

*The Mystique of Transmission: On an Early Chan History and its Contexts.* By Wendi L. Adamek. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007. Pp. xv+578.

As Western studies of Buddhism have become more complex, scholars are slowly unraveling the mysteries of religious traditions such as the Chan school, in which a certain mystique is embraced as both a sign of the possession the true Dharma, and a barrier to the attainment of this knowledge by outsiders. Building upon the work of Bernard Faure (especially his *Rhetoric of Immediacy* and *Will to Orthodoxy*) among others, Wendi Adamek's *The Mystique of Transmission* tackles the mystique of Chan Buddhism by placing the now canonical mythology of patriarchs and transmission into a historical context that is sensitive both to religious belief and to the realpolitik of medieval China. This book not only achieves an insightful analysis of a single text, the *Lidai fabao ji* (Record of the Dharma Jewel Through the Generations), but also draws together the historical and doctrinal contexts surrounding the 8<sup>th</sup> century text, so that it touches upon many major facets of medieval East Asian Buddhism.

This work is a strong reminder that a monograph that focuses on one source need not be accompanied by a scholarly myopia of larger issues, and indeed any scholar in the field will find much here that is engaging and inspiring. The *Lidai fabao ji* was produced in the Bao Tang monastery of Yizhou (in present-day Sichuan), part of a lineage established by Wuzhu (714-774) but one which was held in suspicion by other Buddhist sects and eventually disappeared. Adamek's arguments proceed along three major streams of inquiry: the first is the question of “transmission” – whether it be the transmission of authority, Buddha nature, or authenticity; the second is the text as historical narrative, a conscious attempt to fashion a history for the sect and for Chan Buddhism more generally; the last is regarding the political aspects surrounding the twin discourses of transmission and history, and this comes to incorporate social and economic topics as well.

The first part of the book deals with these issues in an elegant progression from the core question of transmission to broader questions such as those surrounding political influence, the place of the robe

in Chan as talisman of transmission, and the place of women in the text. A background to the *Lidai fabao ji* is offered in the first chapter, where Adamek positions her thesis at the nexus of the three lines of inquiry mentioned above while introducing some of the major themes of her work, and in the second chapter these themes begin to be addressed. The transmission and translation of Buddhism into the Chinese language and culture produced questions over to what extent Indian Buddhism could be transformed in China without losing its authenticity and efficacy (31), and similar questions arose when it came to recognizing legitimate teachers of the Dharma. Not only were Chinese Buddhists faced with resolving these questions within their own religious community, but also had to make these claims meaningful to the state and the laity, who offered material support on the condition that Buddhism was an authentic and effective religious tradition. In this section as in others, Adamek draws upon a wide range of sources and consistently provides strong support for her claims while managing not to alienate those who, like myself, are not familiar with the complicated contexts of medieval Chinese religion.

Adamek also skillfully negotiates the varied responses to these questions by contemporary figures, while offering insights on the complex relationship between the sangha and the state. She argues that the introduction of Buddhist philosophy through Chinese Buddhist doctrine brought new material to long-standing discourses, claiming a sharper boundary between this world and the next – perhaps a consequence of the Buddhist distinction between causes (whose affects extent from previous births) and conditions (which are part of the present lifetime and thus malleable) in the ethical economy of action and consequence (49). In this chapter Adamek raises the argument that the Buddhist discourse surrounding these questions was never completely separate from that of Chinese culture at large, part of a larger move through the rest of the book toward questioning the meaning of strict boundaries between Buddhism on the one hand, and such entities as Daoism and Chinese popular religion on the other (235-252). Such deconstruction of received conceptual categories both advances a trend in recent Chinese Buddhist studies and points the way for future critical research.

In the third and fourth chapters, which deal with lay practice and the contexts of material culture and political legitimacy respectively, the strengths of Adamek's work are highlighted as she uses the

*Lidai fabao ji* as a foundation from which a myriad of fascinating topics can be approached. The construction of the standard lineage of Chan masters as well as the struggle of control of Bodhidharma's robe as a symbolic talisman of the true Dharma offer valuable insights into a period when the framework of Chinese Buddhist doctrinal schools had not yet been ossified and the struggle over legitimacy was still very much an active contest. Adamek reaches into the *Lidai fabao ji* and other sources to reveal the internal tensions of these communities that might otherwise have gone unseen (213-214).

This is a work that demonstrates Adamek's deep familiarity that has come from a long period of engagement with this work in particular, while also showcasing a knowledge of many aspects of Buddhist studies, from the political machinations that influenced the development of doctrinal schools, to the significance and provenance of Chan art forms. Specialists will enjoy the fact that Adamek has included the Chinese for key terms as they appear, as well as accompanying her translation of the *Lidai fabao ji* with the original text in traditional Chinese characters; the inclusion of an appendix listing the full titles and details for the numerous Buddhist texts mentioned at the beginning of the *Lidai fabao ji* is also an invaluable guide to what might otherwise have been a landslide of unfamiliar references.

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