The Sacred Geographies of Asia

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Course Description:
Historians of religion have long noted how the category of sacred space is a fundamental component of most religious traditions, alongside of issues of sacred time, ritual and doctrines. This course aims to understand the constitution and transformation of Buddhist sacred sites in Asia. The earliest Buddhist sacred sites were primarily associated with the historical Buddha or various Bodhisattvas and located within the regions where Buddhism developed in India. The power and importance of Buddhist sacred sites was, to a great extent, derived from their connections—no matter whether historical or legendary—to the Buddha and Buddhist saints. Those sacred sites came to figure in pilgrimage networks where followers wanted to literally follow the path and walk in the footsteps of the Buddha. After the Buddha's death those sacred sites were marked with his enduring presence through stūpas that housed his corporal relics. The institution of an Indian Buddhist sacred geography tethered to sites that were in some way connected to the biography of the Buddha, illustrates well the connection that would ensue throughout Asia between eminent people and particular sacred sites. Wherever Buddhism traveled outside of that cultural sphere new sacred sites were produced. Indeed one of the primary ways to track the geographical and historical spread of Buddhism in Asia is by focusing on the creation, use, and transformation of sites that were characterized as sacred. The spread of Buddhism in Asia may be viewed from one perspective as a protracted and complex process in which numerous sacred sites were continually created and recreated in different cultural settings. This seminar will introduce students to important theoretically and methodologically engaging works in the study of sacred geography and will approach Buddhist sacred sites from a number of perspectives. How were Buddhist sacred sites conceptualized throughout Asia? What kinds of meanings were perceived to be encoded in sacred sites? What kinds of narratives are used to describe those sites? How were new Buddhist sacred sites created and consecrated in geographical (and cultural) contexts at some remove from India, where the sacred sites associated with the historical Buddha were all located? What was the relationship between Buddhist sacred sites and the sacred sites of pre-Buddhist religious traditions? The readings for this course will be comprised of primary sources (in Chinese or English translation) and secondary sources in English or Chinese.

Class Schedule

Class 1 Aug. 5th

Introduction and Theoretical and Methodological Orientations: From Traditional to Critical Geography


Class 2 Aug. 6th

The Buddhist Sacred Geography of India

Readings: 1. Maps of Buddhist Sites in India. 2. John Strong, “Introduction to the Lifestory of the Buddha.” 3. Translations of

Class 3  Aug. 7th  
*Transferring Buddhist Sacred Geography to China* 

Class 4  
*Re-Approaching Chinese Sacred Geography: Mt. Classification Systems* 

Class 5  
*Negotiating Sacred Geography: Mt. Monographs* 

Class 6  
*The Sacred Nature of Built Environments* 

Class 7  
*Japanese Buddhist Sacred Landscapes* 