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Ann Heirman and Mathieu Torck have written a nice, dense 194-page book, which includes a sixteen page bibliography (pp. 169-185) and a five page index (pp. 187-194). The introduction gives the framework of the study, focusing on customs of bodily care, and objects used, that is to say one aspect of Chinese material culture in the Buddhist monastic context. These monastic habits are compared with those of secular society and reveal the influence of customs coming from India on Chinese culture.

The main sources are very clearly presented and give a good overview of the book. These are, for the Buddhist sources, the rules of Indian and Chinese Vinaya, including those of the school of Dhyana (chin. Chan/ jap. Zen), and accounts of pilgrims Faxian (法顯 399-414), Xuanzang (玄奘 627-644) and Yijing (義淨 671-695). For non-Buddhist sources, the authors mainly used books of Ayurvedic and Chinese medicine, to which must be added artefacts from archaeological sites, portraits, and some mural paintings of the Dunhuang caves. The book, which is essentially based on Buddhist sources, mostly Vinaya texts, is divided into four main sections: baths, toilets, care of the mouth and teeth, and finally the hair and nails. One may ask why there is no mention of the care of the nose and ears, since nose care was essential in Indian culture, as ears care was in Chinese culture: does it mean that these cares were unknown in monasteries?

The first chapter (pp. 27-66) examines one of the most important aspects of bodily care in a monastic community: bathing, if possible in hot water, needed to maintain cleanliness, hygiene and health. Bathing habits are detailed according to the 25 rules of Vinaya texts, which have also been included in the Taoist context, and according to the accounts of Pilgrim...
Yijing (635-713) which include an entire chapter about it, and praise the Indian habit of washing frequently in bathtubs with pure rainwater. The main objects necessary for the activity are also given: fuel, clean water, beans (a saponide), oil or grease, pure ash, a piece of wood, an undergarment, a seat, a bottle of water, soap, a knife to scrape the skin, perfumes, and clothes to protect the face, head and body from heat. Sociological details about the context of these baths are also indicated: frequency (about every two weeks), the respect for some privacy despite the collective nature of these ablutions, a hierarchy between master and disciple, etc.

The second chapter (pp. 67-107) deals with the waste rejected by the body, which means toilets, and the treatment of urine and faeces. The rules reveal a desire to differentiate human from animal behaviour, keep a clean image of the clergy and maintain cleanliness around holy places like stupas. A very detailed account is given of the building and development of toilets, through written documents, as well as certain artefacts and archaeological sites. The daily activities of users are also described: snap of a finger or cough to indicate that the latrine is occupied, hanging up of garments to avoid stains, the use of wooden sandals, cleaning private parts with a stick before getting up, etc. Again, the sociological aspect is discussed, with special amenities provided for the sick or elderly.

The third chapter (pp. 109-135) devoted to the care of the mouth and teeth reveals dental care practices according to the Indian and Chinese Vinaya texts. Objects and their use are then discussed (paste, brushing with a wooden stick), not only in the Buddhist context, relying mainly on the account of Yijing, but also in the Chinese context, covering oral hygiene habits in imperial China, and the tradition of “nourishing life” (yangsheng

The fourth and final chapter (pp. 137-164) includes hair and nail care. The authors analyse recommended attitudes to these body parts which grow throughout life, the instruments to be used, the emotions linked to these such expressions of care, and the cultural differences between India and China. The focus is particularly on how those who leave their families (monks and nuns) perceive the hair and nails, in the particular context of shaving the head, which is a mark of identity for monks. The objects used are described: a razor and a whetstone put in a bag worn on the shoulder, a pair of tweezers for navel hair, and a knife for cutting nails.

Thus, continuing John Kieschnick’s studies on the contribution of Buddhism to Chinese material culture, this pioneering book is packed with detailed information about bodily care and material culture in the context of Buddhism and monasteries. It forms a solid basis for further research on this topic.
Indeed, the theme of bodily care in China deserves to be extended to other Chinese social groups and religions. Confucian books of rituals, for example, are full of details about almost daily hand and mouth washing, about the preparation by children on the fifth day of each month of a bath for parents, washing the hair on the third day of the month, and so on. Calendars and almanacs also provide important information on the care of the body, indicating dates and auspicious days. One should add to these sources the writings of some scholars concerned with notions of cleanliness or social identity according to body treatments.

However, some references could be added to the book, such as the “Book of baths and ablutions” (Muyu jing 沐浴經) assigned to the Emperor Jian Wendi 簡文帝 (r. 372) (Nanshi 南史, juan 8); an article by Chen Zuolong 陳祚龍 “After reading the notes of a monk washing after opening a hot bathroom in the monastery Bao’en 報恩, from an ancient Dunhuang manuscript” (Kanle Dunhuang guchao Bao’ensi kai wenshi yu sengji yihou 看了敦煌古抄報恩寺開溫室浴僧記以後) which discusses, among other things, the date of Wenshi jing 溫室經 (Classic on the Bathhouse); a book by Jean-Louis Doreau, Les bains dans l’Inde antique (Paris, 1936); another by Nathalie Mikhailoff, Les manières de propreté. Du Moyen Âge à nos jours (Paris, Maloine, 1990), which usefully complements that reported by the authors of Georges Vigarello, Le propre et le sale. L’hygiène du corps depuis le Moyen Âge (Paris, Seuil, 1985).

As for Buddhist sources, the authors could add the writings of esoteric Buddhism that produce interesting insights into bodily care such as fragrant ablutions, and some Dunhuang manuscripts providing valuable insights into bathing at monasteries, such as the dates reserved for ablutions to expel diseases and obstructions.

We must therefore praise the work of these two authors, who are leading the way to further research in often neglected areas: those of daily life, material culture, bodily hygiene, and religious, medical and symbolic conceptions of cleanliness.