

Panel 3: Manuscripts and East Asian Material Culture

Eugene Wang (Harvard University), “Manuscripts and Cave Paintings: From Gilgit to Dunhuang”

Buddhist caves at Dunhuang around 500 CE contain some of the most coherent meditative programs. Even though these caves were not built for meditation practice, the fact they pictorially map out meditative processes makes them a direct portal through which we can access early visualization practices. While these murals can be linked in some way to the received meditation texts, the programmatic logic and some key details remain elusive. There is a good ground to suspect that something may have been lost in translation. There is also urge to seek the origin of some of the programmatic template beyond China and Central Asia. Additional sources beyond the beaten tracks are sorely needed. This is no longer wishful thinking. The manuscripts coming out of the region of Greater Gandhāra in the 1990s may provide us with the much needed cross-checking. Among the bundles of folios identified as the Sanskrit version of the *Dīrghāgama* (Collection of Long Discourses of the Buddha) is a section on meditation, or “practice of the body” (*Kāyabhāvanā*)[folios 329r4-340r2]. It contains portions that can be variously correlated to the Chinese translation of *Āgamas* and *Vinaya* texts. Comparing the Sanskrit version and the parallel pieced together in Chinese translation reveals subtle ways in which certain things may have been glossed over or lost in translation. Certain aspects of sensation and texture of the meditation practice dramatized in the Sanskrit manuscripts are somehow glossed over or played down in the Chinese translation. An expanded perspective on the matter thus allows us to have a better grip on some otherwise inexplicable and curious images in Dunhuang cave paintings.

James Robson (Harvard University), “The Persistence of the Pen: Handwritten Manuscripts in the Print and Digital Age”

In this talk I will analyze a selection of handwritten manuscripts from a large collection of documents found inside of religious statues from Hunan province. The dates of the manuscripts range from the Qing dynasty (1644-1912) to the present day. Research on these statues revealed that they contain a small niche carved into the back that is filled with a variety of objects, including medicinal herbs, desiccated insects, talismans, paper money, and manuscripts. The manuscripts found in the cache are referred to as a “consecration certificate” [*yizhi* 意志]. A consecration certificate is a handwritten document that provides an unprecedented amount of information about the precise date of the image, its provenance, the name of the deity represented, the patrons who commissioned it, and the reasons for its consecration. These manuscripts contain the addresses where the statues originated (villages, homes, and shrines), the names of the donor(s), reasons for the consecration, identity of the statue, the date it was consecrated, and the statue carver’s name. In many cases, the documents also contain long narrative biographies of family members or religious figures, hagiographies of deities, and the precise reasons why a particular statue was consecrated. A family, for example, might consecrate a statue of a deity if a member of the household was sick or if they had a poor harvest. These documents allow us to discover the statues’ social, religious, and geographic context and provide a rare new vantage point into the study of local Chinese religion and ritual practice. Why have these particular texts remained in manuscript form, despite the development of print and digital

media? In this talk I will also discuss a current project aimed at converting those handwritten manuscripts into a digital archive and the opportunities they present to scholars.

Fuyubi Nakamura (UBC), “The Infinite Possibility of Words: Contemporary Art from Asia”

Regardless of how globalized our image-world might seem, languages and scripts continue to refer to particular cultural locations. If we are unable to read them, however, written words present a purely visual encounter. The paper examines the cultural significance and artistic representations of Asian ‘word’ and ‘writing’ by focusing on its visual and material presence. Writing, especially calligraphy, has been revered as an aesthetic form, and has played an important social and political role in diverse Asian traditions. This tradition of scripting continues to have an impact on contemporary artists as well.

Different media of writing—paper, silk, clay, woodblock or projected screen—evoke different responses to words. Artworks transform writing—a form of communication that is often looked through rather than looked at—into visualized and materialized words. We may experience and sense, rather than to read and translate, script in new ways through contemporary art, and gain an appreciation for the cultural significance of Asian writing beyond mere legibility. By treating words themselves as material culture, not merely as texts, this paper focuses on writing as an anthropological undertaking and invites us to reconsider our relationship with words, image, and objects.