

## The Aura of Buddhist Material Objects in the Age of Mass-Production

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The article discusses material religion in a commercial setting and sets off this discussion with Walter Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936). Benjamin argues that mechanical reproduction emancipated works of art from religious rituals and evaporated the aura of art. This has resonance among some Tibetan Buddhists in the context of mass-produced Buddhist material objects. Are such objects fit to be given as gifts, implemented in rituals, and worshipped on altars? Based upon ethnographic work at a Tibetan Buddhist market in urban China, the article argues that although objects manufactured in factories for profit are not made or handled according to Buddhist tradition, the aura can be produced in different ways and at different points of an object's life.

**Keywords:** aura; Buddhist material objects; commodities; mass-production; Tibetan Buddhism

### Introduction

Once ran into the performance of a Buddhist ritual in the midst of a busy commercial strip in downtown Chengdu. In a small store specializing in *mālā* (prayer beads) that were popular with Tibetan Buddhists, a Tibetan man wearing maroon robes was blessing the premises and all the goods, reciting prayers, and throwing blessed grains in the air. The shopkeeper was a Han Chinese woman wearing elaborate makeup, artificial nails, and her hair high. She had multiple prayer beads crawling up one arm. The monk soon finished, and afterwards, she explained to me that he had passed by her shop, so she asked him to come in and bless her goods. She related: "For this service, you can give ten or fifty Yuan, whatever you like. It will bring you good luck." Scenes like this are actually not unusual in this particular commercial setting, which is the oft-called Tibetan market, where businessmen come to produce profit and customers come to purchase Buddhist paraphernalia. Commodities and customers being blessed by Buddhist professionals, the smell of incense as one enters a shop, and money offerings in the lap of Buddha statues all await the customers visiting the Tibetan market. The main argument of this article is that these are ways to produce aura in mass-

produced Buddhist commodities. I begin my discussion of Buddhist material objects in a commercial setting with German critic Walter Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936).

In his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Benjamin discusses how changes in economic structures—or, more precisely, how new technology enabled an endless reproduction of copies—corrupted the authenticity, creativity, genius, eternal value, and mystery of art (Benjamin, 1969). He acknowledges that reproduction was not new, but that it had entered a new phase in advanced capitalism in which it became mechanical. That, he warns, profoundly modified the production and consumption of art. According to Benjamin, the effect of mechanically copying and distributing art on a massive scale destroys the unique existence of art in a particular place as well as its originality and embeddedness in history and tradition. Benjamin called these aspects of art, “aura.” His use of aura, which Collins Dictionary describes as “a distinctive air or quality considered to be characteristic of a person or thing,”<sup>1</sup> expresses the authenticity of original and unique art.

Let me illustrate this in a Buddhist context. The Yungang Grottoes in Shanxi Province, China, where 51,000 Buddhist statues of varying size are carved in sandstone, is illustrative of Benjamin's aura. They have survived since the fifth century as a “material witness” to what UNESCO has recognized as “the power and endurance of Buddhist belief in China.”<sup>2</sup> The aura of these statues derives from the magnitude of the collection, their beauty and craftsmanship, spectacular abode covering a carved area of 18000 square meters, and fascinating history that began as a Northern Wei project initiated under its state patronage to Buddhism. Moreover, their aura derives from their existence as religious artifacts in cave temples. To Benjamin, aura is grounded in this religious experience. I agree with Brent Plate (2005: 88), who asserts that “[t]ranslating the aura into the language of religious studies is not much of a task, for the leap from aura to ‘sacred’ or ‘holy’ is quite short.” In a Buddhist context, more importantly, the aura of these statues also stems from their capability and efficacy in impacting people and their environments. Furthermore, they serve as mediators between the profane and the sacred (cf. Rambelli 2007), though these very distinctions are blurred, a phenomenon that also becomes evident when we follow their life cycles (cf. Meyer et al., 2010). Therefore, in this article, I extend Benjamin's discussion of aura to a Buddhist context where authenticity is not all that is at stake.<sup>3</sup>

Benjamin argues that, prior to the advent of mechanical production, art was produced to serve religion and thus restricted its consumption to within a religious tradition. Art's “auratic mode of existence” was related to its ritual function, but technological reproducibility later released art from its ‘parasitical dependence on ritual’ (Benjamin, 1969: 224). When art was bound to religious rituals, it was inaccessible for most people since it was the religious elite that had the authority to define its meaning. There was a distance between the art object and the spectator, but since the masses yearned to “get closer” to works of art and to overcome its uniqueness by acquiring its reproduction or its

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/aura> accessed 10.01.18.

<sup>2</sup> <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1039> accessed 10.01.18.

<sup>3</sup> The continued relevance of Benjamin—as well as in the studies of Buddhist material objects—has also been noted by Holmes-Tagchungdarpa (2014), Kendall (2015), and Rambelli (2002).

image, the aura was dispelled (ibid.: 222–223). From Benjamin’s perspective, therefore, mass-production intensifies the presence of art and makes it available to everybody to be experienced at the same time and in various contexts.

We can return to the Yungang Grottoes in China to illustrate how this affected aura. Qingdao City Media Plaza, located on the east coast of China, displayed a 10-metre-high 3D print of one of the statues from the grotto, an Amitâbha Buddha.<sup>4</sup> Although this 3D-printed statue is an exact visual replica, it lacks aura if we follow Benjamin’s argument; it is inauthentic because it is detached from the original tradition, history, and place. New technology enables the reproduction of the Amitâbha Buddha, dislocated it from religion, stripped it of “cult value,” as Benjamin would call it, and has left it only with ‘exhibition value’ (ibid.: 225–226). What I argue, however, is that we cannot judge the value of this 3D-printed statue exhibited in a downtown shopping mall—or any other mechanically reproduced, religious object—unless we know how people *interact* with it. Although religious objects manufactured in factories are not made or handled according to religious tradition, I show that aura can be produced in different ways and at different points of an object’s life.

This article examines how the aura of religious objects is produced in the age of mass-production and contributes to the study of religious materiality, i.e. religious material objects and the ideas and behaviour associated with them (cf. Kieschnick, 2003). Arguing against Benjamin, I draw on ethnographic fieldwork at the Tibetan market in downtown Chengdu, Sichuan Province in China.<sup>5</sup> Chengdu is a historically significant place for both Tibetan Buddhists and merchants, and the Tibetan market has become the main centre for trading Tibetan Buddhist artefacts in China (Brox, 2017). In the aftermath of post-Mao economic reforms, combined with Buddhist revivalism, Tibetans and Han Chinese have increased purchasing power and a supply of inexpensive commodities that can easily be acquired from the approximately 200 shops that constitute the religious market: They can obtain everything needed to furnish the Buddhist home, monastery, and landscape. Statues, images, devotional pictures, prayer beads, incense, charms, religious texts, musical instruments, monastic and ritual robes, offerings for the Buddhist altar, prayer wheels, prayer flags and stûpas (reliquary monuments) are for sale. On a monetary value scale, the commodities range from the grandiose artefacts that are bought as commodities and later offered as generous gifts to root lamas and monasteries, to the inexpensive trinkets that are sold wholesale and are found in curio shops predominantly owned by Han Chinese. Low production costs and seriality have made Buddhist objects cheaper and thus available to more people. Both Buddhists and non-Buddhist consumers coming here cannot avoid mass-produced commodities—they are available and affordable. These commodities can be free from religious ritual since their status depends on the faith, knowledge, and

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<sup>4</sup> <https://gbtimes.com/3d-printed-buddhist-statues-displayed-in-china> accessed 10.01.18.

<sup>5</sup> I have been visiting the market since 2010, but this article is based on biannual, ethnographic research focused upon the commercial transactions that took place at the Tibetan market 2015–2017. I have talked with people involved in the production, dissemination, sacralization, and consumption of Buddhist objects. They are producers, marketers, ritual specialists, practitioners, and consumers who have helped me understand how they negotiate the status of Buddhist commodities. In other publications I have instantiated different modalities of the same market as they relate to place-making practices (Brox, 2016) as well as its history and ethnic composition (Brox, 2017).

preferences of the person relating to the commodity, and also the context in which it is placed: One can use the prayer beads blessed by a Tibetan monk and bought from the shop visited at the opening of this article as an aesthetic decoration, but also as a marker of identity (which is common among Tibetan youth in Chengdu), or they can have an apotropaic function, be an aid or focus of Buddhist merit-making practices, and so forth.

My research at this market suggests that although there is a lot of ambiguity and constant negotiation due to concerns regarding the integrity and efficacy of mass-produced objects, many Tibetan Buddhists do indeed recognize some kind of aura in them. In other words, although the object was produced outside a ritual context, it is not per default less efficacious as Benjamin warns. I assert that we need to pay attention not only to the ways in which religious objects impact the lives of people (en par with Benjamin's auratic art), but also the ways in which people interact with religious objects. There is no clear dichotomy between commodities and 'proper' Buddhist artefacts, I argue, and commodification does not inherently reduce the aura of Buddhist material objects.

Throughout the following, I discuss the complexities of sacred Buddhist artefacts and mass-production. First, I introduce Buddhist objects, how prescriptions spell out and restrict their uses, and their ambiguous nature as interfaces between the secular and the sacred. Secondly, I relate how the commercial setting is perceived as constituting a risk for such objects. I end by presenting three very different modes of action employed by shopkeepers, customers, and ritual specialists. The modes of action creating connections to these objects and thus lifting them out of the mundane sphere are packaging, ritual action, and faith labor. Users ascribe aura to objects despite their production conditions. Of importance is how users relate to Buddhist material objects and create their own spiritual biographies. This is a key to understanding why the aura of a Buddhist material object does not necessarily evaporate during mass-production. This kind of material religion approach speaks against 'an earlier understanding of religion and materiality as belonging to two opposed registers, spirit and matter' (Meyer et al., 2010: 209) by allowing us to think about how aura is produced when people interact with religious objects. The article thus contributes to our understanding of religious materialism and Buddhism as practice and bridges the gap separating 'the levels of humans and some spiritual, divine, or transcendental force' (ibid.: 2010).



*Figure 1. Altar surrounded by commodities in a shop, Chengdu*

### Buddhist material objects

An obvious point of departure for an introduction to comparative Buddhist material culture is the exemplary life story of Buddha Śākyamuni. This is also how John Kieschnick (2003) opens his book on how Buddhism impacted Chinese material culture. Kieschnick reports on ‘trenchant Buddhist attitudes toward material things in general’ (ibid.: 1), and states that ‘[f]ew religions have attacked the material world with the intellectual rigour of Buddhism’ (ibid.: 2). He points to the genesis of Buddhism and relates how Buddha Śākyamuni renounced his princely lifestyle and attachment to family, wealth, and material pleasures to seek enlightenment. Buddha’s life story, depicted in material culture like texts and statues, and passed on from Buddhist teachers to students and Buddhist parents to children, serves as a role model for all Buddhists. It communicates that anti-materialism is necessary for spiritual attainment as it ‘implied a juxtaposition between material comfort and spiritual advancement’ (ibid.). Nonetheless, despite anti-materialist interpretations of Buddhist ideals, Buddhism is packed with material things. They have different functions, spiritual value, soteriological promises, and so forth, being gifts that one offers (e.g. incense, ritual cakes, flowers), recipients of offerings (statues, religious texts, thangkas),<sup>6</sup> ritual tools (*rdo-rje*,<sup>7</sup> bell, pellet-drum), auxiliary practice objects (prayer beads, prayer wheels), as well as apotropaic and auspicious objects (prayer flags, amulets, blessing cords).<sup>8</sup> The correct iconometry, production, and consumption of several of these objects are described in great detail in Buddhist scriptures.<sup>9</sup>

Buddhist material objects are semiophores in the sense that they ‘bear meaning.’ They are ‘...endowed with particular sense and value beyond their material and functional value or potentiality.’ (Rambelli, 2007: 265). We learn from books on Tibetan art (e.g. Huntington et al., 2003, Thurman, 1991) that their aesthetics relate to Buddhist ideas and ideals expressed through composition, colours, shapes, patterns, and decorations—all of which have a deeper meaning and religious functions: They are not random or picked for their beauty. Instead, such books assert that material details support Buddhist practice by symbolizing Buddhist ideals, invoking certain feelings, representing specific knowledge, or acting as mnemonic devices. The preoccupation with labelling every detail of Tibetan artwork as representing or meaning something else (often referring to favoured concepts such as wisdom, compassion, or emptiness) and interpreting Tibetan material objects within a religious narrative has become an obsession (see also Faure, 1998) and an ideological prison (Lopez, 1998). Furthermore, the attention paid to the symbolism of Buddhist objects does not necessarily tell us much about how religious and non-religious users understood and interacted with these objects.

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<sup>6</sup> A thangka is a rectangular silk or painted scroll mounted on brocade, depicting Buddhist motifs.

<sup>7</sup> *Rdo-rje* (San.: *vajra*) is a ritual implement often glossed as symbolizing the indestructible qualities and power of enlightenment, like a “diamond” or “thunderbolt”—terms often used in English translations of Tibetan and Sanskrit texts.

<sup>8</sup> Standard Tibetan terms and names, such as thangka, appear in transcribed form and without italics in the text. Unless otherwise stated, italicised words in the text are transliterated Tibetan using the system developed by Wylie (1959), for example *rdo-rje*.

<sup>9</sup> See for instance Tucci on thangkas (1980) and stūpas (1988).

The handling and use of Buddhist artefacts are essential to Buddhists in the formation of identity (as symbols), in devotional practices (as offerings), and in ceremonies (as ritual implements) (Rambelli, 2007). Nonetheless, materiality has until recently been a marginal topic in the study of Buddhism.<sup>10</sup> We now see a proliferation of studies in Buddhist materiality that has inspired the present article, such as the work by Yael Bentor on Indo-Tibetan consecration texts and practices (1996a, b), John S. Strong's study of relics in different Asian contexts (2004), Donald Swearer's discussion about image consecration in Thailand (2004), and in particular Fabio Rambelli's work on Buddhist materiality in Japan (2002, 2007, 2017). Yet, religious commodities—understood here as goods associated with a particular religion that one can buy and sell, and whose value is mediated not only by an economy in which agents compete for profit, but also other values—are generally ignored within Buddhist studies. Inspiring exemptions include Natasha Heller's (2014) study of Buddha-recitation devices in China and Laurel Kendall's (2015) discussion of sacred goods and services in Korean and Vietnamese city markets. Perhaps the overall scholarly disregard of Buddhist commodities is because they are considered as belonging to an entirely different value regime and therefore have little to tell us about Buddhism. In contrast, sacred objects prompt discussions about religious ideas and values, how they represent the doctrine, are imbued with life or magic, or connect to the sacred. In fact, when scholars deem objects 'Buddhist,' they are often understood as auratic or sacred. But how do Buddhist material objects connect with, or become, sacred? I turn now to discuss sacralization, or the process of turning material objects into something deemed sacred.

Sacralization rituals are performed for material objects everywhere Buddhism has spread, from India to Japan (Swearer, 2004: Chp. 8) and all the way to the United States (e.g. Bao 2015). Rambelli (2007: 268) explains sacralization as the process of transcending the 'mundane, material role of objects.' According to Bentor (1996b: 302) consecrations (in Tibetan called *rab-gnas*) are one of the most frequently performed rituals by Tibetan reincarnate lamas and abbots. Consecrated objects are classified into receptacles (*rten*) of the Buddha's body (images and *thangkas*), speech (books and *gzungs*), and mind (*stûpas* and *tsha-tshas*) (ibid.: 290–291).<sup>11</sup> There are five main components of the ritual. In the fourth step, the deity is summoned to abide in the receptacle, and the receptacle becomes an embodiment of the deity: a statue of a Buddha becomes the Buddha, the deity invited into a text is transformed into letters, and the divinity entering a *stûpa* takes the conical shape of a *stûpa* (ibid.: 191–192). We can say that objects like a statue, text, and *stûpa* become sacred and efficacious after they are consecrated. Like Benjamin's aura that endows the object with the ability to impact people, sacred Buddhist objects have the power to produce effects like good fortune and merit for people interacting with them. As Bentor describes of the perceived function of consecration rituals:

Even though the great majority of Tibetan monastic and lay people do not consider themselves capable of apprehending the exact nature of that which is embodied in a

<sup>10</sup> See Schopen (1991) for a critique.

<sup>11</sup> *Gzungs* (Sanskrit: *dhāraṇī*) are formulas or codes that encapsulate the essence of lengthier texts or teachings. *Tsha-tshas* are miniature clay votive tablets that either come in the conic shape of a *stûpa* or depict Buddhist deities.

receptacle after consecration, they do possess some intuition that there is something sacred present there. [...] Most Tibetan people act as if something is present in a consecrated receptacle, something which may bring blessings (*byin rlabs*) and good fortune (*bkra shis*). (ibid.: 293)

For those who believe that such rituals change the status of the artefact from mundane to extramundane, the ritual increases the value of the receptacle by establishing its efficacy, life, magic, sacredness, aura, or another related term. By localizing and identifying buddhas and divine powers to statues, texts, and stûpas, ordinary people can perform rituals that will help them towards attaining the level of ultimate truth (ibid.). Of course, there are Tibetans and Tibetan Buddhists who do not believe in these forces but think that it is 'blind faith' and superstition that should be corrected through education. Nonetheless, many Tibetan Buddhists perceive Buddhist material objects, following Rambelli's (2007: 259) useful typology, as embodiments of the sacred, representations of doctrines and ideas, and devotional tools that they can use to accumulate merit. In other words, they recognize that these objects have meaning and purpose beyond their materiality and know that they must be handled respectfully. My interlocutors could mention the basic handling prescriptions: that it was wrong to place a Buddhist object in low or dirty places or to step over them or point out their material flaws. Likewise, it was incorrect to turn prayer wheels counter-clockwise, or to use Buddhist objects as decorations or toys or cause damage to them. These are some of the many rules that have been ingrained in Tibetans who are Buddhists.

To sum up, a ritual action such as consecration imbues an object with sacredness, and upholding Buddhist prescriptions for production and handling are part of the maintenance of what we can call the sacred. We can compare this respectful treatment of Buddhist artefacts according to prescriptions, including the ritual handling of Buddhist artefacts, as ways to maintain the cult value that Benjamin refers to in the context of traditional art. The questions, then, are: Does mass-production sever the objects' connection to the sacred and the people's connection to the objects? How do we conceptualize the aura of religious objects, which have been mechanically produced and are now sold for profit as commodities—like Buddha-recitation devices in Shanghai (Heller, 2014), get-rich-amulets in Bangkok (Kitiarsa, 2012), or enchanted statues in Hanoi (Kendall, 2015), which are part of the expanding phenomenon of 'sacred shopping' (ibid.)? How are mass-produced Buddhist material objects fit to be given as a gift, implemented in rituals, and worshipped on a shrine?

### **Sacred objects as commodities**

There is a perception among several of my Tibetan Buddhist interlocutors that, traditionally, sacred objects never actually entered the commodity circuit, nor did they become, in any stage of their lives, mundane commodities simply traded for money during exchanges between the capitalist who sought profit and the faithful who sought good fortune and merit. One interlocutor who expressed this dominant (albeit inaccurate) narrative was Kunchok,<sup>12</sup> a Tibetan man in his thirties who had left his

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<sup>12</sup> The idea that Buddhist material objects traditionally never were commodities is a narrative—not a historical fact—that pervaded talks I had with young Tibetan Buddhists living in Chengdu about Buddhist commodities. In light of

life as a monk at a monastery in eastern Tibet and now made a living in Chengdu as a thangka-painter. He related how, traditionally, the process of producing a thangka was not motivated by making a profit: “It was not about creating art to be exhibited, but about creating a concept.” The traditional exchange relationship between artisans and the faithful, he related, was characterized by the direct and profitless exchange on equal premises: the artisan produced a thangka because he was called upon by a Buddhist who had spiritual needs. The artisan, who was serving the Buddha, would make the thangka with a religious intention, not with the intention to make a profit. Kunchok also worked according to those same principles and also experienced that his customers preferred thangkas that had never been a commodity for offer at a market but had been made upon request directly to him. Such a thangka was more valuable both in terms of value (*rin-thang*) and the price (*rin-gong*) paid in cash. And he would make such a thangka as a friend, not as a businessman, Kunchok asserted.

According to this narrative, which was popular among young Tibetan urbanites, artisans produced Buddhist material objects for specific religious purposes in pre-capitalist Tibet. Now the responsibility of production has moved from Buddhist artisans working for Tibetan monasteries to the hands of non-Tibetan, capitalist atheists working in Chinese factories, where the producers lack the respect, sensitivity, and knowledge of the cultural, religious, and social significance of the Buddhist material objects.

I visited one such factory northwest of Chengdu. In dimly lit rooms, thirty Nepalese migrant workers sat bent over pieces of metal that they would later assemble into sacred receptacles. Buddha heads, arms, ornaments, and headless torsos lay scattered on the factory floor. There was no sanctity in the proximity of these statues because of the noise from the welding, hammering, and polishing of the metal. After assemblage, the statues sat hollow and disenchanting, stored on shop floors (fig. 2), shelves, and in boxes, waiting for someone to buy them for cash and, later, establish a connection to the sacred by giving them a religious purpose (or perhaps they became decorations). These statues had been produced for profit, another Tibetan interlocutor, Tashi, related: “The goods they are selling [at the market] are from here around Chengdu and some southern cities in inland China. [...] Big factories are hired to make it, and those who are working in the factories are mostly Chinese people [...], but it should be Tibetan people.” Of course, Tashi had not visited any factory, so he would not know that the workers in this factory, for instance, were probably Newari Buddhists. Instead, Tashi’s statement perhaps reflected his perception of Chinese businessmen running the operations, rather than the ethnicity and religiosity of the workers.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, what becomes clear is that for Tibetan urbanites like Tashi, what mattered was not only the ways in which objects are produced and how this production was motivated (for profit or for Buddhism) but also who produced these objects and for whom.

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historical evidence from as early as the 5th century, Kendall (2015: 368) concludes that ‘for more than a thousand years, concentrated markets were stocking sacred goods and Chinese artisans were mass-producing them, employing available technology including some of the methods used today, to accommodate a high market demand.’

<sup>13</sup> Thanks to Amy Holmes-Tagchungdarpa for alerting me to this point. I have already dealt with the complexities of ethnicity and economy at this market in a previous work (Brox, 2017), and intend to explore in detail ethnic tensions at the market in a future article.



Affordable Buddhist commodities that were sold at the Tibetan market in Chengdu looked mass-produced. In my conversations with young Tibetan urbanites, they discussed how these products, likely factory-made, were also not likely made according to Tibetan tradition that was upholding their authenticity (*bden-pa*). Therefore, they feared that the production, packing, transportation, storage, marketing, sale, and consumption of these artefacts routinely breached the prescriptions found in the commentaries of Buddhist masters. There is, therefore, an element of risk and ambiguity when acquiring Buddhist artefacts from the market. Moreover, compared to the disenchanting art that Benjamin describes, these religious objects raise the stakes because they are efficacious objects included in Buddhist practice. Other studies corroborate this perceived risk.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, I argue that although production conditions break with tradition and rituals when Buddhist artefacts are mass-produced, this risk can be counteracted in the later stages of its life. Instead of solely focusing on the production of objects, like Benjamin, we additionally need to consider branding and consumption to understand how aura is also produced after the production phase of an artefact.



*Figure 2. Statues and ritual vases in the factory storage*

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<sup>14</sup> Comparatively, in Kendall's study, entrepreneurs in Seoul and Hanoi considered the market as a place of risk. Kendall remarked that commercial artists were 'not attentive to religious taboos or purifications' (Kendall, 2015: 374). Traditional artists, however, will think about purity in the production phase by 'enforcing workshop taboos' in order to respect the gods and make the product as clean as possible, which will increase the perception of these statues as more sacred than those that are mass-produced (*ibid.*: 377ff). See also Heller (2014: 304).

My research suggests three very different modes of action that lift Buddhist material objects out of the mundane sphere: packaging, ritual action, and faith labor. In the remainder of this article, I examine the strategies employed by shopkeepers in authenticating and animating their products and show how they produce aura through branding. I then show how performing a recognized ritual action imbues the objects with authenticity and efficacy. Finally, I argue that consumers' interactions and handling of the objects produces aura even without these mechanisms, as they treat them with faith and respect as if they are sacred.

### Packaging

I call the first mode of action that produces aura *packaging*.<sup>15</sup> Commodities are packed in boxes and sometimes equipped with promotional material, which explains their utility and integrity and gives instructions and promises. For example, the promotion materials that came with a prayer wheel that I bought from the Tibetan market, read: "Turning [the *maṇi* wheel] one rotation is equivalent to chanting Tripiṭaka once. Two rotations are equivalent to reading all the Buddhist scriptures. Three rotations can remove all the sins of body, mind, and speech. Ten rotations can eliminate sins as big as Mount Sumeru [...]" and so forth.<sup>16</sup> Packaging not only equipped such artefacts with sacrality but also instantiated their sacrality; they become unlike any other mundane commodity. Heller has also discussed this, saying that authenticity and efficacy are expressed in packaging because there is a concern for the sacred content. Packaging enables one to distinguish between sacred Buddhist artefacts and mundane, quotidian, and disposable consumer goods (Heller, 2014).

Additionally, packaging involved wrapping commodities in veils of authenticity. Shopkeepers tried to establish trust with the customer by displaying their knowledge about Buddhism and, at times, their own Buddhist virtue. Some shopkeepers obviously practised Buddhism themselves and willingly share their insights and advice regarding iconography and Buddhist practice. Their sales pitch sometimes includes information about vegetarianism, stories about the greatness of their Tibetan master, or perhaps a few philosophical insights. (Others did not care to pretend to know anything about the spiritual biographies or symbolic significance of the items for sale.) There were several shops run by devotees of a particular Tibetan lama or monastery. One devotee was Sonam, a 30-year old Han-Chinese convert who had left his prestigious job at an international corporation in Shanghai to follow his Tibetan master's advice to open a business selling Buddhist icons. During one of our talks, he bemoaned the difficulty of finding "authentic" (he used the Chinese term *zhēnquè*) Buddhist objects at the Tibetan market when I asked where I could buy a good prayer wheel. Sonam

<sup>15</sup> Packaging is also related in other studies situated in Buddhist Asia: Buddha-recitation devices sold throughout China (Heller, 2014); Buddha statues (Bangdel, 2016) and *thangkas* (Bentor, 1993) for sale in Kathmandu, and the trade with sacred objects in Kalimpong (Holmes-Tagchungdarpa, 2017).

<sup>16</sup> Translated from Mandarin by Sonam Tso. The promotional material came with a box containing a prayer wheel bought in December 2016. Some commodities were equipped with promotional material in Mandarin like this one. Others came in Tibetan only, which usually did not promote a particular product but a brand or a workshop. The complexities of packaging regarding who the targeted customers were and how they reacted differently to packaging is explored in detail in a forthcoming article: "What is the Value of a Tibetan Prayer Wheel? The Promises of an Efficacious Object for Sale in China."

claimed that most prayer wheels that were sold at the market were “fake” (he used the English word) in the sense that religious prescriptions had been routinely breached during the production. He saw the same problem with statues produced in factories around Chengdu: “They copy the statues from Nepal... Copying is easier, very easy. They finish them very quickly and can earn easy money. Just like that.” He explained how these manufacturers did not follow Buddhist prescriptions because they lacked knowledge. Sonam had, he claimed, contrary to most retailers at the market, the knowledge that was necessary to secure the authenticity of the items that he dealt with. He hardly thought of it as a business, but saw it as a service to fellow Buddhists; he could equip them for their Buddhist practice. Sonam claimed that he had witnessed first-hand the production process of his goods, so he knew that they were authentic, and he used his intimate knowledge of Buddhist philosophy, production and handling prescriptions, iconography, and history as selling points. That is, customers knew that his goods were made for incorporation into Buddhist practice, rather than as mere decorations or souvenirs in non-religious homes. Sonam related how he had given up his materially rich and successful life to devote all his time to the service of the Buddha, Dharma (the teachings), Saṃgha (the monastic community). While we talked, he constantly moved the beads on his *mālā*. When Sonam in these ways exhibited his virtue and intimate knowledge of Buddhism, he was at the same time packaging the commodities for sale. They were all part of the experience of being in his shop.

Sonam criticized the market for being flooded with fake people and fake goods. Several interlocutors pointed to the possibility that the display of virtue and knowledge was mere artifice. I saw how Tibetan and Han-Chinese shopkeepers had attempted to create a Buddhist ambience in the shop. The smell of burning incense, money offerings conspicuously placed in the lap of statues for sale, shrines (sometimes helter-skelter), Tibetan-language signs (sometimes misspelled), and devotional pictures on a wall with offerings of white silk scarfs (*kha-btags*) were among several ways that the proprietors showcased their Buddhist virtue and knowledge. I saw commodities handled not only with gentleness but also with respect: when a set of buddha statues were packed for transportation, they were carefully placed in wooden boxes with auspicious, white silk scarfs around their necks for a safe journey (fig. 3). Shopkeepers carried prayer beads, played Buddhist chants over the shop’s loudspeakers, recited mantras, and demonstrated the authenticity of their goods by opening the interior of prayer wheels to display sacred script, or showed how one is to turn the prayer wheel clockwise. They demonstrated items with varying degrees of self-confidence and experience, and they did this with varying success that depended on their knowledge but also that of the customers. Shopkeepers tried to make visible that these commodities were proper Buddhist objects. Sometimes customers recognized commodities as authentic, but in other cases, labelled the shop as inauthentic. The first mode of action in this commercial setting, therefore, was packaging commodities as proper Buddhist objects as a way to assert authenticity, addressing a perceived risk involved with Buddhist artefacts in a commercial context.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Holmes-Tagchungdarpa suggests that the concern over authenticity, clear in both my study and that of Heller (2014), is quite specific to China (personal communication). In Holmes-Tagchungdarpa’s study of what she calls “sacred economies” in the Indian-Himalayan town of Kalimpong, there are different valuations of sacred objects



Figure 3. Transporting the Buddha from the Tibetan market (image taken from above)

### Ritual action

Regarding the second, ritual action (which was also recognized by Benjamin in his discussion of aura), I distinguish between three kinds of ritual action that are conceived of and orchestrated in a commercial setting: consecration rituals, blessings, and “opening the eye.” Several Tibetan and Han-Chinese interlocutors at the market saw consecration as essential. Traditionally, consecration is outsourced to a lama or practitioner having special qualifications and qualities in order for the consecration to have more efficacy (Bentor, 1996a; Holmes-Tagchungdarpa, 2017). This tradition is upheld, but shopkeepers and customers in Chengdu do not agree as to how and when. One can purchase from the market all that is needed for consecrating a commodity: every ingredient for filling statues, stûpas, prayer wheels and so on, as well as ready-made consecration-kits that one can hand to a ritual specialist (fig. 4). One can even purchase the ritual labor for a small fee to be performed on the spot. The Chinese call it to ‘open the eye’ (Chi.: *kāiguāng*).<sup>18</sup>

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“concepts of authenticity” were not always the basis of their choices. Instead, we agree that “spiritual authenticity is in the eye of the beholder, and that ultimately, objects become powerful based on the attitude of the people they interact with and their social life.” Thus, Holmes-Tagchungdarpa (2017: 223) concludes that “new technologies that facilitate mass production and dissemination do not inevitably lead to the disappearance of the sacred.”

<sup>18</sup> The Chinese concept of ‘opening the eye’ is used at the market to denote both consecration (*rab-gnas*) and blessing (*byin-rlabs*) as an independent ritual performed for all kinds of Buddhist objects. It should not be confused with the auxiliary ritual known in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism as ‘the eye-opening ceremony’ (*spyān-dbye*) for Buddhist icons. This ritual is practiced in Buddhist Asia when an artisan, after having completed an image, removes the blindfold covering the statue or paints the eyes of the image (Bentor, 1996a: 34; Swearer, 2004: 212ff). Simplified, we can say that the eye-opening ceremony enlivens an object, and consecration sacralizes an object (Swearer, 2004: 5–6). One interesting note: Benjamin asserted that it is in particular the eyes in an image that constitutes its aura: it is towards the eyes of artwork that we are pulled (Plate, 2005: 102).



Figure 4. Consecration-kits for sale

What follows is an example of how this ritual can unfold within the shop. In November 2016, I had a conversation with a shopkeeper about the quality of prayer wheels and how a commodity becomes fit as a sacred object or proper ritual tool. One Tibetan monk who was coincidentally standing next to me with an entourage of middle-aged Chinese women (who were out shopping) intervened in my conversation with the shopkeeper. This prompted my Han Chinese assistant to inquire in Mandarin if he could perform *kāiguāng* for the handheld prayer wheel that I wanted to buy. He agreed and allowed me to film it, but he did not want me to pay for the ritual service. The ritual that he performed lasted two minutes. During the performance, the two shopkeepers attended to other customers. Women in the monk's entourage stopped doing their chores and watched with teary eyes. The monk turned the wheel clockwise while performing a ritual assemblage consisting of different prayers affiliated with the Nyingma school, all of which were from the *rDzogs-pa chen-po klong-chen snying-thig*-cycles.<sup>19</sup> He performed the recitation with amazing speed, demonstrating that he knew the practice well, yet I do not know whether he was accustomed to performing it for objects like the prayer wheel.

The ritual performance started with repetitions of the “times thousand-mantra” (*stong-gyur-gyi sngags*). This can be performed by lay people to increase the merit accumulation of their recitation and can be said over one's *mālā*, prayer wheel, or the like, with usually seven or twenty-one repetitions. This was followed by commanding all harmful spirits to stay away, and then the monk performed a triple recitation of four mantras with protecting and obstacle-dispelling functions oriented towards the four cardinal directions starting with east and continuing clockwise. These mantras occur in some liturgies (*sgrub-thabs*) under the heading “establishing the protection mandala” (a protected space for one's practice). This was followed by another recitation to expel

<sup>19</sup> I owe my sincere gratitude to Sonam Spitz, who transcribed and interpreted this film that I shot in Chengdu, November 2016.

harmful spirits and a recitation called “visualizing the protective sphere” referring to what is commonly called the protection mandala (*srung-'khor*). The monk then recited a dedication, followed by three recitations of the vowels and consonants of the Sanskrit alphabet in order to make up for mistakes in pronunciation and other sound-related mistakes. He finally recited the mantra of dependent arising,<sup>20</sup> and ended with a prayer and mantra recitation for the deities to remain stable in the object, followed by the mantra for empowering images and objects: “Om supratishtha bazraye swaha.” He concluded the ritual with auspicious prayers while he stopped the rotating motion, investigated the ball and chain that had kept the wheel spinning during the ritual, and looked more closely at the details of the prayer wheel.

While I do not have data indicating how frequent such ritual performances take place in the shops, and which parts are included in the brief assemblages, I have witnessed and filmed this a few times and, more often, heard shopkeepers and other customers refer to the importance of such rituals. I have not seen it performed for Tibetan customers. (As one Tibetan customer, who bought a small Guru Rinpoche statue for 300 Renminbi, said: “We have a ritual specialist at home.”) Rituals for commodities were performed by specialists collaborating with the shopkeeper or by random monks coincidentally passing by or entering the shop. They gave abbreviated assemblages of the rituals described by Bentor (1996a-b), or they skipped the entire consecration ritual and replaced it with blessings, sending the object a blow of air, or touching it. Among shopkeepers, there were different interpretations regarding what it means to ‘open the eye’ of Buddhist commodities. Some shops (perhaps the majority) sold buddha statues and prayer wheels that were empty, containing no relics or scriptures nor had they undergone any rituals. Instead, these shops advised their customers to buy the ingredients themselves and then invite a ritual specialist to insert the ingredients into the hollow receptacle and perform the correct rituals. Other shops (in the minority at the market) claimed that the entire shop, including the entirety of its goods, had already been consecrated collectively in the shop by monks. Thus, this second mode of action, ritual action, is also part of the packaging. Heller (2014: 302) similarly reported from other markets in China that Buddha-recitation devices were sold with ads announcing that ‘a dharma teacher has already “opened the eye” (*kaiguang* 開光) of this series of devices, thereby guaranteeing its auspiciousness.’ Sacralization, then, also in a commercial setting, transforms a commodity into a sacred object. To these customers, consecration is vital, but it does not mean that the commodity is aura-less to every customer. Moreover, it does not mean that a commodity cannot be considered sacred without ritual action, which the third mode of action will illuminate.

### **Faith labor**

The third, to treat Buddhist objects with faith (*dad-pa*) and conviction (*yid-ches*), requires no ritual labor and is very different from the other two modes of action. What is at stake here is not the quality of the objects, but rather how the efficacy of objects rests on the disposition of the persons handling

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<sup>20</sup> Some call this “the Buddhist creed” that is often found inscribed on Buddhist materials and at the end of texts. This mantra can empower material objects.

them. I met Tibetans who bought mass-produced Buddhist objects and implemented them in their everyday Buddhist life without any further ritual action. Instead, these Tibetans perform what we might call faith labor.

What follows is one example of faith labor that occurred in Chengdu. A Tibetan entrepreneur in his thirties named Norbu once showed me a prayer wheel standing at his workplace. The table prayer wheel is very common in Tibetan homes where it is turned in order to mechanically recite the sacred script that is enclosed inside the wheel drum (Brox, 2018). At the opening of his business two days earlier, one of his Tibetan friends had presented him with this prayer wheel as a gift. It was a plastic table stand, ten centimeters tall and the circumference about forty centimeters. It consisted of two cylinders: the inner cylinder was placed on a golden base decorated with a six-petalled lotus painted in dark blue, orange, green, and red. The head cover was decorated with an eight-pronged wheel. The inner cylinder shined of fake gold and was decorated with the six-syllable mantra *om maṇi padme hūm*. The cylinder was encased in a transparent container. Through the inner cylinder passed an axle resting in a footstep in the bottom of the outer cylinder. The axle stuck out through the head cover and was covered with a red, plastic handle that looked like a raspberry, though perhaps it represented a heap of jewels. Norbu twisted this handle to set the wheel in motion.



Figure 5. Norbu's prayer wheel

Norbu and I agreed that his prayer wheel looked mass-produced. And since it probably came out of a factory, Norbu assumed that it was more than likely that it was not made according to Tibetan tradition. Perhaps it did not even contain a holy scripture or mantra, but instead, the interior was filled with news print? Because it was enclosed in an acrylic container that was sealed, the prayer wheel was inaccessible, which made it impossible to tell whether the prayer wheel actually contained sacred writing. I was concerned that it would defeat the purpose to use a prayer wheel that did not

contain a sacred text but only newsprint, but Norbu assured me that this was not necessarily a problem. He referred to the story about the eastern-Tibetan woman who received a dog's tooth as a gift from her son, who had returned from Lhasa. Believing that it was the Buddha's tooth she put it on her home altar and prayed to it. Because she believed and prayed, she attained enlightenment when she died. By relating this story, Norbu seemed to say that just by having faith (*dad-pa*) and conviction (*vid-ches*), and by treating it as if it was a sacred object—offering it as a gift, handling it as sacred, and using it in Buddhist practice—that was enough to lift the mundane, mass-produced prayer-wheel gift into the extramundane realm of efficacious, Buddhist material objects. In this case, I consider faith a labor that adds value to the object and produces aura. Faith labor was employed by those who bought mass-produced Buddhist objects and implemented them in their everyday Buddhist life without any further ritual labor. They treated them with faith and respect as if they were sacred objects.

When I related the story of Norbu's prayer wheel to another interlocutor, the Tibetan Buddhist master Lama Chosphel, he commented that what really matters when one encounters a flawed prayer wheel with no mantra inside, or a stûpa with no interior, is its resemblance to a prayer wheel and a stûpa, respectively. Resemblance creates trust within the believer, who therefore connects to the object, like the mother praying to a dog's tooth believing it is the Buddha's tooth, or a man circumambulating a stûpa believing that it contains relics. These people connect to the objects without having any proof of the sacrality of the tooth and the stûpa. In other words, external form is important because it helps to generate faith. Lama Chosphel said that, of course, it is better if also the interior is authentic; if the stûpa indeed does contain relics and the prayer wheel contains sacred writing.<sup>21</sup> Although the interior is unknown, it is important to treat Buddhist material objects faithfully and respectfully.

The story about the dog's tooth is well-known among Tibetans and a favorite story used to illustrate the importance of faith for attaining enlightenment, even in situations involving forged sacredness such as the mass-produced prayer wheel. It is also a good example of how interaction with the prayer wheel is important to the production and maintenance of aura. Tibetan interlocutors treated mass-produced, Buddhist objects with faith and respect as though they were sacred, regardless of production conditions: Norbu placed his mass-produced prayer wheel on a high desk, and Dronkar would never leave a Buddha souvenir on the floor or step over even a photocopied photograph of the Dalai Lama. I experienced how young Tibetan Buddhists, who were living in urban China, also acknowledged that the mass-produced prayer wheel, thangka, or Buddha statue did have value, and that their faith automatically made them interact with Buddhist objects in particular ways. Dronkar, a Tibetan woman in her twenties working in Chengdu for an international NGO, related how, if she was asked to choose between a factory-made, Chinese artefact and a handmade, Tibetan artefact, she preferred the Tibetan. Nevertheless, Dronkar insisted that, even if she felt an artefact was inauthentic, she would still tread carefully: "I couldn't make myself treat it disrespectfully and

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<sup>21</sup> Another Tibetan master who I later interviewed about this case deemed Norbu's solution insufficient, explaining that practice with a prayer wheel that had no sacred content had no benefit (*phan-thogs med-pa*).



break the rules that I have learnt since childhood. I wouldn't be able to put it on the floor or step over it although I know that many people [in the factory] have done so before me." Here, we hear how Dronkar claimed that she treated mass-produced Buddhist commodities differently than mundane, auraless commodities. Dronkar continued: "We have feelings towards it. We value it. Despite its origin, we still see value in it." In other words, she certainly did recognize some kind of aura, in the sense of integrity and efficacy, in mass-produced Buddhist goods. I saw this with several interlocutors.

Amy Holmes-Tagchungdarpa (2014) introduced a similar argument in her discussion about the Tibetan newspaper *The Tibet Mirror* as a religious object. The newspaper is relevant because it was seen by its Tibetan, Bhutanese, and Sikkimese readers as a religious object to which was related particular modes of handling.<sup>22</sup> Seeing the paper as a religious object, the readers treated the paper according to Buddhist prescriptions. They stored the newspapers in their shrine rooms, or if they did not have storage room, they perhaps cut out the photographs of religious figures and recycled them on their shrines as idols. Holmes-Tagchungdarpa argues against Benjamin's assumption that consumers could deal with mass-produced objects according to their own desire because the aura had dissipated. Mass-production was not problematic for the readers of *The Tibet Mirror*, nor was mass-production of Buddhist objects for sale at a downtown market in urban China, I can add, by default dismembering the faithful's access to the sacred. In fact, religious imagery became more available exactly due to being mass-produced, and the aura that Benjamin feared would vanish through mechanical reproduction indeed continued in the newspaper since "the potency of image and text [was] instead strengthened through multiplication" and was thus made more accessible (ibid.: 91). In other words, while mass-production managed the economy of objects' availability, the disposition of the person interacting with the object produced the aura. I perceive the third mode of action, faith labor, as the transformation of mass-produced commodities into sacred Buddhist artefacts.

## Conclusion

Benjamin relates how art has always been reproducible. As an age-old process, art has been copied by pupils training in the crafts, by masters who wanted to disseminate their artwork, and also by those seeking profit—so there is nothing new to this (Benjamin, 1969: 218). The novelty that concerned Benjamin when he wrote his piece in the 1930s was the technology that enabled mass-production and made artwork available to everybody. This democratization of production, dissemination, and consumption, which Benjamin lamented nearly ninety years ago, has also occurred in the case of Buddhist objects in urban China. Yet, Buddhist commodities sitting on the factory floor or on a shelf in a shop, ready to be bought and sold, are not without worth as receptacles of the sacred, representations of Buddhist doctrines, and devotional tools. Aura, as I have argued, is

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<sup>22</sup> Despite not being produced by a Buddhist or with religious intentions, the newspaper (published 1925–1963) was considered a religious object for several reasons: it was written with *dbu-can* script and classical Tibetan language, which were characteristic of religious texts; used religious symbols; and provided news about religious figures as well as their photographs (Holmes-Tagchungdarpa, 2014).

not only produced in the manufacturing phase of the life of an object, but also when it is marketed, sacralized, and viewed as a Buddhist object. The people interacting with these objects negotiates their status as authentic, efficacious Buddhist objects and negotiates whether the production of the sacred requires particular labor.

Both Rambelli (2017), writing about Buddhist material objects in Japan, and Holmes-Tagchungdarpa (2017), working in an Indo-Tibetan context, argue that the transformation from mundane commodity to sacred artefact requires ritual labor. Holmes-Tagchungdarpa takes the example of prayer flags: “The change in the prayer flags from printed cloth lying in bales to powerful prayers entails a transformation of status that is more complex than simply their purchase by a Buddhist who believes in their efficacy.” (ibid.: 231). Like the rituals described by Rambelli (2007: 264), it is necessary “to overcome the mere materiality of objects—their thing-like nature—and to turn them into something else, which, for the lack of a better term, we have been calling ‘sacred’”. According to Benjamin, the aura of art also germinated from religious rituals. Observations at the Tibetan market in Chengdu, however, suggest the necessity of a more composite analytical framework. I conclude that a complex equation of production circumstances, packaging, sacralization rituals, and faith labor produces aura. When ideas about risk regarding the commercialization of Buddhist material objects give rise to doubt and corrode one of the elements in the equation, the other elements have to work harder in order to counter the resulting imbalance.<sup>23</sup> Thus, asking for consecration rituals in a shop or performing faith labor are part of the repertoire consumers draw on to manage the anxieties connected to this risk. Likewise, the marketers of these products also attempt to make up for this imbalance by packaging their products, creating a particular ambience in the shop, spelling out the product’s spiritual integrity in marketing materials, and displaying their own knowledge and virtue. In other words, the marketer and consumer have an imaginative burden of producing a sacrality that may be taken for granted in other patterns of exchange. This presumption of sacrality, which is disrupted in the Tibetan market in Chengdu, is mainly related to knowing and trusting the origin of the artefact. I refer, of course, not to any kind of origin, but that which ensures the assumed right manufacturing conditions for a *thangka* requested directly from a respected artisan, or for a prayer wheel bought from a monastery shop. Buddhist material objects for sale in Chengdu that look mass-produced and whose origins are doubtful are nonetheless not doomed for eternal disenchantment. Both marketers and consumers, in a way, talk back to Benjamin, and claim no inherent problem with mass-production and reserve ways to deal with disenchanted commodities.

Sacrality of an object does not exclusively depend upon ritual action, but can also be co-produced by people’s interaction with it. Bentor (1996a: 50) also alludes to this by showing that the degree of sacredness can be augmented as in the case of a *stûpa* becoming a popular site for pilgrimage (like Bodhanath *Stûpa* in Kathmandu). The same augmentation of the sacred is produced when a receptacle is consecrated by a high lama. Since the consecration of *stûpas*, images, and temples were noted in the biographies of Tibetan masters, their biographies were also entangled with

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<sup>23</sup> I am grateful to Jeff Wilson for his help to draw out this part of the argument.

those of the objects. Similarly, Sharf (2002: 15) has argued that Buddhist icons “are vivified as much through their participation in religious narrative and myth as they are through sacerdotal ritual and liturgy.” Similar to Thai amulets, whose value depends on their biographies (Kitiarsa, 2012), the value of consecrated receptacles within Tibetan Buddhism as sacred objects also depends upon negotiating their life trajectories. We can say that shopkeepers, ritual specialists, and customers negotiates the integrity, efficacy, and the spiritual biographies of Buddhist objects as ways to equip the commodities with values other than “exhibition value” (Benjamin, 1969) and exchange value. The valuation of Buddhist material objects is important, also in the age of emancipatory technological reproducibility. Buddhist material objects as commodities have value in economic terms that depends upon, for example, production costs and processes (making them inexpensive and available to more people) and marketing (as proper Buddhist material objects). Simultaneously, users view and handle them according to Buddhist ideals and recognize them as auratic. Object biographies, which include sacralization processes in the form of packaging and faith labor, as well as blessings and consecration rituals, I suggest, are important for understanding the aura of Buddhist material objects in a time of emancipating mass-production.

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