Symposium: Towards Decolonizing Buddhist Studies: Reading Matthew King's *In the Forest of the Blind* to Reimagine Disciplinary Futures

Getting into Good Methodological Trouble with Matthew King

IN THE FOREST OF THE BLIND: THE EURASIAN JOURNEY OF FAXIAN'S RECORD OF BUDDHIST KINGDOMS

By Matthew W. King.
New York: Columbia University Press, 2022
Pp. 312. Paperback, $40.00; Hardcover, $160.00; E-Book, $39.99.

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Key words
orientalism, colonialism, Buddhism, philology

Should scholars of Buddhism start getting into some good methodological trouble? Matthew King's *In the Forest of the Blind: The Eurasian Journey of Faxian's Record of Buddhist Kingdoms* says, "Yes, please." This rabble-rousing history of Eurasian interpretations of Faxian's *Record of Buddhist Kingdoms* invites fellow academics—those working on Inner Asia, East Asia, and beyond—to find new ways to resist the colonial conceptual apparatus of Buddhist studies. What is this apparatus, and how does King seek to undermine it?

This apparatus is not the classical orientalist formations of the nineteenth century but rather the scholarship that traces lineages from those formations to contemporary academics. Think Lopez, not Burnouf (Lopez 1998; Burnouf 1844). King is keen to show the limits of, as he writes, "colonial-derived Eurocentric genealogies of the many sciences of the Nonwest: [sciences such as] philology and ethnology.... Orientalism and Buddhist studies" (143). Readers like me who teach Buddhism are likely to have at least one of the titles King references on their syllabi, titles such as Donald Lopez's *Prisoners of Shangri La*, David McMahan's *Making of Buddhist Modernism*, and Gregory Schopen's "Archaeology and Protestant Presuppositions in the Study of Buddhism" (Lopez 1998; McMahan 2008; Schopen 1991).

Those of us who teach these histories of Western influence on Buddhist formations teach them for good reason. Cringing at how our students continue to exoticize, romanticize, and rationalize Buddhism, we insist they learn how these popular attitudes descended from violent European expansion. King adds that Buddhist studies scholars also use these genealogies for performances for our colleagues. King writes, "We tend to reference them as part of our professional sociality, to comfort ourselves that we are acknowledging the power-laden location and relations of our field" (143). When I joined the other authors of this collection in Denver for a roundtable on *In the Forest of the Blind* at the American Academy of Religion's annual meeting, I played this point up a bit, saying that King must be criticizing the very interactions we were likely to have at that conference. I admitted that I was quite familiar with these awkward exchanges and wagered that if there was footage of the first time King and I met (which was at the same conference a decade earlier), it would expose me name-dropping someone like Schopen or Lopez to signal that I was not some woo-woo Buddhism student with no awareness of the discipline's vexed history. *In the Forest of the Blind* turns this ethnographic observation into a kind of koan:

> What is the sound of one name dropping? What is the silence of it?
>
> What are we silencing when we speak so much about Eurocentric genealogies and disciplines?

Other scholars, of course, have asked questions like this. Others have pointed out how focusing on European inventions and fantasies ends up leaving Asians in the blurry periphery. For example, in "Are We Prisoners of Shangrila?" George Dreyfus argues that the Dalai Lama is not a captive of Western fantasies of Tibet as *Prisoners of Shangri-La* asserts, but rather a skillful participant in the formations of ideas about Tibet

and Buddhism (Dreyfus 2005). Similarly, Judith Snodgrass's *Presenting Japanese Buddhism to the West* corrects for academic negligence of the agency of Japanese leaders in the formation of modern forms of Buddhism (Snodgrass 2003).

King's concern is that even when scholars bring Asian reformers into the story, there is still a tendency to focus on European knowledge practices. This is a key contribution of this exciting book. *In the Forest of the Blind* not only decenters Westerners, but it also decenters the Western humanist gaze. It explores discursive arenas such as the Qing court, the Gobi monastery, and the Tibetan refugee camp, where Inner Asian scholars produced interpretations of Faxian's *Record*. With careful and creative attention to layered translations and the way they echo and silence each other, King shows how knowledge traditions in Asian arenas have been contiguous with European ones.

This method had me wondering how *In the Forest of the Blind* was in concert with feminist and anticolonial scholars who attend to absences in archives to tell stories of people who have been silenced. I think, though, King is aiming for something different. He intentionally does not write about contexts in which there was a specific relation of force, like colonizer-and-colonized. The Mongolian and Tibetan actors in his book were not subjects of a European empire. They were part of coproductive knowledge–power relations but were not beholden to a specific relation of force like Western colonialism.

Surely many readers will find the approach King describes as an "anti-field history" promising. Others might worry that it is a bit too postmodern, a little too baby with the bathwater. But *In the Forest of the Blind* does something that directly calms this skepticism down. King appends his experimental book with a classic annotated translation. Through his own careful philological work and access to institutional resources, he publishes a complete translation of the Tibetan read against the Mongolian, French, and Chinese, with page numbers and notes. The disciplinary future that this book imagines, then, features something of the familiar, even as it incites something more subversive.

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