



# *Spells, images, and ma##alas: Tracing the evolution of Esoteric Buddhist rituals*, by Koichi Shinohara

Zhaohua Yang

To cite this article: Zhaohua Yang (2015) *Spells, images, and ma##alas: Tracing the evolution of Esoteric Buddhist rituals*, by Koichi Shinohara, *Studies in Chinese Religions*, 1:1, 101-103, DOI: [10.1080/23729988.2015.1026193](https://doi.org/10.1080/23729988.2015.1026193)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23729988.2015.1026193>



Published online: 05 May 2015.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 1144



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

which had previously been understood chiefly as simple mnemonic devices or oral incantations. Copp shows how the term's basic meaning, to *grasp* (to physically hold or to intellectually understand), underlies and connects the term's diverse connotations and the functions of these texts. Throughout the main chapters that follow the introduction, Copp constantly and carefully attends to the discrepancy between the received texts and archaeological remains as well as between the prescriptive and descriptive texts. While the tropes of received texts connect the *dhāraṇī* inscriptions with the traditional Daoist *fu* talismans, examination of actual *dhāraṇī* amulets in bracelets also indicates their connection to Indic *dhāraṇī* amulet practices (Chapter 1).

In terms of structuring his book and defining the scope of his research, Copp chases two rabbits and catches both. His work provides microscopic and telescopic views of his topic. While Chapter 1 locates his study within the larger landscape of religious practices across Asia, Chapters 2 and 3 provide thorough and deep examinations of the material culture and practices of two influential *dhāraṇīs* (the *Mahāpratisarā dhāraṇī* and the *Uṣṇīṣavijayā dhāraṇī*). And then, Chapter 4 again zooms out to reveal how the 'simpler' *dhāraṇī* tradition was understood in relation to the Esoteric Buddhist tradition of tenth century China, by examining Zanning's (919–1001) 'Transmission of the Mystic Store.' This alternating zooming in and out makes his study both useful and meaningful to scholars with interests beyond Chinese Buddhist *dhāraṇī*.

Copp shows how spell practices offer their own map for the study of Buddhism. In much the same way that other scholars have explored new terrain brought into focus by individual subjects such as schools, festivals, and sacred locales, Copp's book reveals complex and unexplored regions of medieval Chinese spell practice. I anticipate that his work will be followed by many others that expand and complicate this initial map, as there are many more interesting *dhāraṇī* practices that were developed and modified after the tenth century and in other East Asian countries – the period and the regions not covered in Copp's book. I believe this book will become a classic as well as pioneering work for the study of Buddhist spells, much in the way that John Strong's book *Relics of the Buddha* remains such for the study of Buddhist relics.

Youn-mi Kim

Yale University

[youn-mi.kim@yale.edu](mailto:youn-mi.kim@yale.edu)

© 2015, Youn-mi Kim

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23729988.2015.1026192>

**Spells, images, and maṇḍalas: Tracing the evolution of Esoteric Buddhist rituals**, by Koichi Shinohara, New York, Columbia University Press, 2014, xxi + 324 pp., \$50.00/£34.50 (hbk), ISBN: 9780231166140

As the second volume in the Sheng Yen Series in Chinese Buddhist Studies published by Columbia University Press, Koichi Shinohara's *Spells, images, and maṇḍalas* is a *tour de force* and the culmination of a lifetime's scholarly accomplishments. Grounded in rigorous, meticulous, nitty-gritty textual scholarship, Koichi Shinohara offers a compelling picture of how the Esoteric Buddhist ritual tradition evolved from the simple recitation of

spells to complex image worship and eventually to more elaborate maṇḍala and visualization rites.

*Spells, images, and maṇḍalas* is divided into three parts and eight chapters. In part I, the most important of the book, Shinohara delineates what he calls the three 'basic scenarios of Esoteric Buddhist rituals.' Based on an analysis of two early Chinese dhāraṇī collections from the fourth to sixth centuries, the first scenario solely involves reciting spells for mostly this-worldly, and sometimes other-worldly, purposes, and seeing their efficacy confirmed by a vision of the deity invoked appearing to the practitioner (Chapter 1). Scenario two adds image worship to spell recitation. Shinohara reconstructs this scenario based on the ritual texts centering on the Eleven-Faced Avalokiteśvara, which date from the fifth or sixth century to the ninth century (Chapters 1 and 2). The third scenario entails a further layer of maṇḍala initiation. Grounded in close readings of the important *Collected Dhāraṇī Sūtras* compiled by Atikūṭa in the seventh century, Shinohara describes how various simpler image rituals were grouped together and synthesized into more complex maṇḍala initiation rites. The earliest of such rites is called the 'All-Gathering Maṇḍala Initiation Ceremony,' which, in both ritual outline and central elements, shared with and was a response to the new post-Vedic *sānti* rituals that became popular around the same time. Notably, the absence of images and introduction of visualization into this last scenario indicate that deities were imaged mentally rather than worshipped as physical objects (Chapters 3 and 4).

In part II, Shinohara shows how visualization became increasingly important by focusing on the dhāraṇī sūtras translated by Bodhiruci in the early eighth century. Chapter 5 examines three sūtras associated with the Vajra, Avalokiteśvara, and Buddha groups respectively, while Chapter 6 studies the sūtras affiliated with Amoghapāśa. Through close comparison between the earlier and later layers of dhāraṇī sūtras associated with the same deity, Shinohara demonstrates compellingly how the earlier practice of reciting dhāraṇī to attain a vision of the deity was transformed into a complex visualization ritual.

In part III, Shinohara examines the so-called 'pure' teaching of East Asian Esoteric Buddhism. Chapter 7 shows how instructions in the earlier All-Gathering Maṇḍala Ceremony were reformulated in Yixing's commentary on the *Mahāvairocana Sūtra* through the introduction of yogic visualization. In particular, the ritual of throwing flowers was reinterpreted to acquire an added meaning of a test of different levels of the candidate's 'accomplishment.' In Chapter 8, Shinohara suggests that the so-called 'pure' teaching remains very much a work in progress by demonstrating how rituals associated with Cintāmaṇicakra Avalokiteśvara were reconfigured into a form of Vajraśekhara visualization in the ritual manuals compiled by Amoghavajra.

In tracing the evolution of Esoteric Buddhist rituals, Shinohara has challenged our preconceptions about Esoteric Buddhism as, for instance, centered on spells. He has, further, delineated a trajectory of development from sound to sight, which resulted in a highly vibrant visual culture. Especially interesting is the interplay he highlights between images, visions, and visualization. According to Shinohara, visions may be generated to confirm the efficacy of spells after their recitation in front of images either carved or painted; narratives of visions may in turn inform the making of such images; and physical images might later be replaced by visualization practices. Shinohara thus makes a clear distinction between image ritual and visualization ritual that has heretofore been obscured in scholarship on Esoteric Buddhism. Another contribution made by Shinohara is that he goes beyond texts belonging to the so-called 'pure' teaching of Esoteric Buddhism to examine a much wider variety of materials, and even emphasizes the continuous evolution

of the ‘pure’ teaching. Moreover, as most of the Chinese materials that he examines in this book have precise dates earlier than the extant Sanskrit and Tibetan sources, Shinohara’s work establishes the significance of Chinese Esoteric Buddhist materials to the study of Buddhist tantra.

The book suffers occasionally from minor mistakes. The esoteric Buddhist rite *abhicāra* has been translated inconsistently. Most of the time Shinohara translates it correctly as ‘conquest’ (p. 150 and p. 273, n58), but elsewhere it is rendered as ‘sorcery’ (p. 118). Polyphones are usually difficult for non-Chinese speakers to master. 都 in *Douhui daochang* 都會道場 (p. 240, n27) and *tou daochang* 都道場 (p. 241, n45) should be pronounced *du* in these two cases; maṇḍalas for overnight (*Jingyisu* 經一宿) repentance ceremonies should be *jingyixiu* (p. 242, n50). The reign-period (627–649) of Emperor Taizong of Tang should be Zhenguan instead of Zhenguang (p. 30). But as the Chinese proverb goes, ‘minor defects cannot obscure the splendor of the jade (*xia bu yan yu*).’ These are unavoidable trivial mistakes that can simply not detract the contributions that Shinohara has made to the field.

In conclusion, *Spells, images, and maṇḍalas* has transformed our understanding of the relationship between earlier dhāraṇī sūtras and the more complex form of esoteric Buddhism. It is a great contribution not only to the field of Chinese Esoteric Buddhism, but to the study of Buddhist tantra as a whole.

Zhaohua Yang

Columbia University

[zy2200@columbia.edu](mailto:zy2200@columbia.edu)

© 2015, Zhaohua Yang

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23729988.2015.1026193>