

Signs from the Unseen Realm: Buddhist Miracle Tales from Early Medieval China, by Robert Ford Campany. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2012. 328 pp. US\$65.00 (cloth).

Robert Campany's latest work is in many ways a continuation of the author's earlier forays into the closely related literary genres of religious hagiography, anomaly accounts, and miracle tales in the early medieval period of Chinese history. In this new project, Campany turns his attention to the role of miracle tales within Chinese Buddhism of the Six Dynasties, offering a detailed analysis and translation of Wang Yan's *Signs from the Unseen Realm* (*Mingxiang ji* 冥祥記), compiled around the year 490. The translation alone constitutes a valuable contribution to our understanding of early medieval Chinese Buddhism and its place within the larger religious atmosphere of Six Dynasties China, and thus should prove interesting to both Buddhologists and Sinologists alike. Moreover, Campany's analysis addresses methodological issues important not only for the study of Buddhism and Chinese religions (especially Daoism), but also more broadly for scholars of various religious traditions.

The book is structured in a format similar to Campany's earlier work on Ge Hong's *Traditions of Divine Transcendents*,¹ consisting of an initial study of the text's history, genre, social context, and narrative and religious themes (1–62); this is followed by complete translations (63–260) of the extant stories from Wang Yan's *Signs from the Unseen Realm*, interspersed with the author's own commentaries on the different tales contained therein.

This study begins with a preface in which Campany describes his own motivation for engaging in this study and addresses some methodological considerations. Echoing an argument that has been put forward by a number of different scholars of Buddhist studies in recent years, he criticizes the overwhelming focus on the study of canonical Buddhist scriptures, renowned translators, and eminent

¹ Robert Ford Campany, *To Live as Long as Heaven and Earth: A Translation and Study of Ge Hong's Traditions of Divine Transcendents* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

scholar-monks. As an antidote to this narrow emphasis on largely prescriptive sources that tell us little about Buddhism as a lived religion functioning at many levels within a complex Chinese society, Campany argues that more attention deserves to be paid to non-scriptural sources—artwork, material culture, histories and biographies, and literary genres such as miracle tales—that can be particularly useful in providing information about the multifarious practices and beliefs of Chinese Buddhist laity. Thus, he attempts to develop a model through which non-scriptural textual sources can be used to recover alternative modes in which normative doctrines were received and interpreted in medieval Chinese society.

Campany's analysis of Wang Yan's text, presented in part 1 of the book, is ambitious and thought-provoking. He begins by introducing the reader to the genre of Buddhist miracle tales and to Wang Yan's text itself, which is no longer fully extant, but of which approximately 129 discrete excerpts, as well as Wang's preface, have been preserved in other sources. Following this introduction to both the text and its author, Campany proceeds to evaluate the social context of miracle tales, and attempts to describe some of the features of the Buddhism represented within Wang's collection. Within this section, he applies several theoretical frameworks to the analysis of Buddhist miracle tales that he has developed in earlier writings, particularly the notions of "collective memory" and cultural or religious "repertoires."²

The processes by which miracle tales were generated, circulated, and eventually recorded were, the author argues, overwhelmingly social; proper understanding of these processes enables scholars to use texts such as Wang Yan's compilation as evidence of the dispositions and activities of the religious communities that created and propagated them. Thus, reading them as artifacts of the "collective memory" of a particular community, Campany sees miracle tales as having both descriptive and prescriptive functions—they not only document the attitudes and actions of the individuals

² Robert Ford Campany, *Making Transcendents: Ascetics and Social Memory in Early Medieval China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009).

who feature in the stories, but also enjoin upon their audience modes of thinking and behaving that are demonstrated, through the stories themselves, to be spiritually beneficial and efficacious. Moreover, as Campany suggests, such demonstrations were in all likelihood more convincing, to a general audience, than those narratives and admonitions contained within scriptures, by virtue of the miracle tales' being placed within familiar settings and infused with cultural values with which a Chinese audience could more readily identify.

Thus, Campany argues, these miracle tales bear witness to a particular "idiom" of Buddhism, exemplified by mostly lay communities, overwhelmingly concerned with those aspects of Buddhism that relate to, and have proven efficacious in addressing, practical concerns of everyday life (and death). Here, he makes use of the notion of religious "repertoires" in approaching the Buddhological debate over a monolithic "Buddhism" vs. multiple "Buddhisms." Campany's notion of "religious traditions as constantly changing repertoires of resources created and used by participants in imagined communities of identity, discourse, and practice" (30) provides an interesting model by which to reconcile the apparent conflict between an idealized (and largely textual) "Buddhism" and the plurality of "Buddhisms" observable on the ground. In addition, as suggested in the following section of Campany's analysis in which he discusses Wang Yan's compilation as a source of evidence for the Sinicization of Buddhism, this notion of religious repertoires provides a useful model for evaluating the relationship between Buddhism and indigenous religious traditions in China like Daoism: most of the elements in the medieval Buddhist repertoire have counterparts in the repertoires of indigenous traditions. Such a model serves to provide a much more nuanced picture of the relationship between different religious traditions than the commonly used unidirectional notions of "influence" or "borrowing," suggesting instead a dynamic field in which religious ideas and practices develop through complex processes of point and counterpoint.

In the remainder of his introductory study, Campany turns to Wang Yan's stories themselves, offering a detailed categorization of seven different types of narrative patterns that are exemplified

throughout the collection, and concluding his analysis with a discussion of eleven broadly defined religious themes that resonate among the different stories. These patterns and themes are further discussed in the individual “Comments” that follow most of the translated stories, wherein the author provides supplemental information on the contents of the particular tales and notes particular instances and variations of the patterns and themes that he has identified. In this fashion, he provides some continuity between the two parts of the book, so that, in reading the translations, the reader is continually being referred back to Company’s main arguments concerning the text. The translations themselves are carefully executed, precise, and copiously annotated.

Signs from the Unseen Realm is an important and informative analysis of Wang Yan’s text in particular, and of early medieval Chinese Buddhist tales in general. The study benefits immensely from the author’s prior research into related genres of early medieval Chinese literature, and the result is a satisfyingly “thick” treatment of the text that places it within a robust social, literary, and religious context. With its broad treatment of issues related to such diverse fields of study as Daoism and Chinese religion, Chinese literature, Buddhism, and comparative religion, Company’s work should prove interesting and useful for scholars from a variety of disciplines.

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