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The Genius Loci of Chinese Manuscripts

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REZENSIONEN / COMPTES RENDUS / REVIEWS

LUDVIK, Catherine: *Sarasvatī. Riverine Goddess of Knowledge; from the manuscript-carrying Vīṇā-player to the weapon-wielding defender of the Dharma*. Leiden/Boston, Mass.: Brill, 2007. ISBN 978-90-04-15814-6; xviii, 374 S., Ill. (Brill's Indological Library 27).

LUDVIK, Catherine: *Recontextualizing the Praises of a Goddess: From the Harivaṁśa to Yijing's Chinese Translation of the Sutra of Golden Light*. Kyoto: Scuola Italiana di Studi sull'Asia Orientale, 2006. ISBN-13: 978-4-900793-24-8; viii, 115 S., 2 plates (Italian School of East Asian Studies Occasional Papers 10).

Catherine Ludvik's *Sarasvatī* is a substantial volume, both in the scope of its survey, and the detail of its investigations. She has set herself the task, she tells us (p. 2) to attempt an "in-depth, comprehensive, and critical treatment of [her] sources in their respective historical, political, and social contexts." She denies that she has limited herself to "collecting textual references to Sarasvatī and listing her images," and states that she has "studied, for instance, developing themes/stories by examining their sources and each of their retellings within groups of texts." She goes on to claim that she has "addressed why and how changes in the conceptualization of Sarasvatī occur, as evidenced by textual and art historical material, in the socio-politico-historical circumstances of the times." If indeed this is what she had been able to accomplish, it would have been splendid. But regrettably, despite the many merits of her work, and they are many, it appears in the end rather more like a vast collection of sources, with individual comments offered, sometimes in great detail, but little overall narrative, nor cohesive fusion to hold the work together, other than its obvious central focus on the figure of Sarasvatī. At the end, CL has advanced little from the basic assertions she makes at the outset concerning the nature or rather natures of the goddess.

The volume is divided into four parts: Vedic Sarasvatī, Epic and Puranic Sarasvatī, Buddhist Sarasvatī, and Images of Sarasvatī. Each section is then subdivided, such that there is a chapter on the *Ṛgveda*, another on the *Atharva*, *Yajur*, and finally on the Brāhmaṇas. The second part treats the *Mahābhārata* and the Purāṇas, the third deals in detail with Sarasvatī in the *Suvarṇabhāsottama-sūtra*, while the fourth on images is divided between early images (treated by site) and images related to the depictions of the goddess in one

Chinese translation of the *Suvarṇabhāṣottama-sūtra*. Each part ends with a “Retrospective,” which however is generally an overview of the main topics treated immediately previously, with little or no added interpretation. Each Part is divided, as noted above, but very often subdivided again and again, such as we have Part One on the Vedic Sarasvatī, Chapter One Ṛgveda, 5. Inspired Thought, 5.3 Common Imagery, and 5.3.2 Water. Water moreover appears also as the second general subdivision of the chapter on the *Ṛgveda*, itself further subdivided. Such classification and data collection leads one to the suspicion that this is investigation by exhaustive listing.

The overall structure of the book, and the section on the Vedic Sarasvatī in particular, put one in mind of the style of scholarship favored by Jan Gonda. I am afraid that I am not qualified to judge the quality of the treatment of Vedic materials here and whether the author is able to bring to bear the same mastery that Gonda did, but since she makes frequent acknowledgment of the assistance received from Werner Knobl, this should stand as some testimony to philological reliability. This approach, however, leaves one with the impression that while the book is of great use as a resource, it will not contribute significantly to thematic or conceptual studies, or goddesses, for instance, or gender, or indeed river worship, music, or even wisdom.

The author’s passion for her subject is evident, and she makes no attempt to hide it. But sometimes this leads to rather odd formulations such as the following on p. 108:

Given that the function of these myths is to glorify the various *tīrtha* alongside this most sacred of rivers, surely their authors intended to show Sarasvatī in the best possible light, despite the overwhelming power of the sages’ *tapas*. It is regrettable, however, that they inadvertently robbed her of her discrimination, and hence knowledge, over which she presides, in the process. Had she fearlessly refused to involve herself in Viśvāmītra’s petty jealousy and been cursed at the outset, her glory and grandeur would not have been reduced.

The author apparently knows what the authors intended and did not intend, and even what they overlooked.

In her treatment of the Purāṇas the author makes frequent reference to the published work and private communications of Yuko Yokochi, which allows her to investigate these sources more critically than they have been treated before. Not being an art historian, I am unable to judge the author’s treatment of this material in the final section of the book. A few points caught my attention, however. On p. 242 the author cites an inscription from a seventh century bronze as follows: *om devadharmoyam nivuya kulikasya / isiyā (?) gaṇiyo (?) (ṇī?)*/. She

then cites the translation of U.P. Shah as follows: “Om. This is the pious gift of the *gaṇiṇi* (nun) Isiyā.” There are absolutely no further remarks made about this inscription, but one instantly sees that, at the very least, several words are missing entirely: what is *nivuya kulikasya*? And what is the word *devadharmā*? Perhaps the author has not noticed that in the immediately preceding inscription treated by Shah he remarks on the donor as belonging to the Nivṛti-kula, the assumption being, I suppose, although I do not know if Shah states this explicitly since I lack access to his book, that the name of the family was transmitted in Middle Indic in what is otherwise more-or-less Sanskrit. Odd however is the expression *devadharmā*, for which we expect obviously *deyadharmā*.¹ In her discussion of dating of textual sources in relation to images, on p. 257, the author makes one of the classic moves one must assiduously avoid; following a rather careful and nuanced discussion of dating, she concludes with a “reasonable assumption.” By the next paragraph, this has become a fixed pivot for her dating. On p. 266, the author demonstrates her understanding of the important principle that texts may be inspired by imagery, and not only the other way around. Overall, she detects in her investigations of the imagery two traditions, one of the goddess as associated with knowledge, the other with music, distinct traditions, which from around the eighth century are merged.

When it comes to the author’s treatment of her Buddhist materials, with which I am much more familiar, there are some critical issues which it seems important to me to raise. It is important to stress that this book, and the monograph *Recontextualizing*, to be treated below, constitute a good contribution to studies on the *Suvarṇabhāṣottama-sūtra*. Nevertheless, especially seen in light of the detail which is devoted to the treatment of Vedic materials, the Buddhist sources are sometimes treated rather more loosely. My remarks may seem nit-picking to some, but I believe they highlight the author’s tendency to sometimes land either in great detail or in vast generalization, with little mediation between the two poles. When she writes, for instance (p. 148): “The three Chinese renderings of the sutra [...] reflect not only different stages or different versions in the development of the Sanskrit original, but also, within the Sarasvatī chapter, the evolving conceptualization of the Indian Buddhist Sarasvatī,” in making a generalization she avoids a particularly difficult problem. If the different Chi-

1 This is an interesting variant discussed since Lüders, for which see recently Oskar von Hinüber, *Die Palola Śāhis: Ihre Steininschriften, Inschriften auf Bronzen, Handschriftenkolophone und Schutzzauber. Materialien zur Geschichte von Gilgit und Chilas*. Antiquities of Northern Pakistan: Reports and Studies 5 [Mainz: Verlag Philipp von Zabern, 2004]: 177ff.

nese translations represent in their differences not different stages of development of the text but indeed different versions, then they most certainly cannot reflect “the evolving conceptualization of the Indian Buddhist Sarasvatī.” In this respect, in her attempt to demonstrate this evolution the author sometimes ends up in arguments that look suspiciously circular.

Although the author’s discussion of herbs and bathing in the sūtra, and the background perhaps behind this, is interesting, it also suffers from the above-mentioned tension between detail and generalization. She offers (pp. 309–315), on the one hand, an annotated listing of the herbs mentioned in various versions of the sūtra, but in her discussion (p. 172) offers without the least critical word, the idea that the so-called Great Bath in Mohenjo-Daro “most probably had purificatory, and hence religious, functions,” referring only to publications of 1931 and 1938. I do not know what the Great Bath meant to the people of Mohenjo-Daro, but I feel confident in asserting that no one else does either. It is only by *assuming* a continuity with later Hindu culture that one can *verify* that very continuity with reference to the Indus Valley Civilization. This is, to be blunt, utterly pointless. Further in the same section the author speaks about the connections of Buddhism with Indian medicine. Here, unfortunately, it appears she may have been somewhat misled by Zysk, to whose work she refers. In any event, it does not appear to have been at all the case that, as she writes (p. 175), infirmaries in Buddhist monasteries cared for the laity, much less that “care for the sick became a monastic function.”

Occasionally the author’s translations seem stuck in a literalist mode, as in (p. 171): “You should protect the supreme sutra king (i.e., the *Sutra of Golden Light*), not permit that [it] disappear, and always obtain that [it] be propagated.” How about “[...] make sure it does not disappear, and always enable it to be propagated”? In a number of other places, she seems to have misunderstood the Chinese she translates. On p. 218, quoting the Chinese 說如是法，施與辯才不可思議，得福無量，諸發心者，速趣菩提， the author translates: “By expounding such a Law, you grant inconceivable eloquence-talent, [causing them] to attain countless blessings, all their heart’s desires, and swift awakening.” She has not noticed the important place here of 者, which requires us to understand: “All who make [this?] aspiration will quickly attain bodhi.” The term 發心 is a very common one meaning “make the aspiration [to awakening],” rendering Sanskrit *cittotpāda*. Other examples of seemingly ignorance of Buddhist usages appear on p. 163, where 諸有智者 is rendered “those who know,” when it plainly means “those who have wisdom.” On p. 195, 端正 in the expression 身體端正 does not mean “her body is proper” (which itself is not meaningful

to me) but rather “her body is beautiful,” nor does 身色端嚴 mean “her bodily aspect is proper and majestic,” but once again simply “her body is beautiful.” On p. 199, referring to a passage on p. 196-197 in which the goddess is compared to a lion, she suggests: “The imagery of the lion, furthermore, is associated with the warrior-ruler, for whom success is victory in battle. The goddess, whose memory ‘excels,’ in that it is ‘most victorious’ (*zuisheng* 最勝), perhaps implying that it leads to military success, is therefore herself appropriately described as an eight-armed, weapon-bearing warrior [...]” This, I am afraid, is highly unlikely: 最勝 almost certainly means nothing more than ‘superior’. This is an example of the ways in which what may seem like a trivial, indeed nit-picking, philological point can lead one astray if improperly understood. At the very least, it would be incumbent on the author in such a case to argue for her reading, rather than simply assert it.

Recontextualizing the Praises of a Goddess was published one year earlier than the longer monograph, and focuses exclusively on the *Harivaṃśa* hymn preserved in Yijing’s translation of the *Suvarṇabhāṣottama*. Although there is inevitably some overlap with the treatment in the more comprehensive book, the monograph primarily consists of materials not covered in the other work. Here, each verse shared by the *Harivaṃśa* and Yijing’s translation is studied line by line. This is extremely helpful, and any future study of the sūtra will certainly profit greatly from this work. That said, some of the author’s tendencies evident in the larger work appear here as well. This includes somewhat wild and unjustified (I would say unjustifiable) connections, such as her attempts (p. 21) to connect the goddess in the *Harivaṃśa* to the Vedic Sarasvatī. After speaking of the epithets applied to her, the author states that when she is characterized as *brahmacāriṇī* this

connects her with the stage of life (*brahmacarya*) devoted to the study of the Vedas. The *brahman*, furthermore, is specifically the priest of the *Atharva Veda*, and the neuter noun *brahman* is the magical spell of this Veda. In the *brahmacarya* state, moreover, celibacy is enjoined upon the student, which is the vow to be taken by the goddess in the *Harivaṃśa* [...], who will remain a virgin.

I frankly cannot imagine how this is relevant here. Since when does classical Sanskrit *brahmacarya* necessarily evoke Vedic *brahman*? Earlier on the same page, in discussing epithets, the author points out that the names Kātyāyanī and Kauśikī “are endowed with Vedic resonance.” This may be, but what additional help is provided by taking the time to note that “Kātyāyana was also the name of a famous grammarian”? Only rarely, however, may one wonder about a render-

ing from Sanskrit. In verse 22 (p. 65) we find *tvayā vyāptam idam sarvam / jagat sthāvarajamgamam* // rendered “By you, this All, / the [living] world that either stands still or moves about, is pervaded.” Is it not simply “You pervade this whole world of the animate and inanimate”?

A final point concerns the secondary sources upon which the author draws for her study. Out of the extensive bibliography listed in the larger volume, the author refers to a mere ten works in Japanese, of which six are dictionaries, one a Japanese grammatical gloss on the Chinese sūtra (*kakikudashi* ‘translation’), one an art catalogue, one a book-length study of the sūtra (rarely referred to), and one an article (putatively by the author herself). If indeed she can read Japanese (and it appears that she lives in Japan), one might expect that she could have made use of the extensive Japanese scholarship on her central theme and related topics. In particular, for example, Iyanaga Nobumi has published extensively (also in French) on the transformation undergone by Indian deities in their journey eastward to Japan. Since this is a theme of interest to the author, covered according to her in the unpublished portion of her doctoral thesis, one might have expected to find even here some reference to the fact that such themes have been studied before. This absence reinforces the impression that the book should be seen more as a collection of sources than as a synthetic analysis or interpretative summa.

Despite what seem to be rather harsh critiques of these two works offered above, it should be stressed that in fact both are very valuable, and should be consulted by anyone with an interest in Sarasvatī, needless to say, but also Indian goddesses, and of course the *Suvarṇabhāsottama* in particular, and Chinese translations of Indian texts more generally as well. Whether those with broader interest in the Vedas, Epics, Purāṇas or Indian art history would be likely to be as well rewarded seems slightly less clear.

Jonathan Silk

MIDDENDORF, Ulrike, *Resexualizing the Desexualized: The Language of Desire and Erotic Love in the Classic of Odes*. Pisa and Roma: Accademia Editoriale, 2007. ISSN: 0392-4866. 281 S.

Resexualizing the Desexualized is a study of the language of desire and erotic love in the form of euphemism in the *Classic of Odes*. The author’s goal is to