https://doi.org/10.29213/crbs..37.202504.93

Kieschnick, John. 2003. *The Impact of Buddhism on Chinese Material Culture.* Princeton University Press[1)]

Rev Wadigala Samitharathana
(University of Oxford, St Cross College, MPhil Candidate in Buddhist Studies)

In general, Kieschnick's (2003) book attempts to bring new insights to Chinese material world; it overviews a vast array of sacred objects, ideas, symbols, monasteries, and ritual implements – *vis-à-vis* dynamic social behaviours of a new Buddhist environment aroused in the first century CE. The author's main focus lies upon resolving a set of negotiations amongst the ideas, behaviours, and relationships in society; he emphasises such aspects as the manufacture and use of a plethora of sacred objects, the purpose of using sanctification ornaments, and the folk attitudes thereto. I will look into these central ideas in which they were permeated in the four chapters of the monograph. By all means, they highlight some points of strength and weakness to a wider extent in scholarship.

The first chapter called 'Sacred Power' (24-82) delves into the relics and icons of Chinese material culture. In fact, the sacred objects have often played a vital role in spreading the word of the Buddha (*buddha-vacana*) since the

1) This book review is based on my MA in Buddhist Studies (with Distinction) that I completed at SOAS University of London in 2023-24. I would therefore be grateful to Dr. Stefania Travagnin (SOAS) for her thoughtful feedback and insights that greatly enriched my understanding and analysis of Chinese Buddhism.

early history of Buddhism. As per the author, the statues/images and relics, as devotional symbols, were a powerful handrail for monastics and lay people to get into Buddhist wisdom in ancient China. By employing Tylor's (1871) intervention of 'animism', according to which soul lives in all creatures of nature, he asserts that China has firmly believed in this phenomenon for early ages – for example, the cult of rock at Chencang that was reported by Sima Qian in the second century BCE. Kieschnick *ipso facto* argues that local citizens strongly remained in practice of invoking supernormal and marvellous powers – that were embodied in the peculiar Buddhist relics and images, viz., 'numinous' (*ling*) in return for a miraculous outcome of an auspicious event (*ganying*).

The second chapter entitled 'Symbolism' (83-156) investigates the monastic uniform, the rosary, and the *ruyi* sceptre; it further sheds light on the Buddhist iconography in Chinese materialism. In effect, Eastern Han (25-220 CE) gave rise to artefacts, symbols in stone reliefs, burial goods, and tomb paintings – of those which were found in Han iconography at first sight, for instance, images of Xi Wangmu on the walls of Han tombs. However, the author has later identified a couple of key issues regarding the Buddhist impact on the Chinese symbolic repertoire: the genesis of symbols and the hardship of their respective interpretations. In particular, during the Tang Dynasty, Buddhist symbolism was introduced with more overarching techniques, for instance, 'illusionistic shading' and the symbols like Dharma wheel, *Swastika*, and Guanyin. Therefore, Kieschnick firmly claims that symbolism in China emerged with a standalone opportunity to thrive in the intellectual rigour of Buddhist philosophy – within monastic and lay communities, rather than a conventional norm of Buddhist art and rituals.

The third chapter titled 'Merit' (157-219) probes multiple books, monasteries, and associates them to a certain extent with the abstract ideas – whereby they shaped Chinese material culture. As the author states, manufacture and

distribution of all devotional objects and monumental statues and buildings were, if not most, driven upon the beliefs in the Buddhist principles of merit; therein lies an omnipresent universal nature which is rooted in human life and moral system – that will reward this life or the next life upon meritorious deeds performed in the past. Furthermore, as Kieschnick scrutinises, although Chinese culture was rather different from this mechanical notion of 'karma' at the earlier periods, Chinese Buddhists were largely endowed with faithful practice of merits – after the first century CE. For instance, The *Biographies of Eminent Monks* have been dedicated to a particular chapter, 'elicit blessings' (*xingfu*) – wherein it narrated several wholesome works cultivated in a lifetime such as the erection of monasteries, *stūpas*, and bridges.

The final chapter named 'Accidents and Incidentals' (220-80) is drawn upon the chair, sugar, and tea – those of which made a recipe for a gradual growth of Chinese material culture by means of non-Buddhist objects. Accordingly, the chair was first introduced to China as a complex innovation for household life. Secondly, sugar was a well-known substance that was used in medicine and cuisine, despite the production technology. Thirdly, indigenous tea had an intimate connection with the rise of monastic Buddhism in China – as it was often used by monks, as part of Buddhist missionary work in society. Although the author agrees that these three items have played a momentous role in expanding Buddhist principles and practices throughout China, later scholars were not delighted to admit such implementations – claiming that there is a drastic departure or distance from orthodox Buddhist teachings.

I will hereafter examine subtle grounds in which these compelling ideas are present in comparison with the burgeoning literature in Chinese Buddhism. In the first chapter, Kieschnick (80) draws a distinction between the personal presence of sacred objects and the impersonal presence of abstract materials named 'animatism' and 'animism', respectively; this was critically identified on the basis of human cognitive perception. This is likely to be an in-depth

philosophical speculation towards the holistic images and relics inherited in Chinese Buddhist culture. For example, as Ch'en (1973, 6) underpins, this has been featured as a moderate aspect of the transformation of Buddhism into China. With reference to the *Lotus* and *Pure Land Sūtras*, the historical concepts and icons of bodhisattvas like Maitreya and Avalokiteśvara were innately imbued with the widespread spiritual qualities per se – such as compassion, loving-kindness, and mercy – that are far beyond the narrow means of physical impressions. Conversely, although this notion seems to be a strong position at first glance, this has left the grounds with caution and scepticism for some modern scholars. They in turn question to what extent these Buddhist exhibits, such as images, teeth, bone, and statues, are intrinsically equipped with such mighty powers and robust interpretations; according to the critique, there are neither rigid meanings nor congenital manifestations upon the material elements. By all means – the numinous course comes into play with the clarity of mind (Mou 2009, 46-47), rather than other external facets affiliated to it. Therefore, this section inevitably makes room for a theoretical paradox of intellect and doubt in contemporary scholarship.

Additionally, as Kieschnick (153-54) probes in the second chapter, there is a solid argument in context: as part of 'sinicization' that means the religio-cultural process of admitting foreign symbols to their local culture – there has been a close relationship between objects and symbolism; this is simply not built in itself, but was projected by human mind natively (Gildow 2014, 62). For instance, during the Tang Dynasty, the 'wooden fish' was an epitome of vigilance as the fish never falls asleep; 'the ever-burning lamp' (*changming-deng*) was emblematic of the mind with right enlightenment because the lamp served as a long-lasting offering to the Buddha. According to Gregory (1986, 2), this is a vague emergence of the Zen meditation practice within the context of Chinese Buddhism; it flows with the 'mind-to-mind transmission' out of textual materials, whilst embracing the historical Buddha through pure enlightenment;

there is an avenue of research for profound wisdom in human life – by introspecting your own motives upon such transcendental objects.

Moreover, Kieschnick (215-18) firmly holds in the third chapter a view that the doctrine of merits was immersed in Chinese material culture – since the historical entrance of Buddhism into China during the late Han Dynasty. As a result, *stūpas*, alms-bowls, books, monasteries, bridges, robes, and so forth particularly represented the charity and wealth of esteemed donors; they *de facto* fleshed out with the prominent concepts of 'karma' and 'rebirth'. According to Ch'en (1964, 46), this moral conduct and wholesome activities paved the way for the Buddhist thought of '*anatta*' (non-self) and '*saṃsāra*' (the cycle of rebirth) against the prevailing tenets of the soul, i.e., 'indestructibility' – that echoed down the ages in local belief. This reflective arrival *ipso facto* helped resolve some enigmatic dilemmas between mental and physical formations – for the sake of spiritual awakening in mankind. On the contrary, according to Kieschnick (219), with reference to *The Scripture of the Resolution of Doubts in the Age of the Semblance Dharma*, the preceding stance gave rise to another convoluted situation about the deeply-rooted instability between the charity and the discourse of emptiness. However, in the lens of Theravāda Buddhist analysis, this is likely to be a psychological or ego-centric entanglement on the gist of the self – due to negligence and ignorance in day-to-day living culture at large (Anālayo 2010, 209).

In the final chapter, Kieschnick (275) intends to mark out the vast scope and enormous complexity of the Buddhist impact on local materialism; it discovers accidental and incidental essentials of monastic life. In my view, although this is theoretically different from the early Buddhist canonical literature, there are a multitude of pragmatic values – whereby Buddhism could spread over the Chinese people in common life in the midst of 'commodification' and 'modernity' (Nichols 2020, 184; Yang 2008, 3) – for example, these values can be discerned in architecture, furniture, medicine, technology, and mass education.

In all, I would assume that this scholarly work provocatively deals with real consequences of Buddhism on Chinese material culture – to a great extent in contemporary scholarship.

| Bibliography |

Anālayo, Bhikkhu. 2010. *Satipaṭṭhāna: The Direct Path to Realisation*. Buddhist Publication Society.

Ch'en, Kenneth Kuan Sheng. 1973. *The Chinese Transformation of Buddhism*. Princeton University Press.

_____. 1964. *Buddhism in China: A Historical Survey*. Princeton University Press.

Gildow, Douglas M. 2014. "The Chinese Buddhist Ritual Field: Common Public Rituals in PRC Monasteries Today". *Journal of Chinese Buddhist Studies* 27 (1), 59-127.

Gregory, Peter N. 1986. *Traditions of Meditations in Chinese Buddhism*. Hawaii University Press.

Kieschnick, John. 2003. *The Impact of Buddhism on Chinese Material Culture*. Princeton University Press.

Mou, Bo, eds. 2009. *Routledge History of World Philosophy: History of Chinese Philosophy*. Routledge.

Nichols, Brian J. 2020. "Interrogating Religious Tourism at Buddhist Monasteries in China". In: *Buddhist Tourism in Asia*, edited by Bruntz, C. and Schedneck, B. Hawaii University Press, 183-205. Available at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvgs09c4?turn_away=true (Accessed: Feb. 13, 2025).

Tylor, Edward Burnett. 1871. *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art, and Custom*. John Murray.

Yang, Mayfair Mei-hui, eds. 2008. *Chinese Religiosities, Afflictions of Modernity and State Formation*. University of California Press. Available at: https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3jn4j8cf (Accessed: Feb. 13, 2025).