

Compte-rendu

Jinah Kim: *Receptacle of the Sacred: Illustrated Manuscripts and the Buddhist Book Cult in South Asia*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2013. 377 pp. 9780520273863.

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In *Receptacle of the Sacred*, Jinah Kim provides us a rich, well-researched study of Buddhist book culture in medieval South Asia, demonstrating the historical foundations for what remains an enduring, essential component of Buddhist thought and practice up to the present day. Three central components of the book cult are examined in the work's three sections: The Book (pp. 23-70), Text and Image (pp. 73-209), and The People (pp. 213-285). Her primary source materials are 110 surviving manuscripts, 28 of which are examined in detail, with a majority coming from eastern India (Bengal and Bihar) and a fewer number from Nepal (pp. 11, 55-59). All of her primary sources come from the *Prajñāpāramitā* ("Perfection of Wisdom") genre, a body of literature first produced around the beginning of the first millennium which serves as the foundation for Mahāyāna Buddhism.

Each text examined by Kim was copied between the 11th and 13th centuries, a timeline which leads her to make a strong departure from much of the accepted Buddhist historiography of the period. Generally, in the Buddhist history of South Asia, this era is regarded as one of significant decline and then devastation, most vividly exemplified by the razing of the great Buddhist university Nalanda Mahavihara in 1193. Through her careful research, however, Kim shows us how at this very moment in the late 12th century, illustrated Buddhist manuscripts reached their "apex in terms of iconographic clarity and the creative spirit behind the design...that realized the full potential of a book as a moveable three-dimensional object" (p. 190). It was in the full use of the physicality of their creation that the bookmakers demonstrated their genius and the tremendous "technological innovation" of that marked this era (p. 204). This leads Kim to argue that this period was thus "not [one] of decline and demise but rather [of] creative spirits and new energy" (p. 219).

She divides the various manuscripts into four groups: A, those designed like *stūpas*; B, those designed as “a container of holy sites, like a three-dimensional pilgrim’s map”; C, those in which the illustrations refer directly to the text; and D, those which are “designed as a three-dimensional *mandāla*” (p. 16). In each case, she argues “illustrating a manuscript charged it with divine power and made it a suitable tool for the spiritual transformation of medieval Buddhist practitioners” (p. 6). No longer were books only the vessels of philosophical and ritual knowledge, they became potent objects which in and of themselves were “a physical container of the Buddha’s dharma body” (p. 41).

Readers familiar with Tibetan Buddhism will instantly be reminded of the famous verses in this tradition attributed to the Buddha, who is said to have told his disciple Ananda:

At the end of five hundred years,
my presence will be in the form of letters.
Consider them as identical to me
and show them due respect.¹

However, in the case of these medieval South Asian manuscripts, it is not the words of the Buddha alone but also their relationship to the illustrations which transformed the texts into ritual objects imbued with power. She explains that through “the introduction of Esoteric iconography in manuscript illustration,” these Mahāyāna texts “(re)emerged as a powerful cultic object of Esoteric Buddhism” (p. 179). Not only were illustrations of Esoteric deities introduced in this period, the bookmakers also seriously considered the physical space in the book that they occupied, constructing the texts in such a way that the tantric deities were paired with their consorts on facing panels in the center of the manuscripts, the gods’ “union in bliss...explicitly suggested” (p. 196). These Esoteric illustrations, and their specific placement in the center of the manuscript, thereby empowered the texts with the blessings of the deities illustrated therein, emphasizing again how the book itself became a powerful instrument of transformation.

Her argument extends still further. Due to the manuscripts’ loose-leafed *pothi* format, composed of “movable parts and fluid spatial boundaries”, she claims that even the act of turning folio pages “evoke[d] the sense of transformation that many esoteric, yogic practitioners in medieval South Asia sought to achieve” (p. 133). Kim

¹ rDza dPal sprul rin po che 2010, p. 262 (translation Patrick Dowd) : *Inga brgya mtha mar 'gyur pa na // nga ni yi ge'i gzugs su 'ong // nga yin snyam du yid byas la // de tshe de la gus pa gyis //*.

explicitly employs “the analogy of [the] Internet and hypertext” to describe the way in which this format allowed the Buddhist practitioner to “roam freely beyond...spatial boundaries and physical limits and absorb all the cultic power” of the pilgrimage sites and Tantric deities portrayed in the paintings (pp. 7, 90). As practitioners flipped through the loose pages of the scriptures, they mirrored their own progress on the Tantric Buddhist path.

Such propositions are undeniably fascinating and provide a truly novel lens through which to view the emergent technologies of the Buddhist book during this period. The arguments are, however, quite speculative. By the author’s own admission, her work is “a historical construct of the early twenty-first century” and premised on the “contention that our present attempts to understand the past can in certain ways be helped more by historical *imagination* than by historical truisms” (p. 11, emphasis mine). The conclusions drawn from this broad interpretative approach must therefore be taken with a grain of salt, however captivating they are.

Contrastingly, “Chapter 6: Social History of the Buddhist Book Cult” relies less on speculative hermeneutics and more on explicit textual details to make concrete, surprising arguments about the social milieu of this period. For example, by the eleventh-century, half of the illuminated manuscripts were commissioned by laywomen and a majority of the male donations came from men from Nepal or Tibet (p. 225). Not only does this demonstrate far more active Buddhist engagement by laywomen than has been generally accepted, the number of foreign donors “suggests that eastern Indian Buddhist monasteries remained international seats of learning even in this late period” (p. 233). Against the dominant narrative of decline, Kim again shows the vibrancy of Buddhism in the subcontinent at this late moment and the broad support from both women and foreigners.

In her epilogue, she describes a book ritual she herself sponsored in 2004 in Patan, Kathmandu, tying her art historical research to contemporary religious practice. She thereby shows the persistence and continuity of the South Asian Buddhist book cult, which while undoubtedly changed, has adapted and continues on to the present day.

In short, *Receptacle of the Sacred* brings to life the uniquely rewarding topic of the medieval Buddhist book cult, inviting its reader to imagine a world of profound and vibrant Buddhist practice at a historical moment generally seen as a Buddhist dark age in South Asia. Students of Art History, Religious and Asian Studies will undoubtedly benefit from this fascinating study.

Works Cited

Patrick Dowd, “Compte-rendu de Jinah Kim: *Receptacle of the Sacred: Illustrated Manuscripts and the Buddhist Book Cult in South Asia.*”, *Revue d’Etudes Tibétaines*, no. 54, Avril 2020, pp. 269-272.

Rdza dpal sprul rin po che. (2010). *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung*. New Delhi: Chos spyod par skrun khang.

