Review

The Lotus Sūtra: A Biography, by Donald S. Lopez, Jr. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016. 257 pp., \$29.95 (hb). ISBN 978-0-691-15220-2.

Reviewed by: M. Alyson Prude, Georgia Southern University USA.
mprude@georgiasouthern.edu

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The Lotus Sūtra: A Biography is part of an extensive series aimed at exploring the ‘reception, interpretation, and influence’ of ‘important religious texts from around the world’ (back jacket). Lopez draws from his wide-ranging expertise in the field of Buddhist studies to assemble the fruits of international scholarship on Indian, Chinese, Japanese, European, and American Buddhisms relevant to the *Lotus*. The *Biography* contains much useful information for contextualizing the *Lotus* but offers more to readers seeking to learn about the *Lotus Sūtra*’s reception in Europe and the United States than those hoping to better understand its enduring import in East Asian Buddhisms.

The first chapter of the *Biography* begins with an explanation of the *Lotus Sūtra*’s ‘one-vehicle’ thesis and offers a clear and concise exposition of its parables. The remainder of the text is organized geographically, beginning with India where Lopez elucidates Yogācāra’s rejection of the *Lotus*’s one-vehicle supremacy in favor of a three-vehicle view of the Buddha’s teachings and the paths to liberation. The third chapter, on China, focuses on the founder of the Tiantai school, Zhiyi’s, philosophy and chronology of the Buddha’s teachings and concludes with references to Tang dynasty miracle tales about rewards obtained by the *sūtra*’s pious devotees. These first 64 pages, roughly a third of the book, are sharp and pertinent to historicizing the *Lotus*.

The longer fourth chapter on Japan describes Nichiren’s life and obsession with the *Lotus*. Lopez explains Nichiren’s self-identification as Viśiṣṭacāritra, the bodhisattva ‘Superior Practices’, and his insistence on aggressive proselytizing (*shakubuku*). A reminder of the *Lotus*’s promises of this-worldly benefits would have helped explain how Nichiren’s maniacal endorsement of the *Lotus* did not have the effect of deterring others from taking up his newly created methods of worship. While a discussion of Nichiren is undoubtedly crucial to the history of the *Lotus Sūtra*, the attention to Nichiren’s life supersedes the discussion of the *Lotus*’s usage and interpretation beyond Nichiren, especially in non-Tendai lineages, such as the Zen traditions of Dōgen and Hakuin.

The fifth chapter, comprising nearly a third of the book, relates Europeans' and then, more briefly, Americans' discovery of Sanskrit Buddhist texts. Lopez alludes to Chinese and Japanese versions of the *Lotus* studied by Europeans before turning to the Frenchman Eugène Burnouf and his *Introduction à l'histoire du Bouddhisme indien*. Lopez includes multiple, long passages from Burnouf's enormous text and devotes pages to describing its appendices in order to demonstrate how far Burnouf had strayed from the *Lotus* (p. 153). Suggesting that, like the *Lotus*, Burnouf's relevant publications can be considered as three books, two books, or one book seems tangential to a contextual understanding of the *Lotus Sūtra*. Even after we learn when and of what ailment Burnouf died, the chapter focuses on Burnouf's preference for a buddha that is 'not the Buddha of the *Lotus Sūtra*' (p. 163). Turning to America, Lopez tells us: 'In the course of his fifty-one-page essay, Salisbury mentions many Buddhist texts. He does not mention the *Lotus Sūtra*' (p. 167). It is unclear why, in this short *Biography*, it is necessary to examine Burnouf's partialities and Salisbury's essay.

The sixth chapter about the *Lotus* in the twentieth century returns to Japan and the scholarship of Jacqueline Stone. It summarizes the politics and infighting between various Nichiren priests and the development of Sōka Gakkai. Finally, in a brief conclusion, Lopez reiterates what makes the *Lotus* unique and important among Mahāyāna texts: it 'contains two of the most uplifting statements in the history of Buddhism—all sentient beings will achieve buddhahood and the Buddha did not really die' (p. 216).

Furthering the analogy criticized above, I suggest thinking of the *Biography*, not as one, but three texts. One text, the 'inferior' one, is the middle portion that is less a story of the *Lotus Sūtra* and more a cultural critique of Buddhism's reception in the West. The Western assimilation of Buddhism and Asian texts is now a familiar parable, and in the case of the *Lotus Sūtra*, not the most important lesson to be learned. The other, 'superior' texts are the first and last thirds of the *Biography* in which the history and interpretations of the *Lotus* retain centre stage. This quick, lively, and compelling read could provide helpful context for undergraduates' understandings of the *Lotus* and nudge students towards an appreciation of religious texts as cultural artifacts. In fact, Lopez ends his engaging and humorous introduction with comments received from his Introduction to Buddhism students, remarks expressing their sense of betrayal that the Buddha lied and their outrage at having to read a *sūtra* that is not 'really' Buddhist. The *Biography*, however, makes no effort to convince twenty-first-century undergraduate *Lotus* haters that the *sūtra* is, in fact, Buddhist, or that the Buddha did not lie when he taught the *śrāvaka* vehicle. Instead, it leaves readers to 'ponder' these issues and to 'live in the darkness of the fissures that seem to scar' the text, a self-referencing, hyperbolic text that seems to disappear when sought and, in fact, 'perhaps was never there' (p. 221).