

Dorothy C. Wong. Buddhist Pilgrim-Monks as Agents of Cultural and Artistic Transmission: The International Buddhist Art Style in East Asia, ca. 645-770. National University of Singapore Press, 2018.

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BOOK REVIEW BY ABIGAIL I. MACBAIN

DOROTHY C. Wong's *Buddhist Pilgrim-Monks* is a sizable volume that discusses the transmission of an artistic form that she refers to as the "Tang International Style" or "East Asian International Buddhist Art Style" during the seventh to eighth century. Wong argues that a shared visual language and common interest in a Buddhist utopia among rulers throughout East Asia provided the underpinnings for this period's circulation of Buddhist arts and materials, facilitated by those she identifies as "pilgrim-monks."

The author, professor of art history at the University of Virginia, has discussed several of the key themes and individuals mentioned in this text in prior publications.¹ Here she takes a unique approach by focusing on the method of transmission and conveyance of religious art and architecture. She posits that traveling pilgrim-monks actively spread this Chinese-developed artistic style, which resulted in it becoming the uniform way of depicting Buddhist images, from the Mogao caves (*Mogaoku* 莫高窟) in Dunhuang 敦煌 to the temples of Nara 奈良. Indeed, much of her book focuses on the Japanese capital of Nara and some of

its oldest remaining religious icons crafted during the Nara period (710–784). The book's approximately 150 images, tables, and maps vividly illustrate her discussion of the dynamism and mobility of the artistic styles, motifs, and techniques circulating throughout the seventh to eighth century.

The period and scope of this text bring to mind several other recent publications regarding the spread of Buddhism throughout East Asia.² Wong emphasizes that the pursuit of a Buddhist state was an underlying catalyst for the transmission of Buddhist art and material culture; this is particularly interesting when juxtaposed with Bryan Lowe's recent work,³ where he argues against overreliance on the state Buddhism model. Wong posits that her kingship-focused, "transmission-transformation" (p. 5) model is an alternative to

1 See, for example, *Chinese Steles*; "The Case for Amoghapāśa"; "The Huayan/Kegon/Hwaōm Paintings in East Asia"; "The Mapping of Sacred Space"; "The Art of Avatamsaka Buddhism"; and "An Agent of Cultural Transmission."

2 See Sen, *Buddhism, Diplomacy, and Trade*; Sen, *Buddhism across Asia*; Sen, *India, China, and the World*; Verschuer, *Across the Perilous Sea*; Wang, *Ambassadors from the Islands of Immortals*; Washizuka et al., *Transmitting the Forms of Divinity*; and Wong and Heldt, *China and Beyond in the Mediaeval Period*. Wong regularly refers to chapters from her co-edited work with Heldt throughout *Buddhist Pilgrim-Monks*, and the sixth chapter in the volume under discussion was originally published in *China and Beyond in the Mediaeval Period* (abbreviated in *Buddhist Pilgrim-Monks* as CBM).

3 See Lowe, *Ritualized Writing*.

the well-known center-periphery construct, although her treatment of the East Asian International Buddhist Art Style's development and distribution is clearly informed by the latter, older theoretical framework.

Despite the title and Wong's insistence that her book is not intended to be an overview of seventh- and eighth-century Chinese and Japanese Buddhist art, it is the art, more than the conveyance, that is the focus of this volume. With three exceptions, the titular pilgrim-monks are largely relegated to passing reference. While this is undoubtedly due in part to a general dearth of biographical information about these monks, this is also a conscious decision on Wong's part to treat these select three individuals as case studies for pilgrim-monks in general, as well as a framing mechanism for the book's organization.

The three monks on whom Wong largely focuses in each of the book's three parts, respectively, are Xuanzang 玄奘 (ca. 602–664), Dōji 道慈 (d. 744), and Jianzhen 鑑真 (688–763). These sections cover the years 645–710, 710–745, and 745–770 and contain two chapters each, for a total of six chapters plus an introduction and a conclusion. Part I is dedicated to Xuanzang, probably the best-known premodern Chinese monk both within and outside Asia; as such, the author has chosen to omit his biographical details and voyage to India, stating that Xuanzang's "multifaceted contributions cannot be fully addressed in a single volume, let alone a chapter" (p. 23).⁴ Considering that significant space is dedicated to establishing Dōji's and Jianzhen's histories and travels in chapters 3 and 6 respectively, this lack of even a brief overview gives a sense of incongruity with the following sections. The author also risks distancing readers by beginning the first chapter with this assumption of prior knowledge.

Chapter 1, "Xuanzang and His Image-Making Activities," focuses on Xuanzang's return to China from India, the objects and images he took back with him, and his influence on the incorporation of Indian themes into the art and architecture of the period. The

majority of this chapter is focused on mass-produced clay tablets that Wong refers to as *dharma-sarīras* (*fa sheli* 法舍利), which, she notes, Xuanzang introduced to China and are connected to the monk's vow to produce one hundred million images of the Buddha. The chapter proceeds into a lengthy description of the two categories of tablets: merit-clay (*shanyeni* 善業泥) and Indian Buddha image (*Yindu foxiang* 印度佛像). She notes that similar mold-pressed tablets are found in Japan, indicating the spread of stamps and molds to fabricate multiple images of the Buddha. The chapter also contains an analysis of what Wong refers to both here and elsewhere as the "earth-touching gesture" (i.e., the "earth witness mudra;" Sk. *bhūmisparśa mudrā*; Ch. *chudi yin* 觸地印 or *xiangmo yin* 降魔印) iconography present in most of these tablets.

Chapter 2, "Genesis of the Bejeweled Buddha in Earth-Touching Gesture," examines what Wong identifies as a hybrid of the "earth-touching gesture" and "bejeweled and crowned Buddha" depictions (i.e., the "bejeweled Buddha in earth-touching gesture"), resulting in a uniquely regal iconography that appealed principally to Buddhist rulers. In particular, she highlights the development and spread of this iconographic form under the reign of empress regnant Wu Zhao 武照 (624–705) from 690–705. Alongside detailed descriptions of the two independent motifs, this chapter contains multiple examples of this amalgamated iconographic form from Chang'an 長安, Longmen 龍門, Sichuan 四川, and Dunhuang, demonstrating not only the vast range of this particular representation but also the magnitude of Wu Zhao's patronage and influence. Wong attributes this emphasis on Buddhist kingship to the influence of numerous foreign monks at Wu Zhao's court in Luoyang 洛陽, several of whom are mentioned on pages 90–92 in a detailed list of notable translators.

With its many examples and a lengthy analysis of this hybridized art form's development and emanation from the two Chinese capitals, this section aptly demonstrates the author's strengths as a scholar of Silk Road art. However, chapter 2 is heavily unbalanced, with all

4 Wong defers to Arthur Waley's *The Real Tripitaka* and Wu Cheng'en's 吳承恩 (c. 1500–c. 1582) sixteenth-century *Xiyou ji* 西遊記 (*Journey to the West*) as exemplary of the many historical and fictional accounts of Xuanzang's life and travels (p. 258, n. 1). For more recent works, see Sen, "The Travel Records of Chinese Pilgrims"; Gordon, *When Asia Was the World*; and Eckel, *To See the Buddha*. For a translation of the biography by Xuanzang's disciples Huili 慧立 (615–c. 675) and Yancong 彦棕 (fl. 649–688), see Li, *A Biography of the Tripitaka Master*.

5 Wong does not provide Sanskrit or Chinese titles for the "bejeweled and crowned Buddha" motif, but she mentions that statues with this type of ornamentation typically demonstrate the teaching gesture (*dharma-cakra mudrā*) or argumentation gesture (*vitarka mudrā*) and occasionally the fearlessness gesture (*abhaya mudrā*) (p. 59). She provides various terms for the "bejeweled Buddha in earth-touching gesture" composite on pages 57–58.

but the final four-and-a-half pages dedicated to Wong's theory about the Bejeweled Buddha in Earth-Touching Gesture's creation and circulation. The discussion of foreign monks at Empress Wu's court appears almost as an afterthought, and only minor consideration is given as to how any of these monks may have aided with spreading such synthesized iconography. When considering Xuanzang's limited role in both chapters, part I sets up an ultimately unresolved tension regarding whether *Buddhist Pilgrim-Monks* is actually focused on the monks and their role in circulating the East Asian International Buddhist Art Style or on examining multiple occurrences of particular artistic themes.

Part II features the Japanese monk Dōji, who is the least known of the three monks mentioned here but was nonetheless an important figure in his day. Chapter 3, "Dōji's Activities in China and Japan," looks at the general phenomenon of Japanese scholar-monks traveling with official missions (*kentōshi* 遣唐使) to China during the seventh to ninth century and the material items with which they returned. Wong states that she selected Dōji due to his "known involvement in Buddhist art and architecture" (p. 99), especially his role with the rebuilding of the state temple Daianji 大安寺. Despite Wong's citing the lack of an official biography as a significant impediment in compiling this biographical material, the details she pieces together from a handful of sources are an impressive example of how to work with seemingly scant material and could arguably be more reliable than a posthumous hagiography.

Alongside introducing us to Dōji, chapter 3 provides readers with information about important motifs that link together texts, images, and countries. In the latter half, Wong features works that, while not necessarily bearing a direct connection with the monk, "represent the character of Nara Buddhist art associated with the time when Dōji was active" (p. 115). She then connects a number of these selected works to sutras or Chinese prototypes. A striking example is the bronze figurine she describes as "Kagenkei, Lion stand with two pairs of dragons encircling a gong (drum)" (pp. 120–21) at Kōfukuji 興福寺 Temple in Nara. Wong states that in its original portrayal, there would have been a statue of a Brahman striking the drum, and the two pieces would have been located underneath a statue of the historical Buddha. This configuration harkens back to the Buddha's assembly in the *Golden Light Sutra* (Sk. *Suvarṇaprabhāsa sūtra*; Ch. *Jin guangming jing*; Jp. *Konkōmyō kyō* 金光明經) and Wong ties it to the

Transformation Tableau of the Golden Light Glorious King Sutra wall mural in Cave 154 at Dunhuang, which also includes an image of a Brahman hitting a drum.

From this examination of golden drum depictions, Wong launches into a discussion of the Four Heavenly Kings (Ch. *sitianwang*; Jp. *shitennō* 四天王), who were also featured in the *Golden Light Sutra*. As protective deities, the Four Heavenly Kings are among the most commonly created Buddhist figures in China, Japan, and Korea, although discussion of these figures in Korea is absent from this text.⁶ These pieces connect with Wong's larger discussion of state Buddhism and how Buddhist scriptures that promised divine protection to the rulers who embraced them, such as the *Golden Light Sutra*, prompted the development and spread of tutelary deities and their artistic representations. The chapter goes on to discuss the Dharma Assembly connected to the *Golden Light Sutra* (Misai-e or Gosai-e 御齋会), which was held annually at the Japanese court for the protection and well-being of both the emperor and state.⁷ This passage is one of the few times where the book considers Buddhist material culture within its associated ritual or temple context; on the whole, the images and statues are typically treated as religiously inspired *objets d'art* rather than components in religious practice with which the pilgrim-monks and other Buddhist practitioners would have interacted.

In chapter 4, "The Rebuilding of Daianji," Wong expands her examination of the East Asian International Buddhist Art Style to include temple architecture. Dōji is again referenced, since Daianji Temple was rebuilt in the capital of Nara during Dōji's term as preceptor. Here, though, the focus is on the temple's art and architecture. The chapter begins with a discussion of Daianji's background and rebuilding, including a detailed analysis of whether or not the layout was based upon the Chinese temple Ximingsi 西明寺. Although acknowledging uniquely similar features, Wong points to their opposite orientations (lateral vs. longitudinal) as evidence that Dōji was not copying Ximingsi but rather following an idealized monastic blueprint written by

6 For more on the Korean usage and examples of the Four Heavenly Kings (*sach'ŏnwang*), see Kim, "(Dis)assembling the National Canon"; Lim, "Images of the Four Heavenly Kings"; and Shim, "Four Heavenly Kings."

7 See Sango, *The Halo of Golden Light*, and Abé, *The Weaving of Mantra*, for more on the Misai-e and the *Golden Light Sutra* at the Japanese court.

Ximingsi's first head monk, Daoxuan 道宣 (596–667).

The chapter transitions to examine written references to icons created for Daianji, including donated and sponsored statues, wall paintings, and embroidery hangings, many of which are no longer extant. Wong particularly makes use of the temple's inventory from 747, titled *An Account of Daianji and Inventory of Its Property Assets* (Daianji garan engi narabi ni ryūki shizaichō 大安寺伽藍縁起并流記資財帳) and later textual references in order to postulate what these inventoried objects were and, in the case of lost works, what they looked like. She then draws in contemporaneous icons and art works from other locations, including the Asian mainland, to indicate the prevalent trends and styles of the period. One notable example appears on pages 150–54, where Wong looks to embroidered pieces from the Dunhuang caves as well as one example at Kajūji 勧修寺 Temple in Kyoto, all dated to the late seventh to early eighth century, in order to speculate on the appearance of Daianji's three lost "embroidered paintings." Although Wong's approach relies on the premise that there is indeed a universal artistic style linking these distant and disparate places, the author nonetheless adds an important visual and descriptive dimension to these textual records as well as contextualizes the non-extant pieces' subject matter and significance.

Part III largely looks at the building of Nara's Tōdaiji 東大寺 Temple and the Chinese precepts master Jianzhen's eleven-year attempt to reach Japan. Chapter 5, "The Art of Avatamsaka Buddhism at the Courts of Wu Zhao and Shōmu/Kōmyō," builds on Wong's essay from a 2012 volume.⁸ Here Wong returns to Wu Zhao and expands her view to consider how this formidable female ruler influenced Japan's Emperor Shōmu 聖武天皇 (701–756) and his daughter, who independently ruled twice under the names Kōken 孝謙天皇 and Shōtoku 称徳天皇 (718–770). The chapter contains references to influential monks during this period, notably the Sogdian monk Fazang 法藏 (643–712) and Japanese monk Genbō 玄昉 (d. 746); however, it is the only chapter that does not attempt to incorporate the pilgrim-monk with which it is categorized.

This densely packed chapter includes a detailed ex-

planation of the *Avatamsaka sūtra*'s⁹ (Ch. *Huayan jing*; Jp. *Kegon kyō* 華嚴經) cosmology and associated artistic motifs, Wu Zhao's sponsorship of large-scale rock carvings and statues, and the creation of the large Vairocana statue, Birushana butsu 毘盧舍那仏, also called the Tōdaiji Daibutsu 東大寺大仏, at Tōdaiji. Wong also includes an analysis of the art and architecture of Sökkuram 石窟庵 Grotto in South Korea. This is the only section in *Buddhist Pilgrim-Monks* that looks at art on the Korean Peninsula, and it is a necessary inclusion that provides some insight into how significant the *Avatamsaka sūtra* was to early Korean Buddhism and art. Its insertion here, however, also serves to highlight that this book on the East Asian International Buddhist Art Style is overwhelmingly concerned with China and Japan to the general exclusion of not only the Korean Peninsula, but also border areas in Central and Southeast Asia that fell within the broad umbrella of Chinese cultural influence during this time.

The final chapter, "Jianzhen's Travels to Japan and the Building of Tōshōdaiji," perhaps best demonstrates Wong's stated goal of using the pilgrim-monks as lenses through which to view the spread of Buddhist art and artistry. Of particular interest is Wong's consideration of Jianzhen's five unsuccessful attempts to reach Japan, the types of materials he attempted to bring, and his additional activities and travels when blown off course.¹⁰ There is also a tantalizing, albeit brief, description of Jianzhen's three years spent in the southern part of China following his fifth attempt, where he encountered traders and commodities from the Middle East and Asia (pp. 227–28). This is one of the only passages demonstrating that these pilgrim-monks encountered and interacted with locations other than the Chinese capitals and Nara, and it hints at the multicultural and transnational exchanges occurring during this period.

9 The *Avatamsaka sūtra* is often translated as the *Flower Garland Sutra* or *Flower Ornament Sutra*, but the Sanskrit title is used here to maintain consistency with Wong's primary reference to the text.

10 For example, following his ship's third failed attempt, Jianzhen and his party stayed at Ayuwangsi 阿育王寺 Monastery near modern-day Shanghai. The monastery contained an Aśoka stupa covered with scenes depicting four stories from the historical Buddha's prior lives, known as *jātaka*. Wong connects this episode to the miniature gilt-bronze Aśoka stupa reliquary that Jianzhen brought to Japan on his final, successful attempt, and postulates that this gift was almost certainly modeled after the original at Ayuwangsi (pp. 225–27); the reliquary is shown on page 236.

8 See Wong, "The Art of Avatamsaka Buddhism"; the book in which this essay appears is also the basis for much of her discussion on the *Avatamsaka sūtra*'s cosmology and art.

This chapter also examines building projects overseen by Jianzhen, notably his temple Tōshōdaiji 唐招提寺 and the ordination platforms that were to take on particular significance in the late Nara to early Heian periods. In particular, Wong points to Chinese influence in the temple's architecture as well as the symbolic Buddhist landscape exemplified in the ordination platforms. This conscious choice to harken back to Chinese and Indian ideals suggests Jianzhen's feelings about what comprised a "proper" Buddhist environment, and could be an interesting topic for future research. That said, considering that Jianzhen lost his sight after his fifth attempt to reach Japan, it is unclear what level of direction he was able to give. Presumably it was the craftsmen who accompanied him who determined the exact style and finishes.

Given that there were skilled workers from China and the Korean Peninsula going to Japan during this period, this begs the question of just how great an impact these monks truly had on the transmission of this East Asian International Buddhist Art Style. Wong focuses largely on the monks' role in transporting a vast array of material culture as the primary evidence for their role in this artistic conveyance. She also mentions stopping points for Xuanzang, Dōji, and Jianzhen during their travels as suggestive of the individuals, temples, sutras, and artwork that they would have encountered. However, as Wong herself notes on page 98, *kentōshi* were regularly accompanied by painters, sculptors, and other craftsmen. It is unclear what the monks saw or received that artists themselves did not or could not receive and utilize in their activities.

In her treatment of the pilgrim-monks, the author brings a refreshing degree of research and attention to Dōji and Jianzhen. However, her assumption that readers will automatically be familiar with Xuanzang's background on the basis of his notoriety could exclude those not immediately familiar with the monk's biography and exploits. This omission is all the more striking in light of the fact that Dōji and Jianzhen are the only monks who receive significant attention. Wong discusses several other monks throughout the book, but as a whole their potential is underutilized. Her decision to classify all mobile monks as "pilgrim-monks" also overly simplifies their varying reasons for travel. Of her case studies, Xuanzang is the only one whose voyage corresponds with the concept of a pilgrimage,

Dōji is essentially studying abroad,¹¹ and Jianzhen is a very determined immigrant. These differences in purpose also indicate differences in motivation, mobility, and resources. For the amount of material that these monks are purported to have collected and moved, they must have had access to some form of commerce and manpower, which is little considered here.

Just as the monks' varying rationales for travel are not fully considered, there is surprisingly little attention paid to the appearance, features, and development of the East Asian International Buddhist Art Style. Its history is covered in a short and wide-ranging introduction (p. 1), and its general portrayal is as a solely Chinese rendering of Indian subject matter that developed in and emanated out of Luoyang and Chang'an to become a universal art style throughout East Asia. The ancient state of Gandhāra and its crucial role as an artistic and cultural nexus for the creation of Buddhist art is barely referenced, Greco-Roman influences on Buddhist iconography are unmentioned, Middle Eastern motifs are represented by a single mention of Tang-Iranian floral medallions, and Central Asian contributions are seemingly limited to the Kingdom of Khotan's minor role in making auspicious images of the Buddha known as *ruixiang* 瑞像. At most, non-Chinese artists are seen as duplicating rather than actively contributing to this art form. When taken in association with the book's overwhelming focus on China and Japan, this limited portrayal of the art form's multicultural influences and existence outside these two countries does little to support Wong's argument that this art style was truly ubiquitous throughout East Asia. In particular, considering that two of the six chapters build upon her previously published material, the book does not expand the field's awareness of this art form, its circulation, or its transnational existence as much as it might have.

These criticisms notwithstanding, *Buddhist Pilgrim-Monks* breaks new ground by examining the role of traveling monks in disseminating Buddhist art, whether by transporting physical items or exposure to the art and architecture they encountered on their journeys. The volume's images complement Wong's arguments and provide a much-needed visual counterbalance to the text-dependent publications mentioned

¹¹ It is worth noting that Wong identifies Dōji and other Japanese monks who similarly went abroad to study as "scholar-monks," although little is made of this distinction.

earlier. Moreover, this book serves as a reminder that religious promulgation is not restricted to philosophies or rituals but also includes items meant to appeal to the senses. *Buddhist Pilgrim-Monks* has established some extremely important groundwork that will hopefully inspire more art historians and religion scholars to further expand our understanding of this rich and engaging religious art form's multicultural creation and distribution.

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