Introduction

This book is about the visual culture of world making. It is prompted by a curiosity about the nature of the "worlds" evoked in medieval Chinese pictures known as "transformation tableaux." Based on Buddhist sutras, they depict scenes of miraculous transformations, such as rebirth of the soul of the deceased in various Buddhist lands of bliss, Buddhist deities manifesting themselves in various capacities, human forms metamorphosing into beasts, subjugation of demons, and ghastly hells. Sponsored by both laity and the Buddhist saṅgha, they adorned the walls of Buddhist monasteries and shrines, served various ritual purposes, and unfailingly excited the public imagination. That these pictures created a world of their own is an obvious point hardly worth belaboring. We are, however, hard-pressed to characterize that world. Modern scholarship on the subject is largely founded upon—and hence founders because of—the premise that these transformation tableaux are pictorial illustrations or derivatives of sutras. Therefore, to make sense of these tableaux is to match them with sutra texts. They are accordingly filed away in our mental cabinet according to the bibliographic taxonomy of sutra sources. Whereas a set of transformation tableaux placed next to one another, on the strength of their distinct pictorial-situational logic, may make perfect sense *spatially,* modern scholars fretfully scratch their heads and wonder why these unrelated *sutra* illustrations should be thus yoked together by violence. The world of the pictures is seen as resulting from transfer of the textual world into the pictorial medium. The truth of the matter is that the sutra upon which a tableau draws explains neither the painter's seemingly whimsical choice of particular textual components nor the way they are assembled.

This problem is particularly exacerbated in the case of the Lotus Sutra, the most popular Buddhist scripture in medieval China. The sutra is full of incidents, such as a house on fire that sends all kinds of creatures into a panic, a father who feigns death to scare his wayward, poison-taking children, a phantom city conjured up on a perilous terrain and wiped out just as easily, a stupa that floats in the sky like a spaceship while carrying Buddhas and their adoring assemblies, and a young woman who soars into the air and instantly becomes a Buddha, to the amazement of Śākyamuni Buddha's incredulous male disciples. Then there is the stupendous and mind-boggling spectacle of Śākyamuni

Buddha extending "his long broad tongue upward till it reached the Brahma heaven,"[1] the mind-bending temporal and spatial scenario in which the Buddha recalls his former life that took place billions of years ago in another realm, and so on. The text easily inspires mental pictures of these graphic scenes in the mind of the reader. However, for the reader of the Lotus Sutra, the encounter with its medieval Chinese "illustrations" is cognitively unsettling, to say the least. It utterly disorientates the reader because little in his previous navigation of the text has prepared him for the kind of pictorial imagination on display in the medieval tableaux.

The text itself already causes enough problems. Structured around a series of dialogues between Śākyamuni Buddha and his interlocutors, the text is interspersed with parables set in various locations. The spatial relationship among them is by no means clear. Nor does the narrative content of these parables show any temporal continuity. Nevertheless, the reader could fall back on the Buddha as his anchor while shuttling between the narrator of the parables and the narrated scenes. Moreover, the twenty-eight chapters, no matter how nonlinear their narrative structure, are nonetheless linear as a textual medium. The reader can thus find his bearing by relying on these structural bedrocks.

None of these narrative devices or structural properties is of any help in facilitating our encounter with pictures derived from the Lotus Sutra. The linear order of the twenty-eight chapters is thrown into complete disarray. Any attempt to diagram the progression of chapters as they are dispersed onto the composition inevitably ends up with a dizzying jumble. Just as bewildering are the painters' choices of which parts of the text to "illustrate." Some chapters are favored over others; some lines are seized upon and elaborated while large chunks of texts are left out. A thorough grasp of the text by no means guarantees an equal success in making sense of the pictures.

One wonders whether one has read the same text that the painter drew upon, whether there is a subtext that lurks behind the picture, or whether different mental habits and sensibilities caused medieval Chinese painters to read and hence fashion mental pictures differently. Disparities in reading experiences and the gap between textual and pictorial representation are indeed among the factors that may explain our modern disorientation. Yet, there seems to be something more.

If scenes derived from various chapters of the Lotus Sutra cohere into a new spatial configuration, if such an assemblage is neither accident nor compositional contingency to be attributed to the painter's whim or creativity, then what underlies and orders the composition? Is it possible that the medieval Chinese harbored a certain mental topography or imaginary world that was brought to bear upon their response to, and use of, the Lotus Sutra, rather than the other way round? This notion is reinforced by a host of texts of a different sort. The Lotus Sutra inspired and generated not only pictures but also a body of tales and hagiographies in medieval China.[2] What is striking about these tales is their attention to only a limited number of cues in the sutra and their insistent reiteration of certain imaginary set scenarios not laid out in the sutra, such as the death scene of the devotee, how he is greeted by the Amitābha Buddha and his entourage in the air, or how he goes to the bureau of King Yama's hell and gets away because of his lifetime recitation of the Lotus Sutra, and so forth. These situations, largely absent in

the sutra, are nonetheless among the stuff that the dream world of the Lotus Sutra is made of in the medieval Chinese imagination. They testify to the existence of an imaginary world that draws on not only the Lotus Sutra but a host of other domains of experience. The sutra provides not so much a textual source as a set of prompts or building blocks out of which a different architecture could be assembled. In some cases, it is all but a pretext for something else. This elusive something else is what this book is about. To the extent that this something else involves a range of factors that may cohere into a picture, it is aptly characterized as a "world," one that accommodates both heterogeneity and unity and that outgrows its textual source and speaks to the diverse needs, concerns, and circumstances of medieval Chinese society.

The characterization of a cultural domain or a picture as a world of its own is by now a commonplace or even a critical cliché. As an analytic framework in service of an argument, it cuts both ways. It may be used to highlight the coherence and continuity within a global sphere, a world, that encompasses local differences; it may also foreground the discontinuity between domains of experiences, or "worlds." The concept is revived here as an enabling analytic construct to meet the conflicting needs arising out of my study of the transformation tableaux of medieval China. On the one hand, the interconnectedness among different domains of experience in medieval China calls for a view of cultural *continuity* and coherence of the past world as a distant other, seen from a present perspective. To take the medieval Chinese world on its own terms and to stress its own web of interrelationships is a way of seeing how differently our modern perceptual categories organize cultural experiences so that what we perceive as unrelated domains of experiences may be seen as having in fact cohered more cogently back then. On the other hand, the Buddhist cosmology that posits multiple worlds, the medieval Chinese preoccupation with the numinous otherworld, the intermingling between the world of the living and that of the spirits, the heterogeneous formation of social groups and communities with their different interests, all call for a heterocosmic framework with which to formulate the medieval Chinese cultural experience.

Insofar as art is concerned, the framework of the world and world making has traditionally fostered assertions about the autonomy of art as a world of its own and the primacy of the creative mind or faculty of imagination and has sought to undermine our blind faith in the bedrock of reality and the entrenched mimetic view of art as representing the physical world. None of these assertions, in fact, serve the present project well. Applied perfunctorily, the notion of world making may have troubling outcomes. Emphasis on the autonomy of art may lead to self-absorbed formalism; de-emphasis inclines toward an embattled and hardened social history of art. However, the framework of world making may be oriented toward a different purpose. To the extent that it emphasizes the coherence and continuity among different domains of experience, it fosters a holistic approach to visual representations. We may thus justifiably cross the generic boundaries of painting, sculpture, and architecture and treat them as subordinate to and integrated with the process of world making. Moreover, we are thus more sensitive to the common ground that unites social-political reality, religious rituals, and artistic production. To the extent that the notion of world making posits different realms

of existence, particularity, and autonomy of experience, we are prompted to attend to the formal properties of different media and their ways of world making.

World making is essentially a spatial metaphor and can aptly be applied to the transformation tableaux. The impulse is already apparent in Victor Mair's magisterial work on the subject. Having surveyed a vast corpus of proposed definitions of the key term "transformation" (*bian*), Mair reaches two conclusions: (1) a "transformation" (*bian*) is "the representation (whether verbal or pictorial or sculptural) of a narrative moment or locus or a succession of narrative moments or loci";[3] (2) it also carries a strong element of the supernatural.[4] While his primary interest in "transformation" (*bian*) is to shed light on the literary genre of "transformation text," his definition is nevertheless a felicitous one that gives equal attention to the visual medium, in that his definition comprises and speaks to both the temporal and the spatial properties of transformation. A transformation is thus at once a "moment" and a "locus," in other words, at once temporally and spatially conceived. The "moment" fittingly describes the nature of verbal narrative, that is, the "transformation text," a medium driven by temporality; the "locus" aptly captures the dynamics of visual representation, that is, the transformation tableaux, which thrive on spatiality.[5] The "locus" amounts to a "scene" with its full force of the "visual."[6]

If we keep Mair's twofold definition of transformation tableaux in mind, then we realize that a transformation tableau is not just any "locus" or "scene" but one charged with supernatural resonances. Here the means of representation (spatial property) is inextricably caught up with what is represented (supernatural phenomena). However, our entrenched modern cognitive taxonomy and discursive habit would present these two senses as discontinuous categories. To capture the force of the transformation tableaux is therefore to find ways of bridging some of our cognitive gaps. Consider Wang Wei's (701–61) comments on a transformation tableau of the Western Paradise that was painted on a stupa in a Buddhist monastery and that commemorated the death of a member of the royalty. It comes as close as we can get to the eighth-century notion of "transformation": "*The Book of Changes* says that the wandering of the soul constitutes the transformation. *The Commentary* says that the vital energy of the soul reaches everywhere. Thus do we know that the intelligent spirit is reborn. Supported by the Way, it is transformed into a perfect body and goes to a happy land."[7] Wang explains that the "transformation [tableau] was painted [or, rather, commissioned] by Dou Shao, the Grand Secretary of the Imperial Chancellery, for his deceased brother, the late husband of the imperial princess." The painting was executed to "cleanse his contaminated [earthly] karma," to envision the "rows of the treasure trees and sparkling gold sands, where Kalaviṅka birds appear to be about to speak . . . , and the lotus pond and treasure seats thereof" and so on. Wang also speaks of the deceased's spirit "ascending [to immortality] through transformation, ceaseless rebirth, exempt from the Six Paths of reincarnation."[8]

The word "transformation" (*bian*) appears three times in the eulogy: "the wandering of the soul constitutes the transformation"; "the intelligent spirit . . . is transformed into a perfect body"; and that this "transformation [tableau] of the Western Paradise" was painted to mourn the patron's deceased brother. Then there are the near synonyms

of "transformation," such as the description of the deceased spirit "ascending [to immortality] [*qian*] through transformation [*hua*], ceaseless rebirth [*zhuansheng*]," and so on. Assuming his contemporary readers' shared understanding of what a transformation tableau is, Wang Wei is under no obligation to provide a glossing of the term "transformation" for us. However, as a poet instinctively given to making connections, drawing analogies, and exploiting the associations of different senses of the same word, we are not surprised to see Wang Wei oscillating among different senses of the term "transformation."

If we are to etymologically or semantically tabulate the different senses of "transformation" (*bian*) in Wang Wei's eulogy, we end up with the following list: a "transformation" can refer to (1) the condition of a deceased person's postmortem spirit, (2) metempsychosis, or the spirit's metamorphosis into a new incarnation in the afterlife Pure Land, or (3) a pictorial tableau depicting the Western Paradise. In other words, "transformation" can indicate (1) a type of spirit, (2) a process, or (3) a painting.

A list, as Jack Goody puts it, "relies on discontinuity rather than continuity."[9] Our modern cognitive taxonomy would resolutely relegate these listed items into distinct domains of experience and unrelated categories. Even if we grant Wang Wei some poetic license in mixing categories and making novel connections—something a poet is wont to do—we are unlikely to treat these three categories as in any way related. If pressed, we may say that the first two senses of "transformation," that is, the condition of the postmortem spirit and metempsychosis, constitute the subject of the third sense, that is, a painting. In saying so, we would cede too much primacy to the painting alone, isolating or dislodging it from its context, of which it is an integral part, and thereby doing injustice to the force of the passage. In Wang Wei's world, the painting was part of the stupa and all its evoked symbolic spaces. All three items in the list that we extrapolate from Wang Wei's eulogy, while discontinuous, somehow have a bearing on one another. The case of "transformation" (*bian*) is thus analogous to the Melanesian concept of *mana,* famously analyzed by Marcel Mauss:

> *Mana* is not simply a force, a being; it is also an action, a quality, a state. . . . On the whole, the word covers a host of ideas which we would designate by phrases such as a sorcerer's power, the magical quality of an object, a magical object, to be magical, to possess magical powers, to be under a spell, to act magically. The single word embraces a whole series of notions which, as we have seen, are inter-related, but which we have always represented as separate concepts. It reveals to us what has seemed to be a fundamental feature of magic—the confusion between actor, rite and object.[10]

The constellation of concepts, as Mauss goes on to point out, is ultimately "a milieu, a *world* separated from—but still in touch with—the other."[11] The spatial metaphor of the world thus serves to bring coherence to what we perceive as discontinuous categories and domains of experience or, rather, in our present case, it serves as a way of bracketing our modern cognitive habit in order to approximate the medieval Chinese experience. It provides an encompassing framework that highlights the correlations among agency, representational media, formal property, and objects of representation.

While the spatial metaphor of the world may confer continuity and coherence on a domain of heterogeneous experiences, it may also be orientated toward discontinuity, depending on the point of view one adopts. Once a world is evoked, boundaries are set, and a shifting stance becomes possible. Viewed from *outside* its scope, we consider everything in it as subsumed under its distinct all-inclusive wholeness. Viewed from *inside* its sphere, however, we are mindful of its limits and horizons, which intimate other worlds. Once we step inside the world of transformation evoked in Wang Wei's eulogy, we are made aware of the paradox that what gives this world—comprising painting, pagoda, and spirits—a certain degree of inner coherence is precisely its concerted mindfulness of other worlds, that is, the "happy land(s)" to be attained.

On a more general level, what characterizes the medieval Chinese world is precisely its deep involvement with the world of spirits and demons, among other things. "With the general triumph of Buddhism," as Jacques Gernet observes, "the picture of the *world* itself was transformed into a vista of immeasurable, infinitely multiplied times and spaces, of a human destiny involved in a continuous cycle of rebirths intermingling the beings of the *visible and invisible worlds* (gods, men, beings of the underworld, animals and demons) and ineluctably subject to the mysterious phenomenon of the fructification of action."[12]

To fully reckon with the world of the transformation tableaux therefore requires a revision of our often skewed notion of the world of medieval China, which tends to be premised upon the primacy of the physical and material world. Wall paintings from tombs and cave shrines are often treated as visual documents of scenes of real life or certain cityscapes. Buddhist paradise scenes are at times taken as registering the monastic layout of Tang China. The validity of this social-historical reading by way of demythologizing notwithstanding, something fundamental is given short shrift. We become less sensitive to the pictorial magic of world making and the workings of the medieval Chinese imagination. Moreover, we reduce the rich imaginative experience into one dimension premised upon the primacy of the physical world and single-world system.

For medieval Chinese men and women, the world was not a monolithic bedrock reality. Buddhist cosmology and worldview did much to change their perception of the world. Rather than the Central Kingdom, China was considered no more than a part of Jambudvīpa, the southern continent of the four great lands in the seas that surrounded Mount Sumeru, which itself was encircled by the Iron Mountains. This horizontal cosmic plan was complemented by a vertical scheme: layers of infernal realms below and of celestial realms above until one reached the aerial domains that culminate in pure abstraction. This single world sphere of Cakravāla, also known as "the small universe," was not the entire cosmic picture. As Mahayana Buddhism gained currency, the Buddhist cosmos was expanded to include myriad Buddha lands beyond the single world sphere. This multiple-world cosmological system, which was already confusing enough as a spatial structure, was further correlated to the past, present, and future reincarnations of sentient beings caught in the revolving existences.[13] In Buddhist thinking, world and mind, cosmology and psychology, are closely related. A world, therefore, oscillates

between a topographic entity and a mental construct.[14] The famous metaphor by Zhiyi (538–97), the great Chinese synthesizer of Buddhist teaching, that one holds "three thousand world-realms within an instant of thought" states the matter in the most dramatic way.[15] Moreover, to illustrate his point about the world created by the mind, Zhiyi reiterates the analogy from the Garland Sutra between the mind's creative power and the painter's hand: "The mind is like a skillful painter capable of picturing the myriad worlds."[16] It is interesting that the craft of painting is here singled out as the optimum exemplification of the working of the mind in world making. This should alert us to the world-making aspects of medieval tableaux steeped in the same cultural ethos. These tableaux register the rich dimensions of a soulful existence and spirituality. To say that they constitute a world of their own is not to deny their manifold relationships to the bedrock reality of the physical world but to affirm that their ways of existence cannot be solely explained by means of the latter. A social history premised solely on the monist concept of the world would hardly explain the working of this imaginary world.

The book therefore is a study of the visual culture of medieval China. As a "religion of images,"[17] Buddhism has much use for vision, optics, phantasmagoria, and meditation and readily dissolves the cognitive boundaries between the observer and the observed; it is nothing short of a visual culture. Thus, it never quite accommodates itself to the ossified kind of art historical practice bereft of the early holistic-methodological magnitude and cultural-historicizing energies exemplified by Warburg and Panofsky. In some entrenched enclaves, iconography is reduced to a fetishizing typology of hand gestures (*mudras*) and jewelry types (attributes); style becomes a catchall mantra and a self-fulfilling explanatory model; material medium (painting, sculpture, architecture, etc.) hardens into a compartmentalized solipsism of self-perpetuating pedigree; pictorial compositions are classified rigidly by scriptural taxonomy. Even in the more recent attempts to break away from the entrenched mode, the uninspired lesser version of politico-social history of art is running out of steam and repeatedly rehashing a predictable narrative (i.e., art serves politics), often at the expense of the visual dynamics altogether. In so doing, the rich totality of perceptual experience of spellbinding viewing and imaginary flights solicited by the Buddhist images, and the optical fiction created by the evocative congeries of statues and wall paintings in a ritual space, are all lost when originally integrated constituents are dismantled and crated into the entrenched categories of iconography, style, and, lately, politics.

The momentum gathered around the surging paradigm of visual culture, with its "conception of the visual as disembodied *image,* re-created in the virtual spaces of sign-exchange and phantasmatic projection,"[18] despite the controversy surrounding its ramifications, may potentially galvanize the study of Buddhist art. Inherently integral and vital to Buddhism, "visual culture" is a long overdue analytic construct that should have arisen from within the study of Buddhist art itself. It is lamentable that this has not quite happened. It is also patently ironic that this paradigmatic rubric, variously characterized—to some extent justifiably—as a "theoretical bubble" or "a muddle of Western devising,"[19] turns out to be a much needed shot in the arm for Buddhist art studies, a field that should have envisioned it in the first place and where it naturally

finds solid footing. It is, nevertheless, salutary that this is happening, and that the paradigm of visual culture is here to stay.

To frame Buddhist art by way of visual culture is to shift the focus from isolated objects to unifying subjects as the ultimate end of inquiry.[20] Not that objects are unimportant—they remain our primary source of art historical scrutiny; but they are to be organized in the perceptual horizon of the subject. They are to be wrested from their conventionally pedigreed art historical moorings of painting, sculpture, and architecture and integrated into imaginary topographies that they were originally intended to evoke and create.[21] Traditional tools of iconography are still useful only insofar as they serve to piece together those perceptual fields and imaginary horizons. Texts and images are discussed not merely for the sake of elucidating each other; they combine to work toward the reconstruction of the large picture of the perceptual field.

The book gathers and examines a set of visual materials more or less related to the Lotus Sutra. In some cases, the focus is on a particular motif—the Many Treasures Stupa, for example—from the sutra; in others, the analysis of wall paintings that "illustrate" the sutra; and in still others, a look at the ways in which a tableau on one face of a pagoda (e.g., the assembly scene at Numinous Vulture Peak from the Lotus Sutra) is related to the tableaux based on other sutras on other faces of the same structure, with the intent of determining what kind of world making arises from such a visual program.

This method heightens the sense of the world of the Lotus Sutra. On the surface, this method appears to assume the primacy of the sutra that orders the world in question, but this is deceptive. As my analysis proceeds, it will be increasingly apparent that there is indeed a "world" of the Lotus Sutra, but it does not derive from the text itself. The making of the world is dictated by a range of other factors, concerns, and agendas, few of which appear in the text itself. The sutra is meaningful in that it provides—or, rather, is seized upon as—a reservoir of cues for world making, a world, however, not of its own initial textual conception.

When medieval Chinese painters visualized the world of the Lotus Sutra, they used a certain spatial structure to map out the disparate scenes described in the sutra. In other words, they were approximating the imaginary world of the Lotus Sutra inherent in the text with their own world picture they carried in their heads, which already had its own internal topographic structure and spatial logic, a mental grid on which they plotted the disparate scenes from the Lotus Sutra. Testifying to the existence of this imaginary world that they brought to bear upon the Lotus Sutra are the stories, hagiographies, and biographies of medieval monks, nuns, and lay people gathered by medieval monks in special collections dedicated to the Lotus Sutra, such as *The Tales of the Lotus Sutra*. What surprises us is how tangential these narrated events are to the content or topography of the sutra world, despite the latter's own mine of tales. Yet the medieval Chinese compiler of these tales saw the fit between the two worlds. More significant for our present purpose, these tales and hagiographies deemed relevant to the Lotus Sutra imply a world of their own with features such as walled cities and rows of buildings manned by underworld personnel. It is this imaginary topography that appears to correspond to the one visualized by the painter. In other words, the so-called imaginary

topography is just the medieval Chinese cognitive stock or mental furniture with which they approximate and order the otherwise strange and unstructured world of the Lotus Sutra. The plot thickens further when these two worlds or horizons—the fictional horizon of the Lotus Sutra and the a priori horizon of the painters—meet and merge, thereby generating a new topography that is neither entirely the fictional world inherent in the Lotus Sutra nor the cognitive stock latent in the medieval Chinese mind before the encounter. This situation is analogous to the one formulated by Austin E. Quigley: "The world of the audience and the world of the play are not radically separate, and neither are the world of the play and the world of the theatre. Each of these opposing worlds in part constitutes and is in part constituted by the others."[22]

This explains a curious fact about the transformation tableaux from medieval China. Even though Mair's twofold definition of "transformation" (that it represents a moment/locus, and that it pertains to *supernatural permutations*) perfectly captures the essential properties of the genre of both transformation text and transformation tableaux, this definition—or any definition—can only go so far. In spite of its adequacy, it does not help us explain, for instance, why certain textual scenes that are ostensibly about supernatural transformation—and called so in the sutra—and that fit this definition perfectly are not included in the transformation tableaux. A dramatic example is the so-called Eighteen Transformations listed in Buddhist texts, which runs nearly the full gamut of miraculous transformations conceivable. These are the ability (1) to move any object, even the worlds, (2) to emit fire from the body, (3) to emit light that can illuminate the innumerable worlds, (4) to cause beings in all the *gatis* (states of sentient existence), including Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and devas, to be seen, (5) to change the nature of an object into something different, (6) to go anywhere, through walls, mountains, water, air, and so forth, (7) to roll anything, even the Himalayas, into a minute size, (8) to enlarge minute objects to gigantic proportions, (9) to store up swarms of people, mountains, or earth within the body, (10) to enter any group, assume their forms, shapes, and voices, preach to them, then disappear, (11) to magnify the body a thousandfold, (12) to disappear, (13) to cause living creatures to become subject to one's will, (14) to control the *ṛddhi* (supernatural power) of those below him in rank, (15) to equip sentient beings with fluency in expression, (16) to cause one who has forgotten the Dharma to remember it again, (17) to bestow joy on listeners, (18) to send forth light to all creatures in all worlds.[23]

Variations of the Eighteen Transformation exist,[24] such as that found in the parable from chapter 27 of the Lotus Sutra. In the parable King Wonderful Adornment is misguided by the non-Buddhist doctrines of the Brahmanical law. His wife and two sons, Pure Storehouse and Pure Eye, are firm believers of Buddhism. At their mother's request, the two sons display "some supernatural wonders" (*xian shenbian*) for their father in order to convert him to the Buddhist faith:

> The two sons, being concerned about their father, leaped up into the air to the height of seven *tāla* trees and there performed various types of supernatural wonders, walking, standing, sitting, and lying down in midair; making water come out of the upper part of their bodies; making fire come out of the lower part of their bodies; mani-

> festing huge bodies that filled the sky and then making themselves small again; after becoming small, making themselves big again; disappearing in the midst of the sky and then suddenly appearing on the ground; sinking into the ground as though it were water; walking on water as though it were land. They manifested these various types of supernatural wonders in order to cause the mind of their royal father to become pure and to make him believe and understand.[25]

One would think that such a dramatic instance of "miraculous transformation" would have naturally been seized upon by the painters of the transformation tableaux—but none of the seventh-century transformation tableaux of the Lotus Sutra includes the scene. By the early eighth century, when the parable of King Wonderful Adornment was included in the Lotus Sutra tableau, the painter had no use for such spectacles, contrary to our expectation. When the medieval Chinese painter visualized "transformation," some other forces appear to have been at work.

This has to do with the symbolic function of the transformation tableaux. To appreciate this point about medieval Chinese art, we have to first of all suppress our post-Romantic assumption about the nature of art: that is, that it is to be enjoyed with suspension of utilitarian values and that it is fashioned by the godlike creative artist, who bends everything to his own will and whim. While nothing should prevent us from appreciating the inventiveness in full display in medieval Chinese paintings, certain social and religious-ritual functional constraints must be considered. The painter's eye did not just roll from heaven to earth in a willful, self-indulgent way; it did so with a certain purpose and to serve a certain ritual-symbolic function. Most transformation tableaux in medieval China were commissioned by monks or lay believers for the ritual purpose of "pursuit of posthumous well-being" (*zhuifu*) of deceased relatives.[26] As imaginary projections of the living, the tableaux map out the tortuous contours of the way to various paradises. On the journey, demons and spirits have to be pacified, supernatural beings have to be invoked as protective agents, purgatory has to be anticipated but ultimately transcended, and paradises are eventually gained. Such a soteriological agenda is the ultimate structure underlying the pictorial program of transformation tableaux.

This brings us to a related issue. Much of the scholarship on the subject is constrained by the misguided premise about the primacy of the sutras, of which the transformation tableaux are deemed mere illustrations, something of secondary importance. Hence, we compartmentalize these tableaux into unrelated boxes by way of the sutra texts. Confronted with a set of transformation tableaux laid out on different walls of a cave shrine or different faces of a pagoda, modern art historians are surprisingly timid and rigid in making connections among them, mainly because the subject matters of the sutra texts, on which the tableaux are based, do not appear to have anything to do with each other. For example, the tableau of the subjugation of Raudrākṣa, based on the *Sutra of the Wise and the Foolish,* is about a disciple of Buddha triumphing over an arch-heretic through bouts of supernatural feats of metamorphosis. The tableau of the Western Paradise, based on the Amitābha Sutra and other texts, shows the postmortem spirits being reborn in the lotus pond of the Amitābha Pure Land located in the west. There is indeed no connection between the two sutras. Abiding by the primacy of the sutra, no one in

his right mind would seek any connection between the two corresponding tableaux. However, once we consider the tableaux as merely taking cues from the sutras and understand that they function on the strength of their own pictorial and spatial logic, on the topographic worlds they build, on the symbolic function their scenes fulfill, we will find that the connection between the two tableaux runs deeper than we thought. Once we factor in other topographic considerations, for example, the spatial quarters to which the tableaux are each assigned, and keeping in mind the rich significance attached to each quarter, we see that each of the transformation tableaux participates in a larger scheme, often of a cosmological scale. From this emerges a symbolic cosmos inhabited by demons and deities of whom the medieval Chinese were mindful in their hopes for a peaceful order of the universe and the tranquility of their deceased ancestors and relatives.

The fact needs no belaboring that *et in Arcadia ego,* that even in the imaginary topography, social-political reality rears its head, albeit in a sublimated way. The Pure Land is never pure, despite its claim to be so. I will therefore trace how social-political circumstances left their indelible marks on the imaginary world. This is not to belabor the point that the imaginary cannot wrest itself free from the grip of circumstantial social-political reality but to show how the latter may have left its impact without interfering with other factors—such as the soteriological interest—that shaped the imaginary topography.

In chapter 1 I deal with one of the most curious facts in Chinese Buddhist art. A widely current motif of twin Buddhas—Śākyamuni and Many Treasures (Prabhūtaratna)—seated side by side inside the niche of the Many Treasures Stupa is derived from chapter 11 of the Lotus Sutra. Identification of the source not only does not explain the popularity of the motif but actually exacerbates the oddity: if the sutra source can explain the visual motif, why is it so conspicuously absent in India and Central Asia, where the sutra was just as available? Further, for nearly two centuries or so, the "illustration" of the Lotus Sutra consisted mostly of this scene alone. The situation thus prompts the question: of the numerous scenes of miracles and spectacles in the sutra, why did this scene in particular capture the medieval Chinese imagination? The search for an answer takes us far beyond the confines of the sutra and into the realms of visionary experience and the ways in which the human imagination grapples with numinous otherness. I contend that the symbolic overtones of a seemingly simple form, a model, that was inherited from pre-Buddhist times were combined with new overtones acquired in the Buddhist context to generate a potent vehicle for symbolic imaginings. I also look at how the formal model as such could constitute a locus around which a topography of visionary experience could be built, the nucleus that generates an imaginary topography.

In chapters 2 and 3 I take a close look at an intriguing early-eighth-century Lotus Sutra tableau in Cave 217 at Dunhuang. Since previous scholars have, I think, misidentified some of the scenes in the tableau and failed to give an overall account of the rationale underlying the entire composition, I offer my iconographic identifications of all the scenes, which in many cases run counter to the prevailing views. With that as a basis, I proceed to engage the central issue of this book, namely, to explain the entire

composition and its related wall paintings in the cave as constituents of a coherent pictorial program evocative of an imaginary topography, a fact curiously passed over by existing scholarship. Various factors that contributed to the making of this imaginary topography are examined. Connections between the Dunhuang paintings and the metropolitan area take us to the social-political landscape of the capital cities of the Tang dynasty. I show that both political circumstances and the ritual needs of the lay community left their indelible marks on the shape of this imaginary topography, not necessarily in a mutually exclusive way. In short, I take into account the range of factors—pictorial responses to textual cues, social-political permutations, and religious imperatives—that make up a possible world.

Chapters 4 and 5 take as their point of departure two salient formal features of the Lotus Sutra tableau discussed in the previous chapters: the composition is a curious combination of a pictorial simulation of a recessed niche in the center, an effect achieved by a trompe l'oeil device, superimposed on a topographic—or even a cartographic—underlay that suggests a bird's-eye view. Thus, the composition opens up two kinds of spaces: one of a mirror, the other of a map. Each is significant in the making of transformation tableaux. These two chapters, therefore, treat each of the two types of spaces separately as formal devices stemming from the complexity of medieval Chinese visual experiences. Each accommodates and registers a particular mode of visual perception and cultural experience. The ultimate issue taken up in these chapters is therefore the dual quality of the mystic vision that entails both penetrating and far-roaming modes.

In chapter 6 I look at a set of four transformation tableaux in relief sculpture on the four faces of the Longhuta, a Tang relic pagoda in Shandong. The point of departure is the connection between the primary tableau of Vulture Peak, based on the Lotus Sutra, on the front face of the pagoda and the tableaux on the other three faces. The spatial scheme according to which the four tableaux are arranged maps out a distinct imaginary topography, which is still in some way embedded in the Lotus Sutra culture. However, the architectonic order of such a sculptural program affords us a rare opportunity to examine the formalization of time and space by way of the "chronotope," the juxtaposition and collapsing of different temporal-spatial entities within one locus and their symbolic implications. Further, such a spatial layout of transformation tableaux provides an arena in which to stage, in a symbolic way, the dramatic sublimation of tensions between different social and interest groups, each with its own aspirations. The imaginary topography is, after all, a symbolic displacement of a less-than-perfect social reality.

Readers with a more general interest in the subject of the book may want to skip chapter 1 and start with chapter 2.