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Autumn Canadian Conferences

Jeffrey Kotyk

McMaster University

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Autumn Canadian Conferences

Jeffrey Kotyk
MCMASTER UNIVERSITY

This autumn I had the opportunity to attend two major conferences dealing with Buddhist Studies and more broadly Asian Studies, both of which were hosted at Canadian institutions. It is always heartening to see an international community come together at a university in Canada, much like in August of 2017 when the University of Toronto hosted the International Association of Buddhist Studies. These gatherings serve not only the interests of the wider scholarly community, but also provide an introduction to the field to local students and junior scholars.

“Buddhism & Technology: Historical Background and Contemporary Challenges,” was held at the University of British Columbia (UBC) on September 20–22, 2019. This conference addressed premodern and modern topics. One major question was: “Was Buddhism really the nemesis of science and technology, or did Buddhism and science co-exist in a symbiotic and complementary relationship?” Other speakers addressed modern concerns, in particular with respect to technological innovation and artificial intelligence.

On Friday evening, at the commencement of the conference, T. H. Barrett (SOAS University of London) gave an opening address titled “Buddhism, Technology, and a Question for Joseph Needham.” Summoning the memory of Needham was quite suitable, since Needham (1900–

1995) was a pioneering historian of premodern science in China. He was responsible for the series *Science and Civilization in China*, which document in detail fields such as biology, chemistry, and astronomy, while also at times addressing the role of Chinese religions.



Figure 1. T. H. Barrett (SOAS University of London) giving an opening address. Photo by Ngoc B. Le. Reprinted with permission

One question I felt worth pondering at the start of the conference was whether Buddhism hindered or encouraged objectively scientific knowledge. My paper, titled “The Astronomical Work of Monk Yixing 一行 (673–727) and its Enduring Legacy in the Song to Ming Periods,” dealt with China’s only astronomer-monk. Yixing was unique in being an early architect of the Mantrayāna tradition (Esoteric Buddhism) in East Asia, in addition to featuring as a significant individual within the history of astronomy and calendrical science in China. One point I made was that Yixing’s Buddhist career was actually quite separate from his career as a

court astronomer. In other words, Buddhism neither inspired nor informed his development of astronomy. The Buddhist community also does not appear to have utilized his calendar or advanced scientific work in any major ways. In this sense, Buddhism neither hindered nor directly encouraged Yixing's scientific investigations. Bill Mak (Kyoto University) also presented a paper on overlapping material. As his abstract points out: "[d]espite claims and accounts of a handful of Buddhist monks in China possessing superior astral knowledge and skills, there is so far no evidence of a single, coherent tradition of Buddhist astronomy." The following discussion session was quite informative, and I really appreciated the opportunity for the dialogue, as well as a question or two from Professor Barrett, who inquired about the socio-political factors involved in Yixing's remarkable career as an astronomer.

We enjoyed a number of lectures over the weekend. One section concerned "Buddhist Philosophy and Technology." These talks focused particularly on the role of Buddhist philosophy as it relates to emerging technologies that are increasingly changing our lives, such as artificial intelligence. Peter Hershock (East West Center, Honolulu), for example discussed "The Intelligence Revolution and the New Great Game: A Buddhist Reflection on the Personal and Societal Predicaments of Big Data and Artificial Intelligence." One thing that came to my mind after listening to his lecture was the ethical questions that linger when we surrender our autonomy online, such as our investment management to machine trading (i.e., the computer trades your money for you). In such systems, we allow our money to be potentially traded in industries in which we otherwise would not invest for moral reasons. Buddhists might stop to wonder whether they are karmically at fault if they allow their money to be traded in such a way.

The following panel dealt with "Use of Computation for Buddhist Studies." Digital Humanities is a growing field in its own right, and in

Buddhist Studies we have come to benefit a great deal from such projects, and the presentations by the speakers highlighted a number of ongoing developments. The paper by Sebastian Nehrdich (Hamburg University), for example:

explores the application of continuous word representations and nearest neighbor search in order to efficiently compute a quotational network for parallel passages of the Chinese Buddhist canon. It also discusses methods of evaluating the quality of the detected parallels and demonstrates a potential use-case of the resulting data for philological research in the form of a web application.

This sort of textual analysis through digital means is a huge step in philology.

The conference proceeded and the Book Prize Lecture was given by Sam van Schaik (The British Library) for *The Meanings of Meditation in Early Zen Buddhism*. We enjoyed a number of other lectures. Natasha Heller (University of Virginia) discussed “The Aesthetics of Android Buddhas,” while Beverley McGuire (University of North Carolina Wilmington) talked about “Buddhist Self-Tracking Apps: Identifying, Tracking, And Regulating Emotions in A Digital Era.” These talks touched upon the implementation of technology in modern Buddhist practices and/or practices derived from Buddhism, such as mindfulness. The scope of the conference included a robust number of topics from premodern to modern concerns.

The conference at UBC went well and proved quite rewarding, and I met a number of new and old colleagues. I am happy to say that the papers of this conference will fortunately be collected into a special volume to be published in the future. I must thank Jinhua Chen and Marcus

Bingenheimer for organizing the conference, and Vicky Baker for facilitating all the logistics of the event.

The other conference I attended this autumn was *Premodern Japanese Studies Conference* which was organized by Mikael Bauer and held at McGill University in Montreal, Quebec, on October 10-11. This was my first visit to Montreal, and moreover it was my first experience attending a conference strictly committed to Japanese Religions. This was a solid opportunity to meet in person a number of scholars whose works I have consulted over the years.

The talks dealt with various topics and time periods, dealing with both philological approaches and issues in art history. The keynote address by Ryūichi Abe (Harvard University) was titled, "Waters, Dragons, and Mantra: Rethinking Kūkai's rainmaking legend." Haruko Wakabayashi (Rutgers University) discussed, "Visualizing Hungry Ghosts in Heian Japan: *Gaki zoshi* as a Transcultural Adaptation of *Zhengfa nianchu jing*." The topics also included Buddhism and Shintō. Emily Simpson (the University of California, Santa Barbara /Dartmouth College) presented her findings on the god Hachiman in her talk, titled "Many Faces of Hachiman: A Consideration of Composite Divinization in Medieval Shinto."



Figure 2. Photo by Han Xiao. Reprinted with permission.

It was clear that gathering together scholars from a diverse range of fields led to gainful brainstorming. Although a lot of discussions nowadays occur on mailing lists, and increasingly also on social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, bringing colleagues together in a focused but relaxed two-day conference still has many merits. I enjoyed the abundant comments following the talks, which often revealed issues and points that ought to be discussed on paper. For example, I was reminded after my own talk on Buddhist astrologer-monks that archaeological evidence can furnish data regarding the chronology of the introduction of iconographic motifs in medieval Japan, which is something I had not considered.

The conference concluded with a formal dinner at the Faculty Club at McGill University. Again, this was another opportunity to socialize with colleagues in a relaxed atmosphere. I must thank Mikael Bauer

for organizing this conference, which is an annual affair that will continue into the future.