CHAPTER THREE

THE MAPPING OF SACRED SPACE: IMAGES OF BUDDHIST COSMOGRAPHIES IN MEDIEVAL CHINA

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The philosophical concept of a “cosmos” transforms the chaos of our experiential world through the structures of space and time and, as W. Randolph Kloetzli notes, “it must not be understood primarily as the physical universe, but rather as structured reality at every level, whether physical or spiritual.”¹ In his investigation of perspective construction and the relationship between art and science in the Western tradition, Martin Kemp remarks, “Naturalistic painting and science both present models of the world. Both kinds of model rely upon discovery and invention, and upon some form of systematic recreation of the investigator.”² The underlying assumption of this observation is that the mode of perception that informs naturalistic painting is based on epistemology, namely, science. In Chinese Buddhist paintings of the medieval period (ca. sixth to tenth century), certain depictions of Buddhist cosmologies (especially pure land cosmologies) also achieve a remarkable degree of spatial realism comparable to that achieved in Renaissance and classical traditions in the West, and underscore a rational perception and ordering of the universe. Rather than being based in Western science, this specific mode of perception and representation corresponds to Buddhist cosmological conceptions or, more specifically, the Chinese interpretation and mapping of certain Buddhist cosmographies. Are these similarities in naturalistic representations of the universe, physical or metaphysical, in disparate traditions only accidents in history, or are there larger principles behind the correlates in conception, perception, and representation? The resemblance of the pure land perspective to that achieved in other traditions is but one of many attempts

¹ Kloetzli 1983: 19.
² Kemp 1990: 338.
to map various types of Buddhist cosmographies. What, then, are other modes of representation? And what are the factors that contribute to the selection of a particular mode of cosmographic representation?

The oldest conception of Buddhist cosmology is rooted in the Indian tradition, shared by both the Hindu and Jain religions. This cosmology, however, evolved as the Buddhist doctrine developed, expanding and transforming into a very different one in Mahāyāna Buddhism. Buddhist cosmology is a vast topic; here I outline a rudimentary classification that distinguishes the single-world system of pre-Mahāyāna Buddhist cosmology from the multiple-world system, or cosmology of innumerables, of Mahāyāna cosmology. Within each category, certain systems stand out because of devotional or doctrinal developments. For example, the pure land cosmology of Amitābha/Amitāyus, which belongs to the multiple-world system, came to dominate Mahāyāna Buddhist practice in medieval China. Another strand of Mahāyāna Buddhist thought in China emphasized the worship of Vairocana Buddha, whose cosmology of the Lotus Repository World incorporated the earlier single-world system but transformed it into a fantastic, miraculous realm. These different Buddhist cosmologies are integral to the diverse theories of Buddhist soteriology set forth in various texts, and they coexist as competing schemes of salvific visions.

Before the introduction of Buddhism, the Chinese possessed their own theories about the universe, albeit less systematic and fantastic than Indian speculations. Buddhist cosmologies and images of cosmographic conceptions were also transmitted when the religion entered China, by way of land and sea routes, beginning in the early centuries of the Common Era. In the fifth and sixth centuries, when the Chinese production of Buddhist art began, the images or partial images of Buddhist cosmologies found in China, such as those depicted in Dunhuang murals (see below), primarily belonged to the

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4 “Soteriology” refers to the doctrine of salvation, while “salvific” means “tending to save, causing salvation.”

5 For a discussion of ancient and medieval Chinese cosmological ideas, see Needham et al. 1959: 210–228.