

PREFACE

Lewis Lancaster

This is a volume in which scholars have approached the topic of the “Chinese Buddhist canon” in a new manner and in some cases with new methods, bringing out a degree of vitality that has not previously been shown in the field. Given the proscription against “canon” that marked the early days of postmodern studies, it was a daring gesture to so openly address an issue that in the past has been held in disrepute. For a few years at the end of the last century, there developed what some have called the “hermeneutics of suspicion.” This was particularly applied to canons that were “suspected” of being hopelessly exclusive. In many ways this so-called “postmodern” attitude hardened over time, and the ironic result was loss of flexibility in scholarship. During that time, a response to one of my papers on the Korean version of the canon was the statement: “We don’t use the word ‘canon’ anymore . . . it is not current with our ideas.” This signaled a sanction against even talking about what were considered to be “elitist” texts, and it unfortunately expanded into a derisive rejection of the very idea of studying them. However, the purposeful disruption and problematizing of the existing approaches in Buddhist studies was by no means all negative. In those instances where it expanded the vision of what could be done, particularly with often neglected material, the impulse that led to the postmodern appraisal remains valuable.

In the conference presentations and discussion, one could feel the spirit once expressed by Milton as being “in the quiet and still air of delightful studies.” There was no attempt to win over the audience with sensationalism that scorned what was fashionable in a previous generation. Instead, the discourse represented the contemporary trend that expands the range of “what can be considered.” There was an unstated assumption that a clearly defined boundary of study for the Chinese canon is not the starting point of research. Instead, the leading edge of our advances in knowledge is fluid and is constantly being created by our methodology, expertise, and findings. The papers of this volume outline the frontiers of our current knowledge, and we all recognize that in the future the push into areas not yet considered will require a constant redrawing of boundaries.

In the spirit of exploring the frontiers, the papers included categories, groups, and types without predetermined restrictions. Thus, it would be fair to say that the papers in this conference on the canon of Buddhist texts in Chinese are progressive. They do not represent a retreat to a former state of study but are aids for the field to move forward. The approach can be defined as open to plurality. As a result, the papers present complex views, asking readers to consider politics, social mores, philosophical discourses, material science, and religious values. Can it be determined that all of these are commensurable? What will be the common measure between material science and political strategy? The answers from the authors of this volume show that we can indeed deal with complexity and move among many different spheres of influence. We can handle the complexity of pluralism and view the emerging Chinese Buddhist canon as a product and a still evolving aspect of the commonality that exists among many facets of society.

This effort on the part of the organizers of the conference, where the material in this book was first presented, might be described as shifting from considering the canon as an “object” to recognizing that it may best be approached as an “event.” Its story is an account of the way the collection of texts known as the “Chinese Buddhist canon” involves people, whether monks, nuns, officials, craftsmen, or readers; places of translation, sites for archiving, places of birth, routes of dissemination; temporality of years, months, days, dynasties, eras; actions of carving printing blocks, producing paper, shelving volumes in libraries. All such events occur within social, political, and religious frameworks. Once such study is begun, it is soon obvious that the canon “event” involves the whole of society. It is not just an elite activity, nor is it limited to the “rabble.” Furthermore, the reports of the conference participants show that the “event” involved thousands of participants who gave support and in some cases direct labor to the creation, maintenance, and ritual reverence of the ever-increasing number of volumes. It might be tempting to reduce the study of the canon to the physi-

cal manifestation and thus maintain that while the “object” was revered and supported, few looked beyond it to the content of the texts themselves. But this would ignore the basis for the enormous outlays of resources that were directed toward the texts.

One of the features of the accumulation of so many volumes of texts with Buddhist content is the way the successive additions were accommodated. The point of convergence came to be the place and manner in which the physical manuscripts were housed. Shelving, cataloging, and all the other aspects that we include under library services were in play in the structuring and maintenance of the texts being produced by translation teams over the centuries. As we see in the reports here, the catalogs that were produced, probably first as mere shelf lists, came to be the basis for the early history of Chinese Buddhism. All discussion of the beginning of the tradition in China finds its way to the process by which the literary material was created, including the names of those involved, the date of the activity, and in some cases, the place where it occurred. This information was recorded in the catalogs of the canon collections, and without it we would have little on which to base a history of early Buddhism in East Asia. The accounts of Buddhist origins in China were reached through reflection on the emerging canon as consonant with the rise of an institutional religious structure. For this reason, without studying the Buddhist canon, we cannot understand how the tradition was viewed by those who began to write them.

Although the catalogs played a pivotal role in describing the chronology of Buddhist history, they are not without flaws that impair the completeness and efficiency of our ability to speak intelligibly about the past. There are significant problems of attribution of authorship and dating based on the colophons and catalog entries for certain texts. These anomalies distort the chronicle of causal relationships in both the annals and doctrinal evolution. We are aware that the canon contains translations from India and Central Asia as well as compilations made in East Asia. The compilations have been adjudged as impostures foisted off to others as genuine authentic “translations,” so they are called by pejorative titles such as “apocrypha” and even “spurious” or “counterfeit.” Any list of texts that have been the most influential in East Asia will contain titles of what I prefer to call “East Asian compilations.” The conference delegates fully accepted the presence of such texts in the canon and were far less judgmental than many of the past research reports. These materials are crucial to our understanding of Buddhism, but we must reconsider how they will be dated and attributed in order to have a more accurate view of how doctrinal matters were conceived and included in the canon.

In addition to these issues of the compilations, we have major problems with the attribution of texts that appear to be authentic translations. It is obvious that many translations are not properly assigned or dated in the catalogs

and colophons, and this is detrimental to our understanding of the history of word use in the texts. At some time in the future, the Chinese Buddhist canon translations should be fully mined for data that will throw light on how Indian and Central Asian Buddhism was developing from the second century onward. The Sanskrit and Prakrit texts, no less than the “East Asian compilations,” show changes over time and multiple sources and authoring hands. The idea that a Sanskrit text is authentic “Buddhism” raises many questions that need to be carefully studied.

In addition to the postmodern complaints about canonicity, there has been the question of who read and studied the texts. Answering it involves trying to ascertain the scope of the “audience” for any given volume. Literacy has often been limited to a small percentage of the population. This was true in East Asia as well as the Indian subcontinent. If few people ever read the texts, then the contemporary academic study of them can hardly be seen as comparable to how they were used in the past. One of the major contributions at the conference was regarding the Jiaxing edition, the string-bound version, made on demand for a growing group of literates who did want to read and study the content. For nearly a century, ordinary people longing for a cheap and easy-to-read edition labored to produce it. This gives us information about the widespread use of the canon and its importance outside the monasteries.

The conference continually returned to issues that touch on questions about the significance of the canon. During the political suppressions of Buddhism in the twentieth century, the canon collections were seen as serving no purpose and therefore had no excuse for being. Consequently, printing blocks and xylograph copies were systematically destroyed. In the anticanon wing of academia, the texts were seen as insignificant to cultural life and destitute of substance for valid study. The canon was thought to be “hollow” and no longer cogent to what was happening in the lives of contemporary people. These criticisms and the subsequent actions often went unanswered; there were no compelling arguments in favor of the pertinence of the canonic collections. With the papers in this volume, one of the most telling examples of the importance of the texts relates to how governments made use of them through the centuries. From the time of the Southern and Northern dynasties, non-Han rulers had had to justify their rule in the face of the historic and long-accepted patterns of inheritance of power through birth. How could these invading peoples find a way to manifest their legitimacy? How the heritage of kingship could be passed on without birthright entitlement was a major problem for new kingdoms being set up on the grounds of the ancient Han culture. Here the Buddhist canon became a constituent of political life. The size of the canon made it worthy of royal attention and the renown associated with copying it in its entirety helped to resolve doubts about the authority of the ruling house. Consequently, the history of the

canon is an inescapable part of dynastic histories. This was repeated in Japan in the early twentieth century, when the one-hundred-volume modern printing was named after Emperor Taishō. It was an example of Japan's ability to create a canon with a completely new arrangement, with sophisticated footnotes, and the Taishō edition became one of the major achievements of the empire. When the first digital version of the Pali canon was made in Thailand, it was done for the king's sixtieth birthday in 1987, and he set forward the second phase of the project. The royal acts of support for the canons were not just public. They were also tied to the dictates of the conscience of rulers and often reflected the deep faith of those who held high positions.

No discussion of the canon can be complete without making reference to the major new resource that has effected striking results. The digital age and the consequent production of virtual surrogates of the printed canons in databases has been an actuating power propelling us, willing or not, into different methods of study. Such alterations of centuries-old methods based on codex formats have aroused a certain amount of resistance. The momentum for employing digital data has at times been dilatory, but it is being instilled in scholarship, and lag time between innovation and application has been decreasing. The Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association (CBETA) offers a range of applications that are spectacular and ultimately groundbreaking for the study of the canon. The only question is how long it will take the average researcher to incorporate these software options into their studies.

As a longtime student of the Chinese canon, I found listening to these papers a moving experience. We are all deeply grateful to Professors Jiang Wu and Lucille Chia for organizing such an important conference. Through their efforts, the field of Buddhist studies has entered a new phase of appreciation for and understanding of the significance of the Chinese Buddhist canon. Those who read this volume will see the growing edge of current scholarship and the promise for what can be possible in the future.

