Buddhism in Chinese Society: An Economic History from the Fifth to the Tenth Centuries (review)

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Jacques Gernet. *Buddhism in Chinese Society: An Economic History from the Fifth to the Tenth Centuries.* Translated by Franciscus Verellen. New York: Columbia University Press, . xvii, pp. Hardcover . ,
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Les aspects économiques du bouddhisme dans la société chinoise du V^e au X^e siècle was first published in Saigon in . Since then it has been reprinted several times, and indeed it helped shape the field of medieval Chinese studies. Its author, Jacques Gernet, has gone on to a long and world-renowned career as a historian of China. In , Columbia University Press reissued this work in an English translation by Franciscus Verellen (with only slightly updated notes and a supplemental bibliography). There is no doubt that in the s this book was of ground-breaking and seminal importance. The question, however, is whether this study, or perhaps any work of historical scholarship, is worth republishing some forty years later.

The happy answer in this case is yes. First of all, language study occupies a great deal of time for serious students of Chinese history, and in the scramble to learn Modern Chinese, Classical Chinese, and Japanese, crucial European languages such as French and German often get short shrift. While the essentials of Gernet's study can be grasped with only a cursory knowledge of French, this new translation will encourage American students to grapple with his arguments and examples in close detail.

Second, despite advances in our knowledge of Tang-dynasty China, most of Gernet's work is still valid. This is because it takes the form of translating and interpreting specific documents, particularly those found at Dunhuang. To the "official" history of Buddhism derived from decrees, memorials, scriptures, standard histories, and inscriptions, Gernet adds population registers at various monasteries, itemized bills for construction projects and feasts, ordination certificates, wills, deeds, contracts, auction receipts, loan certificates, lists of revenues and expenditures, price lists, banquet calendars, catalogs of assets, annual reports, records of offerings, bylaws of Buddhist associations, dinner invitations, and so forth. To a large extent, Gernet bases his analysis and arguments directly on the primary sources that are still at the heart of our understanding of this period of history.

And third, this translation of Gernet's book is timely in that it forces our attention back to the mundane details of Buddhism. It is still the case that many of our students encounter Buddhism in a quick survey course, or in idealized popular accounts that focus on the "great tradition" of doctrine, famous monks, and imperial sponsorship, and this is still a problem. Buddhism was part of the lives of millions in China, many of whom would have known little of elite practices and opinions. To see the tradition as a whole, it is necessary to take into account powerful, wealthy monasteries that owned animals and slaves, that regulated the lives of serfs and rented out land, that spent enormous sums on construction, art, fabrics, and eventually appropriated vast tracts of farmland. Monasteries owned and maintained (but did not operate) mills and presses, and, at least at Dunhuang, it appears that they provided nearly the entire supply of flour and oil to the region. They served as inns, shops, and pawnbrokers, and they loaned out both cash and grain (at rates ranging from zero to percent interest). They also cared for the sick, provided medicines, distributed food to the poor, and welcomed visitors. Individual monks made loans, bought property, and worried about who would inherit their possessions. Monks also interacted with laypersons when they accepted offerings, performed services for the dead, practiced medicine and divination, and attended festivals and the popular torch-lit public vegetarian feasts. Laypersons were no doubt also impressed by monks who performed magic, miracles, exorcisms, and self-mutilations.

One of the most exciting developments in Buddhist pedagogy in recent years is Donald Lopez' *Buddhism in Practice*, a book that takes students past the regu-

larly anthologized great tradition excerpts and into the sometimes strange, usually convoluted world of Buddhism as it was actually lived. This new translation of Gernet's classic study is a welcome addition to that genre. Gernet is at his best when he describes the sights and sounds of Buddhist festivals, or when he lists occupations associated with the new religion:

> The needs of the faithful and their places of worship prompted the appearance of crafts and commerce for the supply of devotional objects in the vicinity of the monasteries. In villages and townships, shops opened where sacred texts were copied and statuettes cast, and which occasionally appear to have been taverns as well. The construction and decoration of buildings, the ornamentation of the streets at festival times, the maintenance of the mills and presses on the monastic estates required the services of craftsmen, technicians, and artists. A considerable number of trades are named in the manuscripts from Tun-huang: nail casters, tin-smiths, pot makers, furnace makers, cauldron repairmen, sculptors, lock smiths, glassworkers, roughcasters, hemp washers, felters, etc. (p.)

The profusion of names, terms, and numbers cited by Gernet is breathtaking, and he offers a portrayal of Buddhism as it was lived in medieval China that has not been matched in forty years.

Professor Gernet (or perhaps his editors at Columbia) wisely decided to give his book a more generic title in English. His research was based on economic data, but he ventures far into sociology—with his account of lay Buddhist associations and his observations about the social mixing that was part of Buddhist festivals; into religious history—with his careful investigations into the Indian roots of Chinese practices and the elaborate justifications made for monks engaging in economic ventures; and into psychology—as when he attempts to understand why people would bankrupt themselves to give lavishly or when he points out that in dealing with the sangha, the notion of remuneration was never fully disentangled from that of pious donation.

Buddhism in Chinese Society is far-ranging and brilliant. Having established that, it is my duty as a reviewer to point out a few weaknesses, some of which are endemic to the genre of *Annales*-style economic history and others of which are more particular. To begin with the first, the strength of this type of history is that it takes us deep into the lives of common, ordinary people. Thanks to Gernet's documents, lists, and descriptions, we can imagine what life might have been like for a monastery serf, or an unordained novice, or a lay believer. Read, for example, the following contract:

> This twelfth day of the second month of the year *I-yu* (presumably or), the monk Pao-hsing of the Ch'ien-yüan monastery, requiring the help of a young man, engages the commoner (*po-hsing*) Teng Wu-tzu for a period of eight months [i.e., for the period of agricultural labor, from March to October]. He has settled the monthly hire at one load of millet and wheat. He has three

mu of wheat fields . . . and four *mu* of millet fields. . . . For summer garments, Teng Wu-tzu shall [be provided with] a long-sleeved robe, a suit, and a pair of leather shoes. From the moment the engagement takes effect, Teng Wu-tzu must appear at work every day of each month; he will not be allowed to shirk his duty. If he is idle during one day in a busy month, he shall be charged [a reduction of his hire of] five *tou*; if it is not a busy month, he shall be charged one *tou* [per day of idleness]. If he dallies on the way or if he naps in the fields . . . [etc.] he shall have to make amends. In case of illness, he shall be permitted to return to the village for five days; but in excess of that period, the amount [of the penalty for idleness] shall be calculated in accordance with the [above-mentioned] rule. (pp. –)

Or this excerpt from a Dunhuang donation list:

Five haircuts offered for the construction by an anonymous believer, for the benefit of her younger brother having departed on a western journey. She hopes that nothing untoward will happen to him and that he may soon be able to return.

Five fans, one *shih* of wheat, and one *shih* of millet offered by Chang I-tzu for the construction, so that his deceased mother may be reborn in the Pure Land, and for the benefit of his father, suffering from eye disease. (pp. –)

The disadvantage of this approach is that there is no structuring narrative or chronological progression. Gernet has arranged his material by theme, and he assumes that readers already have a fundamental grasp of the history of Buddhism in China. Gernet could have been more helpful in guiding his readers through this rich bounty of detail; because he stays close to his sources (not necessarily a fault), his conclusions and observations are often buried in the text. For instance, he begins with the obvious question of just how many monks and nuns there were in China, and his answer soon becomes bogged down in discussions of the distinctions between great monasteries, village chapels, and mountain hermitages, differentiated by size, holdings, status, legal privileges, and sponsorship (by the state, great families, or commoners), as well as investigations into fraudulent registrations of religiously committed itinerant monks and legal registrations of non-religious laypersons who bought ordination certificates to escape corvée labor or taxes. These are crucial considerations, but Gernet does not take pains to make his final, judicious conclusions obvious (and in the next chapter he raises yet more issues such as forged ordination certificates and irregular monks engaged in lay activities).

Gernet's great strength is his attention to detail, and when he offers generalizations, he sometimes stumbles. For example, on page , he notes that "virtually all of [the monks] devoted themselves to activities of a profane nature, and principally to the practice of usury," while later he observes that "not all of the Buddhist clergy practiced usury, only the wealthiest among them and those who occupied important positions within the monastic hierarchy. . . . [T]he num-

ber of monks with sufficient means to grant loans at interest was rather small" (pp. –).

Eyebrows may rise at the remark "there is no difference in nature or meaning between the mutilations and suicides, on the one hand, and the sacrifice of patrimonies, on the other" (p.), and in a study that celebrates diversity and complexity it is somewhat jarring to run into phrases like "the Chinese mentality" (p.) and "the Buddhist faith expresses itself most authentically in. . ." (p.). Gernet concludes a description of a particularly tightly knit Buddhist association with the words "It is clear that an engagement of such totality was dangerous and that its effects exceeded to a remarkable extent the mutual obligations of fellowship in modern societies," but it is not clear to me where the danger in the first part lies (to the mental or physical well-being of individuals? to the state? to the religion?), and I am not at all persuaded of the accuracy of the second half of the assertion.

There are a few lapses of explanation—I wish that he had examined the Vinaya's proscriptions of monks using spiritual powers for personal benefit, and his final four-page chapter on why Buddhism declined after the repression of is simply inadequate—but the most important criticism is that economic analysis has a hard time explaining faith. I was left with a marvelous sense of what people did, but not how their beliefs were integrated with their actions (the one notable exception is Gernet's analysis of the Inexhaustible Treasuries in the Sect of the Three Stages). Only from a narrow point of view could one say that "one of the surest economic effects of the great Buddhist constructions was, frequently, an appalling misery for the peasant class" (p.) or describe Buddhist establishments as having "a parasitical economy that nevertheless had its place in this country of agricultural civilization" (p.). Surely Buddhism offered some benefits, perhaps not all economic, to commoners (and even from an economic perspective, Gernet shows how Buddhism transformed commerce and investment in China). When Gernet ascribes actions to the "collective delirium in the faithful" (p.), he clearly has reached the limits of his analytical resources.

It is refreshing to read a monograph on Buddhism that eagerly investigates the non-spiritual side of things, but perhaps Gernet restricts his focus too much. An ideal history would combine economic analysis with a careful examination of doctrine and belief (a promising methodology can be found in chapter of Rodney Stark's *The Rise of Christianity*, which investigates sacrifice and rational choice theory) as well as political history. A kind of balance might be found by combining *Buddhism in Chinese Society* with Kenneth Ch'en's *Buddhism in China: A Historical Survey* (a volume that was inexplicably omitted from Gernet's supplemental bibliography), but Ch'en's work is now over thirty years old and nearly all its attention is given over to elite Buddhism. Though Gernet's book is

still invaluable, it is time for a new, comprehensive, classroom-friendly survey of Chinese Buddhism.

A final criticism is directed at the publisher. The French edition included ten pages of photographic plates illustrating various types of documents used by Gernet. While they are not, strictly speaking, essential to his non-Chinese-literate readers, their omission is nevertheless a substantial loss. A study of material Buddhism deserves to be accompanied by reproductions of material artifacts. In the spirit of Gernet's general approach, they focus our minds on the concrete.

Readers of this review should recognize that these complaints are quibbles. Jacques Gernet's *Buddhism in Chinese Society* is a masterful, brilliant study. In , the Imperial Secretariat Yao Ch'ung argued in a memorial to the emperor that "Buddhism . . . is not [a religion of the] exterior; it may be apprehended only through the mind" (p.). Gernet's account demonstrates just how wrong he was, and Columbia University Press is to be commended for making this excellent work more widely accessible.

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