

From Mulberry Leaves to Silk Scrolls: New Approaches to the Study of Asian Manuscript Traditions edited by Justin Thomas McDaniel and Lynn Ransom (Philadelphia: Schoenberg Institute of Manuscript Studies, University of Pennsylvania, 2015). ISBN 978-0-8122-4736-7. US\$ \$49.95. £32.50



This is an exciting time for the study of Asian manuscripts. Many new collections have been found, particularly in China. The dramatic fall in the cost of imaging techniques and computer storage has resulted in thousands of manuscript pages becoming available online. This book is the first in a series of "Studies in Manuscript Culture" from the University of Pennsylvania dedicated to the memory of Lawrence J. Schoenberg, a pioneering software magnate and great collector of manuscripts. As Justin McDaniel notes in his introduction, the book offers "a glimpse of innovations into the study of Asian manuscript traditions."

The book is divided into three parts. The first, titled "The Art of the Book", has three show-and-tell essays on outstandingly beautiful manuscripts from Southeast Asia. Hiram Woodward examines the genre of *Tamrā chāng*, Thai manuals on the characteristics of

elephants, concentrating on a particular example from the Walters Collection of which Woodward was the curator. Alexandra Green, curator of the Southeast Asian Collection at the British Museum, offers a detailed description of a late 19th century cosmology manuscript from Burma. Sinéad Ward describes a *Kammavācā* manuscript from Burma which, contrary to the usual format, is illustrated with scenes from Jātaka tales and the life of the Buddha, beautifully done in red and gold. All three essays are lavishly illustrated, showcasing the highly developed art of illustration of the 18th and 19th centuries in Southeast Asia.

The second part of the book, entitled "Inscribing Religious Belief and Practice", has three essays on the contribution of manuscripts to religious history. Angela S. Chiu discusses how legends of the Buddha's visit to the northern Thai territories, along with relics, were techniques for fixing these places as part of the Buddhist world. The essays by Ori Tavor and Daniel Sou show how newly found caches of manuscripts from the Warring States Period (453–211 BCE) are changing the debate on the evolution of early Chinese religious beliefs and practices. Tavor examines manuscripts which debated the use of ritual while Sou examines texts on ghosts, suggesting that exorcism was taken up as a duty by local administrations.

The third section, entitled "Technologies of Writing", reflects Schoenberg's pioneering interest in the digitalization of manuscripts. Kim Plofker notes that the

current transition from paper to digital recording is as momentous as the transition from oral memory to written media in the Vedic age. She shows how authors of early Sanskrit texts considered written recording to be inferior to memory because copyists introduced mistakes. She details how scribes adapted techniques from oral recording to new written forms in Sanskrit manuscripts on scientific topics. Sergei Tourkin provides a guide to the intricate abbreviations used in astronomical and astrological manuscripts written in Arabic script from the 10th to 14th centuries CE.

Over 150,000 manuscripts were found along the Silk Road, especially in the Dunhuang Library Cave, but were scattered among several collections and libraries. Susan Whitfield describes how the International Dunhuang Project is bringing these manuscripts back together again in online form (<http://idp.bl.uk>). In addition, Whitfield provides a fascinating discussion of the evolution of the media or support for writing in Asia, beginning with wood, and then progressing to leaves, paper, strung books, and then concertinas. Peter M. Scharf describes the software developed for digital recording and cataloguing of Sanskrit manuscripts at the virtual Sanskrit Library (www.sanskritlibrary.com).



The article possibly of most interest to readers of this journal will be Hiram's Woodward's essay on "The Characteristics of Elephants." The focus is on a manuscript held by the Walters Art Museum, which seems to be a relatively late production, and thus in rather good condition, but has affinities to other known manuscripts stretching back to the early eighteenth century. Unlike some of these, this manuscript is not simply *Tamrā chāng*, Manual of elephants, but *Tamrā laksana chāng kham khlong*, Manual of the characteristics of elephants in a poetic meter. It dwells on the classification of elephants into different types with different abilities and characters, and has little of the practical material on hunting and training found in other examples of the genre. Woodward points out that such manuals were an "emblem of office" or "badge of authority," something owned by an senior official in charge of elephants as proof of his capacity. This was

something to show off, hence the fine verse and superb illustrations. However, there is some practical material, particularly a mantra to be used in connection with the leather noose employed in hunting and training elephants. By following the trail from this mantra into other documents, Woodward detects a lineage of Brahmans, probably from southern India, who were probably engaged in the production and systematization of elephant lore from the Ayutthaya era through to the early twentieth century. This essay is a fascinating example of “reading” a manuscript.

Although each essay is focused in some way on manuscripts, the range of topics in this collection is very wide, beyond any individual scholar’s core interest. The delight of such books is that they induce the reader to wander into unknown territory, often with surprising results. The essays are all of extremely high quality. The book is also beautifully designed by Judith Stagnitto Abbate, and superbly produced—a work of art in itself.

Chris Baker