BOOK REVIEWS


Reviewed by Mia Y. Ma, PhD Candidate, Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies, University of Cambridge, ym353@cam.ac.uk

In recent years, Buddhist iconography has garnered increased interest amongst scholars specialising in Asian art history. This academic trend has also coincided with the broadening in the scope of ‘Dunhuang Studies’. The field has expanded from a focus primarily on the manuscripts found in the Dunhuang library cave to multidisciplinary studies of artefacts and texts related to Dunhuang, preserved both in China and abroad. The Buddhist concept of the maṇḍala, complex and secret, has never been thoroughly unpacked. It is defined as a wheel, a magic diagram, a symbolic representation of cosmic forces, and an altar on which buddhas and bodhisattvas are situated. Art historians’ inquiries into the maṇḍala are generally undertaken in the context of Tibetan and Japanese esoteric Buddhist culture. Michelle Wang’s new book, Maṇḍalas in the Making: The Visual Culture of Esoteric Buddhism at Dunhuang, engages closely with Buddhist iconographical study and the transformative political environment in Dunhuang from the eighth to the tenth century.

The book is divided into five chapters. In each of these, texts and pictorial objects play equivalent roles in shaping arguments. One major purpose of the book is to provide interpretations of the murals at Dunhuang that depict the Eight Great Bodhisattvas maṇḍala, which is found only in Dunhuang Mogao cave 14, Yulin Caves 25, 20 and 38. Wang argues that this unusual iconographic motif, containing a Buddha in the centre and attended by eight bodhisattvas, preserves memories of Dunhuang during the Tibetan (787–848) and Guiyijun 隨義軍 period (848–1036).

Chapter one, ‘From Dhāraṇī to Maṇḍala’, offers a close analysis of the translations and ritual commentaries on the Revered and Victorious Dhāraṇī of the Buddha’s Uṣṇīṣa Sūtra (Foding zunsheng tuoluoni jing 佛頂尊勝陀羅尼經). In the sūtra, maṇḍalas are defined as altars and are closely related to the ritual site of Śākyamuni’s enlightenment. Wang argues that while both place and practitioner are conflated in the iconography of the ‘Bodhi image’ (p.37: the image of Śākyamuni achieving enlightenment under the Bodhi tree), the maṇḍala becomes the actual focus for ritual practices. During the Tang dynasty, the efficacy of dhāraṇīs was not only achieved by reciting dhāraṇī texts, but also through the process of materialization into paintings, prints and sculptures. This established a new conception of ritual space, in which dhāraṇī texts went through a process of ‘mandalization’ (p. 20). In doing so, the chapter initiates a discussion of the maṇḍala and its relation to the ritual context of dhāraṇīs.

Keywords: Maṇḍalas, Dunhuang studies, Buddhist iconography, Imperial patronage
Chapter two, ‘The Crowned Buddha and Narratives of Enlightenment’, treats the Eight Great Bodhisattvas maṇḍala as an imperial metaphor. It associates the paintings and carvings of this maṇḍala in Yulin Cave 25, which was created during the Tibetan dominance of Dunhuang, with the negotiation of a peace treaty by the Tibetan Empire and Tang China. The transmission of the iconography of a crowned buddha and eight bodhisattvas from Tibet to Dunhuang can therefore be understood as a visual expression of Tibetan royal authority. Wang points out that the mingling of Chinese and Tibetan communities in Dunhuang brought about stylistic bilingualism in art and manuscripts. The iconography of the maṇḍala of the Eight Great Bodhisattvas is also interpreted through chronological examinations of the cult of Vairocana in early Tibet, and of the images of the crowned Buddha which derive from north-west India. Visual references to the coronation of the Buddha (abhiṣeka) as Vairocana in the Akaniṣṭha heaven are explained in terms of imperial coronation rites from South Asia (p. 72).

Chapter Three, ‘Maṇḍala and Historical Memory’, addresses the point that during the Guiyijun period the Dunhuang mural paintings exhibit a continued aesthetic interest in the multicultural style of the Tibetan period. The Eight Great Bodhisattvas maṇḍala was appropriated to be a consistent symbol of political legitimacy. One innovation found in depictions of the Eight Great Bodhisattvas maṇḍala in this period was the incorporation of iconographical elements from the Vajradhātu maṇḍala, which has as its focus the five ‘Wisdom Buddhas’ and which had been introduced to the Hexi Corridor, the historical route for traders and military in Gansu Province that connected north China and Central Asia, by Amoghavajra (705–744). This chapter also discusses the continued resonance of Tibetan cultural and linguistic norms at Dunhuang, demonstrated by the fact that Tibetan remained the lingua franca of the Hexi Corridor, and that the Buddhist administration established during the Tibetan period remained in use during the Guiyijun period.

Chapter Four, ‘Maṇḍalas, Repentance, and Vision’, concerns a visual programme designed for helping to deal with the negative karma of devotees in Dunhuang. Wang argues that the iconography of five buddhas and eight bodhisattvas depicted in the Dunhuang Cave 14 (the patron of which is likely to have been the Zhang clan of Guiyinjun) is evidence of an application of the maṇḍala into repentance rituals. Through examinations of less-discussed Dunhuang manuscripts that reveal a local understanding of the Vajraśekhara-sūtra, the chapter also discovers that repentance and abhiseka rites had been kept in both Chinese and Tibetan.

Chapter Five ‘Beyond the Maṇḍala’, argues that the concept of repentance becomes the unifying feature in the iconographical programmes of Mogao Cave 14. The chapter investigates the bodhisattva path as represented at the cave in three ways. Firstly, by referencing the Sūtra on the Names of the Buddha (Foming jing 佛名經), the chapter details how the visual representations at Cave 14 place special emphasis on the names of bodhisattvas rather than the names of the Buddha. Secondly, much of the manuscript evidence and many of the inscriptions discovered in Dunhuang suggest that Tri Songdetsen (755–794) had been at this time accepted by Tibetan residents at Dunhuang as a bodhisattva king, due to his pivotal role in
the introduction of Buddhism in Tibet. Thirdly, the chapter explores the career of a bodhisattva and Sudhana’s pilgrimage in the Gandavyūha chapter of the Flower Garland Sūtra (Huayan jing 華嚴經), which is incorporated as a minor motif in the mural paintings of the Guiyijun Period.

With abundant descriptions of visual materials from Dunhuang, Tibet, India, and Central Asia, Wang’s book presents wide-ranging implications for how art historians specialising in Asian art can realize a transcultural study using interdisciplinary approaches. In recent decades, art historians specializing in Western art have highlighted the significance of these art works within the networks of social relations. Wang’s effective use of iconographical and semiotic methodology also embraces both sociological and anthropologist perspectives. The ‘visual materials’ which are maṇḍala-related (stone carvings, plaques, manuscripts, Buddhist sūtras, paintings, pillars) and the ‘audience’ groups (patrons, donors, Buddhist priests, artists) are given equal status, whilst also considered to interact with one another. Wang notes that the crowned Buddha can be considered a ‘free agent’ (p. 70), a motif that can move freely between ritual commentaries and doctrinal concerns. The Guiyijun rulers’ continued aesthetic interest in styles and iconographies of the earlier Tibetan period was probably also due to copying pre-existing sketches in the training of local artists throughout the tenth century. Undoubtedly, however, the purpose of all the decorations and paintings was to satisfy patrons: the ruling class of the Dunhuang region in the tenth century, the leaders of Guiyijun, who made the decisions about the appearance of art works and the construction of temples. In other words, the meanings of the visual materials that Wang considers emerge from the dynamic interactions between various objects, people and historical environments.

Previous scholarship has assessed maṇḍala images only in a fragmented way. In his 1997 book The Maṇḍala Sacred Circle in Tibetan Buddhism, Martin Brauen focuses on explaining the composite elements of a maṇḍala, and explores the homology between person and cosmos. In Mandala: The Architecture of Enlightenment (edited by Denise Patry Leidy and Robert A. F. Thurman, 2006), we find an introduction to the various types of maṇḍalas around the world, presented through 48 colour plates with detailed descriptions. Comparable to Wang’s work is the combination of iconographical study and textual analysis found in Japanese Mandala: Representations of Sacred Geography (1999), by Elizabeth ten Grotenhuis. Ten Grotenhuis, however, examines maṇḍalas produced in Japan chronologically, and contextualizes their Buddhist iconography over a broad time span. Michelle Wang, probably for the first time, constructs an integrated narrative which contextualizes and elaborates this complex Buddhist iconography within a specific social and art historical background, in this instance Dunhuang between the eighth and tenth centuries. Her great book illuminates the ways in which the maṇḍala not only can be viewed from a perspective of Buddhology as a ‘performative restaging of the Buddha’s enlightenment’ (p. 20), but also how it functions as a topos for exploring the interests of diverse local communities and the transformation of political authorities in a multicultural setting.