Signs from the Unseen Realm: Buddhist Miracle Tales from Early Medieval China

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Signs from the Unseen Realm: Buddhist Miracle Tales from Early Medieval China.


This book is a comprehensive study and annotated translation with commentaries of Mingxiang ji 冥祥記, a collection of Buddhist miracle tales compiled at the end of the fifth century C.E. by Wang Yan 王琰. The largest compilation of its kind from early medieval China, Mingxiang ji is a treasure trove of written records of the Chinese Buddhist experience as lived and told by contemporary devotees from a broad social spectrum. Written and compiled in the long-standing Chinese narrative tradition of zhiguai 志怪 (accounts of anomalies) collections, Mingxiang ji offers a largely lay-oriented, communal perspective that is distinctive from those of “elite” genres such as scriptures, hagiographies, and theological treatises. Campany’s groundbreaking study of Mingxiang ji as a zhiguai collection does an exemplary job of employing the genre of zhiguai as a rewarding source of research for medieval Chinese Buddhist history. Specifically, this book presents a fascinating case study of Buddhist zhiguai collections as a sinicized expression of the Buddhist worldview. In Campany’s words, “Miracle tales are, among other things, a means of sinicization via historiography” (p. 37). As such, this book is an important contribution to the fields of medieval Chinese religions, historiography, and literary history.

Campany’s study features a substantial introduction that situates Mingxiang ji in the broader contexts of the history of Chinese Buddhism, the Chinese tradition of historiography, and the author’s life and times. Specifically, Campany points out the collective, communal, lay-oriented nature of the miracle tales as reflecting on widespread religious practices and attitudes
of the society, which are distinctive from orthodox Mahāyāna teachings. The introductory chapter investigates the particulars of early medieval Chinese Buddhist culture by way of an analysis of the narrative discourse of the miracle tale, including its generic conventions, recurrent tropes and archetypes (such as the figure of the “spirit monk”), common themes (such as rebirth and devotion to bodhisattvas), and Chinese adaptations of Buddhist practices (such as the abstinence ceremony and strict vegetarianism). According to Campany, the main thematic concerns of the tales in *Mingxiang ji* are not the fundamental Buddhist tenets such as enlightenment, non-duality, emptiness, or the Mahayanist pursuit of the bodhisattva path. Rather, the tales are preoccupied with avoiding karmic retributions (*baoying* 報應) in life and reaping rewards in the afterlife. Campany’s introductory section and story commentaries show that, far from being empty, the Chinese Buddhist universe as reflected in *Mingxiang ji* is full of spiritual forces miraculously responsive (*ganying* 感應) to human desires and deeds. Pervasive throughout the collection is a literal and materialist approach to Buddhist scriptures, icons, and ritual objects, which are regarded as sacred objects with magical efficacy. Monastic laxity is often the target of criticism in the tales. Competitions between Buddhism and other indigenous Chinese cultural practices—such as Confucian ancestor worship, the Daoist pursuit of immortality, and local sacrificial cults—are frequently the driving force of narrative in the collection. Some miracle tales reflect how traditional religious beliefs and practices are absorbed by the Buddhist discourse, such as in Items 67, 71, 86, 99, 124 the power of the indigenous spirit-medium (*wu* 巫) is co-opted to validate the Buddhist worldview (p. 40). In other stories, Buddhist miracles are themselves co-opted to serve a secular agenda. For example, Item 63 features two Buddhist monks transmitting a divine decree to legitimize a dynasty. As Campany points out, that Buddhist miracles are presented in *Mingxiang ji* as “signs from the unseen realm”
is ultimately in keeping with the traditional premise of zhiguai literature, where cosmic anomalies are regarded as heavenly portents. At the same time, Campany also observes that many Buddhist miracle tales display an anxious urge to claim the foreign religion as indigenous to China itself. Collectively, these Buddhist miracle tales as zhiguai stories dramatize in narrative form the dynamic assimilation of one religious culture by another.

The translations that comprise the second part of the book are based on modern Chinese and Japanese editions of the original. The English renderings are scrupulously faithful to the original Chinese syntax, sometimes making for a more scholarly than literary reading. Campany’s selective commentaries on the tales mainly focus on religious and historical—as opposed to fictional, aesthetic, or psychological—aspects of the tales, including narrative references to ritual practices, tensions between Buddhism and indigenous ideologies, and dynamics between various social groups. Finally, the book includes as appendices an index to major motifs in the tales as well as additional translations of questionable and fragmentary passages. The motif index itself stands on its own as a valuable contribution to the study of Chinese folklore, mythology, and literature. Regarding the editorial aspect of the book, the volume as a whole shows remarkable attention to details with one major exception. A regrettable error occurs on the dust jacket of the current hardcover edition, which inexplicably gives the subtitle of the book as “Buddhist Miracle Tales from Early Modern [sic] China.” However, this glaring oversight should be easily corrected in the next printing of this important work.

As a dedicated study in English of the most important collection of Buddhist miracle tales from early medieval China, *Signs from the Unseen Realm* points to a previously under-studied body of literature and a new research direction for the study of Chinese religions. This book makes a convincing case for how research into the lay-oriented miracle tale collections can
complement traditional scholarship on sutras and theology in constructing a fuller picture of medieval Chinese Buddhism in practice. As a translation and study of zhiguai literature, Campany’s book has surpassed all previous endeavors by other scholars of the genre in terms of its comprehensiveness, depth, and texture. His systematic study of the special discourse and historical context of miracle tales yields significant and far-reaching implications for multiple scholarly fields. Most important, by investigating the ideological and functional heterogeneity of Buddhist miracle tales, *Signs from the Unseen Realm* greatly contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the dynamic historical processes of the sinicization of Buddhism in medieval China.

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