Book Reviews

Andrea A. Acri (ed.)

Esoteric Buddhism in Medieval Maritime Asia: Networks of Masters, Texts, Icons.

Singapore: ISEAS—Yusof Ishak Institute, 2016, vii + 468 pp. ISBN 9789814695084, price: USD 79.00 (paperback); 9789814695091, USD 80.00 (e-book). [15 individual chapters are available in pdf form at USD 6.00 each at: <https://bookshop.Iseas.edu.sg>]

Esoteric Buddhism began to develop from roots in the Mahāyāna c. 500 AD, as advanced techniques of concentration and visualization were developed that were said to prepare the practitioner for consecration (*abhiśeka*) into a realm of pure Buddha consciousness as the ‘ruler’ of a particular mandala and Buddha realm. These doctrines proved popular among the ruling classes, who could envision their secular power in terms of spiritual parallels. From c. 700 AD until as late as 1500 AD, the doctrines of esoteric Buddhism spread throughout much of Asia, following the trading routes that also carried the pilgrims, masters, craftsmen and texts of the Hindu and Buddhist worlds.

The publication of Andrea Acri’s edited volume on esoteric Buddhism in medieval maritime Asia should thus be a cause for celebration of anyone with an interest in esoteric Buddhism, or on the growing body of knowledge on the history, material culture, and movement of ideas in the Indian Ocean world. This volume provides a treasure trove of detail on the ‘networks of masters, texts, icons’ of esoteric Buddhism that united monastic, dynastic and lay practitioners in a vast geographical zone that stretched from South Asia through Southeast Asia to China, Korea, and Japan.

The volume is divided into three thematic sections on (1) monks, texts, patrons, (2) art, architecture, and material culture, and (3) Bauddha-Śaiva Dynamics. In the first contribution we immediately enter the world of monks, their patrons, and their textual production with Ian Sinclair’s illuminating work on a manual for the consecration of a ‘world conquering monarch’ (*cakravartin*) composed by Bianhong, a Javanese monk attached to the Tang court

from 780 until his death in 806 AD. Through Bianhong we are also introduced to two founding documents of esoteric Buddhism: the *Vairocanābhisaṃbodhi-tantra* (VAT) and the *Sarvatathāgatattva-saṅgraha* (STTS) and to the influential lineage of Śubhakarāsīṃha (637–715), Vajrabodhi (674–741) and Amoghavajra (704–74), the three ‘great teachers’ of esoteric Buddhism whose travels from South Asia to the Tang court were instrumental in the diffusion of esoteric Buddhism.

A chapter by Kandahjaya follows that provides a detailed account of texts in the Indian and Chinese traditions that provide evidence for the early sources of the religious system of the Old Javanese compendium *Sang Hyang Kamahāyānikan*. Kandahjaya also ably revisits the question of the relationship of the religious system of the SHK with the great *stūpa* at Borobudur. Goble’s work on the role of Amoghavajra in the formulation of the Tang state stands out for its lucid description of the interplay between monastic and state-building concerns in the Tang court. As he points out, the success of Amoghavajra was one among many cases that illustrate the attraction of esoteric Buddhism for ruling elites, who were drawn to ‘the tradition’s guiding ethos of hegemony, control, and power’ (p. 23).

In Part II the picture of maritime Asia during the heyday of esoteric Buddhism is fleshed out with a series of chapters on centers of productivity in the material culture of esoteric Buddhism and the networks that connected them. Bautze-Picron’s chapter studies important centers producing bronze icons in India’s northeast; Reichle’s work introduces us to the great monastery at Ratnagiri, Odisha and its echoes in the architectural record of Java; Swati Chembukar’s study of the great *stūpa* at Kesariya, Bihar, whose innovative shape may have inspired the architecture of Borobudur, opens up a picture of the ‘cosmopolitan vision’ of the Pāla dynasty. Sharock and Bunker’s contribution continues the study of Pāla internationalism that traces the influence of Vajrabodhi by focusing on the similarities between Pāla bronze images of figures like Vajrasattva, similar images produced on the Khorat plateau of the Khmer empire and the statuary and ritual bronzes of central Java in the late first millennium. This is followed by an important survey of the archaeological evidence for esoteric Buddhism in Sumatra by the respected archaeologist John Miksic. His chapter underlines the importance of recent work at sites like the great Buddhist complex at Muara Jambi that suggests the need for a reassessment of the nature of ‘Śrīvijaya’ in the light of evidence for significant early polities north of Palembang and their continuing importance in Sumatran history.

O’Brien’s chapter uses the motif of a noose common to the tale of Sudhana and Manohara and the mandala of *Amoghapāśa* (‘Invincible Noose’), the cen-

tral *bodhisattva* of Candi Jago, to support her reading of the tale of Sudhana in a series of hitherto unidentified reliefs at Candi Jago. Her interpretation suggests a keenly felt concern of the Javanese nobility that the choice of a royal spouse should reflect the perfection of one of the male-female dyads of the esoteric mandalas popular among the nobility of East Java as a guide to both religious and political life.

Part III takes a close look at Bauddha-Śaiva dynamics, a relationship between practitioners of Tantric forms of Buddhism and Śaivism that was marked by porous textual and ritual boundaries, but at the same time by intense rivalries. Chapters by Acri and Sundberg both focus on evidence from the Ratu Boko plateau for religious tensions between adherents of Śaivism and esoteric Buddhism that culminated with the sudden disappearance of the Śailendra dynasty from Javanese history c. 856 AD.

Acri's work carries forward the discussion of a tantric Buddhist mantra inscribed on gold leaf from Ratu Boko by drawing comparative data from Balinese Buddhist and Śaiva sources that strongly suggests the *mantra* was used in a ritual of attraction, coercion, and control (*vaśīkāraṇa*) intended to subjugate the Sañjaya monarch Panaraban and ensure his patronage of the esoteric Buddhism of the Abhayagirivihāra of the Ratu Boko complex.

Sundberg's closely related chapter suggests that the sudden falling off of support for Buddhism in central Java c. 856 AD was hastened by the loss of royal patronage for the parent Abhayagirivihāra at Anurādhapura in Sri Lanka when in 854 AD Sena II converted to the Theravada. The events in central Java are thus linked to the more general interruption of the influence of esoteric Buddhism in maritime Asia in the mid tenth century

A final chapter by Rolf Giebel further explores Śaiva-Bauddha dynamics by unpacking a Chinese Buddhist text of the Tang dynasty to reveal its true identity as a work of tantric Śaivism. By drawing together the many strands of study that are prerequisite to a deeper understanding of the crucial role esoteric Buddhism played in the religious, social, and political life of premodern Asia the contributors to this volume have laid the groundwork for an exciting new phase in the study of maritime Asia.

Thomas Hunter

Department of Asian Studies, The University of British Columbia

thomas.hunter@ubc.ca