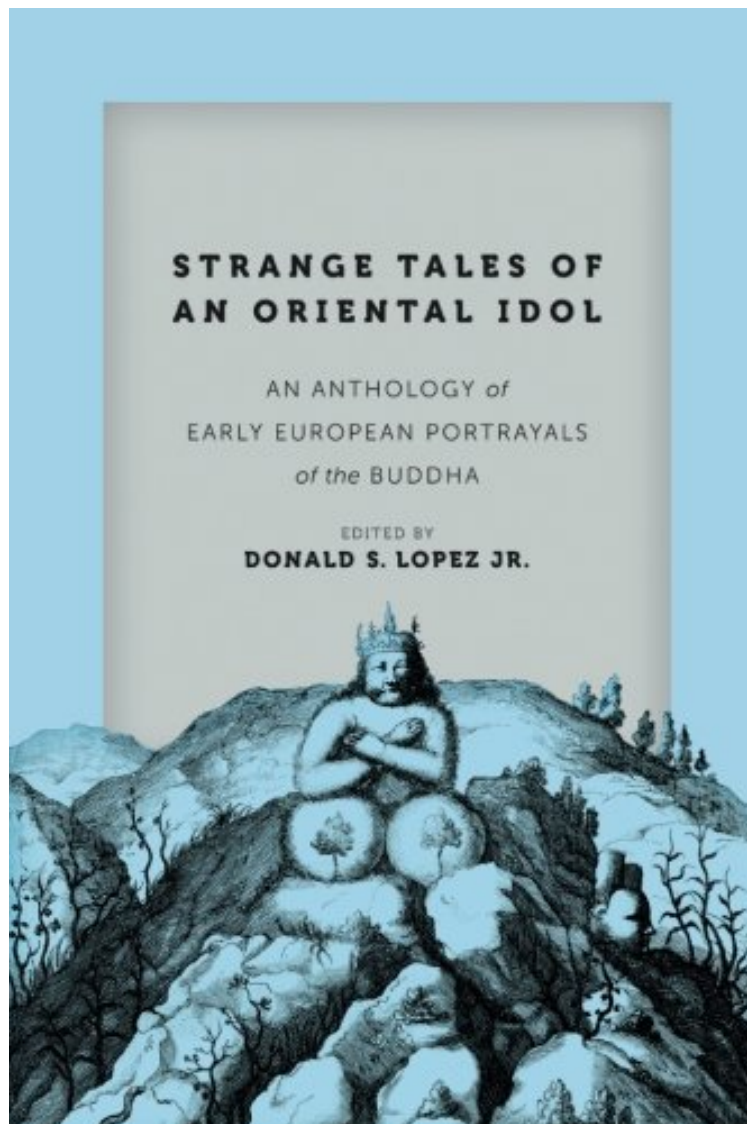


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Strange Tales of an Oriental Idol: An Anthology of Early European Portrayals of the Buddha (Buddhism and Modernity)

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Look around an Eastern-themed gift shop or Asian-inspired garden and you may see a benevolent, rotund and inevitably smiling Buddha. Imported into Western culture, the familiar icon enters popular culture as a good luck symbol and a self-satisfied sage. What today's viewers of such images forget is that, less than two centuries ago, whatever was known or rumored about this wisdom teacher emanated more often from demonic or pagan connotations, rather than cheerful or chubby depictions. This shift in representation has taken nearly two thousand years to spread, far from the homeland near the Himalayan foothills and Indian plains of the historical Buddha. An expert scholar on Buddhist culture at the University of Michigan provides readers with a compendium excerpting over eighty accounts of what the Buddha meant to the forebears of Christians (and, now and then, Muslims and Jews) who attempted to fit this acclaimed personage into their worldviews. Donald S. Lopez, Jr.'s {Strange Tales of an Oriental Idol: An Anthology of Early European Portrayals of the Buddha} takes up the conversion of the Buddha "from stone to flesh." That is, the statues and the portraits of this venerable personage filtered into the imagination of travelers and scholars. They might be mystified or terrified of what they heard or guessed about this fabled or feared entity, and they regarded him or it with "profound suspicion." Simply put, until 1801, the Buddha was not recognized as the founder of what the West invented as Buddhism. For previous tale-tellers, he was known only as an idol. Lopez records over three hundred names for the Buddha between 200 and 1850. The litany stretches back to Clement of Alexandria around that first date. This Church Father distinguishes the Hindu Brahmin priests from non-Hindu followers of the "Boutta, whom, on account of his extraordinary sanctity, they have raised to divine honours." Not bad for the first attempt at defining the change from Gautama to Sakyamuni, from a pampered prince to a wise deity bestowing favors on his worshipers. The professor's introduction sums up the intricate patterns of information about the Buddha as they were transmitted from the Indian subcontinent into the Middle East and across the many Christian and Islamic empires. Tellingly, for nearly a millennium, few reports of the Buddha found their way west. Marco Polo's celebrated chronicle ranks sixth among eighty-odd entries, for instance. After this report, however, versions multiplied along the trade routes set up by Christian missionaries and traders with China. Emissaries at the Great Khan's court linked with Armenian, Persian and papal contacts visiting Mongol rulers. These East-West ties tightened in the 1600s after the Reformation. Among these, the Jesuit Matteo Ricci epitomizes the ambition of the Catholic Church to win over the Chinese. Fr. Ricci also speaks for the dismissal of the Buddhist teachings brought to China from India as a "disaster." Neither a "genuine record of the history of this religion" nor "any real principle upon which one can rely" exists within this faith. For it "lacks the arts of civilization and has no standards of moral conduct to bequeath to posterity." Ricci credits the lack of knowledge of Buddhism abroad with a rationale for denigrating its doctrines. The Jesuits may have adapted Chinese customs as their own to win over the rulers, but they persisted, as with Ippolito Desideri in Tibet, to oppose Buddhism. Other Westerners added their own reactions. These tended to be negative. They offered many adaptations of the Buddha, often without recognizing the true roots of the idol in a historical figure. Yet, Lopez cautions, no single Buddha biography is accepted across Asia. No canonical text exists. Rather than posit a true Asian vs. false Western dichotomy, Lopez asks "whether the Buddha, then and now, here and there, is the product of a more complex and interesting process of influence." Therefore, Lopez allows many texts to nestle and jostle against each other, refusing to rate them. This approach fits into Lopez' career, spent producing learned works demystifying Buddhist tropes. While the collection of polyglot voices may daunt, he offers cogent introductions for each diverse inclusion. For then as now, knowledge of languages varied. Motivations multiplied. Conversion of the "pagans" led to negative attitudes, such as Ricci articulates. Catholics encountering monasteries eerily like their own recoiled as if they walked into the haunts of devils. Gradually, spurred by archaeological, linguistic and military exponents, interest in what became defined as Buddhism supplanted a terror of its teachings. Ethnographic enthusiasm grew in the 1700s and 1800s. This anthology concludes, fittingly, with the 1844 monograph of Eugne Burnouf. This scholar of Old Persian and Sanskrit pioneered the presentation of a human Buddha, rather than a stone idol. And from that juncture, Western sympathy began for the founding figure of a world religion and/or an appealing philosophy. "The myriad idols coalesced into a single figure, who then became a historical figure, a founder of a religion, and a superstition became a philosophy." So Lopez sums up the transformation. Textually-based Buddhism remains dominant in the West, parallel to the quest in the 19th century for an historical Jesus. Whether such pursuits have resulted in reform or regression is left up to the adept.

We tend to think that the Buddha has always been seen as the compassionate sage admired around the world today, but until the nineteenth century, Europeans often regarded him as a nefarious figure, an idol worshipped by the pagans of the Orient. Donald S. Lopez Jr. offers here a rich sourcebook of European fantasies about the Buddha drawn from the works of dozens of authors over fifteen hundred years, including Clement of Alexandria, Marco Polo, St. Francis Xavier, Voltaire, and Sir William Jones. Featuring writings by soldiers, adventurers, merchants, missionaries, theologians, and colonial officers, this volume contains a wide range of portraits of the Buddha. The descriptions are rarely flattering, as all manner of reports—some accurate, some inaccurate, and some garbled—came to circulate among

European savants and eccentrics, many of whom were famous in their day but are long forgotten in ours. Taken together, these accounts present a fascinating picture, not only of the Buddha as he was understood and misunderstood for centuries, but also of his portrayals.

This is an amazing repository of research on Western writings on Buddhism from the earliest times to the mid-nineteenth century. Beautifully written, *Strange Tales of an Oriental Idol* will be a sourcebook for further research among scholars of Buddhism and of East-West interaction, as well as for those interested in Western intellectual history more generally.