



HIMALAYA, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies

Volume 39 | Number 1

Article 32

July 2019

Review of Receptacle of the Sacred: Illustrated Manuscripts and the Buddhist Book Cult in South Asia by Jinah Kim.

Alexander James O'Neill
University of Toronto

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya>

Recommended Citation

O'Neill, Alexander James. 2019. *Review of Receptacle of the Sacred: Illustrated Manuscripts and the Buddhist Book Cult in South Asia by Jinah Kim.. HIMALAYA 39(1).*

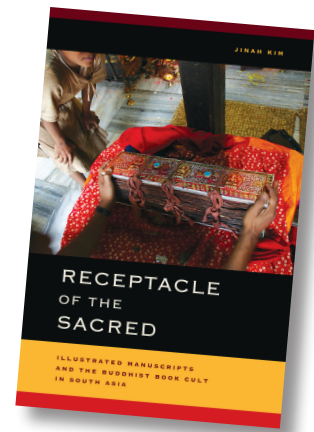
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol39/iss1/32>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by the DigitalCommons@Macalester College at DigitalCommons@Macalester College. It has been accepted for inclusion in HIMALAYA, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Macalester College. For more information, please contact scholarpub@macalester.edu.





Receptacle of the Sacred: Illustrated Manuscripts and the Buddhist Book Cult in South Asia.

Jinah Kim. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013. 377 Pages. ISBN 9780520273863.

Reviewed by Alexander James O'Neill

Jinah Kim's *Receptacle of the Sacred* is a study of the material culture of the Mahāyāna sūtra literature and its worship in late Indian Buddhism, with an account of its worship in contemporary Nepal. Kim argues that the Buddhist cult of the book involves a material configuration that “animates” them as objects (p. 2). She also has a detailed consideration of what may be inferred about the social and historical contexts surrounding the development and maintenance of this cult from the period of late Indian Mahāyāna to the present day.

Kim's study also involves some innovative methodological approaches... What these approaches appear to allow Kim to do is to move beyond manuscripts as objects storing de-contextualized texts and see them as dynamic and complex three-dimensional objects.

O'Neill on *Receptacle of the Sacred: Illustrated Manuscripts and the Buddhist Book Cult in South Asia*.

Kim's introduction, besides providing an overview of the materials under discussion, explores the theme of the animation of the book through its interaction with its ritual and reading agents. The body of Kim's book is divided into three parts. The first part, "The Book," is about the book as ritual object and the physical development of illustrated manuscripts with particular emphasis upon the most popular such manuscripts, those of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*. The second part, "Text and Image," is a further investigation into the matter of manuscript illustration wherein illustrations are argued to systematically represent the manuscript as a *stūpa*, a container of holy sites, or a potential tool for meditation, or as systematically employing esoteric Buddhist iconography. The third part, "The People," considers patterns behind what colophons are able to tell us about the donors and makers of manuscripts, with particular attention paid to the matter of the high number of female and lay donors. The book concludes with an epilogue on the contemporary case of the worship of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* at Kwā Bāhā in Patan, Nepal.

With some relevance to the field of materiality studies in contemporary anthropology, Kim notes throughout the work the manner in which the materiality of a book as a sacred object has a "cultic value." For Kim,

the value of a ritual object appears to function with a kind of agency that does not stem from its "functional value as a text," and yet that "value is very much rooted in its textual context" (p. 7). While she notes "a manuscript of the *Prajñāpāramitā sūtra* is a sacred object precisely because it is the text of the *Prajñāpāramitā sūtra* spoken by the Buddha" (ibid.), one may further ask: what is it precisely about the *Prajñāpāramitā sūtra(s)* that gives rise to its sacrality as an object when compared to other Mahāyāna and non-Mahāyāna texts? While Kim considers passages in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* that "dictate[] the worship of the book in a concrete manner" (p. 37), a consideration of the distribution of these passages throughout the Mahāyāna literature and non-Mahāyāna literature may have been helpful in further understanding this question of "cultic value" in the context of Mahāyāna and late Indian Buddhism. It would also perhaps help with the question of why the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* was the most popular Buddhist text for illustration when other *sūtras* contain scenes that might make for more interesting pictures (pp. 52–54).

The bulk of Kim's argumentation, which comprises Part Two of the book, is made up of the identification and analysis of manuscripts and their illustrations according to iconographic trends, which she classifies into four roughly chronological groups from the late

ninth to early thirteenth centuries (pp. 55–60). Group A includes manuscripts that represent the life of the Buddha or deities that "rendered a book comparable to a reliquary or a *stūpa*" (p. 55). Group B contains manuscripts that depict pilgrimage sites in a systematic manner. Group C are manuscripts that contain images that depict their contents, such as *Pañcarakṣā* deities being depicted in their manuscripts. Group D are manuscripts that depict esoteric deities and use arrangements of images to turn the manuscripts into virtual *maṇḍalas*. Some of Kim's novel observations include the manner in which "high-ranking Esoteric deities occupy the center of Ms D4 [AsP of Gopāla's 4th year (c. 1136 CE), Museum of Fine Arts, Boston No. 20.589], as if the center of the book is the most sacred place" (p. 159). Similarly, she notes how images of deities on opposite folios act as consorts to each other, as evidenced by the manner in which the deities on one of the folios are upside-down in reference to the others (pp. 178–79).

Kim's study also involves some innovative methodological approaches. One such approach is the application of terms such as "hyperlink" to refer to different parts of manuscripts that are linked to each other through devices such as illustrated panels that utilize visual devices of a common theme (pp. 145–46) or which create, throughout a manuscript, a linear *maṇḍala* (pp. 199–200).

Another approach is to speak about situations, such as the consorting deities mentioned previously, as allowing a book to “realize [its] full potential ... as an object with movable parts” (p. 200). A third unique approach appears to be that of identifying “transformation” in these manuscripts. Similar to portable three-dimensional lotus *maṇḍalas*, which dynamically reveal Buddhas hidden by petals, Kim sees manuscripts in group D as transformative three-dimensional objects (pp. 65–68, & e.g. 193–94). What these approaches appear to allow Kim to do is to move beyond manuscripts as objects storing decontextualized texts and see them as dynamic and complex three-dimensional objects.

There are, however, a few points that are worth noting with regard to Kim’s epilogue on the contemporary recitation of the *Prajñāpāramitā* at Kwā Bāhā in Patan, Nepal. The “Vajrācārya training program at Kwā Bāhā initiated in 1997” was not an exclusively Kwā Bāhā affair (p. 275). The organization, called the Vajrācārya Pūjāvidhi Adhyayan Samiti, is based at Nyākhačvak and has members from various monasteries throughout Patan, and even Kathmandu. While many Vajrācāryas from Kwā Bāhā have trained there, the way *pūjās* are performed there differs from inside individual monasteries. Moreover, while the comments regarding the “promiscuous absence of the goddess *Prajñāpāramitā*” in imagery where the book embodying her is present and being worshipped do hold true for Kwā Bāhā (p. 23), they are not the case for some other monasteries such as Oku Bāhā, where there is, in fact, an image of the goddess near where the text is placed for recitation during the Newar month of Guṃlā. Why is her image present at Oku Bāhā and not at Kwā Bāhā, and what

bearing does this have upon the claim about the importance of the “book replac[ing] a goddess” (p. 24)? To these and other matters, such as that of the claimed importance of *darśan* in Buddhism (p. 282), inclusion of discussions with Vajrācāryas (Newar Buddhist ritual specialists) would have benefited the account greatly.

Kim’s *Receptacle of the Sacred* is a fascinating treatment of the topic of northeast Indian and Nepalese Buddhist manuscripts from the tenth to thirteenth centuries. She manages to summarize and discuss many of their features in both old and new ways. Rather than those interested in manuscript studies per se, I think those who may find this work of most interest would be those interested in the social history of the Mahāyāna, questions of materiality, and the intersections between texts, objects, and even doctrines.

Alexander James O’Neill is a PhD candidate at the University of Toronto in the Department for the Study of Religion and the Centre for South Asian Studies. He is preparing his dissertation on the topic of book worship in the Mahāyāna Buddhist literature and as it is practiced in contemporary Nepal.