
Professor Brook’s outstanding study of the social and cultural context and function of gentry patronage of Buddhism in the 15th and 16th century is not only an important work in its own right: it also serves to complement our picture of Ming Buddhism and its spectacular revival in the 15th century. In previous monographic works dealing with the Buddhist and “syncretistic” movements of that period (notably Hsü Sung-pen’s study of Hanshan Deqing, 1979; Judith Berling, about Lin Zhao’en, 1980; Yu Junfang, on Yunqi Zhuhong, 1981), the approach has mainly been biographical, focusing upon the masters themselves, their religious message and their proselytizing activities. *Praying for Power* shows us a rich and at times surprising panorama of another essential aspect of the complex: the various ways—material and otherwise—in which the larger Buddhist temples and monasteries were supported by the gentry on township and county level.

The scope of the study is clearly defined. Chronologically it mainly deals with the 16th–17th century, a distinct phase in the development of gentry sponsorship; in social terms it is limited to individual or collective support of the public and more prestigious *si* by members of the local gentry, and, above all, it does not claim to describe religious ideas and convictions, but is focused upon concrete manifestations of patronage—upon action rather than upon belief. The author’s basic assumption is that this kind of sponsorship—and, to a large extent, the late Ming Buddhist revival itself—must be placed in the context of the economic, social and cultural expansion of the local gentry since the middle of the 16th century. He argues that the whole scale of “self-defining” and “self-asserting” gentry activities that took shape in the late Ming, such as conspicuous consumption, patronage of artists, literary pursuits, charity, and the rendering of public services (“liturgies,” in the Weberian sense), was directly related to the quantitative growth of the local gentry itself. The twenty-fold increase of *shengyuan* 生員 between 1400 and 1600, not paralleled by a significant expansion of the bureaucracy, had led to a situation in which only a small part of the local elite could hope for an official career. The surplus gentry
had to seek other ways to define the position and status in situ, and in doing so they created the distinctive cultural milieu of the late-Ming gentry. Sponsorship of Buddhist institutions, coupled with gentry participation in Buddhist observances and rituals, friendly contacts with leading monks, the organization of lay Buddhist associations, and the “aesthetization” of Buddhist culture—all this came to form an integral part of the local gentry’s quest for self-assertion and autonomy vis-à-vis the government authorities. Like building schools and financing the construction of public works, such acts of religious piety constituted a type of “symbolic capital” legitimizing their status within their own communities.

However, in this whole range of status-defining activities the patronage of Buddhism occupied a unique position. Other standard liturgical services (educational and charitable activities; road and bridge building; supporting shrines dedicated to state-related cults, etc.) all were designed to uphold the Confucian order. They were welcomed by the authorities, for they were considered a useful—and even indispensable—complement to the work of the government. In the case of Buddhism, Prof. Brooks notes that there was no such congruity of interests—the individual magistrate could be a devout Buddhist and be in favour of gentry patronage, but in his official capacity his attitude should be one of indifference and detachment. It was precisely for that reason that sponsorship of Buddhism, as a field of activity not related to government interests, provided the local gentry with an excellent instrument to assert their independence: “the monastery provided a location where the gentry could express their identity as a hegemonic elite while passively resisting dominance of public authority” (p. 34).

Apart from these general observations, the Introduction contains a lucid discussion of several other topics, partly of a methodological nature. In his survey of the historiography of gentry studies the author rejects the Marxist economic model as well as the overemphasis on “bureaucracy” as the all-important characteristic of the Chinese elite (the Weberian model, largely followed by later authorities such as Fei Hsiao-tung and Hsiao Kung-ch’üan). Instead, he firmly places himself in the more recent tradition: gentry status is defined by “a wide repertoire of social and economic strategies,” of which “participation in bureaucracy was only a part” (p. 13).

Part I, “The Culture of Buddhism,” opens with a biographical essay about the Buddhist scholar and Ming loyalist Zhang Dai 張岱 (1597–1689), whose activities as a sponsor and sympathizer are exemplary of this type of sponsorship. Here special attention is given to an interesting feature