

Introduction

Images in Asian Religions: Texts and Contexts

PHYLLIS GRANOFF AND KOICHI SHINOHARA

The study of images in Asian religions has tended to emphasize the centrality of image worship in both Hinduism and Buddhism. The chapters in this volume offer a challenge to any simple understanding of the role of images by looking at aspects of the reception of image worship that have only begun to be studied. For example, there has been little or no attention paid to arguments within Asian religious traditions that make a case against image worship. There has also been little scholarly work done on apologetics for image worship, and the ways in which either Hinduism or Buddhism attempted to make a place for image worship. As this volume demonstrates, both of these are important. We need to consider the strategies that Asian religious texts used to make room for image worship; this can throw light on how images were socially and ritually constructed. A study of the arguments against image worship can help to place such worship within its proper context, by showing that image worship was more problematic than we may have realized. Its centrality did not go unquestioned by certain groups. The chapters in this volume look critically at many of the assumptions with which we have comfortably lived. We have all assumed that we know what we mean when we are talking about images, or that we are all talking about the same thing. Several chapters in this volume will ask us to question what is an

image, and probe more deeply into what Asian religions considered objects of worship.¹

Perhaps the best-known debate about the nature and origin of images in an Asian religion was conducted around the Buddha image and the transition from aniconic to iconic. The scholarly studies have focused on the moment of change and tended to conclude that the contest between aniconic objects of worship and anthropomorphic images was settled at an early point in history.² It is often assumed that after this crucial turning point, anthropomorphic images became the normative objects of worship, with non-anthropomorphic objects, such as pots, figuring mainly as temporary supports in a ritual context or relegated to the margins of orthodox worship. This issue is revisited in several chapters here, which show how anthropomorphic images coexist with other sacred objects; in fact, anthropomorphic images are not unique in the ritual treatment they receive or the ways in which they function in cultic practices. Much of the evidence accumulated here challenges the primacy we tend to accord anthropomorphic images. The “image” of a deity may even be an assemblage of objects, in which an anthropomorphic element is the least important in determining its identity, while the focus of a ritual may be the mantra or sound pattern that is thought to constitute the body of the deity.³

The authors come from different disciplines and bring to the discussion divergent perspectives; they are art historians, anthropologists, historians of religion and philosophy, Sinologists, Indologists, and Japanologists. We share the desire to re-evaluate received assumptions in search of more nuanced ways of understanding how images were received and conceived in Asian religious traditions. Our varied fields of specialization enable us to consider in our discussions both Buddhism and Hinduism, and to take into consideration the evidence of contemporary field observations as well as archeological and textual sources. It is our hope that breaking out of our disciplinary boundaries will afford us new ways of understanding. Despite the diversity of our training, these chapters show that we are all grappling with similar questions. Indeed, we may not agree on every point; strong cases are made here for different interpretations of the evidence available, allowing for lively and productive discussion. Our fundamental diversity of methods and primary data is reflected in the broad scope of the chapters, while our common concerns are clearly highlighted by the subheadings under which the chapters are grouped.

We have arranged the chapters in three parts that make clear their

shared questions. The first, “Defining Images: The Sacred Objects of Indian Religions,” consists of three chapters, all of which grapple with the question, “What do we mean when we speak of ‘images’ in the context of Asian religions?” All three authors suggest that the term “image” covers a wide range of sacred objects and that the boundaries between “images” and other ritual objects are fundamentally fluid. These chapters confront head-on the issue of the primacy of the anthropomorphic image and suggest that the easy progression scholars see in Buddhist art that leads ultimately to the centrality of the Buddha image was only one solution to the problem of how or what to worship.⁴ The focus of all three chapters in Part 1 is India. One of the issues they explore is the significance of the observation that sacred objects are so diverse: can this tell us anything about the origins of image worship and its history, particularly its relationship to Brahminic orthodoxy? We shall see that the answers to this question are complex; they also lead us naturally to the next part, “Images and the Elite Intellectual Culture: Accommodations and Ambiguities.”

The three chapters on China and India found in Part 2 focus on how images were received in erudite circles. Dealing with Hinduism and Buddhism, the authors study the disjunction between the cult of images and certain genres of learned texts, in an effort to understand how elite circles participated in the formation of the cult of images or later made a place for established image cults. These chapters make clear the complexity of the task; learned authors often had to struggle to make a place for image worship and account for its efficacy. The chapters also demonstrate that the problems crossed religious boundaries, while the solutions were many, even within a single religious group. Considered together, these chapters show clearly that responses to images were not uniform; different groups promoted different strategies to accommodate image worship.

This need to pay attention to specific groups and historical contexts leads us to Part 3, “Re-creating the Context of Image Worship: Four Case Studies,” which includes chapters on Japan and Southeast Asia. The four chapters all emphasize the fact that we can best appreciate traditional religious images by recovering the specificity of their original context. In each chapter, the author endeavours to uncover the religious and cultural setting of a particular image or group of images. These four chapters show that the meaning of an image cannot be separated from its ritual and cultural setting. In what follows, we discuss briefly the individual chapters in each part.

Phyllis Granoff's chapter, "Images and Their Ritual Use in Medieval India: Hesitations and Contradictions," begins by raising the question of whether image worship was really central to Indian religions, particularly Hinduism. She focuses on two general cases in which rituals seem to deny what is most fundamental about images as unique objects of worship. In the first, rituals that we normally consider as specific to images are conducted for other objects, such as rosary beads. This practice leads Granoff to question whether images can really be said to have a special status as the focus of a unique cult. The second complex of rituals she examines are healing rituals, in which images figure primarily as objects of monetary value that are to be given to the officiating priests. This, too, she argues, denies them any special status. Their value is in the precious material out of which they are made, which, in turn, allows them to function as appropriate gifts to the priests. Granoff's chapter builds on an earlier study, in which she reviewed the evidence of early Sanskrit texts to argue that image worship was not at all at home in early Indian religions.⁵ This earlier essay focused on anomalies that were created when Brahminic ritual patterns were grafted onto image worship. The present chapter looks at the problem from a slightly different direction, examining cases in which either images or rites focusing on images are used in situations that somehow seem to deny the traits specific to them as images. In doing so, the chapter also raises the question of what defines an image in the ritual context, a question that Daniela Berti and Gilles Tarabout take up in their contributions. Granoff suggests that because Brahmin priestly circles were not entirely comfortable with images, images had no preferred status in their rituals. Thus, images were only one of many possible objects that could be the focus of a cult. Granoff's chapter raises a number of questions about the relationship between image worship and rituals in certain priestly circles; it also indirectly raises the question of what is an "image" of a deity, questions that are also dealt with in many of the chapters. Indeed, Gilles Tarabout's chapter deals directly with these issues and questions Granoff's hypothesis that image worship must have begun outside the elite Brahmin priestly circles. Here was one example of plausible cases made for apparently conflicting hypotheses on the basis of different bodies of evidence.

In Chapter 2, "Theology as History: Divine Images, Imagination, and Rituals in India," Tarabout presents an argument that offers a challenge to many of Granoff's assumptions. He asks us to consider

the evidence of contemporary practice in our discussions of the origins of image worship in India. He proposes that contemporary evidence supports a hypothesis that image worship is in fact more at home in Brahmin and high-caste circles than it is among other, lower-caste groups. Tarabout begins by saying that much of the discussion of the origins of image worship in India has been marred by mistaking theological statements for historical reality. Thus, he contends, the many statements in classical texts and those made by worshippers today, in which image worship is said to be something for the masses, or the lower castes, should not be accepted as a valid description of how image worship actually began.

He then presents the results of his fieldwork in Kerala, which vividly illustrates his contention that while low-caste groups worship odd assemblages of objects in which divine power is either said to reside or has been ritually made to reside, it is Brahmin temples that are more likely to house anthropomorphic images of deities. Contrary to the assertions of the theologians, it is these upper-caste circles in which image worship predominates. This suggests to him that the received model in which image worship, originally popular among the masses, was later accepted by the Brahmins, cannot be correct. He notes that the old model has already been discarded by scholars of Buddhism, and argues that it should now also be set aside by historians of Hinduism.⁶ Both Granoff and Tarabout leave open the large question of the circles in which image worship was originally at home; while Granoff suggests that it was not Brahmin priestly circles, Tarabout argues that it was nonetheless some elite group. Tarabout's chapter also raises the question of what we are talking about when we speak of "images" in Indian religions; while art historians have focused their attention on anthropomorphic images or the representations of Śiva liṅgas in the classical cults, the evidence of the anthropologist demands that we accept an assemblage of diverse objects such as a stool, coconut, and sword as an "image," that is, a representation of the divine. These objects, like the rosary beads Granoff discusses, suggest that the image is only one of many objects in Indian religions that can become the focus of cults. They urge us to broaden our concept of just what an "image" of a deity can be.

The issue of what constitutes the embodiment of the god and his/her distinctive identity is the central question for Daniela Berti in Chapter 3, "Of Metal and Cloths: The Location of Distinctive Features in Divine Iconography (Indian Himalayas)." Berti's evidence comes

from the observation of contemporary cults in the Indian Himalayas. She has studied the *pālki*, or palanquins, of village deities. These structures are elaborately adorned with cloth, jewellery, and metal faces, called *mohrā*. Each palanquin has its own personality; it is identified with a particular deity and receives worship as that deity. Surprisingly, Berti shows that what confers this identity on the palanquin is not the metal faces, the only anthropomorphic element in the assemblage. She notes that it is in fact the shape of the frame that is the first indication of the identity of the deity. The *mohrā* are highly stylized and offer little or no clue as to the identity of the god; Berti suggests that historically the *mohrā* may have represented the donors rather than the deity and were never intended to represent the god. Furthermore, *mohrā* of the same god can differ from each other and be identical to those of another god. The rituals surrounding the construction and storing of the various parts of the palanquin lead to a similar conclusion: pieces of jewellery and other items that we might consider purely “decorative” receive the same ritual treatments as those offered to the frame and the *mohrā*. Here, then, is another case in which anthropomorphism is not the essential mark of the representation of the deity. Berti also makes the point that unlike the case of the traditional image in the temple, where a single object is the support of the cult, the palanquin is a diverse collection of objects, which together are the seat of the god. Like Tarabout’s assemblages of coconuts, swords, and leaves, these palanquins challenge our conceptions of “images” of the divine. They suggest the complexity required for a proper understanding of what constitutes physical supports of religious cults.

All three of these chapters, in fact, stress that diverse objects, subjected to the proper rituals, are regarded in Hinduism as the appropriate focus for a cult; the anthropomorphic image or *liṅga* in the temple has no particular claim to that special status. In all such cases, it is difficult to isolate any particular feature of the “image” that determined its appropriateness for a given ritual. Granoff’s rosary beads, Tarabout’s coconuts, and Berti’s palanquins might all be considered cases in which the actual physical appearance of the support is not obviously connected with the iconography or personality of the god as these are known from other sources. Granoff and Tarabout further attempt to draw conclusions about the relationship between image worship and the elite ritual or intellectual culture, a question that is also studied in the three chapters in Part 2.

For Granoff, this fluidity implied that images somehow did not fit into Brahminic ritual patterns; their ritual function and their being “images” or “likenesses” of a god seemed to have nothing to do with one another. Tarabout’s evidence from contemporary practice provided cases in which the worship of anthropomorphic images was in fact observed to be more at home in Brahmin circles. We are left with the impression that the relationship of image worship to Brahminic orthodoxy is complex indeed.

The first chapter in Part 2, Hans Bakker’s “At the Right Side of the Teacher: Imagination, Imagery, and Image in Vedic and Śaiva Initiation,” as if to mediate between these two positions, offers an unusual example in which Brahminic ritual patterns and image worship have converged and mutually enriched each other. The chapter explores the origins and meaning of an unusual form of Śiva known as Dakṣiṇāmūrti, “The South-facing God,” who is regarded as the divine teacher. It concludes that image worship belonged initially outside of Brahminic circles, but that Brahminic patterns of thinking ultimately transformed not only the worship of images but also its own rituals through the creation of new and iconic forms. Bakker argues that Dakṣiṇāmūrti offers us a case in which we may trace how a concrete visual image of God actually arose among literate Śaiva Brahmins. The process was many-stepped and involved a transformation of a vision of God as teacher, at whose right side (*dakṣiṇataḥ*) the student sat, into the God who faces South (Dakṣiṇāmūrti). Bakker painstakingly reconstructs the process through a close consideration of a number of key texts. He begins with the *Śatapatha-brāhmaṇa* and ritual texts known as the *Gṛhyasūtras* and then moves on to texts of the early Pāśupata school of Śaivism. On the basis of this cumulative evidence, he argues that a wide range of texts detailing rituals of initiation specify that the student is to be at the right of the teacher. Furthermore, he argues, in the Pāśupata initiation ritual, the student was enjoined to regard his teacher as the god Śiva. Thus the student “sits at the right side of Mahādeva’s visual manifestation and sees Him, His *rūpa*, His benign epiphany, in front of him.” Bakker argues that it is this ritual that gave rise to the iconographic form known as Dakṣiṇāmūrti. The teacher, who turned to his right, towards his student, has become the God who faces South, for the word *dakṣiṇa* can mean both “right” and “south.” Bakker supports his arguments with examples of the earliest sculpted representations of Dakṣiṇāmūrti. His chapter offers the first concrete evidence we have for an iconic form of a deity clearly

originating in Brahmin ritual circles. It suggests that the relationship between Brahmins and images is also far more complex than can be described merely by a single theory of the origins of image worship, or by looking at any single genre of texts. There seems to have been a continuing and mutually fructifying relationship from a very early period.

Despite their obvious differences in focus, these four chapters on India all concentrate for the most part on the ritual context of images. Gérard Colas's chapter, "The Competing Hermeneutics of Image Worship in Hinduism (Fifth to Eleventh Century AD)," offers us a very different and much-needed perspective from the Indian philosophical tradition. Colas considers three representative schools of Indian philosophy: the Mīmāṃsā, the school of Indian philosophy most closely linked with the rituals of the Vedic sacrifice; the Advaita Vedānta, known best from the works of the ninth-century philosopher Śaṅkara; and the Nyāya or realist school, which was to a large extent responsible for formulating rules of logic and debate in classical India. Colas takes the eleventh-century philosopher Udayana as an example of Nyāya speculation on the nature of images. For philosophers from all three groups, Colas notes that image worship was not a major topic of interest; we must often infer their attitudes towards image worship from offhand comments they make in the context of other discussions. Finally, he offers as a contrast some remarks on the Vaikhānasas, a group of Vaiṣṇavas who were temple priests, and thus for whom images and their worship were a main concern.

What emerges from Colas's study is the remarkable sense of how diverse the attitudes towards images were among the intellectual elites. While many of the papers on images in India spoke loosely of "Brahmins" or the "Vedic imagination," Colas looks specifically at the philosophical writings of two leading intellectuals of that Vedic tradition as it had been transmitted in the fifth century AD and later. It is not difficult to see from their basic premises that the proponents of the Mīmāṃsā should have found image worship problematic, for, as Colas notes, they rejected the idea that the gods have bodies and that the gods were the central focus of ritual. Orthodox opinion denied that the gods appeared at the sacrifice in bodily form and denied that they ate the offerings. For the orthodox Mīmāṃsā philosopher, the rite itself remained paramount and the deity was made subordinate to the rite. At the same time, as Colas shows, remarks in their texts indicate that the Mīmāṃsā philosophers were aware of public rituals performed for images in temples and accorded them limited sanction. The Advaita

philosopher similarly shows an awareness of the cult of images, although he clearly does not regard the image as god. For Śaṅkara, worshipping an image involves a deliberate act of imputing to the image divine identity. But perhaps the most intriguing evidence that Colas discusses comes from Udayana, for whom an image's status as an object of worship seems to depend not solely on human effort but equally on divine effort. An image is an object of worship when a god makes the deliberate mental effort of identifying himself with the image in question; a role for humans is provided in that gods prefer to do this with regard to images that have been appropriately consecrated.

Colas's chapter illustrates the variety of ways in which intellectuals regarded image worship. It is important evidence from texts usually ignored by scholars who study images, and has much to tell us about the reception of image worship in intellectual circles in medieval India. It also shows us that even within a category like the "Brahmin priests" that Granoff discusses or the "intellectual and social elite" of Tarabout's paper, there was likely to have been a wide range of opinions on images and very different rationales for those opinions.

With Koichi Shinohara's chapter, "Stories of Miraculous Images and Paying Respect to the Three Jewels: A Discourse on Image Worship in Seventh-Century China," we turn from India and Hinduism to Buddhism and East Asia. Like Colas, Shinohara highlights the gap between the well-attested popularity of images in practice and the relative neglect of the subject in medieval scholarly written sources. His main focus is similarly to map out for us how such scholarly circles sought to understand the practice of image worship. Shinohara argues that the discourse on images in medieval Chinese Buddhism evolved only gradually and in several directions that were ultimately never harmonized to allow for the formation of a coherent understanding of the place of image worship. To illustrate this central hypothesis, he examines the treatment of images in the writings of the seventh-century *vinaya* masters Daoxuan and Daoshi.

These two monks were close collaborators at the Ximingsi monastery in the capital city and compiled several major collections of historical records and scriptural passages. Among these, two related collections of image miracle stories are of particular interest. The very fact that Daoxuan and Daoshi were motivated to collect such stories attests to the popularity of the image cult. A close examination of the way in which both these monks framed the stories enables us to reconstruct their attitudes towards image worship; Daoshi's encyclopedic anthology

The Jade Forest in the Dharma Garden is particularly instructive in this connection. Throughout their active careers, both Daoxuan and Daoshi appear to have been preoccupied with a specific apologetic agenda; arguments made against the Buddhist monastic community compelled them to defend the refusal of monks to pay respect to secular authorities of any sort, from family elders and parents to rulers of the kingdom. Instead, Daoxuan and Daoshi argued, monks and nuns pay respect to images and to those who stand above them in the monastic hierarchy.

Shinohara's chapter traces how this argument, first articulated in Daoxuan's *vinaya* commentary, was elaborated in Daoshi's anthologies. In the course of the discussion, he notes that image worship, treated initially as "paying respect to the Buddha," increasingly came to be connected with the practice of Buddha visualization. Thus, by the time of the later and abbreviated version of Daoshi's collection, *Essential Teachings of Scriptures*, the connection between image worship and the arguments surrounding the behaviour of the Buddhist monastics towards secular authorities had receded in importance. At the same time, Shinohara notes, scriptural passages on Buddha visualization and image miracle stories remain only loosely integrated. The conclusion seems inescapable that the popular image cult eluded the efforts of these scholar monks, who sought to secure for it a solid scriptural foundation. Shinohara concludes his exploration by suggesting that the gradual evolution of the discourse surrounding images may well have its parallel in a similarly gradual evolution of the actual practices centring around images. He offers one case, the ritual of bathing images, as an example.

Part 3 of this volume, "Re-creating the Context of Image Worship: Four Case Studies," opens with Robert Gimello's chapter, "Icon and Incantation: The Goddess Zhunti and the Role of Images in the Occult Buddhism of China." Gimello explores the nature and role of icons in Mijiao or esoteric Buddhism in China, in which certain deities are thought to be fully present to their devotees as consecrated and visualized images and as sacred verbal formulas. The Tantric goddess Zhunti (Sanskrit Cundī or Cundā) was the object of popular occult practice in Chinese Buddhism from the Tang dynasty and continues to be popular today. Gimello takes her as representative of an important class of *dhāraṇī* deities, who exist, as it were, at the very intersection of speech and vision. *Dhāraṇīs* are sacred formulas or mantras, and the goddess Zhunti is both mantra and image. The chapter utilizes the earliest documents of the Zhunti cult, texts translated into Chinese in

the late seventh and early eighth centuries, and an eleventh-century Chinese treatise critical to the later development of the cult. It examines these documents against the background of contemporary theory about the significance of “images” in religion, to elucidate a fascinating and little-known aspect of Chinese Buddhism and show its relevance for broader discussions of the nature and function of image cults.

Chari Pradel’s chapter, “The Tenjukoku Shūchō Mandara: Reconstruction of the Iconography and Ritual Context,” also deals with the complex history of the reception of images, but in this case, Pradel is studying a very specific image said to date from the seventh century in Japan. The object in question is one of the most famous products of early Japanese art. Known as the Tenjukoku Shūchō Mandara, it consists of fragments of embroidered cloth in the possession of the Buddhist nunnery of Chūgūji. The fragments are what remain of a pair of curtains said to have been commissioned by Princess Tachibana, one of the consorts of Prince Shōtoku (AD 574-622), and of a replica made in the thirteenth century.

Pradel explores the interpretation of the images represented on the curtain both in medieval Japan and by modern scholars. The understanding of what the curtains depicted was intimately connected with the reverence accorded Prince Shōtoku as a patron of Buddhism. In fact, as Pradel explains, Prince Shōtoku became the focus of a cult not long after his death; he was the subject of numerous hagiographies, in which he was celebrated as the “father of Japanese Buddhism.” The cult began as early as the eighth century and resulted in the creation of both texts and art. Pradel argues that the traditional depiction of Prince Shōtoku has biased scholars in their efforts to understand the work; since Prince Shōtoku was a pious Buddhist, modern scholars assumed that the curtains must also be Buddhist in significance. The curtains originally contained a text, embroidered on the backs of the turtles depicted there. The text has been fully reconstructed, and clearly indicates that the curtains were meant to portray the postmortem fate of the prince. Thus it has been assumed that the curtains depict the rebirth of Prince Shōtoku in some Buddhist paradise, the exact identity of which has been the subject of considerable scholarly debate. As Pradel indicates, the interpretation of the scene on the curtains as the Buddhist Paradise of the Buddha Amida dates at least as far back as the thirteenth century, when the original curtains were discovered by a nun at the Hōryūji temple and a replica was made.

Through a meticulous examination of the pictorial motifs on the curtains and a comparison with contemporary funerary art in Korea, Japan, and China, Pradel comes to the conclusion that the scene on the curtains is in fact not a representation of a Buddhist paradise at all. Indeed, the curtains were not conceived as a Buddhist icon. Pradel here grapples with the gap between written sources and visual object. In this case, an original written text on the icon itself has undergone a re-evaluation by the tradition. In the course of that re-evaluation, a funerary object of non-Buddhist significance has become not only an image of a Buddhist paradise but also an important relic associated with Prince Shōtoku. Shinohara's chapter suggests that traditional scholarly discourse about images in medieval Chinese Buddhism struggled unsuccessfully to develop a coherent discourse about images; here, in this example from medieval Japan, the successful achievement of a consensus about a single image is shown to obscure more than it reveals. Pradel's chapter illustrates another theme that is common to many of the other chapters: the cultural and ritual construction and ultimate fluidity of the meaning of an image.

Elizabeth Sharf's chapter, "Ōbaku Zen Portrait Painting and Its Sino-Japanese Heritage," concerns a body of early modern portrait paintings of eminent Chan and Zen Buddhist monks associated with a Chinese émigré monastic community in Japan known as Ōbaku. The better-known portraits are executed in a bold, colourful style featuring a heavily applied modelling method. As these differ dramatically from traditional medieval East Asian portraits of eminent Buddhist monks, modern scholars have focused on identifying their Western (Indic and/or European) stylistic sources, in the process overlooking their ritual uses and religious meanings. It is this question that is central to Sharf's investigation. She gives special attention to the late Ming portraitist Zeng Jing (1564-1647), whose manner is believed to have established the style of early Ōbaku portrait paintings. She argues that the rhetoric of Western influence, while used to elevate Zeng Jing's achievement, is also employed to marginalize Ōbaku portraiture. Building on the work of Nishigori Ryōsuke, Sharf re-examines extant early portraits in order to identify internal developments freed of the legacy of the better-known, later portraits. She concludes by linking the Ōbaku material to "ancestor portraiture," and returns it squarely to the fold of medieval Chan and Zen Buddhist portraiture known as *chinzō*. Sharf's chapter highlights the need for future research into the textual evidence of the recorded sayings of eminent monks to help

understand the meanings and functions of this body of imagery. Her work makes clear the importance of understanding how these images functioned as ritual objects, a question that is central to many of the chapters in this volume.

The volume concludes with a chapter by Robert Brown, “Ritual and Image at Angkor Wat,” and with a discussion in the context of Southeast Asia of many of the themes that the other chapters explore. Brown endeavours to discover the religious context for the magnificent sculptures at Angkor Wat by asking how they were meant to be viewed. He focuses primarily on the reliefs on the south wall of the lowest gallery, identified by inscription as depicting the builder of Angkor Wat, King Sūryavarman II. The king is before four lords, each identified as well by inscription, and Brown suggests that they are taking an oath of fealty to the king. He argues convincingly against the standard interpretation that the monument as a whole was meant to be ritually circumambulated. He also rejects the more specific theory that the reliefs of Sūryavarman II were intended to be “read” as a continuous historical narrative. Instead, he proposes that, much like the Zen Ōbaku portraits, these portraits of the king were meant to place the subject among a recognized group worthy of reverence. For the Ōbaku portraits, this consisted of the ancestors in the monastic lineage; for Sūryavarman II, Brown argues that it was the gods. In both cases, it is only by careful efforts to understand the original context and function of the images that we can appreciate their full meaning.

Together the chapters in this volume suggest the complexity of the worship of images in Asian religions. They highlight the ambiguities that lay behind the acceptance of image worship in Buddhism and Hinduism and the need for scholars to be sensitive to the various contexts and texts that give images their power.⁷ These contributions should also make clear that to understand those contexts requires the collaborative effort of scholars working from very different perspectives. Textual scholars and anthropologists, art historians and historians of religion, can indeed engage in meaningful dialogue on the scholarly issues that concern all of us.