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Review of *The Impact of Buddhism on  
Chinese Material Culture*

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Review *The Impact of Buddhism on Chinese  
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*The Impact of Buddhism on Chinese Material Culture.* By John Kieschnick. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003, viii +343 pages, ISBN 0-691-09676-7 (paperback), 24.95; ISBN 0-691-09675-9 (cloth), 65.00.

John Kieschnick's second book describes in historical terms the material culture of Chinese Buddhism, including relics, monastic robes, ritual implements, books, buildings, bridges, sugar, tea, and the chair. In the many insightful details of this remarkable book, Kieschnick convinces the reader that material affairs, mundane daily activities, and material objects, have as much impact on a society as any other factor. Kieschnick's arguments are both enjoyable to read and challenging. The book is divided into six sections, an introduction, four chapters ("Sacred Power," "Symbolism," "Merit," and "Accidents and Incidentals"), and a conclusion. Kieschnick begins by highlighting the subtleties and sophistication of Buddhist discussions of "objects" (images, icons, monastic products such as sugar, books, bridges, and so on) over different periods of time, from India to Central Asia to China and throughout East Asia. Kieschnick explains his focus as follows: "What negotiations were involved in making Buddhist objects? What were the objects used for? What were people's attitudes toward these objects?" (16) Since the Buddha's death there have always been tensions between Buddhist notions of frugality and opulence, renunciation and monastic accumulation. These tensions were often played out over specific material objects, as they were understood in a particular sociopolitical setting. Throughout the book Kieschnick argues that religious objects are not simply extensions of unchanging religious doctrines; rather, they are as much part of a religious tradition as any doctrine or statement of faith. Objects have a life of their

own. They alter, influence, manipulate, and change the lives of those who come into contact with them.

In Chapter One, "Sacred Power," Kieschnick all too briefly whisks us through a discussion of "the sacred" before moving on to specific Chinese instances of sacred power and their relationship to terms such as *ling* (numinous), and *ganying* (that which evokes a miraculous response). A good example of how this played out in Buddhist history is to look at the cultural contexts of relic and relic pellets (*sheli*), the teeth of the Buddha, and the mummies of famous monks (47-52). Kieschnick argues that the practice of worshipping images and of venerating remains came into China with Buddhism. He writes that a "key factor in these practices was the belief that a power was present in images and relics" (29). What was it about icons in China, Kieschnick asks, that gave them their power? "And what, beyond tradition, made relics bits of bone, teeth, and ash objects of reverence, fascination, and devotion?" (29) Kieschnick goes on to show how Chinese rulers, on commissioning Buddhist art, sought to establish a connection to sacred power. This discussion is continued in Chapter Two where Kieschnick takes a close look at wall paintings, Han dynasty tombs, and other Buddhist images that have complex symbolic aspects to their interpretation and meaning, such as Buddhist hand gestures (*mudras*), monastic clothing, alms bowls, rugs upon which monks sat, monks' staffs, the rosary, the Buddhist scepter (*ruyi*), and other objects. Not only were these objects of value for monks, they became increasingly important to laypeople, emperors, scholars, and other segments of premodern Chinese society. In all these discussions, Kieschnick draws on a remarkable variety of sources, leaving the reader, by the end of this chapter, convinced of the never-ending human capacity to produce, emplace, and reproduce meaning in objects. I doubt as rich a discussion of these objects in the Chinese context exists outside of Kieschnick's book.

Chapter Three picks up where the preceding chapter left off. The focus is on merit. Few Buddhist concepts (and the objects and material practices surrounding such concepts) had as much impact on Chinese society as the notion of merit. A core component of an exchange practice with enormous social ramifications, the practice of merit profoundly shaped Chinese culture. Kieschnick traces the development of the idea and uses of merit from India to China. As he points out, there was no notion of religious merit in China prior to the entry of Buddhism. Of course, all this depends on what one means by Buddhist merit. At stake is how merit actually worked. As Kieschnick puts it "what, specifically, is one to give, and to whom?" (158) Donors donated funds for temple construction and received merit in exchange. Was

it a gift or an exchange process? Certainly it was a karmic transaction. People built stupas. Chinese monks often built bridges (199-208) and thus participated in what some of the primary texts refer to as *xingfu*, or “eliciting blessings.” Books were produced and copied for merit. Sutras were written in blood by monks or on behalf of donors. Merit was offered in exchange. Monastic practice produced a culture of merit. A variety of activities elicited merit such as producing oil, constructing temples, building toilets, and so forth. Kieschnick covers wide historical ground in making the case for the development of merit in Buddhist China. The “impact” of this concept or, what we now might want to refer to as social practice’ was profound

In Chapter Four, “Accidents and Incidentals,” Kieschnick provides us with fascinating stories of sugar production, the arrival of the chair in China from Indian to Chinese monasteries (240), and the production of tea, the latter having immeasurable influence on China over the last thirteen centuries or so. Sugar and tea production were labor intensive which meant that Buddhist monasteries were labor providers, a fact that raises questions regarding the types of workers resident in monastic settings. Throughout this last chapter, and indeed in much of his book, Kieschnick provides his readers with a sound comparative angle. For instance, whenever he can he brings in a footnote or two on the use of the chair in other cultural settings; or, for example, on sugar production and labor intensive activities in other histories. This adds much color to the text.

Two final brief points can be made. First, the title of the book is misleading (Kieschnick himself points this out on page 283). The term “impact” which sounds overly militaristic is perhaps not the best word to describe the immensely complicated and slow spread of Buddhist ideas, objects, material goods, and language throughout China over the last two thousand years. Then again, what would be a better term? I think in the end, irrespective of terminology, Kieschnick’s reasoning stands, particularly when he concludes the following: “material culture was slow to change in premodern times, and often required the long-term overwhelming influence of a powerful cultural force before any change could take hold. Once established in Chinese society, Buddhism provided such a force” (284). Second, Kieschnick to some extent blurs the lines between “religion” and “culture.” More could be said about these terms. This may seem a picky point, but historians of religion are far from unified in any declarative manner as to the meaning and use of the term religion particularly when we are talking about medieval China (Robert Campany in *History of Religions*, May 2003, 42:4 addresses this problem). These are by no means serious criticisms of Kieschnick’s book; rather, they are just some observations worth throwing into the mix of any

discussion of Buddhism as a religion, religion as material culture, and materiality as a religious practice. In short, Kieschnick clearly makes the case for a focused study of material culture. The end result is a book that shifts our scholarly gaze from an obsession with a presupposed core set of stable Buddhist doctrines to a more balanced view of what it means to encounter doctrine and practice in a more mundane and continuously changing material setting.