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

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# A Review of *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*. By Robert Ford Campany. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2012, ix + 300 pages, ISBN 978-0-8248-3602-3 (cloth), \$65.00.

In *Signs from the Unseen Realm*, Robert Ford Campany provides a lucid translation of the *Mingxiang ji* 冥祥記 (*Records of Signs from the Unseen Realm*), a fifth century collection of Buddhist miracle tales authored by an official named Wang Yan 王琰. In the introduction to the translation, Campany argues that scholars of Buddhism must look outside the traditionally studied genres—sutras and other doctrinal literature—in order to acquire an accurate understanding of how Buddhism was actually practiced in medieval China. The genre of miracle tales is especially useful, Campany asserts, because they “bear invaluable witness not only to the content of the collective memory of religious groups but also to the social process by which collective memory was shaped, transmitted, and preserved” (xii). Thus, the stories in the *Mingxiang ji* are “artifacts” produced by this social process. The tales were not recounted simply to verify the beliefs of the early Chinese Buddhists. They were tools that helped Buddhism assimilate into China.

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Furthermore, they relayed to new Buddhists how to practice efficaciously, thereby molding and perpetuating Buddhism in early medieval China. Unsurprisingly, the forms of Buddhism recounted in these tales often conflicts with early scholarly notions that were informed by doctrinal texts.

The *Mingxiang ji* belongs to a Chinese genre known as *zhiguai* 志怪 (accounts of anomalies), which Buddhists adapted to their own aims. Unlike doctrinal literature, *zhiguai* texts introduce readers to basic Buddhist beliefs without overwhelming them with advanced philosophical concepts. Company indicates that the style of the *zhiguai* genre is similar to that of Chinese histories. Although Buddhist jargon was rarely evident in the text, its content and agenda were decidedly Buddhist (29). Therefore, these tales were more accessible than Buddhist doctrinal literature, especially to lay readers. Further, the resemblance of the text's style to historical genres lent veracity to these stories. Texts like the *Mingxiang ji* also helped Sinicize Buddhism by blending situations and conditions familiar to the Chinese with the unfamiliarity of Buddhist belief and practice. As these stories worked their way into the social consciousness of early medieval China the production of similar tales was ensured.

Company compares the expression of Buddhism found in the *Mingxiang ji* with notions of Chinese Buddhism in earlier Western scholarship, particularly the work of Erik Zürcher. In contrast to the cool, rational, and gentrified Buddhism espoused in Zürcher's work, the miracle tales indicate a type of Buddhism in China that is far more multifarious. Company describes the tales in the *Mingxiang ji* as, "profoundly lay oriented" (31). The concerns of the people in these tales were not the finer points of Buddhist doctrine. Instead, they wanted successful resolutions to their concerns, the biggest of which was the avoidance of harm, both in this life and after death. The tales demonstrate that proper stimuli (*gan* 感)—i.e., a devotional act—routed through correct channels, such as auspicious Buddhists texts and

interceding Bodhisattvas, produced sufficient karmic response (*ying* 應) to aid the suffering. Campany identifies the *ganying* structure as the “single most important organizing concept” in the *Mingxiang ji* (49). The tales validate that miracles happen for specific reasons, and also show how closely woven the Buddhist unseen realm is to the living world. The stimuli-response structure predated Buddhism, which allowed basic Buddhist concepts to be presented in a familiar format while transmitting its superior efficacy. Thus, the Buddhism represented in the *Mingxiang ji* is centrally concerned with acquiring karmic merit because it was more effective than other methods.

The stories in the *Mingxiang ji* fall within seven different narrative frames that Campany identifies in the introduction. Each of the seven will be familiar to scholars who have encountered similar texts. The most popular narrative is calling to the Bodhisattva Guanyin. The frequency of this narrative is attributed to the recent availability of the *Lotus Sutra* in early medieval China. Other narratives include: protagonists returning from death to recount journeys through hells; brief visits from deceased loved ones; extraordinary monks and nuns; and punishments for assaults against the Buddha or the *Dharma*. Campany notes that the social construction and retelling of these tales “ensures their typedness” (47). In other words, similar to a good commercial jingle, the repetitive themes and abundance of these tales helped to insert their Buddhist agendas into Chinese society.

The translation of the *Mingxiang ji* accounts for the majority of the book. The tales are masterfully translated and enjoyable to read. Over one hundred tales are available, and most are followed by a brief commentary. Campany uses the comments to clarify figures, locations, and practices featured in the stories. The translation is so copiously annotated that a review could be written about the superb footnotes alone. In addition to citing the source texts in the footnotes, Campany regularly includes explanations of his translations. These notes are of particular value to scholars of classical Chinese, but would have been

especially helpful if the entire Chinese text was included in the volume. Two short appendices are included along with an impressive bibliography.

The real value of *Signs from the Unseen Realm* is that it demonstrates how unclear our understanding of early Buddhism in China remains. Campany draws from outside the canonical framework that has defined how scholars have traditionally imagined the early Buddhist milieu. As he makes clear, because the field has focused so singularly within this framework, the Buddhism described by foundational figures like Zürcher and Kenneth Ch'en is still recounted and passed down to students. While the earlier work of these scholars continues to be a solid starting place for contemporary research, it should continually be questioned and adapted when necessary. Studying texts like the *Mingxiang ji* is of such import because they challenge and supplement the narratives that are preserved in the scholarly discourse on Chinese Buddhism.

However, there is one area in particular in which Campany disappoints his audience. Throughout the preface he strongly emphasizes the need for scholars to research other genres, yet Campany neglects to suggest what these genres are. This is a curious exclusion given that he is so enthusiastic about his course of action. Furthermore, Campany does not provide any examples from the growing body of scholarship contributing similar research to the field. Linking his own study with similar efforts—such as Daniel Stevenson's recent work with non-canonical Buddhist liturgical literature—would have been an immense help for readers. Instead we are left to assume that Campany's work stands alone. Although these concerns would have surely strengthened the book, the quality of Campany's research and translation far exceeds any criticism.

*Signs from the Unseen Realm* is a remarkable work that scholars of Chinese religion will surely appreciate for some time to come. The translation of the *Mingxiang ji* is accessible to students, and could be a

beneficial resource for instructors to illustrate the nascent Buddhist themes that were important in China during its time. In addition, Campany astutely evinces that these tales did not merely recount miraculous events, but also served as persuasive pre-modern advertisements for Buddhism. It follows, that these tales were consumed and perpetuated by lay Buddhists. Therefore, the *Mingxiang ji* describes a Buddhist milieu that is far more complicated than what was asserted in earlier research by Buddhist scholars. These contrasting views are what make the *Mingxiang ji* and other non-canonical material such rich resources for future scholarship. Campany calls for scholars to continue to look outside traditional sources to find alternative representations of Chinese religion, and *Signs* serves as a great model for future research in that regard.