# Review of Wang, M.C. (2018) Maṇḍalas in the making: the visual culture of esoteric Buddhism at Dunhuang

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# Maṇḍalas in the Making: The Visual Culture of Esoteric Buddhism at Dunhuang.

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MICHELLE C. WANG, *Maṇḍalas in the Making: The Visual Culture of Esoteric Buddhism at Dunhuang*. Sinica Leidensia, 139. Leiden *et al*.: Brill, 2018. xviii, 318 pp. Illustrations, Map, Bibliography, Index. € 127 (HB). ISBN 978-90-04-35765-5

Dunhuang has been considered a time capsule of Buddhist medieval China since its discovery in the early 1900s, but Michelle Wang's book, *Maṇḍalas in the Making*, takes us into a localized space during a special time, namely an esoteric Buddhist cultural milieu during the Guiyijun 歸義軍 period (Return to Allegiance Army, 848–1036). Earlier scholarship on wall paintings that were made during this half century highlighted the return of Chinese Buddhist motifs and the celebration of the recovery of the Hexi Corridor from the Tibetan occupation (786–848). Wang's book, however, convincingly shows that the iconographic, cultural, and religious continuity between these two time periods demands equal attention as the ruptures caused by the clear-cut, drastic shifts of ruling powers.

The departure point of Wang's book is the "Maṇḍala of Eight Great Bodhisattvas" (*Bada pusa mantuluo* 八大菩薩曼荼羅). Whereas the maṇḍala served as a prominent symbol for rulership in medieval Tibet, it was otherwise unknown in Chinese Buddhism and was only seen in four caves in Dunhuang, namely Mogao Cave 14 and Yulin Caves 25, 20, and 38 (p. 20). However, by nicely weaving together local history, religious leadership, monastic and lay practices, and especially initiation, repentance, and mortuary rituals surrounding this motif, Wang's book presents an organic picture of the political and religious configuration in the Guiyijun period Dunhuang. Wang's approach to these wall paintings unfolds in multiple dimensions by treating them as images executed on two-dimensional surfaces, as material objects fitting the spatial and visual programs in the three-dimensional caves, and as text that engaged in dynamic dialogues with ritual manuals. Her research enables us to perceive the iconographic transformation in the broader esoteric Buddhist contact zones with Tibet and South Asia and to understand the "purposeful choices on the part of donors, clergy, and artists" (p. 20). Bringing wall paintings to the forefront of her inquiry is liberating, as the changes in imagery and practice should not be considered to be deviations from the established norms but should be accepted as intentional innovations to transcend doctrinal constraints and create new conceptual space.

Wang points out that Tibetan cultural legacy did not dwindle straightaway in the wake of the Guiyijun takeover. In fact, if situated in the context, it would be a logical, natural existence. By 848, when Zhang Yichao 張議潮 (799–872) overthrew the Tibetan rule, most local residents would have been born during the occupation period, and thus would have been exposed to Tibetan Buddhist practices and would have been fluently bilingual. As a result, a clear trajectory of institutional consistency is seen on the monastic elite level. For example, Wu Hongbian 吳洪辯 (d. 862), who might have assisted Zhang Yichao's takeover, continued to be appointed as the superintendent of monks (*dusengtong* 都僧統) after the occupation (p. 156); the monk known as Wu Facheng 吳法成 in Chinese and as Go Chodrup in Tibetan – thus either a Chinese or Tibetan – was a well-respected translator of texts in Chinese and Tibetan and also the teacher of Zhang Yichao (p. 137). However, the Dunhuang ruling elites were fully aware of their delicate relationship with the Tang Empire (618–906). On one hand, they strived to maintain the status

quo of Dunhuang as a *de facto* autonomous power; on the other hand, they pledged nominal allegiance to the Tang court. Such a tension was manifested in a nuanced way through the repackaging of the motif of the "Maṇḍala of Eight Great Bodhi-sattvas" in the spatial configuration of the caves: the procession of Zhang Yichao, his wife, and his troops are rendered in the most visible area in cave 156 to showcase the military victory, whereas the Tibetan esoteric bodhisattvas, Vajra-sattva and Ākāśagarbha, are placed on the slopes, hidden from the immediate view of the audience (p. 135); similarly, the "Maṇḍala of Eight Great Bodhisattvas" is juxtaposed with a few other motifs on the south wall in Mogao Cave 14 and thus would not draw the direct gaze of the viewer (p. 157).

Each of the five chapters presents a visual or material aspect pertaining to the maṇḍala. Chapter One, "From Dhāraṇī to Maṇḍala," examines how ritual manuals introduced meditative visualization and maṇḍalas as new dimensions to the practices surrounding the *Foding zunsheng tuoluoni* 佛頂尊勝陀羅尼 (Revered and Victorious Dhāraṇī of the Buddha's Uṣṇīṣa). In the seventh century, the benefits of the dhāraṇī were believed to lie in the tangibility of the dust and shadows generated by its pillars and banners, whereas in the eighth century, visualization was incorporated into the practices surrounding the dhāraṇī. Hence, in the process of visualization, the practitioner no longer assumed himself as the historical Śākyamuni Buddha achieving enlightenment in the *bodhi* image (an image of Siddhārtha Gautama, soon to become the Buddha, seated facing east in meditation under the *bodhi* tree at Bodhgayā) (p. 34), but rather envisioned his body transforming into that of the omnipresent Vairocana.

Chapter Two, "The Crowned Buddha and Narratives of Enlightenment," first points out that both the crowned Vairocana in the center and the surrounding bod-hisattvas in the "Maṇḍala of Eight Great Bodhisattvas" were emblems of the Tibetan monarch and the empire. The reiteration of the enlightenment of Śākyamuni in Akaniṣṭha Heaven with meditation mudrā, not under the bodhi tree at Bodhgayā with the "earth-touching" mudrā, allowed room for his iconography to converge with that of Vairocana.

Chapter Three, "Maṇḍalas and Historical Memory," examines the intentional fabric behind the continued legacy of the Tibetan period. The Guiyijun rulers appropriated the maṇḍala because of its core function as a symbol of power and legitimacy. Building on scholarship that challenges the historical validity of the so-called "Two Realms Maṇḍala" (the Vajradhātu Maṇḍala and Garbhadhātu Maṇḍala) as a fixed pair in Shingon Buddhism, Wang maintains that it is the elements associated with the Vajradhātu Maṇḍala that were incorporated into the "Maṇḍala of Eight Great Bodhisattvas." Further to this, the master-disciple relationship between Mahāvairocana and Vajrasattva as deduced from the *Vajraśe-khara* and *Mahāvairocana Sūtras* is visualized in wall paintings and spatial arrange-ments in caves.

Chapter Four, "Maṇḍalas, Repentance, and Vision," explores how the spatial template of the Vajradhātu Maṇḍala in meditation manuals enriched the soteriolo-gical function of repentance rites and bodhisattva precepts. In conventional practice of medieval China, the spatial logic of the rituals pertaining to the repentance and the conferral of bodhisattva precepts was conceived as the "sacred, bounded" ritual platform (p. 203) surrounding the practitioner himself or herself. Meditative tech-niques embedded in the Vajradhātu Maṇḍala allowed the practitioner to envision

the platform also as the larger space for the deities. Moreover, with the appropriation of motifs, styles, and meditation practices, the visual program of Cave 14 might not be a literal guide for rituals, but it presents possibilities of personal agency of the Guiyijun ruling elites, artisans, and the monastic and lay communities in generating new concepts and practices in meditation as well as visual representation.

Chapter Five, "Beyond the Maṇḍala," examines the sociohistorical and religious contexts for privileging the Gaṇḍhavyūha narrative in Cave 85. The absence of the pilgrim Sudhana, the protagonist in the Gaṇḍhavyūha chapter of the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra*, suggests the possibility for practitioners to identify themselves with Sudhana to embark on the journey of awakening. The association of this narrative with Samantabhadra's vows in the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra* and the bodhisattvas of the "Maṇḍala of Eight Great Bodhisattvas" in visual representations demonstrates the conjunction of esoteric and exoteric Buddhist practices – in particular Mahāvairocana and vairocana – and this shows another fundamental difference between the esoteric Buddhist practice in Guiyijun Dunhuang and Shingon Buddhism in medieval Japan.

In conclusion, Wang's book best exemplifies the depth and breadth that a case study can attain. It is rich in detail, careful in examination, and broad in scope. Its critical reading of the earlier scholarship and its interdisciplinary approach pave ways to rethink fundamental aspects in the studies of the visual materials from Dunhuang and maṇḍalas in broader geographic and cultural terms. Nonetheless, its effective articulation of key concepts and ideas also makes the book enjoyable for those who have general interests in esoteric Buddhism and Buddhist art.

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REBECCA DORAN, *Transgressive Typologies: Constructions of Gender and Power in Early Tang China*. Cambridge, MA – London: Harvard University Asia Center, 2016. Harvard-Yenching Institute Monographs, 103. viii, 260 pp. Bibliography, Index. US$39.95 (HB). ISBN 978-0674970588

Rebecca Doran has written an intriguing book that immediately grabs the reader's attention with its provocative title. One immediately wants to know: What kind of transgression of gender roles and taboos? What are these particular typologies of feminine power and excess? And finally, how have these transgressive typologies continued to affect Chinese women? Doran's answers to these questions are both compelling and insightful.

The main character of the study is, of course, Wu Zhao, i.e., Wu Zetian, the female ruler who preceded Catherine the Great of Russia by 1,100 years. The deeds and image of Empress Wu, undoubtedly one of the major milestones in Chinese imperial history, could never be objectively explained. She was a very gifted, very well-read, and above all very willful personality. The annals of her reign could never be expunged. Throughout Chinese history there is no other story that even comes close to hers. On what basis did history permit a woman to become, first jointly with Gaozong and then on her own, the ruler of by then the most populous nation in the world for about half a