

Curatorial Essays

Intersecting Narratives: The Confluence of Science Fiction and Asian Spirituality in Contemporary Art Practice

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An introduction to *New Eden: Science Fiction Mythologies Transformed*

New Eden: Science Fiction Mythologies Transformed, curated by ArtScience Museum, is an interdisciplinary exhibition that delves into the intersectionality of science fiction and Asian spiritual philosophies through the creative praxis of 24 Asian women artists and collectives.

Structured around eight thematic chapters—*Paradox of Paradise*, *Words and Worlds*, *New Nature*, *Ways of Folding Space*, *Crafting New Worlds*, *The Monstrous Feminine*, *New Myths*, and *In A New Light*—the exhibition weaves together narratives found in the Western literary and cinematic genre of science fiction and ideas inherent in Eastern spiritual traditions that have evolved over centuries and millennia. It finds synchronicities between speculative ideas in science fiction and ontological concepts embedded in Asian spiritual frameworks such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, Shintoism, and the diverse belief systems of Southeast Asia.

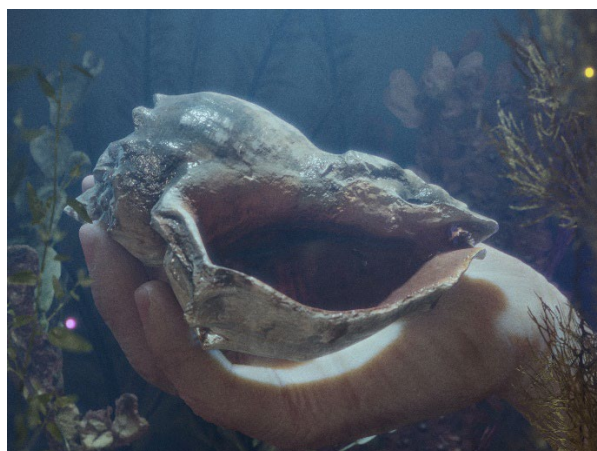


Cao Fei

Nova 17, 2019

Film Still

Courtesy of the artist, Vitamin Creative Space and Sprüth Magers.



Fei Yi Ning

Moonshore I, 2021

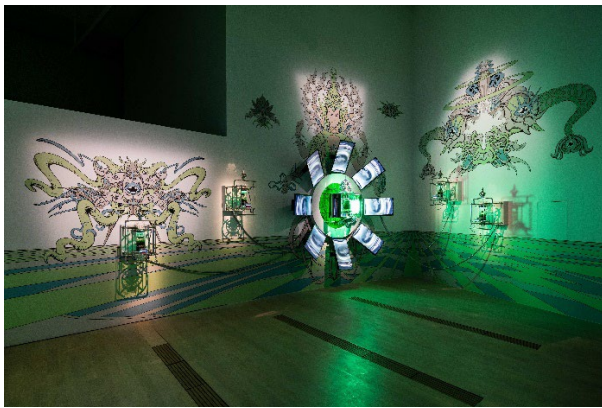
Single channel digital video, 4K, colour, sound
Courtesy of the artist.

Both speculative fiction and Eastern spiritual doctrines engage with the fundamental questions of consciousness and the nature of existence. In science fiction, the exploration of concepts such as simulated realities or alternate dimensions, resonate with ideas found in Eastern philosophies that question the inherent illusion of our perceived reality. Within *New Eden*, artists such as Cao Fei and Fei Yi Ning astutely address these complex questions about reality, memory and knowledge.



Installation view of *Words and Worlds* chapter, ArtScience Museum. Courtesy of Ng Wu Gang.

Ideas of transcending human limitations and achieving higher states of being are common in both realms. In science fiction, this aspiration manifests in concepts such as post-humanism or the digital uploading of human consciousness, mirroring the timeless quest for spiritual enlightenment epitomised in Buddhism or the spiritual liberation known as 'moksha' in Hinduism. The universal human yearning for transcendence, whether via the avenues of scientific innovation or spiritual enlightenment, is addressed by many of the artists featured in *New Eden*. The *Words and Worlds* chapter examines these parallels through the juxtaposition of historical artefacts from a range of Asian countries, cinematic science fiction and an artwork by Shilpa Gupta.



The House of Natural Fiber
Galactica V.2 Dharma Garden, 2023
 Mixed media installation
 Installation view of *Galactica V.2 Dharma Garden*.
 Courtesy of Marina Bay Sands and ArtScience Museum.



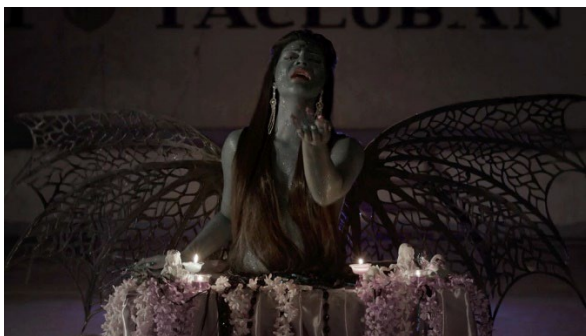
Chok Si Xuan
latent, 2022 - 2023
 3D-printed material, plastic, steel, air pumps and adhesive paint
 Installation view of *latent*. Courtesy of Ng Wu Gang.

Both domains emphasise the fundamental interconnectedness of all living entities. Shintoism, a Japanese religion, focuses on a deep connection with nature, and the belief in 'kami', spirits that inhabit the elements. Science fiction frequently explores the intricate relationship between humanity and the natural environment, envisioning scenarios in which technology and nature seamlessly intertwine. This convergence can be seen in works that feature sentient ecosystems, living planets, or bioengineered organisms, a topic explored by artists like The House of Natural Fiber and Chok Si Xuan in the *New Nature* section.

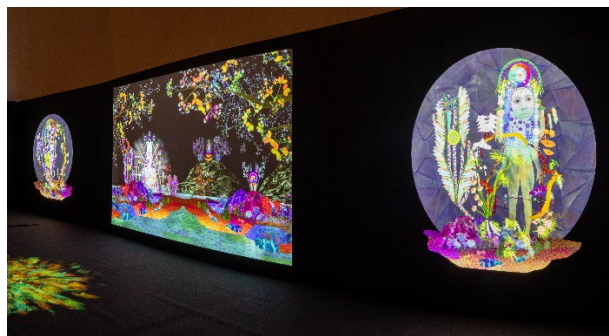


Moon Kyungwon and Jeon Joonho
The Ways of Folding Space and Flying, 2015
 Four channel HD video, colour, sound
 Courtesy of the artists.

In Taoism, an ancient Chinese philosophy and spiritual tradition, there are intriguing parallels to the science fiction concept of travelling in space and time. Taoist texts describe the ability to travel immense distances in the blink of an eye. Taoist philosophy includes the idea of "warping" or "folding" space, suggesting that through spiritual cultivation, individuals can manipulate the very fabric of reality itself, altering distances and connections between entities. In the realm of science fiction, folding space is akin to the idea of wormholes or other spatial anomalies that offer shortcuts for faster interstellar travel. These notions are at the centre of the *Ways of Folding Space* section of the exhibition, manifested in the work of South Korean artists, Moon and Jeon.



Club Ate
Ex Nilalang: Balud, 2015
 Single channel digital video, colour, sound
 © Club Ate. Collection of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Australia. Purchased with funds provided by the Contemporary Collection Benefactors 2021

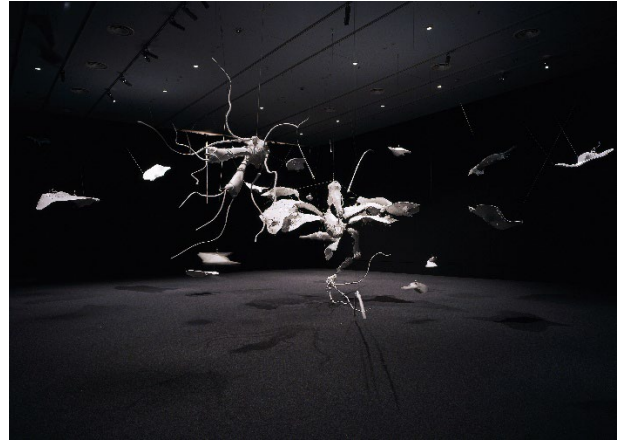


Saya Woolfalk
Cloudscape, 2021
 Four channel video installation, colour, sound
 Courtesy of Marina Bay Sands and ArtScience Museum.

The exhibition also establishes a dialogue between Southeast Asian folklore, a narrative form preoccupied with cultural identity and the ramifications of modernity, and speculative fiction, a genre that scrutinises contemporary life. Southeast Asian folklore is rich with mythical beings like the 'Naga', 'Garuda', and 'Aswang' and astral spirits like the 'Pontianak'. Science fiction often features creatures from other worlds, perhaps drawing inspiration from these allegorical entities. The blending of science fiction and folklore gives rise to imaginative forms of storytelling, which is the focus of *The Monstrous Feminine* chapter of the exhibition, featuring the work of Club Ate, Etsuko Ichihara and others. In other sections of *New Eden*, artists like Saya Woolfalk and Nguyen Trinh Thi fuse the fantastical with the unsettling, leveraging their cultural histories to comment on present-day challenges.



Mariko Mori
Miko No Inori, 1996
 Single channel digital video, colour, sound
 © Mariko Mori. Courtesy of the artist.

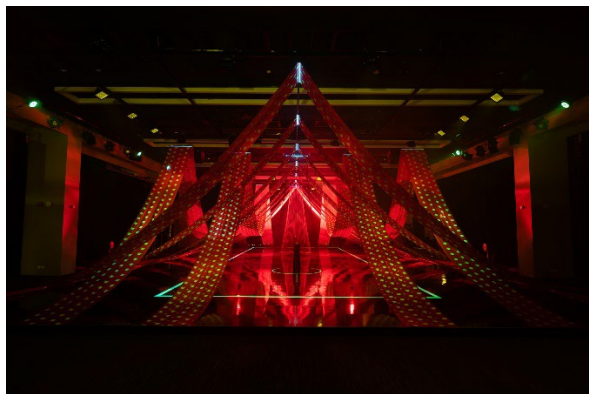


Lee Bul
Untitled, 2003
 Polyurethane, enamel paint, stainless steel and aluminum wire
 Courtesy Studio Lee Bul and Lehmann Maupin, New York, Hong Kong, Seoul, and London.
 Collection of National Gallery Victoria.

Science fiction often includes elements of mysticism, echoing the epistemic inquiries found in Taoism, Hinduism, and Shinto rites of passage. The exhibition's concluding chapter, *In A New Light*, showcases Mariko Mori's seminal work, *Miko No Inori*, a piece that materialises these complex intersections. Positioned in dialogic tension with Mori are installations by Lee Bul and Astria Suparak, who interrogate the sociopolitical structures of science fiction.



Patty Chang
Mountain (Shangri-La), 2005
 Wood, metal, mirror and motor
 Image taken by Joshua White. Courtesy of the artist.



Sputniko! and Napp Studio & Architects
Red Silk of Fate – The Shrine, 2022
 Handwoven silk
 Courtesy of the artists.

The exhibition focuses on the work of Asian women artists and collectives, a decision driven by two critical imperatives. First, the 24 artists in *New Eden* engage with global themes that have made them influential figures in the art world. Artists like Patty Chang and Cao Fei are known for their thought-provoking social commentary, using art to examine gender, urbanisation, and technology's impact on society. Sputniko!, Anne Samat and Soe Yu Nwe interweave indigenous Asian motifs with contemporary sensibilities, a gesture that destabilises conventional art narratives and invites pluralistic engagement. Secondly, the exhibition confronts the masculine

bias of science fiction, historically a Western, male-dominated genre, with women often portrayed in highly stereotypical ways. By foregrounding women and diverse voices, *New Eden* reconfigures hegemonic narratives, embracing more egalitarian forms of storytelling and art-making. Science fiction operates as a speculative canvas, delineating possible futures which can be socially and politically influential. By embracing polyphonic perspectives, *New Eden* advocates for futures that more genuinely reflect the heterogeneity of contemporary society.

The overlaps between speculative fiction and Eastern spiritual belief systems provide fertile ground for creative storytelling and philosophical exploration, highlighting how human fascination with the unknown and our quest for understanding can bridge the gap between science and spirituality. *New Eden* shows how art can forge connections between seemingly disparate realms. The unexpected confluence between science fiction and ancient philosophy inspires contemplation about the nature of our existence and our place of the universe. The artists within *New Eden* also challenge our preconceived notions about what we see in the science fiction genre and show that by drawing on their own Asian traditions, new narratives, aesthetics, and creative propositions can be found.

Materialising Asian spiritual philosophies:

Loans from the Asian Civilisations Museum in *New Eden*

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ArtScience Museum's exhibition, *New Eden: Science Fiction Mythologies Transformed*, features six objects on loan from the collection of the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM), Singapore. Featured in the "Words & Worlds" section, these works explore how connections between the East and the West have contributed to the development of popular science fiction concepts. In addition to embodying ideas such as transcendence, interdimensional travel, and parallel worlds, the objects on display are also a testament to the role of cross-cultural interactions in the development of material culture. By examining the ACM objects in the context of the science fiction concepts explored in the exhibition, along with objects currently on display in ACM's Faith and Belief galleries, this essay provides insights into how the spread of faiths and beliefs have facilitated cross-cultural exchanges of ideas and materials.

Faith and belief

As the only museum in Asia with a pan-Asian scope, ACM is dedicated to exploring Asia's rich artistic heritage, which has been shaped by historical connections between cultures in Asia, and between Asia and the rest of the world. Since its revamp and reopening in 2015, ACM's permanent galleries have been reorganised to highlight the impact of cross-cultural flows on material culture. The Faith and Belief galleries examine the development of sacred and religious art across Asia. In 2022, the museum also held *Body and Spirit: The Human Body in Thought and Practice*, an exhibition that explored how various faith communities approach the human body. Some objects showcased in that exhibition were selected for display in *New Eden*. The cross-cultural origins of these objects allow them to speak across various cultural and belief systems, and in this new context also relate to the many science fiction concepts in *New Eden*.

Transcendence



Figure 1: Reliquary in the shape of a lotus mandala

Myanmar, Bagan, 11th or 12th century

Bronze, height 56 cm

Collection of the Asian Civilisations
Museum

1998-01382



Figure 2: Image of a liberated soul (siddha pratima)

Western India, 20th century

Copper alloy, height 17.9 cm

Collection of the Asian Civilisations
Museum

2017-00059

Transcendence as a science fiction concept explores the idea of surpassing human physical and mental limitations. In Asian spiritual philosophies, a parallel concept is found in the Buddha's enlightenment — an escape from the cycle of birth and re-birth (*samsara*). This concept is represented on the petals of a bronze reliquary in the shape of a lotus mandala (Figure 1) on display in *New Eden*. It depicts the Eight Great Events of the Buddha's life, including the enlightenment at Bodh Gaya. The iconography of the lotus also symbolises the transcendence of physical and mental limitations through enlightenment. Just as a lotus flower emerges from muddy waters to bloom, an individual rises above worldly desires and attachments by gaining spiritual insight and knowledge, eventually reaching a state of enlightenment.



Figure 3: Lotus mandala of Chakrasamvara and Vajravaraḥi
India, Bengal, 12th century (Pala dynasty)
Bronze, height 44 cm
Collection of the Asian Civilisations Museum
2011-02028



Figure 4: Living frame
India, Andhra Pradesh, 18th or 19th century
Copper, height 19 cm
Collection of the Asian Civilisations Museum
2017-00058

The idea of transcendence is also found in Jainism, where achieving complete liberation leads to a state of perfect bliss and the cessation of existence. The image of a liberated soul (*siddha pratima*) (Figure 2) embodies this liberation from karma and the cycle of rebirth, as depicted in the meditational body-denying pose (*kayotsarga mudra*). Similar ideas exist in Vajrayana Buddhism and Hinduism, where the void and emptiness represent a transcendence from the human form. A bronze lotus (Figure 3) from the Pala dynasty in India depicts the union of Chakrasamvara and Vajravaraḥi—great bliss and emptiness. Likewise, the image of the Great Goddess as a living frame (Figure 4) signifies transcendence through a void, where the divine energy (*shakti*) of the goddess is only manifested after form ceases to exist.

Interdimensional travel

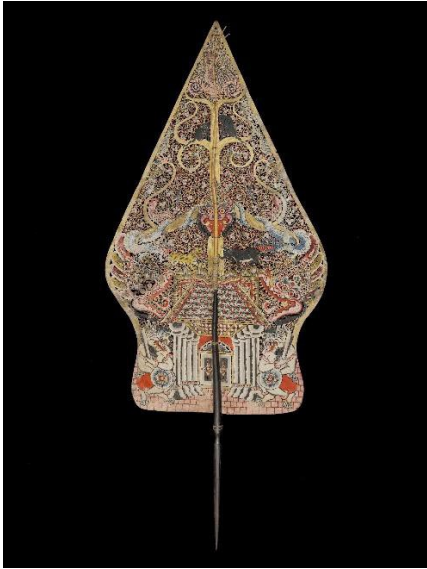


Figure 5: Shadow puppet: Kayon Gapuran

Java, 20th century

Leather, horn, pigments, gold, 105 × 44 cm

Collection of the Asian Civilisations

Museum

1994-03832

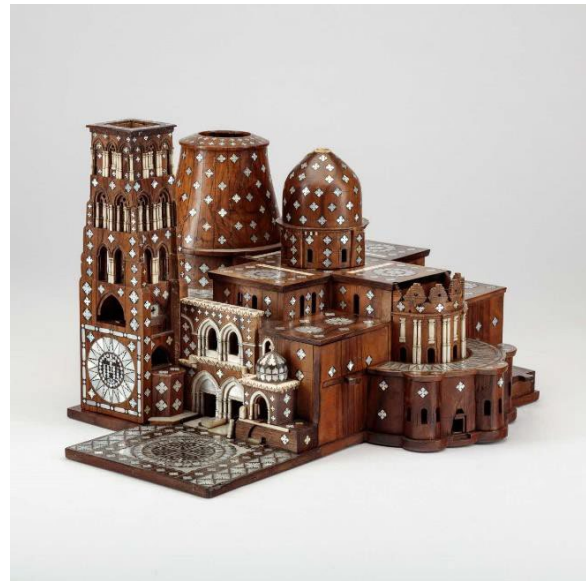


Figure 6: Model of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre

Ottoman Jerusalem or Bethlehem, 17th or 18th century

Olive wood, mother-of-pearl, bone, ebony,

37 × 42.5 cm

Collection of the Asian Civilisations

Museum

2022-00529

Interdimensional travel is conceptualised in *New Eden* as the movement through time and space using objects that facilitate this travel. The objects serve as portals, metaphorically transporting individuals to a different time and space. This grants them the ability to experience a place as it is described. A twentieth-century Javanese shadow puppet (Figure 5) provides an example of a metaphorical interdimensional travel during a *wayang kulit* performance. At the beginning of a performance, the puppeteer (*dalang*) taps the puppet's tip to the top, middle, and bottom of the screen, opening a portal for the audience to experience the performance. The figures depicted on the shadow puppet also signify its importance to the control of time and space. The deity Kala represents time, and the Kayon itself embodies the cosmos as both the Cosmic Mountain and the Tree of Life. In both form and function, the shadow puppet facilitates interdimensional travel.

This concept of interdimensional travel spans various faiths and beliefs and continues in a model of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre (Figure 6). Originally sold as souvenirs for pilgrims, these models were constructed with removable pieces to reveal the interior of the church compound. This feature allowed the faithful to use them as devotional aids through which they could visit or revisit important sites within the compound, such as the five most important Stations of the Cross. For individuals who could not visit the church in person, having a model provided an experiential means to connect with sacred sites. Stylistically, the model replicated the church's structure from 1555 to 1808, enabling devotees to travel across both time and space as they observe it.



Figure 7: Soul boat

Borneo, early or mid-20th century

Wood, 49.5 × 73.3 cm

Collection of the Asian Civilisations
Museum

XXXX-11453



Figure 8: Funerary gateway

Singapore, late 19th or early 20th century

Wood, 273 x 265 cm

Collection of the Asian Civilisations
Museum

2006-01926

Objects not only facilitate the interdimensional travel of the living, but also serve as conduits through which the dead can continue their journey onwards to another realm, where they are transformed into ancestors. The Dayak soul boat (Figure 7) on display in *New Eden* transports the deceased to the land of the departed to meet with the ancestors. The design of the boat mirrors the tripartite world in Dayak cosmology, with the upper world governed by the god represented by the hornbill, and the lower world ruled by a god represented by the naga figure. Also in this section is a Chinese Peranakan funerary gateway (Figure 8), which was used to guide the deceased on their journey to the next realm. The ornate carvings of mythical figures and scenes hint at encounters in the otherworldly realms.

Parallel worlds

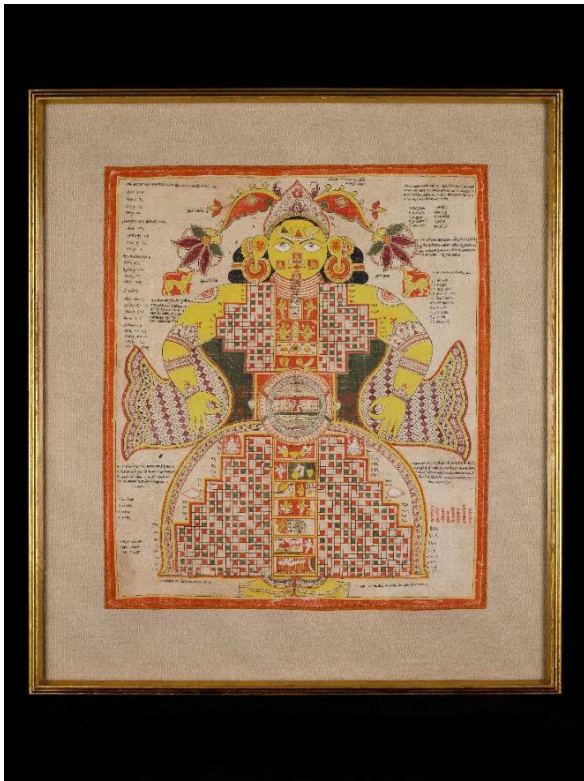


Figure 9: The universe in the form of a human being

India, Rajasthan or Gujarat, 18th century
Cloth painting (*pata*): natural pigments on cotton, 124 x 110 cm

Collection of the Asian Civilisations
Museum
2022-00355

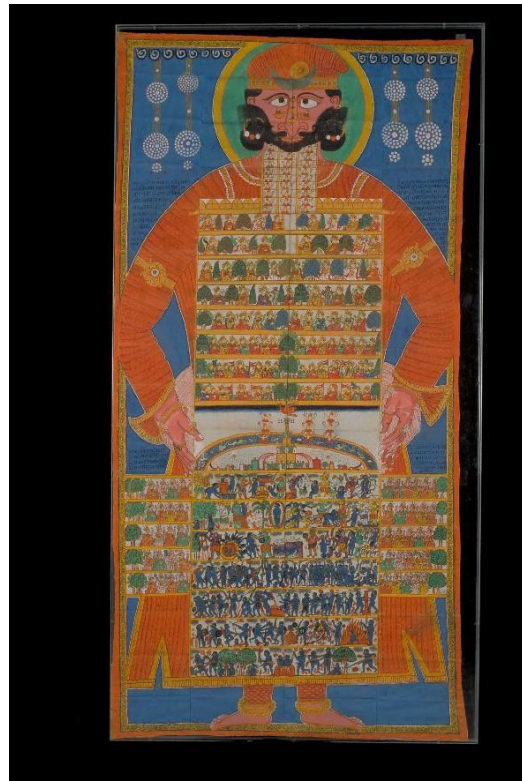


Figure 10: Cloth painting depicting a cosmic being

India, Rajasthan, Mewar, late 18th century
Cloth painting (*pata*): natural pigments on cotton, 180 x 91 cm

Collection of the Asian Civilisations
Museum
1999-00653

The section on parallel worlds explores the possibility of simultaneous realities, where actions in one realm might affect another, and vice versa. This is explored through the karmic system, a shared belief in the Buddhist and Jain faiths. In Jainism, the universe is envisioned as a human being, as shown in these paintings of a female (Figure 9) and male cosmic being (Figure 10) from ACM's collection. Jains view the universe as infinite, with no beginning and end. They liken the cosmos to the human body, emphasising their parallel functions as systems of energy observed from different perspectives. In this vein, the human body exists as a microcosm of the cosmos. The middle world, where the humans live, is the only realm in which one can be liberated from the cycle of rebirth. Gods and goddesses dwell in the realms

above, and the realms below depict scenes from hell. These paintings were likely used as *yantras*, aiding meditation by connecting the individual with the universe.



Figure 11: Buddhist Shrine with Phra Malai scene

Thailand, 19th century (Rattanakosin period)
Wood, lacquer, gold-leaf, 151 x 55 x 46.5 cm
Collection of the Asian Civilisations Museum
1998-01393



Figure 12: Vessantara Jataka scroll

Sopha Pangchat
Northeast Thailand, Ubon Ratchatani Province, 1959–60
Paint on cotton, length 31.4 m
Collection of the Asian Civilisations Museum
1997-02933

The concept of parallel worlds within a karmic system is also expressed in two other important objects in the ACM collection. The first is a Thai Buddhist shrine featuring a scene from the story of Phra Malai (Figure 11), a monk who was able to travel between the realms of heaven, earth, and hell. During his visits to hell, the suffering pleaded with him to return to earth and ask for their families to make merit on their behalf for a better rebirth. Upon his return to earth, a man presents Phra Malai with eight lotus flowers, which he later presents as an offering at the Chulamani stupa in the heaven of Indra, the king of the gods who governs the heaven of the 33 divinities (*Tavatimsa*). There, Phra Malai meets with both Indra and Maitreya, and the latter tells Phra Malai to return to earth and tell the people that should they desire to be reborn during Maitreya's Buddhahood, they must listen to a complete recitation of the Vessantara Jataka.

The story of Phra Malai's visit to heaven and hell features in Vessantara Jataka scrolls commissioned for processions in both Northeastern Thailand and Laos (Figure 12). As the last and most important of the 547 stories of the Buddha's past lives (Jatakas), the Vessantara Jataka tells the story of how Prince Vessantara accumulates great merit through his generous giving – which then contributes towards his rebirth as Siddhartha Gautama in his next life, and his attainment of enlightenment. Both the story of Phra Malai and the Vessantara Jataka are reminders of how the concept of parallel worlds is connected by threads of action and inaction. Tied together with the Jain belief in a cosmos spanning three realms, these stories highlight the shared idea of a karmic system, where individuals traverse through different lives or worlds.

Emerging from cross-cultural interactions between geographies of faiths and beliefs, the ACM objects on display in *New Eden*, along with works from the museum's wider collection, serve as articles for thinking about the many forms of exchange. Specifically, they allow us to tease out connections between Asian spiritual philosophies and Western science fiction concepts. When situated together with the rest of the exhibits, they respond to the main objective set out for *New Eden* – to explore the genesis of science fiction as a genre rooted in visions of imaginary realms and alternative futures.

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