

Buddhism, Diplomacy and Trade

Review >
India - China

Until recently, pre-modern and early modern China was thought to have been culturally and politically isolated outside East Asia. The Middle Kingdom, in fact, engaged with Central, South, and Southeast Asia through cultural, religious and economic ties through most of its documented history.

By Hasan Karrar

In keeping with this new emphasis in Sinology, San Tansen makes important contributions to our body of knowledge by exploring Sino-Indian relations between the years 600 and 1400. Covering a span of close to a millennium, this bold study will be of interest to scholars of China, South Asia, Central Asia, Buddhism and cross-cultural interaction in Eurasia.

Silk Road trade

Chronologically, Tansen's study begins where Liu Xinru's earlier study on ancient China and India ends. In *Ancient India and Ancient China*, Liu explored the economic and cultural relations between the two civilizations, arguing that Buddhism was crucial to the development of trade from the beginning of the Common Era to the year 600. Demonstrating that the role of foreign luxury goods was inseparable from the growing popularity of Buddhism in China, this little known study made an important contribution to the specialized literature on Silk Road trade in the pre-Tang era.

In the present study, Tansen sees Sino-Indian relations as going through two distinct phases. In the first, which lasts till the eighth century, Buddhism was an important component in Sino-Indian relations. By the ninth century, the emphasis on Buddhist transmission from India diminished, as China began to be seen as an important centre for Buddhist learning in its own right.

Mount Wutai

From the beginning to the middle of the seventh century, India was considered the centre of Buddhist learning while China suffered from what Tansen describes as a 'borderland complex'. Scores of Chinese monks made the arduous journey to India in search of scriptures and to visit the land where Buddhism originated. By the eighth century, this equilibrium began to shift. With the revival of Brahmanism, and to a lesser degree, the encroachment of Arab power on the Indian subcontinent,

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the role of Buddhism in India's cultural and social life declined. Simultaneously, China rapidly overcame its borderland complex with the growing popularity of Manjusari and the development of Mount Wutai as a place of pilgrimage (including pilgrims from India). No doubt the transmission of Buddhism from China to other parts of East Asia also contributed to the increasing perception of China as a genuine centre of Buddhism. With pilgrims from India and other parts of East Asia now making the journey to China, the Middle Kingdom became the centre of the Buddhist world.

State sponsorship

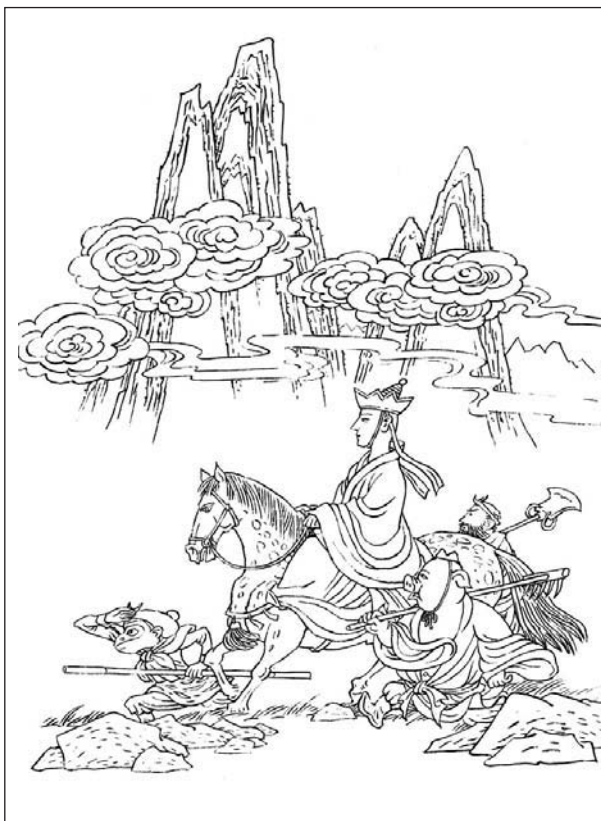
After the eighth century, Buddhism began to play a diminished role in Sino-Indian relations, though its role by no means disappeared. Now largely localized within East Asia, Buddhism survived the fall of the Tang dynasty at the beginning of the tenth century and, as Tansen convincingly demonstrates, remained influential during the Song dynasty, though this is probably more true for the Northern Song. Under the Northern Song, the state continued to sponsor the study of Buddhism and employ Sanskrit scholars. The influx of Inner Asian peoples into first, the periphery, and then into the heartland of China with the establishment of the Liao, the Jin, and the Xi Xia dynasties, ensured continuing interest in Buddhism. For a while, China was an important source of Buddhist documents for kingdoms such as the Liao. But the encircling of China by Inner Asian kingdoms was detrimental to China; besides the obvious military threat the Inner Asian kingdoms posed, the Song dynasty was now cut off from South Asia.

At this point, Tansen's historical chronology falters. The fall of the Song dynasty and the establishment of the Yuan dynasty are given little treatment even though these events fall within Tansen's timeframe. Also, during the Yuan dynasty, Buddhism, albeit Tibetan Buddhism, reached new levels of popularity in China and amongst Mongols on the steppes. More could possibly have been said about this. The nexus of Buddhism, diplomacy and trade continued, though to be fair to Tansen, it was reoriented away from its earlier Sino-Indian domain.

A world system?

Towards the end of his study Tansen attempts to place his study within a world systems perspective by drawing on the influential works of Janet Abu-Lughod and Andre Gunder Frank. In their studies, Abu-Lughod and Frank argue that the Eurasian landmass was highly interconnected through trade prior to the advent of European hege-

mony in the Indian Ocean in the sixteenth century. Abu-Lughod argues for the presence of a world system dating back to 1250; Frank suggests that the presence of such a world system may have its roots yet further back in history. While these scholars have pioneered in developing our understanding of cross-cultural linkages in pre-modern Eurasia, this reader is uncertain whether this discussion adds much value to Tansen's study. Eurasia was economically integrated not only from the year 1250, but from at least the beginning of the Common Era as historians of the Silk Road have long



By Fan Jianping

shown. Indeed, this comes across in Tansen's study too.

Pilgrimage to the West

Tansen's study at times suffers from unevenness when providing detail. Specialists may find not enough in certain areas, on Buddhist doctrines, for example. Non-experts may find parts of the book difficult to follow, such as the discussions on the Central Asian city-states and their role on the Silk Road. These caveats notwithstanding, most scholars will welcome Tansen's effort. Given his broad scope and his sound understanding of the issues under consideration, Tansen has made an important contribution to our understanding of cultural and political ties between China and India. This is indeed a noteworthy achievement and a significant addition to the field. <

- Sen Tansen, 2003. *Buddhism, Diplomacy, and Trade: the realignment of Sino-Indian relations 600-1400*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press and Association for Asian Studies, ISBN 0-8248-2593-4, pp 388.

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- Liu Xinru, 1988. *Ancient India and Ancient China: Trade and Religious Exchanges A.D. 1-600*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

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Encyclopedia of

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Reference

'What is Asia?' ask the editors David Levinson and Karen Christensen in the preface of the Thomson/Gale *Encyclopedia of Modern Asia*, a massive six-volume work published in 2002. Their answer: 'There is no single historical or modern feature that defines or unites all of Asia.' Still, the thirty-three nations that comprise East, Southeast, South, Central and West-Southwest Asia (including Turkey, Iran and Iraq) are covered in this work that contains over 2,600 entries, 1,300 illustrations, 90 maps and 2.2 million words.

By Hendrik E. Niemeijer

Some eight hundred scholars address economics, religion, technology, politics, education, the family, the arts, environmental issues, international relations, the development of sciences and so forth – a massive work achieved in an amazingly short time by one of the largest publishers in the USA. The encyclopedia gives plenty of space to the diversity of modern, that is, twentieth-century Asia. Sometimes this diversity is explained historically, in so far as earlier events have continuing impact. The emphasis on interactions and relationships serves as the 'defining feature of our meaning of modern'. The encyclopedia also aims 'to describe and explain Asia as Asians see and experience it', thus promising fresh insights to students and non-specialist readers.

General topics have been defined to cover the sub-regions and nations: Ethnicity, Marriage and Family, Significant People, Religion and Philosophy, Government, Politics and Law and so on. Apart from this, there are some pan-Asian articles on environmental issues, organisations such as the IMF, and pan-Asian trends such as AIDS.

Quick information

Although the encyclopedia's organizing principles are defensible, it is more eclectic than systematic or scientific. This becomes clear with the Reader's Guide within each of the volumes, which can be used together with the good, detailed index at the end of Vol. 6. Let us take a few samples. When looking under Southeast Asia, Government, Politics, and Law, Indonesia, one finds several topics not relevant to Modern Asia, for instance the Amboina Massacre of 1623. Looking (again: Southeast Asia) at Peoples, Cultures, and Society, Philippines, one only finds Godparenthood. The article on Godparenthood can be found in Vol. 2 where compadrazgo is explained. Is that all on Philippine Peoples, Cultures, and Society? No, one better goes directly to Vol. 4 where one can find a series of interesting articles on Philippine Languages and several composite articles: Philippines – Profile, Philippines – Economic System, Philippines – Education System, Philippines – History, to mention the most important. The Profile articles are to the point and helpful for getting quick information.

Where is the Buddha?

If these composite articles are useful to the general reader, how useful are the articles on the main topics? Let's take another sample: Buddhism? The index promises much information on Buddhism. The articles on Buddhism (Vol. 1 pp. 333-369) cover Central Asia, China, Japan, Korea, Mongolia, Tibet, South Asia, and Southeast Asia (Theravada) of which – curiously enough – only Vietnam is dealt with separately. Although the articles are informative on the historical backgrounds, beliefs and practices, one learns practically nothing about Buddhism in modern China, while Myanmar and Thailand are incorporated into a general article on Buddhism in Southeast Asia. Unfortunately the section on Southeast Asia, Religion and Philosophy, Myanmar, only offers articles on Christianity, Islam and Spirit Cults. Perhaps Thailand? Under Thailand – Profile (Vol. 5 pp. 453-454) we finally find two meagre lines beginning with the sentence 'About 95 percent of the Thai people are Buddhists.' The index at the end of Vol. 6 does not bring us any closer to Buddhism in these two important Buddhist countries – a serious omission. A few lines on Siddhartha Gautama (Buddha) by another Western scholar makes us realize that this encyclopedia would have looked very different if Asian scholars had written on a topic like Buddhism. At this point, Buddhist Asia certainly does not look like Asia 'as Asians see and experience it'.

It is easy to trace omissions in an encyclopedia which is the result of a rapid and digitized business. A quick appearance on the worldwide market then prevails over scrutiny. But the

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publisher could easily have traced the main omissions before publication. Hopefully future editions will be more scholarly without losing its audience of non-specialist readers. The selection of topics could have been more careful, to avoid omissions and the appearance of irrelevant topics. The input of Asian scholars should also be increased.

On the desk of every policy maker

Of course there are many positive things to be said as well. One really needs to go through this encyclopedia oneself to realize that it should be on the desk of every policy maker and newspaper editor dealing with Asia. A positive point, for instance, is that space is devoted to countries such as Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan; it also recognizes the influence of Persian culture and language in Asia. The many articles on international relations are helpful to get quick overviews of tensions and conflicts and are thus useful for journalists. The work also gives ample space to modern art, paintings, literature, and languages. Quick historical overviews in tables are attractive to look at. This encyclopedia is thus more balanced than traditional encyclopedias which tended to focus on persons, events, economic matters and trade.

Back to the question: 'What is Asia?' The Editors have answered the question by saying that diversity matters a great deal. After all, Asia is a construct. They also write: 'Perhaps the one factor common to all of Asia in 2002 is contact with the West and reactions to Westernization.' To focus on this perspective would demand a different encyclopedia, one more focused on Western colonization and global interaction. Thomson/Gale has indeed decided to publish an Encyclopedia on Western Colonialism since 1450 as well (expected in 2006). ◀

- Levinson, David and Karen Christensen, eds., 2002. *Encyclopedia of Modern Asia*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 6 Vols., pp. 3268, ISBN 0-684-80617-7 (hardcover)

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The Eurasian Space

The Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), officially established in 1996, is an inter-regional forum which now consists of the 25 members states of the European Union and the European Commission, the 10 member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), China, Japan and South Korea.

In the second volume of the IIAS/ISEAS Series, *The Eurasian Space. Far More Than Two Continents*, scholars from Asia and Europe examine the engagement between the two continents, highlighting how the ASEM process has enhanced political, economic and cultural ties between various Asian and European countries. The authors address questions such as: how does the Euro fit into East Asian monetary co-operation? How does ASEM influence the construction of East Asian identities? What is the ASEM factor in the formulation of the new Chinese foreign policy?

ASEM is wrongly a little-known process, as it plays a key role in formulating the emerging multilateralist world order of the 21st century. That is has travelled this far, and has spawned a network of interested people, research institutions and civil society organizations, holds promise for the future.

Stokhof, Wim, Paul van der Velde and Yeo Lay Hwee (eds.)

The Eurasian Space: Far More Than Two Continents
Leiden/Singapore: IIAS/ISEAS (2004), pp. 216, tables,
ISBN 981-230-255-7

The melodrama of South Korean modernity

Review >
South Korea

Three decades of urbanisation and rapid industrialisation in South Korea have generated a number of myths, including the assumption that there now exist greater opportunities for upward social mobility. A new book challenges this assumption, focusing on 'melodrama' – fictional and non-fictional stories told by and about women – to capture what traditional scholarship has left out.



Four women c. 1940, Los Angeles, from the collection of Helen Paik Chen

By Suzana Dudic

A husband and wife, he having just quit his job as a policeman, head for South Korea's coast to make a fresh start to their lives. Carrying her husband's severance pay, the wife begins chatting with a stranger at a bus station, only to discover later that her pocket book with their lifesavings is gone. The promise of a new life shattered, the couple become peddlers as their marriage breaks down, and the husband eventually leaves his wife for another woman.

The stuff of soap operas, perhaps. But according to anthropologist Nancy Abelman in *The Melodrama of Mobility: Women, Talk and Class in Contemporary South Korea*, women's real-life narratives, such as this one, are much more. Abelman argues that the 'private talk' of women offers an alternative window to look at the very public story of the country's rapid industrialisation and economic transformation since the 1960s, one which has been left out of virtually all mainstream studies on the subject.

The narrators are eight women in their fifties and sixties of different social standing, whom Abelman refers to by nicknames such as 'The Education Mother', 'Hye-min's Grandmother', 'Mrs. Pak', 'The Janitor' and 'The Moviegoer'. Women of this age group were selected because their lives have run parallel to key events in South Korea's history: Japanese occupation, war, the peninsula's partition, authoritarian regimes and opposition movements, and what anthropologists have dubbed the country's 'compressed modernity' in three decades of social, political and economic transformation.

these tales deal with aspirations to upward social mobility and dislocations of identity that occur during periods of profound social change

In Abelman's hands, these women's tales are not simply chronological 'life stories', but 'social mobility stories'. That is, they deal with ideologically-shaped expectations and aspirations to upward social mobility, and with the dislocations of identity that occur during periods of profound social change. Further, they show how the female characters in the stories, like the characters in soap operas popular among South Korea's female audiences, must learn and re-learn the 'key words' of the day as indices for advancement in a highly patriarchal society.

Personality and persimmons

Playing away the top layer of melodrama, Abelman probes deeper, beginning with the perception that a set of psychological traits describing an individual can be the source of one's social fate. Personality here is viewed as a product of (specific) family and (shared) social histories, filtered by gender. The Education Mother, for instance, the narrator of the story above

and the sister of its female protagonist, explains that the reason behind the tragedy of the lost money that set off the downward spiral of her sister's life lay neither in bad luck, nor in the malevolent intentions of a thief. Instead, it lay in the tragic flaws of her sister's 'boyish personality' and her 'impertinence and impropriety', qualities that are anathema to 'femininity' in Korean culture. Also part of the tragedy, the Education Mother continues, was her sister's rebelliousness against the 'ignorant ambition' of their mother, who privileged her daughter's policeman-suitors' *yangban* heritage, a hereditary nobility of a 'bygone era', instead of paying more attention to his 'lowly' profession.

Hye-min's Grandmother expresses differences in personality types using the metaphor of a persimmon: the person who waits for it to fall compared with the person who snatches it off the tree. She also notes the need to adapt to the 'key words' of the day: 'In this day and age... land alone will not suffice – a person has to be on the ball and impatient with things in order to succeed...' Meanwhile, the Laundress, labouring with pride at her sewing machine 'under the glare of a light bulb covered by a makeshift hat' bemoans her ill-fated marriage, but does not blame others for the fact that the selection of her partner was not her own. Adopting what Adelman calls 'a narrative perspective of selfhood', identity here is not a static construct but a dynamic one, and through the characters' experiences of work, education (especially their children's), marriage and kinship relations, changes to perceptions of class and identity can be observed. The characters can then be understood as 'social products unfurling in the vicissitudes of particular social times'.

Storytelling and scholarship

The main strength of *The Melodrama of Mobility* lies in Abelman's going beyond simply making a collage of 'women's voices' to add to the existing scholarship on three decades of South Korean history. Instead, she uses narrative to underline the need to avoid oversimplifying the changes that the country's 'development' has brought to its people. At the same time, it is Abelman the ethnographer who emerges as the book's central storyteller. She outlines how she came to meet each of the women and the nature of their relationship, and how the idea for the book emerged from observations during earlier fieldwork of 'the visceral class prejudice for farmers' manners, looks and ways of being' by the 'urban middle class'.

However, her storytelling style, paraphrasing to emphasise rather than including more direct quotations from the oral histories, ultimately drowns out the eight main Korean storytellers, and also makes the work less accessible to non-specialists. This is unfortunate, given that the book provides much substance in answering the question Abelman sets out in her introduction, about what this type of ethnography can offer to learning about South Korea's story: a means to go beyond traditional analyses of its 'developmental success' by looking at the everyday drama of its people. ◀

- Abelman, Nancy, 2003. *The Melodrama of Mobility: Women, Talk and Class in Contemporary South Korea*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 325 pp., ISBN 0-8248-2596-9.

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