



Politics & Transcendent Wisdom (Hermeneutics, Studies in the History of Religions)

Charles D. Orzech

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Winner, Best First Book in the History of Religions (American Academy of Religion)

The first examination of the relationship between Buddhist notions of transcendence and political authority in East Asia.

"A significant work that belongs in any serious collection on Buddhist studies."—Choice

"Orzech's project forces a rethinking of the relationship between religion and politics that scholars in all fields of religion will find intriguing. His focus is a Buddhist text authored in China but made to look like a translation from Sanskrit. His study excavates what the winds of history and the biases of history-writers have covered up: the fact that Tantric Buddhism occupied a crucial position in medieval Chinese civilization."—Stephen F. Teiser, Princeton University

Politics and Transcendent Wisdom presents a systematic theoretical framework for understanding the relationship between politics and religion in a variety of contexts. This book examines the formation of "national protection" Buddhism in China and translates the key text of this important movement. Showing that Buddhist notions of sovereignty were meant and were taken as more than mere metaphor, Orzech examines the profound link between Buddhist notions of transcendence and the deployment of political authority in East Asia. To this integration of philosophical tradition and political history is brought a new understanding of Buddhist cosmology.

The contexts of Buddhism as state religion in fifth- and eighth-century China are examined in detail, through extended consideration of the Transcendent Wisdom Scripture for Humane Kings Who Wish to Protect Their States, the text that was the charter for Buddhist state cults in China, Korea, and Japan into the twentieth century. The text first appeared during the fifth century as Buddhists were struggling to understand how their "foreign" religion and the "foreign" rulers of north China might be adapted to Chinese religious and political culture. The Scripture for Humane Kings and the rites enjoined by it were one answer to these questions. Three centuries later, in the context of a fully sinified Buddhism, the T'ang dynasty Tantric master Pu-k'ung produced a new version of the text with new rites that served as the centerpiece of his vision of a Chinese Buddhist state modeled on esoteric lines. The final section of this volume presents for the first time a full, annotated translation of this important East Asian Buddhist text.

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