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John Kieschnick: The Impact of Buddhism on Chinese Material Culture

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INTRODUCTION

WHEN Buddhism began to influence Chinese culture in the first century A.D., it brought with it a vast array of new concepts, doctrines, and beliefs. Detailed conceptions of heavens and hells, a new pantheon, belief in reincarnation, and the doctrine of karma all eventually worked their way into the fabric of Chinese life as Buddhist ideas took hold and spread. Buddhism brought with it as well new types of behavior: forms of seated meditation, the practice of making offerings before images, Buddhist rites of consecration and confession, and even the new gesture of palms pressed together. By exposing Chinese to foreign missionaries and through the translation of foreign texts, Buddhism made contributions to the Chinese understanding of their own language and to the language itself; many expressions common in modern Chinese originated in Buddhist texts, and the recognition of the distinctive characteristics of the Chinese language, such as its dependence on tones, was also sparked by scrutiny of the Indian language in which Buddhist texts were couched.

In addition to all of this, however, Buddhism also altered the material world of the Chinese, introducing new sacred objects, new symbols, buildings, ritual implements, and a host of other objects big and small, as well as new ways of thinking about and interacting with these objects. The impact of Buddhism on Chinese material culture began immediately, with the first evidence we have of Buddhism in China in the first century, and continued long after the twelfth, when Buddhism ceased to be a major cultural force in India. Objects, ideas about objects, and behaviors associated with objects came with Buddhism to China, where they continued to change and evolve in response to new environments and the demands of a dynamic society with an immense capacity to manufacture, employ, and discard material things. Today in all areas where Chinese culture is present, Buddhism continues to hold a prominent place in local material culture. This book attempts to give an overview of these developments by focusing on the histories of a number of objects that are representative of the major themes in the history of the influence of Buddhism on Chinese material culture. But before discussing the histories of particular objects, we turn first to trenchant Buddhist attitudes toward material things in general.

THE BUDDHIST CRITIQUE OF THE MATERIAL WORLD

Few religions have attacked the material world with the intellectual rigor of Buddhism. From the earliest strata of Buddhist texts to the present day, Buddhist monks have espoused an austere ideal of renunciation of the world of things. In the first text of the *Dīrghāgama*, translated from Sanskrit into Chinese in the fifth century, Śākyamuni explains that like the six previous buddhas that came before him, he too was born a prince, and was raised for a life of ease and abundance in a luxurious palace. When his father suspected that his son was leaning toward the life of a renunciant, he attempted to seduce the boy into staying at home by appealing to his “five senses,” supplying him with skilled, beautiful women and augmenting the already lavish adornments of the palace. But in the end, like similar acts of renunciation by the six buddhas that had preceded him in earlier eras, Śākyamuni secretly left the palace by chariot late at night, removed his “precious garments,” donned the robes of an ascetic, and ordered his charioteer to take his princely clothing and chariot back to the palace, while he wandered alone into the forest with nothing.¹ This first great act of renunciation, the model for all Buddhist monks, repeated in numerous texts and depicted in countless paintings and statues, involved more than just the rejection of physical objects: it also signaled the renunciation of pleasing music, sexual pleasure, and attachments to family. But the fact that Śākyamuni was born to a family of great wealth underscored his rejection of *material* pleasures, for the more one has, the greater the act of renunciation. Śākyamuni’s act also implied a juxtaposition between material comfort and spiritual advancement. His biography makes it clear that he could not have achieved enlightenment had he continued to lead the luxurious life of a wealthy prince, surrounded by the extravagant accoutrements of the immensely rich.

This contrast between the material concerns of the wealthy and the spiritual quest of the monk appears frequently in Buddhist scriptures. In the *Madhyamāgama*, the Buddha announces that unlike merchants, warriors, and priests, all of whom seek material wealth, the monk seeks after truth.² Elsewhere the Buddha states that unlike kings who think only of war and covet treasure, or women who think only of men and covet jewels, the monk thinks only of the “four noble truths” and wants only to achieve

¹ *Chang ahan jing* (Skt. *Dīrghāgama*), T no. 1, vol. 1, pp. 1–10. There is no early continuous biography of Śākyamuni, but his renunciation of the life of a prince is common to most of what are considered the earliest references to his life. See Étienne Lamotte, *History of Indian Buddhism: From the Origins to the Saka Era*, pp. 648–62.

² *Zhong ahan jing* (Skt. *Madhyamāgama*), T no. 26, vol. 1, p. 660b–c.

nirvana.³ Wealth is the petty obsession of peddlers who crave one another's belongings, and cannot free themselves of their lust for material things.⁴ Money and treasure, like women, are fetters that “bind hard and fast” and “pollute the mind.”⁵ It was for this reason, the seductive distractions of a life surrounded by material comforts, that Śākyamuni left a life of leisure in a palace for the hard life of the renunciant, and for this reason that he insisted that his disciples follow his example and adopt a life of poverty and restraint.

In any number of scriptural passages, the Buddha warns that the pursuit of material things is not simply a distraction from purer, more lofty concerns; it is short-sighted, because in the long term, one is not rewarded for collecting personal possessions. For “when one's life comes to an end, one's treasures remain in the world.”⁶ And things that were not put to moral use in life serve no purpose in death. The Buddha is equally unrelenting for those content simply to enjoy material possessions in this life. Surrendering to even a modest desire for things is dangerous because, unrestrained, our thirst for possessions can never be quenched: “Even were one to obtain everything in the world, still he would not be satisfied.”⁷

We attach ourselves to the material world, ignoring the horrendous karmic consequences of the neglect of moral duties and unaware that such craving brings only the most fleeting forms of pleasure—fleeting because, in the end, the material world is a deception, a dream from which we must awaken sooner or later. The Buddha tells his disciples that material pleasures are “like a man who dreams of a fine house with fine gardens and sumptuous delights. Yet when he awakes all of it vanishes. Distinctions of wealth and poverty, noble and common are like a dream.”⁸

Buddhist thinkers in India were drawn to this conception of the material world as illusory, and attacked notions of conventional reality with great enthusiasm. This was done by systematically breaking down all phenomena into their constituent elements. Even at a superficial level, all experience can be divided into the “five aggregates” (Skt. *skandhas*): matter, feeling, cognition, impulses, and consciousness. Each of these aggregates can further be seen to contain distinct elements. The influential Indian scholastic work *Abhidharmakośaśāstra*, for instance, states that matter is comprised of eleven basic elements (*dharmas*): the five sense organs, the five types of objects and *avijñāpti* (unexpressed matter). The *Ab-*

³ *Zeng yi ahan jing* (Skt. *Ekottarāgama*), T no. 125, vol. 2, p. 714b.

⁴ *Bie yi za ahan jing* (Skt. *Samyuktāgama*), T no. 100, vol. 2, p. 439b.

⁵ *Za ahan jing* (Skt. *Samyuktāgama*), T no. 99, vol. 2, p. 338b.

⁶ *Ibid.*, T no. 101, vol. 2, p. 496a.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 495c1.

⁸ *Fo bannihuan jing* (Skt. *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra*), T no. 5, vol. 1, p. 161c.

hidarmakośa goes on to list the five types of objects: visible matter, sounds, odors, tastes, and tangibles. Of these, visible matter can be divided into colors, including blue, red, yellow, white, light, and darkness. Sounds are divided into eight categories, tastes into six, odors into four, tangibles into eleven,⁹ and so on. Only the most basic elements (*dharmas*) can be said to exist independently, if only for the briefest of moments; the objects in the world around us only appear to exist as independent, distinct entities. A red vase seems to us to have an enduring, independent existence, but in fact it is only a temporary conglomeration of diverse, independent elements that change constantly as the delicate combination of light, color, density, and so forth alters from moment to moment. The enduring vase that seems to remain whole and unchanged from one day to the next is a trick of the senses, disguising a more fluid reality. When viewed in this way, the material world that surrounds us dissolves into individual, independent elements in a frantic, evanescent flux, temporarily coming together in particular configurations (a red vase, a mountain, a person), only to disappear after the briefest moment and reappear with other elements in yet another configuration.¹⁰ As one text puts it:

The ignorant hold that the ground and other such things exist, while the sage looks on with eyes of wisdom and recognizes that this is folly. It is like a child taking for real an image in a mirror, while an adult sees it as nothing more than a trick of the human eye. [In the same way], ordinary people see the concatenation of dust particles that form the ground and say that it is real.¹¹

Not surprisingly, given these repeated condemnations of the material world as an illusory distraction, the monastic ideal, as laid out in the monastic regulations, also eschewed material wealth. The property allowed to a monk was limited to a short list of necessary items that could be carried on his person: a sewing needle, an alms bowl, sandals, and such. Monks are not to touch money. They are to wear only the simplest of garments and to eat the simplest of foods. In sum, whether in well-known sermons, technical ontological treatises, or monastic regulations, Buddhist teachings are suffused with a suspicion of sensual pleasure and a tendency to denigrate and renounce the material world.

⁹ Louis de La Vallée Poussin, *Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam*, pp. 63ff.

¹⁰ For a clear, brief overview of the concept of *dharmas*, see “Dharma: Buddhist Dharma and Dharmas” in Mircea Eliade, ed., *Encyclopedia of Religion*. For more detail, see the introduction to de La Vallée Poussin, *Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam*, and Th. Stcherbatsky, *The Central Conception of Buddhism and the Meaning of the Word “Dharma.”*

¹¹ *Da zhi du lun* (Skt.**Mahāprajñāpāramitāśāstra*) 42, T no. 1509, vol. 25, p. 365.

OBJECTS IN SERVICE TO THE DHARMA

If, however, we leave the world of recondite doctrines and statements of principle and look instead at the way Buddhism has been practiced, we find material goods everywhere. Archaeological evidence suggests that in India monks owned personal property from the earliest times, and did in fact make use of money.¹² Chinese monks too have always owned personal property, ranging from religious objects like scriptures and devotional images to slaves, animals, and vast estates.¹³ Some both within and without the Buddhist monastic order saw the contrast between an austere monastic ideal and a more comfortable reality as a sign of decline and hypocrisy, but others found ways of justifying the gap through recourse to well-accepted doctrines and texts. In the *Mahīśāsakavinaya*, for instance, the Buddha says that different regions have different standards of purity, and that if a given practice is not appropriate for a particular region, then it should be adapted to local mores, thus leaving considerable leeway in the interpretation of the monastic regulations.¹⁴ Most, however, saw no need to justify the keeping of personal property by monks; it was taken for granted.

Even if we set aside evidence for the way Buddhism was actually practiced and remain in the realm of ideals, it is not correct to characterize Buddhist doctrine as entirely opposed to the use of material things. Far from expressing disinterest in objects, the monastic regulations dwell on monastic possessions at great length, carefully detailing the cut and hem of the monk's robes, the material from which his alms bowl was to be made, and the length of his walking staff. This was done in order to maintain a clear distinction between the objects associated with the austere Buddhist monk and those associated with other types of people devoted to the pursuit of money, goods, and material display. That is, objects were used to express the monk's disdain for the decadent world of those obsessed with personal wealth. Certain objects could be harnessed for the greater cause of the rejection of the material world, but to do so required

¹² Gregory Schopen, *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks: Collected Papers on the Archaeology, Epigraphy, and Texts of Monastic Buddhism in India*; and Xinru Liu, *Ancient India and Ancient China: Trade and Religious Exchanges AD 1–600*, pp. 104–12. For evidence of monastic use of money and ownership of private property in the *Mūlasarvāstivādinaya*, see Gregory Schopen, “The Good Monk and His Money in a Buddhist Monasticism of ‘The Mahāyāna Period,’” pp. 85–105.

¹³ Jacques Gernet, *Buddhism in Chinese Society: An Economic History from the Fifth to the Tenth Centuries*.

¹⁴ *Mishasaibu hexi wufen lü* (Skt. *Mahīśāsakavinaya*), T no. 1421, vol. 22, p. 153a15.

meticulous attention to detail and adherence to codes of behavior in their manufacture and use.

More important still, although individual monks were not supposed to amass *personal* wealth, the *corporate* wealth of the monastic community was not restricted. Indeed it was the sacred duty of the laity to support the monastic community with material donations, an act for which they were compensated by happiness in this world and a better rebirth in the next. In the *Ekottarāgama*, the Buddha explains that, on their death, donors may be rewarded with rebirth in the heavens, in addition to which, five advantages accrue to one who gives: “In aspect he is noble, majestic and powerful; he obtains whatever he wishes, and brings every endeavor to fruition; if he is reborn among men, he is born to a wealthy family; he amasses a great personal fortune; and finally, he is eloquent in speech.”¹⁵ The inclusion of the reward of “a great personal fortune” is particularly telling. One of the ways one is rewarded for giving material things is by the easy acquisition of even more material things. Here we have strayed far from the heady rhetoric of abstention and renunciation and entered instead the realm of philanthropy and monastic solicitation of funds. The importance of giving to the monastic community is stressed repeatedly in Buddhist scriptures and buttressed by references to the fleeting nature of human existence and the relative unimportance of personal possessions in the greater scheme of things. In one story, repeated in various scriptures, a prosperous layman remarks:

Although wealth is a source of pleasure, it is impermanent. One’s treasure, divided [eventually] among the “five clans” [rulers, thieves, water, fire, and profligate sons], serves only to distract one’s mind, to scatter one’s thoughts and dissipate one’s focus, like a monkey that cannot stop fidgeting for even an instant. Life passes as quickly as lightning. The body is impermanent, a reservoir of suffering. For this reason, it is right to give.

Then follows a long list of all manner of things—grain, oil, elephants, jewels, gold, and furniture—that the layman donates to the monastic community.¹⁶

Similar stories of fabulous gifts by generous laypeople abound in Buddhist texts, which describe in great detail the gold and precious gems donated to the sangha during the Buddha’s lifetime. Just as early Christians could draw on the story of the three wise men who brought precious gifts to the baby Jesus, Buddhist donors (and the monks who encouraged their

¹⁵ *Zeng yi ahan jing* (Skt. *Ekottarāgama*), p. 826a.

¹⁶ In addition to giving these goods to monks, he also gives them to brahmins, an act for which the gods criticize him. *Da zhi du lun* (Skt.* *Mahāprajñāpāramitāśāstra*) 11, p. 142b. The story appears in a number of other, earlier texts as well. See Lamotte, *Le traité de la grande vertu de sagesse* pp. 677–88.

donations) could draw on stories from the scriptures of great laypeople who gave spectacular gifts to the Buddha's community of monks.¹⁷ Further, even those familiar with the Buddhist ontology of matter were encouraged to give, while at the same time recognizing that their gifts "exist only as a conglomeration of causes and conditions, without a single *dharma* containing an inherent self. They are like fabric that is the result of the combination of various conditions. Outside of the silk and thread, there is no fabric."¹⁸ In other words, one could at once recognize the ultimate emptiness of all things and still make provisional use of them for a greater good by donating objects to the Buddhist cause. With this solid base of precedent in well-known, authoritative scriptures, donors needed feel no compunction about giving even huge amounts of wealth to what was supposed to be an austere, otherworldly community.

The sociological basis of the promotion of giving in Buddhist scriptures is obvious: Monks relied on donations for much of their income and so drew attention to doctrines that rewarded donations to the monastic community, and propagated stories of generous donors of the past. Often, however, scriptures go beyond the straightforward need to feed and clothe monks. Although the Buddha has passed into nirvana, devotees are encouraged to continue to make material offerings to him. In the *Lotus Sutra*, the Buddha encourages the pious to make offerings to stupas with gold, silver, crystal, clam shell, and agate. They are also enjoined to make Buddha images out of nickel, copper, bronze, and precious gems.¹⁹ Unlike gifts of food, robes, and cash, these ornaments are made not for the direct use of the monastic community but rather as ornaments for the glorification of the Buddha. Objects offered in service to the Buddha were not restricted in the ways that objects associated with individual monks and nuns were. Simplicity and restraint were seldom important ideals in Buddhist art; Buddhist images and devotional objects were instead intended to provoke awe and devotion through spectacular displays of grandeur.

Similarly, in Buddhist scriptures, detailed descriptions of the objects that surrounded the Buddha highlight his majesty and splendor. Take, for example, the opening lines of the *Avataṃsaka Sutra*, which describe the Buddha in the land of Magadha, sitting on ground made of diamonds and surrounded by various gems and banners, with jeweled nets hanging overhead. He sits beneath the tree of enlightenment, its trunk made of lapis

¹⁷ For the Christian parallel, see Dominic Janes, *God and Gold in Late Antiquity*, p. 61.

¹⁸ *Da zhi du lun* 11, p. 142a; Lamotte, *Le traité de la grande vertu de sagesse*, p. 676.

¹⁹ *Miaofa lianhua jing* (Skt. *Saddharmaṃṣṭarika*), T no. 262, vol. 9, pp. 8c–9a; English translation, Leon Hurvitz, *Scripture of the Lotus Blossom of the Fine Dharma* p. 39. For further discussion of precious stones in Buddhist literature and practice, see Liu, *Ancient India and Ancient China*.

lazuli, its branches of “marvelous gems.”²⁰ The scene, in the text constructed of precious objects, marks the Buddha as a superior being, despite the fact that all Buddhists considered the Buddha a renunciant who had transcended attachment to such material goods, just as in early Christian images, Christ, himself a poor man who renounced wealth, carries a gilded cross embedded with precious gems.²¹

In the same way, the paradise of the buddha Amithāba, considered an ideal place for good Buddhists to cultivate themselves, is filled with rare, expensive material objects. The ground there is made of gold. Steps leading to terraces are made of gold, silver, and lapis lazuli. Multiple tiers with railings and netting, all made of jewels, surround the paradise. Even the trees are made of jewels.²² Here, rather than deride the pleasures of material goods, they are used as a lure, a reward for the pious. We have already seen that those who give are rewarded with material wealth; in the same way, laypeople who keep five lay precepts (not to kill, steal, commit lascivious acts, cheat, or drink liquor) are assured that as a reward for doing so, “their wealth will increase and never decrease.”²³

We see the same technique at work in descriptions of the Buddha, who a number of texts note had skin the color of gold.²⁴ Far from distancing the Buddha from secular, material values, Buddhist exegetes readily drew on them, albeit at times in a self-conscious, sophisticated way. The *Mahāprajñāpāramitāsāstra*, for instance, cites the theory that in fact the color of the Buddha’s skin depended on the values of the viewer. For those who did not value gold, the Buddha’s skin looked like lapis lazuli, glass, or diamonds, depending on what the viewer admired most.²⁵ Perhaps the suggestion here that the Buddha’s appearance was essentially an illusion was intended to soften the contrast between the shimmering jewels of the merchant and the appearance of the great renouncer, emphasizing as it does that the Buddha ultimately transcends the limits of regional aesthetics and material values. Nonetheless, even in this case, there is no reluctance to encase the Buddha in the opulent imagery of secular literature. In every society the possession of rare objects is so fundamental as a mark of distinction, their enticement so strong, that it is natural that objects are incorporated into the art and ritual even of religions that embrace the ul-

²⁰ *Da fanguang fo huayan jing* (Skt. *Buddhāvataṃsakasūtra*), T no. 278, vol. 9 p. 395a.

²¹ Janes, *God and Gold in Late Antiquity*, p. 123.

²² *Amituo jing* (Skt. *Sukhāvataṃsāvūyha*), T no. 366, vol. 12, pp. 346c–7a; English translation in Luis O. Gómez, *The Land of Bliss: The Paradise of the Buddha of Measureless Light*, p. 146.

²³ *Chang aban jing* (Skt. *Dirghāgama*), p. 12b.

²⁴ One of the thirty-two marks of the Buddha. For references, see Hajime Nakamura, *Bukkyōgo daijiten* s.v. *sanjūnisō*, pp. 472–3.

²⁵ *Da zhi du lun* 88, p. 684a.

timate transcendence of such values. Linking the Buddha, or for that matter a monastery, with precious gems and elaborate ornamentation had immediate resonance with people from all walks of life, expressing majesty, distinction, and splendor, while at the same time giving expression to the collective desires of donors and devotees for material well-being.

ATTITUDES TOWARD BUDDHIST OBJECTS IN CHINA

In the preceding discussion, I have drawn on Indian texts from different periods and from different traditions within Buddhism. Specialists in Indian Buddhism may be able to distinguish shades of attitudes toward objects in different time periods of Indian Buddhism and to trace developments from one set of texts to another. But in China, Buddhist texts arrived in a haphazard fashion and were never placed in their proper chronological order, an arduous project that vexes even the most talented textual scholars today. All of the texts I drew on above that quoted the Buddha were translated into Chinese before the middle of the fifth century, and in China all were generally considered to represent authentic records of the sayings of the Buddha. Hence, from early on Buddhism both presented Chinese devotees with a strong tradition calling for the renunciation of material things and at the same time actively promoted the use of precious and mundane objects in certain specified contexts. Both strands of Buddhist thought left their traces on Chinese history.

Even before Buddhism entered China, frugality and restraint in the use of objects were important ideals in Chinese thought. Confucius, warning against the seductions of wealth, remarked, "In the eating of coarse rice and the drinking of water, the using of one's elbow for a pillow, joy is to be found. Wealth and rank attained through immoral means have as much to do with me as passing clouds."²⁶ Zhuangzi makes an even stronger case, not just against the glorification of rank, wealth, and status, but against attachment to objects in general, when he entreats his audience to "treat things as things and refuse to be turned into a thing by things."²⁷

Throughout ancient Chinese history, those who displayed wealth in a manner inappropriate to their station were reprimanded, and an ideal of frugal restraint was promoted, for example, in burial rites.²⁸ At the same

²⁶ *Lunyu zhushu* (SBBY edn.) 7, pp. 3b–4a.; English translation from D. C. Lau, *The Analects*, p. 88.

²⁷ *Zhuangzi jiaozhu*, ed. Wang Shumin, 20, p. 720; English translation from A. C. Graham, *Chuang-Tzu: The Inner Chapters* p. 121. See also Stephen Eskildsen, *Asceticism in Early Taoist Religion* pp. 1–14.

²⁸ Mu-chou Poo, "Ideas Concerning Death and Burial in Pre-Han and Han China," pp. 25–62.

time, however, the persistent rhetoric calling for frugality and restraint in the use of wealth betrays the opposite tendency; material goods were commonly used to assert and improve social position and as a way of conveying a sense of splendor, prosperity, and affluence.

In the centuries following the arrival of Buddhism to China, Buddhist attitudes toward material things found their own niche in the Chinese repertoire of ideas about objects. Chinese monks were very familiar with the Buddha's injunctions to renounce material wealth as ephemeral, pretentious vanity. As we have seen, major texts espousing this ideal were translated into Chinese by the middle of the fifth century and were well known to literate monks. All Chinese monks were expected to have some familiarity with the texts detailing the monastic regulations, in which an ideal of austere simplicity is set forth at great length, and Chinese monks composed many works commenting and debating various aspects of the monastic regulations concerning personal property and the proper relations monks are to maintain with material things. Similarly, Indian Buddhist writings on the ephemerality and illusory nature of all material objects received great attention in China. The text I cited above, the *Abhidharmakośa*, treating the way in which the phenomenal world can be broken down into distinct elements, was a standard part of the training of a monk, and important Chinese monastic thinkers pondered the true nature of objects at length in their own writings.²⁹ Buddhist notions of the ephemerality of the world and the fundamental tension between sensuous enjoyment of things and spiritual pursuits were not limited to monks. Through much of Chinese history, refined literary men fantasized about a simpler life in a mountain monastery away from the material trappings of high society, and when Buddhism appears in Chinese narrative, it is often to critique the material decadence of the secular world.

At the same time, in China, Buddhist attitudes toward splendor (*zhuangyan*) and the importance of material expressions of piety were no less influential. Archaeologists and art historians have documented countless Buddhist images from all periods of Chinese Buddhist history of all sizes and shapes, commissioned by people from all walks of life. Great attention was always paid to the substance from which the images were made, and statues of precious metal are common. Indeed, the metal taken up by Buddhist images was so great that it was persistently coveted by the state. From medieval times up to the 1960s, the Chinese government repeatedly called for the melting down of Buddhist images to fill state cof-

²⁹ See, for instance, the comments of the monk Zongmi (780–841) on the “teaching of the phenomenal appearances of the dharmas,” in Peter N. Gregory, *Inquiry into the Origin of Humanity: An Annotated Translation of Tsung-mi's Yüan jen lun with a Modern Commentary*, pp. 148–60.

fers or provide metal for construction or the military. One such instance is particularly revealing. In 845, during Emperor Wuzong's sweeping persecution of Buddhism, the emperor issued an edict forbidding the use of gold, silver, copper, iron, and gems in the making of Buddhist images. Buddhists were to make their images of clay and wood, which, the edict notes, "are sufficient to express respect."³⁰ There is an undeniable logic to the emperor's comment, but his efforts to transform the material expression of Buddhist piety in China had little success; immediately after the emperor's death, his orders were rescinded, and Buddhist devotees began once again to employ precious metals in Buddhist objects. Wuzong failed for two reasons. First, many did not feel that wood and clay could adequately express respect for Buddhist deities; just as the emperor required precious objects in accordance with his position, so too did buddhas and bodhisattvas. Secondly, Buddhist images were seldom if ever only channels of communication between individual devotees and the deities they worshipped; they were at the same time attempts to win or assert social prestige. In social context, there was an enormous difference between a small clay image that anyone could afford to make, and a large image of precious metal that demanded resources available only to the wealthy and powerful. For similar reasons, in addition to substance, size too was of great importance. Monumental images of Buddhist figures commissioned at great expense and taking huge amounts of time and labor still hold a prominent place in the Chinese landscape, as do countless stupas, monasteries, and other Buddhist structures spread throughout the country.

When Chinese Buddhist texts describe Buddhist art and architecture, they do so with the vocabulary of opulence and not with the vocabulary of austerity and restraint, which was reserved for descriptions of monks. The famous fourth-century monk Zhi Daolin, for instance, praises the "color and loveliness of purple and gold" in an image of Śākyamuni.³¹ Elsewhere, stupas are described as "resplendent" (*huali*) and as "ornamented with gold to make them splendid and dazzling."³² They are marked by their beauty and "splendor."³³ As a group of laymen explain in the biography of a seventh-century monk, "Meritorious things made in service to the Buddha must be spectacular."³⁴ This same tendency toward the ornate and elaborate extends even to the rooms where monks lived. In monasteries, "The Buddha Hall is exquisite, the monks' quarters resplendent."³⁵ Or elsewhere, "The Buddha Hall and monastic quarters

³⁰ *Tang huiyao* 49, p. 862.

³¹ "Shijiawen foxiang zan," p. 195c.

³² *Xu gaoseng zhuan* 1, T no. 2060, vol. 50, p. 428b.

³³ See *Fayuan zhulin* 12, T no. 2122, vol. 53, p. 379c.

³⁴ *Song gaoseng zhuan* 18, T no. 2061, vol. 50, p. 821.

³⁵ *Fayuan zhulin* 18, p. 420b.

were gorgeous, the carving sumptuous.”³⁶ Nowhere do we find praise of plain, unadorned Buddhist images and inexpensive stupas, or descriptions of monasteries as simple, humble monastic dwellings. In Chinese Buddhism, such terms were simply not a part of the aesthetic repertoire. And the economic harvest of Buddhist philanthropy was applied to a large extent to ornament.

The contrast between the austere ideal of the monk and the material success of Buddhist monasteries was not lost on Buddhism’s critics. A fifth-century monk-turned-critic questioned his former brethren, asking, “Why is it that their ideals are [so] noble and far-reaching and their activities still are [so] base and common? . . . [Monks] become merchants and engage in barter, wrangling with the masses for profit.”³⁷ One sixth-century critic complained of the wealth and energy “squandered” to erect “elaborate temples.” For “the teaching bequeathed by the Buddha called on his followers not to cultivate the fields and not to store up wealth or grain, but to beg for their food or clothing, and to practice the *dhūtāngas*. This is no longer true.”³⁸ The criticism of what seemed rank hypocrisy continued into later periods. In the early seventh century, Emperor Gaozu, for instance, noted the contrast between the teachings of Buddhism that “give priority to purity, distancing oneself from filth, and cutting off greed and desire” and the “inexhaustible greed” of monks intent on “amassing ever-greater quantities of goods.”³⁹ Or consider a famous eighth-century memorial by Xing Tipi submitted in protest to imperial support for monastic construction that, again, contrasted the “purity” and “self-denial” of Buddhist teachings with the “vast halls, lengthy corridors” and “elaborate ornamentation” of Buddhist monasteries.⁴⁰

But if the contrast between Buddhist ideals of austerity and the opulence of Buddhist buildings and images was shockingly apparent to critics like Xing Tipi, within Buddhist circles the contrast usually slipped by unnoticed. Buddhist texts are replete with references both to the unbridled splendor of devotion and to ideals of renunciation, simplicity, and restraint. Normally, Buddhist writers felt little need to justify the opulence

³⁶ *Song gaoseng zhuan* 27, p. 882b.

³⁷ Objections cited by the monk Daoheng in the early fifth-century treatise *Shi bo lun* in *Hongming ji* 6, T no. 2102, vol. 52, p. 35b; translated in Eric Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China*, p. 262.

³⁸ *Dhūtāngas* are ascetic practices. The comments are those of Xun Ji (d. 547) in *Guang hongming ji* 7, pp. 128c–31b; translated in Kenneth Chen, *Buddhism in China*, p. 187.

³⁹ *Jiu Tang shu* 1, pp. 16–7.

⁴⁰ The edict appears in the *Tang huiyao* 49, pp. 850–51, and the *Wenyuan yinghua* 698, pp. 3603–4, each of which gives different dates. The memorial is discussed in Gernet, *Buddhism in Chinese Society*, p. 330, n.110, and in Stanley Weinstein, *Buddhism Under the Tang*, p. 50.

of Buddhist art and architecture. Take for instance the biography of the Tang monk Yize (773–830), a disciple of the prominent Chan monk Huizhong. The biography repeatedly emphasizes Yize’s detachment from the material world. As a youth he “lived tranquilly, seeking after nothing.” When he became a monk, he “abandoned all of his possessions.” The biography quotes him as saying, “There is nothing in heaven or earth, nothing in the self. Although all is thus negated, neither was there ever anything [to negate]. This is to say, the sage is like a shadow; humanity,⁴¹ a dream. Who is there to live or die?” After studying under Huizhong, Yize retires to a deserted area where he lives in a hut he makes of grass and leaves. “He lived a life of simplicity, drinking from mountain streams and appeasing his hunger with fruit.” All of this fits the pattern of common descriptions of Buddhist ascetics. But what follows is equally typical. “Later, woodcutters saw him and spread the word. There were those who admired his teachings and said, ‘This man of the Way has no disciples.’ And so they led each other up the mountain, constructed rooms, painted images of buddhas, and installed monks, so that it eventually became a flourishing hermitage.”⁴² The biography, and others like it, expresses no uneasiness with the transition in the monk’s environment from stark simplicity to a bustling monastic complex filled with Buddhist paintings; the two ideals were seen as complementary rather than contradictory.

Like notions of emptiness, Buddhist ideals of austerity certainly influenced the way Chinese monks and laypeople thought about material objects. These ideals lay behind the ascetic tendencies of many monks. Monastic concerns to limit the personal property of monks, and an insistence by some monks on a plain monastic uniform of drab, simple garments, and even vegetarianism, can all be traced in part to the emphasis placed on renunciation and self-restraint in Buddhist doctrine. Refined laymen too were drawn to an ideal of Buddhist simplicity. In their later years, even men of means, like for instance the great Tang poet Wang Wei, retired to simple lives of reflection and recitation, surrounding themselves with only a few basic objects.⁴³ But the pull of austerity did not lead monks to strip monasteries of ornamentation in the manner of Protestant

⁴¹ *Baixing*. The *Jingde chuan deng lu* version of Yize’s biography here reads “one hundred years” (*bai nian*). *Jingde chuan deng lu* 4, T no. 2076, vol. 51, p. 234a.

⁴² *Song gaoseng zhuan* 10, p. 768b–c.

⁴³ According to one biography, later in life Wang Wei maintained a vegetarian diet and, after his wife died, did not take a second wife. “His studio contained nothing save a teapot, a medicine pestle, a table for scriptures, and a corded chair. After he retired from the court, he burned incense and sat alone, occupying himself with meditation and chanting.” *Jiu Tang shu* 190b, p. 5052.

reformers, or to even consider the possibility. In practice, monks at times amassed considerable personal fortunes, managed extensive monastic estates worked by tenant farmers and slaves, and adorned themselves with expensive, elaborate monastic robes.

In sum, Buddhist thought as it developed in China allowed for a wide range of attitudes toward objects, from denigration of them as illusory tokens of decadence to embracing them as tools for devotion and understanding of Buddhist truths. One approach to the history of the impact of Buddhism on Chinese material culture would be to examine the works of Chinese Buddhist thinkers with an eye to their treatment of wealth and of objects in general. And in the pages that follow, I devote much attention to the ways in which Buddhist doctrines influenced the history of material culture in China. There is, however, a danger of giving too much weight to the role of ideas in the formation and development of material culture. Many things are employed according to traditions of religious behavior rather than as outgrowths of well-defined doctrinal precepts.⁴⁴ Moreover, at times internal developments in the history of objects provoke doctrinal changes, and not the other way around. To paraphrase Zhuangzi, it is often the objects that manipulate us rather than we who manipulate them. The point is easily missed in the study of religion, which we too easily interpret as an extension of a stable set of core doctrines.

When, instead of looking at broad, general attitudes toward wealth in Buddhist texts, we look at the histories of specific objects, we begin to catch a glimpse of the full range of the impact of Buddhism on Chinese material culture, a spectrum that ranges from objects intimately linked to monastic Buddhism like the monastery and the monk's apparel, to Buddhist objects in settings that have little to do with traditional Buddhist concerns—Buddhist rosaries adorning Qing court clothing, or Buddhist devotional objects in a county museum. Conversely, the histories of objects that seem at first glance to have nothing to do with Buddhism—bridges, or the tools of print technology—on closer inspection turn out to be intimately linked with Buddhist ideas and practices. This is the approach I take below: a collection of the histories of particular objects, attitudes toward them, and ways in which they were used over long stretches of time that, taken together, reveal the complex and subtle ways in which Buddhism changed the material life of a civilization. But before embarking on the details of particular objects, a few remarks on what the term *material culture* means and how it has been used by other scholars to study similar topics will help to clarify what follows.

⁴⁴ For a discussion of the problem, see William H. Walker, "Where Are the Witches of Prehistory?" pp. 245–308.

ON THE TERM *MATERIAL CULTURE*

Scholars working with artifacts have proposed various definitions of material culture. Some have attempted to limit the term to objects people make and use in order to survive, thus excluding ritual implements, objects made for aesthetic enjoyment (i.e., “art”) and even objects made for greater physical comfort, such as furniture.⁴⁵ Others have pushed the boundaries of the concept of material culture to include not only all manner of objects but even human language, since “words, after all, are air masses shaped by the speech apparatus according to culturally acquired rules.”⁴⁶ Most have come down between these two extremes, defining material culture as “all data directly relating to visible or tangible things such as tools, clothing, or shelter which a person or persons have made.”⁴⁷ This “data” includes both ideas about objects (icons are holy, bells are beautiful) as well as behavior associated with objects (devotees make offerings to icons, monks ring monastery bells at particular times of the day). Archaeologist Michael Brian Schiffer has given more precision to the concept by defining artifacts as “phenomena produced, replicated, or otherwise brought wholly or partly to their present form through human means,” thus including a wide array of objects such as art, food, clothing, and gardens, while excluding material things like the stars, natural rivers, and wild animals, which he terms “externs.”⁴⁸

An even more subtle nuance in the term *material culture* is the relationship between material objects and culture. Scholars ordinarily view artifacts as reflections of culture. The nature of the construction of an ancient Chinese bronze vessel, for instance, can give us clues to the social structure of the people who made it, while the images on the vessel may disclose religious beliefs. Others emphasize that in addition to reflecting culture, objects also play an integral part in shaping culture. Without objects, individual and group identity, and virtually all forms of communication and expression, are impossible.⁴⁹ Humans do not interact naked and in the wild: we are always surrounded by objects that influence the way we see the world around us and the way we behave.

⁴⁵ Melville J. Herskovits, *Man and His Works: The Science of Cultural Anthropology* p. 241.

⁴⁶ James Deetz, *In Small Things Forgotten: The Archeology of Early American Life*, pp. 24–5.

⁴⁷ Cornelius Osgood, *Ingalik Material Culture*, p. 26. For a discussion of definitions of *material culture*, see Thomas J. Schlereth, “Material Culture Studies in America, 1876–1976,” pp. 1–5.

⁴⁸ Michael Brian Schiffer, *The Material Life of Human Beings: Artifacts, Behavior, and Communication*, p. 12.

⁴⁹ Schlereth, “Material Culture Studies in America,” pp. 203; Schiffer, *Ibid.*

But while appreciating the greater significance of objects in all aspects of daily life, it is useful to focus on the narrower area of the ideas, behaviors, and relationships that coalesce in order to manufacture and use certain objects. To return to the ancient Chinese bronze, the manufacture of the object involved negotiations between the eventual owner of the bronze and the artisans who made it, in addition to a set of cultural assumptions about the significance of the bronze and technical knowledge passed down over generations about how to make a bronze. These aspects of culture came into being expressly for the sake of the object. In other words, in addition to exploring the ways in which artifacts reflect culture and the role they play more generally in all cultural performances, we can also look more specifically at the cultural figurations that center on specific objects. This will be my focus throughout this book: What negotiations were involved in making Buddhist objects? What were the objects used for? What were people's attitudes toward these objects?

SCHOLARSHIP ON MATERIAL CULTURE

Unlike literary theory, sociology or even religious studies, material culture studies cannot easily be summarized as a genealogy of movements and key figures. It is closer to the field of textual studies in that material culture studies have developed independently in various fields relatively isolated one from the other. Collectors, scholars in the fields of archaeology, folk-life, anthropology, history of technology, art history, and social history have all had to come to terms with objects in their own ways. It is only recently that the field has become self-conscious and that scholars have begun to pool techniques and data from diverse disciplines for insights into the study of the role of objects in culture.

Long before the term *material culture* gained currency, nineteenth-century anthropologists and archeologists gave great importance to objects. This concern grew in large measure from their overriding project of mapping out the evolution of human culture; artifacts are useful for categorizing and comparing different societies. By comparing the manufacture of implements and vessels in prehistory, human development could be seen, for instance, to progress from the Paleolithic to the Neolithic, from the Iron Age to the Bronze Age. Once the basic framework of development was established, contemporary cultures could be placed on the scale of development: Aztecs higher than Tahitians, Chinese higher than Aztecs, Italians higher than Chinese.⁵⁰ Other aspects of culture, from re-

⁵⁰ Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art, and Custom*, p. 27.

ligion to political organization, were factored into the evolutionary equation, but at the foundation of the system of classification was assessment of the material sophistication of the society in question.

Anthropologists soon came to recognize the weaknesses of the evolutionary approach. The prehistorical archaeological record often leaves gaps, telling us, for instance, much about the manufacture of pottery (which survives) but little about basket weaving (which usually doesn't). Differences in technology often tell us more about material resources than about cultural and technological sophistication: one cannot make exquisite gold jewelry without a gold mine.⁵¹ Archaeologists too gradually abandoned a mechanical, unilinear evolutionary model as they discovered instances in which more sophisticated material remains were followed chronologically by less sophisticated ones.⁵²

From very early on, growing up alongside the evolutionary model was the equally important model of diffusionism: the possibility that artifacts were not developed from previous objects independently in a given culture but rather entered the culture in mature form from elsewhere. In its extreme form, "hyper diffusionism," diffusionist theory attempts to trace all developments in material culture the world over to individual discoveries in a small set of core cultures from which all others borrowed.⁵³ Neither evolution nor diffusionist theory have been abandoned entirely, nor should they be. Objects remain valuable and even essential for classifying cultures and for tracing the development (i.e., evolution) of technology.⁵⁴ Bronze signals an important advancement over a previous culture ignorant of its use. And artifacts can tell us much about the relations between cultures. Archaeologists of colonial North America have shown, for instance that the houses built by free blacks in the seventeenth century share characteristics with West African houses and are distinct in structure from houses made by European-Americans built at the same time, indicating the degree to which African Americans at that early date consciously maintained a distinct identity.⁵⁵ All of these themes—development, diffusion, and cultural identity—are key in understanding the impact of Buddhism on Chinese material culture. Some of the objects I discuss below

⁵¹ For an early critique of the evolutionary model, see Robert H. Lowie, *The History of Ethnological Theory*, pp. 10–8.

⁵² William H. Stiebing Jr., *Uncovering the Past: A History of Archaeology*, pp. 254–5.

⁵³ Bruce G. Trigger, *A History of Archaeological Thought*, pp. 150–5.

⁵⁴ In the midst of a critique of the evolutionary model, Robert Lowie, in one of the earliest references I have found to the term *material culture*, concedes that "notwithstanding the qualifications cited, evolution is a positive fact in material culture and freely conceded by the most determined critics of its Victorian champions." *The History of Ethnological Theory*, p. 27.

⁵⁵ Deetz, *In Small Things Forgotten*.

originated in China. Others came to China with Buddhism from abroad. And in many cases, the associations between particular objects and their origins were of great importance in the way people treated them.

Increasingly, anthropologists and archaeologists see artifacts as more than clues to more central cultural concerns; artifacts are themselves key components of culture, present in all forms of behavior and communication. This realization has inspired increasingly sophisticated analysis of objects. They have shown, for instance, that things, like people, go through stages of development, from manufacture (birth), through use (life), and ending in discard (death). An old, broken object is treated differently than a shiny new one is; it means something else. Hence, it is useful to write the “biographies” or “life histories” of things.⁵⁶

Like archaeologists and anthropologists, art historians can be said to have been studying material culture all along, well before the term came into common use. While most have stuck to more strictly aesthetic concerns of style and iconography, some have ventured into regions on the borders of their discipline. Michael Baxandall, to cite one instance among many, has drawn attention to the prices of certain pigments in fifteenth-century Italy, shedding light on the reaction of a fifteenth-century viewer to a painting; at that time, the eye was attracted first to large patches of color made from what everyone knew to be expensive pigment.⁵⁷ In the same work, Baxandall discusses the influence of the mercantile practice of packaging goods in barrels on the way paintings were perceived; at that time, educated men tended to measure volume according to the shape of a barrel.⁵⁸ More generally, attention to patronage and the social and political function of art has become standard practice among art historians. Sociologists and historians have also made efforts to place art history into a social context in which objects are used to define one’s position in society, and not only in order to derive aesthetic pleasure.⁵⁹

Historians have always shown at least a passing interest in the objects people of the past made and used. Herodotus was sure to include the pyramids in his description of Egypt, and Sima Qian was careful to detail the design and contents of Qin Shihuang’s tomb. Nor did the fathers of modern historiography completely neglect the material. Writing in 1848, Macaulay began his history of England by vowing that in addition to treating political and military history, he would also “trace the progress of useful and ornamental arts . . . and not to pass by with neglect even the

⁵⁶ Igor Kopytoff, “The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process,” pp. 64–94; and William H. Walker, “Ceremonial Trash?” pp. 67–79.

⁵⁷ Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy*, pp. 81–6.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 86–94.

⁵⁹ See, for instance, Peter Burke, *The Italian Renaissance: Culture and Society in Italy*; and Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*.

revolutions which have taken place in dress, furniture, repasts, and public amusements.”⁶⁰ At the same time, across the Atlantic, William H. Prescott devoted long passages of flowing prose to the material world of the Aztecs, at one point noting that their “material civilization” placed them “above the rude races of the New World” but “below the cultivated communities of the Old,” echoing the use of artifacts by his contemporaries in archaeology and anthropology.⁶¹

But it is only in the twentieth century that historians began to pay particular attention to the role of tangible things in historical development. In his massive, sweeping survey *The Structures of Everyday Life*, Fernand Braudel examines the history of all manner of objects; maize in prehistoric North America, African huts, eighteenth-century German wallpaper, and Spanish windmills are all given their due place in the development of civilization.⁶² At the other end of the geohistorical scale, Le Roy Ladurie, in a classic example of microhistory, describes carts, roads, textiles, and tools in a fourteenth-century village.⁶³ Perhaps most successfully of all, historians of technology have detailed the rise and impact of the stirrup, the horse-drawn plow, and the camel saddle, to name just a few examples.⁶⁴ In short, while archaeologists may complain that historians have failed to fully incorporate archaeology into their work and remain reluctant to venture beyond texts, few historians would deny the importance of material objects to the course of history, and we can easily find examples of the histories of objects written by some of the world’s most prominent historians.⁶⁵

OBJECTS AND THE HISTORY OF RELIGION

The relative lack of attention to artifacts in historical studies is in large measure the result of practical difficulties: archaeologists and historians are trained in different departments and publish in different journals. Historians do not in general find artifacts irrelevant or trivial in the course of human development; they are simply unfamiliar with the material. Historians of religion, on the other hand, have expressly placed objects out-

⁶⁰ Thomas Babington Macaulay, *The History of England (1848–1861)*, pp. 52–3.

⁶¹ William H. Prescott, *History of the Conquest of Mexico*, p. 330.

⁶² Fernand Braudel, *The Structures of Everyday Life: Civilization and Capitalism 15th–18th Century*.

⁶³ Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Montaillou: The Promised Land of Error*.

⁶⁴ Lynn White, *Medieval Technology and Social Change*; Richard W. Bulliet, *The Camel and the Wheel*.

⁶⁵ For a critique of the dearth of archaeology in historians’ work, see Serge Cleuziou et al., “The Use of Theory in French Archaeology,” pp. 114–5.

side their field of inquiry. Writing in the 1920s, Johan Huizinga was a pioneer in the use of nontraditional sources for the history of the Middle Ages, including the use of artworks to explore the mentalities of French and Dutch people in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. But when it came to a discussion of religion, he found the presence of objects distressing and lamentable: “By this tendency to embodiment in visible forms all holy concepts are constantly exposed to the danger of hardening into mere externalism.” And later, “It was inevitable that this pious attachment to material things should draw all hagiolatry into a sphere of crude and primitive ideas.⁶⁶ The assumption, inherited from the Reformation, is that religion is properly a spiritual pursuit (“holy concepts”) carried out internally, without recourse to any sort of objects (“hard externalism”). Hence, to dwell on relics, icons, and holy water is to waste one’s time on peripherals, epiphenomena better left to antiquarians than the specialist in religion.

In a survey of material culture studies and American religion, Colleen McDannell lamented the same bias. In the vast majority of research on American religion, at most, images and artifacts are used to illustrate points drawn from texts, and often objects are ignored altogether.⁶⁷ This reluctance to discuss the place of material things in religion is remarkably pervasive, and even crops up in works of specialists in Christian archaeology, in which authors give caveats explaining that their findings do not pertain to the essence of Christianity.⁶⁸

The origins of this disdain for religious goods are diverse but can be traced in part first to Protestant reformers like Zwingli and Calvin, who railed against “externalism” and concern for “outward things,” and called for a return to the scriptures as the source of spiritual insights and strength. In the field of religious studies, this tendency was reinforced in a less direct way by the writings of major scholars like Durkheim, Weber, and Eliade, who focused on the separation between the sacred and the profane and insisted that religion at its core constituted a separate, special realm.⁶⁹ This assumption was tied to the division between spirit and matter. With the exception of a select group of objects attributed with sa-

⁶⁶ Johan Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages: A Study of the Forms of Life, Thought and Art in France and the Netherlands in the Dawn of the Renaissance*, pp. 152 and 167.

⁶⁷ Colleen McDannell, “Interpreting Things: Material Culture Studies and American Religion,” pp. 371–87; William Walker makes a similar case for the use of “ordinary objects” in ritual. See Walker, “Where Are the Witches of Prehistory?”

⁶⁸ See the remarks of Gregory Schopen on Charles Thomas, *The Early Christian Archaeology of Northern Britain*, and Graydon F. Snyder, *Ante Pacem: Archaeological Evidence of Church Life before Constantine*, in Schopen, *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks*, pp. 10–2.

⁶⁹ Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America*, pp. 4–8.

cred power, most religious artifacts seem entirely too ordinary, too profane, to offer interesting insights into the nature of religion. Hundreds of nearly identical icons packed into a temple, prayer beads fingered by crass patrons or pious peasants, the robes worn by ordinary monks and nuns all seem better left to archaeologists, historians of popular culture, or economists than to mainstream historians of religion, particularly since the study of such objects inevitably involves discussions of techniques of manufacture and often economic negotiations between craftsmen and client, both of which seem far removed from the search for distinctively religious ideas and values.

Gregory Schopen has demonstrated the same reluctance to engage the material in the study of Buddhism.⁷⁰ From the nineteenth century to the present, specialists in Indian Buddhism have relied almost entirely on texts, despite the fact that a large body of coins, art, and inscriptions have direct bearing on the history of Indian Buddhism. In the rare cases where scholars have engaged material remains, they have been too ready to impose interpretations on objects from textual sources, imputing orthodox motivations to donors listed in inscriptions, for instance, when the inscriptions themselves say nothing of motivation. When artifacts contradict scriptural pronouncements, the tendency has been to suggest convoluted explanations for the objects rather than accept that doctrines laid out in scriptures may not reflect the way Buddhism was practiced. More commonly still, archaeological evidence is ignored entirely, even in areas where it provides the only evidence we have, as in the case of the disposal of the dead in early Buddhist monasticism. Again, material things have seemed at best trivial and at worst a distraction from what is important in religion. Yet religion, like all forms of communication, is intimately linked to the material world. Not only do objects play important roles in all forms of religious activity, but people who engage in religious activities in general recognize the importance of things and comment on them at length, leaving behind a wealth of material for historians willing to explore the place of material culture in religion.

Our understanding of religion changes significantly when objects are added to the picture. At times artifacts reveal that previous assumptions based on textual evidence alone do not hold true. Archaeological remains show that monks in ancient India did in fact own personal property, despite scriptural prohibitions to the practice.⁷¹ Tombstones in New England reveal that Puritans continued to make religious images, despite the strident iconoclasm expounded in contemporary Puritan texts.⁷² Despite

⁷⁰ Schopen, *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks*, pp. 1–22.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 3–5.

⁷² Alan Ludwig, *Graven Images: New England Stonecarving and Its Symbols, 1650–1815*.

their sermons calling for rejection of the material, in practice nineteenth-century Protestant missionaries on the Gold Coast placed great emphasis on the material distinctions of clothing and housing that marked the Christian convert.⁷³ More generally, close attention to the way religious objects are arranged in homes shows that in their day-to-day lives, most people do not see the need to separate the sacred and the profane: a religious image, though hung on a wall next to a commercial calendar, remains religious.⁷⁴

More than a tool to verify or discredit textual claims, a focus on material culture draws our attention to aspects of religion we might otherwise overlook. When we examine how the Bible was used, for instance, we see that in addition to its content, the Bible was also an important cultural symbol. Victorian paintings depicting a stern father reading the Bible to a large, attentive family express an ideal of the upright, harmonious family, symbolized by the act of reading the Bible, apart from which particular passage was being read or how it was understood. The object of the Bible itself evoked strong feelings and shaped behavior. Similarly, historians of medieval religion have looked to images not just for their content, for what they depict, but also for how they were used, how they fit into a culture of prayer in which it was important to have ready access to devotional images at all times, even when traveling.⁷⁵ A focus on material culture also reveals the extent of the impact of religious movements on culture. Material remains in the New World reflect the impact of Spanish missionaries on indigenous religions. The Crusades introduced profound, pervasive changes to the material culture of Europe. And traces of the Islamic occupation in the ninth century can still be seen in the food and architecture of modern Spain.

China provides an abundance of data for the study of Buddhist material culture. After the Cultural Revolution, few academic fields in China have developed as rapidly and with as much success as archaeology. Major Chinese archaeology journals appear monthly, packed with new finds, many Buddhist, from all parts of China.⁷⁶ Artifacts aside, poetry,

⁷³ Birgit Meyer, "Christian Mind and Worldly Matters: Religion and Materiality in Nineteenth-Century Gold Coast," pp. 311–37.

⁷⁴ McDannell, *Material Christianity*, pp. 4–8.

⁷⁵ Eugène Honée, "Image and Imagination in the Medieval Culture of Prayer: A Historical Perspective," pp. 157–74.

⁷⁶ "Material culture studies" has only recently begun to appear as a self-conscious methodology in modern Chinese studies. Unlike archaeology, the discipline of anthropology within China continues to be very weak, and even outside China, anthropologists working on Chinese society have given little emphasis to material culture. The methodology of Chinese archaeologists in modern times derives for the most part from Europe and North America. That being said, the study of "artifacts" (*wenwu*) has been a respectable scholarly vocation in China for centuries; a tradition there of material culture studies in a loose sense can be traced back at least to the eleventh century if not earlier.

novels, miscellaneous notes, and Buddhist texts of various types and periods all contain information on Buddhist objects. We also have a large body of artifacts and writings about artifacts from before the first century A.D. when Buddhism began to influence Chinese society, making it possible in many cases to determine what came to China with Buddhism and what originated in China independently. Similarly, non-Buddhist materials from later periods often allow us to determine the role of Buddhism, as opposed to other distinct traditions, in the history of individual objects.

The greatest difficulties in assessing the impact of Buddhism on Chinese material culture do not relate to scarcity of data but rather to how we interpret it. Perhaps the greatest danger is accepting the spirit/matter dichotomy, according to which the prevalence of material things in Buddhism is a sign of its decadence. China, the stereotype runs, has always been a fundamentally down-to-earth, materially minded culture, unable to accept the purer, more ethereal values of the more spiritual culture of India. This is an idea that is reinforced in part by Chinese Buddhists themselves who have always considered Chinese Buddhism a pale reflection of the golden age of Buddhism at the time of the Buddha; Chinese monks were always ready to lament the degeneracy of the monastic order in China.

This view of the history of Chinese Buddhism does not hold up to closer scrutiny. Buddhist monks in ancient India were no less “materialistic” than their Chinese epigones; many of the objects and attitudes toward objects discussed in this book came to China with Buddhism from India. More fundamentally, we need see nothing wrong with the presence of objects, and even wealth, in religious practice. A small group of erudite monks within the Buddhist tradition has championed the idea that the highest spiritual goals can only be pursued in isolation from the material world. But *we* need not adopt this position. Nor did most Buddhists ever adopt a radical rejection of the material world. For most, in China as elsewhere, objects render the sacred tangible and proximate. Things allow one to communicate with deities and sense their presence. Objects are often the most expressive means for conveying religious ideas and sentiments. In short, material culture is as much a part of religion as language, thought, or ritual. Hence, unless we appreciate the place of material culture in Chinese Buddhist history, our picture of this history remains skewed and incomplete.