Siddhartha Gautama, also known as Sakyamuni (“The sage of the Sakyas”) or more commonly the Buddha (“The Enlightened One”), lived and preached in what are now Nepal and northern India approximately 2,500 years ago. Buddhism, the spiritual tradition that originated from his teachings, is alive and vibrant in a multitude of forms across the world today and still attracts spiritual seekers. However, separated from contemporary society by the layers of time, little is known about the Buddha himself and about the world that he lived in. Indeed, Sakyamuni, the historical person, is often confused with other images and figures associated with Buddhism and other Asian traditions. Xinru Liu wrote *Early Buddhist Society: The World of Gautama Buddha* in answer to her students’ curiosity and interest, soon realizing in the process that there was no other book that accessibly described the historical context of the life of the Buddha and the emergence of Buddhism. Even as she discusses Sakyamuni the individual, in fact the book focuses less on him as a person and more on the broader context in which he lived. With its vivid and fascinating portrait of life and society at the time of the Buddha, Liu’s book will interest the general audience as well as professional scholars of world history, ancient India, and Buddhist studies.

Liu makes use of a wide range of sources to reconstruct the world of the Buddha, focusing in particular on early Buddhist texts in the Pali canon that she collected during years of fieldwork in India throughout the course of her career. She supplements this rich body of literature with inscriptive and visual sources of artworks of early Buddhist monuments, to which she had access through reproductions that are part of the University of Pennsylvania photo archive, a collection funded by the American Institute of Indian Studies (AIIS). In addition to a vast array of English-language secondary sources, Liu, a native Chinese-language speaker, also draws on Chinese primary and secondary sources such as those related to Xuanzang, a seventh-century Chinese Buddhist pilgrim to India, whose travel account offers a...
valuable depiction of Buddhist India over a millennium after the lifetime of the Buddha.

The book is divided into ten chapters, each dedicated to different topics and relying on a variety of sources. Across them, Liu develops a highly nuanced and complex picture of the society in which Buddhism emerged. In the first chapter (“The Time of the Buddha”), Liu provides the general social, historical, and political context in which the Buddha lived and Buddhism arose. As his appellative indicates, Sakyamuni belonged to the Sakya people, an Indo-European-speaking community who lived in the foothills of the Himalayas, at a time when Indo-European cultures had spread eastward across the middle and lower Gangetic plain. The Indo-European-speaking peoples, who practiced Vedic religions, had developed hierarchies of class and caste as they encountered indigenous peoples in these regions. At a time of ever-increasing social complexity, Buddhism emerged as a moralizing religion “when state formation and urbanization based on agricultural development had begun to take shape in South Asia” (p. 1). Buddhism engaged and drew on Brahmanism, as well as the numerous other cults worshipped by the peoples of the forest and mountains, but it developed its own distinct identity and teachings during a period of rapid social change.

In chapter 2 (“Ahura and Asura: Persians and Indians in the Time of the Buddha”), Liu discusses a topic heretofore largely neglected by historians of ancient South Asia: the interaction between the Persian Empire, which ruled the northwest of the Indian subcontinent, and the Gangetic society in which Buddhism arose. Taxila, the Persian administrative center in Gandhara that was part of the Achaemenid Empire, appears frequently in Pali texts. It was through Taxila that the world of northern India in which Buddhism emerged was engaged, however diffusely, with the wider Afro-Eurasian world. Persians practiced a form of ancient Zoroastrianism, which was itself historically linked to ancient Hinduism and Brahmanism, although the traditions had later diverged. The linked etymologies of “ahura” in the Zoroastrian and Persian tradition and “asura” in the Buddhist tradition are evidence, as Liu uncovers, of the Persian presence in the northern Indian subcontinent. In this chapter, Liu highlights what emerges as a significant theme of the book: how Buddhism crossed over with the multiple religious traditions that existed at the time.

In chapter 3 (“The Maladies of Urban Life: Epidemics, Asava, and the Problem of Addiction”), Liu positions the emergence and development of the Buddhist sangha within the context of the challenges posed by urban life. Just like the cities of today, the ancient cities of the Gangetic plain attracted a diversity of people, attracted by the possibility of material abundance. However, these ancient cities were also faced with multiple ills, including social and wealth inequality. Epidemics were common, as was addiction to drugs and alcohol. Buddhism offered an alternative spiritual answer to the people of the time, different from the strictures of Brahmanism, while also providing a model hygienic lifestyle and sanitary community through the sangha.

The middle section of the book discusses the multiple social groups who engaged with the Buddha and Buddhism. In chapter 4 (“Supporters in the Cities: Gahapati, Setthi, Visakha, and Women Who Fed the Sangha”), Liu discusses the gahapati (“householders”) and setthi (“elders”), who emerged as some of the Buddha’s biggest supporters and who did not fit into the varna social order devised by Brahmans. Often resident in the cities but linked back to the villages, gahapatis and setthis emerged as significant social and economic elites in the commercial economy of the time. They were patrons of the Buddhist sangha and drawn to the Buddha’s message amidst their influential, but fluctuating and insecure worldly status. In this chapter, Liu also addresses the role that women played in relation to the sangha, both
within and outside of it. Chapter 5 ("Bimbisara, Pasenadi, Ajatasattu, and the Vajj Rajas") discusses the various monarchical states and *ganasanghas* (polities comprising Ksatriya oligarchs) who were significant in the Gangetic plain and vied with each other for hegemony. These rulers and leaders were connected to the Buddhist sangha in various ways. The Buddha was involved in influencing *ganasangha* politics, sometimes even as an adviser. While some leaders were among the Buddha's biggest supporters, others were against him. Liu weaves together the stories of these political leaders and their relationships with the Buddha by placing them within the broader political context of the time. At a time of patricide and conflict, the Buddhist sangha was often a refuge for victims of warfare and provided a spiritual answer to questions related to human suffering. In this chapter, Liu also addresses the relationship of Buddhism with other rival traditions that were emerging at the time, such as Jainism.

Liu returns to the topic of women and the Buddhist sangha in chapter 6 ("Queens and the Buddhist Sangha"), focusing more specifically on powerful women, such as queens, stateswomen, and matriarchs. Indeed, women had first been admitted to the sangha at the request of Pajapati Gotami, a matriarch of the Sakya clan, who was the Buddha's aunt and foster mother. Many wealthy and powerful women had since become part of the sangha, renouncing their material wealth. Other women, as narrated in chapter 7 ("Patacara and Refugees Who Fled from Cities"), were those who were marginalized from mainstream patriarchal society and found a home in the Buddhist sangha. Some of the earliest Buddhist women left behind poetry, a fascinating source from which to reconstruct their life experiences.[1] As Liu emphasizes in this chapter, a noteworthy feature of the early Buddhist sangha was how it embraced women from high and low social backgrounds, ranging from the elite women mentioned previously to "those who had lost their identities or those who had never had much of an identity because they had been abandoned by single mothers or prostitute mothers." Also accepted were women from outcaste communities as well as those from "forests, marshlands, and mountains; and those who hunted and fished and spoke languages incomprehensible to Indo-European speakers" (p. 143). The sangha became a space in which these women could recover from their traumas and even get educated enough to compose literature and engage with Buddhist philosophical ideas.

The society in which Buddhism emerged was not monolithic and homogenous, but rather highly diverse and heterogenous. Liu returns to this theme in chapter 8 ("Newcomers from Forests, Mountains, and Waters") by discussing the engagement between Buddhism and people who lived far away from the northern urban centers, in mountains, forests, and marshlands. Despite their remoteness, these people constantly engaged and interacted with the Indo-European societies of the Gangetic plain. They often kept to their own customs and traditions, and Brahmans, Jains, and Buddhists “all tried to reconceptualize the great variety of spirits, to accommodate and integrate them into some kind of syncretic framework which would still remain distinctively theirs. They usually ended up creating varying divine and human hierarchies in line with their own perspective of the universe” (p. 150). Engagements with these forest peoples continued during the political formations that emerged following the death of the Buddha, most notably the Mauryan Empire under Ashoka. The artwork of the Bharhut Stupa and the Sanchi Stupa are testament to the interaction between Buddhism and these indigenous spiritualities.

In contrast to the rather more rigid caste hierarchy of Brahmanism, the Buddha preached a mobile hierarchy in which human beings could transition upward and downward across multiple lifetimes. Buddhist teachings outlined multiple realms through which all living beings could transit. Indeed, as Liu discusses in chapter 9
("From Aryans to Candalas: A Mobile Hierarchy in the Buddhist Universe"), the Buddha preached even to Candalas, who had been ostracized in Brahmanism because of the nature of their work but who found a place in Buddhism.

In the final chapter ("Sanchi and Bharhut: Visual Memories of Early Buddhist Society"), Liu embarks on a meticulous analysis of artwork and inscriptions of the Sanchi and Bharhut stupas. These stupas were built a few hundred years after the lifetime of the Buddha and visually demonstrate the extent to which Buddhist stories and teachings were transmitted and then depicted in the early centuries of Buddhist society. Thus it is possible to trace scenes from the Jataka and other Buddhist stories carved on these monuments. In this chapter, Liu deftly shows how artwork and sculpture complement the extant literary sources in trying to reconstruct ancient history.

Liu comes across as sympathetic to the message and teachings of the Buddha and his sangha, and their legacy. This does not in any way detract from the high quality of her scholarship; rather, it shows that it was her interest and passion for the source material that motivated her to compile this book. Although sections of the book were written at different times over the course of a decade, the chapters come together cohesively, as they discuss various important facets of the complex society of the Buddha.

In sum, Early Buddhist Society: The World of Gautama Buddha is a well-researched book written in simple and accessible language, and as such it is well placed as a reference text for introductory courses in Buddhist studies and world history. Students and educated readers alike stand to gain a great deal from the way the book recreates a world that existed 2,500 years ago. Further, through piecing together such an array of sources, Liu provides a model for academic writing and scholarship. The field of Buddhist studies is enriched by this book and by Xinru Liu’s dedication of her immense skills as a historian to the important topic of the life and times of early Buddhist society.

Note
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