

## Buddhism illuminated

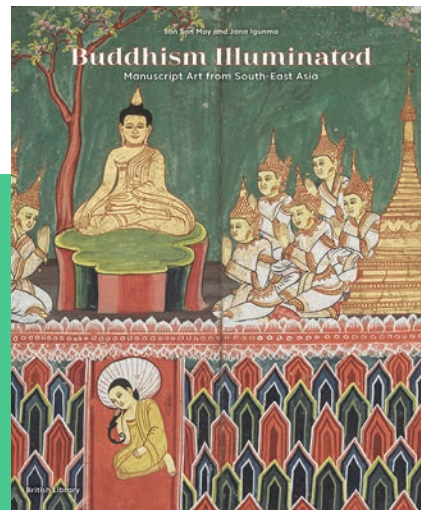
Donald M. Seekins

Reviewed title

### Buddhism Illuminated: Manuscript Art from Southeast Asia

San San May and Jana Igunma. 2018.

London: The British Library  
ISBN 9780712352062



Like the Abrahamic religions of the West (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), Buddhism has employed art in many forms to convey its message to people. In the Theravada Buddhist countries of mainland Southeast Asia (Burma/Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos), the most well-known and visually arresting expressions of Buddhist teachings have been monumental or finely-crafted structures (e.g. pagodas, temples, and monasteries) that have over the centuries functioned as places of study, meditation and pilgrimage for devotees. These include the Shwedagon Pagoda in Rangoon/Yangon, Burma, the temples and pagodas of Pagan/Bagan in central Burma, the Phra Pathom Chedi (pagoda) outside of Bangkok, Thailand, Wat Doi Suthep on a mountain outside of Chiang Mai, Thailand, and the Phra That Luang Chedi in Vientiane, Laos. Also playing a role in the propagation of Buddhist teachings have been famed Buddha images such as the Maha Myat Muni image in Mandalay, Burma, and the Emerald Buddha located in the royal temple-palace complex in Bangkok, as well as colossal reclining Buddha figures of which the most famous are found in Pegu (Bago), Burma, and the palace in Bangkok. Many of these sacred places have been elaborately decorated with frescoes and paintings illustrating the life of Gotama Buddha or the Jataka Tales, which tell of his previous lives before becoming the Enlightened One, as well as representations of elephants, nagas (dragons/snakes), demons, and other real or fantastic creatures from Hindu and Buddhist mythology.

In 21st century Burma, where Buddhist values remain exceptionally strong, the prominence of Buddhist art is one of the things that impresses the visitor the most, as military governments in recent years have striven to add to the country's inventory of Buddhist sites (for example, the White Stone Buddha image in Rangoon and the Uppatasanti Pagoda in Naypyidaw, Burma's new capital). The goal of the country's military rulers has been not only to earn Buddhist merit for themselves (Burmese: *kutho*) as pagoda-builders or restorers, but to assert their political legitimacy in Buddhist terms. The old saying, 'to be Burmese is to be Buddhist,' is still valid for 90 per cent of the country's population who identify as followers of Buddha's teachings.

Although such large and splendid Buddhist structures and imagery are difficult for the visitor to miss, the Theravada countries of Southeast Asia also possess a much less known art form that is very similar to the illuminated manuscripts of medieval Europe. Like their western counterparts, they present intimate and condensed visual religious 'lessons' in bright and appealing colors, highly stylized (there is little room for innovation) and directed toward helping the viewer to make his or her own progress on the road to nibbana (nirvana). Usually combining miniature pictures with sacred text or at least an explanation, they encompass depictions of the Cosmos in Hindu-Buddhist terms, the Birth Tales, the lives of Gotama Buddha and his disciples and scenes of Buddhist festivals and ceremonies, especially those sponsored by the royal family. As in the European illuminated manuscripts, rarely, if ever, is effort made to place these scenes in their original (Indian) context; instead, episodes of sacred history, including their human participants and physical surroundings, are placed in Burmese or Thai settings and often give us a vivid picture of what life was like – at least on elite levels – in pre-colonial mainland Southeast Asia.

Relatively little attention has been paid to these illuminated manuscripts in the West. In her *Arts of Southeast Asia*, Fiona Kerlogue makes brief mention of Burmese illuminated manuscripts (London: Thames & Hudson, 2004, 124–125). In 1992, a specialist at the British Library, Patricia Herbert, published a volume, *The Life of the Buddha* (London: the British Library: Pomegranate Artbooks, 1993), using two Burmese manuscripts in the library's collection and contributed a chapter on this genre to Alexandra Green and Richard Blurton's *Burma: Art and Archeology* (Burmese cosmological manuscripts, in Alexandra Green and T. Richard Blurton (eds) *Burma: Art and Archeology*, London: British Museum Press, 2002, 77–98).

The work under review here, San San May and Jana Igunma's *Buddhism Illuminated: Manuscript Art from Southeast Asia*, represents

a major development in the study of Buddhist illuminated manuscripts not only because it includes a much larger selection of this genre, but also since it includes works from central and northern Thailand and the Tai-speaking Shan States as well as central Burma. Its great merit lies in the fact that the editors have not only created a beautifully illustrated volume in the coffee table book mode (given its size and heaviness, this is hardly the book one would choose as travel reading), but also have presented it in a form in which the illuminations are grouped together to depict and explain (Theravada) Buddhism's basic doctrines: lavishly illustrated chapters are devoted to the Buddha, his teachings (Dhamma), the Buddhist monkhood (the sangha), cause and effect (*kamma*, more widely known as karma), and the supremely important work of making merit in daily life through donations to Buddhist monks and holy places and the performance of good deeds (*punna*). For western readers interested in Buddhism, *Buddhism Illuminated* provides a compelling combination of pleasing-to-view pictures and clearly-written text that that is necessarily missing from prose-only books – with perhaps only a few illustrations of pagodas or Buddha images – that attempt to explain the religion in abstract terms.

For example, on page 11, the authors provide a 19th century Burmese illumination of the legend of Taphussa and Bhallika, two Mon merchants who meet the Buddha just after his Enlightenment, giving him offerings and hearing his first sermon. Gotama Buddha bestows on them eight hairs from the top of his head, which after many adventures they take back to their native country in Lower (southern) Burma and enshrine in the Shwedagon Pagoda, recognized by Burmese Buddhists as the single most important sacred place in their country. This illumination is far more arresting visually than the 15th century stone inscriptions donated by King Dhammazedi to the platform of the Shwedagon which first relates the legend

of the two merchants (who in earlier legends were Indian) and connects them to Burma.

Many of the Thai (or Tai) manuscripts deal with the legend of Phra Malai, a monk endowed with immense merit who travels to the Buddhist heavens and hells in a manner broadly similar to Dante's *Divine Comedy*, learning of the future decline of Buddhism as well as its revival by the Metteyya or Future Buddha.

In the Introduction, the physical characteristics of the manuscripts and their bindings are described in great detail: one type, known as *parabaik* in Burmese, were painted on strips of paper which were folded tightly together, bound with cords and protected with often intricately decorated wooden covers or binding-boards. Other manuscripts were inscribed on palm-leaves, usually lacquered or gilded around the edges, which were also stacked together to make separate volumes. Usually, the *parabaik* volumes were comprised of mulberry paper, which is still used today in Burmese crafts. The *Tipitaka*, the Buddhist scriptures, were inscribed on palm leaves, often using a special script of Burmese letters known as tamarind seed (or 'square') script, because of their special shape. Given the heat and humidity of mainland Southeast Asia, the manuscripts were traditionally wrapped in silk, tied up with special and often beautifully decorated ribbon-bindings and stored in wooden chests – usually made of teak – which themselves were often attractively decorated. These chests had to be made capable of tight closing, lest rats or insects enter and devour the manuscripts.

*Buddhism Illuminated* is comprised of over 100 illuminations in the British Library's collection, most of whom originated in Burma or Thailand. The authors comment that a large number of Burmese manuscripts were 'acquired' from a royal collection in Mandalay, the old royal capital, after the Third Anglo-Burmese War of 1885 (p.9). A more accurate term might be 'stolen' since the Mandalay Palace was thoroughly looted after the British victory by locals as well as British soldiers. But perhaps this is not the place to accuse the British Library of being a treasure house of looted artifacts, though is doubtful that the Burmese items – most of which date from the 19th century – were obtained fairly or peaceably.

The splendor of this volume does lead the reader to wonder whether treasures such as these, spirited off to the colonial Metropole during centuries of European expansion into Asia and Africa, shouldn't someday be returned to their countries of origin – at least when suitable facilities for housing them can be built so that local people can enjoy access to the glories of their past.

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## Creating the universe

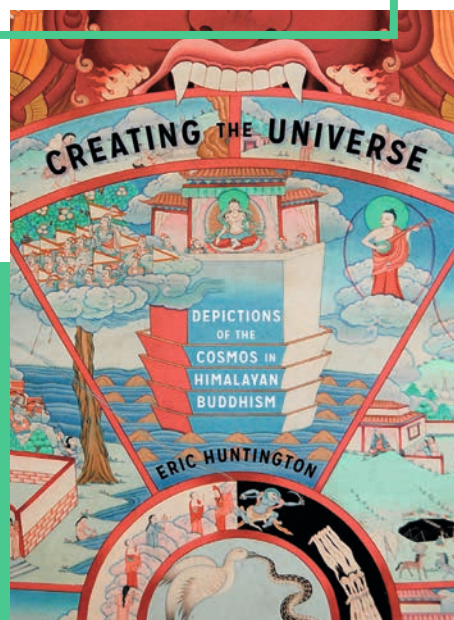
Simon Wickhamsmith

Reviewed title

### Creating the Universe: Depictions of the Cosmos in Himalayan Buddhism

Eric Huntington. 2019.

Seattle: University of Washington Press  
ISBN 9780295744063



When the 19th century Mongolian monk-poet Danzanravjaa named a small rectangular area of the Gobi Desert close to his monastery at Hamarin Hiid 'Shambhala', he was showing his students how Indo-Tibetan Buddhist cosmology could be translated into their own lived experience of the teaching in Mongolia. Right before them the Gobi was transformed into a Pure Land, and their world was forever changed at the point of the intersection of the guru's teaching with their practitioners' minds. Today, Shambhala remains a place of pilgrimage for Mongolians and foreigners alike, its reputation in spiritual power growing even as its appearance remains essentially the same.

Eric Huntington's lucid and beautifully-illustrated book deals with how, through image and through contemplative practice, the mundane world – such as the otherwise unremarkable part of the Gobi Desert that is Shambhala – is realized as a potent and transcendent space of spiritual transformation. The understanding of the cosmos as a dynamic aspect of the process of enlightenment reminds us that, in the

Vajrayāna practise of Himalayan Buddhism, the world and the mind are reflections of one another, and in the recognition of the cosmos as inherently enlightened, the practitioner likewise recognizes the inherent enlightened state of mind.

The book's four chapters explore this cosmological process of realization through four key ideas. The first offers an examination of the creation of the cosmos through text, one which reminds us, scholars and practitioners alike, that such a description (as with any text) is merely an approximation, bound in time and space, of the spiritual experience of an individual author, or set of authors. As Huntington says of Vasubhandhu's *Treasury of Abhidharma* (*Abhidharmakośakārikā*), compiled in the 4th or 5th century, "Vasubhandhu's descriptions emphasize the features that fit his agenda, while his omissions make the unmediated use of his texts in other contexts problematic" (p.30). This acknowledgement of the slippery quality of spiritual texts is nothing new in scholarship, but for this book it bears repeating insofar as texts such as Vasubhandhu's are believed by practitioners, who rely upon such descriptions



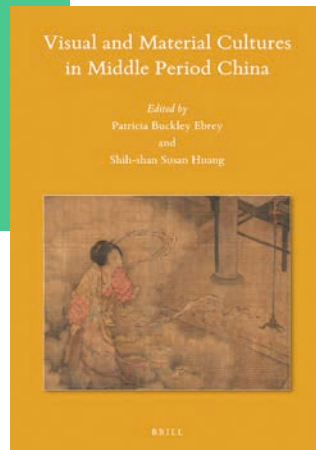
# Visual and material cultures in middle period China

Hang Lin

Reviewed title

## Visual and Material Cultures in Middle Period China

Patricia Buckley Ebrey and Shih-shan Susan Huang (eds). 2017.

Leiden: Brill  
ISBN 9789004348981

In the dynastic history of China, the period from 800 to 1400 is conventionally remembered as a discreditable age of political disunity and intricate interstate relations, bracketed by the mighty Tang (618-907) and Ming (1368-1644) dynasties. It was also a time when 'barbarian' incursions from the north intensified again as the Khitan, Jurchen, Tangut, and Mongol successively established their regimes and conquered parts or all of China. On the other hand, this period has witnessed a dramatic upsurge of visual and material sources that significantly deepen our understanding of the vitality and prosperity of the time, as well as the specific multi-state and multicultural contexts. Consisting of in-depth case studies of various forms of sources, this volume, which originates from the grand Conference on Middle Period China held at Harvard in 2014, represents a collective effort of scholars at the forefront of Chinese art history, archaeology, and history to illuminate this pivotal age in Chinese history. Through examinations of a multiplicity of visual and material cultures, it aims to show the numerous connections between these visual cultures and politics, literature, trade, religion, class, and region (p.12).

The eight essays contained in the volume are divided into four pairs – 'Making Art in Funeral and Ritual Contexts', 'Setting a Scene', 'Appreciating the Written Word', and 'Cross-Cultural Transfers'. Relying on a meticulous study of 12th-century decorated tombs in Henan and Shanxi, Deng Fei tackles "who made these [...] tombs" and "how were they built and decorated" (p.42). By taking a look at the brick makers, clay carvers, and painters, Deng labels these decorated tombs as 'modular construction' that testify the emergence of 'moderately wealthy families' that did not follow the cultural lead of the literati (p.75). Focusing

on three late 12th-century paintings depicting the Buddhist saints of arhats, Phillip Bloom interrogates the specific approaches adopted by the painters to show the mediation between the mundane and supramundane. In particular, these paintings render that otherwise hidden aspects of internal ritual visible, thus mediating and enacting Buddhist belief.

Fan Jeremy Zhang sets out to examine the popular culture of the 13th century by linking paintings, bronze mirrors, ceramic pillows, printed illustrations, and poems and plays of the period. By scrutinizing the complex interconnections between the performing arts and visual arts, as Zhang cogently argues, secular theater exerted different influences on viewers of different walks of life and it also provided venues for the spread of the Quanzhen Daoism, thus "constitut[ing] a crucial development of Jin and Yuan visual culture [and] heralding the full blossom of theatrical imaginary in the subsequent Ming dynasty" (p.147). Drawing on poems, maps, and paintings about the Ten Views of West Lake, Duan Xiaolin investigates the interplay and tension between text and image and their influences on the viewers "to capture ephemeral moments and to associate them indelibly with this cultural landmark" (p.183). Rather than solely illustrating the scenes, that paintings provide a particular way of describing and representing the landscape and function as an effective medium to enhance people's attachment to certain locations around the lake with the lake.

The third pair of essays center around the educated literati during the Southern Song

(1127-1276) to demonstrate how intellectual values and market forces combined shaped the viewing process. Hui-Wen Lu begins with a study of a brick epitaph that was attributed to the 4th-century eminent calligrapher Wang Xianzhi (344-86) to analyze the fierce debate upon its authenticity in the early 13th century. Relating the brick to Wang Xizhi's (303-61) Orchid Pavilion Preface (蘭亭序), Lu forcefully argues that although it was a fabricated work, the circulation of its rubbings and imitations reflected Song literati's enthusiastic endorsement of calligraphy and connoisseurship, displaying the creation story of the tradition that elevated the Wangs to the position of gods of calligraphy. Patricia Buckley Ebrey focuses on some 200-odd colophons written by Zhu Xi (1130-1200) to show the Southern Song literati's interest in antiquities and collecting of art and books. From these colophons, modern readers are able to grasp the "social world in which educated men found meaning and pleasure in showing others pieces of writing that they carefully preserved" (p.250). Thanks to the development of woodblock printing and neo-Confucian academies, this world further expanded the audience for handwritten documents and facsimiles of them.

The two essays in the last section turn to the aspects of cultural contact and material exchange of the period. Inspired by the motif of 'bird and basin' in two late Tang tomb murals, Liu Jie links them to the Tang practice of setting small pools in gardens, which she traces to the influences of Persian products. Although being a quite popular theme in the Tang, in later times it gradually became rare due to "the fading of interest in foreign gold and silver objects" (p.280). In contrast to these Chinese paintings appropriated Persian artistic traditions, Li Yiwen shows in her chapter how Japanese users added inscribed Buddha images to Chinese bronze jars and mirrors and made them serve new ritual purposes. While these Chinese objects landed at Japanese ports, their social and cultural contexts changed accordingly so that their perception was mixed with both the Chinese makers' craftsmanship and the Japanese users' imagination of China, thus revealing "the unwritten interactions and exchanges among different groups of people from different regions" (p.313).

Visual and material sources have been traditionally extensively utilized by art historians and they together depict a vibrant artistic world of China between 800 and 1400. The essays in this volume show, however, that visual and material cultures are being more widely studied by scholars across the disciplines, because they "reflected, adapted to, and reproduced the culture and society around them" (p.18). Through analysis of paintings, ceramics, tomb bricks, and bronze mirrors, many previously obscured aspects of the cultures and societies became more visible and accessible. Thanks to the visual and material cultures, we are now able to have a stronger appreciation of the richness of the period, ranging from theater, travel, trade, ritual practices, to life of commoners and cross-

cultural exchanges, of which extant textual sources are limited whereas visual materials are relatively abundant.

More importantly, this volume represents a rapidly advancing trend of the field to go beyond conventional dynastic periodization of Chinese history. As the title of the volume suggests, the essays are devoted to the 'Middle Period' instead of the Eurocentric designations such as 'medieval' or 'Middle Age.' Covering approximately six centuries from the second half of the Tang to the early Ming, 'Middle Period' is far broader than a dynasty or a century, thus enabling a better understanding of the linear narratives of Chinese history. In doing so, the contributors collectively remind the readers to shift away from periodizing visual and material cultures on the basis of dynastic changes but to pay more attention to this "grey zone in transformation, where old and new ideas overlapped and converged" (p.1).

For someone whose interest rests more on the non-Han peoples of this period, I am pleased to see that two essays (Deng's and Zhang's) touch upon the question of non-Han ruling houses, including the Khitan, Jurchen, and Mongol. Yet in both cases we can detect only little impact in the change in the ethnicity of the ruling house on tomb design and decoration. In many respects, this resonates with Li Qingquan's insightful study of the Liao dynasty (907-1125) tombs at Xuanhua, as locality comes through as more important than political legitimacy to the development of visual and material cultures.<sup>1</sup> However, if our focus of our observation is shifted further north, we may acquire a more lively picture of the visual and material cultures marked by indigenous traditions of non-Han peoples and trans-regional interactions.<sup>2</sup>

This minor caveat aside, this volume is a timely addition to the existing scholarship about visual and material cultures of China from 800 to 1400, extending our understanding of the cultural and economic dynamism during the period. Full with intriguing observations and thought-provoking syntheses, it is bound to an indispensable book which will definitely inspire future researchers on the perennial topic in Chinese and Asian history.

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### Notes

- 1 Li Qingquan 李清泉, 宣化辽墓: 墓葬艺术与辽代社会, (Liao Tombs at Xuanhua: Burial Art and Society of the Liao), Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 2008.
- 1 See, among others, Nancy Shatzman Steinhardt, Liao Architecture, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997; Dieter Kuhn, How the Qidan Reshaped the Tradition of the Chinese Dome-Shaped Tomb, Heidelberg: Edition Forum, 1998; Wu Hung (ed.), Tenth-Century China and Beyond: Art and Visual Culture in a Multi-centered Age, Chicago: The Center for the Art of East Asia/University of Chicago, 2013.

as they embark upon their practise, until such a time as they perceive the cosmological form through their own understanding.

The second chapter investigates the graphic and cosmological construct of the maṇḍala, the palace of a Buddhist deity (a personification of enlightened mind), architecturally rendered to emphasize the qualities associated with the deity in question. Each of these maṇḍalas is seen as "one particular place within the Buddhist cosmos and [the means by which] conceptions of that place relate to the achievement of enlightenment" (p.105). These 'conceptions' relate to the construction and absorption of maṇḍalas in contemplative practise, in which the practitioner experiences the maṇḍala and realizes (makes real) him- or herself with the deity. Thus it is that two practitioners sitting side by side, or on different sides of the world, can experience directly, and according to their own understanding, the maṇḍala of the same deity in different ways. The idea of the local becomes translocal, as Huntington says, and it is through this process that the transformative power of the maṇḍala is experienced.

By extension, the offering of the maṇḍala is one of the four foundational practises (*ngon 'gro*) in Vajrayāna Buddhism, and includes both mental and physical construction of a maṇḍala representing the realized universe. The physical construction of the offering, the theme of Huntington's third chapter, includes objects of sensory enjoyment, such as rice and jewels, piled upon a base. The omission of the hell realms, which as Huntington points out would not make for a pleasant offering, is interesting, since it reveals the presumed gap in the (as yet unenlightened) practitioner's mind between offering the physical representation of the enlightened cosmos and realizing (that is, making real) its idealized and conceptual form. Nonetheless, in making the maṇḍala offering, as in making any offering, the physical, restricted by time and space, is a limited form from which the imagined form, with no such restrictions, develops. Moreover, the mudra form, in which the hands interlace to make a representation of the cosmic Mount Meru surrounded by the four continents (of which our own Jambudvīpa is one), offers another approach. In this way, and with the

spoken prayers of offering, the practitioner conjoins the body-speech-mind triad in an act of cosmic realization.

In his final chapter, Huntington discusses the architectural construction of sacred space, as a simulacrum of the spiritual cosmology with which the preceding chapters have dealt. This ordering is especially welcome, since it places – conceptually as well as physically – the translocal before the local, and so emphasises the state of realization over the process. This is not to say, of course, that the process of construction of a temple is not in itself an aid to contemplative practise; indeed, it emphasizes how the spiritual trajectory necessarily returns to the physical place in which the practitioner is located.

Huntington's exploration of the cosmological architecture of religious buildings reminds us that their relationship with the spiritual world is mediated by time and space, as well as by the choices of those who commission, design and build them. Indeed, one of the hallmarks of this book is its subtle observation on how human perception and comprehension of the spiritual

is made explicit in the buildings in which, and through whose construction, it is approached, and this is greatly aided by the illustrations which accompany the text.

The creation of the universe, and the rendering of cosmological constructs in physical form, is a complex aspect of Vajrayāna practise, and while this book provides a scholarly treatment of one important cultural aspect of the Buddhist spiritual path, it also comes close to being a contemplative text. While its language and discourse is firmly rooted in scholarship, its multitude of explanatory and artistic images and its profound investigation into the relationship between the physical and the mental will surely appeal to those with both an academic and spiritual interest in the subject matter. *Creating the Universe*, then, is an especially notable achievement, and I look forward to future work based upon Huntington's innovative and important approach to the study of Buddhist cosmology and Buddhist practise.

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