In the dynamic history of China, the period from 800 to 1400 is conventionally remembered as a discreditable age of political disunity and intricate interstate relations, bracketed by the mighty Tang (618-907) and Ming (1368-1644) dynasties. It was also a time when “barbarian” incursions from the north intensified again as both the Xūtǎn, Jurchen, Tàng, and Mongol successively established their regimes and conquered parts or all of China. On the other hand, this period witnessed another kind of development, the rise of visual and material sources that significantly deepened our understanding of the vitality and prosperity of the time, as well as the specific multi-state and multicultural contexts. Consisting of in-depth case studies of various forms and decorated with images, this volume, which originates from the grand Conference on Middle Period China held at Hangzhou in 2007, represents a collective effort of art historians and scholars of Chinese art history, archaeology, and history to illuminate the period’s visual and material cultures. Through examinations of a multiplicity of visual and material cultures, it aims to show the numerous connections between these visual cultures and politics, literature, trade, religion, class, and region (p.12).

The eight essays contained in the volume are divided into four pairs – “Making Art in Funerary and Ritual Contexts”, “Appreciating the Written Word”, “Creating Cosmic and Material Worlds: Representing the Written Word”, and “Graphic and Cosmological Construct of the Sacred Space”. The three last sections turn to the visual and material cultures of the period, ranging from theater, travel, trade, exchange of the period. Inspired by the motif of “illuminating the scenes, that paintings provide a particular view on viewers’ “to capture ephemeral moments and to associate them indissolubly with this cultural landmark” (p.183). Rather than solely illustrating the scenes, that paintings provide a particular way of organizing the arts and visual arts, as Zhang cogently argues, secular and religious alike are “the mediating link between viewers of different walks of life and it also provided venues for the spread of the Qianxun Daoism, thus constituting a crucial development of Jin and Yuan visual culture (and) heralding the full blossoming of theatrical imagery in the subsequent Ming dynasty.” (p.194).

By extension, the offering of the mandala is one of the four foundational practices (gaben (pro)) in Vajrayāna Buddhism, and includes both mental and physical construction of a mandala representing the realized universe. The physical construction of the offering, the theme of Huntington’s third chapter, includes objects of sensory enjoyment, such as rice and jewels, piled upon a base. The omission of the hell realms, which as Huntington points out would not make for a pleasant offering, is interesting, since it reveals the presumed gap in the (at least unenlightened) practitioner’s mind between the offering physical representation of the enlightened beings and reality (that is, one’s real) idealized and conceptual form. Nonetheless, in making the mandala offerings, as in making any offering, the physical, restricted by time and space, is a limited form from which the imagined form, with no such restrictions, develops. Moreover, the mudra form, in which the hands interface to make a representation of the cosmic Mount Meru surrounded by the four continents (of which our own Jambudvīpa is one), offers another approach. In this way, and with the spoken prayers of offering, the practitioner conjoins the body–speech–mind triad in an act of cosmic realization.

In his final chapter, Huntington discusses the comprehension and reception of one of the central debates of the period, that of the authenticity in the early 13th century. Relating Wang Xizhi’s (303-61) Orchid Pavilion Preface (353) and the issues surrounding its authenticity to the fierce debate upon its authenticity in the early 13th century. Relating Wang Xizhi’s (303-61) Orchid Pavilion Preface (353) and the issues surrounding its authenticity to the fierce debate upon its authenticity, Huntington argues that the late 13th century Chinese practice of setting gold and silver objects to Chinese bronze jars and mirrors and making them serve new ritual purposes, while these Chinese objects used at Japanese ports, their social and cultural contexts changed accordingly so that their participation in the Japanese market became more visible and accessible. Thanks to the visual and material cultures, we are now able to “read better the appreciation and cognitive trajectory of the period, ranging from theater, travel, trade, ritual practices, to life of commons and cross-cultural exchanges.”

Visual and material cultures have been traditionally extensively utilized by art historians and visual cultures of China from 800 to 1000, expanding our understanding of the complex and changing visual cultures during the period. Full with intriguing observations and thought-provoking syntheses, it is bound to become a central reference book that many inspire future researchers on the perennial topic in Chinese and Asian history.