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Introduction

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In this introduction we outline the aims of the volume and explain its main foundational assumptions and themes. We also offer reflections on the common questions and observations that connect its different contributions, arranged here in four sections.

The Buddha as a literary character[1]

The Buddha, first and foremost, is a literary character. Whatever we think we know about him is an amalgamation of his various lifestories and portrayals across a range of sources, ancient and modern. More words are attributed to the Buddha than perhaps any other figure in premodern human history, with teachings voiced by him recorded in thousands of texts across vast swathes of Asia and spanning many centuries. But when scholars talk about "the Buddha" we are not always as clear as we should be about what we mean. Are we referring to the person we think probably lived and died in northeast India in the fifth century BCE, commonly referred to as the "historical" Buddha? If so, we are on shaky ground. Whereas we need not go so far as to doubt the Buddha's historicity, independent historical evidence for his life is lacking, while even the earliest accounts of his life and teachings give us varied—sometimes incompatible, and often supernormal—details.[2]

1. This collection results from a symposium on "Literary Buddhas Across Ages and Borders" held at the University of Cambridge in July 2022. This, in turn, was part of a project on "Comparative Buddhology in Indian Narrative Literature" funded by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council (2020-2023, AH/T009411/1), and we would like to express our gratitude to the funder for supporting the event and this publication.

2. As Bernard Faure writes (2009: 12): "So what do we actually know about the [historical] Buddha? It is fair to say that he was born, he lived, and he died. The rest remains lost in the mists of myth and legend [...]" The clarification that Faure is here referring to the *historical* Buddha is crucial; what we know of the *literary* Buddha, or variations that we here call "literary Buddhas", is voluminous. For a recent revivification of debate about the historical Buddha and what, if anything, we can know about him, see Drewes 2017; von Hinüber 2019; Drewes 2023a; von Hinüber 2023 and, the last contribution at time of writing, Drewes 2023b.

Keywords: Buddha, literature, character, buddhology, politics

More likely, if we are textual scholars, is that we are referring to the Buddha as portrayed in the texts with which we work. Yet, if that is the case, then instead of referring to a single figure we are really referring to Buddhas as imagined in a range of different texts. Each one of these Buddhas is a discrete literary construction: what the present collection understands to be a separate "literary Buddha."[3]

Admitting this fact is not to dismiss the many connections and continuities between the Buddhas we find in different texts, nor the possibility of a historical link to an actual person. However, it does help us to recognise the opportunities embraced by textual composers and compilers. Literary techniques and forms, such as allusion, metaphor and dialogue, help to create Buddhas who relate to audiences in different ways, potentially affecting or transforming them in the process. Portrayals emphasise different aspects of his character, or place different sorts of teachings in his mouth, meeting the needs of different times and places. In this collection, we take seriously the idea that each of these Buddhas is a literary Buddha, and explore what changes when we treat him as a character that is recreated in every new composition, once we pay attention to questions of authorial intent, literary features and flourishes, and potential audience response. The volume contains thirteen case studies, from different times and places, and this introduction seeks to draw out the key themes and questions that connect them.

A central question for this introduction is what it means to describe a Buddha as "literary" to begin with, since each of our contributions explores the implications of this designation in a different context. We are not using the word "literary" to indicate that every source discussed should be considered "literature." To label texts "literature" would require defining what we mean by that term, and this has been a somewhat fruitless task in the history of literary theory.[4] Formalists would say the definition rests on identifying literary devices or features such as imagery, rhythm, or narrative techniques. This definition of literature depends then on differentiating literary language from "normal" language—it is strangeness that defines literature for formalists. But this definition only really works for poetry; other forms of literature do not generally draw attention to the strangeness of their language. To suggest that what is most important is the way in which something is said, rather than the content, also undermines the aims of many authors, especially those who compose in order to edify or transform their audience. Literature has also been defined as a way of reading; in other words, it is up to us to treat a text as literature, and literature is defined simply as a kind of writing that people value. Although this is not as simple as a subjective judgement, but is rather tied up in power structures of cultural institutions, it still places the emphasis on value, and hence literature defined this way can never be a stable or objective category.

3. Readers may note a purposeful distinction that we make between (1) "the Buddha", the awakened teacher Śākyamuni; (2) "buddhas", meaning the category of "supreme and perfectly awakened beings" (*anuttarasamyaksaṃbuddha*); and (3) "(literary) Buddhas", which refers to retellings of the character, life and deeds of the Buddha Śākyamuni.

4. For an excellent summary of the issues and key scholarship on them see "What is literature?" in Eagleton 1996, 1-14.

Rather than considering "portrayals of the Buddha in literature", we place the emphasis on the adjectival use of "literary." It is most useful to think of literariness as a spectrum, identifiable through textual features including characterisation, imagery and allusion. The case studies included here explore a range of genres of text, from ancient poetry through to modern political essays, and these sources exhibit varying levels of literariness. What they share is an interest in using the character of the Buddha is some creative way, perhaps in order to elicit a particular audience response, or to legitimise a particular viewpoint or practice. The creativity involved may be very obvious or it may be subtle, but the underlying principle of this collection is that each Buddha, though causally conditioned by those before him, is created anew. Each portrayal of the Buddha in any text is a literary character, regardless of how many formal literary features are used in this portrayal, and regardless of the genre of text.

There are more than enough different accounts of the Buddha to fill multiple volumes. Indeed, the title of Bernard Faure's recent book *The Thousand and One Lives of the Buddha* (2022) is a nod to the many different ways in which the Buddha's life has been narrated, and includes chapters on Chinese, Japanese and Western Buddhas. Faure rejects the prevalent historicist modes of reading the Buddha's life and urges us to celebrate the diversity of lives across time and place, an agenda that is shared by the present volume. Even within a single time and place, diversity in tellings and retellings and interpretations is a key feature of the Buddha's lifestory. This is demonstrated by the still more recent collection *The Buddha: A Storied Life*, edited by Vanessa Sasson and Kristin Scheible (2024). In that volume, ten scholars of early South Asian literature and art address different stages in the Buddha's life, from his vow at the feet of a previous Buddha, Dīpaṅkara, to the distribution of the Buddha's relics, exploring how he is brought into being through the stories told about him. *The Buddha: A Storied Life* is in honour of John S. Strong, and particularly celebrates his 2001 book *The Buddha: A Short Biography*, which, in addition to offering a perfectly balanced and insightful overview of the Buddha's life (again, primarily based on early South Asian sources), also changes the way we think about what it means to read his lifestory.

The literary Buddhas that are discussed in the present collection are not intended to be representative of the full range of possible depictions, but rather offer studies of particular examples that help to draw out the broader implications of studying the way the Buddha is presented in different historical and cultural contexts. Although we anticipate that readers will enjoy learning about the diverse ways in which the Buddha has been portrayed—from ancient India to the modern Americas, by authors as far apart as the earliest Buddhist nuns and Jorge Luis Borges—the methodological questions and themes that link the studies that follow are what give the volume its overall shape. As such, these contributions are grouped thematically rather than according to chronology or geography.

The volume is divided into four parts that reflect four key themes that we explore, namely theory and method, relational bonds, political activity and the realm of the cosmic. Each of these sections contains three or four studies that speak primarily

to that theme, but also connect in lesser ways to other contributions from other sections. Below we address each of these four themes in turn, before drawing some broader conclusions about the benefits of this approach in helping us better understand the Buddha, Buddhist literature, and the ways in which we can and should read textual sources.

Literary Buddhas as method and theory

The four studies in "Part A: Literary Buddhas as Method and Theory" introduce different implications of considering each Buddha we encounter as a literary creation. Two of the chapters explore Asian Buddhist methods for retelling the Buddha's lifestory, with attention to how the texts' authors sought to create a particular Buddha for their purposes. Two others explore modern, Western literary Buddhas, one created by a contemporary scholar seeking to understand the Buddha's story through the eyes of his wife, Yasodharā (Skt. Yaśodharā), and the other by a noted literary theorist and poet who sought to read the character of the Buddha through his grasp of Buddhist philosophy.

Adam Miller opens our collection by leading us through an account of the Buddha's life in a Mahāyāna sūtra, the *Precious Banner Sūtra* (*Ratnaketuparivarta*), exploring its distinctive presentation of Śākyamuni in opposition to the villainous deity Māra, whose role is here expanded into that of a complex antihero. As Miller argues, the text, through its portrayal of the Buddha's encounters with Māra, and through its reflexive teachings on its own value, offers us a Buddha who still teaches in the world. In other words, for this source the creation of a literary Buddha is a method for continuing his salvific activity for the audiences of the text. Far from being a mere descriptive account, the Buddha of the *Precious Banner Sūtra* is an active and engaged agent, offering real-world benefits to his readers through the recitation of, and participation in, the text.

Michael Auerback explores a nineteenth century Japanese composition, *The Light of the Three Ages* (*Miyo no hikari* 三世の光), which was designed to purify and correct a perceived laxity in Buddhist knowledge and practice. The author was a nun with a particular devotion to Śākyamuni, and a desire to provide an authentic Buddha-biography to her audience, based on Chinese scriptural sources. Yet, as Auerback shows, her dedication to providing this orthodox reading did not prevent her from adding and subtracting from her sources, in order to make the Buddha more relevant for her own time and place. As well as being a rare example of a lifestory of the Buddha composed by a woman, *The Light of the Three Ages* demonstrates the methods used by compilers and translators within the Buddhist tradition seeking to retell the Buddha's life for new audiences and purposes.

Our third contribution leaps forward in time and to the other side of the world, to the famous Argentine writer and literary innovator, Jorge Luis Borges (1899–1986). Margarita Delgado Creamer highlights how Borges' little-known interest in the Buddha fed into his approach to literary theory. Using two rather different essays focused on the Buddha's life, and drawing on allusions and connections to other works, Delgado Creamer demonstrates how Borges used his understanding of

Buddhist philosophy to approach the story of the Buddha's life in terms of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) and absence of self (*anātman*). Borges also used the many versions of the Buddha's lifestory to explore the close relationship between truth and legend, and to support his insight that there is no such thing as a definitive text. In other words, Borges sought to turn Buddhist philosophy into literary practice, inspired as much by Buddhist accounts of the Buddha's life as reception of teachings attributed to him.

In the final contribution in this section, Vanessa Sasson writes about her experience of becoming the *writer*, rather than simply reader, of the Buddha's lifestory. Reflecting on her attempts to draw out the voice of the Buddha's wife, Yasodharā, for a novel she published in 2018, Sasson suggests that the usual scholarly aims of objectivity and distance may actually hinder our work, and that more open and creative engagements have something valuable to contribute to our understanding of the Buddha. Sasson explores important insights that resulted from radically reframing her own relationship to the story of the Buddha's life and those who shared in it. As Sasson explores, her task required her to fill in the gaps of the story as traditionally told, to imaginatively place herself into the Buddha's lifestory in a way that enabled her to see a different side to his character, as a literary figure already living in multiple texts available to her.

Together, these four studies offer interconnected observations about how theory and method can be illuminated by taking seriously the idea that textual Buddhas are literary constructions with particular aims. By appreciating the methods of the compilers and composers of our sources, we are invited to reflect upon how our own methods—and theoretical underpinnings—might affect our scholarship. Are we, as scholars, doing something fundamentally different to Buddhists when we read and write about the Buddha? Or are we all creating a new reading of the Buddha's lifestory—a new literary Buddha—to suit our purposes? We gain a better understanding of the opportunities offered to Buddhist authors and audiences of different times and places, including the modern world, by noting the strategies and choices involved, from selection of sources, to characterisation, dialogue, allusion, imagery, and more. Moreover, we see how a retelling of the Buddha's life is never a simple descriptive act, but rather has a more significant creative dimension. This creativity of method is particularly highlighted in Sasson's contribution, which, though primarily about the methodological implications of a scholar becoming a writer of Buddha-biography, also moves us into the next section, by seeing the Buddha through his wife.

Literary Buddhas and their relations

Few stories concern just a single agent, operating in a narrative world not shared with any other inhabitants. This collection takes seriously the fact that literary figures act and develop in relationship with others, and the Buddha is no exception. The Buddha's family, his monks and nuns and even his audience outside the text are crucial to the development of his character, as well as the impact of the literature in which he features. The three studies in Part B take up this theme, as well as

each contributing to our understanding of portrayals of the Buddha, especially in South Asian scriptures.

The first contribution to this section continues Sasson's interest in the family of the Buddha, and in the tension between renunciation and care for one's kinsmen, in an examination of the Buddha remembered in an ancient monastic code interlaced with rich narrative material. Reading the *Mūlasarvāstivāda-vinaya*, Sue Roach explores a complex biographical episode recounted as part of the monastic rule of not allowing an unrelated nun to do one's laundry. This rather unlikely context provides an opportunity to tell the story of the Buddha's return to his home town, and his conversion and teaching of his Śākya relatives, particularly his father. Literary techniques abound: narrative framing including an embedded past-life story, careful manipulation of pace and setting, interwoven genres, and attention to the psychology and motivation of the characters, including with humour and humanity. The result is a story that holds our attention and offers us a Buddha who cares deeply for his kinsmen. As Roach argues, the text uses the Buddha's encounters with family members to support its goal of teaching audiences the value of ascetic living.

The Buddha's literal family is sometimes considered as having been replaced by his monastic family, with many of his relations joining the sangha, and his monks and nuns figuratively understood as his sons and daughters.[5] The relationship that the Buddha has with his figurative daughters–the earliest Buddhist nuns–is the focus of Joanna Gruszewska's exploration of the Buddha of the *Therīgāthā*. These celebrated verses of elder nuns foreground women's experiences of the Buddhist path and its culmination, yet the Buddha is still an important presence. Gruszewska points to the different literary functions of the Buddha in that collection: as teacher, eulogist of the nuns' virtues, dialogue partner, antithesis to Māra, and metaphorical father. In a text purporting to be by and about women, the Buddha offers legitimacy and status to the female protagonists, authenticating their experiences. As observed already in Sasson's contribution, traditional literary accounts of the Buddha have tended to keep women on the periphery, but in the *Therīgāthā* it is the Buddha who occupies the sidelines, albeit in a way that is critical to the experiences of the central characters. This literary Buddha has an important role in the poetic account of the attainments of women in the early Buddhist community, where his purpose, as something like a spiritual parent, is bound up with theirs.

We next move to considering the relationships forged between literary Buddhas and audiences outside the text. Naomi Appleton looks to the *Avadānaśataka*, a Sanskrit narrative collection of the mid-first-millennium, and argues that a key part of the text's raison d'être is to make its audience love the Buddha. Appleton outlines three literary strategies at play. First, she highlights the use of long formulaic passages in praise of the Buddha, in particular those that celebrate the impact that he has on beings across the cosmos. Second, she explores the portrayal of audiences within the text who model the correct response to an encounter with the Buddha, as well as the benefits—immediate and longer term—thereof, inspiring a similar reac-

5. See, for example, Strong 2011 for a discussion of the transformation of each of the three lineages of the Buddha; the lineage of the Śākya clan becomes the monastic lineage.

tion from audiences outside the text. Third, she argues that the text offers a careful balance between the supernormal and accessible in the Buddha's characterisation, so that he is at once unimaginably awesome and yet still somehow relatable. These literary strategies, she argues, allow the text to achieve its primary aim: eliciting a faithful mind in the audience external to the text.

These contributions together offer a glimpse of the various literary ends to which the Buddha's lifestory can and has been put, even when he is portrayed through his relationships with others. Indeed, connections between characters within and outside the text are often central to how he functions as a literary Buddha; after all, his very status as a Buddha is bound up with service to others, transforming their lives through his teaching. The same could be said for other kinds of relations, epitomized in the encounter with Māra discussed in Miller's contribution, as well as where the Buddha's status as a political player, with worldly power and responsibility, as emphasized in the contributions that follow.

Literary Buddhas as political agents

Our focus shifts to the role of the Buddha's literary portrayal in political agendas, broadly conceived. Once again, this theme has already been present: we have seen the Buddha legitimise the position of nuns (Gruszewska), and convince others of the appropriateness of ascetic practice (Roach). One of the most common uses of a literary Buddha is to lend authority to a particular idea or cause, and many of these can blur into what we might label political. In this section we bring the political—matters of worldly power, and how it is exercised—to the foreground. Each case study offers evidence for how new contexts, temporal and geographical, demanded new depictions of the great teacher of gods and men.

First, Janine Nicol asks how Indian Buddhist stories of the Buddha's previous lives were reframed to make better political sense for early Chinese audiences and their understanding of kingship. Her examples are taken from one of the earliest Chinese collections of past-life stories about the Buddha (*jātakas*), the *Liudu ji jing* 六度集經 (T152). Nicol shows, through comparison with Indic tellings, how these stories were adapted to present Buddhist notions of kingship that resonate with existing Chinese models. In particular, she shows how these stories emphasise the idea that the Bodhisattva (and by association the Buddha, with whom the Bodhisattva is frequently identified in the text) is the exemplar of an ideal "sage-king," resonating with existing Chinese tradition. The stories in this collection, Nicol shows, are selected and framed in such a way as to downplay the ideal of renunciation, so central to Indian Buddhism, and emphasise the value of good (that is, "Buddhist") kingship. This literary Buddha is a model for good Chinese rulers to emulate.

Our next contribution, by Kavita Pai, attends to the ways in which the modern Indian thinker Dharmanand Kosambi (1876–1947) presented the Buddha's lifestory in support of his political views. A key influence on B.R. Ambedkar's striking vision of the Buddha, Kosambi sought to balance rigorous reading of canonical Buddhist sources with his own vision of peaceful political activism.[6] In his works exploring

6.For a critical edition of Ambedkar's own narration of the Buddha's life and message, see Ambedkar 2011.

the lifestory of the Buddha, and especially his posthumously published play about the Buddha's youth—*Bodhisattva: Nātak*—Kosambi paints the Buddha as a pacifist, with echoes of Gandhi and Pārśvanāth (the last-but-one central teacher, or revelatory "ford-maker" [*tīrthaṅkara*], in Jain tradition) alongside Marx and Tolstoy. This is a Buddha of what came to be called engaged Buddhism: acting in the world to relieve our immediate suffering, rather than prioritising renunciation and liberation from the world. This literary Buddha's focus on this-worldly political concerns is in continuity with Nicol's study of the *Liudu ji jing*, though Kosambi's Buddha is in essence a farmer rather than a king. Both of these distinctly this-worldly Buddhas are in tension with the Buddha who promotes ascetic renunciation, as explored in Roach's reading of the *Mūlasarvāstivāda-vinaya*, but are no less impactful in their respective ages and contexts.

Staying in the same era as Kosambi, and keeping to the idea of the Buddha as social reformer, Roberto García moves our attention to Mexico in his exploration of the work of the post-revolutionary intellectual and politician José Vasconcelos (1882-1959). And like Kosambi, Vasconcelos undoubtedly presents the Buddha, albeit a figure of a distant time and place, as a teacher of ideas compatible with his own. Noting the importance of the Buddha's lifestory for early Latin American encounters with Buddhism, which were heavily influenced by both the spread of Theosophism and the tremendous literary impact of Edwin Arnold's *Light of Asia*, García shows how Vasconcelos departs from this form of engagement. Instead, he uses the Buddha's lifestory to frame his own ideas about both his home state and modernity in general, advancing the new with reference to the old, and drawing implicit comparisons between the Buddha and Jesus. For Vasconcelos, committed to a project of educational reform in modern Mexico, the Buddha's authority, as a wise teacher operating in and for the world, is what matters most.

As well as demonstrating the different political ends to which literary Buddhas have been put, these chapters show how very rooted in time and place each Buddha is. As Buddhist ideas, practices and of course stories have travelled to new cultures, the Buddha has been redeployed to legitimise some or other ideology, with respect to ideal kingship or a secular educational policy, and everything in between. This context-dependent nature of each literary Buddha is of course a theme that bridges the whole collection: we meet Buddhas suited specifically to ancient as well as modern India, early-modern Japan, and the Americas. These three chapters highlight that a context-dependent literary Buddha is often more than a religious teacher: an important reminder that any confinement of the Buddha and his teaching to the domain of "religion" creates an artificial distinction between this and the exercise of worldly power.

Literary Buddhas on a cosmic scale

Our final set of studies moves away from the idea of the Buddha as a relatable character, albeit one reimagined in a multitude of texts and contexts, and draws our attention to how Buddhist literature exhibits developments in pre-modern buddhology—that is, discourse about the nature of awakening, and buddhas in gen-

eral—beyond the Buddha's traditional lifestory.[7] On the one hand, Śākyamuni, by definition, is one of a series of buddhas, each one following a narrative blueprint that concerns bringing the Dharma back into the world. The idea of our Buddha being one of a type, and part of a lineage, is present across Buddhist traditions. However, this notion reaches new creative heights with the advent of Mahāyāna buddhology, which presumes a vast cosmos of awakened beings. Also prevalent in this literature is something like the apotheosis of the Buddha, in which the lines between our Buddha, other buddhas and the very world that they inhabit appear to blur. The character of the Buddha is not limited to his flesh and blood body, and the complexity of what makes up his buddha-ness is something that Buddhist authors have not shied away from exploring.

First, Bai Yu and Athanaric Huard explore the multi-faceted literary heritage behind a visual motif in which the cosmos is depicted on the body of a buddha. Noting that this motif has largely been treated as a primarily visual phenomenon, the authors instead treat it as foremost a literary motif, and assess different textual witnesses for it, from across the breadth of Indian Buddhist sources of the early Common Era. They conclude that there were multiple motivations for this motif in literature, including strategic imitation of Brahmanical tropes, devotional agendas such as the glorification of the supernormal powers of buddhas and bodhisattvas, and the celebration of the connection between all buddhas, in all times and places. We are reminded that literary Buddhas are inherently bound up with visual culture, especially where accounts of his grandeur invite representations in iconography.

In a contribution very much centred on Mahāyāna Buddhism, Christopher Jones examines the position of the buddha of our world and present age, Śākyamuni, among an expanded universe of other buddhas present and teaching in innumerable distant worlds. As far back as we have any insights into the Mahāyāna literary imagination, the Buddha has been presented as just one of many buddhas teaching presently, in a fashion that invited comparison between "our Buddha" and others, such as Amitābha. Attending to a range of Indian sources, Jones considers how the life, deeds and character of Śākyamuni develop in a religious landscape occupied by other awakened counterparts. This serves as a reminder that even while the Mahāyāna elevated our Buddha, and buddhas in general, above and beyond stories about their lives in the world, its authors retained an interest in emphasizing the distinctiveness of one Buddha, Śākyamuni, as a particularly remarkable exemplar among awakened teachers. That this is achieved through further storytelling about the Buddha should not surprise us.

Finally, Rachel Pang draws the volume to a close by exploring a Tibetan author, Shabkar (1781-1851), whose writings weave together both a "historical" lifestory of the Buddha and a presentation of the "ultimate" Buddha framed in cosmic terms. As Pang argues, these two presentations of the Buddha are not incompatible, but speak simply to the notion that the Buddha can be described in multiple ways and from different perspectives. Indeed, this is even true in relation just to the presentation of the Buddha as a historical figure, which Shabkar does with a particular

7. Regarding the Western coinage "buddhology", see Tournier 2017, vii n1.

agenda in mind: namely, the celebration of the example of the Buddha, including through his past lives. That Buddha—the one who was born on a specific day, in a specific place—and the cosmic Buddha Samantabhadra, are one and the same, even as they have their distinctive presentations and uses, which can be mapped onto the frame of "provisional" and "definitive" meaning that features so productively in Tibetan Buddhist hermeneutics.

In addressing the multiplicity of buddhas and the ways in which the very concept of a buddha necessarily relates to literary portrayals of Śākyamuni, this section ties together multiple threads that run through this collection. While the Buddha is most certainly a singular and central character, he is also one of many, both in the cosmic sense, with other buddhas in other times and worlds, and in the sense of this volume's foundational premise: that each Buddha of each text is a distinct literary creation, with his own characteristics, teachings, and functions.

Literary Buddhas and Buddhist studies

Although this volume has sought to speak of each literary Buddha as distinct, we still inevitably refer to him in the singular—"the Buddha"—in recognition of what connects these varied depictions. Indeed, it is the belief that the Buddha is one—the one who made the Dharma available in the world, saving countless beings from suffering with his insights and powers—that makes him such an important character to include in one's text. His very presence commands authority, whether this is authority lent to texts originating in Ancient India, or in contexts far away in time and place. Many of the case studies included here address questions of historical influence, and contextual rootedness, as each literary Buddha is situated in a particular era and location, with its own distinctive character. Linked to this is the relationship between the Buddha and his teaching, remembering that his role as voice of authoritative teachings, his very person coextensive with the truths that he reveals in the world, is perhaps his most important function as a literary character.

We note that behind the case studies presented here there are some literary Buddhas that have had a particularly important influence on others. Two examples that raise their heads in several contributions are the *Buddhacarita*, of Aśvaghosa (c. C2nd), an important classical source for the Buddha's lifestory, and *The Light of Asia* (1879) of Edwin Arnold (1832–1904).[8] Both are laudations of the Buddha in epic verse, and although they speak of very different times, to very different audiences, both had significant impacts on generations of authors, across cultural borders and down to the present day. Another body of literature relevant to many of these studies are collections of past life stories (*jātaka*s), which reminds us that for many Buddhists the lifestory of the Buddha is more than just an account of a single journey from cradle to grave: the character of the Buddha develops over more than one lifetime. The choice of sources to draw on in creating one's literary Buddha was crucial for many of the authors discussed: the Japanese nun Kogetsu deliberately chose what she considered to be "orthodox" sources, while the Tibetan

8. An excellent edition and translation of the extant Sanskrit of the *Buddhacarita* is Olivelle 2008.

master Shabkar mixed a range of genres in his writings; in a more recent composition, Sasson invents material to fill the gaps in a story that, despite its thousands of retellings, did not offer her a full enough account. The result of this engagement with prior Buddhas is a balance of continuity and novelty, with each Buddha recognisably the Buddha, yet also oriented towards meeting the needs of a particular time and place.[9]

Early Western engagement with the figure of the Buddha conceptualized him, often lazily, as something of a deity, or a foreign idol with origins in a pagan "Orient."[10] It has been argued that a next phase in Western scholarship dramatically revised this characterization, and imagined the Buddha foremost a philosopher, or even something like a scientist, offering a "rational" alternative to the established theistic religions of the West. As Donald Lopez Jnr. argues in *The Scientific Buddha* (2012), this Buddha was born in nineteenth century Paris, and is strikingly different to the Buddha of Asian and premodern sources. For Lopez, the birth of a new Buddha when the teachings of Śākyamuni are still in the world is something of an aberration, given the rule that there can only be one Buddha in the world at a time. But taken in a broader view, as this volume demonstrates, such a thing as "the Scientific Buddha" is part of a longstanding tradition of adaptation and reinvention; so too is the Buddha imagined as a spiritual father, a political ideal, a social reformer, or abstract cosmological principle. Each textual community, from the earliest Indian communities to modern global ones, creates their own literary Buddha; "the West", of modernity and after, is no exception. Across all of the studies presented here, and in innumerable accounts of the lifestory of Śākyamuni besides, these are all the one Buddha, and still many Buddhas in as far as the founder of the Buddhist tradition has always been remembered and reinvented in different ways.

As we argued at the beginning of this introduction, a study of literary Buddhas is simply one that acknowledges the creativity inherent in any presentation of the Buddha. However, acknowledging this often leads on to foregrounding literary aspects of his presentation that demonstrate the creative process at work. We encounter an abundance of literary features in the case studies contained in this volume: wordplay, with respect to names of characters and otherwise; dialogical structures; narrative framing, including the embedding of past-life stories; creative approaches to the presentation of time and space, including foreshadowing and interweaving; intertextual allusion; visual imagery; creative adaptation of sources; reflexivity; elaborate characterisation, including through hyperbole and metaphor; and some innovative approaches to authorial voice. We hold that these studies demonstrate how a whole variety of textual genres, including those we might not immediately think of as "literary", are creative in their approach to presenting the Buddha. This is true of traditional Buddhist texts, including poetry, monastic law,

9. On the balance of stability and inventiveness in the reuse of Indian religious literary characters see Black and Geen 2011. McClintock (2011) in the same special issue offers another take on the Buddha as literary character, in this case highlighting his role as trickster in some early Indian narratives.

10. For more regarding the Buddha as an "Oriental idol", see Lopez 2016.

narrative and biographical accounts, but even a secular or political writer, far from the Buddha's homeland, can use the figure of the Buddha to further their ends by being attentive to how his character, deeds and teachings are presented.

Is the Buddha a political revolutionary, an ideal ruler, or an other-worldly ascetic? Is he dismissive of his family, or concerned for their welfare? Does he support his path being available to women? Is he human or supernormal, philosopher or miracle-worker, teacher or deity? Does he lead an escape from the world, or signpost the world's true nature? The case studies explored here offer us many different answers to these and related questions, enriching our understanding of the many lives, in more ways than one, that the Buddha has lived.

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