

HSUEH-MAN SHEN:

Authentic Replicas: Buddhist Art in Medieval China.

xii, 335 pp. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2019. ISBN 978 0 8248 6705 8.

doi:10.1017/S0041977X19000569

This well illustrated and well designed book has its origins in a doctoral thesis awarded by the University of Oxford in 2000 concerning Buddhist relics in medieval China. Since then the progress of archaeology in China has shown a continued interest in relics and their reliquaries, as is demonstrated for example by the publication of Ran Wanli 冉万里, *Zhongguo gudai sheli yimai zhidu yanjiu* 中國古代舍利瘞埋制度研究 (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 2013). But this study is unlikely to be outdated any time soon, since it does far more than simply address the questions covered in the doctorate, but rather takes on the whole problem of authenticity and multiplicity in Chinese Buddhist materials production – even the word “art” in the title is perhaps narrowing expectations beyond the scope of the actual content of the book. At the heart of the matter is a divergence between what at first sight seems to have been similar attitudes towards sacred objects in medieval China and Europe. In the latter, any demonstration that (to take a hypothetical example) the fragments of the True Cross claimed by different institutions if reunited might (as Calvin claimed) constitute a sizeable shipload would probably raise sceptical eyebrows. But as Shen observes at one point, in the late eleventh century in China the “scientist and polymath Shen Gua (1031–1095)” tells us both that he owned a tooth relic of the Buddha and that he watched as it generated some further relics in granular form “just like sweat drops coming out of the human body” (p. 185). We might assume that a relic, a fragment of the cremated remains of a religious leader who had died over a millennium earlier, would both be very rare and would be due to the ravages of time, but a diminishing witness to that lifetime of long ago. Not so, it seems – raising the problem of authenticity and multiplicity in a quite obvious way.

In fact scholars of Buddhism too have had their problems with the terminology describing the passing of the Buddha and the creation of his relics, because the earliest sources to describe the events concerned exhibit linguistic usages that hint at a deeper ambiguity in understandings of this important transition in the Buddha's existence, even if these ambiguities did not unleash actual quarrels such as the polemics over transubstantiation in Europe that – in another cultural difference – fed into religious wars that claimed the lives of millions. One hesitates to try to summarize the carefully argued and scrupulously documented research of Jonathan A. Silk, *Body Language: Indic Śarīra and Chinese Shèlì in the Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra and Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* (Tokyo: The International Institute for Buddhist Studies, 2006), but the fact that on occasion the word we render as “relic” seems to have been used also for the body of the Buddha before his cremation, while possibly a mere proleptic misstatement within a well-known narrative hints already at some divergence between what we think of as a “relic” and what the Buddhist tradition was talking about even before it entered China, a divergence that would seem to lie beyond the difference between cremation and European funerary practice.

Here, however, the investigation perhaps wisely does not start in the philological thickets of Buddhist translation but with the most obvious example of Buddhist hyper-production of sacred material, namely Buddhist texts themselves. The dynastic history of the Sui, for example, makes it clear that Buddhist manuscripts among the Chinese population outnumbered the copies of the “Confucian canon” by a

factor of several tens or hundreds of times. Yet somehow all these copies of the Buddha's words represented his legacy in a way that partook of the nature of a relic. The question of authenticity, and the Chinese term *zhen* 真 which tends to underlie the English word, though later prominent, are not raised at this stage in the book, despite the fine treatment given to the appearance of mechanically accurate copying achievable through printing. This is intriguing, in that secular writing did know the concept of the "true copy" or *zhenben* 真本, though that term was used in what is to me a slightly puzzling way: cf. *BSOAS* 69/2, 2006, 332–3. But a couple of chapters on text are followed by three on images, another instance of the Buddha's relics that preserved neither his bones nor his words but his appearance, and here questions of authenticity are much more overtly to the fore. Two final chapters then turn to the products of cremation honoured by reliquaries, and as shown by the eleventh-century author already cited we are here too grappling with some very unfamiliar yet important phenomena, and the discussion reveals yet more clearly how something can be replicated and even fabricated, but real at the same time.

The richness of this volume is most gratifying, a solid testament to the advantages of not rushing into print with the research results of doctoral work but rather taking the time to explore complex issues over a wide array of materials, however lengthy and taxing that process may be. The materials in question are furthermore amply documented throughout by means of illustrations, to a degree that I imagine will be readily appreciated by art historians. But this book deserves a much wider readership than simply one concerned with material culture, since it touches on some of the most important aspects of religious belief in China throughout the period covered. There are certainly aspects of the topic that are not directly addressed here, such as the political manipulation of sacred objects, but the writing is disciplined enough not to risk too many discursive ventures into areas already known to scholarship. The reading of the meaning of material culture may perhaps be modified in future by discoveries within written sources, though the initial exploration by Jonathan Silk suggests that progress in this direction is unlikely to be rapid. For now, however, Hsueh-man Shen's work sets new standards in challenging us to rethink our ideas about many things. It will, I am sure, be much cited, and with good reason.

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GE ZHAO GUANG (trans. Michael Gibbs Hill):

What is China? Territory, Ethnicity, Culture, and History.

xv, 201 pp. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2018. £28.95. ISBN 978 0 674 73714 3.

doi:10.1017/S0041977X19000570

In *What is China?* Ge Zhaoguang, a historian and public intellectual, tackles historical problems relating to "Asia" and "China"; scholarship, politics and identity; and global, national, and regional history (p. 1). Readers will find it both fascinating and frustrating: fascinating for the insight it provides into Chinese debates on these crucial issues; frustrating as the reader may hope for a more detailed discussion of contemporary problems. Ge is responding, in part, to certain strains of the Mainland New Confucian movement and is a moderate voice in these debates,