

BUDDHIST GEOAESTHETICS

Abstracts

Mountains, Waters, and Dharmakāya: Toward a Geoesthetic Reading of Kūkai's Irrigation Projects

Ryūichi Abé

The construction and restoration of two large-scale irrigation reservoirs, Mannōike in Sanuki Province in 821 and Masudagaike in Yamato Province in 825 are among the celebrated achievements by the monk Kūkai (774-835). However, they are generally recognized as Kūkai's "public" work and understood as exceptions to his other Buddhist accomplishments. This paper strives to understand Kūkai's motive for taking up these two reservoir projects by first investigating his esoteric Buddhist theories in which all things in the material world (Jpn. *kiseken*; Ch. *qishijian*; Skt. *bhājanaloka*) are understood as none other than manifestations of Dharmakāya, and second, analyzing medieval legends of Kūkai that preserved memories of the particular affinity Kūkai said to have had with mountains, waters and nature as a whole. My paper attempts to conclude that Kūkai's reservoir projects were at once exemplarily "public" and "Buddhist" work

The Geoesthetics of Ritual in a Song-Dynasty Buddhist Sanctuary

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Buddhist ritual is often conceptualized as a fleeting, contingent performance—an activity enacted by human agents at a specific time, in a specific space, in response to specific local conditions. How might conceptions of ritual be best brought into dialogue with vaster scales of time and space? How, in other words, might ritual become both eternal and environmental? This paper seeks to address such questions through a close reading of Shizhuanshan 石篆山 (Dazu County, Chongqing Municipality), a private Buddhist sanctuary sponsored by the wealthy layman Yan Xun 嚴遜 in the late eleventh century. After purchasing and cultivating a forested estate in the hills of the eastern Sichuan Basin, Yan underwrote the carving of thirteen image-filled niches, whose completion he celebrated with a performance of the Water-Land Retreat 水陸會, a ritual of universal salvation widely practiced in the Song dynasty (960–1279). Further, Yan Xun commemorated his donations with a long stele text, carved directly into a cliff face, which outlines something like a geoesthetic conception of ritual. I argue that these works of text and image that embrace an entire landscape transform Shizhuanshan into an environmental site for the endless enactment of Buddhist ritual and teaching. Further, I propose that such a concern with perpetuating the performance of ritual through non-human agents was widespread in the Song. In rendering the work of ritual an eternal, environmental concern, Shizhuanshan ultimately encourages a significant reconceptualization of the ways in which ritual is typically understood to be temporally and spatially framed.

Gendered Geoaesthetics: Dali-Kingdom Carvings at Stone Treasure Mountain

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Stone Treasure Mountain (Shibao shan 石寶山), located in the Dali region of what is now southwest China's Yunnan Province, is home to a lesser known set of Buddhist grottoes. During its main period of artistic activity, Stone Treasure Mountain belonged to the territory of the Nanzhao (649-903) and Dali (937-1253) kingdoms, and its set of Buddhist carvings includes depictions of rulers alongside a distinctive array of deities. In general, Buddhist grottoes reveal a missing link in contemporary theories of geoaesthetics, namely, the divine. If we have moved into the anthropocene, perhaps the topos through which to understand sites like Stone Treasure Mountain is the "deicene," a world suffused with, and shaped by, divine agents. Michelle Wang and Wei-ching Lin's theory of performative agency, "defined as the visual and material properties of Buddhist artworks and sites that have the capability to both engage *with* as well as be engaged *by* devotees in a transformative manner," offers a conceptual framework for making sense of divine agency at work at Stone Treasure Mountain. This study of the Stone Treasure Mountain grottoes focuses on three caves: cave 1, which shows a royal figure with his attendants; cave 6, which features eight brilliant kings of wisdom (Chn. *mingwang* 明王; Skt. *vidyārāja*) flanking Mahāvairocana; and cave 8, which consists of a central carving of a vulva/*yoni* surrounded by Buddhist figures. Caves 1, 6, and 8 exhibit performative agency individually, in the way they engage visitors through their gendered visual and spatial regimes, but also collectively, through the path that takes visitors past each site in sequence. Stone Treasure Mountain's gendered grottoes interpellate visitors as subjects of masculine divine agency, while engaging more ambivalently with feminine generative powers.

"Occasions Both Worldly and Transcendent": Sacred Trees in Buddha's India

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Nearly all of the key moments and teachings of the Buddha's life occur in the presence of specific, named trees or groves. My paper provides a map of the "treescape" of early Buddhism and explores particular, named trees in the Pali canon and commentaries to understand how they structure the Buddha's life and teachings. I have found it helpful to import the ideas of "champion trees" and "heritage trees" into this discussion, as they indicate trees in our own time that have special importance for their size, age, and cultural histories. Exploring specific sacred trees in the Buddha's life story puts us on the ground in the localized physical geography of Buddha's India even as they serve as vectors of transcendent meaning and power.

Images in Space and Place: Buddhist Art at Personal, Architectural, and Geographic Scales

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Buddhist images serve as focal points of religious space and place at many different scales—at the peaks of small altars, in the sanctums of larger shrines, across the landscapes of nations and empires, and at the destinations of continent-spanning pilgrimages. Scholars have recourse to different kinds

of evidence at each level, such as ritual manuals, local ethnographies, and travelogues, but the artistic record itself provides unique insights into the roles of images in all of these contexts. From first-century Gandhara to sixth-century Central Asia, sixteenth-century Nepal, and nineteenth-century Mongolia, representations of images in diverse spaces and places reveal changing conceptions of the nature of images at personal, architectural, and geographic scales. Images appear for varied narrative, ritual, and social purposes in these different domains of religiosity, highlighting the intimate connections between Buddhist visual culture and the geography of human experience.

Recreating Liu Benzun's Healing Regime at Cave Temples: Baodingshan as a Therapeutic Devotional Ground

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When Zhao Zhifeng and his followers settled in Baodingshan in the late twelfth, early thirteenth century, they turned a remote mountain location in southwest China into a major center of religious healing. Based on the teachings of a tenth-century master named Liu Benzun, the site comprised a series of monumental compositions in cliff-side relief carvings featuring Liu's Ten Austerities or acts of self-sacrifices as well as pictorial images that promoted exorcism, protection from demons, repentance, harmonization, and moral edification. The emphasis on therapeutic functions as articulated through the selection and placement of specific iconographic motifs at a cave temple was exceptional in the history of this unique architecture form. In this paper, I aim to demonstrate the viability of human health as an interpretative category to assess a range of ecological connections inherent in attempts at achieving the wellness of the mind and body through material culture. As a space between nature and culture, cave temples are particularly rich in geoaesthetic implications, considering that their liminal position had long been recognized by their human users to be replete with magical potency endowed by nature, which could in turn be harnessed to satisfy their spiritual needs. Applying an ecohealth perspective to the study of Baodingshan's iconographic program thus affords us a new interpretation of the site as the earliest extant in southwest China to make religious healing a vital part of its operation and purpose.

Geomorphism as Localism in Chinese Buddhist Sculpture

Jeffrey Moser, Brown University

At various times, sculptors have incorporated the geological qualities of stone into the representational program of their sculpture. This practice of geomorphism recurs irregularly throughout the history of medieval Chinese Buddhist sculpture. It is neither sufficiently widespread to be considered a characteristic feature of medieval Chinese sculpture writ large, nor sufficiently localized to be interpreted as the product of a particular monastic, iconographic, or workshop tradition. Instead, geomorphism appears to be one of many strategies that artisans and their patrons used to simultaneously localize Buddhist iconography and reveal the ubiquity of the Buddha realm. Focusing on the radical transformation of the iconographic program that occurred at Feilailong ("The Peak that Flew in from Afar") in the wake of the Mongol occupation of Hangzhou in 1276, this paper investigates the changing ways in which sculptors responded to the peak's waterworn caves and eroding limestone. By contrasting the intensely geomorphic sculptures of the Song era

with the anti-geomorphic sculptures of the Yuan, it shows how an embodied attention to geology contributed to the making, and unmaking, of a Buddhist place.

The Japanese Image of the Buddhist Earth: Geography, Cosmology, and the Culture of Vision

Max Moerman, Barnard College

The earliest extant Japanese map of the earth, a fourteenth-century painting over one-and-a-half meters square, is a visual transformation of a single literary text: The Great Tang Record of the Western Regions, in which the seventh-century Chinese Buddhist monk Xuanzang describes the landscape of his pilgrimage from China through Central Asia and India. It is an image of the earth that draws every topographic detail — mountains, valleys, and deserts; rivers, lakes, and oceans — exclusively from Xuanzang's text. The map plots Xuanzang's pilgrimages and his piety of place: a landscape physically inscribed with the Buddha's visible traces. Produced, preserved, copied, and venerated in Japanese Buddhist temples for over five hundred years, the map reveals how Japanese monks conceived of the Buddhist world and their place in it. This paper examines this particular image of the earth, and the history of its reception, to reveal how Japanese Buddhists understood the temporal and spatial scale of the earth, its geography and cosmology, and its significance as an object of Buddhist knowledge.

Flesh Mountain: Human Bodies on a Non-Human Scale

Reiko Ohnuma, Dartmouth College

Taking the ordinary, paltry, and deficient human body as a baseline, Buddhist authors in India sometimes chose to imagine the human body in an exaggerated way, on a scale utterly beyond the realm of human experience. Human bodies that extend through space until they reach the ends of the universe; human bodies that contain everything in the universe inside of them; human bodies whose lifespan stretches into infinite time; and human bodies whose individual body-parts are multiplied until they reach almost-infinite numbers—all of these constitute Buddhist examples of using the human body as a kind of “corporeal code” by means of which human beings give voice to that which is immaterial, unimaginable, and not really a “body” at all. This paper will examine the Buddhist use of human bodies on a non-human scale to give voice to immaterial and otherwise hard-to-conceptualize entities. In particular, I will focus on two episodes from the *Karuṇāpūṇḍarika Sūtra* in which bodhisattvas express their universal compassion by transforming themselves into gargantuan and never-depleted mountains of flesh.

Floods, Wars, and Factories in (re)constructing Riverine Buddhism along the Lower Yangzi

Jason Protass, Brown University

This is a first step towards considering what ways Buddhism along rivers has differed from that of mountains, urban settings, and oceans. My primary case is Changlu Monastery, along the Yangzi

River east of Nanjing, destroyed nine times and rebuilt ten. Most recently, the entire surrounding village was relocated so the riverbank of the slow-moving deep-water Jiajiang tributary could support the “national-level” Nanjing Chemical Industry Park. Despite recurring dangers, the drama of the river has necessitated reconstructing the Buddhist monastery. This paper will introduce some salient traits of riverine Buddhism, and consider the dynamics of construction, destruction, and reconstruction along major rivers.

Reading the Chinese Religious Landscape: The Text in Topography and Topography in Text

James Robson, Harvard University

Lynn White once observed that: “What people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them. Human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny—that is, by religion.” This paper asks what we can learn from the pre-modern Chinese attention to, engagement with, and care for the natural world as reflected in its poetry, literature, painting, and religious texts? What were some of the ways that religious texts conditioned the Chinese reading of the geomorphology of the landscape and how did that landscape condition its representation in religious texts?

Zoomorphs as Geomorphs in Kamakura Buddhist Painting

Rachel Saunders, Harvard University

In 1525 the Monastic Council of Elders of the great Hossō monastery of Kōfukuji, Nara, decreed that the “bloodline” of their temple—an enormous, 200-meter-long illustrated biography of Xuanzang’s pilgrimage to India—should never again be allowed to leave the temple compound. The prohibition seems only to have intensified the aura of this early fourteenth-century masterpiece, which functioned as both icon and relic. The richly pigmented and dramatically kinetic landscapes of the handscroll constitute a distinctively Kamakura-era response to the enormous challenge of depicting a legibly “authentic” India (Tenjiku) on the basis of knowledge that was almost exclusively textual. This paper deciphers the lexigraphic landscapes of the scroll, which mobilize fantastic zoomorphism in the service of a geomorphic agenda. Asserting the primacy of the southern transmission of Hossō Buddhism, the scroll simultaneously generates the Buddhist homeland amid the hills of Nara.

Mapping the Ascetic Mount Fuji

Janine Sawada, Brown University

In Tokugawa Japan (1603-1868) the number of ordinary people who undertook pilgrimages to the summit of Mt. Fuji grew exponentially. However, the mountain was never viewed only as a unidirectional pilgrimage destination. Drawing on earlier conceptions that conflated special mountains with both native Japanese kami and great Buddhas, such as Dainichi, in the seventeenth century a network of lay practitioners in the Fuji catchment area began to worship the mountain

itself and to engage ritually with a range of its topographical features. These practice groups, later collectively called Fujikō, took inspiration from the activities of a wandering ascetic called Kakugyō Tōbutsu (1541-1646), who is believed to have performed harsh austerities in the vicinity of the mountain during the last years of the war-torn medieval period and the early decades of the new Tokugawa order. In my paper I will first outline the geographical distribution of Kakugyō's legendary acts of self-denial, particularly his cold water austerities (mizugori), which he allegedly performed following a circuit of "Eight Inner Lakes and Eight Outer Lakes" located in the Mt. Fuji area and beyond. I will then analyze selected writings that the deity of Mt. Fuji, Sengen Dainichi, revealed to Kakugyō after he completed each of his regimens. These ritual image-texts, which incorporate mediated elements of Buddhism, Shugendō, and correlative cosmology, reveal an original aesthetic vision of the mountain as the source and sustainer of the universe.

Human Places and Cosmic Spaces: Ecological Engagements in Early Medieval India

Tamara Sears, Rutgers University

In a landmark essay in 2006, Gregory Schopen established the integral relationship between the Buddhist monastery and the garden. Drawing from Daud Ali's recent 2003 essay on "Gardens in Early Indian Court Life," Schopen connected the idea of the garden as a humanly designed space decorated with paintings and architecture to the siting and structure of early Buddhist viharas. Although largely rooted in textual sources, Ali and Schopen's publications articulated ideas familiar to archaeologists and art historians. The rock-cut viharas at Ajanta had long been lauded for their richly painted narratives, and the Sanchi Survey project had begun demonstrating the ways in which Buddhist monastic sites were tied to patterns of urbanism, including the reshaping of landscape and the building of reservoirs and dams. In this paper, I build upon this body of literature to think more specifically about the relationships among visual representation, architectural space, and local ecologies. I focus on the contiguous and overlapping histories of Ajanta and Ellora, two well-known places that have typically been examined in terms of religion, style and iconography. Instead, I look at how together they reveal an ongoing dialogue between Buddhist and Hindu engagements with different aspects of the living landscape, including seasonal cycles, geomorphology, and temporality on both human and cosmic scales.

What are the Embellished Buddhist Caves For?

Eugene Wang, Harvard University

Embellished Buddhist caves remain a mystery. Meditation gave rise to them. However, nowhere in Buddhist discourse do we ever find the instruction that meditation in caves requires looking at meditation-themed wall paintings. The embellished Buddhist caves therefore fly in the face of Buddhist teachings. The problem is further exacerbated in the caves featuring meditation themes. What do the meditation figures--either painted or sculpted--do there? A fifth-century cave at Dunhuang stages this problem. It also contains the answer. Unpacking the iconographic program of the cave takes us to a domain that has hitherto been little understood. Buddhist caves, it turns out, amounts to an incubator in conceiving a disembodied form of life and consciousness.