

Visual and material cultures in middle period China

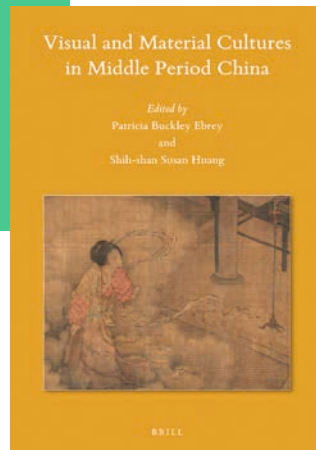
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Reviewed title

Visual and Material Cultures in Middle Period China

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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.¹ 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.²

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 Hawai'i 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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