



INDIA IN THE CHINESE IMAGINATION

MYTH, RELIGION, AND THOUGHT

EDITED BY

JOHN KIESCHNICK AND MEIR SHAHAR

India in the Chinese Imagination

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In Memory of
John R. McRae

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India in the Chinese Imagination



Figure 1. Liu Songnian's *arhat (luohan)*, c. 1155–1218. Courtesy the National Palace Museum Taiwan, Republic of China.

Introduction

Liu Songnian's (ca. 1155–1218) *Arhat* is considered a masterpiece of Chinese portraiture (Figure 1). The renowned court painter depicted in it an Indian Buddhist saint (*arhat*) as he had imagined him to appear. Liu likely never met an Indian in person. In order to render one he merely exaggerated the facial features the Chinese had long associated with foreigners from the west: prominent nose, bushy eyebrows, bulging eyes, and a bearded chin. He even furnished his fanciful Indian subject with pirate-like earrings. The whimsical effect notwithstanding, Liu's *arhat* is deeply moving. Gazelles grazing at his feet and gibbons frolicking overhead, the Indian saint is in complete harmony with the surrounding nature. His concentrated gaze is directed far into space—or into the recess of his own soul. Having shed all worldly concerns, he has achieved transcendence.

Liu's *Arhat* might furnish a convenient introduction to the twin aspects of this book: the Indian impact on the Chinese creative imagination and the Chinese imaginings of India. Beginning in the first century CE, the Buddhist faith brought to China Indian saints and gods, demons and ghouls that were to change forever the Chinese mental landscape. The Buddhist arhats (Chinese: *luohan*), for example, became a favorite topic of Chinese fiction and visual arts, celebrated in statues, paintings, and novels down to modern times. At the same time, the Buddhist influx of Indian philosophy and mythology, art and material culture led inquisitive Chinese minds to ponder their source. For almost two millennia, Chinese thinkers and novelists, artists and architects have been recreating India within their own borders. Paintings such as Liu Songnian's reveal to us India and its inhabitants as fancied by the Chinese: India in the Chinese imagination.

India's impact on Chinese civilization has been the subject of intensive research. Generations of scholars have revealed to us the indebtedness of Chinese culture to Indian precedents. Beginning in the first centuries CE, India contributed—largely through the vehicle of Buddhism—to all aspects of Chinese religious, cultural, artistic, and material life. Chinese notions of transcendence had been radically transformed by the Buddhist notion of liberation, just as the Chinese heavens and hells had been populated by gods and demons of Indian

descent. Chinese paintings and sculptures drew heavily on the Indian—no less than the Central Asian and Greco-Buddhist—techniques by which the Buddha had been visually rendered, and the Chinese performing arts—storytelling and drama—adopted the Indian modes of the *chante-fable* (alternating prose and verse) that had been common in the Indian subcontinent. Chinese philosophy had been forever altered by the substance and style of Indian epistemological and ontological discourse, and the Chinese diet was transformed by the adoption of the sugar and the rice gruel that had been consumed by Indian Buddhist missionaries. Even Chinese furniture had been fashioned after Indian precedents. Prior to the advent of Buddhism, the Chinese sat on mats, whereas following the example of Indian monks they began sitting on chairs.¹

This volume differs from the extensive scholarship that inspired it in paying particular attention to three related aspects of the Indo-Chinese encounter. The first is the impact of Indian religion and literature on the Chinese creative imagination broadly conceived. Buddhism brought to China creatures of the Indian imagination, and metaphysical products of the Indian mind, that were to shape Chinese religion, literature, and philosophical discourse all through the modern period. The following chapters survey Indian gods and demons, no less than philosophical concepts of life, death, and rebirth that inspired Chinese authors far beyond the confines of the Buddhist monastic establishment. The Chinese imagining of India is the second topic. The two civilizations being separated by a daunting geographical gap, only a tiny fraction of the Chinese population had ever been in direct contact with Indian people or things. Hence the Chinese were forced to strain their imagination to conceive of the land to which they were so deeply indebted. The chapters reveal the often surprising ways in which Chinese authors—lay and clerical alike—sought to comprehend India, applying to it Chinese intellectual tools. Closely related is the third topic: the Chinese recreation of India within its own borders. Here the contributors examine some of the ways Chinese monarchs and priests rethought and reinvented Indian philosophy and Indian institutions.

Granting the tremendous influence India exerted over medieval China (largely through Buddhism), it is well to note that the two civilizations had been interacting for the most part indirectly. Prior to modern times, communication and exchange between India and China were conducted largely via intermediaries. Intensive and prolonged *direct* contact originated no earlier than the twentieth century, when it sometimes took a hostile turn. In 1962, after a series of border skirmishes, Chinese and Indian troops clashed in what later became known as the “Sino-Indian War,” a brief but costly conflict fought in harsh conditions over

disputed territory. The war had far-reaching implications for Chinese-Indian relations in the latter half of the twentieth century, but it is also remarkable as the first military confrontation between the two cultures in over a thousand years.² The war marked a new era of direct contact—in this case sadly violent—between India and China; despite the long history of influence and exchange, for approximately two thousand years, relations between India and China had been almost always conducted via neighboring countries and peoples.

We might easily lose sight of the layers of mediation that lay between India and China, given the rich history of trade between the two regions. In medieval times, each was well aware of the other's existence, exchanging all manner of goods and even a series of political embassies. Beginning in roughly the first century, a vibrant trade between India and China flourished, with the establishment and expansion of the Silk Route. India supplied precious gems and aromatics, medicinal plants, spices, cotton, and Buddhist devotional objects; China sent porcelain, gold, camphor, and, above all, silk.³ The goods came through various routes—most famously through the oasis kingdoms of Central Asia, but also by sea and along passages through Tibet and Burma. But while there are records of Indian traders in China and Chinese traders in India, trade for the most part took place through middlemen.⁴ Much of what came to China from India arrived through the efforts of Sogdians, Parthians, and later Arabs. Hence, while many Chinese had seen Indian cotton, or consumed sugar that had been refined by techniques transmitted from India, few would have ever met an actual Indian. The same was true for Indians, who may have been familiar with Chinese silks, but would probably have purchased them from other Indians or from Central Asian merchants.

Records of embassies from India to China and from China to India demonstrate that a select few *did* interact with their counterparts, but such exchanges were the exception rather than the rule. The same was true even for Buddhism, India's most famous and successful import to China. From the first century to the thirteenth, some intrepid Indian monks did make their way to China, and on the Chinese side, pilgrims went to India, came back to China, and wrote about their experiences, most notably Faxian (337–ca. 422), Xuanzang (602–664), and Yijing (635–713). But these pilgrims are famous in part because they were exceptional. Even among the most accomplished Chinese monks, few ever even expressed an intention of making the trip to the land of the Buddha; the journey was considered too treacherous, the obstacles—including the Taklamakan desert, the Himalayas, and the sea—too great. Indeed, the three great Chinese pilgrims were known as much for making the trip itself as for what they saw and learned in India. And while the accounts of India by Faxian, Xuanzang, and Yijing remain valuable for

understanding India in the medieval period, they were written for a particular Chinese audience and reflect the way these three talented Chinese pilgrims wanted their trips to be perceived in China.⁵ In other words, as sources for literate Chinese to understand India, the travel accounts of the Chinese pilgrims provided only indirect access to India, tied up with preconceptions of both the authors and what the authors assumed their Chinese readers wanted to know. From the second century to the eleventh, a handful of Indian monks were active in China, but their numbers were overshadowed by monks from Central Asia—Sogdiana, Bactria, Parthia, Kucha, Khotan and the Kushan empire—who bridged the gap that separated India and China.

The work of virtually all these foreign monks centered on the translation of scripture. For well over half a millennium, Buddhists in China carried out perhaps the greatest, and certainly the best organized, long-term translation project in the history of the world. Working in teams, under imperial auspices, monks and laymen translated a massive body of Buddhist writings from Indian languages—for the most part Sanskrit—into Chinese. Hence, if most Chinese did not have access to India through travel or contact with merchants or monks, they could at least read books from India. Granted, Indian books were largely limited to Buddhist scriptures—references to non-Buddhist Indian writings are extremely rare in Chinese history. Nonetheless, reams of accurate, carefully rendered translations of Buddhist scripture at least seem to have provided Chinese with direct access to Indian Buddhism. But even here, knowledge of India was mediated through the Chinese language. Translators, attempting to present Buddhist writings in elegant, sophisticated Chinese, chose Chinese terms with resonance in the Chinese tradition, inevitably leading to shades of meaning and associations not present in the original.⁶ The number of Chinese monks with any facility at all in Sanskrit was severely limited; the study of Sanskrit was not part of standard monastic training even for the most advanced monks in China. And the massive body of literature on lay interest in Buddhism yields rare examples—if any—of Chinese literati learning Sanskrit.⁷ The relationship between India and China was hence markedly different from that between, for example, China and Japan or Korea. From medieval times to the twentieth century, educated Japanese read widely in Chinese writings—not just Buddhist works—in the original language. Korean monks not only traveled to China, but even became famous within China, composing works in Chinese, attracting Chinese disciples, and contributing directly to the development of Chinese Buddhism. In contrast, the only recorded attempt by a Chinese monk to compose a work in Sanskrit was when the emperor commanded Xuanzang to oversee a Sanskrit translation of the *Dao de jing*.⁸

But even for those Chinese who could not read Sanskrit, travel to India, or meet any who had, the accounts of pilgrims and merchants, precious foreign objects, and, above all, the rich Buddhist literature in Chinese translation were more than enough to inspire speculation about various facets of Indian life. And the picture of India in the Chinese imagination rapidly filled in gaps in knowledge, as fragments of information trickling into China from India took on lives of their own.

Take, for instance, the place of the great Indian king Aśoka in Chinese history. It is unlikely that Aśoka had any significant impact, even indirectly, on China during his third-century BCE rule. But when, centuries later, the story of his rule reached China in Buddhist texts, the *idea* of Aśoka occupied Chinese minds for centuries. Chinese Buddhists claimed that any number of finds were remains of stūpas and relics that had been distributed “throughout the world” by the great Indian king.⁹ And more important still, medieval Chinese emperors like Sui Wendi and Empress Wu drew on the story of Aśoka, imitating his supposed distribution of Buddhist relics to legitimate their own position as “Buddhist rulers.”¹⁰ Just as some Buddhist texts that had only limited circulation in India became enormously successful in China and some texts purporting to be translations from Sanskrit originals were in fact composed in China, biographies of Indian figures grew or were invented entirely in China.¹¹

If Chinese rulers might draw on ideas from India, at times no doubt as much for reasons of political expediency as piety, Chinese monks were in equal parts inspired and haunted by India. Inspired, because they saw in the sacred land of the Buddha possibilities of perfection; haunted, because the China that surrounded them could never equal the India they imagined. Tansen Sen describes the Chinese anxiety over India’s perfection as a “borderland complex.” Although most Chinese assumed that China, the “Middle Kingdom” (*zhongguo*), was the center of the world, Chinese monks often reserved the term middle kingdom for India. And since travel to India was impractical for all but a select few Chinese monks, many traveled to India in their imaginations, witnessing elaborate Indian Buddhist monasteries in visions or discovering that famous relics or even Buddhist deities had left India to take up residence in China.¹² And while Chinese Buddhists described the Indians of their imagination as spiritually accomplished and honest, rivals to Buddhists at court conjured an image of Indians as a devious and pernicious race.¹³

Scholarship on the role of the image of India in Britain—during a time when contacts between India and Britain were much more intimate than those between India and China—underline the importance of imagination even when contact is

much more frequent and direct.¹⁴ Scholarship on the Chinese “invention” of India is, in contrast, scant, despite the fact that their relationship extends over close to two thousand years in a wide variety of artistic and textual genres. The place of India in the Chinese imagination is depicted most lyrically in Edward H. Schafer’s studies of the exotic in the Tang dynasty.¹⁵ Drawing primarily on poetry, Schafer conjures the world of luxury goods and the enthusiasm that surrounded them in the Tang. And while India was by no means the only or even the primary source of exotic goods at the time, India was certainly well known as a source of finery and wonder among the Tang elite. Xinru Liu’s study of trade between ancient India and China and Tansen Sen’s study of Chinese-Indian relations in the medieval period both explore Chinese speculation about India while at the same time relating concrete historical exchanges between the two cultures, demonstrating that the two—physical objects and fantasies, real people and clichés—are ultimately inseparable.

Discussion of the interpretation of India in Britain has centered on the dynamics of colonial power. Though less direct, nationalism plays some role in the scholarship on Chinese-Indian relations, primarily on the Chinese side in debate on “sinification”—the extent to which Chinese adapted and developed Indian elements to suit Chinese needs—with Chinese critics of Buddhism condemning Buddhism as a foreign incursion that is fundamentally anti-Chinese, and scholars of Buddhism countering that Chinese Buddhists adapted the religion to Chinese tastes to the extent that they created something new and fundamentally Chinese.¹⁶ In recent years, scholars have probed the assumptions underlying this discussion. When the Chinese conception of an Indian Buddhist doctrine or figure differs from the original, should it be interpreted as a misunderstanding, or as creative appropriation? Should India have exclusive rights to orthodox Buddhism, or, for that matter, to her other creations, or does, at a certain point, the version of the Indian vision developed outside of India deserve to be called orthodox, or at least, mainstream? Given the internal political, economic, and geographic complexities of India and China during the centuries of their contact, are the terms “India” and “China” too imprecise to lend themselves to meaningful analysis?¹⁷

Discussion of the methodology of research on Chinese-Indian relations in the premodern period has only just begun, and our picture is fragmentary and skewed. The chapters that follow approach the Chinese understanding of India through different genres of writing along diverse paths of development, grappling along the way with the question of what it means to imagine another culture and why it matters.

Part I, “Indian Mythology and the Chinese Imagination,” explores the place

of Indian gods and stories about them in Chinese literature, broadly understood. In this section, Victor Mair, who has long argued for the importance of contact with foreign cultures for a full understanding of Chinese literature and thought, in “Transformation as Imagination in Medieval Popular Buddhist Literature,” demonstrates that Buddhism introduced to Chinese literature a radically new approach to fictionalizing. That is, not only did India provide Chinese authors with new gods and stories about them, it provided them with a new way of thinking out loud and on paper, relatively free of the constraints of history and its tyrannical demand for evidence. In “Indian Mythology and the Chinese Imagination: Nezha, Nalakūbara, and Kṛṣṇa,” Meir Shahar traces the vagaries of Nezha, now one of the most popular and prevalent of all Chinese gods, back to his Indian roots in stories about Nalakūbara and Kṛṣṇa, exploring along the way the extent to which Indian mythology informs Chinese popular religion in often unexpected and puzzling ways, in this case uniting “two of the greatest Asian story-cycles—the Indian legends of the baby Kṛṣṇa, and the Chinese myths of the infant Nezha.” For another transformation of Indian mythology, Bernard Faure, in “Indic Influences on Chinese Mythology: King Yama and His Acolytes as Gods of Destiny,” turns to the underworld, arguing that although the image of Yama as judge of the dead is a typical Indian motif, what happened to it in China—for better or worse—is a typical Chinese development. In China, Yama fluctuated between his role as, on the one hand, a righteous judge modeled in function and appearance on the Chinese magistrate, and, on the other, an Indian god, as powerful as he is unpredictable, capable of shaping not just the world of the dead, but that of the living as well.

A common thread that runs through the Shahar and Faure contributions is the role of Tantric Buddhism in bringing Indian mythology to bear on the Chinese imagination of the supernatural. The history and the very name of the Tantric movement have been the subject of scholarly debate, some preferring to name it “Esoteric Buddhism.” By Tantric Buddhism, Shahar and Faure refer to the form of Buddhism that, crystalizing in sixth- and seventh-century India, was brought to China in its complete form by such ritual masters as Amoghavajra (705–774). They suggest that the vast array of Indian divinities in Tantric (i.e., esoteric) rituals, no less than the movement’s emphasis on iconography and visualization, have exposed Chinese believers to the prolific world of the Indian supernatural.¹⁸

With Nobuyoshi Yamabe’s chapter, “Indian Myth Transformed in a Chinese Apocryphal Text: Two Stories on the Buddha’s Hidden Organ,” the focus turns to conceptions of the figure of the Buddha, and specifically to stories in which the Buddha gives a lesson to prostitutes by creating males to have sex with them and

by displaying his own extraordinary penis. Yamabe carefully traces the sources for elements in these stories, demonstrating the way Buddhists in Central Asia patched together motifs and concepts, making an array of adjustments as they adapted Buddhist lore for a new, Chinese audience.

Part II, “India in Chinese Imaginings of the Past,” explores how Chinese authors, deeply concerned with history, attempted to fit Indian history—and particularly Indian Buddhist history—into their conception of the past. In “From Bodily Relic to Dharma Relic Stūpa: Chinese Materialization of the Aśoka Legend in the Wuyue Period,” Shi Zhiru reconstructs one of the least well understood episodes in the remarkable history of Aśoka’s rule in the Chinese political imagination when, in the tenth century, Chinese rulers imitated an act they believed Aśoka had carried out, purportedly manufacturing 84,000 miniature stūpas, each containing woodblock printed scriptures along with other precious objects, leaving behind both documents describing the event and a rich archaeological record, most of which has only come to light in recent years. In “‘Ancestral Transmission’ in Chinese Buddhist Monasteries: The Example of the Shaolin Temple,” Ye Derong draws on the unparalleled wealth of epigraphical material from the Shaolin Temple to elucidate how major monasteries in premodern China constructed monastic family lines stretching back ultimately to India, in this way creating for generations of monks identities and loyalties to individual monasteries, lineages, and Buddhism as a whole. When Chinese Buddhists attempted to link the Chan tradition back to India, they focused considerable attention on the figure of Bodhidharma as a key link tying the early Chan lineage back to India and eventually the Buddha himself. Chan scholars have, over the past hundred years, demonstrated just how weak this link was. In “The Hagiography of Bodhidharma: Reconstructing the Point of Origin of Chinese Chan Buddhism,” John McRae returns to the legends of Bodhidharma and suggests that we should not be too quick to dismiss the value of early legends of Bodhidharma for understanding the earliest strands of Chan, and that it is possible to perceive connections between these early strands and Buddhism of the same period in other parts of Asia.

Finally, in Part III, “Chinese Rethinking of Indian Buddhism,” three scholars take different approaches to the question how to assess the relationship between Chinese and Indian Buddhism. In “Is Nirvāṇa the Same as Insentience?” Robert Sharf examines historically unrelated and on the surface entirely distinct doctrinal debates, two in India and one in China, and asks whether these apparently arcane and unrelated debates might in fact stem from fundamental concerns—personal identity, ethical responsibility, sentience, and death—that continue to occupy philosophers today, though now in radically different “thought experiments.” In the

final two contributions to the volume, Christine Mollier and Stephen Bokenkamp explore the manifestations of Indian elements not in the more obvious realm of Chinese Buddhism, or even in popular religion, but in Daoism. Mollier, in “Karma and the Bonds of Kinship in Medieval Daoism: Reconciling the Irreconcilable,” shows how, as the doctrine of karma swept across Asia, Daoists gradually appropriated and reinterpreted it in their own scriptures. Finally, Bokenkamp, in “This Foreign Religion of Ours: Lingbao Views of Buddhist Translation,” argues that beyond the more obvious appropriation of terms and concepts, Daoists were also inspired by the Chinese encounter with Sanskrit to conceive “celestial scripts,” a sublime form of writing in which Daoist scriptures, and even, much earlier, some Buddhist scriptures, were composed before being translated into more mundane and more easily decipherable writing for followers of the Dao in our world.

Taken together, the ten chapters presented here reveal both the depth and the subtlety of the encounter between India and China: depth in that they disclose Indian connections in the realms of Chinese gods, conceptions of the underworld, the past, and language as Chinese negotiated problems in family relations, cosmology, literary convention, and the exploration of consciousness; subtle, in that the lives of Indian images, texts, concepts, and gods took on new forms in China and, fueled by a febrile and fertile imagination, over the course of centuries, developed in circuitous and unpredictable ways.

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John McRae participated in the conference, but died during the preparation of the volume. It is to his memory that we dedicate this book.