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In the modern age, maps are created and used as a tool to navigate through known and unknown territories. However, in ancient and medieval times, when travel outside one’s own familiar grounds was uncommon or extremely challenging, maps functioned less as a navigational tool than as a medium that helped viewers imagine or visualize the unseen world beyond their reach. Focusing on Japanese Buddhist world maps from the fourteenth to the nineteenth century, D. Max Moerman’s study unravels the rich cultural history of mapmaking in Japan, which embodied the geographical, cosmological, ritual, and philosophical understanding of the world and Japan’s place therein.

Moerman begins with an introduction of the fourteenth-century Gotenjiku-zu, or the Map of the Five Regions of Tenjiku (hereafter, the Map), by Jūkai at Hōryūji. The Map, the earliest known map of the world in Japan, is based on a record of the pilgrimage to India (Tenjiku) of a seventh-century Chinese monk, Xuanzang. In his first chapter, “Pilgrimage and the Visual Imagination: Text, Image, and the Map of the Buddhist World,” Moerman presents a detailed examination of the content and cultural context of the Map. Through meticulous analysis of the complex interrelationship between its text and image, Moerman brings the Map to life and allows readers to envision the “ultimate of optical illusions” that viewers would have experienced as they stood in front of this “totalizing and encyclopedic display of spatial knowledge, cosmic order, historical demography, and ethnographic description” (p. 52, 15). Ultimately, he argues that what was important for Japanese viewers of the map, more than the geographic information it bears, was its ritual function as a tool for visually tracing Xuanzang’s pilgrimage and virtually traveling to the sacred sites. In this sense, the Map is comparable to sankei mandala (pilgrimage mandala), which lures viewers into the sacred landscape and walks them through the pilgrimage, or the twelve-scroll Genjō Sanzō-e (The Illustrated Life of the Tripitaka Master Xuanzang, currently held at the Fujita Museum), which recounts the story of Xuanzang’s life and takes the
viewer on a journey with him. His comparison of the Map and Genjō Sanzō-e is especially intriguing, as they are contemporaneous and were both created at Hossō temples that venerated Xuanzang as a patriarch. Moerman underscores the differences between the two media and the uniqueness of the Map by pointing to its distinct format, content, and structure, which affected how the narrative was presented and received.

In chapter 2, “Islands of Meaning: Locating Japan in a Buddhist World,” Moerman moves on to explore two peripheral sites that are left out in Xuanzang’s text—Potalaka (J. Fudaraku) and Japan—and their importance to the Japanese understanding of the world. Most notably, Moerman unfolds in this chapter how the Japanese defined Japan’s place within the larger world map. The chapter focuses on early representations of Japan while introducing the framework of sangoku (the “three countries” of India, China, and Japan) and Japan’s redefining of itself from being one of the tiny, scattered islands on the periphery of the Buddhist world map (zokusan hendo), not even mentioned in Xuanzang’s record, to the “Great Country of Japan within Jambudvīpa” (Nansenbushū Dainihonkoku). This framework of sangoku becomes a crucial concept in defining Japanese identity, as Japan views itself as one of the three major Buddhist countries. The framework also leads to the development of Japan’s claim that Buddhism was transmitted eastward and flourished in Japan, while it declined in India and China. The chapter provides an excellent overview of the development of multiple visions of Japan, some of which find its place on the larger Buddhist world map. It provides context for how the Japanese mapped their own knowledge and understanding of the world within the Tenjikucentered world exhibited by the Map.

Chapter 3, “Antecedents and Afterimages: The Culture of Contexts of Replication,” returns to the world presented by the Hōryūji Map and its later copies. The chapter introduces some of the contemporaneous Chinese Buddhist maps in search of a prototype of the Map and the many later copies of the map. Furthermore, it addresses the cultural significance of the act of utsusu, or to copy. Moerman notes that in the Buddhist “replication tradition,” reproduction of Buddhist images and texts was not simply an act of copying but a ritual that generated merit and bond with the prototype. The process of reproduction of the Map was therefore a means to ritually trace, reenact, and spiritually unite the copier with Xuanzang and his pilgrimage, and the reproduced map was regarded as a sacred object. This, according to Moerman, explains why we find so many copies of the Map with little innovation or change made over the centuries of replication.

Meanwhile, in the seventeenth century, a new body of cartographic knowledge was introduced and thus emerged the need for “updating” the classical Buddhist worldview. Chapter 4, “Hybrid Cartographies: The Buddhist Map and the Tokugawa World,” discusses the radical changes in Buddhist mapmaking that emerged in response to new visions of the world presented by European Christians, Chinese Buddhists, Ming encyclopedists, and Japanese maritime traders. Another major innovation that influenced Japanese Buddhist mapmaking was the woodblock print technology of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which led to a commercial circulation of the map that reached a far wider audience. Chapter 5, “Buddhist Cartography and Print Culture: Religious Vision in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” discusses how Buddhist views and knowledge of the world disseminated into the larger intellectual and visual culture of Japan. Multiple sources, including Chinese and translated European materials, had also become readily available, and consequently, Buddhist world maps were often combined with those of Europe, including the “myriad” countries (bankoku) identified by European cartography. Xuanzang’s journey became part of the larger world encompassing Southeast Asia, Europe, and even the Americas. In
the above two chapters, Moerman introduces a remarkably diverse cartographic culture that developed with Japan’s exposure to non-Buddhist sources and shows how it affected the reproduction of Buddhist world maps.

Perhaps the most engaging chapter is the final chapter, “War of the Worlds: Cosmological Debate and the Epistemology of Vision,” in which Moerman discusses in depth debates over the structure of the world and the ways Buddhist mapmakers advocated their vision of the world in the face of competing views. Buddhists rejected the European discourse that was initially closely tied to Christianity as merely empirical, while asserting the superiority of their map created by the Buddhist masters with their heavenly “wisdom eye.” This attainment of “vision” beyond the human eye was central to the theories and practices of Mahayana Buddhism and was applied to defend Buddhist cosmology as represented by the traditional maps that depicted a flat universe with Mount Sumeru at its center. This did not mean that Buddhists were “anti-science.” The numerous examples of maps and elaborate models of traditional Buddhist cosmology presented in this chapter demonstrate that the discourse was articulated through the most advanced forms of technology and scientific knowledge incorporating the visual, material, and mechanical innovations of the time. As discussed in the conclusion, even as European science became the norm and was accepted as “universal,” Japanese mapmakers found ways to reconcile with European astronomy while finding a place for Buddhist cosmology (even Shinto mythology), resulting in what Moerman describes as “a vibrant cosmological pluralism in nineteenth-century Japan” (p. 275).

Moerman’s examination of Japanese Buddhist world maps, spanning over five centuries and across cultural boundaries, is exhaustive as it is. There, however, is one area, Tenjiku, that could have been explored further. The book opens with the Japanese longing for Tenjiku as an imagined place of Buddha’s sacred traces, the appropriation of the Buddhist, Indo-centric worldview and cosmology that allowed them to envision Tenjiku as an actual place that can be virtually reached, and Japan’s search for its place in the world vis-à-vis Tenjiku. Upon encounters with the Western world, however, Tenjiku, now India, was transformed into “one of the many” lands among the myriad countries. In this sense, the history of Buddhist world maps is also a history of the changing perception of Tenjiku.

A question that comes to mind, for example, is the Map’s relationship to the preexisting or contemporaneous Japanese imagination of the landscape, people, and culture of Tenjiku. The text on the Map may have offered detailed information of Tenjiku; however, it was certainly not the only source through which people of medieval Japan pictured Tenjiku. Stories from and of Tenjiku could be found in earlier Buddhist didactic tales, or setsuwa, such as the Konjaku monogatarishū, dated from the early twelfth century, or the later medieval popular short stories known as otogi zōshi tales, many of which had been made into illustrated scrolls and books. Another work from the same period, also discussed in some depth in the first chapter, is Genjō Sanzō-e. Moerman brilliantly illuminates the differences between the Map and the scrolls; I wonder, however, if more could be said about the commonality of the two works, especially in a broader context of the reception and ritual function of Xuanzang’s pilgrimage. The scroll, like the Map, allows the viewer to engage with and trace Xuanzang’s journey through the sacred sites. Moreover, the scrolls, as Rachel Mary Saunders writes, provide a “ready-made visual universe” that the Map does not offer, into which viewers can immerse themselves.\[1\] Is it possible that the two works had complemented each other by serving different purposes and that viewers used both media for a complete ritual reenactment of the pilgrimage? Whether they be in image, text, or both, the existing “knowledge” of Tenjiku must have been critical to viewers of the
Map as they followed the trail outlined in red on the Map and attempted to visualize their journey through the generic landscape and cartouches.

Japanese knowledge of Tenjiku further expands with the introduction of European cartography of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, some of which included visual representations of ethnic people. Actual encounters with the people of “Tenjiku” who arrived on their shores in the sixteenth century would have brought a further, drastic transformation of the image of Tenjiku in the Japanese minds. For instance, what would have been their responses when they discovered that the dark-skinned servants of the Portuguese “southern barbarians” depicted in the Nanban folding screens were people from Tenjiku? Moreover, by the seventeenth century, an increasing number of Japanese traveled and saw India or Southeast Asia with their own eyes. How did their accounts influence the way the maps were perceived or produced? Did the maps and the Buddhist depiction of Tenjiku, in return, affect how new narratives of India were formed? Answers to the questions above would require further exploration of the interactions and interconnectedness between Buddhist world maps and contemporaneous representations of Tenjiku in other visual and textual media.

Having said that, there is, of course, a limitation to what one could cover in a single manuscript. The breadth and depth of Moerman’s study is truly impressive. It is the most comprehensive study of the history of Japanese Buddhist cartography, cosmology, and vision and knowledge of the world to date. Moreover, it offers a new perspective to global history of Japan by demonstrating the impact of transcultural contacts and relationships on the formation of its identity and views of the outside world. The Japanese World Map is undoubtedly an important contribution to the fields of Japanese Buddhism, cartography, visual and material culture, and global history.

Note

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