

# Iconography transformed

## A few notes on the god Vaiśravaṇa

This article aims at an integration of the topic of iconographic transformation processes into a wider context of meaning, in order to enhance its importance from a religious and cultural-scientific point of view. In this sense, my research is not interested in asking how a deity is depicted, but why it is depicted in a particular way; what conclusions can be drawn, and what factors might influence artistic work? Thus, the topic of the image's context, its usage, and its meaning become the focus of attention. By taking the example of the god Vaiśravaṇa, my analysis of 'religious images' of him is composed of two interlinked parts: an exemplary study of a transcultural iconographic transformation process, as well as an analysis of the images' context.

### From India to Japan: Vaiśravaṇa

Vaiśravaṇa is an Indian god of both the Vedic-Brāhmaṇical and Buddhist pantheons alike. For the Buddha never denied the existence of the Vedic and Brāhmaṇical gods; a great number of them have indeed been incorporated into Buddhism, first and foremost as guardians of the buddhas and bodhisattvas. Within Buddhism, the figure of Vaiśravaṇa has spread across the whole Buddhist world as far as Japan.

Vaiśravaṇa is mentioned for the first time, in the Atharvaveda (8.10.28), a text of the ancient Vedas written down in the second century BC, but dating from about 1000 BC (e.g., Flood 1996: 35–40; Gonda 1975; Griffith 1895: 426; Michaels 1998: 67–78). Originally described as a malevolent demon, he loses his demonic association in the epic period and becomes consistently connected to the higher gods of the Brāhmaṇical pantheon. However, it is not before the epics and Purāṇas that Vaiśravaṇa is 'officially' awarded the guardianship of the northern cardinal

direction and wealth by the god Brahmā (Johnson 2005: 33). Yet, he remains lord of the yakṣas (e.g., Gangadharan 1984: 988; Deshpande 1989: 533) and sometimes rakṣas (Van Buitenen 1981: 402).

As guardian and lord of the north he is part of a group called the Lokapāla, which refers to the guardians of the directions. Interestingly, Vaiśravaṇa's mission to guard the northern region correlates with his role as a wealth deity (Daniélou 1964: 194): In the Mahābhārata (6.6; 14.8) the north is interpreted as a region of abundance and treasures (e.g., Ganguli 1887–8: 23; Ganguli 1894–6: 14). This might correlate with the fact, that the Himalaya region is located in India's north and in the epics mountains are regarded as treasuries.

Vaiśravaṇa was incorporated into the Buddhist pantheon at an early date. In the Pāli canon he is described as one of the Four Heavenly Kings, Cātummahārājikā devā, a group of tutelary deities guarding the four cardinal directions. As we know from the Dīgha Nikāya (2.18.207, 2.20.257–2.20.258, 2.32.202) and Vimāna Vatthu (3,4), for example, he maintains his most important functions, being described as the protector of the northern region and residing in a splendid palace. His role as a wealth deity fades into the background though (e.g., Walshe 1987: 294, 317, 476; Hecker 1994: 77). Unlike in the Vedic and Hindu traditional texts, there is hardly any indication of how he is represented in terms of his attributes or other iconographical descriptions in the early Buddhist scriptures. Thus, his Indian Buddhist depictions reveal strong ties to his description in śruti and smṛti literature.

With the emergence and spread of Mahāyāna Buddhism along the silk roads to Turfan, Dunhuang and Central China, Vaiśravaṇa is slowly turned into the leader of the Heavenly Kings and was even inde-

pendently worshipped in East Asia. The earliest extant images of Vaiśravaṇa in China date back to the Táng period (618–907). In Táng China the god comes to be venerated as a state-protecting divinity and plays a central part in esoteric rituals for the purpose, for ‘it was believed that he followed the armies to protect the Real Law’ (e.g., Demiéville 2010: 39; Juergensmeyer 2013: 191; Orzech 2010: 395).

Mark Juergensmeyer (2013: 190) states: ‘Chinese emperors hired a wide assortment of ritual specialists, assuring their military victories. During the Tang period ... these were often priests of the Tantric (also known as Esoteric) Buddhist tradition. Indian-born ritual masters such as Amoghavajra (705–774) conjured a panoply of Tantric martial divinities for the protection of the Chinese state.’

In Japan, Vaiśravaṇa undergoes quite a similar development. The first instance in which we are told about the divinity in the Japanese context is already a war-like situation: just a few decades after the spread of Buddhism in Japan, sources already mention Vaiśravaṇa in association with a political event. Shōtoku Taishi (574–622), one of the most important patrons of Buddhism in Japan, fights a war against the opponents of the religion. We are told that only with the help of the Shi-tennō, the Four Heavenly Kings, is he victorious and defeats his rivals, which results in the flourishing of Buddhism. He dedicates to them the first state temple of Japan, the Shi-tennō-ji in Ōsaka.

It is especially in this early period of Buddhism in Japan that the Four Heavenly Kings play an important role. As in China, Buddhism at that time was believed to entail definite military and political advantages to the Japanese government, as are described in certain Buddhist scriptures such as the Golden Light Sutra. Thus, in the Nara period, Buddhism was institutionalized as a state religion and government-funded temples and monasteries were established throughout Japan. Copies of particular sutras, all having in common an emphasis on the protection of the nation, were sent to those temples, where monks and nuns were obliged to recite them continually in order to maintain the prosperity of Japan. Besides their superior task as Dharmapāla, the Shi-tennō are now described as protecting the rightful Buddhist king and his people from calamities, epidemics and enemies. It is during this period that the Shi-tennō evolved into a rather important group of deities. In almost all temples of the Nara period, the Shi-tennō were installed in the four corners around the main sanctuary, or



Figure 1. Sculpture (sandstone), about 10 CE North India. Government Museum Mathurā, Uttar Pradesh.

sometimes guarding the temple gates. However, in subsequent decades, the Four Heavenly Kings were increasingly reduced to the subordinate function of guardian figures in Buddhist temples and the importance of the group declines. Whilst the Shi-tennō even come to be replaced by esoteric Buddhist groupings of guardian deities, Vaiśravaṇa departs from the group and becomes worshipped as an independent god. This development can be retraced to a certain trend in China, which I will refer to later.

By looking at representational examples from India and East Asia Vaiśravaṇa seemingly changes his function, and due to this, his iconography, completely. His very first representation is that on a railing pillar at Bharhut, dating from the second century BC Vaiśravaṇa is depicted as a yakṣa, without any of the special features and attributes associated with him yet. There is just the inscription on his image which tells us that it is kupiro yakho, the yakṣa Kubera. It was not before the first to second centuries CE that Vaiśravaṇa, who in India was more widely known as Kubera or Jambhala, began to be shown with his specific characteristics: he is depicted as small, pot-bellied, with short arms and legs, sitting on cushions,



Figure 2. Sculpture (stone). Ratnagiri, Maharashtra; 50,8 cm.

wearing heavy ornaments and jewellery and carrying a mongoose, a money bag and a citron or a cup in his hands. Surrounded by treasures, he is shown as a god of wealth. Figures 1 and 2 show two representational examples of Vaiśravaṇa from North India and Mahārāṣṭra.

His original 'Hindu' iconography could however be hardly any more different from that of his Buddhist counterpart. In East Asia Vaiśravaṇa is portrayed as a tall and fierce warrior, slender, with a crown and clad in armour, always armed with weapons and holding his most important attribute, the pagoda, in his hand (Fig. 3 and 4). Figure 3 shows one of the earliest extant Chinese examples of Vaiśravaṇa at Fengxian Temple, Lóngmén, dated to the Táng period. Figure 4 is a Japanese scroll painted during the Kamakura era, depicting Vaiśravaṇa with his retinue. In India as well as in East Asia Vaiśravaṇa's iconography became standardized very early.

## Visual cultures and the concept of the gaze

In order to help us better understand the special characteristics of images, and especially religiously used images, I do want to refer to some theoretical concepts. Basically, trying to define a 'religious image' means dealing with the pivotal question of 'What is a picture?' By discussing picture-theoretical approaches, I have realised that this question cannot be answered easily and, moreover, it is an issue of debate among the prevailing (semiotic, anthropological, and phenomenological) picture theories exponents. They all provide useful partial interpretations of aspects of the image, but cannot define it in depth. As a result, a new trend in the interpretation of art has gained in importance in the last few years: a hermeneutical approach to pictures, initiated by Max Imdahl's *The Iconic*.

There are two ways in which the hermeneutical approach to a picture is useful in regard to defining a religious image: 1) Picture hermeneutics emphasize the special characteristics of visual phenomena. While the main picture theories attempt to interpret images in regard to their special paradigms, hence risking a limited evaluation of picture phenomena, hermeneutics tries to observe an artwork's innermost structure in order to determine its significance. For that reason, hermeneutical approaches can be applied to images of any cultural milieu. Moreover, 2) hermeneutics offer a more comprehensive approach, making use of semiotic and phenomenological paradigms alike while presenting both their advantages and disadvantages. At this point, it takes up its own considerations and focuses mainly on the artwork and its relation to the viewer. This is an important advantage for the investigation of a religious image, since categories such as personal faith are more significant and, thus, issues about the different modes of gazing as well as the recipient's active role while gazing at images should be dealt with. Moreover, hermeneutical approaches can be connected to David Morgan's explanation of the *gaze* as well as to the research field of visual culture, offering a significant addition. Unfortunately, looking into the main arguments of the single-image theories in depth would lead us too far astray in this matter, but I will refer explicitly to the concept of the gaze in respect of visual culture, for it deals with the topic of images and religion more specifically.

In his books *The Sacred Gaze* (2005) and *The Embodied Eye* (2012) David Morgan studies the gaze in detail and shows that to gaze does not only mean to look at something. Instead, it involves a wide range

of visual practices based on culturally and historically shaped conceptions and practices. In addition the gaze is always connected to a particular worldview (Beinhauer-Köhler 2010a: 11).

Morgan defines gazing as follows:

I understand the concept of gaze to mean the visual network that constitutes a social act of looking. A gaze consists of several parts: a viewer, fellow viewers, the subject of their viewing, the context or setting of the subject, and the rules that govern the particular relationship between viewer and subject. ... A gaze is a projection of conventions that enables certain possibilities of meaning, certain forms of experience, and certain relations among participants. (Morgan 2005: 3, 4)

The concept of gazing is closely interconnected with the topic of visual culture, which describes certain aspects as well as certain ways in which members of a particular culture deal with the visual (Beinhauer-Köhler 2010a: 9, 11; Beinhauer-Köhler 2010b: 129). Bärbel Beinhauer-Köhler (2010a: 11) further develops this approach by showing that visual cultures are not to be understood as coherent units. Rather they can be differentiated into different but equally existing perspectives of seeing. Visual cultures are thus similarly affected by local, temporal and social, as well as pop religious and individual criteria and orthodox resp. orthoprax standardizations, which in turn are influenced by the prevalent notion of the god and sacrality in general.

So it is rather different if we study Vaiśravaṇa in his function as an eminent protector of Buddhism, being mentioned in the most important Buddhist sources and being installed in Buddhist sanctuaries, or as one of the Seven Lucky Gods. The grouping of the Seven Lucky Gods, Shichi fukujin, develops in the Japanese Muromachi period (1336–1573), when urban culture begins to flourish. The Shichi fukujin involves seven gods from different religious backgrounds that express the pursuit of *genze riyaku*, ‘this-worldly benefits’. The proper handling of the group is much more informal and less awe-inspiring than with other figures of the Buddhist and Shintō pantheon. This is in turn reflected in visual depictions of the Shichi fukujin: they are often shown sitting together genially and cheerfully, or are even caricatured as being drunk. Vaiśravaṇa is still portrayed as a soldier, but not a



Figure 3. Vaiśravaṇa. Stone carving (lime stone). Táng period, 672–675 CE. Fengxian. Temple, Lóngmén. Cave 19; 15.24 cm.

fierce and grim one, rather as a cheerful character with a somewhat corpulent body.

What actually is a big advantage of using concepts of the gaze and visual cultures is that they emphasize the fact that images are not media in themselves. On the contrary, they are closely connected to the socio-political sphere.

### Images and the social construction of reality

How closely religion and art are interwoven with other fields of society, has already been pointed out by Susanne Langer (1951) and Clifford Geertz (1993, 1994), who dealt with the matter of art affecting the social construction of reality. Or, as Morgan puts it:

...visual culture refers to the images and objects that deploy particular ways of seeing and therefore contribute to the social, intellectual, and perceptual construction of reality... . (Morgan 2005: 27)

On the one hand, divine images, and iconic cult images in particular, require a situational context



Figure 4. Vaiśravaṇa. Scroll paint (brush on silk). Kamakura period, late twelfth to early thirteenth century ce; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; 119,1 x 68,1cm.

and cultural framework that endows the image with a certain meaning, manipulates the worshippers' understanding of the deity and the connection to its cult image. As a matter of fact, in regard to iconic\* representations of transcendent beings it can be questioned whether a man-made cult image can represent a divinity at all. Because deities cannot be discerned directly, their reference is therefore always just an assumption that needs to be socially and institution-

\* Although Vaiśravaṇa is predominantly depicted and worshipped in his three-dimensional form, he can also be shown in an *aniconic* way. In esoteric Buddhist maṇḍalas, for example in the Womb Realm Maṇḍala, the *garbhakośadhātu*, Vaiśravaṇa's representation can be replaced by his *bīja*, a 'seed syllable' that is used as a metaphor.

ally consolidated. Or to put in the words of Geertz, cult images need an 'aura of factuality', to be understood as true manifestations of the divine. On the other hand, images help to support and preserve social realities, which means that seeing is not a mere biological process but needs to be learned and cultivated. Gazing is, besides, always affected by social, political, historical, religious and other criteria (e.g., Bräunlein 2004: 224; Büttner and Gott dang 2006: 11; Mitchell 1998: 87; Morgan 2012: 48; Van Eck and Winters 2005: 3). Because images can be understood as cultural configurations (Bräunlein), their creation's social preconditions and consequences as well as their political significance are of major concern:

... we need to discern in the social life of images the creation of ways of seeing that draw from and articulate power relations; the lure of images as living agencies; the needs or desires of the devout; the structuring of class, race, and gender; the interests of institutions; and the practices of teaching and disciplining the body to engage images as moral, spiritual, or magical technologies. ... Images appear to act as discrete sources of power that affect events or people as a force or agent of change that requires nothing more to achieve its aim than the originary, authorizing act of its maker or patron. (Morgan 2005: 66, 68)

Morgan's remarks are very closely related to the work of Alfred Gell, who already exposed art objects as social agents (1998). Matthew Canepa too suggests, that artworks and images are not just mere representations of a culture, but take an active part in its constitution and transformation:

... objects can occupy the social roles of active, sentient beings. ... The ancient and medieval world presents an array of situations where objects, from sculptures and paintings to manuscripts and even buildings, could be imbued not just with religious significance, but divine presence or the constituents of political power. (Canepa 2010: 9)

At this point it becomes crucial to ask for a cult image's function and utilization, for Hans Belting (1993: 55) states that the analysis of images can never be separated from the question of who uses visual

media and for which purpose. Probably the most important motivation in producing idols is the creation of the presence of the unrepresentable divine. The image becomes the medium of two entirely different spheres; within it transcendence and immanence are unified (e.g., Bräunlein 2009: 776–7; Zink 2003: 203). As images are thought to enable the experience of, and therefore the communication with, a divine presence, they often define the setting, purpose and structure of a ritual act (e.g., Gladigow 2005: 62; Graf 2001: 242).

Images have long been used by religious peoples around the world to communicate with the unseen, mysterious, and potentially uncontrollable forces that are understood to govern life. Sacrificial offerings before (and often to) images are the material form of an economy of exchange that allows believers to enter into a relationship with deities, which is intended to result in mutual satisfaction. Images make the god or saint or spirit available for petition, praise, offering, and negotiation. (Morgan 2005: 59)

I have already referred to the Táng Chinese as well as Japanese practice of invoking Vaiśravaṇa in order to assure military victories. What is interesting in regard to our deity is, that by looking at the ritual uses of his cult image we see that they coincide with his primary functions as a wealth and war god; the rituals aim at obtaining wealth and fortunes of war. The interesting thing is, that by comparing the ritual acts involving Vaiśravaṇa in India, as described in certain scripts such as the *Grhyasūtra* (2.5), *Nāṭyaśāstra* (1.3) or the *Śāṅkhāyana Grhyasūtra* (2.17.4, 2.14.17) (e.g., Satapathy 2002: 60; Kumar 2010: 86; Oldenberg 1886: 90, 86) and Japan (Chaudhuri 2003: 21, 30–1, 112–13) we recognize a certain tendency: in India, Vaiśravaṇa is predominately worshipped as a god of wealth, in Japan as a god of war, correlating with the preferred mode of representation in the respective regions.

The topic of the cult image's utilization takes us to another important trend in the study of images: its connection to the political sphere. Burkhard Gladigow (2005: 65–9, 81, 85) shows this on the basis of the ancient Greek monumental cult image and the small statuette. Huge, immobile, monumental cult images occasion the erection of temples, the deployment of an institutional and religious elite and regulated image

worship. Besides, the maintenance of the temple and the regulation of the cult becomes subject to the territorial sovereignty (Graf 2001: 236–43).

Especially in the case of a martial deity like Vaiśravaṇa, his connection to the political sphere is of major concern. We have already heard that Vaiśravaṇa is venerated as a war god, or at least ritually invoked, in times of war in China and Japan. This link might have even caused his detachment from the group of the Four Heavenly Kings and the formation of an independent cult in East Asia. This development seems to have started in the Central Asian kingdom of Khotan. Sources tell us that the Khotanese royal family claims to be descended from the god, a belief which has brought about Vaiśravaṇa's rise to major popularity in the oasis. The legend's motifs find their way into Vaiśravaṇa's iconography and a special iconographical type is created. This 'Vaiśravaṇa of Khotan' is shown clad in armour, wearing a tall crown, being upheld by the earth goddess Pṛthivi and flanked by two demons.

From Khotan, the cult of Vaiśravaṇa spread to China, where a lot of his earlier Chinese representations can especially be found in Dunhuang. His popularity in the East Asian region might have been promoted by a legend often referred to as the Legendary Siege of Anxi, which we know best from two scriptures; the *Biography of Eminent Monks of Song Dynasty*, *Song gao seng zhuan* (988) and the *Comprehensive Record of the Buddhas and Patriarchs*, *Fozu tongji*. They tell us that when 'Barbarians' attack Anxi, one of the four Chinese garrisons in the Tarim basin, the Táng emperor Xuanzong (712–765) asks the esoteric Buddhist monk Amoghavajra (704–774) for help. Amoghavajra, a monk from Central Asia, then prays to Vaiśravaṇa. Further, we are told that in 742 the earth in Anxi shakes and golden mice or rats appear and gnaw the invader's bowstrings. When finally Vaiśravaṇa appears above the northern city gate, the enemies immediately flee and Anxi is saved. After this event, emperor Xuanzong orders the erection of Vaiśravaṇa statues in all city towers and army encampments. While the historicity of the Legendary Siege of Anxi is rightly doubted, Goble tries to account for the true historical basis of the legend. Historically it is safe to assume that Amoghavajra assisted the Táng throne during and following the uprising of An Lushan and that one of the Táng emperors in this period was actually Xuanzong. Geoffrey Goble (2013: 13) states that, 'Amoghavajra's presence and ritual services were

clearly conceived of as an important element in the Tang military resistance to the rebellion initiated by An Lushan.’ Moreover, as already mentioned, there was a military practice of venerating Vaiśravaṇa in the Táng period. Thus, it is quite possible that thanks to Amoghavajra and his invocation of ‘Vaiśravaṇa of Khotan’, the deity’s role as a individual war deity was popularized. Not long after these events in China, the cult of Tobatsu Bishamon, as the deity is referred to in Japan, spread in Japan, Kūkai (774–835), who established esoteric Shingon Buddhism in Japan, will have brought the earliest Japanese Tobatsu Bishamon statue to Japan.

A high density of Vaiśravaṇa statues can however be found in northeastern Honshū, where the court in Kyōto waged war against the Emishi, a group of people who resisted the rule of the Japanese Emperors. Three centuries later, the Hiraizumi Fujiwara, a regional political organization that existed in parallel with the Japanese court in twelfth century Kitakami, North Japan, came to inherit the Emishi. Mimi Hall Yiengpruksawan, in her book *Hiraizumi: Buddhist Art and Regional Politics in Twelfth-Century Japan* (1998), deals with the entanglement of art and politics in the case of the Hiraizumi Fujiwara. Continually needing to justify and maintain their rule besides the royal dynasty in Kyōto the Hiraizumi Fujiwara used the power of art and architecture to claim a religious and political mandate:

Art as a form of rhetoric, a way to tell a story convincingly, here becomes a potent strategy in the consolidation and maintenance of power. It seems that the Hiraizumi Fujiwara sought to demonstrate that they were worthy men, fit to rule, and their land a sacred as well as political domain. Over the landscape of their Kitakami forbearers, they laid out a cognitive map of Buddhist mandate by which they negotiated and sustained their sovereignty. (Yiengpruksawan 1998: 199)

As a result, a widespread worship of Vaiśravaṇa forms in the Kitakami basin, for his function as guardian of the north and protector of legitimate rulers may have been useful for frontier Buddhism. What we can see is that art and politics somehow form a comprehensive relation: a martial deity like Vaiśravaṇa may have suited a ruler’s need in certain military situations, be it for legitimization, to frighten enemies, or

to encourage troops. On the other hand, being adopted in a military or political campaign definitely contributed to the growth and spread of the god’s popularity.

### The image and its context

A second aspect of my research is a focus on the topic of the previously mentioned context of the image. Here, I am thinking of questions which go beyond the immanent interpretation of an artwork. In regard to Vaiśravaṇa, I am talking about 1) cultural contact, inter- and intra-religious encounters, as well as the transfer of culture and religion; and 2) socio-political, cultural, and historical developments. The issue of power and the images’ ability to affect culture leads beyond the scope of an immanent interpretation of the image and places it in a wider cultural and social context. Encounters between different cultures, societies, and religions may be the cause of changes on different levels – for example, the ritual, doctrinal, or iconographic level of a given religion. Further, as we have already seen, art reflects and changes its environment, being nevertheless influenced by socio-political, cultural, and historical developments. In this regard, entangled history and cultural transfer theories provide some important ideas: Categories such as ‘self/other’ and the closely connected difference between inter- and intra-religious encounters allow us to deal in more detail with questions pertaining to socio-political, cultural, and historical developments that generate iconographic transformations.

### Transfer processes

The importance of cultural contact and the transfer of culture and religion becomes evident when we think of the history of Buddhism. Vaiśravaṇa is found within the pantheon of a religion that extended its sphere of influence over large parts of Asia. As already mentioned, the deity originates from the Vedic-Brāhmaṇical pantheon and is integrated into Buddhism at an early date. From the Indian subcontinent, Buddhism spread to Central Asia and along the ancient silk roads to China in the Hân dynasty (206 BC – 220 CE), as well as in Korea in the fourth and Japan in the sixth century BC. Thus, Vaiśravaṇa’s transfer from India to Japan covers a long period of time and geographical distance. On its way from India to East Asia, Buddhism encountered a variety of cultural milieus, religions, and societies, all leaving their marks on this religious movement. The Buddhist religion that reaches Japan is not really

Indian anymore, but an enhanced version, with numerous Central Asian and especially Chinese elements.

In order to study cultural contact as well as cultural and religious transfer, I analyse and make use of theoretical approaches from comparative history, transfer theories, and entangled history, or *histoire croisée*, which focus on the various exchange relationships between the objects of comparison.

Michel Espagne, dealing with the cultural transfer between France and Germany in his book *Les transferts culturels franco-allemands* (1999), was the first to highlight the importance of transfer processes in history. What relational and multiperspectival approaches have in common is their critique of comparative historical theories: In laying stress on the processual character of mutual perception and influence, they are trying to avoid the reproduction of *a priori* defined, static objects of investigation. They deal with the interactions of cultures and societies, the dynamics of cultural interchange processes and the flow of material and intellectual objects. Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann (2006: 37) thus underline that a transfer is not a linear process, but proceeds between several points and in a number of directions, sometimes in chronological order, sometimes temporally overlapping. Moreover, one of the major objectives is to overcome the focus on nation-centred viewpoints, terminologies and categories. This approach especially benefits studies that are dealing with a historical timeframe in which the concept of a nation did not yet exist, as is the case in this survey too. This seems to be most applicable in studying the reasons behind iconographical transformation processes.

Comparative history, in turn, is an analytical instrument for the isolation of specific common as well as variant factors of various comparative cases. This allows for their comparison, analysis and typing and helps us to understand other cultures better. Because comparative history investigates parallels and differences at a certain time, it often does this in a de-contextualizing and synchronising fashion (Kaelble 2003: 472–3). As a result, transfer theories have been originally formulated in response to comparative history and are often seen as being opposed to it. In my opinion, comparative history and transfer studies have a complementary relation to each other. While a comparative historical approach is interested in the moment before and after the transfer, the focus of transfer history is the process in between. A transfer process is provoked by the perception of a differ-

ence between two or more cultures and comparative method helps us to account for those differences. On the other hand material or intellectual transfers can cause transformations in iconography.

In regard to Vaiśravaṇa I therefore started with a detailed analysis of his most important written as well as visual sources in the Vedic-Brāhmanical as well as Buddhist contexts. Comparing the results allowed for a contrasting juxtaposition of his functions, descriptions and iconographic depictions. Thus, I was able to determine his iconography in India and Japan as well as possible transformations and appropriations, and when and where these took place. From a transfer-historical perspective in turn, in regard to Vaiśravaṇa we are not that much interested in his iconographical transformation in India and Japan as such, but rather how Buddhism, and thus his image, spreads from India to Japan. In this sense, the history of Buddhism in different cultures as well as the means of its expansion is of special interest. I just want to mention two research studies that are of particular interest in this regard. In her revealing book *Ancient India and Ancient China: Trade and Religious Exchanges A.D. 1-600* (1994) Xinru Liu deals with the most important connection between India and East Asia; the ancient silk roads. They are a remarkable example of the encounters of societies, cultures and religions and thus one of the most important sources for iconographical and religious transformation processes, at least in terms of Buddhism. Kenneth Ch'en, for example, is concerned with the spread of Buddhism in China and the Chinese transformation of the religion in certain spheres of Chinese life, such as polity or economy (Ch'en 1973). Moreover, we can ask which media, which actors and institutions were involved in the expansion of Buddhism? Further, as *histoire croisée* is not a specific method we can concentrate on those ideas that help us account for Vaiśravaṇa's iconographic transformation. In accordance with *histoire croisée* we will avoid *a priori* defined, static objects of investigation, but rather concentrate on the category of self and other in religions and the related concept of intra- and inter-religious encounters.

#### Self and other

As already mentioned, the topic of self and other forms an important category in exchange and transfer processes, for one culture can never exist without the existence of another one (e.g., Espagne 1997: 312; Middell 2000: 19). Structures, symbols and cultural practices are thus not defined in advance, but always



in relation to the other culture (Eisenberg 2003: 404). Moreover, Nikolas Jaspert (2012: 169) states that it is often transfer processes that cause systematization processes intra-religiously, by means of normative texts, canon or jurisdiction and inter-religiously by categorization, apologetics and polemics. As

... after their constitutional phase, religious traditions tend not only to define themselves, but also to define others' we need to account for the perspective of alterity and xenology by studying both the perception and the treatment of the alien and unknown. (Jaspert 2012: 167, 169)

Within the context of defining self and other, we can, for example, enquire as to the relationships between those religions to which Vaiśravaṇa belongs. As a Buddhist deva, he is venerated in Buddhism and Brāhmaṇism alike, so it could be interesting to deal with questions like how and to what extent are the traditions interrelated? Without going into detail here, I just want to point out that most scholars consider that Buddhism evolved in reaction to, as well as out of, Brahmanism. Recent approaches however consider Buddhism to have developed independently of Brāhmaṇism, although sharing the same cultural and religious background.

By means of his concept of pan-Asian divinities, David Seyfort Ruegg shows that such a definition and demarcation of certain categories or entities is not always that easy, especially when it comes to the definitions of inner and outer or culture and religion. Drawing on the observance that there are several deities that are not only worshipped in Brāhmaṇism-Hinduism but in Buddhism as well, many scholars have tended to speak of a borrowing of Brāhmaṇical-Hindu deities by Buddhists (Ruegg 2008: v, 43, 89). Ruegg (21) however opines that Buddhism and Brāhmaṇism-Hinduism have never been two clearly distinct and well-demarcated entities, rather sharing a mutual background.

It appeared that the idea of a partly common religious and cultural substratum, (back)ground or heritage might significantly help in accounting for common features, and indeed sometimes a certain intertextuality, which we encounter when studying Buddhism in the context of the religious India. (Ruegg 2008: 131)

In this sense, Ruegg tries to analyse their relationship by reference to the Buddhist emic idea of *laukika* and *lokottara* (Ruegg 2008: vi–viii, 37–9, 42–3, 93). While the supramundane *lokottara* realm is specifically Buddhist and just involves those Buddhist figures that do play a soteriological role in Buddhism, the worldly gods, which are venerated in Buddhism and Hinduism alike are classed among the *laukika* sphere. The *laukika* sphere is equivalent to the pan-Asian substratum, which means that its worldly gods are not so much Buddhist or Brāhmaṇical in particular, but pan-Asian. They are subject to *saṃsāra* as well as the *lokottara* realm.

As to whether Vaiśravaṇa can be described as pan-Asian because he originated from a commonly shared Buddhist and Brāhmaṇical religious and cultural substratum, I would like to remain undecided here. However in terms of the fact that Vaiśravaṇa is found in all cultures throughout Asia that adopted the Vedic-Brāhmaṇical religion or Buddhism, he can be referred to as pan-Indian/Asian divinity.

#### Inter- and intra-religious encounters

Because processes of transfer and encounter do affect the cultural sphere they also exert influence at the religious level. Following Pierre Bourdieu's field concept, neither cultures nor religious traditions are to be understood as monolithic and static entities (2000). Rather they are dynamic and interacting systems, permanently being constituted, transformed and recreated by human actions and various elements such as ideas, agents and institutions (Canepa 2010: 9). 'Religious contacts challenge religious traditions to differentiate themselves, position themselves and establish an identity and thus promote the controversy of the religious field inwardly and outwardly as well as the demarcation of boundaries' (Krech 2015: 64). As a consequence, according to Volkhard Krech (2013: 4–5), when studying religious fields it might be useful to differentiate between inner and outer boundaries and hence inter- and intra-religious relationships: thus, a religious field's

inner boundaries are permanently being established and reproduced by the intra- and inter-religious controversy surrounding its conceptual and practical content. Its outer boundaries emerge through the distinction and interferences between religion and other societal fields. (Krech 2013: 4–5)

In other words, a religious field is not only defined by its internal progress but also outwardly, first of all by political, economic and suchlike factors (Krech 2015: 64). In addition, Krech (2012: 59–61) defines intra-religious encounters as processes of schism, the formation of sects or schools and the differentiation between orthodoxy, heterodoxy and heresy, as well as certain kinds of mission. He describes inter-religious encounters as contacts between two traditions defining themselves as religions. However:

The absorption of elements of a religion and amalgamation processes are usually just as much of an extra-religious as religious nature, and religious ideas can just as equally be stimulated by political or economic developments as, vice-versa, political and economic structures by religious ideas. (Krech 2012: 33)

Now, Vaiśravaṇa is an interesting example in regard to intra-religious developments: from the more orthodox schools' point of view, today commonly known as Theravāda, it is only members of the monastic community that are able to attain Buddhahood. In the second century BC however, new scriptures and commentaries on the Buddha's teaching began to circulate within the monastic community that brought about the formation of Mahāyāna Buddhism between the first century BC and the second century CE. The representatives of Mahāyāna Buddhism argue that every human being is able to attain enlightenment, causing a huge expansion of the Buddhist pantheon. In the course of these events, some lesser gods such as Vaiśravaṇa, associated with worldly benefits like wealth, fertility, health and happiness and thus providing a more common metaphor to the common people, attain major popularity. Taking a look at intra-religious relations as well as external factors defining a religious field we find another interesting example in the formation of the tantric tradition due to the changing society of medieval India (Warder 2000: 477). In the sixth century CE the downfall of the Gupta Empire, that had covered most of the Indian subcontinent, led to decentralization, regionalism and militarization. During this period the Buddhist monastic communities lost their patrons and had to act as landowners on their own. They adopted the characteristics of their surrounding environment, such as the utilization of political power in order to accomplish their goals and to advance their agenda (Davidson 2002: 112). According to Ronald Davidson these war-

like circumstances are reflected in the tantric tradition:

The primary difference between normative Mahāyāna and tantric Buddhism is that the latter appropriates an overarching political metaphor of overlordship in this very life, so that initiation is performed in a manner derived from the coronation rituals of medieval Hinduism. Tantric Buddhism may be understood as a sacralization of the early medieval political and military fragmentation of North India, with its contentious rivalries between feudal clans. (Davidson and Orzech 2004: 820)

Śivaism, with martial Lord Śiva as supreme god, becomes quite popular within India's ruling and especially military elite. This development affects the Buddhist pantheon directly: it becomes enriched with armed and wrathful deities, most of them incorporated from the Brāhmaṇical pantheon, whose purpose is to protect Buddhism from antagonizing gods and religions. Thus, tantric belief finds its way into Mahāyāna Buddhism and gives rise to the development of esoteric Buddhism, commonly known as Vajrayāna, which spread to Tibet in the seventh century CE and Japan in the eighth century. Esoteric Buddhism, with its new deities, inspires artists to produce a huge amount of religious artwork, insisting on the design of new iconographic characteristics as expressions of their gods' divine, spiritual and physical power. Consequently, representations are enriched by numerous attributes, weapons, multiple arms and heads and wrathful facial expressions. Vaiśravaṇa becomes a common member of the Vajrayāna pantheon.

In summary, we can refer to Canepa (2010: 19), who points to the importance of transfer processes and the study of cross-cultural interactions in regard to iconographical transformation processes:

... confronting the problem of cross-cultural interaction among visual cultures demands that we concentrate not just on the objects, their origins, contexts, patrons, or creators, but on the process and practices of cross-cultural interaction that provide the dynamic means of their transformation. (Canepa 2010: 19)

## Concluding remarks

This present paper examines the reconstruction of Vaiśravaṇa's iconographic development by showing that it is not exclusively the result of religious factors. Additionally, theoretical approaches that may make a contribution to defining iconographic transformation processes are analysed and adapted to this research.

I have tried to account for an iconographic transformation process in two interlinked parts: On the one hand, it is crucial to understand how images operate and how they are embedded in various fields of culture and society. Picture-theoretical approaches, as well as the concept of visual culture and the gaze, help us to understand the special characteristics of a religiously used image like that of Vaiśravaṇa. Moreover, they allow us to deal with the close relationship of visual media and the political sphere, for the issue of power and the ability of images to affect culture places it in a wider cultural and social context. On the other hand, we have focused on the context of the image that exceeds the immanent interpretation of an artwork. With the expansion of religious traditions, visual media are distributed. On behalf of theories of cultural contact and transfer processes we referred to the spread of Buddhism, which on its way from India to East Asia encounters various cultural milieus, religions and societies. Such encounters may be the cause of changes, at different levels, of a given religion, and visual media can be re-interpreted in a new context. With reference to Vaiśravaṇa, we have seen that during his transfer from India to Japan he was transformed from a wealth deity into a war god.

This article however, did not aim at making an analysis of the god's forms of representation, but tried to classify them within a broader context. In my opinion, in dealing with art, images and iconography from a cultural/religious/scientific perspective, it is not only important to know, *in which way* a particular figure is depicted. As we have seen, images are always connected to a particular worldview, hence exceeding the focus on visual media by itself. Therefore, it is at least as relevant to ask *why* a figure is depicted in a certain way. I seek to illustrate how such a process can move forward and what conclusions can be drawn in regard to modifications in the religious systems involved, as well as in terms of cultural contacts. ■

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