

Introduction

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This volume of essays began in two work sessions in March 2018: a workshop entitled “Miraculous Images: Buddhist, Hindu, Christian,” held at the University of Virginia, and the “Reflections on Sacred/Miraculous Images” panel presented at the annual Association for Asian Studies conference in Washington, DC. The shared goal of these two meetings was to address the phenomenon of “miraculous” images in various cultures, although the current volume is limited to religious traditions across Asia. Selected papers from these sessions are joined here by additional contributions to cover a broader geographical and cultural spectrum, from India to East Asia and Mongolia. The topics addressed include nature and manifestations of the numinous, the relationship between worshipper and the worshipped, the agency of visibility, the power of place, pilgrimage, authority and textual sources, copies, and materiality.

When we speak of a religious image, we often think of a material representation of a deity or saint in anthropomorphic form, such as a statue of the Buddha in stone or bronze, or a portrait of a saint in two-dimensional form. Within this phenomenon of making, copying, and discovering images of deities and saints, it is well known that a certain class of images is considered more sacred than others; the belief that an inanimate object can possess spiritual essence has given rise to miraculous images across traditions. Purportedly these images can perform miracles—they emit light; sweat or bleed; move about; possess healing, protective, or salvific powers; and at times can act as destructive forces. While consecrated statues ordinarily embody the presence of the deities they represent, these images are especially renowned for their potent power and their ability to perform miracles.

Special rituals imbue material representations of Buddhist deities with their presence. [1] [#N1]. Buddhism was adopted in many regions across Asia, as the geographic breadth of this collection attests, and the overlay of Buddhism on other cultures fundamentally transformed religious expressions in those cultures. Essays on China, Japan, Korea, and Mongolia all note the near, or total, absence of anthropomorphic representations of deities or spirits before the arrival of Buddhism. Considering the widespread use of anthropomorphic images in later periods, the impact Buddhism had on indigenous cultures cannot be underestimated. [2] [#N2]. In a number of indigenous traditions, the numinous was located in nature—in plants, rocks, trees, mountains, or streams—a concept that has been

referred to as animism. Manifestations of the numinous were thus tied to specific locations; these sacred places attracted visits from the faithful. Unusual displays of natural phenomena, such as the flashing or emission of light, were also considered revelations of the divine. In cultures in which ancestors were worshipped, the spirits of ancestors were expressed in both material and immaterial forms (such as dreams); they also retained the agency of personhood, and could be both benevolent and malignant.

Buddhism's interactions with local beliefs, and the adaptations, syntheses, and transformations that followed, are carefully examined in several of the essays here. For example, Samuel Morse discusses a variety of strategies that artists undertook in replicating a renowned sacred image first created in the eighth century—the Eleven-Headed Kannon at Hasedera—including the use of “consecrated wood,” or wood seasoned with lightning, for fashioning copies until the early sixteenth century. Imbued with power, the wood was believed to be capable of performing both benevolent and malevolent acts. Morse notes, “Through the carving of the Eleven-Headed Kannon, the log, which was once a source of malfeasance, became a source of beneficence.” The taming of local spirits by or in the service of Buddhism is a common trope in narratives of Buddhist encounters with other cultures, including the claim of victory over indigenous Indian spirits.

The interaction between indigenous and Buddhist traditions is also explored in Laurel Kendall, Jongsung Yang, and Yul Soo Yoon's discussion of god pictures for Korean *mansin* (female shamans). They observe that, while the belief in paintings functioning as seats of gods is derived from Buddhist and Hindu worlds, the gods themselves are “people who once lived but who, by force of valor, piety, grievance, or the manner of their deaths, have been transformed from mere ancestors into agentive gods.” Unlike expectations for consecrated Buddha statues, the efficacy of shamanist god pictures is unpredictable, relying on the relationship between the *mansin* and her gods as well as the production of the paintings. Beyond the god pictures serving as inspiration and as sites of the *mansin*'s daily devotion, the gods also inhabited the *mansin*'s own body. The authors write, “The gods become an uncanny presence in the here and now through the ‘vehicle’ of the shaman's voice and costumed, miming body, enabling astute divinations and the performance of efficacious rituals, expelling misfortune and opening her client's path to things auspicious.”

When the Mongols adopted Buddhism, Isabelle Charleux observes, they continued to worship their great ancestors, Sky/Heaven, mountain and river spirits, and shamanist spirits. Three-dimensional figurines were used in ancient shamanistic practice, but later Mongol cults of gods and ancestors seldom employed man-made support. Instead, the gods and great ancestors manifested themselves in the mountain, in elements of the landscape, or through dreams and direct encounters. In the Mongolian veneration of living Buddhist images that possessed agency and autonomy, Charleux ponders whether we might find conflation with ancestors' cults and the shamanistic practices of the pre-Buddhist Mongol world.

Portraits of saints are explored in the essays by Julia Murray and Murad Khan Mumtaz. [3] [#N3]. In cults of both Confucius and Sufi saints, the impetus to make lifelike portraits, which in turn served as sites of saints' presence and powers, also was influenced by the Indic tradition of anthropomorphic religious imagery. The agency of Confucian portraits, Murray argues, came from a synthesis of several practices: manifestations of the numinous in unusual phenomena in nature, as described in Confucius's biographies and in apocryphal stories, and the agency of the saint as exercised through his portrait. In Chinese Buddhist miracle tales, which incorporate the Chinese religious concept of *ganying* (response to

stimulus), it is typically the actions of devotees that evoke a sympathetic response from a sculptural or pictorial image. However, Murray notes that “stories involving portraits of Confucius suggest that the response goes the other way . . . it is the efficacy of the Sage himself, present within the image, that provokes a response from the human or natural world.”

Sufi mystic traditions in Mughal India also inherited the view that devotional portraits of Sufi saints were sites of the saints’ presence. Mumtaz’s essay explicates the ways in which saints’ portraits facilitated meditative visualization of, and communication with, the saints as spiritual guides, especially in the case of female devotees who could not meet with their guides face-to-face. In some instances, such portraits also functioned as portals for practitioners’ communication with the supernatural world, with the ultimate goals of union with God and encounters with gatherings of saints and prophets in the spiritual realm. In its emphasis on visualization, the Sufi tradition also shared the Indic concept of *darśan*, a belief that the devotee’s beholding of an image charged with the deity’s presence is an act of devotion that can bring about blessing. [4].[#N4]

The agency of visibility is further explored in other essays. Janice Leoshko examines the convergence of a number of elements that constitute the miraculous nature of Bodhgayā and the proliferation of Bodhgayā images (the Buddha in *bhūmisparśa* mudra, or earth-touching gesture) between the sixth and thirteenth centuries: the agency of seeing, the power of place, and ritual technologies. She explains that the shower of benefits that came with *darśan* resulted from devotees’ encounters with images at sacred places. Bodhgayā, being the place associated with the Buddha’s attainment of enlightenment, was a sacred site invested with power. After the sixth century, emerging ritual technologies brought about shifts in practice in tandem with new doctrinal interpretation. *Sādhana* texts prescribe practitioners to visualize, for example, the Vajrāsana Buddha—the Buddha in *bhūmisparśa* mudra. This practice, Leoshko explains, is the same as visualizing an enlightened state and thus connects the practitioner with “the miraculous power of what Śākyamuni realized while seated beneath the bodhi tree.” The truth that the Buddha realized at Bodhgayā was increasingly understood to be the concept of *śūnyata* (emptiness), encapsulated in the *ye dharmā* verse, or the dependent-origination formula, which was inscribed on an ever-growing variety of objects, from images to miniature stupas and clay tablets stamped with a Bodhgayā image and ensconced in the Mahābodhi Temple. The repetitive nature of these ritual technologies contributed to the proliferation of objects featuring the Bodhgayā image, the materiality of which united the miraculous nature of the Buddha’s enlightenment experience with rituals, the agency of seeing, and the sacredness of Bodhgayā as a place.

My own essay provides additional perspectives on the Bodhgayā image, exploring two separate phenomena: the spread of the Bodhgayā image as an iconographic prototype eastward to China and other parts of Asia since the seventh century, and the designation of the Bodhgayā image in Mahābodhi Temple as a special, light-emitting miraculous image (known as the Light-Emitting Image of Magadha). Legends of the light-emitting miraculous image at Bodhgayā, such as one recorded by Xuanzang, spurred Chinese pilgrims to travel westward to visit the sacred site, and to seek light-emitting images as evidence of responses from the Buddha. Light is a symbol of the divine in many cultures, [5].[#N5], but the miraculous feats of emitting light described in Buddhist canonical texts held specific meanings for Chinese worshippers.

Used as a rhetorical strategy in early Buddhist texts, the ability to emit light and perform other miracles asserts the authority of the Buddha and his disciples over heretics. Light

imagery in Mahāyāna Buddhism, however, is associated with visionary, transcendent, mystic experiences of truth. Buddhas' and great bodhisattvas' displays of light emission are among the wonder-working acts that fulfill their salvific roles. In pre-Buddhist China, as noted in Murray's essay, paranormal displays of natural phenomena were seen as signs of the numinous. Chinese notions of religiosity, in terms such as *ganying* (response to stimulus) or *lingyan* (verification of the numinous), also imply a specific relationship between the worshipper and the worshipped. Being able to see an image that emits light is evidence of the numinous, a response to the worshipper's devotion. The agency of visuality in this case is different from the Indic notion of *darśan*, in which the devotee receives blessing by beholding an image charged with the presence of the deity. The act of seeing therefore held different meanings for different groups of worshippers.

Cognizance of the power of place, or locations imbued with the presence of the numinous, is a concept common to many cultures. [6][#N6] Buddhist worshippers in India, Japan, Mongolia, and elsewhere visited sacred sites and sought blessing from encounters with deities through their representations. Chinese Buddhists also undertook pilgrimages; no doubt they shared the pan-Buddhist concept of *darśan*, but they also sought signs from the deities that would affirm their faith. The sacred geography of pilgrimage sites contributed to the movement of pilgrims, as well as to the production, transactions, and flows of religious artifacts in multiple directions.

The role of textual traditions in relation to miraculous images is another theme explored in several essays. [7][#N7] My discussion notes the symbiotic development of Buddhist biographies and pilgrimage sites in India, as well as the connection between the miraculous tales/hagiographies developed in China and the phenomenon of pilgrims traveling to India in order to view miraculous images and seek responses from deities. In Morse's essay, the continually evolving legendary history of a particular miraculous statue established the authoritative source from which later sculptors drew in fashioning replicas of sacred images. Discussions by Murray and Charleux also demonstrate the importance of biographies and hagiographies—of saints or of specific statues—in authenticating their miraculous status and powers. Furthermore, the authors point out that the promotion of particular images enhanced the prestige of specific sites or institutions, which in turn attracted additional pilgrims.

Tales of miraculous images further played the role of legitimizing and localizing Buddhism in faraway lands. Through a study of texts composed by high-ranking lamas as well as legends and tales from the sixteenth century to the present, Charleux's essay illustrates how these marvelous images often became tutelary deities of local groups; some also functioned as palladia, or religio-political treasures that protected the state, a role that "first portraits" of the Buddha also played in a number of countries—note that the Udayana image (first portrait of the Buddha) is also discussed in the essays by Wong and Morse. In the case of the Sufi tradition, Mumtaz extrapolates disciples' spiritual experiences from their memoirs as well as from hagiographies of saints. Furthermore, he notes that descriptions of the practitioner's mystical union with god in these works drew on parallel encounters with the "beloved" in Persianate and Indic romances.

Can sacred images be duplicated, and do such copies retain the sacred nature of the originals? Morse's discussion focuses on the challenges of duplicating a miraculous image when the original was lost, pointing out that a succession of copies of the same miraculous image relied not on fidelity but on the incorporation of special material (wood seasoned with lightning) and the cumulative iconographic features that had developed in evolving

legends. Additionally, he highlights each artist's awareness of their own individual agency in interpretation, especially during the thirteenth century. Murray's essay similar explores the nature of replicas of Confucius's portraits. She points out that in late imperial China replicas were derived from a specific prototype attributed to the Tang painting master Wu Daozi, which was said to be capable of performing miracles. The subsequent copies thereby contributed to the dissemination of the cult. In Mongolian Buddhism, Charleux notes, replicas of famous or miraculous Buddhist statues represented the first step in the localization of Buddhism to Mongolia. The famous Bodhgayā image, as noted in the essays by Leoshko and Wong, was reproduced widely. The large numbers seen in India and elsewhere after the sixth century, as Leoshko notes, were produced in connection with ritual technologies to invoke the power of seeing and experiencing (magical) enlightenment and to receive blessings. Copies of sacred images brought by pilgrims back to China and other countries facilitated the circulation of sacred images in vast territories of Asia.

The essays in this volume demonstrate that there is no monolithic meaning that constitutes miraculous or sacred images for every culture. Fundamental concepts of the numinous and religiosity in each culture persist, even alongside extensive interactions with other religions. While the essays by no means exhaust the topic of miraculous images and related themes, we hope they can encourage further investigations.



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Notes

1. For discussions of Buddhist consecration rituals, see Richard Gombrich, "The Consecration of a Buddhist Image," *Journal of Asian Studies*, 26, no. 1 (1966): 23–36; John Kieschnick, *The Impact of Buddhism on Chinese Material Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 59–63; Donald K. Swearer, *Becoming the Buddha: The Ritual of Image Consecration in Thailand* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004). ↗[#N1-ptri]
2. See Bernard Faure, *Visions of Power: Imagining Medieval Japanese Buddhism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996); Robert H. Sharf and Elizabeth H.

- Sharf, eds., *Living Images: Japanese Buddhist Icons in Context* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001); John Kieschnick's discussion of sacred power in *The Impact of Buddhism on Chinese Material Culture*, 24–82; and “The Performative Agency of Buddhist Art and Architecture in Asia,” with an introduction by Michelle C. Wang and Wei-Cheng Lin, *Ars Orientalis* 46 (2016). [↗\[#N2-pt1\]](#)
3. A discussion of Buddhist saints in Thailand is in Stanley J. Tambiah, *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets: A Study in Charisma, Hagiography, Sectarianism, and Millennial Buddhism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984). [↗\[#N3-pt1\]](#)
 4. Diana Eck, *Darśan: Seeing the Diving Image in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 3. [↗\[#N4-pt1\]](#)
 5. See Matthew Kapstein, ed., *The Presence of Light: Divine Radiance and Religious Experience* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004). [↗\[#N5-pt1\]](#)
 6. Recent works on the topic include James Robson, *Power of Place: The Religious Landscape of the Southern Sacred Peak (Nanyue 南嶽) in Medieval China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); James Benn, Jinhua Chen, and James Robson, eds., *Images, Relics, and Legends: The Formation and Transformation of Buddhist Sacred Sites* (Oakville, Ontario: Mosaic Press, 2012). [↗\[#N6-pt1\]](#)
 7. There are many works on this topic; see, for example, Richard H. Davis, ed., *Images, Miracles, and Authority in Asian Religious Traditions* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998). [↗\[#N7-pt1\]](#)

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