

BOOK REVIEWS

***Spells, Images, and Maṇḍalas: Tracing the Evolution of Esoteric Buddhist Rituals.* By Koichi Shinohara. New York: Columbia University Press, 2014. 352 pages. \$55 (hardcover), ISBN 978-0-2311-6614-0.**

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Koichi Shinohara's *Spells, Images, and Maṇḍalas* is perhaps the most important book on esoteric or tantric Buddhism (Ch. *mijiao*; Jpn. *mikkyō* 密教) to be published in decades.¹ It reconfigures the history of esoteric rituals through a series of careful studies of some twenty texts translated into Chinese between the fifth and eighth centuries. The book's modest tone and dry prose belie its far-reaching claims. It aims to show us the very creation of esoterism as we know it.

What's new here is that, whereas previous scholars focused on the idea of esoterism and its relationship to elite theorists of China or Japan, Shinohara wants to focus on "the actual content of ritual practice" (p. xii) by looking at spell collections, *maṇḍala* ceremony descriptions, and ritual handbooks. His basic thesis is that "pure" esoteric Buddhism—the kind practiced in Japan today, which privileges

1. Shinohara uses the term "esoteric" in an admittedly anachronistic way in order to conveniently designate the corpus of *dhāraṇī*- and *maṇḍala*-focused texts he discusses. I'll flag the teleology implied by this term here as a warning to readers before adopting Shinohara's terms myself for the remainder of this review.

the *Mahāvairocana* and the *Vajraśekhara* sutras—is not a coherent whole but “a series of distinct phases in a process of continuous evolution” (p. xiv).² That is to say, it is an ordering of things, a system created out of disparate (and often resistant) parts. Stated baldly in this way, the book’s central claim seems obvious—things are more complicated than they seem, the various elements of a system or text are in “negotiation” or “tension” or what have you. Yes, everything deserves more nuance; but Shinohara goes further to tell us exactly *how* the spells and images of the early ritual books evolved into a system. The result is a “hypothetical reconstruction” (p. xi) that is admittedly speculative but generally plausible, and, like the best historical hypotheses, has strong explanatory power for large swaths of evidence that have rarely been considered in Western academia before.

The general outline of Shinohara’s hypothesis is that spells (*dhāraṇī*) went from being simply recited (with miraculous visions confirming their efficacy) to becoming associated with images of specific deities, which were then synthesized in *maṇḍalas*, which soon began to stress visualization instead of image worship, until finally the practitioner was encouraged to identify the *maṇḍala*’s many deities with the central deity, and the central deity with him- or herself. In this way, “pure” esoteric Buddhism developed through a process of accretion and deliberate systematization. It also means that the oral practice of spell recitation produced a rich visual culture that would become standardized into two parallel traditions: mental visualization and physical iconography.

In section 1, comprised of chapters 1–4, Shinohara proposes three basic ritual “scenarios” that underlie his later analysis. In the first scenario (chap. 1), a practitioner recites a spell in hopes of receiving specific, this-worldly benefits, and the ritual’s efficacy is confirmed by a vision of one or multiple deities. To illustrate this scenario, the author examines two Chinese *dhāraṇī* collections from the fifth and sixth centuries.³ The entries in these collections are heterogeneous in nature,

2. See, for example, works by Michel Strickmann, Ryūichi Abé, Robert Scharf, Ronald Davidson, Fabio Rambelli, Robert Gimello, Charles Orzech, and Paul Copp.

3. These are *The Divine Spells of the Great Dhāraṇīs Taught by the Seven Buddhas and Eight Bodhisattvas* 七佛八菩薩所說大陀羅尼神咒經 (T. 1332, fourth to fifth centuries) and the *Miscellaneous Collection of Dhāraṇīs* 陀羅尼雜集 (T. 1336, early sixth century). Translations of titles follow Shinohara.

ranging from a simple listing of the spell and its effects, to complex accounts of the spell's origins and the deity to whom it should be addressed. Redundancies suggest that the collections are hodgepodes of spells that grew over time. At this point, the spells are not strongly associated with icons of deities. Instead, what is most common to these collections is the assumption that practitioners will experience spontaneous visions to confirm the efficacy of the ritual.

In the second ritual scenario (chap. 2), the spell is recited before an image of a deity, which will sometimes speak or emit light if the ritual has been performed properly. To trace the development from the first to the second scenario, Shinohara analyzes four translated texts from roughly 570–750 related to Eleven-Faced Avalokiteśvara, which he proposes are different stages in the evolution of the same ritual.⁴ These ritual texts share a common core consisting of two parts: spells directed to Avalokiteśvara and a long series of instructions on how to create a wooden image of the bodhisattva. Shinohara posits that the earliest layer of this core is only the spells without the image since a Sanskrit fragment of the same text contains only this part. If this is true, then an earlier ritual without an image becomes transformed into one performed around a specific icon. Instead of the practitioner having a spontaneous vision, it is a pre-existing icon which moves and speaks in confirmation of the ritual's efficacy. Thus, the ritual of the Eleven-Faced Avalokiteśvara follows the same trajectory as the *dhāraṇī* collections. But these texts go one step further: in two of the later versions, the image worship is replaced with visualization techniques, the sort of thing found in “mature” esoterism.

Which brings us to the third ritual scenario (chap. 3) in which the practitioner is initiated before a whole pantheon arranged in a *maṇḍala*, and various spells are associated with specific deities. The key text in this stage of development is the All-Gathering Maṇḍala Initiation Ceremony (variously called *pūjihuitan* 普集會壇 or *douhui daochang* 都會道場) described in the *Collected Dhāraṇī Sutras* (translated

4. These are *The Sutra of the Divine Spell of the Eleven-Faced Avalokiteśvara* 十一面觀世音神咒經 (T. 1070, trans. ca. 570); part of the *Collected Dhāraṇī Sutras* 陀羅尼集經 (T. 901, trans. 654); *The Sutra of the Divine Spell of the Eleven-Faced* 十一面神咒心經 (T. 1071, trans. 656); and *The Ritual Manuals for the Recitation of the Secret Mind Mantra of the Eleven-Faced Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara* 十一面觀自在菩薩心密言念誦儀軌經 (T. 1069, trans. mid eighth century).

and compiled at the capital in 654). As opposed to the earlier spell collections, which were jumbled agglomerations, the *Collected Dhāraṇī Sutras* is “carefully organized,” full of cross-references, and “presents a coherent and carefully worked out picture” of its *maṇḍalas* (p. 31). In the first eleven fascicles of the *Collected Dhāraṇī Sutras*, rituals are numbered, given introductory narratives, and are said to “belong to” a specific deity.

At this point, Shinohara goes into great detail describing the variety of rituals and images associated with the *maṇḍalas* presented in this part of the *Collected Dhāraṇī Sutras*, including a fivefold typology of *maṇḍalas* (pp. 45–48), a six-page description of an entry on Vajragarbha (pp. 39–44), and a summary of four other entries (on the Bhṛkuṭi Maṇḍala, pp. 48–49; on the Śṛṅkhalā Maṇḍala Ceremony, pp. 50–53; on the iconography of the deity Prajñāpāramitā, pp. 54–57; and on the iconography of the deity Kuṇḍalin, pp. 56–63). All of this illustrates two main points. The first is that *maṇḍalas* are a way of bringing various deities in relation to each other, making them part of a single system. At this stage, there is no strong hierarchy to the deities; in “water *maṇḍalas*,” for example, any deity can serve as the central or king deity. The second main point is that *maṇḍalas* destabilize the status of icons. In the first two ritual scenarios, when the practitioner expects to have a miraculous vision or to see an image come to life, the individual is left with little control. But with *maṇḍalas* comes visualization, and this gives the individual control over the deity. I cannot make a Buddha statue speak, but I can create an image of the Buddha in my mind. Moreover, visualizations make images somewhat redundant. Thus, by the time of the *Collected Dhāraṇī Sutras*, icons and elaborate rituals have split.

In the twelfth fascicle of the *Collected Dhāraṇī Sutras* (covered in chaps. 3–4), these various rituals are integrated in the All-Gathering Ceremony. This was the “first synthesis in the Esoteric ritual tradition” and proved to be “profoundly influential” (p. 70). The All-Gathering ceremony collects various deities and orders them under the gaze of a central deity. Importantly, this central deity is usually Eleven-Faced Avalokiteśvara, not Vajragarbha, as would be the case in “mature” esoterism. That is to say, the first systematic esoteric *maṇḍala* developed prior to the dominance of Vajra deities, and may even have emerged out of an Avalokiteśvara cult (p. 142).

In the remainder of chapter 4, Shinohara attempts to show that the All-Gathering Maṇḍala Ceremony is modeled on other post-Vedic rituals in India, especially the *śānti* or appeasement rituals which would later become central to Purāṇic Hinduism. I find these efforts unconvincing, since the parallels drawn are tenuous at best. For example, Shinohara notes the fact that the ceremony grounds for both the All-Gathering Ceremony and the post-Vedic Puṣyasnāna Ceremony must be cleaned of bones, hair, and other undesirable things (p. 75). But the idea of sanctified ritual ground is practically ubiquitous in world religions, so this is not sufficient evidence to posit a shared origin. He also draws a parallel between the two ceremonies' threefold schemas for protection: in the All-Gathering Ceremony, this is the earth, four directions, and sky, while the post-Vedic *Śāntikalpa*, this is the earth, atmosphere, and heavens (p. 86). The three parts listed here are not the same—the *Śāntikalpa*'s schema does not mention the earth. The reader is left to believe that Shinohara wants to assert a shared origin merely based on the existence of a tripartite division in both.

The basic leap in logic made by part 1 is the assumption of an evolutionary model of textual development. Things are assumed to go from simple to more complex; they get bigger, they become systematic. Shinohara occasionally admits that things may have been more complicated, that simpler forms may have been preserved alongside the more complicated ones (pp. xiv–xv), but this sort of qualification is defensive and never actually influences his model of development. We may also note the possibility of spells and rituals becoming *simplified* over time, a possibility Shinohara never seems to consider. In fact, we know that many sutras were indeed abbreviated in translation, since the medieval Chinese audience often had little patience with the expansive, repetitive style that was the norm in India.⁵

In part 2, comprised of chapters 5–6, Shinohara takes a closer look at the emergence of the genre of *dhāraṇī* sutras and the related introduction of visualization practices. What sets Shinohara apart

5. Cf. Dao'an's "Preface" to the *Abridged Mahāprañjāpāramitā Sutra* 摩訶鉢羅若波羅蜜經抄序, in which he describes translators who, finding "the words [of sutras] strange and endless, excise sometimes five hundred to a thousand words" 向語文無以異, 或千五百刈而不存 (T. 2145, 55:52b). The early catalogue *Chu sanzang jiji* 出三藏記集 (comp. 515), for example, lists many "extracts" (*chao* 抄) and more than a dozen "smaller versions" (*xiaopin* 小品) of scriptures.

from previous scholarship is his decision to start from a series of so-called “miscellaneous” *dhāraṇī* sutras translated by Bodhiruci in the early eighth century instead of the *Mahāvairocana* and the *Vajrasāekhara* sutras that would become normative for the later tradition. These represent a further development from the three scenarios of part 1, in which a sequence of spells “maps” the ritual ceremony and come to be associated with specific *mudrās*. In chapter 5, the author examines three esoteric sutras translated by Bodhiruci, along with other translations of the same sutras.⁶ The fundamental assumption is that these different translations, which can vary enormously in their content, represent different Sanskrit originals that had developed over time. In general, the earlier versions of these sutras have little to say about visualization practice, while the later versions contain extensive visual instructions in service of more elaborate ritual ceremonies. Moreover, the later versions use a new term, “accomplishment” (*chengjiu* 成就), to describe ritual efficacy.

Shinohara’s assumption that the different Chinese versions represent Sanskrit originals from very different time periods is another major logical leap that the reader must approach with caution. For the second of the texts considered in chapter 5, we are looking at four translations which were all completed in the first decade of the eighth century. That is to say, they are all contemporaneous. There is no evidence for dating one version earlier than another, aside from the way it fits into Shinohara’s hypothesis. The conclusion is used as an interpretive lens for the evidence under consideration. Moreover, at least two of these translations—those by Śikṣānanda and Bodhiruci—have been found in several manuscripts from the Dunhuang corpus, dating to the late medieval period (eighth to tenth centuries). This proves definitively that at least one “earlier” version which placed less emphasis on visualization was consistently used by practitioners in later periods. This fact in itself does not disprove Shinohara’s hypothesis, but it

6. The three Bodhiruci sutras are *The Secret Dhāraṇī That Resides in the Great Jewel Pavilion Sutra* 廣大包樓閣善住祕密陀羅尼經 (T. 1006; earlier translation: T. 1007; later translation: T. 1005), *The Cintāmaṇicakra Dhāraṇī Sūtra* 如意輪陀羅尼經 (T. 1080; earlier translations: T. 1081, 1082, and 1083), and *The One-Syllable Buddhoṣṇīṣa Cakravartin Sutra* 一字佛頂輪王經 (T. 951; earlier translation: T. 952; later translation T. 950).

does make it far less certain. The hypothetical development of *dhāraṇī* sutras is not so linear as presented here.

In chapter 6, Shinohara examines the tradition of Amoghapāśa sutras, looking at four predecessors to Bodhiruci's massive 33-fascicle translation.⁷ The earliest versions describe rituals in which a spell is recited 1008 times in front of an image of Avalokiteśvara. If successful, "the body of the practitioner emits light, and Avalokiteśvara appears, rubs the top of his head, and fulfills his wishes" (p. 142). Later versions of the Amoghapāśa sutras incorporate the same spells and rituals into a *maṇḍala*, following Shinohara's proposed model of development. The evidence here is slightly stronger, since the translations are not so tightly clustered together—the first version appears in 587, 120 years prior to Bodhiruci's. Still, we should remain cautious in assuming that date of translation closely correlates to an imagined Sanskrit original's date of compilation. In any case, Bodhiruci's expanded translation is important for introducing the visualization of individual syllables as part of the ritual program. It also begins to associate *maṇḍalas* more strongly with Vajra deities like Vairocana, especially in its "Universal Liberation" ritual cycle (p. 143). Shinohara's main point, which I find convincing, is that Bodhiruci's version does not bear the influence of the *Mahāvairocana* and *Vajrasāekhara* sutras and should instead be understood in relationship to the simpler (and perhaps earlier) esoteric rituals discussed in part 1 of the book.

Part 3 (chaps. 7–8) examines how these earlier *maṇḍala* rituals became codified into the "pure" esoteric Buddhism we recognize today. Again, Shinohara scrupulously avoids privileging the *Mahāvairocana* and *Vajrasāekhara* sutras, choosing instead to focus on commentaries and ritual manuals to see how practitioners actually understood the tradition. Chapter 7 examines Yixing's commentary to the *Mahāvairocana-sūtra*. His argument centers on interpretations of the rite of flower-throwing, in which the practitioner tosses flower petals onto a *maṇḍala*, such as in the All-Gathering Ceremony where the flower's falls determines the deity with whom the practitioner will be affiliated. The *Guhya Tantra* 蕤呬耶經,⁸ which aims to outline practice

7. For Bodhiruci's version, see T. 1092. For his predecessors, see T. 1093, 1094, 1096, and 1097.

8. Yixing refers to this text under a different transliterated name, *Juxi[jing]* 瞿醯經, which must have predated the earliest extant Chinese translation (T.

applicable to all *maṇḍalas*, makes a further distinction—the practitioner will be granted one of three grades of accomplishment depending on where the flower falls in relation to the deity’s depicted body (on the upper, middle, or lower parts). Crucially, Yixing’s commentary follows the *Guhya Tantra*’s interpretation of the flower-throwing rite, which highlights a hidden tension in these rites. In the earlier All-Gathering Ceremony, which lacked visualization, the flower-throwing rite was necessary because the practitioner had to choose a single deity to address. In the ritual outlined in Yixing’s later commentary, the central deity becomes Vairocana, who is in turn identified with all other deities on the *maṇḍala* through visualization. The act of “choosing” a deity through the flower-throwing rite (as in the All-Gathering Ceremony) is illogical since all the deities are now one. Therefore, the *Guhya Tantra*’s idea of grades of accomplishment is necessary to Yixing if he wishes to preserve the flower throwing. The important point here is that visualization renders iconography obsolete, since the pantheon is identified with the central deity, and the central deity is in turn identified with the practitioner’s mind (p. 167). The flower-throwing rite must be reinterpreted to match the theories underlying these practices.

Chapter 8 is a study of two ritual manuals attributed to Amoghavajra (705–774).⁹ These manuals add a new layer to *maṇḍala* practice: they introduce explicitly yogic visualization techniques to the esoteric ritual tradition. In this version, a general ceremony introduces the practitioner to a sequence of ritual visualizations which can be applied to any deity. Whereas the All-Gathering Ceremony only loosely integrated individual deities into a pantheon, Amoghavajra’s manuals produce a totalizing system featuring an entire suite of Vajra deities. In short, “all Esoteric rituals are now understood to follow the model of the initiation ritual” (p. 170), which will define esoteric practice for centuries to come. The earlier of Amoghavajra’s manuals (*T.* 1085) draws on the ritual tradition of the *Mahāvairocana-sūtra*, while later one (*T.* 1086) more explicitly aligns itself with the *Vajraśekhara-sūtra*. This is important, because it amounts to an application of old mantras (originally applied to Vajra deities) to a new context (Avalokiteśvara deities). The

897), completed some twenty years after Yixing’s death.

9. Namely, the *Manual for the Recitation Ritual for Bodhisattva Cintāmaṇicakra Avalokiteśvara* 觀自在菩薩如意輪念誦儀軌 (*T.* 1085) and the *Cintāmaṇicakra Yoga of Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara* 觀自在菩薩如意輪瑜伽 (*T.* 1086).

relationship between these two sets of deities continued to be carefully negotiated for the next few centuries, and even when we leave the esoteric tradition in the late eighth century, it remains in a state of flux.

In the “Conclusion,” Shinohara jumps ahead several centuries to twelfth- and thirteenth-century Japan to note some of the ripple effects of the development process he has outlined. In particular, we find a codified iconography of deities in compilations like the *Zuzōshō* 図像抄, *Bessonzakki* 別尊雜記, *Kakuzenshō* 覺禪鈔, and *Asabashō* 阿娑縛抄. This iconography draws on both canonical instructions on how to paint deities found in sutras and the detailed descriptions of visualized deities. However, we must remember that these are essentially two different practices: the creation of physical images for widespread devotion and the creation of mental images for initiates’ private rituals. The visualizations were never meant to be portrayed physically—a point that becomes clearer when we consider the practice of visualizing abstract syllables. Thus, Shinohara notes a gap between the production of physical images by artisans and the production of visualizations by ritual specialists, which he traces back to All-Gathering Ceremony in the *Collected Dhāraṇī Sutras* (p. 201). The conclusion also highlights in a concrete way the main thrust of the book: how an oral ritual practice eventually produced a rich visual culture.

Spells, Images, and Maṇḍalas is not for the faint of heart. It is philology. The main content of the book consists of a series of careful studies of repetitive and often boring texts. Translations, editions, textual structures are compared at length. The subsections of each chapter, shorn of its introduction and conclusion, read like entries in a reference work. And perhaps this is how it is best understood: reading notes for *dhāraṇī* sutras, to be consulted by students in a graduate seminar, holding the *Taishō* canon in one hand and *Spells* in the other. Shinohara often spends five or more pages simply summarizing a ritual text, and such passages look less like the content of a scholarly monograph and more like decontextualized *Taishō* marginalia.

This makes for a very odd experience. On the one hand, there are no extended quotations (or translations) from primary sources; on the other hand, the book is composed of almost nothing *but* primary sources, albeit in abbreviated form. The result is that reading *Spells* feels a lot like sitting down to watch a movie, only to have someone stand between you and the screen and describe the characters’ every move. Sometimes you want the learned commentator to just get out of the way and let you see for yourself.

But this method is one of the book's strengths, too. Most of these texts are obscure even by esoteric standards, and we have Shinohara to thank for bringing them to our scholarly attention and reaffirming their value to the history of Buddhism. His careful comparison of ritual and textual details yield some fascinating insights (see, for example, his treatment of the flower-throwing ceremony in chapter 7). Few other scholars, working in any language, could pull off Shinohara's mix of macro- and microscopic research. The ability to generate a far-reaching hypothesis (albeit speculative) from the minute particulars of a remote corner of the Chinese Tripiṭaka is enviable indeed. It also shows us that one need not always wade deep into the trenches of epigraphy, excavated epitaphs, or Dunhuang manuscripts to yield fresh insights on medieval Buddhism. Sometimes it is enough to dust off a few neglected volumes of the *Taishō* canon.

At the very least, *Spells, Images, and Maṇḍalas* reaffirms for us the importance of the nascent esoteric Buddhist tradition in medieval China—a phenomenon all too often ignored by Sinologists and Buddhologists alike. Think, for a moment, about the fact that four different translations of a *dhāraṇī* ritual text were produced—some in the capital—in the first decade of the eighth century (discussed in chap. 5). This means that such rituals were popular and important enough to devote an enormous amount of resources to translations of the texts on which they were based. It also means that different temples or lineages offered competing versions of these rituals to practitioners, which implies that there was a high demand for them.

This should make us pause and reconsider the fact that the study of esoteric Buddhism has emerged as a specialized subfield of Buddhology, rarely integrated into the broader cultural histories of East Asia. If esoteric Buddhism was indeed so widespread, should we not expect to feel its influence in, say, medieval Chinese economic history or Tang poetry? Sure, recent scholarship has examined the cultural impact of “Buddhism” as a whole, but what about *dhāraṇī* and *maṇḍala* practice?

Despite a few stylistic infelicities and logical leaps, *Spells, Images, and Maṇḍalas* is a monumental achievement. It offers a coherent and powerful new proposal for the emergence of esoteric Buddhism. It proves the central importance of visual culture to this tradition, charting the shifting relationship between spell, icon, and visualization over the course of four centuries. Anyone who wishes to understand the early history of esoteric Buddhism cannot afford to ignore it.