



Michelle C. Wang. *Maṇḍalas in the Making: The Visual Culture of Esoteric Buddhism at Dunhuang.* Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2018. xvii + 318 pp. ISBN 978-90-04-35765-5.

Reviewed by Zhenru Zhou (The University of Chicago)

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Commissioned by Jessica Zu (USC Dornsife, School of Religion)

Maṇḍalas in the Making is the first English-language academic monograph that comprehensively treats the eighth- to tenth-century Buddhist maṇḍalas that were produced in the area around Dunhuang, a Silk Road town located at the margins of Tang China and the Tibetan empire. Methodologically, Wang examines the esoteric Buddhist visuality at Dunhuang through the three lenses of historical, performative, and representational spaces. Theoretically, Wang generalizes the term “maṇḍalization” to describe the transformation of Dunhuang visual culture and the lasting impact on the visual and material art of Buddhism. [1]

Maṇḍalas, a topic of Buddhist art and architecture substantially developed in the past three decades, are believed to be biaxial, symmetrical, map-like images that instantiate the realms and beings of enlightenment and organize ritual practices.[2] In contrast to the conventional approach that sees a maṇḍala as a fixed set of iconography and a point in a certain transmission lineage, Wang reassesses it from the perspective of image-making process and hybrid sources.[3] Building upon earlier scholarship on Sino-Japanese maṇḍala paintings and that on Indo-Tibetan maṇḍalic monuments, *Maṇḍalas in the Making* destabilizes the border between the distinct cultures and that between different art media.[4] Fur-

thermore, critical hermeneutics that emerged in the studies of Chinese art and religion, such as modularity and hybridity, adopt new senses in *Maṇḍalas in the Making*. [5]

In order to accomplish her aim, Wang judiciously chooses the subject matter and the historical context that are characterized by their *in-betweenness* and carefully investigates them through three kinds of *space*: historical, performative, and representational. The focus of her analysis—the Maṇḍala of Eight Great Bodhisattvas—is a kind of early maṇḍala that was not only widely transmitted across India, the Himalayas, and the Tarim Basin but also arguably precluded the Two Realms Maṇḍala in Japan. The site—Dunhuang—is a miraculously preserved context in which political turmoil and religious autonomy under the Tibetan occupation of Dunhuang (786–848) and the succeeding local regime, called Guiyijun (lit. Return to Allegiance Army, 848–1036), allowed hybridized and localized productions of maṇḍalas. Wang not only masters iconographical and stylistic studies of well-selected works of mural and portable paintings, diagrams, and caves in Dunhuang, but also contextualizes them in the shifting political and religious landscapes of the Sino-Tibetan borderlands. Wang further conceptualizes the maṇḍalas produced in Dunhuang through the lenses of historical, performative, and representation-

al *spaces*—a historical meeting place of the Chinese and Tibetan esoteric Buddhist traditions, a setting for performing meditative visualization and repentance rituals, and a spatial template for staging the Buddha’s enlightenment as well as composing pictorial images and cave shrines. In this way, *Maṇḍalas in the Making* sheds new lights on how maṇḍalas took form and what they could look like.

Maṇḍalas in the Making makes three major claims. First, Guiyijun-period Dunhuang felt the lingering impacts from both the Tang (618–907) and the Tibetan empires (618–842) as well as the continuing political negotiations; locally produced in this context, the Dunhuang maṇḍalas reveal a historical association between the Maṇḍala of Eight Great Bodhisattvas promoted in the Tibetan empire and the Vajradhātu Maṇḍala—one of the Two Realms Maṇḍala flourished in the Japanese Shingon tradition. Second, maṇḍalas brought new spatial concepts to preexisting Chinese Buddhist practices, such as devotion to *dhāraṇī* (a genre of incantation) and repentance rituals, and a new perspective toward the Buddha’s enlightenment, which alternatively pinpoints his coronation in Akaniṣṭha Heaven, one of the thirty-three-level heavens in Buddhist cosmology. Third, in addition to an eightfold structure in plan, maṇḍalas prompted a three-dimensional spatial template in Dunhuang portable paintings and cave designs as they did elsewhere. This template is a vertical, tripartite composition that signifies the cosmological, ritual, and human realms. Thus, it evokes, in the minds of medieval Buddhist practitioners, a progression through the *trikāya* (the three modes of being of the Buddha). Through a series of careful analysis of the textual, pictorial, and architectural evidence from Dunhuang and beyond, Wang arrives at a generalization about these claimed patterns, which she dubs “the maṇḍalization of Dunhuang” (p. 274).

Wang’s narrative of “maṇḍalization” begins with the introduction of maṇḍalas to dhāraṇī in

eightth-century China, which resulted in a new conception of bounded ritual space. Despite the lack of maṇḍala images from this period, chapter 1 offers a detailed textual analysis of two ritual manuals related to one of the most popular dhāraṇī in Tang China. Through a theoretical reconstruction of early maṇḍala altars and Buddha icons used during the rituals, Wang unpacks the new ritual techniques and spatial concepts promoted by contemporaneous esoteric Buddhist masters in the Tang capital city, Chang’an.

Chapters 2 and 3 examine the maṇḍala images in the Tibetan empire and Dunhuang. They investigate key images of the Maṇḍala of Eight Great Bodhisattvas in Tibetan- and Guiyijun-period Dunhuang as well as the ideologies and social conditions that prompted the art productions. Chapter 2 relates the emergence of the maṇḍala in Dunhuang to the rise of the Tibetan empire. The Tibetan empire popularized the art of maṇḍala, whose imperial metaphor and narrative of enlightenment became integral to empire-building. The Tibetan empire also played a crucial role in transmitting artistic styles from Kashmir and Nepal to Dunhuang. When zooming into local art production in Tibetan-period Dunhuang, Wang highlights the juxtaposition of Tang and Tibetan artistic styles in mural and silk paintings, which she characterizes as “artistic bilingualism” (p. 121).

Chapter 3 continues to observe the bilingual mode in Guiyijun-period Dunhuang cave shrines and portable paintings and unpacks the historical memory and political legitimacy visualized by maṇḍala images. Here one may find some of the finest visual studies in the book. For instance, Wang convincingly pinpoints the Tibetan artistic legacy in murals at less obvious positions in a cave owned by an anti-Tibetan Guiyijun ruler (pp. 134–135). Wang also highlights the central role of a maṇḍala diagram in structuring and connecting a tripartite space in a devotional silk painting (pp. 180–185).

Chapters 4 and 5 further contextualize the maṇḍala images in the iconographic and ritual programs of selected cave shrines. What Wang treats as a culmination of esoteric Buddhist visuality at Dunhuang is the Guiyijun-period Mogao Cave 14. Wang argues that a uniquely rich combination of maṇḍalas and iconographies in this cave is tied to different programs of repentance. Chapter 4 examines the relevance between discrete mural paintings featuring five Buddhas and eight bodhisattvas and repentance rituals that are prescribed in some Dunhuang manuscripts to require a conjunction of such iconographies. Chapter 5 investigates the relationships between a mural circle of bodhisattva images in the same cave, a separate set of repentance rituals, and pictorial programs of tripartite monuments in Indonesia and western Tibet. In this way, Wang proposes to understand the Dunhuang cave as a new kind of maṇḍalic architecture and decodes its sophisticated creation in ritual contexts.

While most of the analyses are conducted in a meticulous manner, a few questions remain in the reviewer's mind. First, since Wang emphasizes the Tibetan impact on the art and visual culture of a multiethnic Dunhuang to a degree more than is common, one expects a justification of the fact that no Tibetan patronage is known to the nearly two hundred caves from the Tibetan and Guiyijun periods.[6] Second, as Wang tends to contextualize Mogao Cave 14 among architectural monuments that are located thousands of miles away from Dunhuang and are not proved to have had any direct contact, one wonders why she has hesitated to seriously consider the immediate context, namely, the pre-Tibetan Dunhuang caves. A tripartite pictorial program had not been uncommon throughout the four-century cave construction before the Tibetan occupation of Dunhuang. Rather than "the maṇḍalization of Dunhuang" (p. 274), could one explain the phenomenon that chapter 5 examines as the diffusion of maṇḍalas in the visual traditions that had been established before the introduction of maṇḍala? Just like the classical debate

between the Buddhist conquest of China and the Sinicization of Buddhism, this question has no clear-cut answer.

Although a conclusion about some of the core materials in the book has yet to be reached, it is fair to suggest that *Maṇḍalas in the Making* achieves its claimed goals concerning methodology, namely, reading esoteric Buddhist iconography in specific spatial contexts, revealing the mutability and adaptability of a spatial template, and re-considering an early history of maṇḍalas in China.

Due to the frequency of technical terms in Chinese, Sanskrit, and Tibetan languages and the quantity of meticulous details and explanatory footnotes, this book is more useful for specialists in Sino-Tibetan Buddhist art. Nonetheless, any reader will appreciate the 130 color illustrations and well-crafted diagrams.

Notes

[1]. "Maṇḍalization" has been primarily used to discuss esoteric ritual practice. See Charles D. Orzech, *Politics and Transcendent Wisdom: The Scripture for Humane Kings in the Creation of Chinese Buddhism* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998).

[2]. For a comprehensive literature review, see Heather Blair, "Maṇḍala," Oxford Bibliographies website, last modified August 31, 2015, DOI: 10.1093/OBO/9780195393521-0100.

[3]. For an excellent study of the same topic from the conventional approach, see Kimiaki Tanaka, *Tonkō: Mikkyō to bijutsu* [Dunhuang: Esoteric Buddhism and its art] (Kyoto: Hōzōkan, 2000).

[4]. For examples of the two areas of scholarship, see, respectively, Chikyo Yamamoto, *Introduction to the Maṇḍala* (Kyoto: Dōhōsha, 1980); and Geri Hockfield Malandra, *Unfolding a Maṇḍala: The Buddhist Cave Temples at Ellora* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993).

[5]. For instances of the methodological inquiries, see, respectively, Lothar Ledderose, *Ten Thousand Things: Module and Mass Production in Chinese Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); and the workshop “Syncretism & Hybridity in Chinese Religious History,” University of Chicago, April 28-29, 2017, <https://ceas.uchicago.edu/news/april-28-29-syncretism-hybridity-chinese-religious-history> (accessed December 10, 2020).

[6]. See, for example, Wang Huimin, *Dunhuang Fojiao yu shiku yingzao* [Dunhuang Buddhism and cave construction] (Lanzhou: Gansu jiaoyu chubanshe, 2013).

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