

caa.reviews

critical reviews of books, exhibitions, and projects in all areas and periods of art history and visual studies
published by the College Art Association

1/31

January 31, 2008

Stephen F. Teiser

Reinventing the Wheel: Paintings of Rebirth in Medieval Buddhist Temples

Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007. 336 pp.; 14 color ill.; 74 b/w ill. Cloth \$60.00 (9780295986494)



Winston Kyan

CrossRef DOI: [10.3202/caa.reviews.2008.9](https://doi.org/10.3202/caa.reviews.2008.9)

At the outset of *Reinventing the Wheel*, Stephen Teiser recounts an episode from Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* that sets into motion the primary theme of his study. In this episode, the British curator of the Lahore Museum and a Tibetan lama exchange views in which the former presents Buddhism as a sweeping phenomenon framed by the panorama of book knowledge, while the latter intimates that the true fruits of the religion are found more locally in one's own awareness and experience. Likewise, the modern scholar must negotiate similar tensions in the study of Buddhist art. While the undeniable similarities of pan-Asian Buddhist iconography tempt generalizations, the regional distinctions of an increasingly deconstructed "Asia" demand specificity. Teiser tackles this challenge of negotiating the local within the transnational through a compelling analysis of painted wheels of rebirth. These are illustrations of Buddhist transmigration that not only appear in sites from India to Tibet, Central Asia and China, but also provide a powerful lens onto the diverse artistic, social, and ritual conditions that have shaped their representation over time and place.

Since Buddhist existence is defined by the cyclical terms of endless rebirth rather than the linear terms of life and death, the very form of the wheel is a fitting symbol for Buddhist concepts of being. Indeed, the origin myth for these images prescribe their original function as visual proxies for the teachings of Maudgalyayana, a monk who used his travels through various realms of existence to elucidate the consequences of past actions on future rebirths. The suitability of the wheel to illustrate complex doctrine is also apparent in its constituent parts, and Teiser devotes much of chapter 1 to explaining the basic iconography of the wheel. For example, the axle contains the intertwined symbols of greed, hatred, and delusion (imagined as a chicken, serpent, and pig, respectively) that spin the cycle of existence. Next, the hub encloses two opposing groups of monks and demons, exemplars and seducers who represent the potentially positive or negative trajectories of rebirth. After that, the spokes divide the six paths of rebirth into gods, demigods, human beings, animals, hungry ghosts, and hell dwellers. Finally, the outer rim illustrates the twelve stages of delusion that mark the life experience of all living beings (also known as the Twelve Conditions). Having established the basic iconography for the reader, Teiser ends this chapter with a methodological call to arms for Buddhist-art scholarship that he then systematically applies to his study of wheels of rebirth. For the sake of concision, this review focuses on the implications of these methodological prescriptions.

Teiser's first methodological point concerns the visual literacy of Buddhist devotees, which demands that modern scholars examine the pictorial dimensions of Buddhist ideas. Accordingly, chapters 2 and 3 compare the earliest surviving textual account of rebirth wheels (in the second-century *Mulasarvastivada vinaya* of monastic rules) against its earliest surviving visual representation (in a fifth-century mural in Ajanta Cave 17). Although this comparison demonstrates the close correspondence between doctrinal description and pictorial representation in these early materials, it also highlights the inevitable discrepancy between text and image. For example, the part of the Ajanta mural reserved for the paths of rebirth

contains eight sections rather than the conventional six. How does one explain this gap between an image and its textual source? Teiser's explanation for this particular disjunction is complex yet compelling. Relying on archeological reconstruction and Buddhist subdivision, he argues that the extra sections of the Ajanta wheel reflect an alternate textual source that divides the human realm into the four continents of Indian cosmology (thereby filling in the extra two sections in the mural).

Chapters 4 and 5 explore the text-image relationship in Buddhist art from another perspective: by reconstructing historical practices of representation, viewing, and imagining from textual descriptions alone. Returning to the *Mulasarvastivada vinaya*, Teiser analyzes the story of King Rudrayana, whose ritual contemplation of a portable painting of the Buddha and the Twelve Conditions leads to his spiritual awakening. Notably, this account not only testifies to the religious power implicit in viewing images of rebirth, but also suggests that such images were executed as objects of private devotion. Given the lack of surviving pictorial evidence from medieval China, can one infer that medieval Chinese practices of viewing wheels of rebirth were similar? Teiser answers yes, and through an erudite use of fifth-century miracle tales and seventh-century accounts of temple architecture, he argues that medieval Chinese viewers not only endowed wheels of rebirth with talismanic powers, but that such images were most likely incorporated into the iconographic program of a temple's outer precincts.

Chapters 6 and 7 move from the realm of imagined wheels to surviving examples from Northwest China, namely from the cave temple sites of Kumtura (Cave 75, ninth century) and Yulin (Cave 19, tenth century), respectively. In both chapters, Teiser weaves a rich narrative of local culture and patronage around what are in effect small and badly damaged images. However, Teiser's attention to the broadly historical—as opposed to the strictly aesthetic—importance of these images leads to another of his methodological injunctions: the practices of speaking, visualizing, and performing that constitute the ritual context of Buddhist art. In this sense, the small scale of Kumtura Cave 75 (just large enough to accommodate a meditating monk) suggests a different ritual context from the earlier, more public image on the porch outside Ajanta Cave 17. Indeed, the ritual function of Kumtura Cave 17 is glossed by a life-size image of a meditating monk on the main wall (a figure that emanates the six paths of rebirth from his lap) as well as a surviving inscription that references practices of mandala viewing from the *Mahavairocana* sutra. Taken together, Teiser argues, the spatial, pictorial, and epigraphic evidence on the walls of Cave 17 served to guide the visualization of wheels of rebirth and its concomitant karmic principles. In contrast to the Kumtura example, the wheel of rebirth in Yulin Cave 19 appears in an entrance corridor opposite a painting of the monk Maudgalyayana's tour of hell, presenting a different spatial, pictorial, and ritual context. Teiser interprets this striking juxtaposition in two ways: first, as reflecting the newly translated Chinese version of the classic *vinaya* account, which describes the origin of painted rebirth wheels as a substitute for Maudgalyayana's teachings; and second, as indicating a liminal marker between the entrance corridor and the Buddhist paradise depicted within the main chamber.

Chapters 8 and 9 continue Teiser's exploration of the ritual context of rebirth wheels through the perspectives of esoteric practice and pilgrimage, respectively. His case study of the former centers on a temple in Tabo, commissioned by the ruling family of western Tibet in the tenth century, while his exploration of the latter focuses on the carvings at Baodingshan (Dazu), Sichuan, completed in the thirteenth century. The Tibetan image is notable as the earliest known wheel of rebirth represented within the context of Tantric ritual, whose goal was the union of the practitioner with the appropriate deity. How, then, did the painted wheel in the temple porch at Tabo fit into this overall visual program, one that led the practitioner to merge ultimately with Vairocana Buddha represented in the main chamber? Since the tantric ritual in question is articulated as a spatial mandala, Teiser argues that the wheel must also be read as a spatial construct that demands the mental passage of a viewer through its various realms of rebirth. In some ways, the public counterpart of the passage involved in esoteric ritual is the exoteric movement of pilgrimage, a context that brings the reader to the last of Teiser's case studies: the monumental (twenty-five-foot high) wheel of rebirth near the entrance to the decorated grottoes at Baodingshan, Sichuan. This series of carved Buddhist tableaux, which integrate local cult worship with the basic teachings of Mahayana Buddhism, was completed circa 1250 under the direction of Zhao Zhifeng, a miracle-working religious figure who developed the site into a thriving pilgrimage center. Zhao's intense personal involvement at Baodingshan is perhaps most evident in the incorporation of his own image into the Buddhist iconography of the site, including the wheel of rebirth in which he appears at the center. By inserting himself into the very heart of a canonical Buddhist image, Zhao openly announces that the teachings of the wheel of rebirth, along with the compendium of Buddhist teachings illustrated at the site, are accessible to all pilgrims.

Chapter 10 concludes Teiser's study and offers much more than a summary of the preceding chapters. In many ways, this is the most theoretical and thought-provoking section of the book, especially for art historians interested in the spatial and temporal implications of specific forms. Accordingly, Teiser argues that the spatial property of the wheel as delineating one

realm from another is underscored by its temporal aspect representing two distinct forms of circular time: one involving repetition and the other non-recurrence. Both relate to the philosophical underpinnings of the wheel of rebirth, in which unenlightened beings caught in the repetitive nature of rebirth contrast with enlightened beings who have achieved existential non-recurrence. Propositions like this one, which deftly combine classic art-historical problems of form with fundamental Buddhist issues of existence, appear frequently in this erudite and well-written study, one that deserves to be used as both a basic reference for the representation and history of wheels of rebirth as well as a methodological model for the study of Buddhist art.

Winston Kyan

Assistant Professor, Department of Art, Macalester College

kyan@macalester.edu

Copyright ©2008 College Art Association, Inc. [Terms of Use](#)

275 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10001 | T: 212-691-1051 | F: 212-627-2381 | caareviews@collegeart.org