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## Materializing Buddhist Memories: Objects and Images of the Silk Road in Hirayama Ikuo and Yakushiji temple.

This paper analyzes the view of the Silk Road promoted by the Japanese painter Hirayama Ikuo 平山郁夫 (1930–2009) by focusing on the interaction between objects and images at two different locations: the Silk Road Museum in Yamanashi prefecture and Yakushiji temple in Nara. It will show how paintings, archaeological findings, and relics produce a loop of material and spiritual imagination and practices centered on the memorialization of the past, both in the collective sense of the transmission of Buddhism to Japan, and in the individual sense of one's affective links. The mobilization of such a view of the past allows for the construction of a sense of community and moral duty, and fosters its own reproduction through the translation of economic activities in religious terms.

*Keywords:* Silk Road – Hirayama Ikuo – Yakushiji – Materiality – Memorialization

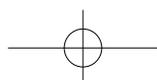
In *The Ideals of the East* (1903), the philosopher and art critic Okakura Kakuzô 岡倉覚三 (1862–1913), while comparing in Hegelian fashion the unfolding of the Oriental spirit to that of the Occidental, finds an important difference in the manner in which the two have given priority to matter or spirit: matter is necessarily present as a means by which civilization expresses itself through art, but while among the Orientals an idealist approach has prevailed, the West has dedicated more attention to realism, objects, and materialism.<sup>1</sup> In Okakura's narrative, the spiritual essence that unfolds from India to Japan finds its historical counterpart in the spread of Buddhism. In this way, the philosopher associates the Orient with Buddhism and spirituality, on the one hand, and the West with materialism on the other.

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1. Okakura 2007: 102.

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This East/West spatial dualism finds a temporal echo in an explanatory panel hanging at the entrance of the *kondô* 金堂 (golden hall) of Yakushiji temple in Nara. The panel tells the story of how the hall, after being in disrepair for centuries, was reconstructed thanks to donations coming from all over Japan since 1968, and juxtaposes the eternal benefits of the bodhisattva spirit materialized in the building with the spiritual damage that affluence can cause in modern societies. Materialism here is linked with modernity, while the preservation of ancient monuments allows the post-economic boom generations of Japanese Buddhists to keep in contact with spirituality.

These two examples show how modern discourses about Buddhism have defined it in spiritual terms and dissociated it from materialism, intended both in economic terms and as a way to approach reality and objects. Both these examples also show the ambiguity of this dichotomy, as Okakura based his opinion on the study of works of art, while the reconstruction of the hall at Yakushiji was only made possible thanks to the renovated prosperity of Japan. This can be seen as an example of the paradox that, according to Daniel Miller, characterizes the relation between religion and materiality: affirming immateriality by means of materiality.<sup>2</sup>

The two examples I have selected to introduce this paper are also indirectly connected by their reference to the idea of the eastward spread of Buddhism: Okakura builds his unifying narrative of the “ideals of the East” on the shared thread of the Oriental spirit rising in India and finding its peak in Japan; the reconstructions and renovations at Yakushiji have underlined the legacy of this Nara temple as an ending point of the spiritual journey of Buddhism through the Silk Road that connected the Eurasian continent.<sup>3</sup> In this paper, I will examine how modern reimaginings of the past that link the Silk Road and Buddhism deny the dichotomy between Buddhism and materialism or materiality by emphasizing the importance of objects and framing economic practices of donation and purchase in religious terms. I will do this by focusing on the visual narratives of Buddhist journeys at the center of the artistic production of contemporary *nihonga* painter, Hirayama Ikuo, and their interaction with objects displayed in a secularly-defined space, the Silk Road Museum in Yamanashi prefecture, and in a religiously-defined one, the Xuanzang Pavilion of Yakushiji temple (*Genjôsanjôin* 玄奘三蔵院). In analyzing these relationships, I will focus on the double aspect of materiality in connection with Buddhism: objects and economic practices.

2. See Miller, 2005: Introduction.

3. The connection between Yakushiji and the Silk Road will be dealt with in more detail in the second part of this paper.

Historians of Buddhism have shown as early as the 1950s the importance of trade and economic connections in the spread of the Buddha's teachings in Asia, and the more recent turn toward objects and materiality in the study of religion has even further highlighted these connections. French historian Jacques Gernet has underlined the importance of donations and monastic-trade networks in the spread of Buddhism to East Asia, an aspect recently investigated further in connection with premodern diplomatic relations by Tansen Sen.<sup>4</sup> John Kieschnick has likewise shown how the study of material culture is essential to understand how Buddhism interacted with Chinese culture, while Fabio Rambelli has pointed out how the Japanese monks who travelled to China in search of Buddhist teachings (*guhô* 求法) gave material proof of the transmission of Buddhism by bringing objects back with them.<sup>5</sup> The tight link between materiality, expressed in terms of trade and travelling objects, and the eastward spread of Buddhism can be found particularly in modern ideas and imagery of the Silk Road. Tamara Chin has shown how the chronotope of the Silk Road is associated today particularly with cosmopolitan views of international collaboration and cultural exchange, but also how the term itself was coined in the late nineteenth century in the context of the imperialist competition to secure the natural resources of Central Asia.<sup>6</sup>

In consonance with this more recent work, I argue that the visual narratives of journeys on the Silk Road connected with Buddhism in the work of Hirayama Ikuo 平山郁夫 (1930–2009) interact with material culture and economic practices in a way that can only be understood if we go beyond the dichotomy between the spiritual and the material. It is not my aim to criticize religion or art because of their material foundations, or to claim that objects ought to be given more attention than ideas in the study of religion, which would restate the dichotomy between matter and spirit present in modernist discourses on Buddhism. Rather, following Daniel Miller's characterization of the material turn in the study of religion and culture as an attempt to go beyond the subject-object dichotomy,<sup>7</sup> I aim to show that ideas and images about Buddhism and the Silk Road encourage economic activities and determine the way objects are conceived and displayed, and at the same time that these ideas and images are nourished and produced by the same aspects of material culture.

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4. Gernet 1956, Sen 2003.
  5. Kieschnick 2003, Rambelli 2007: Chapter 2.
  6. Chin 2013.
  7. Miller 2005: 41-46.

1. *Feeling the Presence of the Past:  
Images and Objects at the Silk Road Museum.*

The Hirayama Ikuo Silk Road Museum in Yamanashi prefecture<sup>8</sup> displays a combination of paintings by its founder, the *nihonga* artist Hirayama Ikuo, and his impressive collection of objects from all over Eurasia, ranging from Gandharan Buddhist sculptures and Persian coins, to Phoenician glassware. Together with the focus on the life experiences and travels of Hirayama, this combination of images and objects is aimed at creating a unified narrative of the Silk Road as a space of cultural exchange where religion, especially Buddhism, played an essential role. In his artistic production, Hirayama has visually reimagined the landscapes of the Silk Road and of the eastward journey of Buddhism, and he has reconceived both these elements as a way to overcome his personal trauma of witnessing the Hiroshima atomic bombing of 1945 and the collective trauma of war. While the teachings of the Buddha allayed the artist's fear of death after being exposed to nuclear radiation, the Silk Road represented an idealized peaceful space that connected cultures across national boundaries.

Hirayama Ikuo is considered one of the leading painters of the postwar Japanese *nihonga* movement, and he is also an influential figure both at the national level, for his role as president of the Tokyo School of Fine Arts, and at the international, as UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador. In his many autobiographical works,<sup>9</sup> Hirayama Ikuo frames his decision to become an artist, and his choice of Buddhism as a subject, in light of his traumatic experience of the Hiroshima nuclear bombing. Hirayama himself was a *hibakusha* 被爆者, a survivor of the nuclear bombing, and after the war his health was severely affected by the consequences of radiation exposure. After many years of trying to repress the memory of this traumatic experience, Hirayama decided to face it by painting *Hiroshima Reborn* (*Hiroshima Shôhenzu* 広島生変図, 1979), where the figure of the Buddhist protective deity Fudô Myôdô towers over the flames of the nuclear bombing, suggesting an energetic message of resurrection for the city of Hiroshima.

Hirayama chose Buddhist subjects because he identified himself with Shakyamuni's own experience of suffering, and saw in his enlightenment, and in the efforts of later Buddhists to spread his teachings, a model of hope to overcome

8. <http://www.silkroad-museum.jp/> (accessed October 2018).

9. One of the most complete autobiographies is: Hirayama 1997. See also Hirayama 1988 and 1996.

his own trauma. More specifically, the first work that earned him fame was *The Transmission of Buddhism* (*Bukkyō Denrai* 仏教伝来, 1959), where he painted the journey back to China of the seventh-century monk Xuanzang, who had spent years studying Buddhism in the native land of Shakyamuni. This subject united a series of themes very important to Hirayama, such as the experience of physical pain and the dangers of a long journey through Central Asia, the search for meaning in the teaching of the Buddha, and the journey home in order to share this meaning with the others.

Hirayama defines his own approach to art as “historical painting.” But rather than claiming historical accuracy and realism, he aims to imbue his representations of landscapes and events of the past with personal experience and imagination.<sup>10</sup> Imagination is a key term in understanding the appropriation and reconception of Buddhist narratives in Hirayama’s work. Nagai Akio, curator of the Hiroshima Prefectural Museum, uses two concepts to describe the artist’s approach to his subjects: fantasy (*gensō* 幻想) and inspired dream or vision (*reimu* 霊夢).<sup>11</sup> Through these two concepts, Nagai shows how Hirayama adds personal experiences from his own life to the representation of scenes from Buddhist stories. The painter himself acknowledges the importance of adding his own imagination to both the Buddhist scenes and the Central Asian landscapes he portrays, in order both to express his own empathic identification with them and to inspire in the observer the same kind of imagination.

Starting from the 1960s, after the success of his *The Transmission of Buddhism*, Hirayama decided to follow the model of his inspiring hero Xuanzang and explore Buddhist sites and ruins across the Asian continent. Both the landscape paintings and the objects displayed at the Silk Road Museum are the product of decades of such travels and collecting activity. In addition to spreading a specific message of pacifism, spirituality, and intercultural exchange through his art, Hirayama also turned the preservation of the cultural heritage of the Silk Road into his lifetime commitment. In 1988 he established the Foundation for the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Heritage 文化財保護振興財団, promoting the idea of a “Red Cross for Cultural Heritage” 文化財赤十字, and in collaboration with UNESCO this foundation supported a series of study and preservation projects at many sites across Asia.<sup>13</sup> Through such projects, the Japanese painter also worked to contribute

10. Hirayama 1997: 151-152.

11. Nagai 2007.

12. Hirayama 1997, 151.

13. Hirayama and Hisamitsu 1997 and 2011.

to the image of a cosmopolitan and peaceful post-WWII Japan, which could use its economic prosperity to preserve and promote the shared Eurasian cultural heritage of the Silk Road.<sup>14</sup>

The Silk Road Museum, as well as others founded by Hirayama, especially the Hirayama Ikuo Museum of Art, dedicated to the life and work of the artist himself in his native island of Onomichi, Hiroshima prefecture,<sup>15</sup> participates in this mission by combining a visual experience that stirs the imagination of the visitor, while also providing objects that anchor the narrative in the historical past. The paintings blend images of a Buddhist past devoid of sectarian divisions and dreamy landscapes where national borders are erased, thereby offering what art historian Carol Duncan has defined as a ritualized aesthetic experience of vision that allows the visitor to achieve spiritual detachment from everyday life and educates him to moral and civil progress.<sup>16</sup> In addition, they sacralize the memory of the collector and artist by associating him with the very idea of the Silk Road, the eastward transmission of Buddhism, and with the long tradition of East Asian Buddhist monks and pilgrims who undertook the difficult journey to India.<sup>17</sup>

If vision is central to the moralizing experience of a museum visit, as Carol Duncan suggests, the materiality of objects, that is, their physical presence in the museum, plays an essential role in the transmission of Hirayama's message on the Silk Road. The Japanese painter himself notes that objects can affect the observer. Their weight, texture, color, and design impress the senses and create a stronger sense of presence (*sonzaikan* 存在感) to what is imagined through the paintings and the narrative offered in the labels.<sup>18</sup> A similar "sense of presence" is described by Hirayama when he recalls his travels to the Buddhist sites along the Silk Road.<sup>19</sup> It is this feeling that allowed the painter in Bodhgaya to superimpose his imagination

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14. Hirayama 2007, Hiryama and Hiro 1996. In Hiryama Ikuo's view of his mission to preserve cultural heritage, objects of artistic value which are smuggled become "cultural property refugees," as in the case of the objects recovered in Japan and returned to the Afghan government after 2001, see Kyūshū Kokuritsu Hakubutsukan and Tōkyō Kokuritsu Hakubutsukan 2016.
  15. <http://hirayama-museum.or.jp/en.html> (accessed April 2019).
  16. Duncan 1995: 7-20.
  17. On the sacralization of the memory of the collector in memorial museums, see again Duncan 1995: 72-100. Parallels between Hiryama and Xuanzang can be found in almost all the works dedicated to him, especially in: Kawakita and Kawaguchi 1990, Hiryama 1996, *Bijutsu no mado* (ed.) 2001, Hiryama 2001b.
  18. Tōkyō Geijutsu Daigaku and Asahi Shinbunsha 2002: 8-9.
  19. Hiryama *et al.* 1985: 81.

of the Buddhist past on the present ruins he could see, and in his paintings he tried to transmit this process of projection of the past on the present. The function of the objects in the museum described by Hirayama recalls one of the ways suggested by Ronald Grimes to appreciate the ritual interaction with sacred objects in a museum: synesthesia, or the blurring of different sensorial approaches to an object.<sup>20</sup> Rather than only observing an object, touching or using it would impress upon the visitor a completely different experience. Obviously in the case of the Silk Road Museum, this possibility is precluded because the objects are protected behind glass barriers.

If we consider the glass barrier as a limit to Hirayama's "sense of presence," it is not only the physicality of the objects that can affect the imagination of the observer, but also their disposition in a room. As Jas Elsner has noticed, the arrangement of objects in an exhibition is not only the product of a plan or research, but it also produces knowledge, and the example he chooses specifically refers to the creation of an image of the Silk Road by juxtaposition of findings coming from different parts of the Eurasian continent.<sup>21</sup> The same happens at the Silk Road Museum, where Buddhist sculptures and images from different regions and periods create a linear and unified narrative of the transmission of Buddhism from India to Japan. While objects that have a clear link to Buddhism, such as statues, are central in this imagination process, other objects not necessarily used in religiously-defined spaces or practices, such as glassware and silk goods, play another important role: they suggest the idea of a space where goods and ideas freely travelled. Buddhism could be locally adapted, rejected, modified, and still suggests differences, but the materiality and practical use of a glass vase or a silk cloth can overcome cultural differences. The importance of goods exchange is linked to the ideal of peace mentioned also in the labels of Hirayama's paintings that depict caravans crossing the deserts of Central Asia: peace is the basis for trade and prosperity, which also facilitates the exchange of ideas. Rather than a simple imagination of another time and space, this message becomes a constructive project for international collaboration.

In the Silk Road collections of Hirayama Ikuo, coins—the means of economic exchange par excellence—assume the function of historical proof for the transmission of religious and cultural ideas.<sup>22</sup> Hirayama, in an interview with art historian Uehara Kazu,<sup>23</sup> describes coins as "time capsules" because they offer

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20. Grimes 1992.

21. Elsner 2018.

22. For more information on coins in the Hirayama Ikuo collections, see Tanabe *et al.* 1997, and Hirayama 2013: Chapter 4.

23. Hirayama *et al.* 1985: 50.

precious historical information for the reconstruction of chronology in areas and periods where this is otherwise impossible.

Coins also provide proof of cultural exchange, as in the particular case of a golden coin and the narrative associated with it in an explanatory panel at the Silk Road Museum (fig. 1).<sup>24</sup> The coin dates back to the kingdom of Kanishka I, who ruled over the Kushan empire during the second century CE. The kingdom centered on the area of Gandhâra and Bactria, and as a ruler Kanishka greatly contributed to the expansion of Buddhism. The peculiarity of this coin is that, while on one of its faces we find the image of Kanishka, on the other side there is a representation of an Anemos, one of the Greek deities associated with the winds. A photo of the coin is placed at the center of a panel containing pictures and narratives that explain the development and transmission of the image of the wind deity. The narrative starts with a Greek cup decorated with the image of the winged deity Boreas, the god of the northern wind. It then passes through two Kushan coins: the first is our own golden coin, the second one is important because it shows the same wind deity losing its wings. The third coin, again a Kushan one, introduces



Figure 1.

Panel at the Hirayama Ikuo Silk Road Museum, showing the transformation of the wind deity. The Kanishka golden coin is the second from the right in the upper row (photo of the author).

24. The visual narrative in the panel is based on the research by Tanabe Katsumi. For a full iconographical analysis of the coins and of the wind deity transmission see Tanabe 1990. I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for informing me about this article.

the innovation of the wind deity weaving a kind of shawl, and the same image is identified in a relief from Gandhâra and in a cave at Dunhuang. The final image represents the destination and ending result of the evolution of the wind god: the Japanese god of wind Fûjin 風神, who carries a bag similar to the shawl visible in the third Kushan coin. Placed in the context of the museum, a simple object such as a coin can communicate in a very direct way the complex concepts of cultural contact and transmission of religious ideas.

While suggesting the idea of the Silk Road as a chronotope of prosperous trade, cultural exchanges, and flows of religions, the coins seem to lose both their original use and their economic value, in the same way as other objects in a museum do. Hirayama Michiko 平山美知子, the painter's wife and companion on all travels, as well as director of the Silk Road Museum, commenting on the glass collection that she herself started, maintains that what makes these objects invaluable is the fact that they have travelled through time. In addition, she associates her collection of Silk Road glassware with feelings of nostalgia, as these objects remind her of the times she was brought by her parents to the Nara National Museum to admire the temporary exhibitions of precious ancient artefacts coming from all over Asia which form the Shôsôin repository treasures.<sup>25</sup> This description finds resonance in Grimes' association of sacralization and the process of singularization of objects happening in modern museums: commodification in modern capitalist societies produces a sense of nostalgia that is reflected in the way museums single out certain objects for their aesthetic and cultural importance, denying their economic value and in so doing making them priceless.<sup>26</sup>

The objects displayed in the Silk Road Museum are obviously not for sale, but what is particularly interesting in the Hirayama couple's approach to their work in art and cultural heritage preservation is that they do not deny the economic process that allowed both the production of Hirayama Ikuo's paintings and the gathering of the collection of artefacts from all over Eurasia. The money necessary for art and museums become part of a cycle that connects to donors and benefactors, and the entire process is reinterpreted in spiritual terms. Michiko tells the story of how the couple purchased the statue of a sitting Buddha in China using money coming from

25. Hirayama Ikuo *Shirukurôdo Bijutsukan 2007*: preface. The National Museum in Nara still shows a few selected objects of the very important collection of the Shôsôin on a rotating basis every autumn, and such exhibitions draws a large number of visitors. On the role of the survey of the collection for the reconception of the past in Meiji Japan, see Tanaka 2009: Chapter 1.

26. Grimes 1992.

the inheritance she received from her mother.<sup>27</sup> This acknowledgement associates money with affective links: Michiko reinterprets the acquisition of a Buddhist statue that ended up displayed at the Silk Road Museum as a gesture dedicated to the memory of her mother. The economic dimension of the mission of spreading a specific view of the Silk Road becomes a way to strengthen connections between living people and between the living and the dead. The objects in the museum are priceless not only because of their aesthetic and cultural value, but because they materialize deep affective bonds.

Objects in the Silk Road Museum play an essential role in fostering a view of the past aimed at inspiring peace, spirituality, and international cultural exchange among its visitors both in terms of materiality and in establishing a sense of interpersonal connection through economic relations. The objects displayed provide physical and historical proof to the narrative of a unified Silk Road chronotope suggested by Hirayama through his “historical imagination” paintings. The narrative is strengthened by a loop of reciprocal definition between objects and images: the objects in the museum provide a sense of presence for the images, but the landscapes and religious/historical scenes represented in the paintings constitute an essential interpretive background for the display of the objects themselves. Attributing priority to either objects or images, materiality or imagination, is not easy and less productive than conceiving them in a loop: Hirayama’s artworks are inspired by contemplation of ruins, but the experience of such ruins is strongly affected by the knowledge and imagined Buddhist past of the painter.

Finally, the economic dimension recognized in producing art and collecting artefacts becomes an integral part of the moral and spiritual message of the Silk Road promoted by Hirayama’s work and activism. The prosperity of contemporary Japan can be used to preserve Eurasian cultural heritage and promote in this way international collaboration. The visitors to the museum already participate in the process by paying for admission tickets and purchasing souvenirs at the museum shop.

Is this moral message of the Silk Road devoid of religious connotations because of its display in a secularly-defined space as a museum? In one of his publications, Hirayama Ikuo seems to suggest a positive answer to this question: in his view of the Silk Road, Buddhism is a cultural experience rather than a religion.<sup>28</sup> This

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27. Tanabe 2007: conclusion. On the importance of donations for the cultural preservation activities promoted by Hirayama and the institutions he founded, see also Hirayama 2011: 164-165.

28. Hirayama 1996: 98-109, 176.

interpretation can solve conflicts of religious affiliation and reciprocal exclusion by replacing a divisive concept of religion with one of culture seen as a flowing and unifying process. In addition, certain views of the museum as a “secular” or “neutral” space could deny a religious message in displays of religious objects, as the one supported by John Clarke, curator of the Buddhist gallery of the Victorian and Albert Museum in London.<sup>29</sup> However, critical research on the relation between museums and religion has significantly complicated the neutrality of museums and has shown that art displays can have ritual and sacralizing functions.<sup>30</sup> Despite being framed in cultural terms and not being confined within traditional Japanese sectarian affiliations, Buddhist religious discourse is still central in the Silk Road imaginary promoted by Hirayama’s art and collections in two ways. First, the moral message of the Silk Road is aimed at fostering a culturally interconnected world where religion and spirituality can freely be expressed and circulate, for which the narrative of the Buddhist eastward transmission provides a model. Second, Buddhism plays an essential role in the idea of preserving the memory of the past, both at the collective level of the Japanese connection with Asia, through the shared Buddhist heritage, and at the individual level of using donations to honor the memory of one’s own deceased relatives. In the next section, I will show how both these elements are present when Hirayama’s idea of the Silk Road interacts with the mobilization of a Buddhist past and of memory of the dead in a space more traditionally identifiable as religious: Yakushiji temple in Nara.

## 2. *Materializing Memory: Silk Road Imaginary and Memorial Offerings at Yakushiji Temple.*

On the fifth of every month, the priests at Yakushiji temple in Nara hold ceremonies to commemorate Xuanzang 玄奘三藏 (602–664), the Chinese monk famous for his pilgrimage to India and for the many Buddhist texts he brought to China and translated. Yakushiji honors Xuanzang as a founding figure, as the temple is one of the headquarters of the Hossô sect 法相宗 in Japan, a school based on the Yogâcâra teachings spread to East Asia through the important contribution of Xuanzang. On the day dedicated to him, the priests first perform a sutra chanting ceremony in the middle of the precincts of the Xuanzang Pavilion, where alleged corporeal relics of the Chinese monk are housed in a pagoda. The priests then enter a hall behind the pagoda where they recite a prayer for peace in front of large wall paintings depicting

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29. Clarke 2015.

30. Grimes 1992, Duncan 1995, Starn 2005.

a modern rendering of the Central Asian landscapes through which Xuanzang travelled (fig.2). The creator of these paintings is Hirayama Ikuo. The rituals ideally link the memory of the founder Xuanzang, materialized in the relics, with the message of peace and spirituality contained in Hirayama's artistic reimagination of the Silk Road. How did relics and images come to be connected?

The relics must be understood within the context not only of the celebration of Yakushiji's long history of relations with the transmission of Buddhism from the continent, but also of the more recent history of Japanese imperialism in East Asia. In the former, the role of the Silk Road is central in a narrative that stresses the eighth century connection between the thriving Buddhist institutions in the Japanese capital of Nara and the Tang dynasty Chinese capital of Chang'an. A number of objects, both ancient and more recent, are preserved and displayed at Yakushiji to provide material evidence of the temple's Silk Road legacy and foster its contemporary reimagination. For example, the statue of Yakushi Nyorai in the *kondô* sits on a pedestal whose surface motifs are interpreted as a visual embodiment of ancient cultural flows from the continent: they mix motifs from Greece, Persia, India, and China, all major cultural areas along the ancient Silk Road. The *daikôdô* (grand golden hall) instead enshrines an object that is more directly linked to Buddhism, a stone bearing the footprints of the historical Buddha Shakyamuni, which is allegedly a copy made by Japanese Buddhist monks in eighth century Chang'an and modelled on a Chinese copy of the original stone in the Deer Park of Sarnath, where the Buddha preached his first sermon.



Figure 2.

Buddhist priests of Yakushiji performing a prayer for peace in front of the wall paintings made by Hirayama Ikuo for the Xuanzang Pavilion. The image is available at the website of the Sankei Shinbun newspaper: <http://sankei-nara-iga.jp/news/archives/4691> (last access: 10 March 2019).

The relics of Xuanzang enshrined in the Xuanzang Pavilion instead have a more recent and controversial history, as Benjamin Brose has shown.<sup>31</sup> They were discovered in Nanjing during the Japanese occupation, their origins ascertained by a scholarly committee, and then they were split in different portions whose travels around Asia followed the ebb and flow of post-WWII diplomatic relations between the PRC, Japan, India, and Taiwan. Part of the relics were brought to Japan in 1944, enshrined at Jionji temple 慈恩寺 in Saitama prefecture, and from there a portion was donated in 1980 to Yakushiji temple in memory of its connection with the famous Chinese pilgrim-monk. While the donation of part of the Japanese relics to Taiwan in the 1950s had caused protests in mainland China,<sup>32</sup> the renewed diplomatic relations between Tokyo and Beijing in the 1980s allowed a group of priests and lay devotees of Yakushiji to go on a pilgrimage to Chinese sites linked to the life of Xuanzang while touring there the newly acquired relics.<sup>33</sup> The charismatic chief abbot of Yakushiji, Takada Kôin 高田好胤 (1924–1988), who since the 1960s had started a fundraising campaign to rebuild structures within the temple precincts, promoted the construction of the new Xuanzang Pavilion (*Genjôsanzôin* 玄奘三蔵院) in order to enshrine the important relics in a proper space. At its inauguration in 1991, Chinese Buddhist delegations from temples related to Xuanzang also participated.

It was thanks to his wife's connections that Hirayama Ikuo met abbot Takada and was commissioned to produce a series of large wall paintings dedicated to the travels of Xuanzang for this new Pavilion.<sup>34</sup> The choice of Hirayama was motivated by his artistic celebrity thanks to a painting of his dedicated to the Chinese monk. It took Hirayama almost twenty years to complete this task, and when the hall with the paintings was finally opened to the public in 2000, his main regret was that abbot Takada had already passed away.

Hirayama completed thirteen large wall paintings in which he imaginatively follows the journey of the monk from Chang'an through Central Asia to Nalanda, one of the most famous Buddhist monasteries in India. Commenting on the way he represented this journey, Hirayama states that he attempted to mix a realistic approach based on his own direct experience of the landscapes and sites with his "historical imagination" of Xuanzang's travels.<sup>35</sup>

31. Brose 2016.

32. Brose 2016: 160-164.

33. Yakushiji 2015: 97-99. See also the monthly magazine of the temple: *Yakushiji* 2018 (196): 16.

34. Hirayama 2001a: 134-136.

35. Hirayama 2001a: 85-100.

Rather than simply celebrating the famous ancient journey, the scenes in the paintings show how a contemporary traveler would see those landscapes today. For example, Nalanda is not represented as a thriving ancient center of Buddhist learning, but is depicted in its current state of archaeological ruins. The starry night sky which decorates the ceiling is aimed at making the observers imagine themselves under the sky in the deserts of Central Asia. More than memory of the past, the paintings stir the imagination of the visitors and could work to inspire in them a desire to experience those exotic places for themselves.

Knowledge of Hirayama's life and travel experiences, which is readily available to visitors through not only the painter's fame and presence in the media, but also information about him provided at the temple, is another element that is used to enhance the effect of the paintings on the imagination. Setouchi Jakuchô 瀬戸内寂聴 (1922–), a feminist activist and writer turned Buddhist nun, as well as the Taiwanese-Japanese novelist Chin Shunshin 陳舜臣 (1924–2015), both express how the paintings impressed them not only on account of their realistic-imaginative style, but also because they know that their author had personally followed Xuanzang's example in travelling extensively throughout Asia.<sup>36</sup> Setouchi and Chin describe such connections in terms of *en* 縁, a complex Buddhist concept related to karmic bonds between sentient beings but also between the living and the dead. The association of Hirayama's travels and achievements with those of Xuanzang provides them with a moral and religious connotation, while also providing today's Japanese visitors with a chronologically and culturally closer reference point for self-identification. According to Chin, the visual experience of the wall paintings, combined with knowledge of Xuanzang's and Hirayama's journeys, turns the exotic landscapes of Central and Southern Asia into "original landscapes" (*genfûkei* 原風景), a concept used in Japanese anthropology to define a sort of inner landscape, which entices in the observer feelings of nostalgia associated with childhood, and which plays an important function in constructing a sense of community. The faraway lands that witnessed the spread of Buddhism and the pilgrimage of Xuanzang become familiar for the visitor through the painter's imagination.

However, if it is possible to identify the purpose in the visual narrative of the art and of its display, it is much harder to ascertain how the observer may receive these narratives.<sup>37</sup> Does the visitor to the Xuanzang Pavilion share the same feeling of nostalgia and familiarity with the exotic landscapes of the Silk Road that Setouchi and Chin express? Non-fiction author Ômiya Tomonobu offers an example of how

36. Hirayama 2001a: 122-26.

37. As Jas Elsner points out, Elsner 2018: 337-339.

the display of the images fails to deliver the intended message.<sup>38</sup> He describes two moments of puzzlement in his experience of the wall-paintings of the Xuanzang Pavilion. First, he remembers how a visitor bumped her head against the glass that protects the room where the paintings are displayed. The observers are actually a few feet further away from the paintings than how they are usually in a museum, and this distance may hinder a potential experience of self-identification with the landscape, which is the aim of the artist. Second, Ômiya recalls his surprise while watching a television broadcast of the unveiling ceremony for the wall-paintings. Rather than with a simple vernissage, the special location within temple precincts was signaled by a ritual of consecration that, according to the words of the TV reporter, signified that “those were not images, but gods (*kami* 神).”<sup>39</sup> It is necessary to pause on such a statement because it introduces an important distinction between the display of Hirayama’s art in a museum and that at Yakushiji: the sacred value of the latter, sanctioned through ritual.

On December 31, 2000—a day chosen because of its symbolic importance as the last one of the second millennium—the opening of the Xuanzang Pavilion hall dedicated to Hirayama’s wall paintings was marked through an eye-opening ceremony (*kaigen kuyô* 開眼供養): the painter added a last brushstroke on one of the canvases, using a large brush that connected him through a multicolor rope first to the chief abbot of Yakushiji, and then to other officiants (*fig.3*). The eye-opening



Figure 3.

Photo of the eye-opening ceremony at the Xuanzang Pavilion, 31 December 2000. Hirayama Ikuo is holding the brush, and the abbot of Yakushiji the colorful ropes (photo adapted from Hirayama 2001a: 116).

38. Ômiya 2012.

39. Ômiya 2012: 15.

ceremony is quite common in Japanese Buddhism, and it is used to enliven new statues of the Buddha, usually by painting or piercing their eyes.<sup>40</sup> The most famous one, which provided the model for Hirayama's, was held in 752 to consecrate the giant Buddha Vairocana statue at the Tōdaiji, in Nara, and it similarly featured multicolor ropes connecting the brush held by emperor Shōmu to other officiants. The reference to such a famous precedent is not arbitrary, as the modern ritual recalls images of a past golden age in the history of Japanese Buddhism, when the great Buddhist institutions in Nara, including Yakushiji, thrived through the cultural contacts with the continent and through the political and economic support of the emperor. In so doing, the ceremony participates in a similar project to that of Hirayama's view of the Silk Road, namely, the reimagination of a past marked by cultural exchange and Buddhist spread as a model for a peaceful and cosmopolitan present.

The eye-opening ceremony also signifies, in the words of the TV reporter, that those are not mere paintings, but are infused with a divine nature. However, according to Hirayama, they have achieved the status of "images-body relics" (*eshinshari* 絵身舍利) not only because of the ritual, but also because they embody his own life experiences and the physical and financial efforts he made to realize them.<sup>41</sup> In addition, the painter sees the ropes tied to his brush as materializing two important connections: that between him and the abbot of Yakushiji—more than the priest officiating the ceremony, ideally the ropes symbolize the memory of the previous abbot Takada, who commissioned the work—; and the connection between the artist and all those people that economically supported his career by purchasing his art.

Hirayama's interpretation of the eye-opening ceremony unveils a series of important elements that link images, materiality, and Buddhist concepts. First, the wall paintings assume a sacred aura not only because of their closeness to the relics of Xuanzang, but because through ritual they become relics themselves, in the same way in which Buddha statues and icons "become alive" through the same kind of ceremony. The status of "relics" ritually reached by the wall paintings sets them apart from the other works by Hirayama displayed at museums. In addition, while permanent collections at art museums are regularly open to visit, the Xuanzang Pavilion can be visited only at specific times of the year that follow the ritual calendar of the temple. This limited accessibility can be compared to the difference in display between relics and museum objects. While the latter must be

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40 Horton 2007: 10-12.

41. Hirayama 2001a: 85-100.

visible, in order to strengthen the “sense of presence” and offer historical evidence to the idea of the Silk Road, the former are enshrined and kept from the sight of the worshipper, despite being centrally placed in the Pavilion. Despite these conceptual and practical differences between museum and temple display, we can still find a functional similarity between the two. Much like Hirayama’s paintings in the museum provide an imaginative visual context for the material physicality and historical value of the objects displayed, so too are the wall paintings in the temple aimed at enriching through imagination the experience of the Japanese Buddhist visitor who has come to pay homage to the relics of Xuanzang. While a typical practice in Japanese Buddhist material culture was to insert relics into statues or icons in order to empower them,<sup>42</sup> it is possible to say here that Hirayama’s wall paintings have been “inserted upon” the relics of Xuanzang at Yakushiji in order to make them closer to the visitor by providing them with an imaginative setting.

However, what makes these paintings particularly sacred for Hirayama is not only a traditional Buddhist view of ritual and icons, but also the labor necessary to produce them, which ties together the artist, the commissioner, and the donors. The material aspect of art, reinterpreted in terms of a shared experience of effort, become the embodiment of affective connections translated in Buddhist terms of the *en* bond. While describing how the wall paintings were made, Hirayama points out that the heavy mineral pigments and tools used, as well as the large size of the canvas, made the artist’s work physically taxing. Commenting on these words, Setouchi notes how the shared experience of effort that binds Xuanzang and Hirayama is not only represented by their long journeys throughout Asia, but also includes the labor of the translator and of the artist.<sup>43</sup>

The materiality of the wall paintings, including the pigments, tools, and labor, also implies the economic dimension of the entire process of art making, which Hirayama frames in spiritual terms, much like his wife interpreted the purchase of a Buddha statue as memorial act for her mother. The painter clarifies that he has donated the wall paintings to Yakushiji, pointing out their significant cost in terms of expensive materials and amount of labor. In explaining why he did it and what allowed him such generosity, he acknowledges economic ties and gives them a connotation close to the Buddhist concept of *en*. He sees this donation as a way to repay Xuanzang for inspiring him to produce the painting that launched his successful career, which in turn allowed him to be generous, thanks to the high prices people are willing to pay for his work. Here it is possible to see how

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42. Robson 2017.

43. Hirayama 2001a: 123.

material capital is converted into religious capital and how this transformation is materialized through art.

The lay parishioners of Yakushiji temple can participate in a similar process of meritorious acts not only by purchasing Hirayama's art, but also through donating to the temple in memory of their deceased loved ones. This practice has two important points in common with the Silk Road narratives of Yakushiji and Hirayama's art: it is materialized in objects, and it is based on the mobilization of a discourse on the past that links personal affects with practices that have a long Buddhist history. Again in a way similar to the Silk Road narratives, the practice of donation at Yakushiji gives a religious intent to the economic dimensions, all the while establishing a sense of community.

The most productive of these practices is sutra copying (*shakyô* 写経). Since the 1960s thousands of Japanese Buddhists have copied sutras at Yakushiji as a spiritual practice aimed at maintaining the link both with Buddhism and with the memory of their own deceased relatives. The monetary donations associated with sutra copying have been so plentiful that they allowed for the restoration and the reconstruction of multiple buildings in the temple precincts.

Takada Kôin, commissioner of the Xuanzang Pavilion, started this practice as soon as he became chief abbot in 1967. He connects the beginning of this mission with a memory of how he stood in awe of the Eastern Pagoda after it survived a destructive typhoon, and how he thought of the building as a buddha itself, because it materializes the link with the invisible world, and at the same time it is the product of the effort of people who cared about such a link.<sup>44</sup> In addition, he also sees the sutra copying donations and temple reconstructions as a way to translate the economic prosperity of late 1960s Japan in religious and artistic terms, allowing the country to rise after post-WWII material and spiritual misery, a view also restated in the explanatory panel described in the introduction of this paper.<sup>45</sup> By contributing to the preservation of the historical and artistic heritage of Yakushiji, donors can associate themselves and their deceased loved ones with the aura of eternity that monuments have. Here we find again the paradox of affirming immateriality by means of materiality—both in the sense of material objects and economic aspects of labor and money—following Daniel Miller and Lynn Meskell.<sup>46</sup> One of Takada's key mottos of his mission is "One who seeks eternal things and strives in eternity is called a bodhisattva."<sup>47</sup>

44. Takada 1969: 19-27.

45. *Yakushiji* 2018 (194): 4-9.

46. Miller 2005: especially the Introduction and Chapter 1 by Lynn Meskell.

47. 永遠なるものを求めて永遠に努力する人を菩薩といふ。Quoted in a memory article by the current chief abbot, in *Yakushiji* 2018 (194): 4.

The practice of sutra copying rituals, associated with meritorious character and scholarly activities, is widespread in the history of Buddhism, and its importance in Japan has been analyzed also for its material aspects.<sup>48</sup> Its recent revitalization at Yakushiji additionally benefits from the specific mobilization of the past in the narratives and imagery of the Silk Road: its founding figure Xuanzang is remembered as a great translator of Buddhist texts, and the Pavilion that enshrines his relics also contains a statue of the monk holding a brush and Indian-style palm-leaf manuscripts.

The thousands of sutra copies produced by Japanese Buddhists nationwide become themselves a materialization of both local and transnational Buddhist links. Most of them are enshrined in the *kondô*, creating a physical link of closeness between their authors and the Yakushi Buddha enshrined in the building, which was restored again thanks to the sutra copying donations. However, part of the sutra copies currently collected for the restoration of the Western Pagoda are enshrined in the Japanese temple in Bodhgaya, India, establishing a link between Yakushiji and the place where Shakyamuni reached enlightenment.

In addition, with the expansion of the temple reconstruction program, other practices of memorialization have been associated with donations. Objects are enshrined in the temple carrying the names of deceased people whose loved ones donated to Yakushiji for their eternal memory (*eitai kuyô* 永代供養). Among them are lanterns in the Xuanzang Pavilion, golden tablets that cover the wall behind a large image of Amida Nyorai, and *hyakumantô* 百万塔, or miniature stupas containing prayer scrolls. While the lanterns are directly associated with Xuanzang through their physical proximity to his relics, the other two memorial objects are also immersed in the narrative of the Silk Road Buddhist past. The tablets are in a recently rebuilt hall decorated with large panels that illustrate Nara and Heian period Japanese monks who travelled to China to foster the transmission of Buddhism to the archipelago. The *hyakumantô* recalls the famous precedent of Nara period empress Shôtoku's donation of one million miniature stupas containing scrolls with *dhâraṇî* spells. Those spells were part of a Buddhist text that encourages the construction of pagodas for expiating sin and accumulating merit.<sup>49</sup> These objects are a materialization of a double practice of memorialization, as they express the personal affective links of the donors, while using a material and visual narrative to connect the donors to the golden age of Yakushiji and of Silk Road Buddhist transmission.

Practices of donations and memorialization are not only financially useful to fund large projects of restoration and reconstruction at Yakushiji, but also to build

48. Rambelli 2007: Chapter 3 and Lowe 2017.

49. Yiengpruksawan, 1987.

a community of people that keep the association with the temple for longer than a just a single pilgrimage visit. This is particularly important for this temple that, like the other Nara institutions, was not included in the *danka* system (*danka seido* 檀家制度) of temple household affiliation in the Tokugawa period, and therefore does not have a community of parishioners who periodically visit their family graves and contribute to support the temple.<sup>50</sup>

While symbolizing this newly created community, the memorial objects and the reconstructed buildings in Yakushiji also directly foster new connections by virtue of their materiality. Their production offers employment to entire families who then are tied to the temple, as very often both artisanal skills and customers' loyalty are transmitted within the family. In a series of articles that commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the start of the sutra copying fundraising campaign, the monthly publication of Yakushiji included interviews with some of the artisans who work for the temple.<sup>51</sup> Two in particular are interesting because they connect labor and material objects with affective links. In the first, the chief carpenter remembers with admiration the teachings he received from his master, the artisan who directed the reconstruction of the Western Pagoda, and whose working tools his disciple still preserves. In the second interview, the woman who is now in charge of the workshop that produces the paper for the sutra copying regards in the paper production process a double link to her father, who started the commission for abbot Takada, and to the temple donors who will copy sutras on that paper. The families of the artisans that work for Yakushiji become in this way part of the newly built community, while contributing to expand it through their work.

Finally, the importance of materiality and craftsmanship at Yakushiji is ritually associated with narratives of the Silk Road and transmission of Buddhism so central to the temple. The Buddha relics discovered during the ongoing restoration works of the Eastern Pagoda are scheduled to be re-enshrined using five containers crafted by skilled artisans for just this purpose, and whose material recalls Silk Road trade in a similar way as the objects displayed in Hirayama Ikuo's Silk Road Museum do: glass, gold, lacquer, porcelain, and silk.

50. Takada Kôin himself points out this peculiarity of the Nara temples while stressing that the real function of the memorialization is for the spiritual benefit of the living and for the preservation of their spiritual life, Takada 1969: 93-96.

51. *Yakushiji* 2018 (195): 21-28; *Yakushiji* 2018 (196): 34-39.

52. From the newsletter of Yakushiji website: <https://www.nara-yakushiji.com/> (accessed October 2018). The reopening to the public of the Eastern Pagoda is scheduled for 2020, as many other events and restoration works around Japan planned in preparation for the Olympic Games in Tokyo.

At Yakushiji temple, a complex dynamic unfolds around images and objects, linking them to the construction of collective memories of the past and individual affective bonds to the past, present, and future. Images of the past, both at the level of the golden age of the temple and at the more intimate level of personal affects toward one's deceased, are mobilized to support materially the preservation of the temple itself, which in turn reminds the visitors of their religious and affective bonds, spinning a loop of spiritual and material discourse and practices.

### 3. Conclusion: Of Matter and Memory.

The reconstruction of the Western Pagoda at Yakushiji (1981), was the first achievement of the donations associated with sutra copying. It has been recently enriched with a series of sculptures by artist Nakamura Shinya 中村晋也 (1926–), which portray four scenes of the life of the Buddha. In all the scenes, the figure of the Buddha dramatically emerges in shining gilt bronze from a dark background. However, in addition to the Buddha, two glittering objects are clearly visible. First, in the scene of the setting in motion of the Dharma Wheel (*tenpōrin* 転法輪), the coins collected by the merchant Sudatta to buy Jetavana and donate it to the Buddha and his disciples shine (fig.4); and second, in the scene of the distribution of the Buddha's relics (*bunshari* 分舍利), the containers of the relics themselves do the same.



Figure 4.

Detail from Nakamura Shinya's sculpture "Discourse of the Turning of the Dharma Wheel" (転法輪), in the Western Pagoda of Yakushiji. Sudatta is kneeling while covering the Jetavana garden with golden coins in order to buy it and donate it to the Buddha. An image of the full scene is available at the Yakushiji website: [https://www.nara-yakushiji.com/guide/garan\\_seito.html](https://www.nara-yakushiji.com/guide/garan_seito.html) (last access: 10 March 2019)

These scenes draw our attention to the early importance of materiality in Buddhism. The shining gilt bronze connects in an aura of sacredness the Buddha, the meritorious act of donation by lay Buddhists, and the materialization of memory in the form of relics. This connection can be used to summarize the analysis of materiality and Buddhism in this paper: images and objects associated with Buddhism through discourse and practice play an essential role in anchoring a memory of the past both at the individual and collective level. This memory then fosters a sense of community that on its turn encourages the economic support for the reproduction of the same images and objects.

Both Hirayama Ikuo and Yakushiji valorize a spiritual connection with the past, through the preservation of cultural heritage and of the memory of one's own affective links. They create visual and material narratives where the Silk Road and the transmission of Buddhism become means for achieving eternity, by overcoming the finality of life and the borders of history and nations, and by connecting with the world of spirituality. The association with the Silk Road allows the artist, the temple, and the donors to participate in this idea of eternity. In addition, the view of Buddhism as a shared cultural experience is a means to transcend sectarian affiliations and can be displayed in both a secular and a religious space.

Matter, instead of being defined as the negation of the spirit, becomes an embodiment of it, be it through artworks, archaeological findings, or relics and memorial objects, as well as a tool to reproduce and spread this spirit. While mobilizing the discourse of a loss of spirit in the modern materialist world, the moral narrative of the Silk Road promoted by Hirayama Ikuo and Yakushiji allows an affluent society to translate its prosperity into meritorious acts that provide it with sense of community and higher purpose.

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