Historiography is a discipline that holds significant importance for historians of Chinese Buddhism and East Asian Buddhism as a whole. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine how Buddhist textual sources could be exploited critically if one does not have a firm grasp of the context in which they were produced, the agendas of their author(s) or editor(s), their target readership, the patterns of selection and source criticism that guided their production, their textual history, and so forth. In sum, how could we purport to write the history of Chinese Buddhism without first evaluating the value and limitations of the historical writings that we rely on? Yet, despite a few pioneering studies such as those of Chen Yuan 陳垣 (1880–1971), Tso Sze-bong 曹仕邦, or Helwig Schmidt-Glintzer, the study of historiographical trends and practices in Chinese Buddhist works has not attracted much scholarly attention until the last two decades.[1] John Kieschnick’s latest monograph, *Buddhist Historiography in China*, marks a major milestone in the study of Buddhist historical writings and makes a substantial contribution to the broader fields of Buddhist studies and Sinology. There is no doubt that this book will serve as a valuable reference tool and inspire further research on Buddhist and East Asian historiography in the years ahead. In a way, we find ourselves wishing that it had been published earlier and that we could already reap the benefits of its numerous insights. But projects such as this require time, and it is evident that Kieschnick’s book was in the making for several years. According to a CV from 2017, research for this monograph, initially titled *The Place of the Past in Chinese Buddhism*, commenced around 2008. The seed may even have been planted earlier, perhaps influenced by John R. McRae’s review of *The Eminent Monk* (1997) in which he expressed that he was “left with the rather odd wish that Kieschnick had written a somewhat different
kind of book.”[2] citing as an example Tso Sze-bong’s Zhongguo fojiao shixue shi (A History of Buddhist Historiography in China), which appeared just two years later.[3] McRae’s wish seems to have been fulfilled, though the organization of the book, tailored for Western readership, is resolutely different from that of Tso Sze-bong’s.

In terms of content, Buddhist Historiography in China is structured into six evenly distributed chapters featuring minimalist titles that have become characteristic of the author’s style: “India,” “Sources,” “Karma,” “Prophecy,” “Genealogy,” and “Modernity.” The introduction opens by addressing the principal premise of the book—namely, that there is such a thing as Buddhist historiography. In this monograph, Kieschnick endeavors to examine historical writings authored by Buddhist monks and laymen, focusing on a corpus of thirty-eight or so texts. His goal is to unearth and analyze distinctive “visions of the past” fostered by Buddhist literature, practices, and institutions (p. 2).

The author proceeds to show how and why history mattered to Buddhist communities in China. Indeed, as Kieschnick notes, historical writings are after all largely marginal to the daily rituals of these communities (e.g., devotional practice, chanting, copying of scriptures). And yet, despite pervasive Buddhist and Chinese cyclical conceptions of time, there are many ways in which history was meaningful for Buddhist circles in China. Beyond the profound influence of Chinese traditional historiography on Buddhist historical writings, Kieschnick argues that what makes these historiographical works Buddhist lies their conception of time, doctrinal orientations, unique agendas, and certain characteristics in the historiographical practices developed by their author(s) or compiler(s). He singles out both the genealogical approach and the use of karma as the “most distinctively Buddhist” elements in East Asian Buddhist historical writings (pp. 8–9).

One of Kieschnick’s most intriguing contributions in the introduction is his attempt to delineate “phases” in the development of Buddhist historiography in China. The four phases correspond to four distinct literary genres: (1) prosopographies (ca. fifth–tenth century) such as Huijiao’s 魏晉 (497–554) Gaoseng zhuan (高僧傳); (2) genealogical histories (from the eighth century onward?) like Daoyuan’s 道原 (d.u.) Jingde chuandeng lu (景德傳燈録); (3) universal histories (from the thirteenth century onward?) such as Zhipan’s 志磐 (ca. 1220–75) Fozu tongji (佛祖統紀); and (4) modern historiographical writings (from the twentieth century onward), including works by Yinshun 印順 (1906–2005), Dongchu 東初 (1908–77), or Shengyan 聖嚴 (1931–2009; aka Sheng Yen).

Kieschnick’s broader aim through this monograph is to advocate for the importance of Buddhist historiography within the larger field of Chinese historiography. “Every overview of Chinese historiography,” he writes, “should take Buddhism into consideration” (pp. 20–21). Additionally, the author modestly expresses his aspirations to “carve out a place of greater prominence for historical thought in the intellectual history of Chinese Buddhism” and to “contribute more generally to a growing body of scholarship on the distinctive characteristics of religious historiography, past and present” (p. 21). There is no doubt that these general objectives have been met and that, in fact, much more has been accomplished through the chapters that follow.

Chapter 1 highlights the pivotal role of the Indian Buddhist heritage in shaping the perspectives and craft of Buddhist historians in China. Here, Kieschnick focuses on a few selected themes—chronology, prophecy, lineage, and source criticism—to underscore the specificities of Buddhist historical writings compared to court histories. Kieschnick reveals that Buddhist historians in China were at times more zealous than their court counterparts in their attempts to ascertain ancient dates (e.g., the dates of the Buddha’s birth or nir-
vāṇa), using chronology as a platform to showcase their historiographical craftsmanship and legitimacy.

Chapter 2 delves into the various practices of source criticism within Chinese Buddhist historical writings. Regardless of the prevalent tendency for compilation, akin to the broader Chinese historiographical tradition, Kieschnick shows that Buddhist historians also occasionally demonstrated a scholarly ethos. We find them elaborating on the sources they consulted, explaining their selection criteria, evaluating disparities among accounts of the same individual or event, glossing over discrepancies in names, dates, and other variant readings in their sources, and even uncovering biases in previous works. Kieschnick argues that the way Buddhist historians navigated discordant accounts suggests a genuine interest for historical accuracy and unveils distinctive Buddhist convictions embedded within their interpretative frameworks. I found this chapter to be particularly captivating and hope that it will encourage further research—for example, by period, genre, author, and text—into the exciting and fundamental field of inquiry that is source criticism.

Chapter 3 explores the significance of karma within Chinese Buddhist historiography. Equipped with a keen awareness of karmic principles, Buddhist historians frequently turned to the notion of karma, including its unfolding over many lives, to interpret both past and present events. And despite incorporating “less Buddhist historiographical” concepts such as destiny (yunshu 運数 or tianming 天命) from the Song dynasty onward (p. 104), Kieschnick argues that karma—encompassing the three interrelated notions of causality, ethics, and rebirth—remained one of the most distinctive historiographical tools pervasively employed by Buddhist historians in China.

In chapter 4, Kieschnick scrutinizes the odd but widespread emphasis on the prediction of “future” events within Chinese Buddhist historiography. Notwithstanding their focus on the past, Buddhist historians dedicated considerable attention to omens, dreams, and mostly ex eventu prophecies to make sense of specific events and link them together. Through an array of well-selected examples, the author examines some of the most salient functions of prophecies, predictive dreams, and other wondrous signs (e.g., to establish a chronology, to advance polemical claims), highlighting precedents in Indian and Chinese writings, and successfully showcasing their prevalence in Buddhist historical works.

Chapter 5 turns to the emergence of genealogical histories within the context of sectarian competition, with an emphasis on the “lamp records” (denglu 燈錄) of the Chan tradition and, to a lesser extent, Tiantai texts. Kieschnick argues that the rise of genealogical writings raised the stakes for Buddhist historiography as historians raced to establish their own vision of “orthodoxy” and, in the process, connected themselves to a lineage of eminent masters presumably extending back to the Buddha. By tracing lineages and excluding rival branches, however, compilers exacerbated sectarian tensions and exposed themselves to the scrutiny of later historians. Here the author is to be lauded for resituating Chan genealogies within the larger premodern tradition of Buddhist historiography. Thus we learn that Chan histories occasionally displayed practices in line with broader historiographical conventions, and that the use of lineage itself can be understood as a historiographical tool.

In chapter 6, Kieschnick traces the evolution of Chinese Buddhist historical writings from traditional forms to modern scholarly approaches. He contrasts the increasing gap between some Buddhist monks (e.g., Taixu 太虚) and academic historians (e.g., Chen Yuan, Hu Shih 胡適, Tang Yongtong 湯用彤) in early twentieth-century China, noting how the latter, influenced by Western historiography, introduced new methodologies and perspectives that created new challenges for modern Buddhist historians. Yinshun is then intro-
duced as the figure who marked a radical departure from traditional Buddhist historiography, opening the tradition of the “monk-scholar” continued by figures like Dongchu or Shengyan. Though the works and individuals examined are limited, this chapter sheds light on the new trends of Buddhist historiography amidst modernization in China.

Two appendices follow the brief conclusion: a chronological list of the major primary sources analyzed, and a compilation of genealogies traced in the *Fufazang yinyuan zhuang* 付法藏因緣傳, Tiantai, and Chan texts. There is a great discrepancy regarding the extent to which sources in the first appendix are actually used throughout the monograph. One of them, the *Chanlin sengbao zhuang* 禪林僧寶傳, was cited nowhere in the study. The value of the second appendix remains somewhat limited since the names of the Indian patriarchs from Chinese texts are given only in Sanskrit and a few inaccuracies mar the charts.[4] Otherwise, these appendices should prove handy for readers less familiar with the materials surveyed in this book.

Though there is no doubt that Kieschnick maintains a high level of scholarly rigor throughout the monograph, it is still possible to note certain limitations. My intention here is to offer constructive criticism and highlight issues that the author and fellow scholars could take into consideration in future contributions.

The first point concerns the very definition of historiography in the Chinese Buddhist context and the mix of literary genres. As noted earlier, what Kieschnick regards as historiography encompasses many different things. Yet the book does not contain sustained theoretical discussions of what historiography is and how these genres and texts qualify as such. In a sense, although we learn what, in Kieschnick's view, makes a historiographical work *Buddhist*, it remains slightly unclear what marks a Buddhist text as *historiographical*. This reluctance to delve into more theoretical issues at times creates minor inconsistencies in the arguments put forward and a sense of imbalance in the supporting evidence provided.

For example, when Kieschnick argues that historiographical writings did not seem to have been of tremendous importance in the daily life of Buddhist communities in China, he supports this by indicating that no copies of the *Gaoseng zhuang* were found in Dunhuang 敦煌. That said, the author does include Chan genealogies among the surveyed texts, several of which were recovered from the Mogao Caves 莫高窟 complex. Obviously, the circulation of these texts in this region does not necessarily invalidate Kieschnick's main point. However, if one wants to ascertain the validity of the observation, it would be essential to determine how and why these early Chan histories were relevant to Buddhist circles in ninth- or tenth-century Dunhuang.[5]

To stay with Chan genealogies, Kieschnick rightly observes that these texts “did not conform to the standards of high history, built on solid foundation, dense with references to multiple sources and erudite asides” (p. 42). Informed by the works of John Maraldo, John McRae, and Arthur Wright, the author is aware of the tensions between history, sectarianism, and hagiography within these texts, and there is indeed no reason not to examine Chan genealogies along with non-sectarian bio-hagiographies of monks and nuns or the Tiantai universal histories. That said, besides chapter 5, I could not but notice a relative paucity of references to Chan texts to illustrate the various historiographical trends discussed.[6]

Kieschnick writes in the introduction that he will primarily consider four major genres—prosopography, genealogy, universal history, and modern historiography—corresponding to four phases in Chinese Buddhist historiography. While these four phases are oddly reduced to three in the conclusion,[7] the more important issue relates to the exclusion of genres and texts that participated in the historiographical tradition under discussion.
Since the book presents itself as an overview of Buddhist historiography in China, perhaps a more in-depth discussion of the methodological considerations guiding the corpus studied and a more balanced use of sources would have strengthened the book's conclusions.

For instance, although Kieschnick also integrates insights from more minor genres like bibliographic treatises and chronological works, one wonders why local Buddhist histories such as gazetteers (difang zhi 方志) or works like the Nanyue zongsheng ji 南嶽總勝集 were omitted from study. The author justifies these omissions by indicating that such genres, along with autobiography, are “so distinctive that they merit separate treatment” (p. 19). However, the same could be said for each of the four main genres discussed. Did the monks who produced these texts not see them as local forms of history? Are these less “historical” than the Chan genealogies?

Other genres that would be worth considering include funerary and temple inscriptions, which not unfrequently cite previous texts and invoke dreams or supernatural phenomena to justify the construction of various Buddhist monuments and institutions. One could also look for historiographical concerns in works not typically associated with historiography such as miracle tales or doctrinal treatises. More fundamentally, it would be interesting to examine Buddhist discourses about biographies of monks and nuns, Chan lamp records, and so forth qua history—that is, to determine what Buddhists in China themselves regarded as history.

The second, more minor issue that I would like to raise relates to the lack of emphasis on the sociopolitical and religious contexts in which the texts discussed were produced. To be sure, what Buddhist Historiography in China demonstrates with brio are shared historiographical practices across the various genres examined. The backdrop of this thematic approach, however, is that it leaves little place to discuss the specificity of the texts surveyed (e.g., their authorial motivations, audience, or reception) and the subtler developments of Chinese Buddhist historiography. In this respect, the periodization advanced by Kieschnick is more evocative of major “innovations” in that tradition than palpable “phases.” This is most conspicuous if we consider that biographies of monks and nuns were produced well beyond the eleventh century or that Chan genealogies emerged already in the early eighth century.

As the author himself suggests, future studies may thus want to explore in more detail how distinct literary genres shaped historiographical practices and, conversely, how historiographical techniques were honed and developed through the centuries within these genres. Additionally, and though this may prove more difficult to realize, statistical and systematic comparison of different texts could help us refine our image of the developments of Chinese Buddhist historiography.

As the bibliography testifies, Kieschnick displays an impressive mastery of the relevant sources and literature on the various topics and texts explored throughout his monograph. The author is to be commended for considering publications in English, German, and French, along with modern Chinese and Japanese, on what is a wide range of topics, periods, and texts. In some respects, however, the book may have benefited from closer engagement with existing scholarship. For instance, John Jorgensen’s recent contribution on Bodhidharma and Huike 慧可 in the Xu Gaoseng zhuang 续高僧传 contains relevant insights into Daoxuan’s 道宣 (596–667) historiographical craft. Perhaps more surprising is the absence of Jan Yün-hua’s 冉雲華 (1923–2018) pioneering paper on Buddhist historiography in Song China, which, though lacking the sort of analysis provided by Kieschnick, nonetheless gives a more comprehensive list of historiographical works produced under the Song. Similarly, it would have been interesting to consider Maraldo’s work on...
Buddhist hermeneutics and historicity, in particular his claim that “Chinese Buddhist histories originated in an attempt to ‘naturalize’ Buddhism in China.”[12] As an aside, readers interested in the Fufazang yinyuan zhuan will be happy to know that Elizabeth Morrison’s long-awaited article—still cited as an unpublished manuscript in Kieschnick’s monograph (pp. 227n59–60, 274)—has been published in the meantime.[13]

Regarding the editing work proper, the monograph is very well produced but it perhaps could have used a stronger editorial hand. Typographical errors and hyphenation issues are few, but there is a non-negligible number of technical inconsistencies that could potentially affect the reading experience of non-specialists. Pinyin romanizations, Chinese characters, or English translations are not consistently given on the first occurrence of a work; some text titles are translated differently in different parts of the book, occasionally impacting the index; segmentation of Romanized words and phrases is inconsistent throughout the book; and the references and bibliography are sometimes mismatched or disordered. Lastly, the book contains a few minor factual errors that do not materially affect its arguments.[14]

Regarding premodern sources, one could perhaps regret that citations of Chinese texts, with the notable exception of traditional Chinese histories, mostly come from the Taishō Canon and other editions digitized by SAT and CBETA, rather than updated critical editions.

The translations of primary sources and terms provided throughout the book follow a high scholarly standard and inaccuracies are very rare. I checked carefully all translations provided in the first fifty pages of the book and did not find a single mistake, though a few variant readings in the original witnesses of the texts translated could have deserved a note.

All in all, Buddhist Historiography in China is an excellent contribution to the fields of Buddhist studies and Sinology, and it will be an inevitable landmark for future studies on the topic. Written in a lively and engaging style, this is a book that I would recommend for both undergraduate classrooms and graduate seminars. It is of reasonable length and particularly informative regarding a wide range of basic topics in Chinese Buddhism. To borrow Bernard Faure’s words, I think it is fair to say that Kieschnick has found here a very fine balance between “pearls” and “strings”—that is, between carefully selected examples that are both entertaining and informative, and compelling lines of analysis that help make sense of this data and allow us to better understand Buddhist historiography in China.[15]

Notes

[1]. For recent works, see, for example, Cao Ganghua 唐剛華, Mingdai fojiao fangzhi yanjiu 明代佛教方志研究 (Beijing: Zhongguo Renmin daxue chubanshe, 2011); Cao Ganghua, Songdai fojiao shiji yanjiu 宋代佛教史籍研究 (Shanghai: Huadong Shifan daxue chubanshe, 2005); Song Daofa 宋道發, Fojiao shiguan yanjiu 佛教史觀研究 (Beijing: Zongjiao wenhua chubanshe, 2009).


[4]. I am not entirely sure on which text “Lineage Chart 2” is based since Yaoshan Weiyan 藥山惟儼 (d. ca. 827) is regarded as a successor, not of Qingyuan Xingsi 青原行思 (d. ca. 738/741), but of Shitou Xiqian 石頭希遷 (701–91) both in the Zutang ji 祖堂集 and the Jingde chuandeng lu. Besides this, it would have been clearer to include both Luohan Guichen 羅漢桂琛 (867–928) and Fayan Wenyi 法眼文益 (885–958), who lead to the Fayan branch. “Lineage Chart 4,” as it includes all disciples mentioned in the Lengqie shizi ji 楞伽師資記, does not
adequately reflect which individuals the compiler(s) of the text regarded as legitimate successors.

[5]. On this topic, see, for example, the recent paper by Sam van Schaik, “Chan Texts in Practice: Towards a Socio-Historical Approach to Early Chan,” Journal of Chan Buddhism 3, no. 1–2 (2023): 17–34.

[6]. In the first half of the book, for instance, references to the Jingde chuandeng lu pale in comparison with those to Zhipan's or Zanning's works. The influential Baolin zhuan is mentioned only four times throughout the book, while the Zutang ji is discussed only twice. Yet, both texts contain precious information regarding historiographical practices in the late Tang and the Five Dynasties period.

[7]. That is, prosopography (500–1000), genealogical history (1000–1900), and modern Buddhist historiography (1900–2000, or today).


[9]. Kieschnick does highlight that there is “excellent scholarship on Chinese Buddhist historiography in various languages” (p. 215n5). However, he only rarely situates his contribution with regard to that scholarship. Song Daofa's most relevant work, for instance, is referenced or discussed only in four places throughout the book.


[12]. See John C. Maraldo, “Hermeneutics and Historicity in the Study of Buddhism,” Eastern Buddhist 19, no. 1 (1986): 17–43. I am sure, however, that the author would disagree with Maraldo's claim that “there is nothing essentially Buddhist about Chinese Buddhist histories” (“Hermeneutics and Historicity,” 33).


[14]. For example, Yinshun seems to have passed away in June 2005 and not 2003 (p. 1) and he did not technically author a “collection of essays titled Researching Buddhism with Buddhism” in 1954 (p. 1). Originally, Yi fofa yanjiu fofa was the title of a single essay reportedly composed in 1954 (Minguo 43). It is not until much later that this essay was included in the sixteenth volume of a collection of Yinshun's essays, lectures, and other texts published by Zhengwen Publishing House 正聞出版社 in 1972 under the title Miaoyun ji 妙雲集. The confusion comes from the fact that this sixteenth volume came to receive the title of the first essay that it contains—namely, Yi fofa yanjiu fofa. However, the other essays in that volume are not always directly related to this topic, and they were in any case composed at different times, which explains why they “do not consistently apply a historical methodology informed by Buddhist doctrine,” as Kieschnick notes (p. 185). See, for example, Marcus Bingenheimer, Der Mönchsgelehrte Yinshun (*1906) und seine Bedeutung für den Chinesisch-Taiwanischen Buddhismus im 20. Jahrhundert (Heidelberg: Edition Forum, 2004), 16, 174, 312–15.
[15]. McRae, review of *The Eminent Monk*, 127.

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