

stood as definitive of "high religion," as opposed to "low" traditions, which were, until recently, often ignored by sinologists and buddhologists alike. While the high traditions supposedly comprised clearly articulated and internally coherent doctrinal and ritual systems, the low traditions are frequently viewed as diluted, syncretic, diffuse, corrupt, or even degenerate transmutations of the elite norms.) For the scholar of Chinese Buddhism, first and foremost among the normative traditions is "Indian Buddhism," often construed as a sophisticated system of doctrine and practice preserved by the monastic elite. The Indian Buddhist tradition was not univocal; it sanctioned a variety of competing but interrelated philosophical positions, systematized into discrete exegetical "schools": Sarvāstivāda, Mādhyamika, Yogācāra, and so on. All such schools were deemed orthodox or legitimate in China by virtue of canonical sanction and the prestige of their Indian ancestry. The story of Chinese Buddhism is then the history of the Indian Buddhist tradition, embodied in various scriptures, exegetical schools, ritual practices, and monastic institutions, moving eastward, infiltrating every stratum of Chinese society.

The issue of sinification—the manner and extent to which Buddhism and Chinese culture were transformed through their mutual encounter and dialogue—emerged to dominate the study of Chinese Buddhism for much of the past century. The titles of seminal works in the field—"The Indianization of China" (Hu Shih 1937), *The Buddhist Conquest of China* (Zürcher 1972), *The Chinese Transformation of Buddhism* (Ch'en 1973), *Tsung-mi and the Sinification of Buddhism* (Gregory 1991), and so on—bear witness to the enduring allure of this narrative trope. It may now be time to reassess the hermeneutic and epistemic entailments of the encounter paradigm.

The Story of Chinese Buddhism

The textbook account of the encounter between Buddhism and Chinese civilization begins with Buddhism drifting into China in the Eastern Han dynasty (A.D. 25–220) via trade routes linking China to Central and South Asia. Most of the early Buddhist missionaries in China were associated with Mahāyāna, a fact that bespeaks the growing popularity of this movement in India at the time. Buddhism extolled celibacy, mendicancy, and other forms of social renunciation, making it antithetical in many respects to prevailing Confucian mores. But as Confucianism fell into disrepute in the latter years of the

Eastern Han, members of the Chinese elite were drawn to Buddhist texts, doctrine, and meditation practices owing to compelling but ultimately superficial and misleading similarities with Taoism.

The first generations of Buddhists in China did their best in the face of daunting obstacles. The scarcity of authoritative Indian Buddhist masters coupled with the lack of accurate translations of Indian texts rendered a proper understanding of Buddhism well-nigh impossible. This situation together with the appearance of a plethora of "apocryphal" scriptures (indigenous Chinese texts written so as to resemble translations of Indic originals) exacerbated the propensity to confuse or conflate Buddhism with native Chinese thought. (The most conspicuous example of this tendency is the early hermeneutic strategy known as "matching concepts" [*ho-i* 格義], which entailed the explicit pairing of Indian Buddhist and native Chinese terms and categories.) The confusion lasted for over two centuries. Then, in 401, the distinguished Kuchean Buddhist scholar Kumārajīva (Chiu-mo-lo-shih 鳩摩羅什, 350–ca. 409),² long held captive in Liang-chou, was rescued by Yao Hsing 姚興 (r. 394–416), ruler of the Later Ch'in dynasty, and brought to the capital, Ch'ang-an. With the generous patronage of the court, Kumārajīva oversaw the translation of dozens of major Buddhist scriptures and commentaries, and schooled a distinguished cohort of Chinese monks in the intricacies of Indian Buddhist doctrine. Kumārajīva's relatively lucid translations coupled with the training he imparted to his disciples allowed for a more sophisticated, if not "authentic," Chinese encounter with Indian Buddhism.

The work of Kumārajīva and the South Asian missionaries and translators who followed him—figures such as Bodhiruci (P'u-t'i-lu-chih 菩提流支, arrived in China in 508) and Paramārtha (Chen-ti 真諦, 499–569)—facilitated the development of Chinese counterparts to Indian exegetical systems, including San-lun 三論 (based on Indian Mādhyamika treatises), Ti-lun 地論 (based on the *Dasābhūmikasūtraśāstra*), and She-lun 攝論 (based on the *Mahāyānasamgraha*). These schools evolved during the Northern and Southern Dynasties (ca. 317–ca. 589), a period in which the more ascetic, devotional, and thaumaturgic forms of Buddhism found a home in the "barbarian" kingdoms of the north, while the more metaphysical and philosophical facets of Buddhism proved attractive to segments of the displaced Han elite in the south.

The Sui (581–618) and T'ang (618–906) dynasties constitute, ac-

cording to this narrative, the "Golden Age" of Chinese Buddhism. Advances in ship-building and marine navigation opened the Southeast Asian sea route, while the westward expansion of Chinese military and political control facilitated travel and trade along the Central Asian silk road, allowing Chinese pilgrims such as Hsüan-tsang 玄奘 (ca. 600–664) and I-ching 義淨 (635–713) to journey to India, study at Nālandā and other centers of Indian Buddhist learning, and return with the latest texts and teachings. Chinese pilgrims joined a steady stream of Indian and Central Asian immigrant Buddhist monks in applying their linguistic and doctrinal expertise to the production of ever more faithful translations of Indian texts. At the same time, a succession of eminent South Asian Tantric patriarchs—notably Śubhakarasiṃha (Shan-wu-wei 善無畏, 637–735), Vajrabodhi (Chin-kang-chih 金剛智, 671–741), and Amoghavajra (Pu-k'ung 不空, 705–774)—arrived at the Chinese capital and, with the enthusiastic support of the court, disseminated the latest forms of Indian Vajrayāna Buddhism. The favorable cultural and political climate together with the patronage of a succession of Sui and T'ang rulers spurred the development of truly indigenous Chinese schools, including T'ien-t'ai 天台, Hua-yen 華嚴, Pure Land, and, most important of all, Ch'an 禪. Chinese Buddhism had come of age: the Chinese were ready and willing to distance themselves from the unquestioned authority of the Indian tradition and to strike out in new directions.

The An Lu-shan 安祿山 rebellion of 755, which brought the T'ang court to the brink of political and financial collapse, marks the beginning of the end of large-scale state patronage of Buddhism. This crisis was followed some ninety years later by the Hui-ch'ang 會昌 persecution, which proved particularly devastating to those schools best known for textual exegesis, such as T'ien-t'ai, Hua-yen, and Fa-hsiang 法相. The Buddhist traditions that were to emerge from the T'ang relatively unscathed—Pure Land and Ch'an—survived precisely because they were less dependent on scriptural learning, monastic ritual, and clerical tutelage, and thus were less susceptible to the vagaries of state and aristocratic patronage. Pure Land and Ch'an were oriented toward individual faith and salvation gained through meditative practice, respectively, rendering them accessible and appealing to the masses. As such, these traditions, infused at times with popular forms of Tantra, came to dominate the Chinese Buddhist landscape down to the present day. However, this syncretic form of Buddhist practice failed to inspire the kinds of doctrinal creativity and sophisti-

cation seen in the T'ang period. Intellectually, Buddhism went into a long and inexorable decline from which it never recovered.

The master narrative outlined above has endured for close to a century. It was formalized by Arthur Wright over forty years ago, when he divided Chinese Buddhist history into four periods of "preparation" (Eastern Han and early Six Dynasties), "domestication" (Northern and Southern Dynasties), "independent growth" (Sui and T'ang dynasties), and "appropriation" (Five Dynasties to 1900; Wright 1959). While modern scholars quibble over the details, the underlying narrative structure has proven remarkably resilient, and we continue to view the development of Chinese Buddhism in terms of an extended encounter between India and China. Accordingly, research tends to focus on the processes of domestication and transformation, which raise the issue of the fidelity of Chinese Buddhism to Indian models. Did native Chinese Buddhist schools such as T'ien-t'ai, Hua-yen, and Ch'an ultimately remain true to the underlying philosophical, spiritual, and soteriological insights of their Indian forebears? Or was Indian Buddhism irrevocably altered in the process of rendering it into a Chinese idiom? And if the evidence weighs in favor of the latter position, might it be better to abandon the notion of Buddhism altogether in favor of multiple, regionally or culturally specific "Buddhisms"?

For all the intellectual attractions of this line of inquiry, scholars have come to recognize that the master narrative on which it is based is riddled with historical and hermeneutic problems. To mention merely a few: while the first South and Central Asian clerics to arrive in China during the second and third centuries were indeed associated with Mahāyāna, they may well have been religious refugees, rather than missionaries, and thus their presence in China is not evidence of the ascendancy of Mahāyāna in Central Asia, much less India, at this time.³ The claim that Kumārajīva's translations were more "accurate" than those of his predecessors is also problematic, an important issue to which I shall return. While nominal entities such as San-lun, T'i-lun, and She-lun are often treated as discrete schools or traditions, they are better regarded as organizational categories applied after the fact by medieval Buddhist historians and bibliographers. The notion that the T'ang dynasty was the golden age of Buddhism in general and Ch'an in particular turns out to be the product of Sung Ch'an polemicists; there is little evidence that the major Ch'an figures of

the T'ang viewed themselves as belonging to an independent tradition or school. And despite its rhetoric Ch'an was no less dependent on the written word, on formal monastic ritual, and on state and aristocratic patronage than was any other Buddhist tradition in China.⁴ Pure Land never existed at all as an independent exegetical tradition, much less an institution or sect, in T'ang or Sung China, and the same appears to be true of Tantra or Vajrayāna.⁵ These too are historiographic and bibliographic categories wielded by sectarian scholiasts long after the phenomena in question. The notion that Buddhism went into a protracted decline following the watershed of the T'ang is similarly based on long-standing but unwarranted historiographical biases; Buddhist institutions and intellectual traditions continued to flourish through the Sung dynasty (960–1279) and enjoyed periods of renewed vigor and growth in later periods as well.⁶ Finally, while Ch'an, Pure Land, and Vajrayāna continue to be construed in psychological terms—as oriented toward personal liberation, self-transformation, meditative experience, or faith—this conception is in large part the product of twentieth-century Buddhist apologetics.⁷

Many of the specific problems with the master narrative can be traced to a tendency to confuse sectarian polemics with social history. Foreign students of Chinese Buddhism find themselves peering back at the tradition through centuries of East Asian Buddhist scholarship, a scholarly heritage that continues to reflect traditional sectarian concerns down to the present day. Japanese scholars, whose textual erudition and philological authority is justifiably lauded, have exercised a particularly strong influence on their Western students. Yet the work of the Japanese scholars, many of whom are sons of Buddhist priests if not priests themselves, is often informed by a set of assumptions concerning the nature of Chinese Buddhism that reflect historical developments specific to Japan.

Japanese Buddhism, from its very inception, was subject to a degree of autocratic state control that surpassed anything seen in early Buddhist China. Government oversight of all aspects of Buddhist activity encouraged competition, if not open strife, among individual teachers, lineages, and temples as they contended for the patronage of the court and the aristocratic families in what was often a zero-sum game. State control was but one of several factors that led to the overriding sense of lineal and sectarian identity that came to characterize Japanese Buddhism. The Japanese Buddhist monastic institution quickly evolved into multiple independent and somewhat exclusion-

ary schools, formally recognized and superintended by the central government, each holding to distinctive modes of dress, liturgy, ritual, and doctrine, and each governed by its own centralized ecclesiastic organization. The situation in China was quite different; while the Chinese state did attempt to regulate the *sangha* and control its growth and influence, efforts in this direction were tempered by geographical, cultural, and political contingencies. It was not until the Northern Sung that the central government formally authorized the association between a particular monastery and a specific lineage or school, and even then sectarian consciousness remained muted in comparison with Japan. Chinese monks, irrespective of their ordination lineage, were bound together by their adherence to a more or less common monastic code, a common mode of dress, a common stock of liturgical and ritual knowledge, and so on. As such, there were relatively few barriers standing in the way of Chinese monks who wished to travel from one monastery to another in search of new teachers and teachings. Periods of peregrination were the norm, a practice that contributed to the consolidation of the Chinese *sangha* across the vast reaches of the empire.

Scholars are now aware that the lines separating San-lun from T'ien-t'ai, T'ien-t'ai from Pure Land, Pure Land from Ch'an, Ch'an from Neo-Confucianism, elite from popular, and popular from Tantra are by no means as clear as was once thought.⁸ Indeed, some of these so-called schools never existed at all as self-conscious institutional entities or religious movements in China. Even the fundamental distinctions between Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism need to be reconsidered: none of these traditions correspond to the self-contained religious and philosophical systems described in many textbook accounts.

As a corrective, scholars such as Daniel Overmyer, Michel Strickmann, Stephen Teiser, and Erik Zürcher have argued that we should place less stock in materials produced by the clerical elite in favor of research into popular belief and practice. Zürcher notes that "as soon as we go below that top level, quite another picture emerges, in which Buddhism loses much of its sharp contour, as it is absorbed into the surrounding mass of Chinese indigenous religion."⁹ Such an approach, coupled with a growing enthusiasm among scholars of Asian religion for social history, promises to redress our understanding of Chinese Buddhism writ large. But attention to popular practice should not serve as an excuse to ignore the products of the elite tradition

altogether; to do so is to leave current models for the study of Buddhist doctrinal and intellectual history—models that continue to reflect Japanese sectarian concerns—largely intact. For the most part, modern studies of medieval Buddhist doctrine are still framed in terms of interrelationships between discrete and autonomous historical entities.

The reified entities that loom largest in the master narrative are “Indian Buddhism” and “Chinese culture.” For what is significant if not the result of the Chinese attempt to comprehend, represent, and assimilate the Buddhism of India? Scholars model the process of assimilation in different ways, depending on whether they are predisposed to highlight fidelity to the Indian tradition (the Buddhist conquest of China) or the overpowering force of sinic culture (the Chinese transformation of Buddhism). The former position might be conceived along the lines of Gadamer’s “fusion of horizons.” According to this model, the continuing dialogue between the Buddhist and native Chinese traditions over the course of many centuries overcame imposing linguistic and cultural barriers and gave rise to a hermeneutic sophistication that allowed the Chinese to appreciate Indian Buddhism for what it was, even while dressing it in new garb. The latter case—the “transformation” model in its most radical sense—might be likened to the grain of sand that, irritating the oyster, gives rise to a fine pearl. The birth of the pearl is undeniably due to the stimulus of the sand, yet the original grain is unrecognizable in the finished product. Many scholars would prefer to steer a middle course between the two extremes, highlighting both the profound influence of Buddhism on Chinese culture and the manner in which Buddhism was altered as it was rendered into a Chinese idiom. Yet the desire to find middle ground should not serve as an excuse to ignore or evade the underlying hermeneutical issues.¹⁰

For example, some scholars continue to view the early use of *ko-i* (matching concepts) or the use of the *Tao-te ching* and the *Chuang-tzu* 莊子 in Buddhist exegesis as paradigmatic of the tendency to misconstrue Buddhism by casting it in native Chinese terms. It is true that in the latter days of the Han dynasty, Chinese interested in Taoist meditative disciplines approached Buddhism, mediated through works such as An Shih-ko’s 安世高 translations of *dhyaṇa* scriptures, as a new and powerful means to attain long life and immortality. As a result, the Wei-Chin/North-South Dynasties period witnessed the compilation of a host of Taoist scriptures with strong Buddhist resonances as

well as apocryphal Buddhist sūtras replete with Taoist cosmology, terminology, and messianic eschatology.¹¹ But why approach such developments as a “misconstruction” of Buddhism? (Did the early Roman Christians “misconstruct” Judaism? Did nineteenth-century Mormons “misconstruct” Christianity?)

According to the master narrative, such misunderstandings were ameliorated as the Chinese were given access to more accurate translations, such as those by Kumārajīva. Such translations supposedly provided the Chinese with the conceptual resources with which to overcome the distorting influence of traditional Chinese metaphysics and soteriology, resulting in a more accurate or authentic engagement with Buddhist ideas.¹² Yet it is unclear just what is meant by “accurate” or “authentic” in this context. Certainly there was a considerable increase in scholastic sophistication by the end of the Six Dynasties. But the attention of Buddhist exegetes continued to be drawn to topics that resonated with long-standing intellectual and ethical concerns in China: questions as to the universality of buddha-nature or the soteriological and ethical significance of the “matrix of buddhahood” (*ju-lai tsang* 如來藏, Sk. *tathāgatagarbha*), for example, recalled perennial Chinese disputes over the moral valence of human nature (*hsing* 性). Similarly, Chinese Buddhists mulled over the nature of sainthood (*sheng* 聖), drawing explicitly on Chinese archetypes of the sage-king that went back to the Chou dynasty, if not earlier. And in the T’ang dynasty there was an increasing preoccupation with issues of lineage and transmission, reflecting traditional Chinese concerns with lineal patrimony and the veneration of one’s ancestors. It is only natural that Chinese Buddhist exegetes should focus on moral and metaphysical issues of long-standing concern to Chinese intellectuals. The question, then, is not whether the Chinese ever “got Buddhism right,” but rather what this might mean.

As is well known, *ko-i* was explicitly repudiated as early as the fourth century by Tao-an 道安 (312–385), who recognized its shortcomings. Yet this did not, and indeed could not, stop the Chinese from rendering Buddhism in a language with which they were familiar. How else was Buddhism to be understood in China, short of mastering the original languages of Indian Buddhism? (And even then, as students of Sanskrit know all too well, understanding is by no means assured.) Moreover, while scholars generally agree that Kumārajīva’s translations represent an advance over those of his predecessors, they are far from transparent semantic transcriptions. On the contrary, the popu-

larity of Kumārajīva's translations was not due to their fidelity to the originals—who would have been in a position to judge?—but rather to the elegance and accessibility of his prose. (Note that Kumārajīva's translations continued to be favored long after the more technically "accurate" translations of Hsüan-tsang became available.)

More to the point, our own position as arbiters of the fidelity of Chinese translations or of the pertinence of indigenous Chinese Buddhist exegesis is far from unassailable. The historical development of Indian Mahāyāna remains poorly understood even today. Scholars continue to disagree over the fundamental impetus for the Mahāyāna movement (was it social, institutional, doctrinal, or ritual?), over its primary audience (monastic or lay?), and so on. Our relative ignorance of the cultural, social, and institutional provenance of Indian Mahāyāna frustrates attempts to recover the original doctrinal and ideological import of Mahāyāna scriptures and treatises. It is thus not surprising that, despite decades of concerted effort, there is still little consensus among scholars concerning the meaning of seminal Mādhyamika and Yogācāra tenets.¹³ Our appraisal of the accuracy of Chinese translations and interpretations is, therefore, compromised by our own distance from the Indic originals. Indeed, we are at a far greater temporal and geographic remove from the Indian sources than were the Chinese of the Six Dynasties and the T'ang.¹⁴

The Chinese looked to Buddhism for answers to questions that they found apposite—they approached Chinese translations of Buddhist texts not as glosses on the Indic originals, but as valuable resources that addressed their own immediate conceptual, social, and existential concerns. Accordingly, in order to understand the answers they found, we must first deduce the questions they were asking: questions whose historical, linguistic, and conceptual genealogy was largely Chinese. This elementary and oft-repeated Cadamerian insight tends to be ignored in the scholarly act of glossing a Chinese Buddhist term with its technical Sanskrit "equivalent." While I too indulge in this venerable buddhological convention, my task in this study is to reveal the intellectual chicanery that often goes unnoticed in such philological sleight of hand.

Normative Buddhism

There is another problem with scholarly depictions of the so-called Chinese encounter with Buddhism, namely, the ahistorical reification of Buddhism itself. The master narrative tends to approach Buddhism

as a disembodied corpus of scripture, doctrine, mythology, and ethics that can be extracted readily from its specific regional and cultural deployments. As such, prescriptive documents wrenched from any meaningful sociological context form the basis of many textbook accounts of Buddhism in general and Indian Buddhism in particular. The image of Buddhism that emerges is then employed as a standard against which to measure later deviation or, in the case of China, sinification.¹⁵

As Buddhism disappeared from the land of its birth centuries ago, we are unable to appraise the credibility of our textually based reconstructions against a body of ethnographic data. Without knowing something of the social and ideological setting in which the surviving Indian Buddhist corpus took shape, our understanding of the significance of said corpus is destined to remain speculative at best.¹⁶ Recently, Gregory Schopen and others have attempted to fill this lacuna with the help of archaeological, epigraphical, and art historical remains, a material record that may help to mitigate confusions between canonical prescription and historical description.¹⁷

The growing body of archaeological evidence has forced scholars to revise their image of early and medieval Indian Buddhism. Contrary to received textbook accounts, we find the early *saṃgha* engaged in the worship of an omnipotent buddha through the veneration of relics, stūpas, images, and sacred texts. Filial piety, the offering of material goods to the *saṃgha*, transference of merit, and the appealing of local spirits played a central role in monastic as well as in lay discipline. Monks appear to have retained vestiges of their hereditary social status after ordination, and some, at least, continued to manage personal property. Monasteries often controlled tremendous wealth, including vast landholdings and slaves. And many of the practices once dismissed as "popular accretions" or relegated to the category "Tantra"—notably the invocation of deities through the worship of images and the concomitant belief in the magical efficacy of ritual performance and sacred utterance—turn out not to be later borrowings from Brahmanism, Hinduism, or folk cults, but to be part and parcel of Buddhist devotion from early on. In short, Indian Buddhism is beginning to look more like a "religion" and less like the atheistic, rational, and humanistic creed that apologists are sometimes disposed to discover in the canon.

When we turn to the living cultures in which Buddhism still survives, we find Buddhism inextricably alloyed with autochthonous traditions. Buddhism, in both its lay and monastic forms, is suffused with

shamanism, ancestor worship, cults directed toward the veneration of aboriginal gods and local holy men, thaumaturgy, auguring and divination, appeasement of baleful spirits and wayward ghosts, ritual possession and exorcism, and any number of other indigenous practices, some of which are explicitly proscribed in Buddhist scripture.¹⁸

There do exist religious communities that seek to divest themselves of such "popular accretions" in order to return to their authentic Buddhist roots. Perhaps the most conspicuous contemporary examples are found among the Theravāda monastic reform movements of Southeast Asia or among Sōn reform movements in Korea. But the rhetoric of reform—of returning to an earlier, more pristine monasticism oriented toward lofty soteriological goals—has been a ubiquitous if not beguiling trope throughout Buddhist history. The discourse of reform and purification is predicated on the ability to distinguish genuine versus ersatz teachings, orthodox versus apocryphal texts, essential versus extraneous rites, authentic versus spurious lineages, and so on. And there are simply no universally accepted doctrinal or historical grounds on which to base such distinctions; they remain, in the end, judgment calls influenced not only by scripture and tradition, but also by contemporary social and political contingencies. To claim privileged access to original or pure Buddhism, whether on the basis of lineage, knowledge of scripture, mediative discipline, inner purity, or personal insight, is to claim the authority and prestige of the tradition as one's own. Thus, from a historian's point of view, such claims to "speak for the tradition" must be examined with an eye to their immediate polemical and institutional investments. (Note that contemporary Buddhist reform movements often draw, albeit selectively, on the work of contemporary Buddhist scholarship and thus inadvertently lend ethnographic credibility to textbook reconstructions of normative Buddhism.)

Accordingly, it seems prudent to assume that Buddhism, even in the land of its origin, would have been fully implicated in a wide variety of local religious practices that had little if any scriptural sanction. Scripture has always been but one factor of many determining the contours of Buddhist religious life. Not that this would have been pleasing to medieval Buddhist scholastics, whose own authority was predicated on their access to and facility with scripture. Some among the Buddhist intelligentsia clearly favored prohibiting such incursions; these folks left their traces in the welter of often contradictory interdictions directed against divination, thaumaturgy, and so on. But even

then the scholastics' conception of "pure" or "essential" Buddhism was anything but consistent, and their own shrill and unremitting warnings together with the extant archeological record suggest that few were paying attention. There is thus little reason to assume that the depiction of Buddhist monastic life found in the scriptures ever bore much resemblance to the situation on the ground. It was, rather, an idealized ideological construct that in all likelihood existed in marked tension with living practice. As Jonathan Z. Smith has cogently argued, the social and cognitive allure of religious systems lies in precisely this gap between the ideal and the actual (Smith 1982).

Wherever Buddhism moved, the local Buddhist clergy was compelled to reconstruct its own functional model(s) of normative Buddhism so as to establish the foundation and compass of ecclesiastical authority. This complex process involved deciphering, systematizing, and ranking the often haphazard collection of texts, teachings, and ritual traditions at its disposal. The proliferation of *p'an-chiao* 判教 ("tenet classification") schemes in China comes immediately to mind, but analogous attempts at creating comprehensive and definitive accounts of the buddha-dharma can be found throughout Asia.¹⁹ And now the process is repeated anew by the authors of modern textbooks; they too must decide what to include, what to exclude, and how to create a semblance of order. They too tend to base their decisions on prescriptive documents largely bereft of historical or social context. But while there are similarities between the work of medieval scholastics and that of modern scholars, there are also vast differences. For one thing, the textbook author begins by framing Buddhism not as the embodiment of truth, but as one of many "world religions"—an anachronistic and misleading category that emerged out of nineteenth-century Christian theology.²⁰ And in keeping with nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century predilections, Buddhism continues to be portrayed by some as a humanistic creed that eschews ritual worship and faith in favor of transformative mystical experience—a characterization that would, no doubt, perplex medieval Buddhist commentators.

In looking at the variety of phenomena subsumed under the rubric of Buddhism, it is tempting to invoke the notion of "syncretism." Buddhism would then be construed as an autonomous religious system that originated in India and assimilated (or was assimilated by) a variety of regional traditions and cults as it traveled across Asia. Thus, there would be Taoist-Buddhist syncretism in China, Bon-Buddhist syncretism in Tibet, Shinto-Buddhist syncretism in Japan, and so on.

The problem is that the category of syncretism presupposes the existence of distinct religious entities that predate the syncretic amalgam precisely what is absent, or at least unrecoverable, in the case of Buddhism. (Nor are modern scholars on firmer ground in their attempt to recover pre-Buddhist Taoism, Bon, or Shinto; each of these traditions postdates the introduction of Buddhism into its respective region, and each was constructed, at least in part, as Buddhism's "autochthonous other," while yet borrowing liberally from Buddhist institutions, ritual, iconography, and doctrine.)²¹ In the final analysis, pure or unadulterated Buddhism is little more than an analytic abstraction posited by Buddhist polemicists, apologists, reformers, and now scholars. Perhaps we have managed to persist in talking of Buddhism in the abstract for so long simply because the complex, living reality of Indian Buddhism is no longer around to challenge us.

I am not suggesting that we abandon the term "Buddhism" altogether. Educated Buddhist clerics throughout history have distinguished, at least in the abstract, Buddhist from non-Buddhist teachings and practices, but the manner in which they did so differed significantly from place to place, school to school. The term "Buddhism" turns out to be a site of unremitting contestation, as a cacophony of voices—each averring privileged access to the essence of the tradition—lays claim to its authority. Our own attempts to identify or stipulate the fundamental tenets, core practices, or even "family resemblances" that characterize Buddhism do little more than add to this unremitting din, while at the same time distracting us from the obvious: the power of the term is sustained in part by its very indeterminacy, its function as a placeholder. The authority of the word "Buddhism" lies not in its normative signification(s) so much as in its rhetorical deployments.²²

This indeterminacy forced local Buddhist ecclesiastics to circumscribe orthodoxy and orthopraxis by juxtaposing Buddhism with the heterodox teachings of their immediate rivals. The Jains would thus play a pivotal, if unacknowledged, role in the stipulation of Buddhist orthodoxy in India; Bon played an analogous role in Tibet, Taoism in China, *kami* worship in Japan, and so on. This polemical use of the "other" is not unique to Buddhism: scholars have pointed out the degree to which virtually all self-conscious religious traditions—not to mention national, cultural, and ethnic groupings—define themselves through contradiinction with the beliefs and practices of their

neighbors.²³ Confucianism, to pick one salient example, did not emerge out of a consistent or unique set of philosophical or ethical principles. Rather, T'ang and Sung literati circumscribed the just tradition largely by contrasting it with what they found most distasteful in Buddhism and Taoism.²⁴ And individual Chinese Buddhist lineages and exegetical traditions similarly defined themselves through contrast with the "inferior," if not "erroneous," teachings and practices of their Buddhist rivals.²⁵

It would be of little heuristic advantage to jettison the term "Buddhism" simply because it lacks a consistent historical or doctrinal referent. (Indeed, were we to forswear all ill-defined signifiers, we would quickly be reduced to silence.) While there may have been little pan-Asian consensus as to what was signified by the word, it was, nonetheless, invested with considerable rhetorical and suasive power. The source of this power was determined according to local norms and expectations. Authority was attributed to the witness of an omniscient buddha; the thaumaturgic power and prophetic insight of local Buddhist saints; the mastery of esoteric ritual; the miraculous potency of sacred relics, images, and texts; or, in more recent times, a perceptive understanding of consciousness and the human condition ascertained through astute philosophical analysis coupled with meditative insight. In discussing the Chinese appropriation of Buddhism, therefore, one must remain mindful of the rhetorical dimensions of the term; "Buddhism" was, and remains to this day, a contested term whose meaning should not be sought in some definitive set of myths, doctrines, or practices, but rather in the modes of authority it warranted in diverse cultural and regional settings.

Cross-Cultural Dialogue, Syncretism, and Alterity

In their analysis of the evolution of Chinese Buddhism, scholars have appealed to the notion of syncretism, that is, the analysis of religious phenomena in terms of the interaction and borrowing between two or more traditions.²⁶ Indeed, the rubric of syncretism has become ubiquitous in the study of Chinese religion writ large; the Chinese, students are told, are predisposed to syncretic accommodation, perhaps best exemplified in the doctrine of the unity of the three creeds (*san-chiao ho-i* 三教合一).²⁷

The notion of syncretism would seem particularly apposite to the

analysis of the Chinese engagement with Buddhism: as I have discussed, Chinese Buddhism has been approached as emerging from an encounter between two distinct religious cultures, an encounter that engendered a certain degree of mutual borrowing and syncretic rapprochement.

On examination, however, the metaphor of cultural dialogue is misleading. The routes connecting South and Central Asia to China were long and perilous, and for much of medieval history, travel between these regions was difficult if not impossible. While foreign monks with mastery over Buddhist scripture and doctrine, such as Dharmarakṣa, Kumārajīva, Bodhiruci, and Paramārtha, played an important role in the transmission process, they were relatively few in number, and their command of Chinese was often wanting.²⁸ And while some Chinese pilgrims did successfully journey to India, develop fluency in Indic languages, acquire religious texts, images, and ritual paraphernalia, and return home to transmit their understanding of Buddhism, only a handful are remembered in the historical record for their contributions to the transmission of Buddhism to China.

There is, in fact, little evidence that Indian or even Central Asian Buddhist priests were ever active in large numbers in medieval China. Foreign translators and exegetes influenced religious history primarily through the agency of their Chinese translations and commentaries, and even then it is only with qualification that they can be considered "translators" in the modern sense of the term: not all of the foreign monks celebrated as translators were fully conversant in Chinese, and fewer still were fully literate in the written language. The foreign priests were primarily responsible for reading, reciting from memory, or explicating the original text in their native vernacular, while the actual task of producing a Chinese rendering was done by one or more Chinese scribes (*pi-shou* 筆受), often with the help of bilingual translators who may or may not have had facility with Buddhist doctrine and terminology.²⁹ Translation teams could not afford to be choosy about their staff, as bilingual translators, whether of foreign or Chinese descent, were a rare commodity throughout Chinese history.³⁰ In short, the role of immigrant missionaries and translators in the evolution of Chinese Buddhism is easily overstated; while foreign translators are often given a prominent role at the beginning of Chinese Buddhist biographical collections,

they compose a relatively small fraction of the thousands of monks memorialized in such works, and they are rarely reckoned among the recognized founders or patriarchs of Chinese Buddhist schools.

Similarly, with the exception of *dhāraṇī* and mantra—sacred formulae that are largely devoid of discursive content—the Chinese engagement with Indian Buddhist ritual and liturgy was mediated through the Chinese language. As for Indian monastic codes, they were translated into Chinese and made the subject of extensive commentaries, but in the end they proved inadequate as regulators of Chinese monastic life, necessitating the evolution of supplementary monastic regulations, known as "pure rules" (*ch'ing-kwei* 清規), that took into account the specific social and institutional contingencies of the Chinese *songzha* (Collected 1983).

It is thus difficult to speak in simple terms of a Chinese dialogue or encounter with Indian Buddhism. Chinese functioned as the sole Buddhist ecclesiastical language from the inception of Buddhism in the Han down through the medieval period, and given the paucity of bilingual clerics, whatever "dialogue" transpired took place largely among the Chinese themselves. Their encounter was with a Buddhism already sinified if only by virtue of being rendered, through an often convoluted process of translation and exegesis, into the native tongue. There were exceptions: as mentioned above, some Chinese successfully made the round trip to India and back, while others studied directly under immigrant Central or South Asian masters resident in China. But the tendency has been to construe such figures as paradigmatic of the process of transmission and domestication rather than as relatively isolated exceptions.

Given the fragmentary nature of this encounter, the alterity of Indian Buddhism would have gone largely unrecognized by Chinese Buddhists. Besides, as philosophers of cultural incommensurability have noted, the "other" is only recognized as such to the extent that it can be transcribed into a meaningful and thus to some extent familiar idiom.³¹ Like ships passing in the night, seminal features of Indian Buddhist thought simply failed to capture the attention, or at least the imagination, of the Chinese. Even in the so-called golden age of the T'ang, the primary concerns of Buddhist exegetes, as shall become clear in the course of this study, lay in areas that had intellectual antecedents in pre-Buddhist China.

The problems of cross-cultural transmission and translation were

exacerbated by specific features of Chinese language and orthography. As scholars have long pointed out, despite extensive and prolonged contact with foreigners, the Chinese language remained relatively free of phonetic loan words; the Chinese preferred to translate foreign terms and concepts, creating sinic neologisms when necessary (Harmsmeier 1998:31). This was in part because of cultural factors (a deep-rooted conviction in the superiority of Chinese culture and language), compounded by the use of a script that did not lend itself to transliteration. The important exceptions were Sanskrit Buddhist technical terms, many of which were indeed transliterated: *bodhi* (awakening) was rendered as *p'u-t'i* 菩提, *prajñā* (wisdom) as *po-jo* 般若, *anuttarāṣaṃyaksambodhi* (unexcelled perfect enlightenment) as *a-nou-to-lo-san-miao-san-p'u-t'i* 阿耨多羅三藐三菩提, and so on. However, the profusion of Buddhist transliterations was not due to a sense that these terms resisted translation; many of them were regularly glossed using vernacular "equivalents."³² Rather, the use of transliteration was connected with the belief that the original Sanskrit sounds were more than arbitrary signifiers. The original sounds of sacred Sanskrit words and phrases were believed to possess a certain mantric potency arising from their natural affinity, or even metaphysical identity, with the things they signified. This notion had analogues, if not precedents, in non-Buddhist Chinese writings, where it was used to explain the power of apotropaic spells and incantations.³³ One should not, therefore, place too much stock in the ability of transliterations to preserve a sense of the alterity of the original Sanskrit.

Thus, while the proliferation of Indic transliterations may well have reinforced belief in the preternatural efficacy of Buddhist ritual and liturgy, it does not in itself testify to the Chinese appreciation of cultural difference. All told, the Chinese showed remarkably little interest in the study of Sanskrit or any other foreign language (Harmsmeier 1998:82-84), and there is evidence that Chinese Buddhists frequently failed to grasp the linguistic and hermeneutic challenges that faced them. Robert van Gulik found that in China, as in Japan, the ability to read and write the Indian Siddham script was regularly mistaken for mastery of Sanskrit proper and that many of the East Asian clerics renowned for their proficiency in Sanskrit had little if any command over the grammar, or even the lexicon, of any Indic language. It might appear incredible that the Chinese should so confuse language and script until one reflects on the nature of Chinese orthography: one cannot read the Chinese script aloud without actually knowing the

language.³⁴ Whatever lay behind the confusion, it would appear that the educated Chinese elite, not to mention the unlettered masses, remained largely ignorant of the vast linguistic and conceptual divide that separated them from the world of Indian Buddhism. ^{1998:31} ✓

Local Knowledge

I have argued that it is historically and hermeneutically misleading to conceive of the sinification of Buddhism in terms of a dialogue between two discrete cultural traditions. On the one hand, "dialogue" is an inappropriate metaphor for a conversation that was, in many respects, one-sided. On the other hand, the silent partner in the purported encounter, Buddhism, tends to be construed in ahistorical and essentialized terms that compromise its descriptive value and analytic leverage. ✓

These seemingly abstract hermeneutic issues have concrete ramifications for the way scholars frame, conceptualize, and represent Chinese religious phenomena. Categories do matter: our identification of a text, doctrine, image, or rite as Indian or Chinese, Buddhist or Taoist, Tantric or Ch'an orients our approach to the material, predisposing us to one set of readings while foreclosing others. It behooves us to reflect on the premises and entailments of such identifications. ✓

Take, for example, the identification of the earliest so-called Buddhist images in China, examined in a seminal article by Wu Hung (1986). These include the buddha-like images found on Han bronze mirrors studied by Mizuno Seichi and Nagahiro Toshio, the "buddha figure" discovered in the first chamber of a Han tomb at Ma-hao 麻豪 (Szechwan) by Richard Edwards in 1949, figures on a clay stand from P'eng-shan 彭山 (Szechwan), a tombstone from T'eng-hsien 滕縣 (Shan-tung), and so on. On the basis of their iconographic features, such images had been heralded as the earliest extant examples of Buddhist art in China.

There is little doubt that the iconography of these images was influenced by Indian prototypes: they display features such as the *uṣṇīṣa*-like protuberance on the head, the *abhaya* *mudrā*, and so on. However, Wu Hung argues that our identifications of the images should not be based on surface morphological characteristics, but rather on whether or not such works were intended to "propagate Buddhist ideas or serve in Buddhist ritual or institutional practices." ✓

In short, one must "pay attention to the function of the works, and to the cultural tradition and the social context in which they were created" (Wu Hung 1986:264).

There is considerable evidence that in the Eastern Han the Buddha was worshiped as a foreign god of imposing visage possessing supernatural powers. But, according to Wu Hung, while the foreign origins of this buddha-god may have been appreciated, he was nonetheless thought of and worshiped as a member of the indigenous pantheon. A careful examination of the sites in which the early examples of Buddhist imagery are found invariably reveal a connection with local cults that are now often subsumed under the category "religious Taoism." Specifically, the Buddha was associated with Tung Wang-kung 東王公, Hsi Wang-mu 西王母, and other deities who inhabit the realm west of Kunlun and possess the elixir of immortality.³⁵ In each case Wu Hung fails to find evidence of an "inherently Buddhist content, or Buddhist religious function.... In fact, these works cannot even be seen as reflecting a fusion of Buddhism and the Chinese tradition. They only reflect a random borrowing of Buddhist elements by Han popular art" (1986:273). As there is no evidence of familiarity with Buddhist concepts or doctrine, Wu Hung concludes that these isolated Indian motifs should not be construed as evidence of "Buddhism" per se. "Instead of proclaiming these carvings to be the earliest Buddhist art in China, therefore, it is perhaps more appropriate to say that they are the earliest examples of Taoist art" (1986:303).

Wu Hung's point is well taken, yet his analysis may be compromised by his suggestion that the images be reidentified as "Taoist": there is little evidence that the worshippers of said images would have placed either the images or themselves under such a rubric. Rather, the inertia of well-ingrained scholarly habit is reflected in the need, in the face of singular and indeterminate complexity, to resort to convenient markers of dubious historical or descriptive value.

Nevertheless, Wu Hung's reconstruction of the ritual context of these late Han images is significant. For one thing, it forces scholars of Buddhism to revisit the well-known accounts of the Buddha being worshiped along with Lao-tzu and the Yellow Emperor by Liu Ying 劉英, king of Ch'u 楚, in A.D. 65, and Emperor Huan 桓 in 166.³⁶ These events have been cited as evidence that members of the Chinese elite of the Eastern Han dynasty were both aware of and favorably disposed toward Buddhism. Yet, on reflection, these events may only indicate

that the figure of the Buddha had been incorporated into the local pantheon as a powerful foreign divinity to whom one could make offerings and solicitations.

Again, there is no question as to the iconographic genealogy of these early buddha-like images; their characteristics strongly suggest Indian influence. But this genealogy says little about how they were understood locally. And the same question might be raised concerning many other elements of Indian religion that drifted into China over the course of many centuries, from ritual and liturgical practices to temple architecture, clerical dress, texts, doctrines, modes of exegesis, and the institution of monasticism itself. When it comes to recovering the significance of such phenomena in China, knowledge of their Central or South Asian antecedents, especially when derived from prescriptive sources, may not get us very far. Clearly we require an understanding of local social and institutional structures, cosmology, metaphysics, attitudes toward the spirit realm and the afterlife—in short, the local *episteme*.

A case in point is the phenomenon of modern North American "convert" Buddhism—the Buddhism of Americans who are not of Asian descent. Newcomers to the religion are fortunate to live at a time when travel between America and Asia is relatively painless, when there is ready access to authoritative Asian teachers, when scholars have made significant contributions to an understanding of Buddhist history and doctrine, and when anyone with a credit card can purchase reputable translations and studies of Buddhist texts on the Internet. Should they wish, converts can study classical and vernacular Buddhist languages at one of dozens of universities and colleges that offer such courses. Yet in the midst of such riches, most American converts, including many educated and well-respected Western Buddhist teachers, show little interest in appraising the fidelity of their Buddhist understanding against Asian norms. This is not to say that they are unconcerned with issues of authority; it is just that authority is deemed to lie in the transcendent (ahistorical and transcultural) truth of the teachings rather than in correspondence to Asian archetypes, and this view gives North Americans the freedom to pick and choose. Some go so far as to tout contemporary American Buddhism, with its suspicion of institutional authority, its rejection of ritual and ceremony, its ambivalence toward monasticism, celibacy, and other forms of renunciation, and its singular emphasis on meditation and inner transformation, as a return to the original essence of

Buddhism. Indeed, many American Buddhists see their challenge as extricating this essence from centuries of Asian cultural accretions, and they have little patience for scholars who would question such an enterprise on historical or doctrinal grounds. Accordingly, American Buddhists prefer tracts by modern Western or Westernized Asian teachers to translations of classical texts or scholarly expositions of doctrine. Needless to say, these attitudes do not reflect traditional Buddhist ideals, but rather bespeak deeply ingrained Protestant American attitudes toward religious truth, authority, and institutions. The Zeigist is so persuasive and compelling (not to mention lucrative) that many Asian Buddhist missionaries have, consciously or otherwise, assimilated Western religious attitudes, thereby becoming complicit in the American reinvention of Buddhism.³⁷

It is clear, I think, that the metaphor of "dialogue" is inadequate, if not misleading, for such complex historical processes. The North American example is a reminder that even if T'ang Buddhists did have sustained access to "unadulterated" Indian masters, texts, and teachings, it might not have made much difference. (Ch'an, for one, was founded on an ideology that rationalized the selective rejection of Indian authority.) And like modern Asian missionaries to the West, the Indian and Central Asian masters who did propagate Buddhism in China might have functioned not as bastions of Indian orthodoxy, but rather as witting or unwitting accomplices in the Chinese domestication of their tradition.³⁸

I have no ready alternative to the prevailing paradigms for modeling sinification. The complexity of the linguistic, social, institutional, and conceptual interactions between culturally and linguistically diverse peoples spread over a vast region and lasting over many centuries thwarts the desire for a single comprehensive account. But nor will it do to remain at the level of isolated historical singularities. Scholars are obliged to aver to *some* synoptic categories, overarching narratives, salient metaphors and analogies, lest we abrogate altogether our responsibility to render the past meaningful.

Perhaps we might draw a lesson from the biological and evolutionary sciences. The classical taxonomic enterprise, which attempted to discover the order that lay behind the diversity of biological life forms, took recourse in static taxonomic categories and concepts—families, genera, species, differentiae, and so on. Scientists eventually came to recognize that attempts to represent the development of and natural relationships between manifold life forms in terms of such reified

categories failed to capture adequately the dynamic complexity and structural disequilibrium of evolving biological systems. It is not only that the gene pool is in perpetual flux, but so too are the environmental "niches" in which the heterogeneous "agents" are embedded, rendering the description of the system in terms of stable interrelationships between autonomous species little more than a heuristic conceit. Yet such complexity cannot be represented without some sort of schema, and for that, taxonomic categories and principles remain indispensable. The challenge, then, is to bear in mind the provisional and heuristic nature of biological taxonomies, revising as one goes.

Similar conceptual problems arise in other disciplines that deal with dynamic and adaptive systems, including sociology, economics, cognitive science, geophysics, immunology, ecology, and so on. In each case researchers are confronted with interactive networks of mind-boggling complexity. Attempts to conceptualize such complexity in a nonreductive manner have given rise to notions such as self-organization and self-regulation, emergent properties, nonlinear systems, and evolutionary drift.³⁹ It may turn out that a complex systems approach will prove of value to scholars of cultural and historical processes as well.⁴⁰ At the very least, it is a reminder that the tidy schemas we create, the stories we tell, are little more than edifying fictions that serve to forestall an intellectually paralyzing aporia.

This book is a modest attempt to apply some of the hermeneutic principles described above to the study of a single, somewhat obscure, nominally Buddhist, T'ang dynasty text, the *Treasure Store Treatise*. This short, metaphysically oriented treatise is divided into three chapters of equal length: "The Broad Illumination of Emptiness and Being," "The Essential Purity of Transcendence and Subtlety," and "The Empty Mystery of the Point of Genesis." The terminology of the chapter titles bespeaks the somewhat rarefied and "mystical" tone of the work. Yet the treatise touches on a broad range of subjects, from cosmology and Buddhist dialectic to social theory and ritual practice. The *Treasure Store Treatise* thus provides an opportunity to reexamine a number of doctrines and themes central to T'ang Buddhist thought. In the course of my analysis, I shall argue that seminal Buddhist notions bearing on everything from abstract conceptions of buddhahood to the ritual veneration of images were entrenched in an understanding of the world that was, for lack of a better word, Chinese. Once one begins to tease out the underlying *Weltanschauung*, the *Treasure Store Treatise*