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Chen Jinhua. *Monks and Monarchs, Kinship and Kingship: Tanqian in Sui Buddhism and Politics.* Kyoto: Scuola Italiana di Studi sull'Asia Orientale, 2002. xiii + 310 pp. $40.00, paper, ISBN 978-4-900793-21-7.

Reviewed by Linda Penkower

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Chen Jinhua is emerging as one of the most prolific and innovative historians of medieval Chinese Buddhism. With his dogged eye for detail, command of an extraordinary breadth of sources, and keen sensitivity to the interpretation of history, Chen is always a pleasure to read, first for his provocative and penetrating insights on the topic at hand and again for the voluminous and intimate tidbits of information that bring the medieval Chinese Buddhist landscape to life. A master sleuth in the making, whose exuberance at times spills over into speculation, Chen moves the disparate pieces of the medieval puzzle around the board to often stunning (and startling) effect.

In *Monks and Monarchs, Kinship and Kingship* Chen turns his considerable talent to Tanqian (542-607), one of the most revered and powerful monks of the Sui dynasty. With close ties to the Sui court of Wendi and as a key player in the Renshou relic-distribution campaigns and head abbot until his death of the Chandingsi (perhaps the foremost monastery in the realm established to promote meditation practice), Tanqian nonetheless has been largely overlooked in contemporary scholarship, a consequence of the vicissitudes of subsequent medieval court politics and the concomitant lack of attention given to him in premodern Buddhist histories. Like much of his previous work, in *Monks and Monarchs, Kinship and Kingship*, Chen is determined to set the record straight by teasing out the personalities and motivations that influenced Tanqian and, in turn, were influenced by him. The result is the most complete examination of Tanqian we have to date.

It is moreover considerably more than that. For, as we have come to expect of Chen, and as the title of his book implies, his interests lie in the intersection of Buddhism, politics, and society and the effect those connections had on the unfolding of history. In the case at hand, Tanqian's career serves as a convenient framework through which Chen investigates two principal aspects of early seventh-century Chinese Buddhism, namely, relic veneration and meditation, in politico-religious perspective.

In addition to a brief introduction and conclusion (and I might add delightfully whimsical and

highly personal acknowledgments), five chapters and four appendices comprise the book. Chapter 1, "Tanqian's Life, Background and Disciples", is most notable for its special attention to non-Buddhist, family background and connections, an avenue of inquiry largely overlooked by Buddhist historians who, more often than not, treat monastics mainly in terms of their connections and positions within the Buddhist world (pp. 11-50). Chen reminds us that, in addition to the importance of religious and political ties, not only did family background sometimes play a role in shaping the careers of monks but also that monastic careers could affect secular family fortunes. In Tanqian's case, his membership in the prestigious Taiyuan Wang clan is shown to have been a major factor contributing to his entry and success in the court of Sui Wendi, participation in the planning of the Renshou relic-distribution campaigns and, through a matrilineal tie, recognition as a divination specialist, a skill highly prized by Wendi.

Tanqian's biographical sketch sets the stage for the two main concerns of the book: the imperial use of relics, as represented by the Renshou relic-distribution campaigns in the provinces, and its promotion of meditation practice, as represented by the establishment of the Chandingsi in Chang'an. Chapter 2, "Tanqian and the Relic-distribution Campaigns" (pp. 51-87), focuses on the three campaigns to distribute relics carried out by Sui Wendi in the last four years of his reign, and includes as an appendix the translation of two documents related to those Renshou-era campaigns (pp. 89-107). In 601, 602 and again in 604, Wendi ordered a total of one hundred fifteen Buddhist relics to be taken from the palace and distributed throughout the realm. The campaigns were lavishly funded, carried out by numerous monks and officials both in the capital and the provinces, and meticulously orchestrated--including decrees to install the relics in their respective pagodas at exactly the same moment of time. Each campaign moreover resulted in the sighting of auspicious signs and the generation of miracle tales at numerous installation sites.

The Renshou relic-distribution campaigns have been well studied by such scholars as Arthur Wright and Yamazaki Hiroshi in their context as an ideological device employed by Wendi to break down the racial and cultural barriers that existed in his reunified empire. Acknowledging this motive, Chen nonetheless suggests that, unlike the first two decades of Wendi's reign that demanded a synthetic political strategy, the Renshou era marked Wendi's unannounced intention to make Buddhism the sole cornerstone of his state ideology. As evidence for this reversal in policy, Chen cites an edict to abolish Confucian schools issued on the same day as the relic-distribution campaign was proclaimed in 601 and the decree in 603 to establish the Chandingsi in Chang'an to promote meditation practice (discussed in Chapters 4 and 5). Thus, at the same time that the relic-distribution campaigns moved Buddhism and Buddhists from the center to the periphery, establishment of the Chandingsi as "the first national meditation center" solidified Buddhism and concentrated influential Buddhists in the capital. Further contributing to the received scholarship, Chen goes on to argue that the relic-distribution campaigns, coming two decades after the formation of the Sui (581) and more than a decade after the reunification of China (589), were moreover less an exercise in internal legitimatization than were they linked to Wendi's expansionistic ambitions, casting the emperor in the image of an Ashoka-like universal monarch. This resulted, for example, in requests (Chen suggests these were coerced) for relics by dignitaries of the three states of the Korean peninsula and an imperial edict to have texts related to the relic-distribution campaigns translated into Sanskrit and circulated in India.

Buddhism and Buddhists of course benefited from these policies. Tanqian was placed in charge of escorting one of the relics to the Fengquansi in

Qizhou during the first campaign. Chen suggests that Tanqian and his kinsman, Wang Shao, an influential court scholar known for his skill at interpreting auspicious signs (but discredited as a fraud and sycophant in later histories), indeed may have been instrumental in initiating the idea of an imperial relic-distribution campaign. Dismissing the official story that an Indian monk gave the relics to Wendi some twenty years before the start of the campaigns as untenable for an emperor obsessed with omens, Chen speculates that the relics were collected, again at the instigation of Tanqian, Wang Shao, and their group, after Wendi decided to launch the campaigns. For evidence of the key roles Wang Shao and Tanqian played in the campaigns, Chen points to Wang Shao's (d. 601) authorship of the ***Shenli ganying ji***, a collection of miracle accounts associated with the first two relic-distribution campaigns. And, based on a comparison of the repentance text used during the campaigns (reputedly written by Wendi) and a work by Tanqian, Chen persuasively argues that Tanqian in all probability composed the former as well.

Chapter 3, "Tied by Dharma and Blood," continues discussion of the manipulation of relics as a source of political legitimatization by looking at the legacy of the Renshou relic-distribution campaigns on Empress Wu's use of relic veneration (pp. 109-148). While direct, corroborating documentation here is hard fought, Chen pieces together events and motivations from a wide variety of sources to make a convincing argument for the influence of Wendi's campaigns on Empress Wu's use of relic veneration, documenting in particular the similarities in structure between the two missions. Chen places emphasis on not only the similarities between Wendi and Empress Wu (as Buddhist benefactors and perceived usurpers of the throne in need of a universal legitimizing strategy to trump the localized concept of the mandate of heaven) but also their kinship connections (Empress Wu's ninth generation grandfather was Wendi's eighth generation grandfather).[1]

Perhaps Chen's boldest proposition in this chapter--and one of great consequence to our understanding of medieval Chinese Buddhist history--is mentioned only in passing. Here he states that the Huayan exegete Fazang (643-712), who benefited mightily from the patronage of Empress Wu, sensing a change in political fortunes, betrayed the empress during the ***coup d'Ã©tat*** of 705 that left her briefly and only nominally on the throne. Chen suggests that this political opportunism in part accounts for Fazang's continued success under the three subsequent reigns of Zhongzong (reigned 705-710), Ruizong (reigned 710-712) and Xuanzong (reigned 712-756), and concludes "Fazang may have saved Buddhism from being associated closely with the Great Zhou in the minds of these two [sic] emperors and their officials" (pp. 145-146). Chen previously made his case for this assertion in "More than a Philosopher: Fazang as a Politician and Miracle Worker," and promises to do so again in ***History and His Stories: A Biographical Study of the Avata.msaka Master Fazang*** (forthcoming).[2] There he rather ingeniously (if on occasion circumstantially) argues that a corrected reading of a corrupted section of Fazang's biography found in Choe Chiweon's ***Beopjang jeon*** (T 50, no. 2054: 283b18-21) reveals Fazang's altered allegiance.

The remaining two chapters of the book turn their attention to the early medieval meditation traditions. Chapter 4, "Six Meditation Groups in the sixth and seventh centuries," is a meticulous study of the biographical information of six meditative factions outlined in Daoxuan's (596-667) ***Xu gaoseng zhuan*** and elsewhere and covers the one hundred and fifty years between the reign of Liang Wendi (reigned 502-549) and circa 650 (pp. 149-179). Representing these groups are Sengchou (480-560) in the northeast, Sengshi (476-563) in the northwest, Bodhidharma around the Yangzi and Luo rivers, Zhicui in Jinling (Nanjing), Huisi

(515-577) in Nanyue and Zhiyi (538-597) in Jingzhou and Tiantai, and Huizan (536-607) in Jinyang (Taiyuan). By the time of Tanqian, these six groups could effectively have been considered to descend from Sengchou (including Sengshi and Huizan), Huisi-Zhiyi (including Zhicui) and Bodhidharma.[3]

Simply put, Chen's analysis of these well-studied biographies has the potential to set the way in which modern scholarship has evaluated Bodhidharma and his group on its head. Chen makes two controversial observations. First, he insists that a proper reading of Daoxuan reveals a distinct preference for Sengchou's meditation group (and indeed all of the other factions) over and above Bodhidharma's, which Daoxuan criticizes as ungraspable, impractical, and lacking in doctrinal study and proper regard for the precepts. This interpretation challenges received scholarship, which tends to view Daoxuan's comparison of Sengchou and Bodhidharma as a complementary set of opposites--in/as a "duel/dual" as Bernard Faure has characterized it--the former emphasizing simplicity and purity, the latter practical and doctrinal complexity. Second, Chen goes on to suggest that in Daoxuan's criticisms of unnamed meditation practitioners (thought by Chen to be Bodhidharma followers) can be found brief references to a seventh-century Chan-style monasticism, which anticipates both the work ethic and "sudden" meditation techniques that later came to characterize the Southern school of Chan, a development that most scholars date to the later Tang or beyond.

This sets the stage for an examination of "Tanqian and the Twin Chandingsi Monasteries" that absorbs Chapter 5 and includes a discussion and chart of the three principal monks (*sangang*) of the twin Chanding monasteries as appendices (pp. 181-211). In 603, at exactly the same time that Wendi was promoting the relic-distribution campaigns, he established the Chandingsi (Monastery of Meditation) in Chang'an, appointed Tanqian as its abbot and decreed that the monastery be staffed by one hundred-twenty eminent meditation masters (plus assistants) culled from across the realm. Chen cites evidence that Tanqian was probably simultaneously appointed to head the Da Chandingsi (Great Monastery of Meditation) upon its establishment in 604. Based on a careful reading of the biographical information available for twenty-six of the monks selected by Tanqian to reside at the two Chanding monasteries, Chen shows that these monks represented all of the above groups with the exclusion of monks from the Bodhidharma tradition. He goes on to suggest that Tanqian's animosity towards this tradition stemmed from his radically different interpretation of the *La.nkaavataara Sutra*, a scripture with life-long appeal to Tanqian and a foundational text for Bodhidharma and his group. This snub by Tanqian and the Sui court, Chen concludes, ironically may have contributed both to the Tang support of Chan monks in the Bodhidharma line and the obscuration of Tanqian in the later histories.

These alternative interpretations of Daoxuan and their effect on Sui policy towards Buddhism may be as difficult to prove as they are to disprove, as we are dealing with a paucity of textual documentation. The rivalry that Chen proposes between the Sengchou and Bodhidharma groups may--or may not--have been more fluid than Chen suggests. Likewise, there is scant direct evidence that Tanqian censured Bodhidharma-style meditation. The extant lineal records of twenty-six monks who resided at the Chanding monasteries are too incomplete a sampling to definitively state that no monks of the Bodhidharma line were included at these centers. The brief allusions to Chan-style monasticism moreover may never resolve the issue of the relationship between seventh-century meditation centers and later Chan developments. Still, the challenges Chen presents are argued well enough to shake received scholarship from its complacency and it is conceivable that Chen's interpretations may stand up to further scrutiny (as far as that is possible). The very

fact that Chen shifts the angle of the prism of well-worn texts to force serious consideration of alternative interpretations is a tribute to the bold strokes with which he approaches his work.

Monks and Monarchs, Kinship and Kingship is an impressive book. Chen (as usual) is ever on the lookout for biographical and dating discrepancies, overlooked associations and motivations, from which he tenaciously builds intricate and well-documented arguments to reveal complex connections not only in the life of Tanqian, but also among monks and monarchs, kin and kings in the Sui dynasty. I, for one, am willing to forgive him his excesses and look forward to the publication of the long list of works-in-progress noted in the bibliography.

Notes

[1]. Parts of this chapter can also be found in Chen's "Shariira and Scepter: Empress Wu's Political Use of Buddhist Relics," in the *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 25, Nos. 1 and 2 (2002): pp. 33-150. The book includes a useful genealogical chart of four imperial families as an appendix.

[2]. See Chen Jinua, "More than a Philosopher: Fazang as a Politician and Miracle Worker," *History of Religions* 42 (May 2003): pp. 344-352

[3]. Chen has previously discussed these factions and their relationship to one another in "An Alternative View of the Meditation Tradition on China: Meditation in the Life and Works of Daoxuan," in *T'oung Pao* 88 (2002): pp. 332-395).