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The Eminent Monk: Buddhist Ideals in Medieval Chinese Hagiography. By John Kieschnick. Honolulu: University of Hawaii / Kuroda Institute, 1997 (Studies in East Asian Buddhism 10). Pp.vii + 218. ISBN 0-8248-1841-5, \$27.00.

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This is a study of the representations of monks in three major biographical compilations by Huijiao (497-554), Daoxuan (596-667), and Zanning (919-1001). The “Introduction” discusses these biographical collections themselves and reviews the motives for the compilations, their literary structure, and their reception by later readers. The book begins by distinguishing between monastic biography as either a source for learning a “factual core” or as a source for “the monastic imagination,” settling on the latter as the task of the book (p.1). While the focus is on biographies as “an expression of the idea of the monk,” in fact the book frequently connects historicity and hagiography (p.3).

Chapter one, “Asceticism,” approaches aspects of the production of monastic difference, with sections on sex, food, clothing, and acts of asceticism beyond the clerical norm, which is expanded in a section on self-mutilation and ritual suicide. That such practices served to distinguish the monk (in real life and in the literary imagination) is clear; but Kieschnick finds a considerable number of accounts of “meat-eating wine-drinking monks,” who seem to contradict the austere, normative images of monks in the biographies. Kieschnick’s attempt to resolve this puzzle is perhaps the most interesting portion of the book, worthy of further expansion. He argues that the inclusion of these “trickster” figures allowed the biographers to claim such monks as orthodox. “On his deathbed, Zanning could claim to have tamed the trickster” (p.63). These stories do not attempt to demonstrate that monks always kept the Vinaya rules; they demonstrate that keeping or breaking the Vinaya rules is a matter for monks to decide, and not for the uninformed or for anti-Buddhists to decide. The inclusion of rule-breaking monks is thus an assertion of jurisdiction over rules.

Chapter two, “Thaumaturgy,” details the various techniques of wonder-working, including prophecy, control over rain, demonstrations of bodily control, and particularly spells. Kieschnick sets these powers in a Buddhist context of the supernatural powers accruing to meditators. An interesting but still undeveloped sub-theme of this chapter is the relation of thaumaturgy to the foreign origin of Buddhism: “the Buddhist spell was seen as chiefly the domain of the foreign” (p.86). And: “these abilities were linked to the perceived alien character of the monk” (p.110). Of course, it is hardly a criticism of a book to say it brings up further questions!

There is also a balanced and thoughtful section on miracles, particularly those of the *gantong* or “spiritual resonance” type, spontaneous reactions of the natural environment to the presence of holy monks or the performance of rituals. In an interesting turn of phrase, Kieschnick describes this type of “miracle”—not properly speaking an exception to the patterns of nature but rather fully natural—as “the mechanism of the numinous.” Rightly, he

contextualizes this kind of mechanism with reference to pre-Buddhist Chinese conceptions, such as found in the *Yijing (I Ching)*. An extension of this section deals with divine visions.

The third chapter, “Scholarship,” is the least likely to appeal to a general reader, though it contains a number of valuable points. Kieschnick describes in broad terms the academic training and social status of scholar-monks, gradually building up an image of scholarly activity as vivid as our current knowledge permits. Current discussion notwithstanding, we still do not know that much about the performative aspects of Chinese Buddhist debate. Perhaps as a legacy of idealism in religious studies, we seem to prefer examining the fruits of such arguments without much reference to the real circumstances of scholarly engagement which produced them. In contrast, the social, polemical and psychological dimensions of debate are suggested here: “In stories of monastic disputes and rivalries, debates, slander, and enmity, we find fissures in the same sangha depicted in official edicts and memorials as a uniform block of nameless, dark-robed religious” (p.130). Certainly, after reading this study, that uniform block is shattered.

A last section to chapter three concerns the gradual increase in the biographies of the Chan ideal of monkhood, presented as anti-scholastic, iconoclastic, repudiating certain aspects of the monastic ideal dominant through to the mid-Tang. Hence, “the Chan accounts ridicule every element of the scholar-monk ideal that had taken shape over the centuries in traditional hagiography” (p.133). True to his Stanford training, Kieschnick does not accept Chan hagiographies as descriptions of real practice, any more than he did with earlier biography. The chapter rounds out with a discussion of Chan recorded sayings as the successors to the biographies discussed here. A brief last chapter summarizes some of the previous discussion.

One strength of this book is its consciousness of difference, the juggling of diverse voices and implied audiences. Clearly Kieschnick is concerned throughout with the *sitz im leben* of these texts, concerned with the facts not of the events described but of the descriptions themselves. Yet whenever possible he generalizes cautiously about the real social practices which gave these stories meaning. He is also quite adept at highlighting Chinese Buddhism as a negotiation of Indian and Chinese elements. Another strength, which quickly persuaded me to order this book for use in a lower-division class on East Asian religion, is the readability of the prose, light in its theoretical touch and interspersed with some great stories.