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Review:

Sarasvatī is the name of an Indian deity who was taken up into Buddhist tradition and carried along into East Asia as far as Japan, where she is generally known as Benzaiten. In a way, therefore, this impressive book serves two sets of readers, first and foremost Indologists – hence its place in an indological series – but also those who are interested in the wider history of Buddhism or more generally of Asian religions. The later part of the work offers a study of relevant parts of the Buddhist *Sutra of Golden Light*, of which the Chinese versions represent a major source, even for the Indian developments.

While ancient Indian studies are notorious for their uncertainties there is an extreme example here when we read concerning the Ṛg *Veda* that "Although composed sometime after 1750 B.C.E. ... it dates from about the twelfth century B.C.E." (p.9). Once that typically indological statement has been digested however, the analysis of relevant parts of the Vedas is extremely instructive. Ludvik takes issue with earlier studies (notably by Gonda) and works out a convincing sequence for the initial development of Sarasvatī from the imagery of a flowing river to an identification with "speech" (Vāc), the latter being crucial for the correct performance of ritual. "Sacrifice was rendered continuous, and hence successful, through speech, whose fluency was akin to the uninterrupted flow of a river, i.e. the Sarasvatī." (p.90). We then move forward to the *Mahābhārata* and the *Pūraṇas*. Here it is still the river itself which is revered, among other things as a route for pilgrimage and a residence for seers, but at the same time Sarasvatī takes form as a fully personified goddess of speech and knowledge with whom other divine figures enter into relationship in the shifting scenes of Indian mythology. In a fascinating passage on page 99 we learn how the Sarasvatī as a river changes her course to take account of the various seers residing on the banks. It changes its course in order to be seen by the righteous ones, and in order not to be seen by the unrighteous it

even occasionally disappears into the earth. When the banks are crowded with righteous seers the course meanders to make more space for them. These changes facilitate "Dharma", and discourage *adharmā*. Looking ahead, such flexibility, always in the interests of "Dharma", is a way of thinking which is eminently transferable to Mahāyāna Buddhism. Is it perhaps this facility which encouraged the Buddhists to adopt Sarasvatī as an auxiliary divine helper? But as yet we are still in non-Buddhist India. Here Sarasvatī is viewed in the *Mahābhārata* as Brahmā's daughter and in the *Purāṇas* as his consort, and at the same time comes to be identified with various other rivers and other goddesses. In these confusing landscapes the *worship* of Sarasvatī provides a certain focus, the benefits of this worship being above all speech, knowledge and music. Speech can be granted particularly if one has been struck dumb by a curse, but there is also the sweet speech which leads to worldly prosperity. Knowledge arises through the skill in the sciences which Sarasvatī bestows, while lasting conjugal union and longevity seem to arise almost coincidentally in an ever increasing list of benefits. Finally there is the gift of music in seven notes, modes, songs or modulations, not to mention "the forty-nine musical times, and the three octaves" (p. 131), all of which is symbolised iconographically by her lute-like *vīṇā*.

With that we come to Part Three, which is about Sarasvatī in Buddhist sutras and above all in the *Sutra of Golden Light* which contains an important chapter devoted specifically to the goddess. At this point it may be noted that this is a highly technical book in which the plentiful Indian vocabulary, with some Chinese for good measure, is very cleanly presented. However there are one or two idiosyncratic forms of English. Thus we find in various parts of the book the expression "in retrospective" (for "in retrospect"), apparently following a recent fashion to use adjectives as nouns. Does this matter? Perhaps not. The brief retrospects are certainly most helpful in signposting the overall sequence of the argument. This reader also experienced slight hesitation over "compareless" (p.125, perhaps a Canadianism?) when "incomparable" would still do. A little more confusing, in particular in Part Three, is the apparent abandonment of the conventional distinction between "texts" and "versions". In such studies, the latter term has traditionally been reserved for translations of texts. Of course, Chinese versions of Sanskrit Buddhist texts, or presumed Sanskrit texts which have been lost (or in some cases never even existed) can themselves take on the status of texts in the new cultural situation. While such versions are of interest to Indologists trying to get extra information about their own field, they become texts in their own right for those whose interest is focused on East Asia. This tension is particularly evident in the study of sutras such as the *Sutra of Golden Light*, which plays such an important role in the study of Sarasvatī / Biancai tiannü / Benzaiten(nyo). The "retrospective" of this section of the book ends with a discussion, inevitably inconclusive, about why certain sections in the Yijing version are not found in the extant Sanskrit, a common problem in the study of Chinese Buddhist texts. Ludvik reflects at some length on whether and/or why they might have been excised (pp 220-1). However in such cases what has usually happened is that the manuscript tradition has simply separated at some point, so that an extant Sanskrit text of later date (as they usually are) *can* represent an earlier stage in the manuscript tradition. Moreover, in some cases it can fairly be speculated that the sections in question never had a Sanskrit original at all. This is conceivably relevant to the "visualisation"

passage of the chapter in question, which apparently reflects the phase when a number of "visualisation" sutras were being produced in the Chinese cultural area. Admittedly, its presence in the Tibetan version may speak against such a possibility. As explained, by the time such versions had been incorporated into Chinese, Korean and Japanese Buddhism, they were just "texts" in their own right. Nobody was interested in Sanskrit "originals" at that time. This means that the various snap-shots of Sarasvatī in the various texts and versions develop a cumulative, superimposed effect as the goddess was taken further and further afield. Catherine Ludvik takes us some way down this path, while holding India firmly in view.

Be that all as it may, we have in this section an extremely useful introduction and consideration of the *Sutra of Golden Light* itself. We should remember that the relevant chapter of the sutra is studied here "so as to elucidate the developing conceptualization of the Buddhist Sarasvatī in India as reflected in the sutra and its Chinese translations" (p. 154). The author gives a clear delineation of the layers of tradition in the chapter relating to Sarasvatī, in which she has now come to be known as Great Eloquence Deity (Da Biantian) or Eloquence Talent Goddess (Biancai tiannü). There are evidently three phases in the development of the goddess here, the first being in line with the Vedic background, the second being about a ritual bath with much ado about herbs etc., interpreted both medicinally and as "a kind of consecration ritual", and the third consisting of praises of Great Eloquence Deity. The section on praises, offered by the Brahman Kauṇḍinya, itself consists of several sections which are explored with great care and delicacy, particular attention being paid to the way in which the themes of the Indian texts are drawn into the Buddhist context. It is also in this section that the goddess is brought into association with certain Indian goddesses who have warrior associations, so that we have the slightly strange result (whether viewed in terms of earlier Indian presentations or in later Japanese retrospect) that Sarasvatī / Biancai tiannü comes to be depicted as holding weapons. These are not really for war, but for the defence of the Dharma, now the Buddhist Dharma, and to locate this Ludvik adduces the presence in the same sutra of the chapters on the Four Celestial Kings who also defend the Dharma. If this explains why the goddess was shown with eight arms for holding weapons, it must be said that the well-known eighth century Japanese example to which we are referred (figure 25) has eight arms but no weapons and looks extremely gentle. Why the "ferocity and bloody violence" of the Hindu counterparts is "no longer apparent in the Buddhist context", while the Four Celestial Kings maintain their frightening severity, remains unclear.

Inevitably, with so many variations in the characteristics and functions of this goddess, the possibilities for iconographic variation, confusion and misunderstanding are great. In the fourth part of her book, Catharine Ludvik turns to the iconographical development and provides a step-by-step account of a number of images, correcting various identifications. She establishes two main groups of Sarasvatī images, first the "riverine goddess of knowledge", without weapons, and second the Buddhist goddess of eloquence who paradoxically had taken on a weapon-bearing aspect. The connections and the transference from one to the other are precisely what could be explored in the third part of the Biancai tiannü chapter of the *Sutra of Golden Light*, but iconographically the

documentation is completed by discussion of a number of sculptures of a particular goddess who "lends her form" to Sarasvatī. This is Mahiṣāsūramardīnī, who was widely represented from Afghanistan to Java and is regarded here as the prototype for eight-armed images of Sarasvatī. The fascination of this study, as pointed out in the conclusion, is that the latter iconographical form did not survive (as Sarasvatī) in India, but became well-known in Japan – at any rate for a while.

This is where the book ends. Without spoiling the story, it may be added that in a strange way the connection with the *Sutra of Golden Light* gives us a major clue for further developments in Japan, for while this sutra was important in the early reception of Buddhism in Japan it later suffered eclipse. Later Japanese generations lost interest in the warrior goddess aspect. After all, they had other strong *kami* such as Hachiman, while Buddhism was protected by the Four Celestial Kings, not to mention the two ferocious guardians at temple gates big enough to house them. Benzaiten herself was eventually incorporated into the ranks of the Seven Gods of Good Fortune (*shichifukujin*) where she plays her lute to this day. By a play on the Chinese characters she also functions in this context as a goddess of the "purse" and is thus, like some of the others, good for commerce. In other contexts, as a stand-alone divinity, she inhabits islands such as Chikubushima in Lake Biwa and has a complex relation to dragons and snakes, but although this certainly builds on the water theme, it is yet another story. In general it may be said that Benzaiten once again became a goddess of eloquence and music, being patronised by professional talkers and musical artists, and somehow being protected by Buddhist monks in their temple grounds rather than the other way round. On April 22nd 2008, at a delicately balanced event at the shrine of Brightly Sounding Benzaiten (Myōon Benzaiten) in the Demachi area of Kyōto, real persons played real *biwa* (lutes) while green tea (*maccha*) was served. Following this a number of monks from the nearby Zen temple Shōkokuji performed a noisy *tendoku* sutra recitation of the great *Prajñā* sutra in front of an artistic scroll depicting Benzaiten herself, with her musical instrument. Any weaponry had been long forgotten. By chance the event attracted both the writer of this review and the author of the book. In view of these very long-term developments of the "riverine goddess of knowledge" in Japan, it may be hoped that there will sometime be a sequel to this excellent book, even though it would admittedly lose all indological relevance.

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