

***Chinese Esoteric Buddhism: Amoghavajra, the Ruling Elite, and the Emergence of a Tradition.*** By Geoffrey C. Goble. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019. Pp. xii + 319. \$70.00.

Major publications dealing with Esoteric Buddhism in China used to be a rarity in Buddhist studies a generation ago, and only in recent years has the situation changed rather dramatically, especially in the West, not the least thanks to the Columbia University Press's promotion of new scholarship within this field. It is, therefore, a most fortuitous and welcome event that we now have this new study by Geoffrey C. Goble, a study which focuses on Amoghavajra (705–774), arguably the single most important and influential Buddhist master of Esoteric Buddhism in the history of China.

In order to ground our following discussion more firmly, let us begin by reviewing the contents of the book, which is divided into six chapters and an introduction as follows:

“Introduction.” Here the author presents his view on what constitutes Esoteric Buddhism and, to some extent, review the findings of past scholarship in the field. Most noteworthy is Goble's model for dealing with Esoteric Buddhism as a concept. In order to differentiate between an “esoteric buddhism,” which he characterizes in a two-fold manner as “esoteric Buddhism” and an “Esoteric Buddhism.” The former is used to distinguish mixed forms of esoteric types of practices, while the latter is the designation he has chosen for the type of Buddhism promulgated by the Three Ācāryas, of the mid-Tang, i.e., Śubhākarasiṃha, Vajrabodhi, and Amoghavajra, but more specifically with that of the latter.

Chapter One: “The Three Great Masters of *Kaiyuan* and the Teaching of the Five Divisions.” This chapter focuses on the diverse roles of the Three Ācāryas of the Tang, i.e., and an attempt is made to discuss the different impacts they made.

Chapter Two: “Esoteric Buddhism in Context: Tang Imperial Religion.” Goble is here making much out of Esoteric Buddhism, i.e., Amoghavajra's Buddhism, and its role as part of formal state support (*huguo* 護國). In a sense, an equation is made between Esoteric Buddhism and state religion per se.

Chapter Three: “Esoteric Buddhism in Context: The An Lushan Rebellions and Tang War Religion.” This chapter highlights Amoghavajra's ascendancy to prominence on the back of the rebellion. When talking about “context,” the author is mainly referring to historical context, not so much religious context.

Chapter Four: “Amoghavajra and the Ruling Elite.” As stated in the title this is exactly what the chapter deals with. Here the author explores Amoghavajra's connection with a number of important figures in the Tang government including the three emperors and a host of important officials.

Chapter Five: “The Institutional Establishment of Esoteric Buddhism.” Here much attention is given to the centres of Esoteric Buddhism established by Amoghavajra, in particular Mt. Wutai 五台山, which, under his aegis, shifted character towards a more Esoteric Buddhist site, including the cult of Mañjuśrī, its patron bodhisattva.

Chapter Six: “The Consolidation of Amoghavajra’s Legacy.” This chapter is divided into three sections concerning the establishment of Amoghavajra’s legacy: First, an initial period from the master’s death in 774 and ending in *c.* 800 with the loss of access by Amoghavajra’s disciples to the court; then a section in which a second consolidation of Esoteric Buddhist legacy is made covering the years 784–800; and, finally, a section on how Amoghavajra’s brand of Esoteric Buddhism was received in the later historical imagination and, as part of that, a lengthy discussion of the Song Buddhist writer, Zanning 贊寧 (919–1001), and his historical writings on Amoghavajra’s role in Chinese Buddhism (pp. 231–41). In many ways, this chapter is the most interesting in the book.

The obvious strength of Goble’s study is his detailed study of the formal documents highlighting Amoghavajra’s relationship with the Tang court, in particular those found in the *Da Tang gu dade zeng sikong dabian zheng Guangzhi Bukong sanzang xingzhuang* 大唐故大德贈司空大辨正廣智不空三藏行狀 (T. 2056.50). It is a good thing, timely as well, that this highly important material takes centre stage in the accounts of Amoghavajra and his form of Esoteric Buddhism. There has previously been several attempts at making use of the this data, but none has brought it into play as well as by Goble does.

The final chapter in the book dealing with Amoghavajra’s legacy is also of significance, as the author here explains the developments that followed in the aftermath of the master’s death. In this process Goble effectively buries some of the misconceptions that have marred previous understanding of Esoteric Buddhism as a living phenomena of the late Tang, in particular the “disappearance theory,” i.e., the idea that Esoteric Buddhism ended with the Huichang 會昌 Suppression of Buddhism during the 840s.

Following that we have the lengthy discussion of Amoghavajra’s legacy as transmitted in the writings of Zanning’s *Song gaoseng zhuan* 宋高僧傳 (T. 2060.50). Goble provides not only a meaningful discussion of the role of Zanning’s presentation of Amoghavajra, but also deals with the manner in which the former’s writings have affected our understanding of the latter. As this reviewer sees it, Zanning’s manner of understanding has been overestimated in formulating the history of Esoteric Buddhism during the mid- and late Tang. To this we may add the obvious, namely that he was not a specialist of Esoteric Buddhism *per se*, and apparently also not of its history, which is why his descriptions are both superficial, anachronistic, and

somewhat off the mark. Goble understands this and contextualizes this material in a more useful and balanced manner than we have hitherto seen.

The issue of Esoteric Buddhism during the late Tang, i.e., following the demise of Amoghavajra, is an important one that has hitherto been somewhat understudied apart from the sporadic work of a few Japanese and Western scholars. Goble does rectify this to some extent, but in my view does not go far enough. This is a shame as it could have benefitted his line of argument and strengthened the historical foundations for his study. What is hinted at here is that it would have been interesting and useful to see to what extent Amoghavajra's brand of Esoteric Buddhism actually continued to influence the further development of the Esoteric Buddhist tradition in China, and by extension that of both the Liao and the Koryō (the Japanese developments course being self-evident).

On the negative side there are a number of problematic issues in Goble's study, which should be addressed. First, there is the introduction. It is messy and somewhat antiquated even though it does try to come up with a new model for conceptualizing the phenomena of "Esoteric Buddhism." It appears that Goble has landed himself between several chairs as he tries to navigate the often conflicting views held by contemporary Western scholarship with regard to the best way of conceptualizing the phenomena of an Esoteric Buddhism in medieval China.

Precisely because of the ambiguous manner in which the author has chosen to tackle the prickly and contentious issue of "Esoteric Buddhism" by distinguishing an "esoteric Buddhism" and an "Esoteric Buddhism," he lands himself in unnecessary trouble. His model of distinction is, of course, a methodological ploy made to avoid taking a meaningful and definite stance on the phenomena of Esoteric Buddhism as a salient aspect of Mahāyāna Buddhism in China. Instead, he reserves "esoteric Buddhism" to mean something akin to a mixed esotericism, i.e., pre-Amoghavajra ritual practices, while choosing "Esoteric Buddhism" as a term exclusively reserved for Amoghavajra's brand of Esoteric Buddhism. The result is that Goble continues to flounder around in the old discourses that have informed the field in the past century or so, in particular the postulated distinction between "mixed esotericism" (*zōmitsu* 雜密) and "pure esotericism" (*junmitsu* 純密), as conceptualized by sectarian scholarship in Japan.<sup>1</sup> What Goble ends up doing is basically to replicate these categories under new names and, in doing so, avoiding taking a firm stand of his own. As understood by this reviewer, the author does not bury these outmoded misnomers effectively—especially now that he had the chance to do so—but in a way perpetuates them, in a

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<sup>1</sup> This problematic issue has been discussed in some detail by Bob Sharf in his *Coming to Terms with Chinese Buddhism: A Reading of the Treasure Store Treatise* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002), pp. 263–78.

disguised manner. Therefore, we, as readers, suddenly find ourselves presented with the two concepts of “esoteric Buddhism” and “Esoteric Buddhism,” as if they were proper historical phenomena, the implication being that we should henceforth accept that real “Esoteric Buddhism” only began with Amoghavajra. However, this is, of course, quite incorrect. Despite the considerable imprint Śubhākarasiṃha, Vajrabodhi, and Amoghavajra have left on Esoteric Buddhism in China, they were not really its founders, perhaps from an institutional or imperially sanctified point of view one may be partly justified in doing so, but certainly not as far as basic concepts, doctrines, and practices are concerned. In fact, many of the teachings promoted by the Three Ācāryas were already more or less fully developed before they even appeared on the proverbial scene in the first quarter of the eighth century.<sup>2</sup> It would have been more useful if Goble had demonstrated how Esoteric Buddhism in China came about through a protracted, complex yet organic development eventually culminating in the “mature” Esoteric Buddhist tradition associated with the Three Ācāryas, rather than attempting to cast them in the roles as the progenitors of Chinese Esoteric Buddhism per se. What we might consider special and distinctive to Amoghavajra’s dispensation of Esoteric Buddhism is, of course, his promotion of the *Vajraśekhara* (*Sarvatathāhagatatattva-saṃgraha*) and its related cycle of scriptures. In this regard, one may rightly talk about his brand of Esoteric Buddhism as constituting a new development, even a reformation of sorts.

Goble’s failure in connecting Esoteric Buddhism of the Kaiyuan 開元 era with the earlier developments could have been easily avoided had he made use of Koichi Shinohara’s 篠原亨一 recent study on Esoteric Buddhist ritual to achieve some sense of what constituted this continuity.<sup>3</sup> One supposes that his downplaying of the pre-Kaiyuan forms of Esoteric Buddhism in China was done in order to bolster his presentation of Amoghavajra as the “ancestor” of Chinese Esoteric Buddhism, something which, in my view, is incorrect. If Amoghavajra was indeed such an ancestor, what are we to do with the works and activities of a series of Esoteric

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Ronald M. Davidson, “Some Observations on an Uṣṇīṣa Abhiṣeka Rite in Atikūṭa’s *Dhāraṇī-saṃgraha*,” in *Transformations and Transfer of Tantra in Asia and Beyond*, ed. István Keul, Religion and Society 52 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2012), pp. 77–98; Koichi Shinohara, *Spells, Images, and Maṇḍalas: Tracing the Evolution of Esoteric Buddhist Rituals* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014); and Henrik H. Sørensen, “Spells and Magical Practices as Reflected in the Early Chinese Buddhist Sources (c. 300–600 C.E.) and Their Implications for the Rise and Development of Esoteric Buddhism,” in *Chinese and Tibetan Esoteric Buddhism*, ed. Yael Bentor and Meir Shohar (Leiden: Brill, 2017), pp. 41–71.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Shinohara, *Spells, Images, and Maṇḍalas*. This study specifically links up the earlier Esoteric Buddhist tradition with that of Amoghavajra through an analysis of primary ritual developments.

Buddhist masters active in seventh-century China, including Ātiguṇḍa, Boḥiruci, and Ratnacintana? Moreover, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that the rise, development, and fruition of Chinese Esoteric Buddhism during the medieval period followed more or less the tradition's historical developments in India. Somehow Goble's introduction is overly ambiguous and leaves one with the feeling that he did not think it through carefully enough.

In the light of the above, it is hard to understand what the author actually means when stating that, "The ambiguous identity of Amoghavajra and the ambiguous relationship between Esoteric and esoteric Buddhism were established in the historical imagination" (p. 241). This is exactly what Goble himself has done. He imagines that there were two forms of Esoteric Buddhism between which an ambiguous relationship persisted. This is, of course, incorrect. The only ambiguity that exists is really the author's own caused by an unsuccessful methodological construct invented by himself.

Given that Goble's study appeared from the press in the summer of 2019, one must wonder to what extent he has been aware of the developments in the field that have taken place within the decade prior to that. In any case, he appears to have been unaware of a number of rather seminal studies and contributions that have informed the field more recently, including *Transfer of Buddhism Across Central Asian Networks*,<sup>4</sup> *Chinese and Tibetan Esoteric Buddhism*, the recent dissertation by Harriet Hunter,<sup>5</sup> and Orzech's "Metaphor, Translation, and the Construction of Kingship in *The Scripture for Humane Kings* and the *Mahāmāyūrī Vidyārājñī Sūtra*."<sup>6</sup> One also wonders why the author did not consult Sem Vermeersch's study on the relationship between Buddhism and the Koryō State (918–1392), which—although it concerns state Buddhism in another East Asian culture—raises many of the exact same issues as his own study does.<sup>7</sup> It is also surprising that when referring to the work by Lü Jianfū 呂建福, Goble makes use of the twenty-five-year-old first

<sup>4</sup> *Transfer of Buddhism Across Central Asian Networks (7th to 13th Centuries)*, ed. Carmen Meinert, *Dynamics in the History of Religions* 8 (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> Harriet Jean Hunter, "A Transmission and Its Transformation: The *Liqujing Shibahui Mantuluo* in Daigoji" (Ph.D. diss., Leiden University, 2018). Although not focusing on Amoghavajra nor his political side, this dissertation offers a wealth of information on Esoteric Buddhism in China in the post-Amoghavajra period.

<sup>6</sup> Charles D. Orzech, "Metaphor, Translation, and the Construction of Kingship in *The Scripture for Humane Kings* and the *Mahāmāyūrī Vidyārājñī Sūtra*," *Cahiers d'Extrême-Asie* 13 (2002–2003), pp. 55–83.

<sup>7</sup> See Sem Vermeersch, *The Power of the Buddhas: The Politics of Buddhism during the Koryō Dynasty (918–1392)*, *Harvard East Asian Monographs* 303 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2008).

edition when a greatly revised and expanded version appeared in 2010, a full decade ago.<sup>8</sup> Likewise, he has used Marc des Jardins's dissertation on Amoghavajra and Mahāmāyūrī from 2002, but not the published study from 2011 which constitutes an obvious improvement over the dissertation.<sup>9</sup> Oversights such as these and failure to engage with the above material is actually quite deplorable because had Goble chosen to take note of it, this could have helped him arrive at a more meaningful and perhaps also a more up-to-date introduction to his book. Unfortunately, this has not happened and this is a noticeable drawback to what is otherwise a balanced and highly qualified study.

In addition to Goble's self-imposed problem regarding the two forms of Esoteric Buddhism he imagines existed in Chinese Buddhism, which—from the perspective of this reviewer—poses the most serious problem in his study, the book has a number of other, lesser issues to which we shall presently turn.

First, there is a methodological problem with the author's insistence that Esoteric Buddhism equals imperial Buddhism (pp. 188–200). This does not mean that Amoghavajra's Buddhism should not be understood as an "imperial Buddhism," as it surely also was that. However, to reduce Esoteric Buddhism, a primary phenomenon of Chinese Buddhism from the late medieval period onwards, to such a narrow role as Goble does here, poses a serious conceptual problem, not just historically but also with regard to aspects of practice, doctrine, material culture, etc. His equation only makes sense if we define Esoteric Buddhism as "Amoghavajra's Buddhism" in the narrowest possible sense. Something which, of course, should not be done as already discussed above. Esoteric Buddhism was a thriving, trans-sectarian movement in medieval China from the fifth century and onwards, the import and power of which culminated during the second half of the Tang, but continued in vogue up to modern times in a variety of forms including those of Tibet and Mongolia. Hence, to limit Esoteric Buddhism to a relatively short period in the middle of the Tang makes little sense in the light of the extensive primary sources covering a period of more than fifteen hundred years.

The author also argues that most of the textual records on Chinese Buddhism are inseparable from the imperial state (p. 175). In the light of the extent and diversity of the primary sources, I am not sure this is a view I would choose to endorse. Surely many records, especially those emanating from the discourses of the Tang state were so. However, to cast the representation of Chinese Buddhism broadly as primarily

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<sup>8</sup> Lū Jianfu, *Zhongguo mijiao shi* 中國密教史 (The history of Esoteric Buddhism in China), rev. ed. (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2011).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. J.F. Marc des Jardins, *Le sūtra de la Mahāmāyūrī: rituel et politique dans la Chine des Tang (618–907)* (Québec: Presses de l'Université Laval, 2011).

reflecting the perspective of the state is not something I personally recognize. The discourses pertaining to Chinese Buddhism are extremely varied and diverse, in fact so much so, that it makes little sense to try to fit them all into one particular frame of conceptualization. Surely in this case one size does not fit all feet.

Elsewhere Goble writes that “Buddhist monasteries were not formally sectarian in the Tang Dynasty” (p. 176). This is a view that is still debated, and for sure one that has not been satisfactorily settled as yet. It is correct that there were many Buddhist temples that housed a variety of practitioners adhering to different Buddhist methods of practice and learning, but it is equally true that there were specific groups of practitioners, and indeed “schools” (*zong* 宗), which were more sectarian in their manner of organization. To the latter, we may count both the Tiantai tradition, which already before the Tang was highly sectarian, as well as several of the Chan 禪 lineages that arose during the second half of the Tang, including the lineages claiming descend from Huineng 慧能 (638–713) such as Mazu’s 馬祖 (709–788) Hongzhou School 洪州派. This can be readily documented by consulting the surviving epigraphical records on metal and stone where sectarian and lineage discourses are especially prominent (actually the primary reason for these records to exist). Moreover, reporting from his pilgrimage to Tang China during the mid-ninth century, Ennin 円仁 (794–864) mentions that the Korean Buddhist temple (Fahua yuan 法華院) on the Shandong Peninsula in which he sojourned during the years 839–840 was affiliated with the Tiantai School based on Mt. Wutai 五台山. This indicates that sectarian developments in Chinese Buddhism were indeed under way during the mid-to second half of the Tang. In this connection it is also of importance to remember the discussion of the various formations of Chan Buddhism as recounted by the Chan and Huayan 華嚴 exegete Guifeng Zongmi 圭峰宗密 (780–841) in his various works. This data clearly indicates that by the time he was writing during the first half of the ninth century, even within the Chan tradition, clear signs of sectarian developments could be seen in Chinese Buddhism, something which is sure to have effected the concerned temples and the institutional character of Chinese more broadly conceived. In this regard there is a structural issue regarding the Tang Buddhist temples, one which has often been overlooked, and which Goble appears to have overlooked as well. This has to do with the manner in which many temples were compartmentalized into larger and lesser cloisters (*yuan* 院). Such an arrangement allowed for practitioners of diverse Buddhist orientations and specialities to live together within the confines of the same temple or monastery, while at the same time perusing their own choice of sectarian adherence or line of study. In this regard contemporary studies on Buddhism in Dunhuang’s temples offer illuminating insights.

In addition to the issues raised above, Goble’s study has a few, minor glitches. I shall forego the opportunity to list them all, but limit myself to a few. In one

instance he translates the term *sangmen* 桑門 as “concealed *śramaṇa*” (p. 162). “*Sangmen*” is a standard signifier that simply means a member of the Buddhist *saṃgha*, i.e., a monk or nun. No one is “concealed.” Elsewhere Goble has Amoghavajra addressing the emperor to the effect that “. . . You bestowed on me fragrant medicines, secretly undertaking empowerments” (p. 150). I am not overly enthusiastic about this translation, the implications of which is that the emperor bestowed medicine and empowerment on Amoghavajra secretly! One would think that while it was the emperor who bestowed *incense* and medicine on Amoghavajra, he in turn used them to make secret (*mi* 密), i.e., *esoteric*, *empowerments* (Skt. *adhiṣṭhāna*, Chin. *jiachi* 加持) on behalf of the emperor.

One also encounters the peculiar category of “named incense,” a translation of *mingxiang* 名香 (p. 150). However, this designation just means important incense. In other words, a type of incense, such as *agaru*, is what is intended here.

In all fairness it must be said that Goble’s focus is not on Esoteric Buddhist practices, nor its systems of beliefs, neither that on which Amoghavajra built, nor the tradition he helped develop. Therefore, some of the criticisms levelled on the present study may admittedly not be entirely fair. However, it should not be overlooked that the very title of the book is “Chinese Esoteric Buddhism,” wherefore one is justified in expecting a more all-round grasp of the tradition. That being said, as a study on the mainly political side of Amoghavajra, Goble’s study certainly brings new light to our understanding of this influential master and his circle of primarily lay followers, not the least the three successive emperors he served under, as well as a string of important government and military officials. Thus, this study provides us with a firm grounding of the Chinese historical context in which Amoghavajra operated in the empire’s Twin Capitals. This means that we now have a study which situates the master centrally in the interphase between religion and politics during the mid- to late eighth century and, as such, highlights the many intricate aspects of his role as imperial advisor and Buddhist promoter of the Tang state. However, as a presentation of the role of Chinese Esoteric Buddhism in Tang politics—not to mention the practice of Esoteric Buddhism in the Tang empire—Goble’s study leaves many questions unanswered. This means that we are still far from a comprehensive understanding of Esoteric Buddhism under the Tang, and, when seen from that perspective, the title of his study is overly ambitious, or even misleading.

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