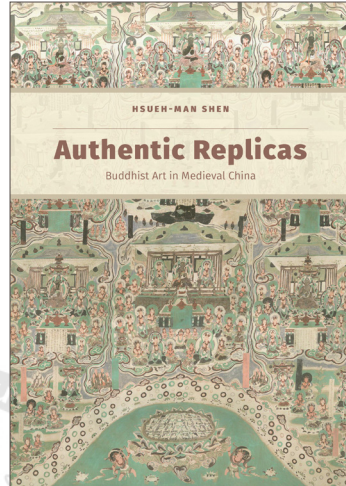


Book Review



Shen, Hsueh-man. *Authentic Replicas: Buddhist Art in Medieval China*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2019. 352 pp.; 113 colour ill., 19 b/w.

Hsueh-man Shen's important, erudite, and elegantly written new monograph, *Authentic Replicas: Buddhist Art in Medieval China*, situates itself at the intersections of two critical developments in the study of religious art. First, there is the development within the specific field of Chinese Buddhist art to closely examine material culture associated with popular needs, as opposed to elite patronage. Here, Stanley Abe's *Ordinary Images* and Sarah Fraser's *Performing the Visual* stand out as examples.¹ Second, there is the development in Western art history to examine popular religious images within the context of efficacy. Here, one refers to David Freedberg's *The Power of Images* and Hans Belting's *Likeness and Presence*.² Shen takes these two currents and creates her own narrative, which centers on the prevalence of copies in medieval Chinese visual and material culture. As the author puts it: 'The objects surrounding worship of the Buddha were reproduced on such an unprecedented scale in medieval China that it seems fair

¹ Abe, *Ordinary Images*; Fraser, *Performing the Visual*.

² Freedberg, *The Power of Images*; Belting, *Likeness and Presence*.

to say that Buddhist material culture of the period is essentially a culture of replication' (2).

The book, comprised of an Introduction, seven chapters, and Concluding Remarks, is broadly divided into three sections. Part One focuses on material texts that are replicated, either through printing or manuscript copies. Part Two focuses on image replication. Part Three focus on the multiplication of relics and reliquaries. In addition, the author lays out an analytical framework in the Introduction of five 'modalities of replication' that appear throughout the seven chapters and three sections (9–10). It is useful for this review to present these five modalities:

- 1) Sequential production of substitutable copies (copies linked to a shared origin)
- 2) Concomitant installation of multiples (the display of identical copies at the same time)
- 3) Composition of designs from multiples (using parts of the original to create larger compositions)
- 4) Repeated performance of ritual and sacred acts (replicating the act and the object)
- 5) Fabrication of replication stories (claiming a connection between an object and the power source)

In Chapter One, 'Establishing Textual Authority in a Print Culture', the author explores how the Chinese Buddhist canon in its various copies established authority during an age of printing. It focuses on canon formation within the context of Chinese print culture and argues that printing the canon actually manifested its textual authority. The chapter is useful for its general overview of the contents and history of the Chinese Buddhist canon, which the author impressively links to similar canon formation in the Liao 遼 territories, Korea, and Japan. More specifically, the author explores how inscriptions emphasize the connection between the production of printing blocks and the generation of merit through a close study of prints sponsored by a tenth century ruler of Dunhuang, Cao Yuanzhong 曹元忠. One inscription reads, 'Cao Yuanzhong hired a craftsman to cut this printing block in the hope of bringing safety to the state and peace

to the people' (28). For the author, this is clear evidence that the printing block itself had the power to bring good fortune. This power would then be passed on to the prints made from the block. 'Thus, in theory, even after a wooden block had become worn, its word or image impressions vague, its inherent power remained undiminished' (28). In addition, these blocks had the benefit of textual accuracy that was directly related to merit accumulation and associated blessings. In freehand manuscript writing, human errors are inevitable, and could seriously damage the efficacy of sacred words. 'In this respect, reproductions using woodblocks with their guarantee of accuracy was superior to manual transcription. Moreover, the foolproof fidelity of the printed production earned then the status of "genuine" originals that could serve as models for manual transcriptions' (29). The author then explores the process of reproducing text relics, something that both elite and popular audiences pursued. Text relics were one of three major relic types: body relics, contact relics, and dharma (or text) relics. Dharma relics included all of the Buddha's teachings in its material forms, from short verses to complete sutras. The author sums up the importance of dharma relics thus: 'although there was disagreement within the broader Buddhist tradition about the spiritual equivalence of dharma relics and body relics, in practice both were used as reminders or embodiments of the Buddha' (33).

In Chapter Two, 'Accruing Merit in a Manuscript Culture', the author explores the replication of individual scriptures in the manuscript culture that flourished alongside the print culture discussed in Chapter One. The author makes the distinction between the use of print culture to establish textual authority and manuscript culture used to earn merit through sincerity expressed through uniqueness and personalization, which is better manifested in manuscripts than in prints. The author's analysis then extends to Japan, where there was a similar interest in the replication of texts and a belief in the Final Dharma, the last of the three ages of Buddhism following the death of the Buddha, which led to the building of sutra mounds in Japan that commemorated scriptures or text relics. The author also explores manuscripts as sites of embellishment in the manner of Buddhist art and architecture. These decorations took the form of luxury materials such as gold or silver ink written on blue paper, rendering the material

properties of the object equally worthy of reverence as the sacred words they spelled out. The author then argues that ‘under the influence of the cult of scripture and its doctrine of merit accrual through replication, the marriage of Buddhist ideas and Chinese methods of textual replication grew even stronger, spurring the reproduction of Buddhist texts in medieval China on an unprecedented scale’ (67–8).

In Chapter Three, ‘Multiple Ways to Multiply Buddhist Images’, the author explores stamp impressions, woodblock prints, silk paintings and wall murals to see how modular designs made the production of a wide variety of images easier. The author begins with a discussion of illuminated scrolls on the *Sutras of Buddha Names*. The author takes the repetition of images to argue that by replicating the Buddhahood attained by past buddhas the experience of those Buddhas were also replicated. Turning to Dunhuang scrolls with buddha images executed through repeated impressions, the author argues that they constitute an ‘image-only’ scripture that is similar to the *Sutras of Buddha Names* in reflecting the buddha nature found in all beings. The author goes on to look at cave-temples from Mount Beishan 北山, Dazu 大足 and paintings discovered in the secret library cave, Cave 17 at Mogao 莫高, to explore how a ‘modular system of replication was exploited to create a visuality characterized by multiplicity and density’ (105). The author finds an intersection where techniques from ancient China such as bronze-casting, textile-weaving, and tile-making were used for the purpose of Buddhist replication. ‘The capacity of modular systems to reproduce high-quality objects or images with speed and efficiency enabled the medieval Chinese to use multiples strategically in order to illustrate the Buddhist doctrine of the One and the All’ (105). Modular systems not only produced visual patterns that could change scale according to specific needs, but these systems also led to exchanges across media. The emphasis on process is also important since without the repeated acts of making, the objects and images could not be activated. ‘In other words, it is through replication and repetition that efficacy is generated’ (105).

In Chapter Four, ‘Replication and the Transmission of Buddhist Iconography’, the author explores how traditional Chinese bronze casting technology changed clay votive plaques based on Indian images into new icons that were sturdy enough to serve as models for

further reproduction in Japan. By focusing on votive tablets made of soft materials such as clay or certain metals, the author investigates how these votive plaques became reliable replications of Buddhist images that led to the spread of these designs across Asia. ‘The metal plaques produced in medieval Japan provide an interesting insight into how the modular system of reproduction was employed to enrich Buddhist material culture. Exploiting the malleability of soft metals, the Japanese used the techniques of repoussé to reproduce images and object types transmitted from the mainland. With existing tiles serving as modules, they created variations and generated composite imagery for reproductions in both clay and metal’ (135).

In Chapter Five, ‘Replicating the Buddha’s True Appearance’, the author investigates how models known as *yang* 様 were used to create multiples of well-known icons, including the famous Seiryōji 清涼寺 Buddha modeled on a Chinese image that was in turn based on the King Udayana image. The well-known legend is that King Udayana, missing the Buddha’s presence while he went to preach to his mother in heaven, had an image carved in his likeness so that they would not be apart. Notably, the Seiryōji Buddha has two origins, both emphasizing that this image is a copy. No claims to originality are needed for the image to be powerful. ‘One story relates to the creation and transmission of the Buddha’s first image, the other story, told by the corporeal relics inside the image body forges a connection with the actual body of the historical Buddha. All the biographical and physiological references were meant to prove that the Seiryōji image was a truthful and valuable copy’ (166). When the statue arrived in Japan, it started a new lineage of images because it was the first of its kind in Japan. As the author puts it, ‘on a physical and practical level, the flexible size and material of *yang* made them particularly useful for transmitting iconography across regions unlike molds, which are not always easy to transport. More importantly, replicating from a renowned and potent *yang* brings forth efficacy, insisting on following a certain *yang* shortens or even eliminates the distance between secondary copies and the primary copy (i.e., the *yang*)’ (167–8).

In Chapter Six, ‘Manifesting the Buddha’s Body in Reliquaries’, the author investigates the ontology of Buddha relics to argue that reliquaries functioned both to hide the Buddha’s body as well as to shed

light on his presence in the here and now. As for the Buddha Śākyamuni, his relics, or *śarīra*, came about after he achieved nirvana and his body cremated. At that event, eight rulers from surrounding kingdoms began fighting over the Buddha's *śarīra*, eventually settling on dividing the *śarīra* into eight parts. Each of the kingdoms then erected a stupa to enshrine the *śarīra*. The need for *śarīra* far outpaced these eight deposits and legitimizing narratives to create new and unlimited *śarīra* soon developed. 'Buddhists then found comfort in texts in which the Buddha himself provided what can only be called a recipe for manufacturing *śarīra* whenever the supply of real relics ran out. Such texts stated that beads made of precious materials such as gold, silver, beryl, crystal, agate and glass to be *śarīra*' (173)³ Moreover, 'the relationship between *śarīra* and the Buddha's perished body continued to occupy the minds of Buddhist practitioners in the Song 宋 dynasty. Inscriptions discovered in Song relic burials reveal an attempt to differentiate major categories of *śarīra* on the basis of physical experience and their relationship with the Buddha's body. Words such as *gu* 骨 (bone), *shen* 身 (body) and *sheli* 舍利 (*śarīra*) used interchangeably during the Tang dynasty to denote *śarīra* no longer referred to the same thing. *Sheli*, the Chinese transliteration of *śarīra* now denoted tiny relic grains, which were considered material proof of the discipline, meditation, wisdom, and endurance displayed by a meritorious being. By contrast, *zhenshen* 真身 was reserved for relics in the form of human bones' (173). The limitless source of *śarīra* along with the evermore popular relic cult meant that the production of reliquaries also flourished during the Tang 唐 and Song 宋 periods. Indeed, it was the reliquaries that allowed the Buddha's relics to be identified as special remains.

Chapter Seven, 'Reenacting the Devotional Act of Relic Burial', examines relics, reliquaries and the votive act of donating relics within the context of King Qian Chu 錢俶 (929–988, r. 947–978), the last ruler of the Wuyue 吳越 Kingdom before it was annexed by the Song. In particular, it focuses on Qian Chu's efforts to create eighty-four thousand miniature stupas along the lines of the great Indian King Aśoka (r. ca. 269–232 BCE). Each of these miniature stupas were made

³ Shen, *Authentic Replicas*, 173.

of precious metals and each contained a print of the *Dhāraṇī Sutra of the Seal of the Precious Casket*, also commissioned by Qian Chu. Qian Chu's mission is seen by historians as harking back to King Aśoka's project, which comprised Aśoka collecting all the *śarīra* from the Buddha's cremation and redistributing them in eighty-four thousand stupas that he placed all over his kingdom. The author then states that, '... the Qian Chu reliquaries and their replicas reveal a distinctive situation for historians of Chinese art. Rather than a clear-cut division between a copy and the original there are numerous examples of objects that enjoyed the ontological status of both an original and a copy. Therefore, instead of trying to force an object into only one category, it may be more fruitful to begin looking at things across a spectrum, along which the original sits at one end and the copy sits at the other' (214).

There are many strengths in this complex and comprehensive work. First, the author embraces a transregional approach that tries to find connections between China and other regional powers of the same time period, including the Liao dynasty, Japan, and Korea. Indeed, China is taken as a country of regions, and discussed accordingly. Another strength is a close examination of objects that point to the author's curatorial background. Another strength are the copious illustrations with useful didactic captions. There are in total 113 color illustrations and 19 black and white. There is also an exceptional use of diagrams to illustrate arguments (129). Last but not least, Shen's study gets to the issue of process, asking not only why, but how images were replicated

For a book as ambitiously conceived and competently executed as this, it is hard to find fault. But if suggestions may be made, it is in reference to the lack of engagement with critical theory. And although Walter Benjamin is mentioned in passing on page 168, there is no meaningful engagement with his idea that mechanical reproduction alters the aura or singularity of the original.⁴ Likewise, Jean Baudrillard's idea of the simulacrum as a copy without an original could have been engaged with to reach out to other subfields

⁴ Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'.

through the shared language of critical theory.⁵ The sheer breadth of the project also poses its own problems, namely, the reader longs for a more in depth, less synthetic treatment of the material. Perhaps a case study of one archaeological site or one cave temple might be a stronger way to present evidence than selecting a wide swathe of materials that are then disconnected to more in-depth contextual analysis. But these are mere quibbles in the face of a what is a landmark study on the visual and material culture of medieval China.

Bibliography

- Abe, Stanley K. *Ordinary Images*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002.
- Belting, Hans. *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.
- Benjamin, Walter. 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'. In *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt, 217–252. New York: Schocken Books, 1968.
- Camille, Michael. 'Simulacrum'. In *Critical Terms for Art History*, edited by Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff, 31–44. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.
- Fraser, Sarah E. *Performing the Visual: The Practice of Buddhist Wall Painting in China and Central Asia 618–960*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004.
- Freedberg, David. *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.

WINSTON KYAN
University of Utah
winston.kyan@utah.edu

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.15239/hijbs.04.02.10>

⁵ Camille, 'Simulacrum'.