Buddhist Manuscript Cultures in Premodern Japan

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Abstract

Recent discoveries and scholarship on Japanese Buddhist manuscripts have illuminated new areas of research and raised previously unexplored questions in Buddhist studies and East Asian religions. This article introduces some of the recent finds and approaches to these materials. It focuses on three sets of sources: scriptorium documents from an imperial treasure house known as the Shōsōin, canonical manuscripts (issaikyō) based on texts translated or composed in China, and sacred works (shōgyō) produced and collected by Japanese monks for use in temple life. In addition to surveying these sources and the most influential secondary literature on them, this article proposes methodological alternatives to philological studies by focusing on what I call ritual, curricular, social, and material approaches.

The discovery in 1900 of a hidden cave of manuscripts in Western China near the oasis town of Dunhuang revolutionized Buddhist studies and enriched our understanding of Silk Road history and culture. Recent research into Japanese manuscripts, though far less heralded, has similar potential to stimulate research in the study of Buddhism and East Asian religions. Several hundred thousand or perhaps as many as a million or more scrolls and booklets in manuscript form populate temple and archival collections in Japan, the vast majority unpublished and unstudied.1 In the past three decades, however, scholars have begun to mine manuscript collections to uncover sources that challenge existing narratives and stimulate new research questions. This essay will outline some of the major finds from the late 20th century to the present day and consider methodological issues related to the study of manuscript cultures with the aim of developing new research questions and approaches.

The first part will focus on three types of sources. It will begin with the documents of the treasure house, the Shōsōin, which provide intimate details into the operations of an eighth-century office for copying Buddhist scripture. Second are manuscripts of Buddhist texts originally translated or composed in China and deemed part of the issaikyō or Buddhist canon. Finally, we will turn to manuscripts primarily produced in Japanese temples known as sacred works (shōgyō), which also came to be seen as scriptural in character.2 For each section, I will outline groundbreaking publications to highlight these sources importance for Buddhist studies both as a pan-Asian phenomenon and within Japan more specifically.3 The final part of the paper will explore methodological issues related to research on manuscript cultures focusing on ritual, curricular, social, and material practices.

Japan’s Oldest Archive: Shōsōin Documents and Sutra Transcription in Early Japan

On the grounds of the temple Tōdai-ji stands a raised floor, log cabin style (azekura) building from the eighth century. This structure, commonly known as the Shōsōin,4 is perhaps most famous for preserving treasures donated by eighth-century royals, many of which reached Japan via the Silk Road. But it also contains5 more than 10,000 documents relevant to the study of Buddhist manuscript cultures in premodern Japan. Outside of a small number of documents from the northern section of the storehouse that mostly relate to the treasures, the vast...
majority—667 scrolls and five bound books—derive from the archives of the Office of Sutra Transcription, a semi-official government bureau charged with copying Buddhist scripture or sutras primarily at the bequest of the royal family and their entourage. These documents, which are from the center section of the storehouse, bear no relation to the treasures. The reason these scriptorium documents ended up in the Shōsōin alongside the treasures is a mystery, though it is likely that they were placed there during repairs to another storehouse only to be forgotten for several centuries until their rediscovery in the 19th century. Whatever the reason, their preservation was a blessing for scholars of Japanese Buddhism. These documents illuminate the circulation of texts amongst monks and laity, ritual practices related to copying scripture, the cultic and doctrinal choices by patrons in selecting texts to be copied, the shape of the canon, as well as numerous other aspects of eighth-century religiosity.

Unfortunately, the promise of Shōsōin documents is only matched by their difficulty in use. The biggest obstacle emerges from the fact that the manuscripts have been reassembled repeatedly both in the eighth century and by 19th and 20th-century scholars. Administrators at the Office of Sutra Transcription made scrolls out of recycled materials—both from official documents originally produced outside the scriptorium and from internal scriptorium documents. Scrolls would be cut apart and pieced together in new configurations. As a result, when they were rediscovered in the 19th century, they were already often at least one stage removed from their ‘original’ configuration. But these problems only got worse after their rediscovery. Hoida Tadatomo (1791–1847), the scholar responsible for their initial study, as well as subsequent researchers, repeatedly peeled apart and sometimes cut sections from the Shōsōin scrolls and then reassembled them in a new arrangement based on their interests related to collecting official documents (kumon) and seals. For this reason, the current configuration of documents is often two stages removed from the original order. Publication in print format in Dai Nihon komonjo only further complicated matters, as these editors attempted (unsuccessfully) to chronologically order the documents, adding an additional level of distance from the first and second configurations dating to the eighth century. In their present form, Shōsōin documents form a 10,000 plus piece jigsaw puzzle, mixed up repeatedly, and sometimes idiosyncratically over the last 1300 years.

Thanks to the publication of research tools such as extensive catalogs and photographic reproductions, as well as the success of two graduate seminars—one at the Tokyo University Historiographical Institute and one at Osaka City University—aimed at training researchers in Shōsōin studies, scholars are finally gaining the capabilities to put this puzzle together. Sakaehara Towao, a leading scholar and teacher in the field of Shōsōin studies, has advocated an approach of gathering and analyzing all documents related to an individual sutra copying project (kobetsu shakyō jigyō). This approach promises a return to some semblance of the eighth-century order of the collection, since a set of documents would have been completed for each project, recording matters ranging from distribution of scrolls to purchasing rations.

The method advocated by Sakaehara, which aims to better understand earlier configurations, recognizes the drastic transformations to the documents in the archive over centuries of reassembling manuscripts. It also promises insights relevant to Buddhist studies, because it enables scholars to isolate the circumstances within which particular texts were transcribed. In short, his method, which has been adopted by numerous other scholars in Shōsōin studies, helps illuminate the ways individuals at court in early Japan used Buddhist scripture.

To understand the religious significance of documents related to copying scripture, it is necessary to remember that transcribing sutras in early Japan was a heavily ritualized endeavor. Scribes commonly purified their bodies before copying texts by avoiding defilements such as meat and contact with death, performed ablutions, and wore special garments known as pure robes (Lowe 2012a). In doing so, they created empowered manuscripts capable of answering
the prayers of patrons, whose requests ranged from sending their ancestors to a Pure Land to protecting the realm from disaster (Lowe 2011).

Sponsoring the transcription of sutras represents one of the most common acts of lay patronage in early Japan and East Asia more broadly. Individuals throughout the Japanese archipelago spent significant resources on these projects for various purposes. Scholars such as Sakaehara Towao (2005b, 2009) and Yamamoto Yukio (2002, 267–373) have published on impressive memorial projects such as copying the entire canon in a year after the death of Queen Consort Kōmyō (701–760) and transcribing 1000 copies of the Lotus Sutra for Empress Genshō (680–748). Others have highlighted copying for apotropaic purposes. For example, Miyazaki Kenji (2006, 59–86) has studied the transcription of the *Heart Sutra* to produce one copy for every day of the year on behalf of the rulers to protect the realm, a practice that occurred multiple times in the eighth century. And I have written about projects likely used to protect the soon to be enthroned Princess Abe from the threat of sorcery and demons said to accompany an era of cosmological decline (Lowe 2012b, 282–348).

In addition to work on individual projects, scholarship on the Shōsōin has also uncovered a variety of other areas related to ancient Japanese Buddhism including but not limited to the following: institutional history of the Office of Sutra Transcription as well as scriptoria at the Imperial Palace and aristocratic households (Yamashita 1999c; Sakaehara 2000, 2005a), the nature of the canon in early Japan (Lowe 2014a forthcoming; Miyazaki 2006, 367–418; Yamashita 1999a, 1999b, 2000), lectures on the Kegon Sutra (Horiike 1973; Miyazaki 2006, 201–246; Yamashita 2002; Yamamoto 2006), collating manuscripts (Miyazaki 2006, 247–328; Yamashita 2001), the religious lives of scribes and laborers (Lowe 2012a; Ōkusa 2010, 2013), and the material objects used for copying scripture (Sugimoto 2001, 141–169; Watanabe 2010, 2011). It should be added that from looking at colophons in temple, museum, and university collections, it is clear that sutra copying extended well beyond the court. Fellowships of devotees frequently pooled their resources together to copy scriptures in provinces some distance from the capital (Lowe 2012b, 111–126).12

Recovering the Manuscripts of Chang’an Buddhism: Canonical Texts (issaikyō) in Japanese Collections

Over the last few decades, scholars have also begun to examine collections of canonical Buddhist scripture in Japanese temple archives.13 Japanese collections provide unrivaled coverage in early manuscripts across the canon. Though the Dunhuang corpus has received far more attention from scholars of Chinese and Indic Buddhism than Japanese materials to date, only about 30 percent of the Buddhist canon survived in Dunhuang. Manuscripts in Japan, on the other hand, preserve almost the entire Chinese language Buddhist canon, as defined by the Newly Authorized Catalog of Śakyamuni’s Teachings of the Zhenyuan Era (Zhenyuan xinding shijiao mulu 貞元新定釋教目錄) of 794.14 Moreover, Japanese manuscripts often contain earlier versions than those used for the Taishō canon, the most widely cited modern edition, which was based on the 13th-century Korean woodblock version descended from the Chinese Kaibao edition of the tenth century. Most Japanese manuscripts, on the other hand, derive from scrolls first imported in the seventh and eighth centuries, thus connecting to an earlier stemma of texts. In other words, these manuscripts better preserve the ways texts may have appeared in the Buddhism of the capital Chang’an in the sixth through tenth centuries. They also better capture the versions of texts that would have been read and circulated in medieval Japan.

While some of the differences between published editions and Japanese manuscripts are minor, others are significant. For example, Ochiai Toshinori found that the *Maming pusa zhuan* 馬鳴菩薩傳, a biography of Asvaghosa preserved in Japanese manuscripts at Nanatsu-dera 七寺 as well as several other temples, is a completely different (and earlier) text compared to the Taishō
Research into the Liang Biographies of Eminent Monks (Liang Gao seng zhuang 梁高僧傳) conducted by Dingyuan (2012) and the Continued Biographies of Eminent Monks (Xu gao seng zhuang 續高僧傳) by Saitō Tatsuya (2012) have shown how Japanese manuscripts such as those at Nanatsu-dera, Kongō-ji 金剛寺, and Kōshō-ji 興聖寺 preserve earlier editions of these key hagiographical collections. Kajiura Susumu (2001), Florin Deleanu (2003), Hung Hung-lung (2006, 2008, 2009), and Stefano Zacchetti (2004a, 2008) have examined a Kongō-ji manuscript discovered in 1999 that contains an alternate and likely earlier version of the An ban shou yi jing 安般守意經 translated by An Shigao 安世高 (fl. C. 148–180) with possible emendations by him as well. Since An Shigao is generally considered the first great translator of Buddhist works into Chinese, this find has attracted attention particularly for its potential insights into early translation practices. Scholars have long relied on published editions in the Taishō canon, but this research into Japanese temple archives has shown the need to carefully consult multiple manuscript editions, as many texts seem to have been altered prior to the publication of printed editions of the canon from the tenth century.

Japanese manuscripts also preserve some texts that had otherwise been completely or partially lost. An entire volume has been published dedicated to one such text, the Piluo sanmei jing 昆羅三昧經, an extremely early example of an indigenously composed Chinese sutra possibly dating to the third century. Another indigenous work, the Jingdu Sanmei jing, was partially known in China, but Nanatsu-dera manuscripts provide missing scrolls enabling an English translation by Harumi Ziegler (2001). Jamie Hubbard (2000) has looked at how manuscript from the controversial Three Stages movement such as the Sanjie fo fa 三階佛法, which were thought to be excised from the canon, were preserved in several Japanese manuscripts including a complete edition from Nanatsu-dera. The An ban shou yi jing 安般守意經 manuscript cited above also preserves the Shi er men jing 十二門經, the Jie shi er men jing 解十二門經, and a commentary on the two preceding texts, focusing especially on the Shi er men jing. According to Zacchetti (2003), who has translated the Shi er men jing (2004b), all three of these texts, which were thought to have been lost, may also have been composed by An Shigao. These are just a few examples of newly found scrolls, but it is certain that future publications on Japanese manuscripts will continue to find previously unknown sources providing a more complete portrayal of Buddhism in China.

Japanese scholars led by Ochiai Toshinori have recently tried to facilitate research into these canonical materials through the creation of a database of ‘old Buddhist manuscripts in Japanese collections’ and a catalog (Kokusai Bukkyōgaku Daigaku Daigaku Gakujutsu Furontia Jikkōinkai 2006). These contain data from the following collections: Shōgōzu 聖語藏, Kongō-ji, Nanatsu-dera, Ishiyama-dera 石山寺, Kōshō-ji, Saihō-ji 西方寺, Shingū-ji 新宮寺, and Myōren-ji 妙蓮寺 (the Matsuosha canon 松尾社). Unfortunately, due to problems obtaining permissions for images, the digital capabilities of the database in open access remain limited to the first sheet for the vast majority of manuscripts, though it is possible to view and print color copies of many full manuscripts by visiting the library at the International College for Postgraduate Buddhist Studies in Tokyo. While scholars would surely benefit from the data being made available through open access to full manuscripts from all temples, the online database and the catalogue still provide a useful starting point for research into canonical Buddhist texts.

Of the above collections, the single most important is likely that of the Shōgōzu both because of the antiquity of many of its manuscripts and for the fact that many have been digitized with high quality images available for purchase. To begin with some background, the Shōgōzu, a repository for sutra manuscripts, is located at the Tōdai-ji 東大寺 compound next to the Shōsoin treasure house. It was originally a part of Sonshō-in 尊勝院, a subtemple of Tōdai-ji constructed in 955 that was its center for Kegon 華厳 and Shingon 真言 studies. The present structure dates to
the late 12th century and the building and scrolls were relocated to the Shōsōin compound in 1896. In addition to 443 scrolls from medieval China, the collection also includes close to 1500 eighth–century manuscripts as well more than 2000 additional scrolls of handwritten materials from the ninth through 14th centuries, not to mention almost 900 scrolls of printed material.20 Recently, the scrolls from the Shōgozō have been published in digital format (CD-R and DVD) by Maruzen. While the images in the digital editions are of high quality, the prohibitive cost (14,300,000 yen plus tax at present with the project halfway complete) has made them relatively inaccessible with only two universities in the US acquiring these titles (Cornell and Princeton).21

Beyond the Shōgozō collection, which in spite of its importance, is only beginning to receive attention, Nanatsu-dera and Kongō-ji have generated significant interest in the last 25 years.22 In fact, the collection of manuscripts (3398 in roll form and 1556 folded books) at Nanatsu-dera, a Shingon temple in downtown Nagoya, rediscovered in 1990, surely represents the most heralded discovery of Buddhist texts in Japanese temples in the last century. The excitement surrounding this cache, which contained several works that had been previously thought to be lost, is reflected in the comments of Antonino Forte, who wrote, ‘This find may turn out to be the most significant discovery of ancient texts in East Asia since the appearance of the Dunhuang manuscripts at the beginning of the century.’23 The biggest recent discovery since Nanatsu-dera has been the Kongō-ji manuscripts, which have been the source of numerous publications over the last decade. Kongō-ji, a temple in Osaka, contains over 4500 extant scrolls in its canon. Research on this canon started in the mid-1990s but picked up in particular from 2000. Like Nanatsu-dera, the majority of texts are copies that derive from a lineage of manuscripts first imported in the eighth century or earlier, thus reflecting copies of scrolls first produced in medieval China. There are numerous other collections of canons that await scholarly attention and promise exciting results regarding how Buddhism may have looked in the Chinese capital of Chang’an (and even before it) and the versions of texts that circulated in medieval Japan.24

**Doctrinal Studies and Ritual Practice from the Ground Level: Sacred Works (shōgyō)**

While canonical texts have shed much light on new aspects of Japanese Buddhism, the most exciting sources for understanding the way Buddhism was practiced in medieval Japan are surely the collections of texts referred to as *shōgyō* or sacred works. Brian Ruppert’s (2009, 64) enthusiasm for the possibilities opened by these sources points to their promise: ‘Once we actually attend to the sacred writings and Buddhist communities scattered throughout Japan, we may be able to speak, through our interpretive prism, with a fluency we have never previously enjoyed.’ So what are *shōgyō*? The term refers to manuscripts produced and collected by Japanese monks for use in temple life.25 Nagamura Makoto, one of the leading scholars on the topic, has outlined a variety of forms these texts took including commentaries on canonical texts (*shoshaku* 疏釋), debate scripts (*rongisō* 論義草), records of questions and answers from debates (*mondoki* 開答記), digests (*shōmotsu* 抄物), and notes based on oral transmission (*kikigaki* 閲書). They were copied, digested, edited, compiled, and recorded as notes at temples throughout medieval Japan.26 In particular, collections at temples such as Daigo-ji 醍醐寺, Tōdai-ji 東大寺, Ninna-ji 仁和寺, Kōfuku-ji 興福寺, and Ishiyama-dera 石山寺, to just name a few, have all received attention in recent years. Of these, Daigo-ji holds what may be the largest extant temple collection of *shōgyō* materials in Japan with 100,000 manuscripts in 800 boxes (Ruppert 2013, 363). As Brian Ruppert (2010, 140) has noted, we should remember that very few manuscript collections remain from Tendai institutions, which were the most powerful temple complexes in medieval Japan, due to the numerous conflicts that plagued sites such as Enryaku-ji 廻暦寺 and Onjō-ji 圓城寺. Instead, we have a much richer understanding of
Shingon sites, as well as other non-Tendai temples including older Nara institutions and those from the so-called New Kamakura schools. These sources provide a ground level perspective of temple life, highlighting the texts that monks authored and circulated within the monastery. It is with this in mind that Nagamura (2000, 58) has emphasized that shōgyō provide a perspective on the everyday doctrinal practices (nichijōteki na kyōgaku katsudō 日常的な道教活動) of monks, a useful term for describing the type of Buddhology possible through research into these manuscripts. The Buddhological research enabled by shōgyō would focus on the way Buddhism was actually taught and interpreted by clergy active in medieval Japanese temples in contrast to idealized normative visions of what Buddhist doctrine ought to be.

Focusing on the everyday aspects of doctrine has helped shift the perspective away from well-known and heavily studied founders such as Kūkai (774–835), Shinran (1173–1262), and Dōgen (1200–1253). In fact, shōgyō studies have illuminated people and practices that were central to medieval Buddhism but have received little attention in standard narratives constructed from published materials. These include influential but overlooked figures such as Shukaku (1150–1202) from Ninna-ji (Ruppert 2011) and Sōshō (1202–1278) from Tōdai-ji (Sango 2012), as well as many others individuals studied in Japanese scholarship. Shukaku, the son of an emperor, is particularly noteworthy and represents ‘one of the most influential masters in the history of Shingon lineages’ (Ruppert 2011, 794). Shukaku’s case is informative because he provides an example of a dharma prince (hosshinō 法親王), a child of a sovereign placed in a monastery as a youth. These dharma princes, who became increasingly influential in the medieval period, were trained from childhood with the expectation of assuming the abbacy of their temple. Manuscripts reveal that Shukaku authored or compiled a range of materials such as manuals of Buddhist music, protocols for conducting ceremonies, and pronouncements uttered at the start of rituals (hyōbyaku 表白). Research into the documents he produced reveals the various practices and studies that elite monks undertook medieval Japan.

Asuka Sango (2012) has highlighted the writings of Sōshō, who produced nearly 500 texts, mostly in the context of debate ritual. Participation in debate ritual simultaneously allowed Sōshō to advance in his understanding of Buddhist doctrine and to secure monastic promotions. The two goals were interrelated, since debate required doctrinal knowledge and was rewarded with promotions within the monastic hierarchy. Sango’s study also demonstrates that participation in debate ritual required deep familiarity with Buddhist philosophical texts and broad learning that transcended facile sectarian distinctions. In fact, it enabled interactions and exchange between institutions. As Sango (2012, 269) notes, ‘A debate ritual provided a space for elite scholar-monks of different schools to engage in dialogue across sectarian lines.’ While shōgyō tore down some barriers, it also solidified others. Studies of sacred works have shown how the production of manuscripts contributed to the creation of lineages and negotiation of power relations. Sango, along with scholars writing in Japanese, has argued that the production of shōgyō aided in the development of the cloister system (inge 院家) within Buddhist monasteries centered on transmission of texts and teachings from master to disciple. Cloisters functioned as sub-temples within larger monasteries centered on a particular discipline. Texts would be transmitted within these cloisters with expressed intent that they not circulate beyond members of the lineage. The production and reproduction of shōgyō, therefore, served to strengthen the emergence of cloisters by linking lineage with textual circulation through control of the copying of texts. Ruppert (2009) has added to these studies by showing how claims of copying a text in the hand of a master also served to strengthen lineage claims. The production of shōgyō, therefore, simultaneously reflected and contributed to institutional changes within medieval temples, leading to the growth of the cloister system.
Manuscript Cultures: Curricular, Ritual, Sociological, and Material Approaches

While the above discussion has outlined some of the recent finds and their significance, it is also necessary to reflect more generally on the methods for studying manuscripts. Like the authors of a recent introduction to Buddhist manuscript cultures, I contend that it is necessary to consider ‘religious notions concerning textuality and…aspects of broader social, cultural and ritual realities.’ Some of the approaches I will outline below correspond to what scholars such as Fabio Rambelli and Daniel Veidlinger have referred to respectively as non-hermeneutic or cultic: practices toward texts that do not focus on reading for meaning. Other methods address more explicitly hermeneutic and discursive practices, which center on understanding the meaning of the words that compose the text. While the distinction between hermeneutic and non-hermeneutic is a useful heuristic—particularly for highlighting previously unresearched aspects of textuality—and one that has stimulated new approaches and research questions, such divisions represent a somewhat false dichotomy. Hermeneutic and non-hermeneutic practices developed in dynamic relation with one another. After all, many of the beliefs and ritual practices directed toward scripture are advocated within the texts themselves. And seemingly non-hermeneutic material and social practices related to manuscripts shaped the way scripture was interpreted. Instead of drawing lines along the hermeneutic and non-hermeneutic binary, I will focus on four aspects of manuscript cultures: ritual, curricular, social, and material. Throughout, I will pay attention to the ways that interpretive practices intersect with seemingly non-hermeneutic ones.

Manuscripts were ritualized both in their production and in their use. In calling them ritualized, I draw on the dynamic definition offered by Catherine Bell (1992, 74); writing and reading practices related to sutras were ritualized in the sense that they were strategically distinguished from other more quotidian practices such as composing documents or reading secular works. Much of this ritualization stems from the broad belief system that Gregory Schopen famously called ‘the cult of the book’: namely, the attitudes and practices directed at sutras as objects worthy of veneration. Authors of sutras promoted the worship of scripture as objects equivalent to the Buddha himself. They promised rewards to those who transcribed canonical texts. The Buddhist faithful frequently took these texts up on their promises. In East Asia, these practices blossomed so that the very act of transcribing a text followed ritualized techniques. These included performing purifactory practices prior to transcription and elaborate dedication ceremonies afterward (Lowe 2011, 2012a, 2012b). Over time, these ritualized practices became codified in manuals and referred to as nyohōkyō 如法経 (Kabutogi 1983, esp. 3–143; Nakano 2009, esp. 118–133; Lowe 2014b forthcoming). From this time, people in Japan began burying sutras as well, a practice that may even have precedence in Gandhāra and China. After texts were produced, they were commonly recited, sometimes in the tendoku format, a term nicely translated by Lori Meeks (2010, 121) as ‘ritualized speed reading’ in which only select parts were rapidly read. Halle O’Neal (2011, 26–51 and 2012, 120–127) has surveyed several other practices, including copying texts on stone and tiles, blood writing, rapid transcription (such as copying the entire canon in a day), and performing prostrations with the copying of each character. These ritual practices, which were believed to create merit, served a range of purposes from curing illness to memorializing the dead. At the same time, many of the practices emerged out of particular interpretations of Buddhist ideas related to merit, purity, and the notion of the text as equivalent to the body of the Buddha. In these ways, the ritualized practices themselves could be called hermeneutic in that they were bodily interpretations of Buddhist ideas.

As scholars continue to explore the relationship between ritual practice and manuscript cultures, some of the following research questions drawn out of ritual studies may be helpful. In place of a hermeneutic and non-hermeneutic binary, it may be useful to consider the...
Durkheimian question of the dynamic relationship between practice and belief. How do ritualized practices instill particular understandings of the cosmos and ethics? How do these understandings in turn shape ritual practices? Drawing on more recent work by scholars such as Catherine Bell and Saba Mahmood, researchers can also assess the relationship between ritual practice, politics, Aristotelian ethics, and agency. Do ritual practices in the Buddhist tradition contribute to the cultivation of virtue and particular moral dispositions as Mahmood (2005) has suggested they do for Egyptian women? How does ritualized writing in the Japanese case function as ‘a strategic play of power, of domination and resistance’ to borrow the words of Bell (1992, 204).

To turn to the more seemingly intellectual side of manuscript cultures, it is also necessary to develop methods for better understanding what manuscripts can tell us about the practice of learning (shugaku 修学) in premodern Japan. Here, Justin McDaniel’s (2008, 6–8) notion of curricula proves useful:

Curricula are intertextual. Curricula put texts into different contexts. They bring together texts and oral performance in a dynamic context of teaching and learning, a developing process of negotiation between teachers and students, canon and commentaries, classical and vernacular, oral and written, physical and intellectual, aesthetic and ethical, secular and religious… To explore the curriculum of a particular religious community at a particular time and place is to look at its pedagogical methods, textual resources, physical practices, and educational structures, as well as at the relationship between the ideal religious authorities of the past and the constantly evolving lives of exegetes, pedagogues, and novice consumers.

Curriculum, for McDaniel, is not an abstract concept such as Buddhist doctrine, but instead a collection of social practices grounded in relations with material objects (manuscripts) in particular institutional settings. Japanese manuscripts provide a wealth of insight into these curricular practices. Shōsōin and shōgyō manuscripts reveal how texts circulated within a monastic community and offer a glimpse of the reading lists monks used to prepare for lectures and debates. The issaikyō of temples such as Nanatsu-dera reveal the practical canons on the ground that monks actually referred to, rather than modern constructed editions. Moreover, shōgyō—both in the form of notes based on oral transmission and colophons—show how learning often occurred within the relationship between master and disciple. Interpretation in premodern Japan was always a social and material practice.

In thinking of curricula, research shifts from what a text means to how it was understood and used by a given community within a specific historical, geographic, and institutional setting. New questions emerge. How did texts circulate? Who had access? For what purposes were manuscripts read? How were they taught and studied? How did innovation in interpretation develop? How did new interpretations gain authority?

Pedagogical practices represent only one aspect of the social nature of manuscript cultures. The very production of a manuscript requires complex social organizations. As Robert Darnton (1982) has shown, books are always produced through a ‘communication circuit’ that involves the relationships of individuals and institutions. Manuscripts too—perhaps even more so than printed books—were also produced through a vast web of human relationships (Taylor 1999, 358). They required the exchange of paper, training in writing, skilled laborers, and even administrators. At the Office of Sutra Transcription, administrators would supervise the circulation of manuscripts from an assembler, to a scribe, to two or three proofreaders, and back to the assembler again. Texts would then often circulate to temple libraries or to monks for recitation in rituals. Learning required social organizations capable of producing and circulating material goods and training individuals in the skills needed for manuscript production.
At the same time, manuscripts were not simply passive objects in these processes. Manuscript production itself generated new social organizations. For the eighth century, I have emphasized the way fellowships gathered together to pool resources to create a manuscript. These communities often shared common religious goals that transcended traditional geographic and familial organizations. They represent a previously unknown community originating in their connections to textual production and piety. Medieval efforts to compile canons such as the one at Ishiyama-dera often required large fundraising campaigns that also linked together broad segments of the population and benefited from extensive social networks forged by proselytizing monks. Making manuscripts made communities.

Analyzing the relationship between text and society adds a human element to manuscript cultures, stimulating new questions about agency and society? What institutional structures allow people to join together to copy and read texts? What types of social relationships do texts create? Does the production of Buddhist manuscripts form communities with shared values or does it contribute to differentiation based on access and literacy? How does a patron’s relationship with a manuscript differ from that of a scribe, proofreader, assembler, or monk?

This final question regarding laborers prompts attention to the material resources required to produce manuscripts. Texts are not just words. They are material goods. For example, in premodern Japan, sutras were most commonly words on a scroll composed of lined paper glued together and inscribed with ink by a brush made of rabbit hair. Manuscripts also had significant aesthetic qualities. In some cases, we see particular sutras and even entire canons being copied on colored paper with gold or silver ink and often ornamented with elaborate front pieces. In others, an entire sutra is copied in the shape of a reliquary. Remembering these material and aesthetic qualities is vital to a full understanding of manuscript cultures. As Imre Galambos and Sam van Schaik (2012, 5–6) have recently written in an introduction to a Dunhuang manuscript:

Thus the study of manuscripts is, whether implicitly or explicitly, also a study of materiality. When we study a manuscript we must take into account the circumstances of its creation. These include the individuals who created it, as well as the wider social norms that allowed it to come into being. We must also consider the physical elements that had to come together to produce the manuscript, including the paper, ink, and writing implement.

Traditionally, issues such as paper and calligraphy have primarily been used to date texts, but recent scholarship has begun to explore the significance of objects associated with manuscripts relative to hermeneutical questions. For example, Akao Eikei (2008) has shown how the differences of design in rollers at Nanatsu-dera were used to classify manuscripts: black lacquer with gold leaf (kinpaku 金箔) around the end for Mahāyāna sutras, black lacquer with gold leaf on the tip for Mahāyāna treatises, red lacquer around the end for Hinayāna sutras, red lacquer plum blossoms (umebachī 梅鉢) on the tip for Hinayāna vinaya, red lacquer on the tip for Hinayāna treatises, as well as biographies and collections, and red lacquer lotus blossom patterns (renben 蓮弁) for works deemed non-canonical by Chinese catalogs. Here, we can see the close relationship between seemingly minute material practices and the classification of knowledge. These material objects reflected existing classification schemes and also served to signify these differences to viewers. Their very materiality surely contributed to the stability of classification systems closely connected to textual interpretation.

While some progress has been made, the implications for many aspects of materiality remains unexplored. In what ways was knowledge mediated by access to technological and material resources? Do technologies drive the production of writing or vice versa? Why did individuals
choose particular material objects such as colored paper to copy texts? How does form relate to meaning? Does the materiality structure interpretation? Does it make sense, as some scholars have suggested, to speak of the agency of objects?

Conclusion

This article began with a survey of some relatively recent discoveries in Japanese Buddhist manuscripts. But as we have seen in the final section, finding the manuscript is only the first step. What to do with a manuscript once you find it is perhaps the more important question. Carefully transcribing and translating texts for academic publication is only one of many possibilities, albeit an obviously useful one. A more thorough exploration of all aspects of manuscript cultures may alter our frameworks and sources for understanding Buddhism in premodern Japan and elsewhere. As research into Japanese Buddhist manuscripts progresses, new questions and approaches will surely emerge.

Short Biography

Bryan Lowe is an assistant professor in the Department of Religious Studies at Vanderbilt University. He specializes in East Asian religions with a focus on Buddhism in early Japan (seventh through ninth centuries). He has broad interests in ritual practice, Buddhist manuscript cultures, and the relationship between religion and the state. He is currently completing a book manuscript, Ritualized Writing: Buddhist Practice and Scriptural Cultures in Early Japan. He has published on a range of topics including purity and Buddhism, Chinese indigenous sutras, the construction of the state Buddhism model in 19th and 20th-century Japan, and the notion of the Buddhist canon in ancient Japan.

Notes

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1 Brian Ruppert has estimated close to half a million extant manuscripts just looking at collections from some of the more powerful Buddhist institutions from premodern Japan. Although this type of quantitative work is still in its infancy, Japan may very well have the largest collection of premodern manuscripts in the world, and the number could be more than a million if all Edo-period (1603–1868) materials were included. Personal correspondence, 6/18/2014. This article will only discuss pre-Edo materials with a focus on the eighth through 14th centuries. This article will focus on materials originating in East Asia written in Chinese and Japanese. For recent research on Indic materials in Japanese collections, see the relevant chapters of Harrison and Hartmann (2014).
2 For some preliminary remarks on how sacred works came to be treated as scripture through the creation of catalogs, see Ruppert (2012, 563).
3 I should note that I will largely ignore documents related primarily to economic activities such as managing temple estates and similar matters. This is not to imply a strict separation between economics and religion. Rather, space constraints and personal expertise have required me to focus primarily on doctrinal and ritual issues.
4 Technically, the area around the structure, which previously contained several other buildings, is the Shōsōin, and the treasure house itself is the Shōsō, but the building is commonly referred to as the Shōsōin, a practice I will adopt in this essay.
5 Or more precisely, formerly contained. The objects and manuscripts are now in a modern facility next door.
6 Documents from the Office of Sutra Transcription occupy more than 90 percent of the total collection. See Sakaehara (2011, 24). In this article, I have generally tried to cite English language works when available and only included the most significant Japanese sources. Unfortunately, for many topics, Japanese language publications are the only ones available. In these cases, I have cited the relevant sources in Japanese.
7 For an English overview of the issues related to the history of the collection, see Farris (2007). For the best overview in Japanese, see Sakaehara (2011, 21–162). Also see the more detailed study by Nishi (2002).

Unfortunately, the Osaka City University seminar concluded with the retirement of Sakaebara Towao in 2013, leaving the Historiographical Institute as the primary site for training in Shōsōin studies.

For this approach, see Sakaebara (2011, 130–162). It is significantly influenced by groundbreaking work such as Minagawa (1962) and Sonoda (1974). The approach advocated by Sakaebara and others has radically challenged the position of classic and still widely cited works such as Ishida Mosaku ([1930] 1966), which was truly remarkable for the time it was published—a period that predated the publication of Dai Nihon Kongōhō—but needs to be used with a great deal of caution by scholars today.

For the only English language example of this approach, see Lowe (2012b, 282–348). In Japanese, there have been many studies of individual sutra copying projects. Some examples include Haruna (1993), Miyazaki (2006, esp. 59–86), Ōsumi (1999), Sakaebara (2003, 2005b, 2009), Watanabe (1998), and Yamamoto (2002).

My in-progress book manuscript dedicates a chapter to this topic. My dissertation, cited here, introduces some preliminary thoughts.

Here, I use the word canonical to refer to texts that were treated as such (i.e. considered part of the issaikyō in Japanese temple settings. It should be noted that this includes many texts first composed in China, some spuriously claiming Indic origins. Much of the following paragraph draws from Ochiai (2008), a presentation delivered at the EBTI/CBETA Conference at Dharma Drum Buddhist College, Taiwan. The paper is available online. For the complexities of defining the canon in early Japan; see Lowe (2014a (forthcoming)).

For a brief overview of this catalog, see Storch (2014, 117).

For a study, see Ochiai (2000). For a transcription, see Ochiai and Saitō (2000). Stuart Young has translated this text into English, introduced Ochiai’s findings, and assessed them. See Young (2014 (forthcoming)).

It is actually likely that the Taishō edition is not An Shigao’s translation, but instead an early and typographically unique form of commentary. See Zacchetti (2008).

The first volume of Makita and Ochiai (1994–2000) is dedicated to this scripture.

For an English language overview of other new texts from Nanatsu-dera, see Ochiai (1991) and the review by Hubbard (1991).

Tanaka (1973) can also be used alongside it. Though dated and occasionally incorrect, it provides data of other temples beyond those used in Kokusai Bukkyōgaku Daigaiku Daigaiku Gakujutsu Furontia Jikkō Linkai (2006).

For a more detailed overview of the Shōgozō in Japanese, see Iida (2011). For a brief introduction in English, see my web page.


For a brief overview of other sizable canons in temple collections, see Akao (2000, 792–795).

For the most widely cited definition, see Nagamura (2000, 168–169).

This paragraph has drawn in particular on Nagamura (2000, 189–200). For a brief English language summary of Nagamura’s epochal work, see Ruppert (2010, 142–143).

In the above two sections, I have mostly focused on sources in temple collections. University, museum, and other archives are the source of numerous other collections of Buddhist manuscripts as well. For a nice overview, see Ruppert (2006).

Berkwitz et al. (2009, 11).

For non-hemeneutic, see Rambelli (2007, 88–128). For discursive versus cultic, see Veidlinger (2006, 5–7). This phenomenon extends beyond Buddhism into a variety of other traditions, as highlighted in a recent chapter on ‘non-textual’ uses of books by Rowan Watson; see Watson (2009).


Rambelli (2007) has shown how scripture was equated with the body of the Buddha in diverse sources in medieval Japanese Buddhism.
For sutra burial in Japan, see Blair (2008, 151–188) and Moerman (2007, 2010). For Gandhara, see Salomon (2009). China remains poorly understood, but I have found one medieval Chinese story that discusses sutra burial; see Fahua zhuanji, T 2068.51.81c.

For one take on this particular question, see Lowe (2012a).

For a clear and illustrated depiction of the process through which manuscripts were produced at the Office of Sutra Transcription, see Sakehara 2002, 142–167.


Works Cited


Harrison, Paul & Hartmann, Jens-Uwe (eds.) (2014). From Birch to Digital Data: Recent Advances in Buddhist Manuscript Research. Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften.


