

Book Reviews

Asia

Nalanda Srivijaya and beyond: Re-exploring Buddhist art in Asia

Edited by GAURI PARIMOO KRISHNAN

Singapore: Asian Civilisations Museum, 2017. Pp. 296. Maps, Plates, Notes, Bibliography, Index.

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This book is a result of an exhibition at the Asian Civilisations Museum in Singapore, *On the Nalanda trail*, which was accompanied by a conference focused on ‘Interaction and Practice’. The essays in this book attempt to offer some new insights into the patterns of exchange and textual–image correlations between the Nalanda tradition and the arts and artefacts of Southeast Asia. This volume has ten essays. Each essay is well argued in its particular sociopolitical, art historical or architectural context; nonetheless, the intellectual tradition of Nalanda itself and its ancient connections with Southeast Asia are not adequately dealt with.

The editor, Gauri Parimoo Krishnan, starts her introductory essay by highlighting the problematic colonial constructs of Buddhism-Hinduism. Her argument is supported by the theory of Indianisation, which is somewhat problematic because of its normative structure and over-generalisation. The early Buddhist Nikāya schools are mistakenly identified as Theravada, and the Mulasarvāstivāda School is described as ‘a school of Theravada’ (p. 19). The essay outlines Gupta and post-Gupta period styles and how this legacy was carried forward in Southeast Asia.

Frederick M. Asher’s meticulously researched chapter on ‘Xuanzang at Nalanda’ stands out in this collection. It dwells on the enigmatic historicity of the monastic university of Nalanda. His essay questions the colonially constructed Buddhist historiography of British India and notes how Alexander Cunningham, founder of the Archaeological Survey of India, ‘manipulated the evidence to make it suit what he wanted to show’ (p. 28). Asher’s essay also points to the obscurity of Xuanzang’s writings and cautions readers against accepting those accounts as historical reality.

Suchandra Ghosh’s chapter on Mainamati presents a broad survey of the Buddhist archaeological remnants of southeastern Bangladesh. The findings in this chapter underscore the large presence of Mahayana Buddhism in the Comilla area of Bangladesh. However, Ghosh repeats pervasive stereotypes — for example, linking Buddhist tantra to aboriginal and Brahmanical practices — which does not do justice to a book that sets out to ‘re-explore’ the Buddhist art of Asia.

The chapter by Peter Skilling can be considered as the gem of this volume. Skilling explores the relationship between writing and material culture through text-image-inscription correlation in his essay, and posits the widely prevalent practice of inscribing *dhāraṇi* (incantations) as the formalisation of the act of merit.

His chapter contextualises the artefacts and asserts that these ‘images were not manufactured as autonomous art objects; they were tailored to suit a variety of ritual needs’ (p. 59). He also discusses some of the peculiar technical terms and formulas found in the inscriptions.

The next chapter, ‘Buddhism in the Bujang Valley, Kedah’ by Nik Hassan Shuhaimi Nik Abdul Rahman, provides a good descriptive account of the excavatory investigations conducted during the last 25 years in Bujang Valley and in the plains of Merbok in peninsular Malaysia. It connects the architectural details of the minor Buddhist monuments uncovered with those of Yaran in southern Thailand. Unlike Skilling’s essay, however, the findings are not contextualised, nor is there any further attempt to point out the linkages of the findings with Nalanda.

John N. Miksic’s essay notes that the Malays are oblivious to their Buddhist heritage. It posits that the Buddhist heritage of this region prior to the Srivijaya Empire dates back to the fifth century CE. Miksic notes that ‘one of the last Malay kingdoms was located in Singapore’ (p. 147). This chapter discusses the archaeology of Srivijaya in some detail and points out how the Nalanda connection shaped the Buddhist culture of Srivijaya; but the erroneous and inadequate information about the classifications of Buddhist literature are disappointing, and renders the arguments rather opaque.

Gauri Parimoo Krishnan’s second chapter in this book is on ‘the roots and legacy of the art on Nalanda as seen in Srivijaya’, which also indirectly argues for the Indianisation theory. While delineating monastic centres other than Nalanda, this chapter only remarks in passing on Vikramshila, which attracted more foreign students than Nalanda. The concluding remarks do accept that Srivijayan art was not exclusively influenced by Nalanda, but was a convergence of many other inspirations and that ‘the artists of Srivijaya have assimilated these influences and created their own forms’ (p. 194).

The chapter by Teoh Eng Soon discusses ‘the Chinese assimilation of Avalokiteśvara’. It is a commendable and eloquently written essay from an ‘amateur scholar’. Teoh’s essay reflects upon the transformation of Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara into the feminine Guanyin. He deems it plausible that ‘Chinese Buddhism regarded Avalokiteśvara and Tara as synonymous’ (p. 215). This essay also highlights how the stories about the miracles performed by the Indian masters in China played a vital role in the spread of Buddhism there.

Ho Puay-Peng’s essay is another remarkable contribution in this volume. It attempts to investigate the architecture and the contextual popularity of the two colossal images of Avalokiteśvara erected in tenth-century China. It traces the efficacy of monumental images and the patterns of patronage given to such forms. The essay has rich and in-depth discussions on the architectural forms of monastic complexes of Hebei region in northern China, which houses one of the colossal images.

Rajeshwari Ghose’s chapter on Kizil concerns Buddhist art and religion along the Silk Road. She discusses Kizil as a case study through Xuanzang’s records and examines the presence of different Buddhist schools and their doctrines. The essay attempts to investigate a relevant subject — the philosophical school and practices of Buddhism followed in the region of fifth-century Kucha. However, the essay meanders, offering little of substance. Like Krishnan’s essay, Ghose’s mistakenly identifies the Sarvastivadins Schools with Theravada Buddhism. At the end of this essay, while

delineating the visual representation of Avadāna literature in the mural paintings of the Kizil caves, *The sutra of the wise and foolish* is presumed 'to be a compilation of lecture notes collected in Khotan' (p. 264). This presumption is incorrect; its Indian Sanskrit version, mentioned as *Dammūka-sutra*, can be found in the Lhasa edition of the Tibetan Buddhist canon.

This volume is accompanied with clear maps and all the pages and plates are in colour. As with most multi-authored volumes, there is a considerable variation in the quality of the contributions. Nevertheless, looking at the paucity of the materials available on Buddhist arts in this region, this volume is going to be a significant addition to the resources available on Southeast Asian art history.

As the eminent art historian Ananda K. Coomaraswamy perceptively observed,

it is not our aesthetic, but only by their rhetoric, that we can hope to understand and interpret the arts of other peoples and other ages than our own ... Our present university courses in this field embody a pathetic fallacy, and are anything but scientific in any sense.

Many such misconceptions about Buddhist art still linger in certain quarters of art history and some essays of this volume certainly provide the possibilities of removing such misconceptions.

PRANSHU SAMDARSHI
University of Delhi

Exile in colonial Asia: Kings, convicts, commemoration

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The publication of Ronit Ricci's edited collection, *Exile in colonial Asia: Kings, convicts, commemoration* is an important event for the field. This volume, made up of ten contributions with an introductory essay also offered by the author, covers ground that we have not seen before in the region. Though there has been some work on the notion of exile in this part of the world — notably on the exile of officials in classical China, for example, but also, increasingly, in colonial Southeast Asia, as practised by European overlords on their subject, indigenous populations — the idea of charting this process as a whole across the width and breadth of Asian space is new, to my knowledge. As such, this is a signal work — one that will hopefully inform others, and start a raft of publishing on similar topics. We could use the book. Exile was a powerful tool, both for local governments punishing their own subjects, and for imperial governments keen to move 'troublemakers' and 'rabble-rousers' away from their ethnic fellows, and out toward 'safer' pastures. This volume covers a wide range of exiling in history, and the first essay by Ronit Ricci herself, and a second contribution by Clare Anderson, which also looks at the theme over the two centuries