

Brief Reviews of Books

A Late Sixteenth-Century Chinese Buddhist Fellowship: Spiritual Ambitions, Intellectual Debates, and Epistolary Connections. By JENNIFER EICHMAN. Sinica Leidensia, vol. 127. Boston: BRILL, 2016. Pp. xvi + 422. €139, \$180.

This book makes a valuable contribution to the study of late imperial Chinese Buddhism by examining a network of monks and lay practitioners connected by relationships rather than geography. Drawing primarily on epistolary sources, it seeks to ground late Ming intellectual, social, and religious history in a particular group of elite men concerned about how they might best cultivate their heart-mind. Eichman uses “mind cultivation” as a bridge concept in late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Buddhist and Confucian discourse, especially the work of the Buddhist monk Lianchi Zhuhong 蓮池株宏 (1535–1615) and the Yangming-Confucian Zhou Rudeng 周汝登 (1547–1629).

Eichman challenges the notion that Confucians set the terms of the debate and predominated over Buddhist monastics in the late Ming dynasty, arguing that Yangming-Confucians instead opened up a discursive space that allowed Buddhists to shape their tradition and influence others (pp. 24–25, 114). By providing a focused study of seventy elite men active during the Wanli period (1573–1620), she seeks to inspire similar localized studies that might give a better sense of the contours of Buddhist networks and associations in the sixteenth century (pp. 22, 357). She acknowledges the constraints of her study, namely that the group consists of elite men who met through introductions during examination periods or while in government office and thereby lacks any differentiation of gender, ethnicity, educational attainment, or economic and social status. However, she emphasizes their breadth of intellectual aptitude and spiritual progress, and she includes a brief discussion of wives, concubines, and servants in her discussion of Pure Land practices (pp. 226–41).

Eichman presents her arguments carefully and meticulously, and she provides ample footnotes for specialists in late imperial Chinese Buddhism. Not only does she list all of the epistolary sources consulted and analyzed, but she discusses how such letters were produced, their extant woodblock form, and their reliability, as well as how they were circulated among a select group of friends in a quasi-private form of communication (p. 43). This degree of thoroughness becomes particularly useful when she considers the multiple religious modalities adopted by late sixteenth-century elite men, and the difficulty of characterizing who was “Confucian” or what *ru* 儒 encompassed (pp. 49–52).

Her substantive footnotes clarify how specialized terms or phrases were interpreted.

Eichmann also puts herself in dialogue with a range of scholars including those of networks, epistolary and print culture, religious identity, Confucian Studies, Buddhist Studies, religious practice, lived religion, meditation, religious experience, as well as Pure Land and Chan Buddhism. The structure of her book allows for individual chapters to be easily incorporated into graduate or advanced undergraduate courses as one discusses general topics such as religious identity, ethics, and meditation, or more specific issues such as killing and eating animals, releasing-life societies, encounter dialogues, or Pure Land recitation.

Finally, Eichman allows for and acknowledges ambiguity in her sources, which results in a nuanced and complex rendering of religious thought and practice. She does not try to resolve contradictions such as Zhou Rudeng’s asserting a clear distinction between Buddhist and Confucian traditions while adopting many Chan-inspired spiritual exercises (pp. 97–98). She highlights instances when her descriptive sources conflict with prescriptive or canonical ideas, for example the depiction of a personal link or “self” carried from one life to the next in Zhuhong’s animal tales instead of no-self or the notion of karmic residue retained from past lives (p. 131). She illustrates ways that Zhuhong as a “pragmatic spiritual advisor” accommodated those just beginning to uphold the first precept by allowing them to buy prepared meat dishes, eat “clean meat,” or recite a *dhāraṇī* before the sacrifice of an animal (p. 169). She admits that even though Zhuhong sought to persuade men to give up wearing silk robes, he and his circle were not pacifists, nor did they object to corporal punishments or just use of the death sentence (p. 215). By acknowledging such tensions and demonstrating ways that everyday life impinged on religious thought and practice, Eichman further underscores the importance of embedding doctrinal studies in particular social and cultural contexts.

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Studies on the Archaeology of Ebla, 1980-2010. By PAOLO MATTHIAE, edited by FRANCES PINNOCK. Wiesbaden: HARRASSOWITZ VERLAG, 2013. Pp. xi + 664, 226 plts. €98.

As the title suggests, the present volume contains papers by Paolo Matthiae about various aspects of his