
Published by the renowned Brill as the twenty-fourth volume in the Chinese Section of its *Handbook of Oriental Studies*, the present work is a rather comprehensive study or, as its editors would like to put it, a study reflecting the state of the art in our knowledge on the tantric and/or esoteric forms of Buddhism practiced in the East Asian countries of China, Korea and Japan. Included in the work are eighty-seven essays by about forty scholars on a vast array of topics loosely linked to the history and practices of Buddhism in the above countries. For its sheer scale and range, the work presents itself as a unique one and offers itself as a source-book on the none too easily definable or circumscribable form of esoteric and/or tantric Buddhism for a wider public. Leafing through the work before one actually settles down to read it, one comes across an ample amount of pictures, diagrams and illustrations which eventually reveal themselves very useful for a better understanding of the topics they are related to. Even so, the general reader may be warned against entertaining thoughts about any easy understanding of the subject matter dealt within the body of the book; and this despite the best efforts by its authors themselves to make it so. Claims of arcane knowledge, inaccessible to ordinary logic and intelligence, expressed in a kind language defying grammatical rules, have always been part of the esoteric form of Buddhism. Its focus has usually been on magical formulas, correct ritual practices and on the use of spiritual techniques. Moreover, the difficulties associated with any clear understanding of the original tantric texts and doctrines become all the more pronounced through their translations into other East Asian languages and by adaptation of esoteric Buddhism itself to these cultures.

The plan of the work which we are dealing with here is as follows: a general introductory section containing ten essays relating to the main sources and common practices of esoteric Buddhism is followed by three other distinct sections devoted to the Chinese, Korean and Japanese versions of the same and their history. For a general reader who has had no previous exposure to the esoteric form of Buddhism practiced in these countries, the introductory section provides a comprehensive picture of such Buddhism within which to situate these. The very first article in the work, co-authored by its editors, is understandably meant to clarify the methodological principles behind the work. But it does much more than that. Making allowances for the divergent views still prevailing among scholars regarding most aspects of this Buddhism, including its history and doctrines, the article offers some very useful conceptual clarifications about the use of adjectives such as tantric, esoteric, etc., in relation to this form of Buddhism. One of the goals itself of the present work is identified by its editors as providing impetus for further research into esoteric Buddhism and for identifying better the plurality of meanings associated with the term “esoteric” as applied to Buddhism.

This rather voluminous work is appended at the end by about 150 pages consisting of a very rich bibliography, a very useful index and abbreviations. There is little doubt that the present study brings together some of the latest views and information available on East Asian esoteric Buddhism in a one-volume work. - Benedict Kanakappally, OCD.