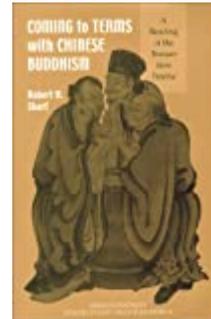




Robert H. Sharf. *Coming to Terms with Chinese Buddhism: A Reading of the Treasure Store Treatise.* Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001. 400 pp. \$48.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8248-2443-3.



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Coming to Terms with Chinese Buddhism is a detailed study of the complex dynamics of the sinicization of Buddhism, centering around the translation of an eighth century apocryphal Chan treatise named the *Baozang lun* ("Treasure Store Treatise"). Robert Sharf's interest in this particular treatise was sparked by what it reveals about the way Buddhism in China, and especially the Chan tradition, developed in relation to the Chinese philosophical/religious intellectual milieu in which it was produced. Although the treatise was attributed to the Sanlun master Sengzhao (374-414), it is clear that the *Baozang lun* was actually an eighth century production showing pronounced Daoist and Confucian influences that were an integral part of the intellectual environ of the period. The author's essays on the background of the text aim to clarify the nature of these influences, and the way that the intellectual environment of China evolved with Buddhism in its midst. The book is divided into three main parts: an introduction; a longer section comprised of two essays pertaining to the philological and cosmological background of the treatise, and the translation itself. There is also a separate article, containing a critique of Japanese historiography of esoteric Buddhism, included in the appendix of the book.

The introduction is constituted primarily by an argument for the re-assessment of the historiographical mod-

els previously used in the interpretation of the process of assimilation of Buddhism into China. Sharf first recites for us what he calls the "master narrative," wherein studies of medieval Buddhist doctrine "are still framed in terms of interrelationships between discrete and autonomous historical entities" (p. 10). He argues incisively that the method of interpreting East Asian intellectual history as a series of interactions between distinct sects, such as Pure Land, Sanlun, Neo-Confucianism, and even broader categories, such as "Indian Buddhism" and "Chinese culture," needs to be re-appraised in light of the recent heightened historical awareness that the lines demarcating these entities are at best, nebulous.

With the questioning of this master narrative as an operating principle, Sharf is encouraging future scholars to more accurately evaluate the role, in sinicization, of commonly-cited East Asian Buddhist concepts, such as *tathaagatagarbha* and "Buddha-nature," as well as the role of local religious counterparts to Buddhism such as Bon, Shinto, pre-Buddhist Daoism, and so forth. An entitled model of Buddhism as a distinct tradition becomes difficult to support in view of the fact that the entity that we label as "Buddhism" cannot but be an admixture of other movements by which, in contradistinction to, it defined itself. Sharf concludes, based on this appraisal of the situation that "In the final analysis, pure or unadulter-

ated Buddhism is little more than an analytic abstraction posited by Buddhist polemicists, apologists, reformers, and now scholars” (p. 16). This questioning of the master narrative is not limited to a disapproval of the notions of distinct sects, but extends to the conceptions of the interaction of the larger Indian and Chinese cultural entities themselves, and thus “...it is historically and hermeneutically misleading to conceive of the sinification of Buddhism in terms of a dialogue between two discrete cultural traditions” (p. 21). While there are numerous perspicacious observations made in this introduction, I think that some specialists of East Asian Buddhism may not so readily accept this neatly packaged characterization of prior Chinese Buddhist historiography. For example, although most scholars will no doubt recognize the general tendencies of the “master narrative” told here, it should be noted for the uninitiated that this narrative represents, to a great extent, Sharf’s own take, since there are no citations given in this section that confirm its replication elsewhere. I will address this issue in further detail below.

The first of the two essays on the historical and cosmological background of the treatise focuses on its dating and provenance. Here Sharf enumerates the variety of factors in the Chinese religious landscape that served to bring a mixed pedigree text such as the *Baozang lun* into existence. The possible reasons for the attribution to Sengzhao are examined, along with the detailed investigation of the text’s philological roots and relations through comparative analysis of works of similar pedigree, most notably the *Jueguan lun*, a text closely associated with the Oxhead “school” of Chan. Finally, the Daoist roots for the discourse that generated the treatise are scrutinized, with a special focus on Twofold Mystery Daoism and Gentry Daoism, both of which were in a position of unusual popularity and official acceptance during the first half of the century that the *Baozang lun* was written. This section is especially rich in facts and analysis showing the depth of the symbiotic relationship of Chan and Daoism during this period.

In the second part of his discussion on the historical and cosmological background of the treatise, entitled “Chinese Buddhism and the Cosmology of Sympathetic Resonance,” Sharf introduces us to an aspect of the Chinese religious worldview that would exert a powerful influence on Buddhist soteriology as it underwent the process of being rendered into a Chinese idiom. This is *ganying* (“stimulus-response”), the pre-Buddhist Chinese concept that becomes the basis for the creation of various Mahaayaana notions of “response body,” “transformation

body,” and so forth. Sharf shows the extent to which the ideas that developed in East Asia regarding the response body and its variants had their roots in pre-Buddhist Chinese cosmology. This argument is grounded in the observations on the early Chinese worldview made by such scholars as Needham, Mote, and Bodde, that explain a Chinese religious consciousness that is distinguished by its intuitions of invisible connections: between heaven and earth, spirits and men, and between things belonging to the same categories (Ch. *lei*), such as tones, elements and so forth. This is the organismic worldview of the ancient Chinese that is seen in virtually all of their major classical texts, regardless of whether they are considered to be of “Confucian” or “Daoist” pedigree.

In the process of the assimilation of Buddhist doctrine into Chinese idiom, it is in precisely the texts that held the greatest influence on the development of East Asian Buddhist soteriology, such as the *La.nkaavataara-sutra* and *Awakening of Faith*, where the concepts of *nir-maa.nakaaya* and *sa.mbhogakaaya* show the greatest degree of ambivalence in connotation. Starting from this point in the text (p. 100 ff.) Sharf provides us with one of the most lucid analyses of buddha-body theory that I have seen, comparing the different ways that Sanskrit terms for the various buddha-bodies were translated in various texts, with a special focus on the variations in rendering seen in the three Chinese translations of the *La.nkaavataara-sutra*. He then concludes the discussion by showing the relationship between the indigenous Chinese notion of sage, and East Asian buddha-body theory, as transformed through this Chinese cosmological sensibility of “sympathetic resonance.” He also brings into the discussion of resonance the concept of “invocation” (Sk. *adhi.s.thaana*, Ch. *jiachi*), and shows as well how the Indian understanding of “causes and conditions” (Sk. *hetu-pratyaya*; Ch. *yinyuan*) also fell under the transforming power of this intuition of sympathetic resonance. This essay on the historical and cosmological background of the treatise is well-documented, cogently argued, and offers many new insights.

Having taken the time to scrutinize the translation in considerable detail, I can report that this is an extremely accurate and well-polished rendition of the treatise. The quality of the translation is further enhanced by the lengths to which Sharf has gone in investigating and explaining for us both the background of important technical terms, and his reasons for translating them the way he does. Sharf explains virtually every single term that we might have concerns about, some of the more important being “apex of reality” (Ch. *shiji*, Sk. *bhuutako.ti*),

“point of genesis” (Ch. *benji*), “transcendence and subtlety” (Ch. *liwei*) and so forth. As he demonstrates, with a text like the *Treasure Store Treatise*, a solid understanding of the usage and development of many terms in their pre-Buddhist classical Chinese usage is imperative for grasping their full connotations. This sort of clarification is what his title, “coming to terms,” alludes to. The *Baozang lun* was not merely something slapped together by a group of Daoists trying to imitate a Buddhist work (or vice versa) but a carefully wrought piece reflecting many subtle nuances in the development of Buddhology at that point in time and location. Thus it is a valuable work for understanding the development of notions of original enlightenment, classical Chan, as well as the way Buddhist and Daoist religious thinkers were discoursing amidst the intellectual milieu of the period.

Appendix 1 features an article that reassesses many commonly-held understandings regarding the history of Esoteric Buddhism (Ch. *Mijiao*, *Zhenyan*) in China. With sharp critical acumen, Sharf argues to the effect that what has come to be regarded a “lineage” of esoteric Buddhism in China (centered around ‘Subhaakarasi.mha, Vajrabodhi, Amoghavajra, et. al.) is largely a fabrication developed in Japanese scholarship for the purpose of providing early historical grounding for later Japanese sectarian models, thereby validating the distinct Mikkyou/Shingon lineages in Japan. Observing that the “Chinese sources actually provide little in the way of evidence to support the Japanese understanding of a self-conscious esoteric school or lineage” (p. 267), Sharf examines how such Japanese scholars as Yoritomo Motohiro read Zanning’s *Song gaoseng zhuan* in such a way as to support lineage theories. Sharf finds such readings to be “forced” (p. 271) hypothesizing instead that Zanning was “engaged in an anachronistic, if not ad hoc, tenet-classification scheme, the purport of which was doctrinal exegesis, not historical description” (p. 272). This is a ground-breaking piece, one which cannot be ignored by future scholarly treatments of the history of East Asian Esotericism.

Coming to Terms with Chinese Buddhism is a well-researched and carefully executed study that will become known as a valuable contribution to our understanding of East Asian Buddhism. This being said, I would like to voice some disagreements with certain interpretive premises and conclusions offered within the book, as well as a small note regarding its structure.

First, although the second part of the title indicates that the book should be understood as a “reading of the

Treasure Store Treatise,” it should be pointed out that through much of the first half of the book, the relationship of the discourse to the central themes of the treatise itself is tenuous. The introduction, the second essay prior to the treatise, and the essay in the appendix may almost be taken as stand-alone articles. While they *can* be subsumed under the rubric of “Coming to Terms with Chinese Buddhism” there is some lack of thematic cohesiveness in relation to the ostensive subject text.

As noted above, I also had a bit of difficulty with the expectations that seemed to be placed on the reader in the introduction, especially regarding the critique of the “master narrative.” It seems that this characterization of that narrative is, if not significantly more reified than that which has been understood by most scholars in the field, then at least a bit dated. Scholars of East Asian Buddhism, in my experience, have not held much esteem for the concept of discrete “schools” during the early period of sinicization for some time. As for the debunking of the notion of a Chinese-Indian “dialogue,” I don’t recall, even in graduate school, having gotten the impression from Zurcher, Ch’en, et. al., that there ever existed anything like an Indian-Chinese dialogue—that Chinese culture as a whole had any serious communication with, much less impact on, Indian traditions. Thus, there is some sense in which this criticism seems to be directed at a straw man.

One might also argue that problems emerge in the ongoing discourse of de-entification, specifically the apparent difficulty Sharf himself has in strictly adhering to it. There is a sense of inconsistency in Sharf’s seeming need to rely on the same sorts of “reified” categories that he would like so much to steer us away from—specifically, reified notions of distinct traditions, lineages, and cultural barriers. When it comes to the discussion later in the introduction where he needs to identify the traditions that formed the basis for the production of the treatise, it seems that we are asked to acknowledge the existence of very much reified Buddhist (Oxhead) and Daoist (Two Mystery) traditions, which competed for government patronage, and which, according to Sharf, actively sought to steal each other’s canonical terminology. Sharf reasons thus:

“What is one to make of the fact that a vast number of key terms in such purportedly Taoist works are unambiguously Buddhist in origin? ... It is unlikely that such large-scale borrowing is the result of peaceful coexistence and benevolent intellectual exchange. Given the political and social stakes in the seventh and eighth centuries, with both Taoists and Buddhists vying for pres-

tige and state patronage, the texts I have been examining may represent the concerted attempts by both sides to lay exclusive claim to a common conceptual terrain” (pp. 70-71).

To make this argument work, it seems that we cannot but acknowledge the existence of clearly distinguished traditions. This would not be unreasonable, if not for the repeated, well-articulated arguments made by the author for seeing the religious philosophical terrain of the period as a symbiotic whole, rather than as being made up of discrete schools. If we are being asked to assume a different model here, the reasons for doing so do not seem to be clearly explained.

Even if one finds no problems of consistency in interpretive model, one might still have difficulty swallowing the conclusion drawn in the last sentence of the above citation, which asks the reader to understand that the usage of “Daoist” vocabulary in a philosophical-soteriological text such as this was governed primarily by concerns of contrivance in seeking the attainment of favor from the state polity.

We cannot deny the concerns of leading Buddhists vis-a-vis local competing traditions for recognition from and sponsorship by the state polity in any area of Asia in the premodern period. But the tendency seen here (which is shared by much of East Asian philological/historical Buddhist scholarship) to interpret the composition of every single text primarily in terms of political aims is, to me, extreme. The *Treasure Store* is a work that is centered on the discussion of soteriological practices in terms of contemplative approaches developing in a nascent Chan movement. Sharf has, in his prior narrative, gone to such great lengths to show us how Buddhists and Daoists (and any other groups in between) had been sharing in the same idiom for centuries, and had found, from the outset, an extensive range of similarity in nuance of philosophical vocabulary. I would suggest, then, that this overlap in vocabulary might have had as much to do with the simple sharing of discourse within a given intellectual milieu, as it had to do with concerns for securing state patronage. Thus, I see no reason not

to think that the selection of the vocabulary of the *Treasure Store Treatise* could have been, in large part, the result of “benevolent intellectual exchange.” What would 21st century scholars think if they were to find out that researchers 1000 years hence interpreted their writings assuming that the content of every single work was fully motivated by the aim of attaining tenure?

In terms of sharing vocabulary, we might observe the distinctive vocabulary—the “buzz words”—that we see used in North American Zen centers, so much of which originates in non-Buddhist sources: from North American Christian traditions, from psychotherapeutic discourse, or from other Asian religious movements. This is a borrowing which is done, I would say, almost fully without consciousness of “turf struggles” with those traditions, and more importantly, often without any consciousness whatsoever. Many Americans use words like karma, zen, nirvana, etc., without a clue as to what those terms actually mean in their original contexts. In the historical period covered by this book, Daoist uses of Buddhist terms often display the same recontextualization of meaning; and these get borrowed back into Buddhist texts, so that the ‘meanings’ of many key terms become conflated or reconfigured so that after a certain point it is not even relevant to label the usage of a certain term as Daoist or Buddhist. By the time the *Treasure Store Treatise* is written, as Sharf has so well explained, this kind of interchange has been going on for several centuries. Thus, the hypothesis that places “turf struggles” at the fore does not seem especially tenable.

The reader should not take the extent of my indulgence in engaging with the interpretive conclusions drawn by in this book to mean that I find it to be on the whole flawed or problematic. On the contrary, it is precisely because the book is intended to be challenging of the suppositions of previous scholarship, and does such a good job of raising important issues, that one is motivated to engage oneself with its conclusions. The research that has gone into this study is extensive, and it has been well-presented. Serious students of East Asian Buddhism and Chinese thought will want to include it in their personal libraries.

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