



The body incantatory: Spells and the ritual imagination in medieval Chinese Buddhism, by Paul Copp

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BOOK REVIEWS

The body incantatory: Spells and the ritual imagination in medieval Chinese Buddhism, by Paul Copp, New York, Columbia University Press, 2014, xxx +363 pp., \$49.50 (hbk), ISBN: 9780231162708

Paul Copp's *The Body Incantatory* is groundbreaking in many respects. Providing an in-depth study of a largely ignored subject – the *dhāraṇī* incantations practiced in China outside of the high Esoteric Buddhist tradition – his work paints a new picture of the Buddhist practices of later medieval China, filling an academic lacuna. Discussion of *dhāraṇī* has largely been limited to scholarship on the high Esoteric Buddhist tradition, as the former was often thought to be an important component of the latter. The widespread teleological model of Esoteric Buddhist history treated the 'older and simpler' *dhāraṇī* practices as a mere prologue to the elaborate Esoteric Buddhist *dhāraṇī* rituals with which, scholarship has assumed, they were replaced after the eighth century. Examining important archaeological finds as well as received texts, *The Body Incantatory* reveals that the 'older' *dhāraṇī* practices remained a vital tradition until the early Song dynasty.

The most valuable contribution of *The Body Incantatory* is that it broadens, and even corrects, our scholarly understanding of *dhāraṇī*: Copp shows that contrary to previous assumptions *dhāraṇī* incantations were not only speech but also multi-sensory and synesthetic *things*. Whether inscribed on stone, printed on paper, or stamped on silk, they worked as potent 'material incantations' that medieval Chinese, beginning in the late seventh century, believed had potent efficacy. Reading his book, we realize that spoken *dhāraṇī* – whether as components of rituals, magical formulas, or mnemonic devices – formed only a small facet of the multifarious *dhāraṇī* practices of the age. As surprising as this revelation is, Copp's book also shows that 'material incantation' was not an eccentric oddity, but rather formed one branch of a larger religious culture in Buddhism and Asian religion more broadly that treated sacred objects, including relics and scriptures, as potent apotropaic entities. At the same time, *The Body Incantatory* discloses the unique workings and logic of 'material incantation' in the imagination of medieval Chinese Buddhists, making clear the danger of treating different types of sacred objects as one homogeneous group. Focusing on two influential *dhāraṇīs*, Copp convincingly shows that two ritual logics made the 'material incantations' effective: *wearing* and *anointing*. The former logic is seen in *Mahāpratisarā dhāraṇī* sheets that were worn as amulets; the latter is observed in stone pillars carved with the *Uṣṇīṣavijayā dhāraṇī*, which were believed to enchant the body through such mediums as the pillar's shadows and dust that came into contact with a worshipper's body. I believe that Copp's concept of 'material efficacy,' with which he explains the workings of these written incantations, will be highly useful to many scholars, including those studying sacred and potent objects from any number of different religious traditions.

One major factor behind this innovative study is Copp's active and careful use of archaeological materials. These help clarify the ritual logic behind 'material efficacy' in the Chinese ritual imagination and open our eyes to the vital life of the 'older' *dhāraṇī* practices that persisted even after Esoteric Buddhism's transmission to China. These

archaeological sources – especially the *Mahāpratisarā dhāraṇī* amulet sheets found in tomb excavations (discussed in Chapter 2) – have remained largely outside the purview of both religious studies and art history. Although both academic fields are quickly changing and expanding their disciplinary boundaries, the former traditionally gave primacy to written texts and the latter to fine arts over simple ritual objects. In Copp's book, the amulet sheets produced between the eighth and tenth centuries in a broad swath of China, together with the great number of *dhāraṇī* texts from Dunhuang, attest to the fact that, for various classes of people in medieval China, the 'older and simpler' *dhāraṇī* tradition remained a more familiar and important practice than the high Esoteric Buddhist tradition. This is a revelation about Chinese Buddhist practice of the period that we would miss if we relied solely on received texts. The stone pillars inscribed with the *Uṣṇīṣavijayā dhāraṇī* constitute another group of materials examined in Copp's study (discussed in Chapter 3). He shows that these 'material incantations' occupied a crucial place in the *Uṣṇīṣavijayā dhāraṇī* practice. By reading the colophons on these pillars as well as scriptures and miracle stories about this influential *dhāraṇī*, Copp reveals how these *dhāraṇī* pillars worked as potent material incantations through the medium of shadow or dust. Practitioners believed that the *dhāraṇī*'s blessing would be transferred to anyone who came into contact with a pillar's shadow or touched dust from their surfaces.

Copp's methodology, which truly crosses boundaries between academic disciplines, also accounts for the book's success. Over the last several decades, countless books have argued that their work adopts an interdisciplinary methodology. Copp's book, however, adopts a *new* interdisciplinary methodology – *new* in terms of the unprecedented level of active and effective engagement with methods outside of his own field, as I explain below. Copp's study follows a larger trend in the humanities moving 'away from the primacy of discourse to the priority of the object' (p. 2). In the field of Buddhist studies, starting in the 1980s, Gregory Schopen's use of archeological finds and epigraphic data provided a model for scholarship on Indian Buddhism that was subsequently followed by individuals working on the material culture and practices of Chinese Buddhism and Daoism in East Asia. Copp's approach to archeological finds, however, is different and new in that his mastery of the art historical methods necessary to analyze them has an intensity and depth that I have not seen in previous interdisciplinary works in his field. He demonstrates great sensitivity and insight, for instance, when examining the changing media (from manuscript to half-xylograph to complete xylograph) of the *dhāraṇī* amulet sheets. He reveals that this development simultaneously changed the mode of representation (from episodic to iconic), entailed the de-personalization of the *dhāraṇī* (the name of the recipient upon whom the efficacy is being bestowed disappears from the *dhāraṇī*), and gave rise to the inclusion of new iconography (the bodhisattva Mahāpratisara) (Chapter 3). Copp not only adopts art historical analysis to achieve his goals, but also effectively uses the previous scholarship of art historians for his research. A quotation from art historian Martin J. Powers opens the preface – surprising in a work on Chinese Buddhism and emblematic of the effective incorporation of works by many prominent art historians into *The Body Incantatory*, including Wu Hung, Eugene Y. Wang, Sarah E. Fraser, and Katherine Tsiang. Copp's work, in turn, is already influencing art historians' studies of Buddhist art. In his research, I find a true interaction between the fields of religious studies and art history.

Although I first highlighted Copp's effective use of archaeological and epigraphic data, it goes without saying that he also draws heavily on traditional textual data – from prescriptive scriptures to descriptive historical records, from miracle tales to philosophical treatises. This brings a healthy balance to his work. The introduction to his book, which focuses on various Buddhist scriptures, brings to light the diverse meanings of *dhāraṇī*,

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.

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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