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THE METAMORPHOSIS OF PURE LAND ART IN TANG CHINA

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ANNE NING FENG

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ABSTRACT

Western Pure Land transformation tableaux are images that depict a distant paradise governed by Amitābha Buddha, who vowed to save the souls of sentient beings from our current world. In Tang dynasty (618-907 C.E.) China, Amitābha's paradise emerged through painted images as a majestic water-bound palace. This dissertation reconceives of the Pure Land tableau—not as a straightforward reflection of Buddhist doctrine or a resource for the historical study of Tang architecture—but as an innovative mode of image-making, one that through painting transformed conceptions of pictorial space and the possibilities of vision in East Asian art.

The Pure Land tableau reveals a daring new attitude towards the visual depiction of material phenomena in the Tang Empire, encouraging viewers to *see through* forms, from bodies, to buildings and landscapes. The Tang Pure Land tableau emerged at the intersection of two developments: First, the tableau allowed painters to explore the power of their own craft as mode of world making. Second, Pure Land visuality was the product of a new imperial vision, with a controlling gaze that *sees through* architecture, organizing a cosmopolitan synthesis of Chinese, Indic, and Central Asian forms. I argue that the Pure Land tableau became a threshold for new practices of envisioning transparency, the transmutation of substance, and the transformation of space. These developments coalesce around understandings of water as the conceptual ground—a medium and metaphor—for the Pure Land.

This study examines Pure Land transformation tableaux at a cave complex called the Dunhuang Grottoes in west China, during the strongest presence of Tang control in the region between the 640s and 770s. This work consists of four chapters, each with a different emphasis on the Pure Land tableau. The first chapter reviews recent scholarship on Pure Land art at Dunhuang. The second chapter focuses on the Ajātaśatru Narrative and theories of

viewing related to landscape imagery, the third chapter deals with the Sixteen Meditations and the painter's craft of representing meditational processes. The last chapter discusses the phenomenological experience of the Pure Land tableau through the device of the "lotus pond". Taken together, these chapters argue for a period of striking innovation in Chinese art, one that led to a dynamic rethinking of the relation of the human body to the surface of an illusionistic painting.

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ABBREVIATIONS

- QTS* *Quan Tang shi* 全唐詩, comp. Peng Dingqiu 彭定求 et al. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1960.
- QTW* *Quan Tang wen* 全唐文, ed. Dong Gao 董誥 et al. Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1990.
- SWQS 20 *juan* in vol. 682 of Yingyin wenyuange Siku quanshu edition 影印文淵閣四庫全書 (Taipei: Taiwan shangwu yinshuguan, 1983).
- P. Pelliot collection of Dunhuang manuscripts, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris.
- S. Stein collection of Dunhuang manuscripts, British Library, London.
- T. Taishō shinshū Daizōkyō 大正新修大藏經, ed. Takakusu Junjirō 高楠順次郎 et al. 85 vols. Tokyo: Taishō issaikyō kankōkai, 1924–1933. Also in CBETA electronic database. Texts are abbreviated as T., followed by the work number, volume number, page number, and the registry column (a, b, or c).

INTRODUCTION

Western Pure Land transformation tableaux (*xifang jingtu bianxiang* 西方淨土變相) are images that depict a distant Buddhist Paradise to the far west of our current Sāha world (Fig.0-1). This paradise is governed by a deity called Amitābha (*amitufo* 阿彌陀佛), the “Buddha of Infinite Light”, who is also called Amitāyus (*wuliangshoufo* 無量壽佛), the “Buddha of Limitless Life”. Before achieving Buddhahood, Amitābha made forty-eight vows to save the souls of sentient beings from our current world. After death, followers of Amitābha will be reborn in the Western Pure Land — one of the countless Buddha lands in the ten directions. Amitābha’s realm is filled with supernatural sounds, scents, and sights that will guarantee eventual enlightenment for its subjects. This world of virtue is known as the “Land of Bliss” (Chinese: *jileshijie* 極樂世界, Sanskrit: *Sukhāvātī*). In Tang dynasty (618-907 C.E.) China, Amitābha’s paradise emerged through painted images as a majestic water-bound palace with Amitābha at the center.¹

With extraordinary perspectival views, paintings of this supernatural paradise have been frequently used as a visual document of China’s medieval past. Vague notions of “realism” have plagued studies of Pure Land art for almost a century: through the tableau, the historian of material culture has tried to reimagine Tang architecture, furniture, vessels, musical instruments, textiles, birds, and flowers. At the same time, formalists have viewed the portrayal of architecture in the tableau as a pinnacle in the development of pictorial space in pre-modern Chinese art. As a “symbolic form,” the Pure Land tableau has become a

¹ Eugene Y. Wang, “Pure Land Art”, in *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, ed. Robert Buswell (New York: Macmillan, 2003), 693-698.

metaphor of Tang opulence and prosperity.² At its best, the tableau is a testimony to the highest painterly skill; at its worst, a mere didactic illustration of Buddhist teachings. The Pure Land tableau was at the center of medieval visual culture, yet existing scholarly accounts have largely failed to explain why and how this proved to be the case. Rather than ask what the Pure Land tableau tells us about medieval Chinese architecture or the doctrines of Pure Land Buddhism, I approach the tableau as a protagonist in its own story: it is only by removing these sedimented layers of interpretation—whether from architectural or Buddhist historians—that we can grasp how the Pure Land tableau *produced*, rather than merely reflected, new understandings of vision and space.

The Pure Land tableau reveals a daring new attitude towards the visual depiction of material phenomena in the Tang Empire, encouraging viewers to *see through* forms, from bodies, to vessels, to buildings, to landscapes. The Tang Pure Land tableau can be situated at the intersection of two developments: first, the conceptual problem in Mahāyāna thought of how to depict the emptiness of forms in this world in order to grasp the Pure Land as a true realm: how realization of one's entrapment in the phenomenal world can lead to enlightenment. Painters creatively grappled with this problem to experiment with painting as a mode of world making.³ The tableau allowed painters to theorize upon and interrogate the limits and power of their own craft. Second, Pure Land visuality was the product of a new imperial vision, with a controlling gaze that *sees through* architecture, organizing a cosmopolitan synthesis of Chinese, Indic, and Central Asian forms. This imperial vision was

² Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective As Symbolic Form* (New York: Cambridge, Mass.: Zone Books; MIT Press, 1991), 27-54. James Elkins, *The Poetics of Perspective* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994), 18.

³ E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 146-180.

intimately linked to the urban environment of Chang'an and the challenge of navigating its bustling markets, temples, and palaces.

Central to what I call “Pure Land visuality” is the concept and element of water. I demonstrate that water emerged as the conceptual ground of the Pure Land: as a way of making sense of transparency, the transmutation of substances, and the transformation of space. Water was both a metaphor and a medium for the creation of the Pure Land tableau: viewers were promised a new body when born again as babes in a lotus pond, while water—a substance that connects the human world to the divine—formed the very basis upon which the Pure Land was to be built. Attempts to depict and conceptualize water within Dunhuang caves prefigured a radically new relationship between the human body and the surfaces of illusionistic paintings.

Envisioning Transparency

To explain what I mean by the ability to *see through* forms we can look at a detail from the 8th century Pure Land tableau in Cave 172 at Mogao, Dunhuang. The painters of the tableau were fascinated by their ability to explore the effects of transparency through the depiction of objects, substances, and materials. With broad shoulders and a thin waist, the Indic body of the bodhisattva is adorned with colors and patterns found across the Eurasian continent (Fig.0-2).⁴ Like the heavy jewels suspended from his torso, his body is hefty and concrete, with the contours of his muscles and flesh rendered through exotic techniques of

⁴ Zhao Feng 趙豐, Wang Yue 王樂, Xu Zheng 徐錚, “*Dunhuang sichou de leixing yu fenqi* 敦煌絲綢的類型與分期,” *Dunhuang sichou yishu quanji: yingcang juan* 敦煌絲綢藝術全集：英藏卷, ed. Zhao Feng 趙豐 (Shanghai: Donghua daxue chubanshe, 2007), 22-27.

chiaroscuro.⁵ Through the diaphanous silks and gauzes clinging from his body, the bodhisattva's corporeality is made doubly visible. He gently clutches a small vessel in his right hand. His thumb is seen through on the other side of the transparent bottle. Inside this fragile vessel grows a flower. The transparency of the vessel is made possible by the fleshiness of the bodhisattva. The bodhisattva becomes a metaphor for seeing and knowing, a philosophical blending of body and vessel. For those who have the capacity of divine vision, the bodhisattva's concrete body can also become something clear and transparent like the small bottle in his hand. In Buddhist iconography, bodhisattvas holding a transparent vessel are a common trope, yet it is in the Sui and Tang period that these transparent vessels start to appear in painted form. Never mass-produced in China, glass and crystal vessels were largely imported from the Iranian world.⁶ Together with the Central Asian textile patterns and Chinese transparent silks, the Indic bodhisattva was a trans-regional assemblage invented by Dunhuang painters.

This fascination with the effect of transparency is also evident in the formation of architecture. Moving slightly beyond the small vessel is the timber-frame edifice of the Buddhist hall that serves as the backdrop for Amitābha (Fig.-03). The pillars are drastically foreshortened, showing us the entire structure of the building. The inner wooden-brackets can be seen under the eaves, and the patterned ground floor of the entire hall is also made visible. Behind the pillars, we can see the bases of two other Buddhist halls in the distance. In other words, like the small vessel, the building is also a transparent one. The building embraces a

⁵ Wen Fong, "Ao-t'u-hua or Receding-and-protruding Painting at Tun-huang," *Proceedings of the International Conference on Sinology: Section of History of Arts* (Taipei: Academia Sinica, 1981), 73-94. Mary H. Fong, "The Technique of 'Chiaroscuro' in Chinese Painting from Han through T'ang," *Artibus Asiae* 38, no. 2/3 (1976): 91-127.

⁶ An Jiayao 安家瑶, "Zhongguo de zaoqi boli qimin 中國的早期玻璃器皿," *Kaogu xuebao* 考古學報, no.4 (1984): 413-447.

visual paradox, with an extravagant rooftop, elaborate wooden-brackets, and ornate ground floor, the actual interior of the building is surprisingly small — only one by three bays — impossible to hold anything inside. Like the small vessel in the bodhisattva’s hand, the large hall is also transparent—rather than housing the image of a Buddha, the supernatural edifice serves as a frame for Amitābha in the Pure Land tableau. The timber-frame building has been folded inside out.

Historicist approaches to the Pure Land tableau have obscured this sophisticated visual discourse on seeing through form and substance. The goal of perspectival views in the Pure Land tableau does not follow modern ideas on the development of pictorial space. They are created, instead, through the painter’s experimentation in showing things as if “transparent” (*yingche* 映徹). The conceptual ground for Pure Land visibility is water—a clear natural substance that can transform, transmute, and mark leveled horizons that are flat like “the surfaces of a mirror.” The entire palace of the Pure Land in Cave 172 sits upon water (Fig.0-4). The lotus pond is also where newborn souls arrive in the Pure Land. The viewer is supposed to become one of these small babes floating in the water on lotus flowers.

Sources for the Pure Land Tableau

This study examines 7th – 8th century Pure Land transformation tableaux at a cave complex called the Mogao Grottoes in west China. Rediscovered in the early 20th century the Dunhuang corpus of Pure Land imagery, consisting of the earliest surviving examples of this painting type, has been crucial to the study of Pure Land art in East Asia.⁷ During the strongest presence of Tang control in the region between the 640s and 770s, the Pure Land

⁷ Eugene Y. Wang, “Pure Land Art,” 693.

tableau was painted 43 times at the Mogao cave site, and was the most depicted subject matter at Dunhuang.⁸ Its impact not only transformed all other types of tableau painting, but also redefined the development of cave chapels at Dunhuang. Records show that the Pure Land tableau was painted in several Buddhist monasteries in the Tang capital Chang'an. Painting became an increasingly important and public artistic form during the Tang dynasty. Famous mural painters were admired as celebrities, and we also witness the first theorizations of different painting styles.

The Pure Land tableau is closely associated with the three “Pure Land Sutras” in the Buddhist cannon. The first two are shorter and longer versions of the *Sukhāvāṭīvyūha-Sūtra*. The *Amitābha Sūtra* (*Amituo jing* 阿彌陀經) is sometimes called the “Shorter Sutra”, and the *Amitāyurdhyāna Sūtra* (*Wuliangshoufo jing* 無量壽佛經) is usually referred to as the “Longer Sutra”. The third Pure Land sutra is the *Meditation on the Buddha of Immeasurable Life Sūtra* (*Guan wuliangshoufo jing* 觀無量壽佛經), or *Meditation Sūtra* (*Guanjing* 觀經).⁹ The first two sutras provide a world-view of the Pure Land and the mechanism of Amitābha's salvific vows. The third sutra features a narrative preface known as the “Ajātaśatru Narrative” (*weishengyuan* 未生怨), in which an evil prince called Ajātaśatru locks up his own mother Lady Vaidehī during a palace coup. The core of the sutra is a meditation process called the “Sixteen Meditations” (*shiliu guan* 十六觀), in which Shakyamuni Buddha teaches Lady Vaidehī how to meditate on the Western Pure Land. The last three of the Sixteen

⁸ Wang Huimin 王惠民. “Xifang jingtubian xingshi de xingcheng guocheng he wancheng shijian 西方淨土變形式的形成過程和完成時間,” *Dunhuang Research* 139, no.3 (2013): 82-83, Wang Huimin 王惠民. “Dunhuang xifang jingtu xinyang ziliao yu jingtu tuxiangyanjiushi 敦煌西方淨土信仰資料與淨土圖像研究史,” *Dunhuang Research* 69, no.3 (2001):14.

⁹ T. 12, 0366. T. 12, 0360. T. 12, 0365. Luis O. Gómez, *Land of Bliss: The Paradise of the Buddha of Measureless Light: Sanskrit and Chinese Versions of the Sukhāvāṭīvyūha Sūtras* (University of Hawai'i Press, 1996), 124-143. Hisao Inagaki, *The Three Pure Land Sutras: A Study and Translation* (Kyoto: Nagata Bunshodo, 1995), 3-11.

Meditations introduces a rebirth system called the “Nine Grades of Rebirth” (*jiupin wangsheng* 九品往生). The Western Pure Land was the focus and goal of meditational practices that were widespread in medieval China. Pure Land practice became immensely popular, and the worship of the Amitābha Buddha reached its zenith as an urgent soteriological response to the emerging apocalyptic ideas of the “end of the dharma” (*mofa* 末法) in the 6th century.¹⁰ The Western Pure Land transformation tableau promises a new world, a new body, and a new form of existence for its viewer. Portraying processes of rebirth and making a supernatural realm visible, this new pictorial form directly speaks to the complex interrelationship between pictorial illusionism and embodied vision in medieval China. The *Meditation Sutra* teaches practitioners how to meditate and “see” Amitābha’s paradise. In this light, the study of the Pure Land tableau is essentially a study of medieval vision, and how it takes place within the Tang Empire.

While scholars have traditionally turned towards the Pure Land sutras and their commentaries to understand the Pure Land transformation tableaux, I attend instead to the historical materiality of these cave murals as an analytical framework. Visually framing the Pure Land tableau, images of the Ajātaśatru Narrative and the Sixteen Meditations are crucial for understanding the Pure Land tableau. They are the first type of Pure Land images that appear at Dunhuang, and are commonly added to the sides of the Pure Land tableau from the 8th century onwards (Fig.0-1). Narrative images have a long history in Chinese pictorial art, but the Ajātaśatru Narrative is the first narrative sequence embedded within a coherent architectural space. The Narrative instructs viewers with a new way of seeing through architecture, allowing viewers to come to terms with their own bodily imprisonment in the

¹⁰ Eugene Y. Wang, “Pure Land Art,” 693. Julian Pas, *Visions of Sukhāvātī: Shan-Tao’s Commentary on the Kuan Wu-Liang-Shou-Fo Ching* (State University of New York Press, 1995), 141-149. For concepts on the “end of the dharma” in East Asia, see Jan Nattier, *Once Upon a Future Time: Studies in a Buddhist Prophecy of Decline* (Berkeley, Calif.: Asian Humanities Press, 1991), 90-100.

Sāha world. The Sixteen Meditations are the first images that visualize the inner workings of meditative phenomena. Rather than a “visual aid” for practitioners, the Sixteen Mediations is a visual commentary on meditative experience. As a brand new pictorial form, the Sixteen Mediations connects acts of image-making and visionary experience. Both image-types reveal to us the sort of viewer that the Pure Land tableau desires — one that can repent, see through phenomena, come to terms with entrapment, and shed their body for a new one in the Pure Land. Paying close attention to the architectural context of Pure Land art, we will also see how imaginations of water and light were central to how cave interiors at Dunhuang were conceived.

New Records of a “Golden Age”: Historiography of Pure Land Art at Dunhuang

The study of Pure Land art was a trans-regional endeavor in the 20th century. When the Mogao cave site was re-discovered in the early 20th century by European explorers, the Dunhuang Pure Land tableau became the center of new narratives concerning the history and development of Chinese art. The Dunhuang Pure Land tableau embodied the magnificence of the Tang dynasty, which is commonly lauded a “golden age” for Chinese art and culture. The perspectival views, palatial architecture, and figural representations of the rediscovered Pure Land tableau provided utterly new visual forms that had not been seen in what was considered traditional Chinese painting before the 20th century. In different art historical discourses, the Tang dynasty Pure Land tableau took many forms. For historians of Buddhist art, the iconography of the Pure Land tableau was a reflection of Pure Land doctrines. Historians of architecture have used the Pure Land tableau to reconstruct medieval monasteries and palaces. In these discourse, the Pure Land tableau becomes either a secondary illustration of religious teachings or a visual document of pre-modern timber-

frame architecture. At the same time, the analysis of perspective creates teleological narratives of formal development, devoid of socio-historical context.

Academic research on Dunhuang Pure Land imagery started after the French Sinologist Paul Pelliot (1878-1945) published photographs of the Mogao caves in the 1920s.¹¹ In 1931, Arthur Waley produced a catalogue of paintings in the British Museum collection that had been retrieved from Dunhuang's Cave 17 by the Hungarian-born British archaeologist Aurel Stein (1862 – 1943).¹² Outside of China, the first study came from Ludwig Bacchofer (1894-1976), a trained formalist and the only student of Heinrich Wölfflin that specialized in oriental art. In his 1931 essay “Die Raumdarstellung in der chinesischen Malerei des ersten Jahrtausends n. Chr.”¹³ Bacchofer became the first art historian to use Dunhuang Pure Land images to trace the development of pictorial space in Chinese art. Bacchofer's large narratives of formal development were based on broad comparisons between the arts of the East and West, but he was the first to apply a formalist analysis of pictorial space to Chinese painting. In the Far East, the first iconographic studies of Pure Land images came from Matsumoto Eichii, who wrote about the Sixteen Meditations and Ajātaśatru Narrative using Dunhuang materials. The original article appeared in *Kokka* in 1932, and was later included in Matsumoto's seminal *Study of Dunhuang Paintings (tonkoga*

¹¹ Paul Pelliot, *Les Grottes De Touen-Houang: Peintures Et Sculptures Bouddhiques Des Époques Des Wei, Des T'ang Et Des Song* (Paris: Librairie Paul Geuthner, 1914-1924).

¹² Arthur Waley (1889-1966), British Museum. Department of Prints and Drawings, and Delhi (India). Central Asian Antiquities Museum. *A Catalogue of Paintings Recovered From Tun-huang By Sir Aurel Stein, K.C.I.E.*: Preserved in the Sub-department of Oriental Prints and Drawings in the British Museum, and in the Museum of Central Asian Antiquities (Delhi. London: Printed by order of the Trustees of the British Museum and of the government of India, 1931).

¹³ Ludwig Bacchofer, “Die Raumdarstellung in der Chinesischen Malerei des ersten Jahrtausends n.Chr.,” *Müncher Jahrbuch der Bildenen Kunst* 8 (1931): 193-242. Also see, Lillian Lan-Ying Tseng, “Traditional Chinese Painting Through the Modern European Eye – the Case of Ludwig Bachhofer,” in *Tradition and Modernity: Comparative Perspectives*, Sun Kangyi, Meng Hua eds. (Peking University Press, 2007), 508-533

no kenkyu 敦煌画の研究) in 1937.¹⁴ He categorized Dunhuang Pure Land images that included the Sixteen Meditations and Ajātaśatru Narrative on the outer rims as “*Meditations Sutra tableaux*”, while the ones that do not are called “*Amitābha tableaux*”. The study was also based on comparisons between Dunhuang examples and later Japanese Pure Land art, in an effort to locate the origins of Japanese Buddhist iconography in Tang China. Notably, this was the time when the Taishō Tripiṭaka was being collated by Takakusu Junjiro (1866-1945) between 1924-1934. One of the main editors, Ono Genmyo (1883-1939), was a historian of Buddhist art and a Pure Land monk. The topic was of great importance to the scholarly and religious community in Japan, and the section on Dunhuang Pure Land tableaux came out as the first chapter of Matsumoto’s book.

Diverging from the aesthetics of traditional Chinese ink painting, Chinese academics and many artists promoted the so-called “realism” of Dunhuang Pure Land art. In the same year of Matsumoto’s first publication, Liang Sicheng, the founding father of Chinese architectural history started to use Pelliot’s photographs of Dunhuang Pure Land tableaux to study Chinese timber-frame architecture.¹⁵ In 1932, he published an essay on Tang dynasty Buddhist temples and palaces seen in Dunhuang murals and on the Dule Monastery in the newly founded *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Chinese Architecture*.¹⁶ By the 1940s,

¹⁴ Matsumoto Eichii 松本榮一, “*Kankyō henshō gaien no kenkyū* 觀經变相外縁の研究 (上) (下),” Part I. *Kokka* 国華 502 (September 1932): 249-253. Part II. *Kokka* 503 (October 1932): 294-300-253. Matsumoto, Eiichi 松本榮一. *Tonkōga No Kenkyū* 敦煌画の研究 (Tōkyō: Tōhō Bunka Gakuin Tōkyō Kenkyūjo : Hatsubaijo Bunkyūdō Shoten, 1937), 1-59

¹⁵ Liang Sicheng 梁思成, “*Bo xihe xiansheng guanyu dunhuang jianzhu de yifengxin* 伯希和先生關於敦煌建築的一封信,” [A Letter from Professor Paul Pelliot to Liang Ssu-cheng]. *Yingzao xueshe huikan* 營造學社彙刊[Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Chinese Architecture] 3, no.4 (1932): 10.

¹⁶ Liang Sicheng 梁思成. “*Women suozhidao de tangdai fosi yu gongdian* 我們所知道的唐代佛寺與宮殿”, *Yingzao xueshe huikan* 營造學社彙刊[Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Chinese Architecture] 3, no.1 (1932): 75-114. Liang Sicheng 梁思成, “*Jixian dulesi guanyingde shanmenkao*

when the Nationalist Party moved westwards to Dunhuang during the Sino-Japanese War, the Pure Land tableau was folded into new narratives of national art forms. The first director of the Dunhuang Institute, Chang Shuhong, a French-trained painter, emphasized the Realism of the Tang Pure Land tableau, comparing the fleshiness of its bodhisattvas to figure paintings by Leonardo da Vinci or Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres.¹⁷ The Pure Land tableau was used by Chang to promote Realist art forms, against other trends of modernist painting such as Surrealism, which Chang particularly disliked. In this new chapter, the religious cave mural became a representative national art form.

These foundational studies in Germany, Japan, and China in the 1930-1940s established three approaches to the Dunhuang Pure Land tableau. Like the study of many archeological materials in China, the three approaches have remained largely segregated in the 20th century. A student of Liang Sicheng, Xiao Mo wrote his classic *Architectural Research of Dunhuang Grottoes* 敦煌建築研究 in 1989, which was based on painting details abstracted from the Pure Land tableaux, and this was the same for Sun Yihua's more recent catalogue of Dunhuang architectural images issued by the Dunhuang Academy.¹⁸ Iconographical studies of Pure Land art are still the main focus of recent scholarship in East Asia. In Shi Pingting's catalogue of Dunhuang Pure Land art, the Dunhuang corpus is divided into three categories according to the three Pure Land sutras.¹⁹ This tripartite division based

蔚縣獨樂寺觀音閣山門考”, *Yingzao xueshe huikan* 營造學社彙刊[Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Chinese Architecture] 3, no.2 (1932): 7-100.

¹⁷ Chang Shuhong 常書鴻, “Dunhuang yishu yu jinhou zhongguo wenhua jianshe 敦煌藝術與今後中國文化建設,” *Wenhua xianfeng* 文化先鋒, no.24, (1946):3-7.

¹⁸ Xiao Mo 蕭默, *Dunhuang jianzhu yanjiu* 敦煌建築研究 (Beijing: wen wu chubanshe, 1986): 61-81, Sun Yihua 孫毅華, *Jianzhu huajian* 建築畫卷, *Dunhuang shiku quanji* 敦煌石窟全集, Vol.21, ed. Dunhuang Academy (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Commercial Press, 2001), 69-170.

¹⁹ Shi Pingting 施萍婷, *Amituojing huajuan* 阿彌陀經畫卷, *Dunhuang shiku quanji* 敦煌石窟全集, Vol.5 (Honk Kong: Hong Kong Commercial Press The Commercial Press, 1999).

on sutra texts is largely a modern construction that medieval painters were unconcerned with and this has caused several unresolved controversies on the iconographical identification of Pure Land images at Dunhuang. Lastly, formalist concerns with the development of pictorial space and the transition between large epochs of Chinese art in the Pure Land tableau were once picked up briefly by art historians such as Alexander C. Soper, but have largely been dropped in recent scholarship.

Although our knowledge of the Dunhuang Pure Land tableau comes from these foundational works, the study of Pure Land imagery at Dunhuang remains problematic. Seen as either illustrations of Buddhist texts, or objective visual records of medieval material culture, there is very little concern with the tableau's own materiality, format, or medium-specificity.²⁰ Most studies have only focused on the Pure Land tableau as a pictorial image, rather than as a mural within a religious architectural enclosure.

Rethinking Shandao and Buddhist Textual Sources

Among the three “Pure Land Sutras”, the *Meditation Sūtra* played the most vital role in the development of medieval Pure Land practices in East Asia, which led to at least forty different commentaries composed in China before the year 800 C.E.²¹ The Chinese translation of the text is attributed to Kālayaśas 曇良耶舍 (383–442), who was from Central Asia and excelled in Buddhist meditative practices. With no extant Sanskrit counterpart, the *Meditation Sutrā* was probably created in the Gandharan region and translated into Chinese,

²⁰ Wu Hung, “Historical Materiality of Painting” (manuscript, June 2002), Microsoft Word File. Preface to Japanese edition of Wu Hung. *The Double Screen: Medium and Representation in Chinese Painting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

²¹ Kenneth K. Tanaka, *The Dawn of Chinese Pure Land Buddhist Doctrine: Ching-ying Hui-yuan's Commentary On the Visualization Sutra* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), xvii.

or directly produced in Jiankang (current day Nanjing) during the Yuanjia period (424-442).²² The most important commentary on the *Meditation Sutra* is Shandao's 善導 (613-681) late 7th century *magnum opus*, the *Commentary on Meditation on the Buddha of Immeasurable Life Sutra* (*Guan wuliangshoufo jing* 觀無量壽佛經疏).²³ Shandao's mentor Daochuo 道綽 (562-645) promoted the practice of the "mindfulness of the Buddha" (*nianfo* 念佛), a mental and verbal recollection of Amitābha Buddha, which was popular among the lay community.²⁴ Shandao is known for expanding the classes of sentient beings that could enter the Pure Land to include the masses. Shandao has been regarded as a critical figure in the development of representations of the Pure Land, and art historians have often used his writings to study the iconography of Pure Land tableaux.²⁵ As traditional modes of iconographic analysis treat Pure Land representations as illustrations of sutra texts or Shandao's writings, we should instead regard the Pure Land tableau as an important force that affected exegetical writings.

Buddhist mediations before the Sui-Tang period conventionally focused on the body of deities and many claim that it was Shandao's emphasis on meditating on the realm of the

²² Fujita Kotatsu 藤田宏達, *Genshi Jōdo Shisō No Kenkyū* 原始淨土思想の研究 (Tōkyō: Iwanami Shoten, 1970), 116-176. Fujita Kotatsu 藤田宏達, "The Textual Origins of the Kuan Wu-liang-shou ching: A Canonical Scripture of Pure Land Buddhism," trans. Kenneth K. Tanaka. In *Chinese Buddhist Apocrypha*, ed. Robert E. Buswell, Jr. (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i), 149-73. Jonathan A. Silk. "The Composition of the "Guan Wuliangshoufo-jing": Some Buddhist and Jain Parallels to Its Narrative Frame," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 25, no. 2 (1997): 181-256.

²³ T. 37, 1753. Pas, 8.

²⁴ Mochizuki, Shinkō 望月信亨, *Jōdokyō No Kenkyū* 淨土教之研究 (Tōkyō: Kanao Bun'endō, 1930), 37-141, 180-196, 242-259. David W. Chappell. "The Formation of the Pure Land Movement in China: Tao-ch'o and Shan-tao," in *The Pure Land Tradition: History and Development* (Berkeley Buddhist Studies Series, no. 3), eds. James Foard, Michael Solomon, and Richard K. Payne (Berkeley: Center for South and South-east Asian Studies at the University of California, and the Institute of Buddhist Studies, 1996), 139-171. Robert H. Sharf, "On Pure Land Buddhism and Ch'an/Pure Land Syncretism in Medieval China," *T'oung Pao* 88, no.4 (2002): 282-331. Barend J. Ter Haar. "Buddhist-Inspired Options: Aspects of Lay Religious Life in the Lower Yangzi from 1100 until 1340," *T'oung Pao*, Second Series, 87, no. 1/3 (2001): 92-152.

²⁵ Wu Hung, "Reborn in Paradise: A Case study of Dunhuang Sutra Painting and its Religious, Ritual and Artistic Context," *Orientalism* 23, no.5 (May 1992): 55.

Pure Land rather than the body of Amitābha Buddha that led to the sudden flourishing of large Pure Land tableaux.²⁶ Following Arthur Waley, some suggest that representations of the Ajātaśatru Narrative were direct illustrations of Shandao's writings rather than the *Meditation Sutra* itself. Shandao expounded the theory "contradictory causation" (*niyuan* 逆緣) in the narrative tale, in which the prince's evil deeds caused the eventual salvation of his mother.²⁷

There are, however, two problems with these assumptions. A few 6th century stelae from Sichuan already show representations of Amitābha's realm that emphasize the space of the Pure Land rather than the body of Amitābha, and some of the earliest Pure Land representations at Dunhuang, including the Ajātaśatru Narrative and the Sixteen Meditations, might predate Shandao's writings. As Dunhuang examples show, the most important aspect of the Ajātaśatru Narrative in the visual tradition was not the theory of "contradictory causation", but the meeting between the Buddha and Vaidehī. As Kenneth K. Tanaka has argued, Shandao's writings only became the central foci of Chinese Pure Land studies through modern Japanese scholarship, but many important commentaries on the *Meditation Sutra* have been largely neglected.²⁸ The earliest commentary was written by Huiyuan of the Jingying Temple 淨影慧遠 (523 – 592), who established a tradition of Pure Land exegetical literature, which was followed by Jizang 吉藏 (549-623) and the Tiantai dhyana master Zhiyi 智顓 (538-579).²⁹

²⁶ Wu Hung and Ning Qiang, "Paradise Images in Early Chinese Art," in *The Flowering of a Foreign Faith: New Studies in Chinese Buddhist Art*, ed. J. Baker (Mumbai: Marg Publications, 1998), 64.

²⁷ Waley, xxi

²⁸ Tanaka, xvii-xviii.

²⁹ T.37, 1749. T.37, 1750. T.37, 1752. The Zhiyi commentary might be compiled in the 18th century, see Tanaka 45.

Rethinking the role of Shandao, I believe we should regard the monk as a sophisticated viewer of Pure Land images. Indeed, in his *Meritorious Methods of the Samādhi [existing in] Contemplating the Sea of Characters of Budha Amitābha* (*guannian amituofu xianghai sanmei gongde famen* 觀念阿彌陀佛相海三昧功德法門), Shandao specifically notes that an adept should “draw tableaux according to the *Meditation Sutra*”.³⁰ This shows that he was someone who understood well the sway of visual representation and cleverly made use of a robust visual culture of the Pure Land that was already flourishing during his lifetime. There is a close correspondence between Shandao’s commentary and illustrations of the Ajātaśatru Narrative. But rather than having Shandao as an authoritative voice who dictated what images should look like, we could also say that his vivid descriptions of small details and action within the Ajātaśatru Narrative were based on moments of ekphrasis. For example, in the scene where Ajātaśatru wields a sword at his own mother, Shandao elaborated on this critical moment within the tale, adding pathos and visual detail,

This was to illustrate the extent of King Ajātaśatru’s anger. Facing a treacherous [son], how painful this was for the mother! [He] pulled her by the head and clutched his sword. Life and death were hung by a string. The serene mother held her palms together, bent forward and lowered her head, succumbing to the force of her son’s hand.³¹

此明世王瞋盛，逆及於母。何其痛哉！撮頭擬劍，身命頓在須臾。慈母合掌，曲身低頭，就兒之手。

This detail was not mentioned in the *Meditation Sutra*, but the earliest representation of the Ajātaśatru Narrative in Cave 431 at Dunhuang already includes the same detail of the Queen lowering her head to accept her fate (Fig.0-5). It is highly possible that this detail came from

³⁰ “又依經畫變，觀想寶樹寶池寶樓莊嚴者，現生除滅無量億阿僧祇劫生死之罪”；T.47, 1959: 25a11-12.

³¹ T.1753, 37: 0256a13-16.

oral storytelling traditions with the rise of public sermons (*sujiang* 俗講) and narrative tales found in “transformation texts” (*bianwen* 變文).³² At the same time, Shandao’s description might also be an instance of ekphrasis after he saw images like the ones in Cave 431. Another detail in Shandao’s *Commentary* also attests to his ekphrastic aspirations. Discussing the moment when Shakyamuni met with Vaidehī, he oddly reassures the reader that the Buddha in this scene is in fact Shakyamuni Buddha.

When speaking of Shakyamuni Buddha, he is slightly different from other Buddhas. But all the Buddhas have the same name and their bodies and images are not different from each other. Therefore, here he is marked as Shakyamuni, in order to not cause confusion.³³

言釋迦牟尼佛者，簡異餘佛。但諸佛名通，身相不異，今故標定釋迦使無疑也。

There is no reason to make this distinction when one is dealing with the text of the *Meditation Sutra*. This can only be the case when viewing a Pure Land transformation tableau because it frequently had to illustrate two different Buddhas at the same time—one is Shakyamuni, the historical Buddha in our world that went to teach Vaidehī how to enter Amitābha’s paradise, and the other one is Amitābha Buddha the ruler of the Pure Land in a different world. It is often the case that the only way to identify different Buddhas from each other is through contextual information—inscriptions, iconographic tropes, or the Buddha’s accompanying deities. As seen in many Dunhuang examples, even the most highly trained painters would mix up different Buddhas by portraying the wrong accompanying deities. Shandao was certainly wary of this problem, and as an exemplary viewer of Buddhist images, took note of this in his commentary.

³² Hou Chong 侯冲, “*Sujiang xinkao* 俗講新考,” [A new approach to *Sujiang* (Buddhist teaching lectures for the folks)] *Dunhuang Research* 122, no.4 (2002):118-124.

³³ T.1753, 37: 0257b10-12.

In my study, Shandao will be a guiding force for us to understand the Pure Land tableau, but instead of treating the tableau as an illustration of Shandao's exegeses, I will treat him as an acute viewer of images in 7th century Chang'an, and an experimental theorist of visual phenomena. At the same time, two other 7th century writers will also help us understand the visual culture of Chang'an from which the Pure Land tableau emerged. One of them is Shandao's contemporary Jiakai 迦才 (active 7th century), who wrote the *Treatise of the Pure Land* (*jingtu lun* 淨土論).³⁴ Jiakai's treatise provides the earliest "Tales of Rebirth" (*wangsheng zhuan* 往生傳) — a genre of religious narratives that recounts miraculous deaths and visionary experiences that testify to the efficacy of Pure Land practices. Many of these are deathbed scenarios, in which various numinous phenomena occur on the occasions of a death, such as fragrance, supernatural light, or music in the air — indicating the welcoming descent of Amitābha and his entourage to retrieve souls to be reborn in the Pure Land.³⁵ Sometimes these tales tell of monks or laymen accidentally entering into the Pure Land. These narratives are crucial for us to understand how the Pure Land was imagined in the 7th century.

Another important 7th century writer is the prolific Vinaya master Daoxuan 道宣 (596-667). As a renowned compiler, editor, and historian, Daoxuan's writings provide us with crucial sources to understand Buddhist images and spaces in the 7th century.³⁶ Shandao was first mentioned in Daoxuan's *Continued Biographies of Eminent Monks* (*xugaoshengzhuan* 續高僧傳), which was completed in 645 with later additions included in

³⁴ T.47, 1963.

³⁵ Whalen Lai, "Legends of Births and the Pure Land Tradition in China," in *The Pure Land Tradition: History and Development* (Berkeley Buddhist Studies Series, no. 3), eds. James Foard, Michael Solomon, and Richard K. Payne (Berkeley: Center for South and South-east Asian Studies at the University of California, and the Institute of Buddhist Studies, 1996), 174-232.

³⁶ Fujiyoshi Masumi 藤善眞澄, *Dōsen den no kenkyū* 道宣伝の研究 (Kyōto-shi : Kyōto Daigaku Gakujutsu Shuppankai, 2002), 387-391, 330-370.

665.³⁷ An important Pure Land image called the “Amitābha and Fifty Bodhisattvas” was recorded in Daoxuan’s *Record of Miraculous Responses to the Three Jewels in China* (*Jishenzhou sanbao gantong lu* 集神州三寶感通錄) in 664.³⁸ He wrote the *Illustrated Scripture of Jetavana Vihāra of Śrāvastī in Central India* (*zhongtianzhu weisheguo qiyuansi tujiang* 中天竺舍衛國祇洹寺圖經) in 667, and the treatise allows us to imagine what he considered to be an ideal Buddhist monastery.³⁹ Working closely with the royal court, Daoxuan’s writing was largely concerned with reforming monastic practices.⁴⁰ Promoting the Buddhist community and Buddhist belief, he attended debates at court that intended to recalibrate the relationship between the Buddhist sangha and the royalty.⁴¹ Daoxuan’s works were extremely influential, and several images at Dunhuang are directly related to Daoxuan’s *Record of Miraculous Responses to the Three Jewels in China*.

A City of Transformation: The Pure Land Tableau and Chang’an Urban Experience

Although Chinese architectural historians have frequently drawn from features of Pure Land tableaux, very few studies have examined the dynamic relationship between the Pure Land

³⁷ T. 2060, 50.

³⁸ T. 2106, 52.

³⁹ T. 45, 1899.

⁴⁰ Koichi Shinohara, “Changing Roles for Miraculous Image in Medieval Chinese Buddhism: A Study of the Miracle Image Section in Daoxuan’s ‘Collected Records,’” in *Images, Miracles, and Authority in Asian Religious Traditions*. ed. Richard H. Davis (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1998), 141-188. Puay-peng Ho, “The Ideal Monastery: Daoxuan’s Description of the Central Indian Jetavana Vihāra,” *East Asian History*, no.10, (December 1995): 1-18.

⁴¹ Fujiyoshi, Masumi, 330-370. Koichi Shinohara, “Stories of Miraculous Images and Pay Respect to the Three Jewels: A Discourse on Image Worship in Seventh-Centry China,” in *Images in Asian Religions: Text and Contexts*, eds. Phyllis Granoff, Koichi Shinohara (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2004), 180-220.

tableau and the city of Chang'an.⁴² Most have discussed the transmission of painting styles, artists, and cartoons to Dunhuang from the capital, but rarely have art historians connected the visual experience of the metropolis with the Pure Land tableau's magnificent palatial complexes.

All of our literary guides, from Shandao to Jiakai and Daoxuan, were city dwellers in Chang'an, residing in its many monasteries, and engaging with the urban masses and court elite. The prosperous capital was one of the largest cities in the medieval world with a population of over one million. First built in the Sui dynasty (581-619), it became the epicenter of Tang art and culture. Sights and sounds within the cosmopolitan capital were made possible by new architectural forms, myriad religious spaces, new forms of nighttime entertainment, and bustling commercial activity. The tribute system and international trade imbued the imperium with new objects and ideas. The art and culture of Chang'an is embodied in the term "transformation" (*bian* 變) — the representation (verbal, pictorial or sculptural) of narrative moments with strong elements of the supernatural.⁴³ A visual transformation is called a "transformation tableau" (*bianxiang* 變相).⁴⁴ Eugene Wang has stressed the "world-making" capacity of the transformation tableau, both in terms of how it poses a specifically spatial problem for image-making, and how it indexes the expanded worldview of Mahayana Buddhism of Sui-Tang China that emphasized the possibility of

⁴² Wu Hung, "The Origins of Chinese Painting (Paleolithic Period to Tang Dynasty)," in *Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting*, eds. Yang Xin, Nie Chongzhen, Lang Shaojun, Richard M. Barnhart, James Cahill, Wu Hung (New Haven: Beijing: Yale University Press; Foreign Languages Press, 1997), 63.

⁴³ Victor Mair, *T'ang Transformation Texts: A Study of the Buddhist Contribution to the Rise of Vernacular Fiction and Drama in China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 41-44. Eugene Y. Wang, *Shaping the Lotus Sutra: Buddhist Visual Culture in Medieval China* (Seattle: Washington University Press, 2006), xvii.

⁴⁴ For further discussions on "*bianxiang*", see Wu Hung, "What is *Bianxiang*? On the Relationship between Dunhuang Art and Dunhuang Literature," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 52, no. 1 (June 1992): 111-192.

multiple Buddhist worlds, against our modern understanding of a singular and secular world.⁴⁵

The Pure Land tableau is intimately connected to the visual regime of the capital. By tracing the development of the Pure Land tableau at Dunhuang, a frontier town, we catch a glimpse of how capital culture was purposefully distributed across the empire and beyond. Throughout the Early Tang and the High Tang (618-755), the court was plagued by palace coups and power struggles, while the empire's frontiers were often in military combat with foreign forces.

After seizing the throne from his own brother and forcing his father to retire, the second ruler of the Tang dynasty Emperor Taizong (598- 649, r.626-649) led several military campaigns into the Korean peninsula and Central Asia. It was through Taizong's efforts at territorial expansion, that Dunhuang was folded into this new regime. And it was during this time that we find the first Pure Land tableaux at Dunhuang. Following Taizong, Emperor Gaozong (628 – 683, r.649-683) and Empress Wu Zetian (624-705, r.690-705) ruled the empire as equals for many years, until Wu Zetian finally seized the throne for herself in 690, becoming the first and only female emperor of China. Moving against Confucian doctrines opposed to the role of women as imperial rulers, Wu Zetian was known for manipulating political representation at court and throughout the empire to justify her claims to power. Buddhist imagery was central to her campaign of self-fashioning as a sage and reincarnation

⁴⁵ Wang's concept of "world-making" comes from Nelson Goodman's claim the "arts must be taken no less seriously than the sciences as modes of discovery, creation, and enlargement of knowledge in the broad sense of advancement of the understanding, and thus that the philosophy of art should be conceived as an integral part of metaphysics and epistemology". Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1978), 102. Wang writes, "rather than be constrained by the structure of the text, the medieval Chinese painters imposed on the text a spatial order of their own, a world picture they harbored, which already has its own internal topographic structure and spatial logic, a mental grid through which they plot the disparate scenes from the Lotus Sutra." Eugene Y. Wang 2006, xiv.

of Buddhist deities.⁴⁶ She commissioned four-hundred Pure Land tableaux to be distributed at the hundreds of “Great Cloud Monasteries”(dayun si 大雲寺) that she established across the empire. In this light, we can say that Wu Zetian also coopted the popularity of the Pure Land tableau to serve in her projects of controlling and standardizing political representation.⁴⁷

New imagery was, however, never simply copied at Dunhuang. The Buddhist caves at the Mogao complex were unique to the local region, and the introduction of new images inevitably underwent a process of adaptation and translation to make sense within the cave space. The style of paintings selected, and the method of including them in new cave projects or the refurbishment of older caves were brought out by different families in the Dunhuang area for different purposes. By tracing the introduction of Pure Land imagery, and its metamorphosis in the Mogao caves, we will be able to examine the dynamics between imperial representation and local adaptation. A crucial method for understanding this is by paying close attention to the historical materiality of the Dunhuang cave, and the painter’s practice.

The Dunhuang Cave and the Dunhuang Painter

The Mogao Caves (*mogao ku* 莫高窟) are located at Dunhuang in Gansu province, one of many Buddhist cave complexes in west China, Central Asia, and South Asia, a nexus of trade

⁴⁶ N. Harry Rothschild. *Emperor Wu Zhao and Her Pantheon of Devis, Divinities, and Dynastic Mothers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 191-226.

⁴⁷ Onishi Makiko 大西磨希子, “Fojiao yishu yu tangchao gongting – zhuizhi dangma mantuoluo tu guankui 佛教藝術與唐朝宮廷——綴織當麻曼陀羅圖管窺,” in *Xinyang, shijian yu wenhua tiaoshi disijie guoji hanxue huiyi lunwenji* 信仰、實踐與文化調適 第四屆國際漢學會議論文集, eds. Kang Bao (Paul R. Katz) and Liu Shufen (Taipei: zhongyang hanjiu yuan (Academia Sinica)中央研究院, 2013), 251-270.

routes that we now call the “Silk Road”.⁴⁸ Dunhuang is an oasis town in the arid lands of the Hexi Corridor. The region was a crossroads between different cultures, and an important pathway that connected the Central Plains of China with what was traditionally called the “western regions”(xiyu 西域) in current day Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. To the south of the corridor is the Tibetan plateau, and to the north of it are the Steppe grasslands. In pre-modern times, the local population at Dunhuang was largely agricultural, and reached 50,000 in the Tang period. The Mogao Grottoes are located 25 kilometers southeast from the town center across a desert terrain, in a river valley between the rocky Sanwei Mountain (*sanwei shan* 三危山), and the earthen “Mountain of Singing Sands” (*mingsha shan* 鳴沙山). There are, in total, over 700 caves on site built between the 5th and 13th centuries. All of the grottoes are man-made structures dug into the earthen cliff façade, with their entranceways facing east and their main altars to the west end of the cave interior. The caves in the northern district are usually undecorated, and were living quarters for monks and artisans. The 492 caves in the southern district were ornately adorned as ceremonial spaces.

As unique architectural forms, man-made Buddhist caves at Dunhuang are sophisticated assemblages of painting, polychrome sculpture, and architectural spaces, yet research on Dunhuang caves remains largely divided according to medium. There are separate studies of Dunhuang architecture, Dunhuang mural painting, and Dunhuang sculpture. Wall paintings are further divided by different iconographic themes. Within each subdivision, images are treated as a closed system with its own stylistic developments, isolated from medium and context. The major setback with this approach is that it does not take into account how caves were created as an integral whole. Altars, niches, elongated

⁴⁸ Valerie Hansen, *The Silk Road: A New History*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 1-24. Tamara Chin, “The Invention of the Silk Road, 1877,” *Critical Inquiry* 40:1 (2013): 194-219

corridors, gold appliqué, illusionistic murals, and larger-than-life statues are employed together to forge otherworldly experiences for a medieval viewer. Transformation tableaux of various themes, icons of diverse deities, donor portraits of different generations actively speak to and through each other. A viewer's interaction with these enclosed spaces is not only cognitive but also palpably corporeal, responding to light conditions, variations of scale, as well as temperature change. Approaching Buddhist murals as religious adornment in dark cave interiors, this study will examine the various framing technologies that bring about the material efficacy of religious images and sacred spaces.

Dunhuang cave interiors are usually very dark, and as Wu Hung reminds us, Dunhuang art is mainly about image-making rather than image-viewing.⁴⁹ A crucial source for studying artisan painting techniques at Dunhuang are the sixty-five “monochrome drawings” (白画 *baihua*) found in Cave 17, mostly from the 9-10th century.⁵⁰ There are two large groups of these “sketches”: one for larger positional designs, and one for details of figural groups. The drawings clearly demonstrate the painters' cognitive behavior of thinking spatially instead of narratively (Fig.0-6).⁵¹ Many have pointed out that a crucial procedure in wall painting design can be found in Xie He's 謝赫 (active, 5th century) “Six Laws for Painting” (*liufa* 六法), in which an important rule is called “dividing and planning, positioning and arranging” (*jingyiing weizhi* 經營位置).⁵²

⁴⁹ Wu Hung, “What is Bianxiang? On the Relationship between Dunhuang Art and Dunhuang Literature,” 111-192.

⁵⁰ Sha Wutian 沙武田, *Dunhuang huagao yanjiu* 敦煌畫稿研 (Beijing: minzu chubanshe, 2006), 36-40.

⁵¹ Sarah E. Fraser, *Performing the Visual: The Practice of Buddhist Wall Painting in China and Central Asia, 618-960* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2004), 9

⁵² Sha Wutian 2006, 22-28.

The sketch is a pivotal object that oscillates between artistic creativity and stigmatization—the spontaneous “artist” is born through the disappearance of preparatory drawings, while the repetitive “academician” is born through their institutionalization. On the one hand, the legendary 8th century painter Wu Daozi 吳道子 is able to complete an entire landscape mural within a single day in a painting contest. Within this miraculous and effortless painting process, the “sketch”, which is closely connected to artisanal practice, is absent. On the other hand, the repetitive “academician” is born through its standardization in collaborative mural production as seen in the 9th–10th century designs of Dunhuang caves, executed by a possible painting academy.⁵³

Sha Wutian claims that the main artistic impulse at Dunhuang was that of “imitation” rather than creativity. The proliferation of painting subjects, genres, and styles throughout the history of Dunhuang ultimately terminates in standardization, which was finally achieved by the establishment of the painting academy during the 10th century. Sha’s idea of “imitation” for the artisan becomes the antithesis of “creativity”, rather than an opportunity for artistic inspiration.⁵⁴ Instead, these “monochrome drawings” enable us to understand how the role of the artisan was crucial in conditioning the ways in which mural paintings were designed in caves. Many have tried to identify formal similarities in mural paintings or internal relationships through a possible “cartoon” (*fenben* 粉本), yet this approach implies a direct one-to-one relationship between extant sketches and murals. Instead, many of these cursory freehand drawings were objects of a painters’ internal creative process and were not meant to

⁵³ Fraser 2004, 197-229.

⁵⁴ Sha Wutian, 2006, 493-501. Wu Lixing 吴立行, “*Zhiduhua zongjiaoxia dui gongjiang zhizuo jishu yu fengge de yingxiang* 制度化宗教下对“工匠”制作技术与风格的影响 — 以敦煌遗画为例,” in *Kaogu yu yishushi de jiaohui* 考古與藝術史的交匯 [Proceedings of the International Forum on Archaeology and Art History] (Hangzhou: China Academy of Art, 2008), 353-381.

provide information of pictorial details. This “cognitive practice” calls attention to the painter’s ability to flexibly adapt to new situations in different cave environments.⁵⁵

Most of the monochrome drawings from Cave 17 are dated later than the 8th century, but we can still trace the many ways in which images were adapted to different situations by Dunhuang painters by looking at the mural itself. By identifying instances of replication and variations, we will be able to trace the life and impact of new Pure Land imagery at Dunhuang.⁵⁶ With the Dunhuang Academy’s recent launch of “Digital Dunhuang” (*shuzi dunhuang* 數字敦煌) an online catalogue of thirty Dunhuang caves in 2015, we are now able to see minute details of mural paintings like never before.⁵⁷ As the digital catalogue is organized by individual caves, murals paintings are situated back into their original contexts within caves. However, we must also keep in mind that dark cave interiors were artificially illuminated with a warm light tone for professional photography, and many images were digitally stitched together and touched up afterwards. I have purposefully adjusted the color tone and contrast of images in the dissertation for the sake of clarity. Nevertheless, these new close-up views of the cave paintings allow us to see the murals as artisans once examined their painted surfaces.

Chapter Outlines

This study consists of four chapters that will roughly follow the progression of the *Meditation Sutra*, each with a different emphasis on the crucial role of water in the Pure Land tableau.

⁵⁵ Fraser 2004, 54-62.

⁵⁶ New technology in digitization has significantly changed how we approach Dunhuang caves today.

⁵⁷ “Digital Dunhuang 數字敦煌,” accessed July 27, 2018, <https://www.e-dunhuang.com/index.htm>.

The first chapter reviews recent scholarship on Pure Land art at Dunhuang. The second chapter focuses on the Ajātaśatru Narrative and theories of viewing related to landscape imagery, the third chapter deals with the Sixteen Meditations and the painter's craft of representing meditational processes. The last chapter discusses the phenomenological experience of the Pure Land tableau through the device of the "lotus pond".

Chapter One follows Shandao's journey into Chang'an. Analyzing the earliest sources of Shandao's biography, we will see how his religious career was deeply intertwined with the lives of images. Reframing Shandao's experience within the capital, this chapter reveals ways in which urban life informed his exegetical writings and treatment of Pure Land imagery. By approaching Shandao as a viewer of the Pure Land tableau, we will be able to resituate the earliest examples of Pure Land imagery at Dunhuang in the larger social historical context of the frontier oasis town. Rethinking the developmental narrative of Pure Land art at large, we will see how the first Pure Land images that appeared at Dunhuang in the mid-7th century were multifaceted, patronized by different families and organizations, and assumed a variety of forms in different types of cave structures. By examining Mogao's first "family chapel" Cave 220, an important political project patronized by the Zhai family between 642 and 662, this chapter will review dominant methodologies in the critical literature on Dunhuang art and examine how George Kubler's theory of "prime objects and replicas" is applied to the study of Dunhuang caves.

Chapter Two examines a new theory of viewing that emerges from Pure Land art through the figure of Lady Vaidehī and her relationship with landscape imagery, or "mountains and water" (*shanshui* 山水). The noble laywoman is portrayed widely in medieval art, both as the protagonist of a Buddhist tale called the Ajātaśatru Narrative, and as the practitioner represented in the Sixteen Meditations. Through her body and viewpoints we

learn from the historical Buddha how to visualize the Western Pure Land, yet little is known of Vaidehī's role and importance in Chinese art history. Among forty different versions of the Ajātaśatru Narrative in both Buddhist and Jain traditions, the *Meditation Sutra* is the only text that takes Vaidehī as the main protagonist, instead of the crowned prince Ajātaśatru. This chapter looks at the earliest representations of Lady Vaidehī in two mid-7th century caves at Dunhuang, Cave 431 and Cave 209 within the framework of landscape aesthetics, repentance rites, and Buddhist gender dynamics. I argue that Vaidehī's body and viewpoints create a new mode of seeing in Buddhist art. This mode is the result of major political transformations in the period as the Tang Empire sought to make itself the heartland of Buddhism. The cave became a space that could compress impossible spatial and temporal distances, creating a new vision of paradise that combined Chinese and Indian sacred geographies. Lady Vaidehī became a vehicle through which this new vision was constructed and experienced. She was designed as a viewer/worshipper *par excellence*. Using new materials from recent archeological findings of landscape images in 8th century tombs, this chapter explores the spatial connection between tomb structures in China and Buddhist cave spaces, and how landscape imagery expanded the understanding of death, the afterlife and paradise.

Chapter Three introduces new visual forms brought forth by meditative experience in the Sixteen Meditations sequence. I specifically look at how the sequence was depicted in Dunhuang caves and how water was understood to transform into various substances that create the architectural complex of the Pure Land. Moving beyond problems of iconography that have dogged previous studies, I focus on moments when medieval painters started to explore complex representational strategies to make sense of a new type of visionary experience that is codified through the Sixteen Meditations. By focusing on the "Water Meditation", the second stage in the Sixteen Meditations, I show that the inconsistencies between the textual foundation of the Sixteen Meditations and its pictorial representations

should be regarded as a productive disjunction, one that activates the Pure Land tableau as an efficacious object. This not only reveals how the Sixteen Meditations is a process of spatial-temporal unfolding (an event that *creates* a Buddhist world, rather than a description of its physical details), but also provides a reflexive critique of the Pure Land tableau itself as an image, one that has the power to think back. In a sense, the Pure Land tableau makes the act of viewing into a merit-generating event. What also emerges from this study is a new discourse on the multifaceted representational strategies employed by medieval painters to visualize as well as choreograph meditational experiences.

The last chapter examines the lotus pond as a spatial, structural, and conceptual device in the Pure Land tableau. I look at the Pure Land tableau in four interrelated frameworks. The first framework is that of ritual, in which I examine descriptions of the Pure Land in *Tales of Rebirth*. The monk Fangqi's dream will guide us through different ways in which the Pure Land was imagined, and how this imagination was structured around the water pond in the Pure Land tableau. Pure Land tableaux started to feature Amitābha's realm as a large palatial complex by the 8th century, and this was closely related to new palatial and monastic spaces within the capital. Reading Daoxuan's treatise on an ideal Indian monastery, we will examine how new building structures fostered new phenomenologies of monastic space. Finally, the chapter looks at the "Amitābha Buddha and Fifty Bodhisattvas" miraculous image and its relationship with Pure Land transformation tableau inside Cave 171. Centered on aquatic imaginations, the visual rhetoric of both image types are direct opposites from each other, with the tableau format triumphing pictorial illusionism and the miraculous image dislodging the distance between viewer and image. The two represent the two sides of Pure Land visuality. Cave 171 contains three identical renditions of the Western Pure Land and enshrines in its main niche the "Amitābha Buddha and Fifty Bodhisattvas". I argue that multiple images of the Western Pure Land were orchestrated to conceptually

transform the cave interior into the lotus pond in Amitābha's paradise. This configuration enables those that enter the cave to imagine themselves being reborn in the Western Pure Land.

CHAPTER ONE

WHAT DID SHANDAO SEE? THE SHAPE OF PURE LAND ART

The Pure Land transformation tableau was a sensational phenomenon in medieval China. Products of an expanding imperium propagating refinement, spirituality, and cosmopolitanism, Pure Land images were most well known as wall paintings that covered the halls of large Buddhist temples in the Tang capital of Chang'an. The Tang dynasty Pure Land tableaux that now survive in Buddhist caves at Dunhuang are regarded as relics of this magnificent past. But what, we might ask, would it have been like to view one of these paintings in Tang China? When Tang viewers looked at a Pure Land tableau, what did they see? In this chapter we will begin our journey in Chang'an with a thirty-two year old monk named Shandao who had just arrived in the capital and move our way westward to a cave shrine constructed by a certain Zhai family at Dunhuang, shortly after a victorious military campaign into Central Asia.

The history of the Pure Land transformation tableau is often told through the monk's writings on Amitābha's paradise and starts with the installment of the first full-wall Pure Land image at Dunhuang. This chapter, however, creates a different picture of both the figure of Shandao and the Dunhuang cave. Shandao, I argue, allows us to gauge the impact that Pure Land images had on practices of viewing in 7th century China. At the same time, the newly built family shrine provides us with an entry point into the medieval world from which the Pure Land tableau emerged. In rereading Shandao's biography as a guide to viewing the Pure Land tableau, I critically reassess existing studies of style, iconography, and ritual in the study of Pure Land art.

1.1 Illuminating Shandao: Towards a Visual Culture of the Pure Land

Pure Land images have commonly been studied in close association with Shandao 善導 (613-681).¹ He is most renowned for his extensive *Commentary on the Meditation Sutra* (*Guan wuliangshoufo jingshu* 觀無量壽佛經疏), and various ritual texts and hymns that he composed for Pure Land rituals.² Shandao's writings have been immensely influential across East Asia, and Buddhist historians have portrayed him as the key proponent of the "Pure Land Movement" in China. He is hailed as a patriarch of the "Pure Land School (*jingtu zong* 淨土宗, Jpn: *Jōdo Shū*)", following Lushan Huiyuan 廬山慧遠 (332-416), Tanluan 曇鸞 (476-542), and Daochuo 道綽 (562-645). Shandao was proclaimed an exemplar for Pure Land Buddhism for advocating a practice called the "mindfulness of the Buddha" (Chinese: *nianfo* 念佛 Sanskrit: *buddhānusmṛti*), which entails both incessantly chanting the name of Amitābha Buddha, as well as meditating on his image. It is said that this simple practice was suitable for the lay community and the masses. He emphasized the power of faith in Amitābha Buddha's salvific vows to bring all walks of life into his Western Pure Land and achieve eventual enlightenment.

Historians of Buddhist art have frequently portrayed Shandao in this light, basing their accounts on the canonical history of Pure Land Buddhism. For instance, Shi Pingting's

¹ David W. Chappell, "The Formation of the Pure Land Movement in China: Tao Ch'ao and Shandao," in *The Pure Land Tradition: History and Development*, eds. James Foard, Michael Solomon, and Richard K. Payne (Berkeley Buddhist Studies Series, Number Three, 1996), 119-171. Robert H. Sharf, "On Pure Land Buddhism and Ch'an/Pure Land Syncretism in Medieval China," *T'oung Pao*, Second Series 88, Fasc.4/5 (2002): 282-331. Zhiru, "The Maitreya Connection in Tang Development of Dizang Worship." *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 65.1 (2005): 99-132.

² T.1753, 37. T.1959, 4. T.1980, 47. T.1979, 47. T1966, 47. See, Pas, 105-135. For studies of Dunhuang versions, see Yang Mingfen 楊明芬, *Tangdaixifang jingtu lichen fa yanjiu yi dunhuang mogaoku xifang jingtu xinyang wei zhongxin* 唐代西方淨土禮懺法研究：以敦煌莫高窟西方淨土信仰為中心 (Beijing: mingzu chubanshe, 2007), 35.

catalogue of Pure Land art at Dunhuang starts with a very similar narrative, which serves as the historical and religious context for understanding Dunhuang murals.³ Pure Land art followed the shape of Pure Land Buddhism based on such a lineage of patriarchs, and art historians have studied many Pure Land transformation tableaux based on Shandao's writings. Indeed, as we shall see, records show that Shandao had himself painted "two hundred Pure Land tableaux". However, recent studies show that Shandao's canonical status as a Pure Land patriarch comes from strong sectarian impulses embedded in Japanese Pure Land Buddhism, and much of his celebrated biography as understood in modern scholarship today is a product of historical myth-making. Revisiting the figure of Shandao, without the pre-conceptions of sectarian scholarship, will allow us to reconstruct a more complex and dynamic relationship between Buddhist histories and Pure Land imagery in the Tang period. In short, I believe we should see Shandao not as a standardized doctrinal voice for Pure Land art, but as an active viewer of religious imagery in the 7th century.

Buddhologists, such as Julian Pas, have pointed out that the idea of a Chinese Pure Land "school" that originated in the late 4th century and spread across East Asia was a later invention. Pure Land activity in medieval China should be regarded as a religious cult or movement rather than an institutionalized school. The lineage of Pure Land "patriarchs" was retrospectively constructed by Buddhist historians and used by Hōnen 法然 (1133-1212), the founder of Japanese Pure Land Buddhism in the 12th century. More recently, Robert H. Sharf and Zhiru have argued that rather than an independent social movement, the so-called "Pure land cult" was more of a practice that was always diffuse and mainstream in medieval Chinese Buddhism. In this same light, the majority of Shandao's biographical sources are found in Song (960-1279) sources, which are texts that were specifically written and collated

³ Shi Pingting 1999, 10-16.

to affirm the benefits of Pure Land practices.⁴ Contemporary Tang sources are scarce and are commonly used by Buddhist historians to construct a biographical outline of Shandao's life, without paying close attention to the nature of its textual contexts.

From some contemporary sources and surviving inscriptions, we know that Shandao was born at the end of the Sui dynasty (581-619) in 613 and entered into monastic life at a young age. He studied with Daochuo at Xuanzhong Monastery (*xuanzhong si* 玄中寺) in Bingzhou 並州 and left for Chang'an shortly after Daochuo's death in 645. He had an illustrious career in the capital and as a dhyāna master (*chanshi* 禪師) of the Shiji Monastery (*shiji si* 實際寺), he was involved in the construction of the monumental Vairocana Buddha icon at the Longmen Grottoes, which was directly sponsored by Empress Wu Zetian (624-705) between 672 and 675. He also taught Huaiyun 懷惲 (640-701) for ten years, who later became the abbot of the same Shiji Monastery. Song texts subsequently elaborated details of Shandao's life, emphasizing how he accepted disciples among monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen without discrimination, and how he was passionately devoted to meditation, garnering a large group of followers in the capital for over more than three decades.⁵

⁴ T.2071, 51: 119a25-b13. T.49, 2035: 0276b10-b23.

⁵ T.50, 2060: 0684a11-19. T.51, 2070: 105b24-c08. Anonymous, "He Luo shangdu Longmenshan zhi yang da Lushena xiangkan ji" 河洛上都龍門之陽大盧舍那像龕記, in *Quan Tang wen* 全唐文, ed. Dong Gao 董誥 et al. (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1990) [hereafter *QTW*], 987. 4526c–4527a. Si Zhuang 思庄, "Shiji si gusi zhu Huai Yun fengchi zeng Longchan da fashi beiming (bing xu)" 實際寺故寺主懷惲奉敕贈隆闡大法師碑銘 (并序), in *QTW*, 916. 4227b–4228c. "Tang Ci'en si Shandao chanshi tabei seng Yicheng zhuan Li Fangzheng shu Yonglong er nian jingzhao" 唐慈恩寺善導禪師塔碑僧義成撰李振芳正書永隆二年京兆, in Chen Si 陳思, *Baoke congbian* 寶刻叢編, 20 juan in vol. 682 of *Yingyin wenyuange Siku quanshu* edition 影印文淵閣四庫全書 (Taipei: Taiwan shangwu yinshuguan, 1983) [hereafter, all Siku quanshu editions will be referred to as "SKQS"], 7. 304b. "Tang Ci'en si Shandao chanshi tabei Yonglong er nian" 唐慈恩寺善導禪師塔碑永隆二年, in Chen Si, *Baoke congbian* in vol. 682 of SKQS, 7. 318a. "Tang cien si shandao hesheng ming seng zhi yu bing shu dazhong wunian jingzhao jinshilu" 唐慈恩寺善導和尚塔銘僧志遇撰并書大中五年京兆金石錄, in Chen Si, *Baoke congbian* in vol. 682 of SKQS.

The earliest record of Shandao can be found in Daoxuan's 道宣(596-667) *Continued Biographies of Eminent Monks* (*xugaoshengzhuan* 續高僧傳), with an anecdotal description of Shandao's activities in the capital. He was not given a standalone entry, and the anecdote was part of another monk's biography. Daoxuan's *Biographies* was completed in 645 with later additions included in 665. Perhaps, Shandao had only arrived in Chang'an after the death of Daochuo in 645, and was still establishing himself in the capital. His fame must have been noteworthy for Daoxuan to include him in the 665 additions. Most Buddhist historians have noted the fragmentary nature of this anecdote. However, if we look at the larger context of this entry, we start to see how Shandao and the Pure Land practices he promoted were intimately associated with brightness, light, and fervent piety.

Recently, there is a mountain monk named Shandao, who traveled far and wide to seek the path of the Way. [He] arrived at Xihe and encountered Daochuo, and exclusively practiced chanting the Buddha's name (*nianfo* 念佛) and the good deeds of Amitābha. [He] then entered the capital, and widely spreading this practice. He copied the *Amitābha Sutra* tens of thousands of times. Countless men and women worshiped him. One time he was preaching at the "Monastery of Brightness" (*guangmingsi* 光明寺), someone said to Shandao, "If one chants the name of the Buddha right now, will one be guaranteed rebirth in the Pure Land?" Shandao replied, "If one chants the Buddha, birth is guaranteed." After paying his respect, the person started to continuously chant "Namo-Amitābha (*namo amituofu* 南無阿彌陀佛)" as he exited the "Monastery of Brightness". He climbed on top of a willow tree, held his palms together, and faced towards the west. He then threw himself off [the tree], plummeted to the ground, and died immediately. This incident alarmed the authorities.

近有山僧善導者，周遊寰宇求訪道津，行至西河遇道綽部，惟行念佛彌陀淨。既入京師廣行此化，寫彌陀經數萬卷，士女奉者其數無量。時在光明寺說法。有人告導曰：“今念佛名定生淨土不？”導曰：“念佛定生。”其人禮拜訖，口誦南無阿彌陀佛聲聲相次出光明寺門。上柳樹表，合掌西望，倒投身下，至地遂死。事聞臺省。⁶

Shandao's anecdote was embedded in the monk Huitong's 會通 biographical entry, but the section was in fact dedicated to recent accounts of self-immolation and ritual suicide related

⁶ T.50, 2060: 0684a11-19.

to the *Lotus Sutra* in the Zhenguan period (627-649). Towards the end of the Zhenguan, Huitong built a grotto for himself with firewood in the Zhongnan Mountains. He reverently chanted the *Lotus Sutra* and lit his grotto on fire. A bright white light from the southwest poured into the flames, and his body was burnt into ashes in the morning. In 627, two nun sisters set up a high platform in Jinzhou and wrapped their bodies with waxed cloth. Whilst chanting the *Lotus Sutra* they set themselves on fire and burned like two bright torches through the night. In the morning, their bodies incinerated into ashes, but their tongues remained. Another young man from Bingzhou secretly planned to burn himself after reading the *Lotus Sutra*. When many came to rescue him, they realized that he was already dead in the flames. Such accounts are commonly associated with the zealous piety evoked by readers of the *Lotus Sutra*.⁷ In the sutra, bodhisattva Medicine King (Chinese: *yaowang* 藥王, Sankrit: Bhaisajjaraja) heroically made offerings by burning his body after hearing the *Lotus Sutra*. Carefully inducing fragrances, he anointed his body and wrapped himself with oil-soaked cloth. As an offering at the highest level, his body burned brightly for one thousand and two hundred years. This inspired passionate Buddhists in medieval China to imitate the Medicine King's auto-cremation, making their bodies into gifts for the Buddha. Here, another question remains unsolved. In this passage dedicated to self-immolation and the *Lotus Sutra*, why include a tale on someone's suicidal plunge from a willow tree in hope for rebirth in the Pure Land?

One of the major benefits of hearing the chapter on the Medicine King in the *Lotus Sutra* was guaranteed rebirth in Amitābha's Western Pure Land.⁸ The *Lotus Sutra* states that

⁷ James A. Benn, "The Lotus Sutra and Self-immolation," in *Readings of the Lotus Sutra*, eds. Stephen F. Teiser and Jacqueline I. Stone, (Columbia University Press, New York, 2009), 107-131

⁸ “若如來滅後後五百歲中，若有女人聞是經典，如說修行。於此命終，即往安樂世界，阿彌陀佛、大菩薩眾，圍繞住處，生蓮華中，寶座之上，不復為貪欲所惱，亦復不為瞋恚愚癡所惱，亦復不為憍慢嫉妬諸垢所惱，得菩薩神通、無生法忍”；T.9, 0262: 0054b29-c05.

those who come across this section in the sutra would also be able to arrive in the Pure Land and enjoy all of its heavenly benefits. We could perhaps say that such passionate acts of self-immolation after reading the *Lotus Sutra* were, at the same time, led by an obsessive yearning for the Western Pure Land, which explains the strange inclusion of a religious suicide related to the teachings of Shandao.

Another important factor is the repeated emphasis on light and brightness in all of these accounts. Huitong's transformation came with supernatural white light that poured in the flames, and the bodies of the nuns blazed like torches. Those that tried to rescue the secretive young man ended up adding more firewood to the flames after discovering that he was already dead, transforming the self-sacrifice immediately into a ritual cremation. A pyromaniacal impulse and obsession with light runs through these anecdotes. Shandao's anecdote also took place at a specific place –the “Monastery of Brightness” in the Huaiyuan Ward 懷遠坊 of the capital (Fig.1-1). The monastery was founded in 584 during the Sui dynasty, and when Emperor Wen 隋文帝 (541 – 604) bestowed some wax candles to the temple, they miraculously started to burn by themselves. The emperor gave the temple its name after this anomaly. By the 9th century, the monastery continued to be associated with light and eventually was destroyed by fire. The only object that survived was a Maitreya icon that was later moved into Anguo Monastery (*anguo si* 安國寺). The icon also had a reputation of frequently emitting light when it was still enshrined in the “Monastery of Brightness”.⁹

⁹ “又改本住雲居。以為栖巖寺。勅大樂令齊樹提。造中朝山佛曲。見傳供養。延安其寺宇結眾成業。勅齋蠟燭。未及將爇而自然發焰。延奇之。以事聞帝。因改住寺可為光明也。延曰。弘化須廣。未可自專以額。重奏別立一所。帝然之。今光明寺是也”；T.50,2060: 489a14-a20. “隋開皇四年，文帝為沙門法經所立。時有延興寺僧曇延，因隋文賜以蠟燭，自然發焰，隋文奇之，將改所住寺為光明寺。” Xu Song 徐松, *Tang liangjing chengfang kao* 唐兩京城坊考, ed. Zhang Mu 張穆 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1985), 4. 118–119. “殿，開元初玄宗拆寢室施之。當陽彌勒像，法空自光明寺移來。未建都時，此像在村蘭若中，往往放光，因號光明寺。寺在

In effect, Shandao was preaching about the “Buddha of Infinite Light” that governed a radiant paradise, in the “Monastery of Brightness” where objects tend to self-immolate, and the zeal of attaining rebirth in this Pure Land caused both members of the clergy and laymen to burn themselves like blazing torches. If we simply read this passage through a historicist lens, then we would only arrive at separate source material for practices related to the *Lotus Sutra* and Shandao’s fragmented biography.¹⁰ On the contrary, the burning of bodies like candles and longing for paradise show that the passage was more likely Daoxuan’s commentary on brightness, self-annihilation, and intense Buddhist piety. Religious fervor was much in the air during the decades of Daoxuan’s writing in the mid-7th century, when Shandao was establishing himself in the city. The celebrated monk Xuanzang 玄奘 (602-664) had triumphantly returned to the capital in 645 with a royal reception after traveling in Central Asia and India for fourteen years. He brought back numerous sutras and images from India, and the court sponsored comprehensive translation projects of the newly retrieved scriptures. At the same time, the famous Buddha finger bone relic from Famen Monastery (*famen si* 法門寺) was discovered in 631 and it was brought into the imperial palace in 660. The relic frequently emitted all types of colors and light, and the public spectacle caused thousands to flock to the streets.¹¹ In other words, Shandao was actively participating in this

懷遠坊，後為延火所燒，唯像獨存。” Duan Chengshi 段成式, *Youyang zazu jiaojian* 酉陽雜俎校箋, ed. Xu Yimin 許逸民 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2015), v. 4, 5. 1776.

¹⁰ Dudbridge’s concept of the “inner and outer stories” in accounts of the supernatural in Tang literature allowed scholars to regard these texts as crucial sources for our study of religious experience. See Glen Dudbridge, “Tang Sources for the Study of Religious Culture: Problems and Procedures”, in *Books, Tales and Vernacular Culture: Selected Papers on China*, (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 97-112. Glen Dudbridge, *Religious Experience and Lay Society in the Tang Chang: A Reading of Tai Fu’s Kuang-I chi* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 14.

¹¹ Eugene Y. Wang, “Of the True Body: The Buddha’s Relics and Corporeal Transformation in Sui-Tang China,” in *Body and Face in Chinese Visual Culture*, Wu Hung and Katherine Mino, eds. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 79-111. Robert H. Sharf, “The Buddha’s Finger Bones at Famen and the Art of Chinese Esoteric Buddhism.” *The Art Bulletin* 93, no. 1 (2011): 38-

public frenzy for Buddhist miracles and promised paradises – he must have been particularly good at fanning the flames.

Extraordinary light is often associated with Buddhist miracles, but the Pure Land connection with luminescence appears to be particularly pertinent in our case. In this atmosphere of incandescent piety, Shandao's reputation and the type of practices that he promoted were brightly burning through the capital. It is perhaps because of this episode at the "Monastery of Brightness" that Shandao was later given the name "Monk of Brightness" (*guangming heshang* 光明和尚) in Japan. This conception of brightness that is inherently connected to Shandao is crucial for us to understand Pure Land imagery. As we shall see in Chapter Three, the Pure Land transformation tableau aspired for a capacity to achieve effects of blinding light. Painters were particularly interested in the power of their craft and the limits of visibility in religious painting. Iridescent and glowing, Pure Land images were powerful paintings that had a profound effect on their viewers. In the history of Pure Land art, Shandao was known as an executor of Pure Land tableaux and many art historians have studied Pure Land imagery through Shandao's writings. However, a closer look at his biography shows a different picture. It was not Shandao, the doctrinal specialist that dictated how to produce Pure Land tableaux; on the contrary, it was Shandao the viewer that was taken in by a robust visual culture of Amitābha's Pure Land.

The second earliest biography of Shandao comes from *Accounts of Auspicious Responses of Those Who Were Reborn in the Western Pure Land* 往生西方淨土瑞應傳.¹²

The text is attributed to Wenshen 文諗 and Shaokang 少康 (?-805), and was possibly written

59. Tansen Sen. *Buddhism, Diplomacy, and Trade: The Realignment of Sino-Indian Relations, 600-1400* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003), 68-79.

¹² T51.2070.

between the 9-10th century. The passage here serves as a basis of all later accounts of Shandao's biography, and art historians have been particularly interested in a single detail from this passage that tells of Shandao creating two hundred Pure Land transformation tableaux. They believe that the Tang Pure Land tableau was closely related to his elaborate commentary on the *Meditation Sutra* and his treatises on the Pure Land rituals. However, if we read the entire entry, the biography carefully charts out the arch of Shandao's spiritual progression, which is played out against his strong relationship with religious imagery.

In the Tang dynasty, there was a dhyāna master named Shandao, whose surname was Zhu. He was a native of Sizhou and joined monastic life at a young age. Once [Shandao] saw a *Western Pure Land tableau* and with a sigh he said, "What is more deserving than to present oneself in front of the lotus-throne and rest one's spirit in the Land of Purity!" Thereupon he took all the precepts and together with the vinaya master Miaokai he studied the *Mediation Sutra*. Joyfully he remarked, "Pursuing other practices will lead you astray and it would be hard to achieve [enlightenment], only this practice of meditation (*guanmen* 觀門) would guarantee transcendence beyond life and death." After this, he went to the dhyāna master Daochuo and asked, "Is it true that one could be reborn [in the Pure Land] by practicing mindfulness of the Buddha (*nianfo* 念佛)?" The master replied, "Take a lotus flower, and practice the ritual for seven days. If the flower does not wilt, then rebirth is successful." After this, [Shandao] went to the dharma master Ying in the Eastern Capital who preached the *Avatamsaka Sūtra* for forty times. Shandao entered into the dhyāna master Daochuo's ritual precinct (*daochang* 道場), and sojourned in [the Pure Land] during samādhi. He sighed and said, "I regret that I have labored over textual commentaries in vain for so many years. Had one known the wonders of practicing the mindfulness of the Buddha!" The dhyāna master [Daochuo] replied, "The sutras are true and the Buddha does speak of falsehoods." During his lifetime the dhyāna master [Shandao] frequently enjoyed begging for food, and he would often feel guilt, saying, "Even Shakyamuni Buddha begged for alms. Who am I to sit still and receive offerings?" He passed things on to the śrāmaṇera and did not receive any gifts. He copied the *Amitābha Sutra* for ten thousand times and painted two hundred Pure Land tableaux. Whenever he saw a temple he would always repair it. Since Buddhism has traveled east, no one has been as celebrated as this dhyāna master.

13

唐朝善導禪師姓朱，泗州人也。少出家，時見西方變相嘆曰：“何當託質蓮臺棲神淨土？”及受具戒，妙開律師共看觀經，喜交嘆乃曰：“修餘行業迥僻難成，唯此觀門定超生死。”遂至綽禪師所問曰：“念佛實得往生否？”師曰：“各辯一蓮花，行道七日，不萎者即得往生。”又東都英法師講華嚴經四

¹³ T.2070, 51: 105, b24-c08. English translation see Pas, 82-83, with variations.

十遍，入綽禪師道場，遊三昧而嘆曰：“自恨多年空尋文疏勞身心耳。何期念佛不可思議。”禪師曰：“經有誠言，佛豈妄語。”禪師平生常樂乞食，每自責曰：“釋迦尚乃分衛，善導何人端居索供。”乃至沙彌，並不受禮。寫彌陀經十萬卷，畫淨土變相二百鋪，所見塔廟無不修葺。佛法東行，未有禪師之盛矣。

In this biography, Shandao's career is bookended by his engagement with images. Shandao entered the monastery at a young age, and immediately received the precepts after seeing a Pure Land tableau. He then started to read the *Meditation Sutra* and studied with Daochuo the practice of the “mindfulness of the Buddha”. As noted before, “mindfulness of the Buddha” or *nianfo*, which later exclusively meant the chanting of Amitābha's name initially included both verbal chanting and also the envisioning on the body and realm of Amitābha.

Successfully mastering *nianfo*, Shandao is able to roam the Pure Land during *samadhi* (a type of mental absorption during meditation) – in which he sees and experiences the heavenly realm that he once saw in a Pure Land tableau during his youth. He remarks upon how he had studied Buddhist commentaries and texts in vain, until he mastered the “mindfulness of the Buddha”. He copied the *Amitābha Sutra* extensively and created hundreds of Pure Land tableaux. In other words, Shandao moves from seeing a Pure Land tableau, to the reading of texts on the Pure Land, practicing *nianfo* as ritual, achieving *samādhi* experiences of the Pure Land, and creating more texts and images of the Pure Land on his own.

It is not difficult to see how Shandao came to be understood as an instrumental figure behind the proliferation of Pure Land transformation tableaux. However, as most art historians have credited Shandao with the spread of Pure Land images, they have also, as we shall see later in this chapter, created an interpretive framework that has been dominated by Shandao's writings. Rather, as this passage shows, Shandao's biography itself betrays how he was, from the very beginning, deeply moved by a strong visual culture of the Western Pure Land that had come into being before and during his lifetime —he was, by all means,

“enchanted” by an image.¹⁴ By eventually creating hundreds of Pure Land tableau, Shandao comes full circle with his youthful experience. Pure Land practices have always been closely tied to images, in which both image-making and viewing feed into important aspects of Buddhist soteriology. Shandao was a monk who truly understood the significance of images, and vigorously made use of them, successfully drawing the attention of the urban population and also the imperial court. It is not a surprise, therefore, that he was involved in the construction of the monumental icon of Vairocana Buddha at Longmen. The direct sponsor of the project, Empress Wu Zetian, was known for her political wit and clever use of imperial representation.¹⁵

We should see Shandao not as a religious authority who dictated what Pure Land tableaux should look like, but someone who was deeply affected by and keenly aware of the “power of images.”¹⁶ Like the radiant paradise that such images set out to depict, Pure Land tableaux were vibrant, mesmerizing, and seductive. They could be found on countless Buddhist temple walls in the capital and across the Tang Empire. Buddhist monasteries became increasingly public spaces in the city, and celebrated painters often painted murals for the public to admire.¹⁷ The urban elite would commission embroidered Pure Land tableaux for recently deceased family members and invite celebrated poets to write elaborate

¹⁴ Alfred Gell, “The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology,” in *Anthropology, Art, and Aesthetics*, ed. Jeremy Coote (Clarendon Press, 1994), 40-63

¹⁵ For studies on We Zetian and political representation, see Antonino Forte, *Mingtang and Buddhist Utopias in the History of the Astronomical Clock: the Tower, Statue, and Armillary Sphere constructed by Empress Wu* (Roma: Istituto italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1988), 229-239. Rothschild, 191-226.

¹⁶ See, David. Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), xxii - xxiv

¹⁷ Rong Xinjiang 榮新江, “*Cong wangzhai dao siguan: tangdai chang’an gonggong kongjian de kuoda yu shehui bianqian* 從王宅到寺觀：唐代長安公共空間的擴大與社會變遷,” in *Suiting chang’an: xingbie, jiyi ji qita* 隋唐長安：性別，記憶及其他 (Beijing: sanlian chubanshe, 2009), 68-88.

encomiums on them. They were visual proof for the existence of Amitābha's "Land of Bliss"—looking at a tableau and making a tableau brings one closer to paradise. If Shandao committed himself wholeheartedly to Pure Land practices after a single glance of a tableau, could the self-immolating monk and nuns, burning like torches in Daoxuan's records, also have succumbed to the seductive force of the gleaming Pure Land tableau?

As we have revisited the figure of Shandao as a monk deeply affected by the power of images, important art historical questions remain: What kind of image did Shandao see? What type of image did Shandao make? What gave them such a seductive force? Modern art historians have quickly pointed out the remarkable sense of pictorial space in the Pure Land tableau, and this has received great attention from many formalist scholars in the 20th century. A pre-history of the Tang Pure Land tableau is essentially a history of Chinese pictorial space. Since the destruction of the Tang capital, we can no longer witness the marvelous temple murals in Chang'an, but Pure Land art has survived at several archeological sites across China, especially at the Longmen grottoes close to the Eastern Capital Luoyang, rock-cut cave sites in southwest China, and Dunhuang caves to the northwest. There have been many theories for the origins of the Pure Land tableau, and in the following section, we will review some possible candidates and analyze a few hypotheses based on Pure Land images since the 5th century.

1.2 In Search of the Tang Pure Land Tableau

When speaking of the history of Pure Land imagery, we commonly trace the "development and formation" of the Western Pure Land transformation tableau to summarize the variety of

images related to the Western Paradise.¹⁸ Rather than thinking of a holistic narrative that will place these divergent images into the same category, we should think of them as interconnected image systems with strong internal logics.¹⁹ During Shandao's lifetime, icons of Amitābha and paintings of his divine realm circulated throughout medieval China. There was also an important miraculous image (*ruixiang* 瑞像) that featured Amitābha and his entourage on lotus vines. *Ruixiang* were a special category of religious images that had extraordinary origins or supernatural powers. And finally, there are images representing Amitābha's realm that scholars have generally treated as proto-Pure Land tableaux.

The earliest textual record of an Amitābha icon is dated to 402. The monk Huiyuan of Mt. Lu 廬山慧遠(334-416) and one hundred and twenty-three Buddhist followers vowed to be reborn in the Western Pure Land in front of an Amitābha icon on Mount Lu. The gathering marked the founding the White Lotus society (*bailianshe* 白蓮社), and historians traditionally claim that the event established of the Pure Land cult, with Huiyuan as the first patriarch of the so-called "Pure Land School". Beyond this textual reference, the earliest surviving image of Amitābha is found in Cave 169 at Binglingsi 炳靈寺 in current day Gansu Province (Fig.1-2). Dated to 420, the image is composed of two bodhisattvas flanking a seated Buddha on a pond of water. The earliest images of Amitābha in Dunhuang appear in "Preaching Scenes"(*shuofatu* 說法圖) found in a Northern Wei (368-534) Cave 251, and the north side of the east wall in Cave 285 (dated to 538-39) (Fig.1-3).²⁰

¹⁸ Tsukamoto Zenryu 塚本善隆, "Jingtubinshi gaishuo 淨土變史概說," trans. Li Dachuan 李大川, *Dunhuang Research* 101 (no.1 2007): 107-113. Wang Huimin, "Xifang jingtubian xingshi de xingcheng guocheng he wancheng shijian," 76-85. Jin Weinuo 金維諾, "xifang jingtubian de cingcheng yu fazhan 西方淨土變的形成與發展," *Fojiao wenhua* 佛教文化, no.2 (1992), 32.

¹⁹ Eugene Y. Wang, "Pure Land Art," 693.

²⁰ Shi Pingting 1999, 10-16.

Beyond icons and preaching scenes, there is the “Amitābha and Fifty Bodhisattvas Miraculous Image” (*amituo yu wushi pusa ruixiang* 阿彌陀與五十菩薩瑞像) (Fig.1-4).²¹ According to Daoxuan, the image descended to the human world upon the request of a bodhisattva from Amitābha Buddha. Emperor Ming of the Han dynasty 漢明帝 (28-75) dreamed of this image and dispatched his envoy to India. The image resurfaced during the first year of the Sui dynasty in 581. Since then, the image began to flourish in the capital of Chang’an. This image appears in Dunhuang three times, in Caves 171, 332 and 23, but can also found at several locations in Sichuan and Longmen dated to the 7-8th century. Several Japanese scholars believe that the Pure Land mural featuring Amitābha in the Golden Hall of Hōryūji 法隆寺 is a version of this iconography(Fig.1-5).²² Amy McNair argues that carving such miraculous images in stone in imperial caves at Longmen can be seen as ways of preserving the Dharma during the pervasive apocalyptic anxiety in the 7th century.²³

As for the Pure Land transformation tableau, we mostly start to trace its origins from four Sichuan steles from Wanfo Monastery (*wanfosi* 萬佛寺) that date to the 5-6th century. Images with converging perspective are carved on the back of Buddhist stone sculptures in

²¹ Sometimes Amitābha is accompanied by Avalokiteśvara and Mahāsthāmaprāpta, which makes the iconography into “Amitābha and Fifty-two bodhisattvas”. See Wang Huimin 王惠民, “*Yifo wushi pusa tuyuan kao* 一佛五十菩薩圖源考,” in *Maijishan shiku yishu wenhua lunwenji* 麥積山石窟藝術文化論文集, eds. Zheng Binling 鄭炳林 and Hua Pingning 花平寧 (Lanzhou: Lanzhou University Press, 2004), 529-46. Hu Wenhe 胡文和, *Sichuan daojiao fojiao shiku yishu* 四川道教佛教石窟藝術, (Sichuan renmin chubanshe, 1994), 246. Zhang Tongbiao 張同標, “*Amituofu sanzun wushi pusa xiang yuanliu kao* 阿彌陀佛三尊五十菩薩像源流考,” *Yishu Kaogu* 藝術考古[Ethnic Arts Quarterly], no.3 (2012):98-105.

²² Matsumoto Eiichi, 1-59. Katsuki Genyijoro 勝木言一郎, “*Chūgoku ni okeru amidasanzon goju bosatsuzu no zuzō ni tsuite* 中国における阿彌陀三尊 五十菩薩図の図像について,” *Bukkyo geijutsu* 仏教芸術 214 (1994): 61-73.

²³ Amy McNair, *Donors of Longmen: Faith, Politics and Patronage in Medieval Chinese Buddhist Sculpture*, (University of Hawai’i Press, 2007), 89-110. *Zhongguoshiku: longmen shiku* 中國石窟: 龍門石窟, eds. Longmen wenwu baoguan suo 龍門文物保管所 and Beijing daxue 北京大學 (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1991) 257-260.

low relief (Fig.1-6). Similar compositions with converging perspective can be found in a Western Wei (535-557) mural of the Western Pure Land in Cave 127 at Majijishan 麥積山石窟 (Fig.1-7). The most famous of such images are the relief panels from Caves 1 and 2 of Southern Xiangtangshan Caves 響堂山石窟 of the Northern Qi (550-557) period, dated to 565 (Fig.1-8). The earliest image that scholars believe to be a proto-Pure Land transformation tableau at Dunhuang appears in a Sui Dynasty (581 -618) Cave 393 (Fig.1-9, 1-10). The mural is set on the main wall of a small cave, featuring Amitābha Buddha and two bodhisattvas in a lotus pond. The pond is surrounded by trees, and in the distance there are four additional images of Buddha triads in smaller sizes, giving the mural the illusion of receding pictorial space.²⁴

In his biography, it was a Pure Land transformation tableau that caused Shandao to yearn for rebirth in Amitābha's Paradise. It was perhaps their ability to portray space that fascinated the monk, and in a similar way, a strong interest in pictorial space runs through all the modern art historical studies of Pure Land transformation tableaux. The invention of "convergent perspective" has been taken as a revolution in pictorial space in China. More specifically, scholars have marked the 7th century as a watershed moment in Chinese art, precisely because of the emergence of the Pure Land tableau and its advanced capacity to

²⁴ Another significant site is the Xiaonanzhai Cave 小南海石窟 near Anyang, dated to the late 6th century. The small cave is associated with meditation practices and contains the earliest images of the Nine Grades of Rebirth (*jiupinwangsheng* 九品往生), which is specifically featured in the *Meditation Sutra*. See Sunkyung Kim, "Decline of the Law, Death of the Monk: Buddhist Texts and Images in the Anyang Caves of Late Sixth-Century China" (PhD. diss., Duke University, 2005). Henensheng gudai jianzhu baohu yanjiu suo 河南省古代建築保護研究所, "Henan Anyang Lingquangsi shiku ji Xiaonanzhai shi ku 河南安陽靈泉寺石窟及小南海石窟," *Wenwu* 文物, no.4 (1988):1-14, 20. Yen Chuan-ying 顏娟英, "Beiqi changuan ku de tuxiang kao – cong xiaonanzhai dao xiangtangshan shiku 北齊禪觀窟的圖像考——從小南海石窟到響堂山石窟," in *Jinghua shuiyue: zhongguo gudai meishu kaogu yu fojiao yishu de tantao* 鏡花水月: 中國古代美術考古與佛教藝術的探討 (Taipei Shi : Shi tou chuban gufen youxian gongsi, 2016), 261-320. Katsuki Genichirō 勝木言一郎, "shōnankai sekkutsu chūkutsuno sambutsu zōzō to kuhun ōjō huchō ni kansuru ikkosatsu 小南海石窟中窟の三仏造像と九品往生図浮彫に関する一考察", *Bijutsushi* 美術史 45, no.1 (February, 1996), 68-86.

represent space. It was in the 7th century that large full wall compositions of the Pure Land started to appear at Dunhuang.

This type of architecturally framed pictorial space was of much interest for Ludwig F. Bachhofer, a student of Heinrich Wölfflin, who was one of the first art historians to employ formalist analysis to Asian art. Writing in the 1930-40s, he was also particularly interested in exploring Erwin Panofsky's study of perspective in his own analysis of the development of pictorial space in Chinese painting.²⁵ For Bachhofer, the Tang Pure Land tableau was the solution to the problem of pictorial space in Chinese art. Following Bachhofer, in his 1948 seminal essay "Life-Motion and the Sense of Space in Early Chinese Representational Art", Alexander C. Soper also positions the Tang Pure Land tableau as the ending point for the development of pictorial space in medieval China, comparing the artistic transition from the Han dynasty to the Tang, to the move in Greek art from the archaic to the Hellenistic.²⁶ However, in the following decades, scholars who have mostly focused on the origins of landscape painting and pictorial space have largely neglected this topic.²⁷

²⁵ Ludwig F. Bachhofer "Die Raumdarstellung in der Chinesischen Malerei des ersten Jahrtausends n.Chr.," 193-242. Ludwig F. Bachhofer, *A Short History of Chinese Art* (New York: Pantheon, 1946), 98-99. Lillian Tseng, "Traditional Chinese Painting through the Modern European Eye: the Case of Ludwig Bachhofer (1894-1976)," in *Tradition and Modernity: Comparative Perspective*, ed. Kang-i Sun Chang and MENG Hua (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2007), 508-533.

²⁶ "T'ang representation, in contrast, has learned not only how to give the illusion of swelling mass by line alone, but has achieved a complimentary control of space as well. The grand Paradises of Tunhuang, with their great numbers of figures and their sumptuous settings of palaces, terraces, and pools, are set out in plane behind plane and unified by a centralized perspective as effectively as a neo-classic opera staged by Schinkel." Alexander C. Soper, "Life-Motion and the Sense of Space in Early Chinese Representational Art," *The Art Bulletin* 30, no. 3 (Sep., 1948): 167-186. Alexander C. Soper, "Early Chinese Landscape Painting," *The Art Bulletin* 23, no. 2 (Jun., 1941): 141-164.

²⁷ Studies of pictorial space have been mostly focused on landscape painting, the dominant form of scholarly painting since the Song dynasty. See Michael Sullivan, *The Birth of Landscape Painting in China* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1962). Michael Sullivan, *Chinese Landscape Painting, vol 2 The Sui and Tang dynasties*, (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1980). Wen Fong and Princeton University Art Museum, *Images of the Mind: Selections From the Edward L. Elliott Family and John B. Elliott Collections of Chinese Calligraphy and Painting At the Art Museum*, (Princeton University. Princeton, N.J.: Art Museum, Princeton University in association with Princeton University Press, 1984), 20-50. Wen Fong, "Towards a Structural Analysis of Chinese Landscape Painting," *Art Journal* 28, no.4 (Summer, 1969): 388-397 Wen Fong's idea of a "structural

More recently, there are two intersecting hypotheses on the making of the Western Pure Land transformation tableau: 1) expanded pictorial space in preaching scenes of the Buddha, or 2) the conceptual blending between the indigenous idea of paradise or the realm of immortality and the introduction of the Buddhist *sukhāvātī*.²⁸ The first view is based on formalist studies of Dunhuang murals, which uses motifs, styles, and textual sources to establish a teleological narrative for the evolution of Pure Land images. The former view starts with Duan Wenjie brief assumption that Pure Land tableaux originated from preaching scenes and gradually became more elaborate.²⁹ Duan Wenjie claims that lotus and pond elements around Buddha assemblies may serve as a type of “proto-Western Pure Land tableau” in the Western Wei (535-556) (Fig.1-11).³⁰ This emphasis on the process of rebirth within a lotus bud was a special feature in Chinese Western Paradise art according to the assumptions of several Japanese scholars, such as the earlier Matsumoto Eiichi and Nakamura Koji.³¹ In a slightly different light, Higashiyama Kengo locates the core of

analysis” is closely related by Erwin Panofsky’s 1927 essay “Perspective as Symbolic Form”, for English translation, see Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, Christopher Wood trans, (The MIT Press, 1996).

²⁸ Ning Qiang, “*Cong ousiang chongbai dao guanxiang tianguo – lun xifang jingtu bianxiang zhi xingcheng* 從“偶像崇拜”到“觀想天國”—論西方淨土變相之形成, in *Duan Wenjie dunhuang yanjiu wushinian jinian wenji* 段文傑敦煌研究五十年紀念文集 (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1996), 146-149. Higashiyama Kengo 東山健吾, “*Dunhuang mogaoku shuxia shuofatu xingshi de wailai yingxiang jiqi bianxian* 敦煌莫高窟樹下說法圖形式的外來影響及其變遷”, *Dunhuang Studies*, no.1(1991): 48-56. Wu Hung and Ning Qiang, 54-67. Dorothy Wong, “Four Sichuan Buddhist Steles and the Beginnings of Pure Land Imagery in China,” *Archives of Asian Art* 51 (1998/1999): 56-79. Wang Huimin 王惠民. “*Xifang jingtubian xingshi de xingcheng guocheng he wancheng shijian*,” 76-85,

²⁹ Duan Wenjie 段文傑, “*Zaoqi mogaoku yishu* 早期莫高窟藝術,” *Zhongguo shiku: dunhuang mogaoku di yi juan* 中國石窟：敦煌莫高窟第一卷, edited by dunhuang wenwu yanjiusuo 敦煌文物研究所編著 (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1987), 177.

³⁰ Wang Huimin 王惠民. “*Dunhuang xifang jingtu xinyang ziliao yu jingtu tuxiangyanjiushi*,”14.

³¹ Matsumoto Eiichi, 1-59. Nakamura Koji 中村興二, “*Riben de jingtu bianxiang yu dunhuang* 日本的淨土變相與敦煌,” in *Zhongguoshiku: mogaoku di san juan* 中國石窟：敦煌莫高窟 第3卷, (Wenwu chubanshe,1987), 210 – 221.

Western Pure Land tableau in the Buddha triad composition rather than the lotus pond motifs. He connects images of the “Buddha Preaching Under Trees”(shuxia shuofatu 樹下說法圖) with prototypes in Gandharan Buddhist art, which gradually evolves into the mature 7th century Pure Land tableau that contain palatial complexes. Unlike formalistically oriented scholars, Wang Huimin’s comprehensive survey of Pure Land imagery (also containing the Pure Land of Bhaisajyaguru, and that of Maitreya) is founded upon intensive iconographical studies of Pure Land sutras, commentaries, and hagiographic writings. Instead of using visual motifs to identify Pure Land scenes, he locates elements within the three Pure Land sutras that *could be* illustrated and creates several criteria for identifying Western Pure Land scenes, acknowledging the possibility of having images based on multiple sutra texts.

The second group blends the boundaries between non-Buddhist and Buddhist art, and links images to ideological shifts or historical events based in specific localities. The idea of “pure land-as-space” was enriched by Ning Qiang and Wu Hung, as they trace the conceptual intermingling between pre-Buddhist heaven images in China and that of the Western Pure Land. Wu Hung has argued that the first Buddhist images in China were initially conflated with auspicious images of immortality, such as the indigenous Queen Mother of the West (Fig.1-12). Ning Qiang suggests that there was a conceptual shift from the emphasis on the Amitābha Buddha as the focus of worship to the entire Pure Land itself.³² We can trace a change in the terminology used for the Chinese translations of *sukhāvātī* from the earlier phonetic translation of *xumoti* 須摩提 to the later semantic translation of “Land of Bliss” (*jile* 極樂) in the 7th century. This links non-Buddhist images of heaven to early images of the

³² Ning Qiang 1996, p. 146.

Buddhist *sukhāvātī*.³³ Incorporating visual structures beyond Buddhist art, they examine compositions in which an iconic figure presiding over a palatial architecture can be seen as a source for Pure Land imagery, such as 2nd century money tree bases or soul jars with images of the Queen Mother of the West in her paradise with gate-towers (*que 闕*).³⁴

Dorothy Wong's study of four Sichuan steles creates a historically grounded interpretation of early representations of the Pure Land. Analyzing four steles from Sichuan with images of Amitābha, Maitreya, and their respective pure lands, Wong not only demonstrates the close affiliation between the two cults, but also anchors the new visual significance of such images in regional environments. Studying relief carvings on the back of two mid-6 to 7th century stelae, Wong divides the composition into two realms: the spiritual and mundane (Fig. 1-7). The upper part created in convergent perspective indicates the pure land, while the lower part of overlapping mountain ridges represents the worldly realm, which is "full of dangers and temptations but at the same time the locus of a program of religious practice and worship leading to rebirth in the Pure Land depicted above."³⁵ She interprets this pictorial arrangement as "visual conceptions of the new Mahāyāna worldview" that can be closely associated with the Huiyuan lineage, which promoted "Perfection of Wisdom" teaching (Chinese: *banre boluomiduo* 般若波罗蜜多, Sanskrit: *Prajñāparamitā*), the bodhisattva doctrine, *dhyāna* practice, and devotional Buddhism.

³³ Wu Hung, "Buddhist Elements in Early Chinese Art (2nd and 3rd Centuries A.D.)," *Artibus Asiae* 47, no. 3/4 (1986): 263-303+305-352. Wu Hung, *Monumentality in Early Chinese Art and Architecture*, (Stanford University Press 1996), 136-142

³⁴ Wu Hung and Ning Qiang, 63-66. For studies of *hunping*, also see Stanley Abe, *Ordinary Images* (University of Chicago Press 2002), 11-101.

³⁵ Dorothy Wong, *Chinese Steles: Pre-Buddhist and Buddhist Use of A Symbolic Form* (University of Hawai'i Press: Honolulu, 1994), 156. Dorothy Wong, "Four Sichuan Buddhist Steles and the Beginnings of Pure Land Imagery in China," *Archives of Asian Art* 51 (1998/1999): 56-79.

More importantly, this lineage can be directly traced to Sichuan in the 6th century. Wong compares the stele reliefs with earlier Han dynasty (25-220) and Western Jin (265-316) tile images from the same region and conducts a more detailed analysis of pictorial space. The use of space-cells and overlapping in the lower part of the steles with mountain scenes can be traced to pictorial tiles from Sichuan, whereas the traditional Chinese method of using parallel orthogonal perspective is revolutionized by the steles' employment of convergent perspective. Wong compares this method with early Pure Land images at Maijishan and Xiangtangshan and claims that there were multiple methods at work in representing the Pure Land all across China, and the mature Tang Pure Land tableau found in Dunhuang is a result of such interacting trends.

Nonetheless, in our search for the “Tang Pure Land tableau”, there are still several aspects that remain problematic: Firstly, scholars tend to draw upon different examples to represent the definitive “Tang Western Pure Land tableau”. Dorothy Wong chose a mid-8th century Cave 320 (Fig.1-13) and Cave 148 dated to 776 (Fig.1-14).³⁶ Wu Hung uses the mid-8th century Cave 172, because it contains two Pure Land transformation tableaux on the north and south walls (Fig.1-15).³⁷ Similarly, Cave 171 has also been perceived as the epitome of Pure Land art, with three Pure Land transformation tableaux in a single cave.³⁸ On the other hand, the early 8th century Cave 217 has the first Pure Land transformation tableau that contains images of the Ajatasatru Narrative and Sixteen Meditations in the same composition

³⁶ Wu Hung and Ning Qiang, 62-64. Wong 2004, 160-161.

³⁷ Wu Hung, “Reborn in Paradise: A Case study of Dunhuang Sutra Painting and its Religious, Ritual and Artistic Context,” *Orientalism* 23, no.5 (May 1992): 52-60.

³⁸ Wang Zhi 王治, “Kongjian biaoda yu yuyi – yi dunhuang xifang jingtu bian jiegou yanjiu wei zhongxin 空间表达与寓意——以敦煌西方净土变结构研究为中心,” (PhD diss., Central Academy of Fine Arts, 2011), 97-98. Wang Zhi 王治, “Changlu zhaoyao wangshengbian – dunhuang mogaoku tangdai xifang jingtu bian jiegou jiexi 长路遥遥往生便—敦煌莫高窟唐代西方净土变结构解析,” in *Art Research* 美术研究 (January 2013): 68-74. Shi Pingting 2002, 123-124.

(Fig.1-16).³⁹ The Pure Land tableaux mentioned above share several similarities, such as illusionism, grandeur, and mastery in painting technique. However, in this teleological narrative of “proto-to-mature” Pure Land tableaux, the definition of a “Tang Pure Land tableaux” remains ambiguous and the selection of a handful of masterworks during the 7-8th century has left most examples of such imagery at Dunhuang understudied.

Secondly, a traditional Sino-centric view has limited our attention to East Asia, and we have not considered the rich connection between Dunhuang imagery and Central Asian art throughout its history. Early on, Ludwig F. Bachhofer had suggested that the composition of a frontal main deity with a surrounding entourage came from Kuchean painting. Miyaji Akira and Yamabe Nobuyoshi have also discovered several images related to the *Meditation Sutra* in Toyok Turfan (Fig.1-17).⁴⁰ Many scholars suspect that the *Meditation Sutra* itself, which does not have a Sanskrit counterpart, was initially composed and compiled in Central Asia.

Thirdly, the spatial and material environments of Western Pure Land paintings have largely been neglected. Early images of Amitābha tend to be in the painted medium or relief,

³⁹ Wang Huimin, “*Xifang jingtubian xingshi de xingcheng guocheng he wancheng shijian*,” 85.

⁴⁰ Miyaji Akira 宮治昭, “*Turufan, Toyoku sekkutsu no zenkankutsu hekgani tsuite: Jōdozu, Jōdo kansōzu, fujō kansōzu*, part 1 トゥルファン・トヨク石窟の禅観窟壁画について -- 浄土図・浄土観想図・不浄観想図 (上),” *Bukkyō geijutsu* 仏教芸術 *Ars Buddhica* 221, no.7 (1995):15-41. Miyaji Akira 宮治昭, “*Turufan, Toyoku sekkutsu no zenkankutsu hekgani tsuite: Jōdozu, Jōdo kansōzu, fujō kansōzu*, part 2 トゥルファン・トヨク石窟の禅観窟壁画について -- 浄土図・浄土観想図・不浄観想図 (中),” *Bukkyō geijutsu* 仏教芸術 *Ars Buddhica* 223, no.11 (1995):15-36. Miyaji Akira 宮治昭, “*Turufan, Toyoku sekkutsu no zenkankutsu hekgani tsuite: Jōdozu, Jōdo kansōzu, fujō kansōzu*, part 3 トゥルファン・トヨク石窟の禅観窟壁画について -- 浄土図・浄土観想図・不浄観想図 (下),” *Bukkyō geijutsu* 仏教芸術 *Ars Buddhica* 226, no.5 (1996):38-83. Miyaji Akira 宮治昭, *Tu yugou shiku bihua yu changuan* 吐峪沟石窟壁画與禪觀, trans. He Xiaoping 賀小萍, (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chuban she, 2009). Yamabe Nobuyoshi, “The Sutra on the Ocean-like Samadhi and the Visualization of the Buddha: The Interfusion of the Chinese and Indian Cultures in Central Asia as Reflected in a Fifth Century Apocryphal Sutra,” (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1999). Yamabe Nobuyoshi, “Practice of Visualization and the Visualization Sutra: An Examination of Mural Paintings at Toyok, Turfan,” *Pacific World*, no.4 (Fall 2002): 123-152.

on cave walls or the back of steles, and very few of these images occupy the main shrine of precincts. Rather than thinking about images in diverse locations, we should be more concerned with how such images appeared in one site, such as Dunhuang. Where were Pure Land images usually placed? How did they interact with viewers inside a Buddhist cave?

1.3 Chang'an and Dunhuang: Cave 220 in the 7th Century

Returning to our search for the Pure Land tableau from Shandao's youth - Exactly what kind of image did he see? One potential candidate would be Cave 220 at Dunhuang (Fig.1-18) Created between 642 and 662, the cave introduced dramatically innovative images to the oasis town. With the first full-wall depictions of transformation tableaux at Dunhuang, the cave provided the frontier region with a flare of Tang cosmopolitanism. The east wall of the inner chamber showcases an image of a Chinese emperor attending Vimalakirti's magical debate against Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī —an iconography that might have come directly from the imperial court (Fig.1-19). The reason why the 7th century is regarded as a turning point in Chinese art is largely related to Cave 220. An ink inscription marks the grotto as the “Zhai Family Cave” (*zhaijiaku* 翟家窟), and the Zhai family continued to repair and update the cave until at least 925 C.E., adding images such as the “New Style Mañjuśrī” (*xinyang wenshuxiang* 新樣文殊像) in the cave's corridor (Fig.1-20).⁴¹ Although previous constructions at the site were likely sponsored by local magistrates and powerful families,

⁴¹ Ning Qiang, *Art, Religion and Politics in Medieval China: The Dunhuang Cave of the Zhai Family* (University of Hawaii Press, 2004), 77.

Cave 220 was the first time one prominent family at Dunhuang claimed the patronage and upkeep of a single cave.

The creation of Cave 220 rests upon a complex matrix of political, cultural, and artistic interactions between the local Dunhuang population and the new Tang regime that was flexing its military power towards Central Asia. In his case study of Cave 220, Ning Qiang argues that the cave functioned as a family shrine for the Zhai clan. The Tang regime was established in 618, and Dunhuang, a frontier oasis, came under the jurisdiction of the new empire in 619. However, the region remained politically tumultuous for years, plagued with local uprisings, and a brief declaration of independence.⁴² It was not until the 630s that Dunhuang was fully under Tang control, as imperial military campaigns spread westwards into Central Asia (Fig. 1-21). In 640, Tang forces achieved one of its most important victories by conquering Karakhoja (*Gaochang* 高昌) – a prosperous oasis kingdom in current day Turfan, Xinjiang, whose population was also devoutly Buddhist. “The Protectorate General to Pacify the West” (*anxi duhufu* 安西都護府) was established after this victory to further control oasis kingdoms round the Tarim Basin. Four garrisons were eventually installed in Kucha, Khotan, Kashgar, and Karashahr under the western protectorate in the following decades between 648-658. This allowed the Tang Empire to control the region until the Tibetan Empire took over the area in the late 8th century after the An Lushan Rebellion had severely weakened the Tang court in 755. Members of the Zhai family were directly involved in the military campaign for Karakhoja, and Ning Qiang suggests that the Buddhist cave was created to appease fallen soldiers or deceased family members after the military expedition. Since its re-discovery in the early 20th century, the cave has attracted much scholarly

⁴² Ibid, 11-12.

attention, which in turn, also provides for us a perfect case to work through current problems in studying the Tang Pure Land tableau in terms of iconography and ritual.

The standard-sized Cave 220 has a front and rear chamber connected by a corridor (1.55m) on a west-east axis (Fig.1-22). The main chamber has a rectangular layout (5.6 x 5.3m) and truncated-pyramid-like ceiling (4.85m) with four slopes —a cave type that had become typical by this period. A two-meter-deep rectangular niche is dug into the west wall, creating an elevated platform (H:1.1m) (Fig.1-23). Upon this platform, in the middle of the niche is a seated Buddha on top of a sumeru base (*xumizuo* 須彌座) that is connected to the back of the niche. The Buddha is flanked by two attending bodhisattvas and two monks (usually disciples of the Buddha). All of the figures are free-standing polychrome statues that were added later during refurbishment projects.⁴³

Most Dunhuang caves have a similar layout by the 7th century, what makes this cave significant are the new types of images that appear in the main chamber.⁴⁴ In 1943, the top layer of the mural was removed from the wall, revealing a 7th century painting surface beneath (Fig.1-24). Protected by the upper layer, much of the pigments on the inner surface survived the passage of time, providing us with a glimpse of pristine Tang opulence – something that, prior to the re-discovery of Dunhuang, could only have been imagined through textual records, due to the dearth of surviving Tang painting today. The bold application of colors, sophisticated use of shading and chiaroscuro, and advance sense of pictorial space stunned modern viewers —for prior to the 20th century, the history of Chinese

⁴³ Shi Zhangru 石璋如, *Mogaoku xing* 莫高窟形 (Taipei: Zhongyang yanjiu yuan li hi yuyan yanjiusuo, 1996), 176. *Dunhuang mogaoku neirong zonglu* 敦煌莫高窟內容總錄, edited by Dunhuang yanjiuyuan 敦煌研究院 [Dunhuang Academy] (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1996), 76.

⁴⁴ For Tang period Dunhuang art, see Duan Wenjie 段文傑, “*Tangdai qianqi mogaoku yishu* 唐代前期莫高窟藝術”, *Zhongguo shiku: dunhuang mogaoku di san juan* 中國石窟: 敦煌莫高窟第三卷, ed. Dunhuang wenwu yanjiusuo 敦煌文物研究所, Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1987), 161-175.

painting history had been traditionally told through the triumph of the ink brushstroke, use of line, and monochrome painting. 20th century archeologists, artists, and historians alike were equally dumbfounded: What were these images and where did they come from?

The iconography of the murals has prompted much scholarly debate. Many believe that the mural on the north wall is based on *Bhaisajya-guru Sutra* (*Fundamental Vows of the Master of Healing Tathāgata*, 佛說藥師如來本願經), which was translated by Dharmagupta in Luoyang in 617 during the Sui dynasty (Fig.1-25).⁴⁵ The mural features seven Buddhas standing on a platform with a lotus pond in front. The seven Buddhas are surrounded by other heavenly beings and attendants, and on the foreground closest to the viewer, several large lighting devices are being ignited, during performances of music and dance. Bhaisajya-guru, also known as the Medicine Master Buddha (or Medicine Buddha) (*yaoshifo* 藥師佛), governs the Lapis Lazuli Pure Land of the East (*dongfang liuli jingtu* 東方琉璃淨土) and is associated with healing. The odd repetition of the seven Medicine Buddhas is unique and never seen elsewhere. The lotus pond is not a feature of the Lapis Lazuli Pure Land in the sutra text. The mural depicts a specific healing ritual described in the *Bhaisajyaguru Sutra*, which instructs adepts to create “seven images of the Tathāgata (Medicine Buddha)” and light seven lamps in front of each image. In current scholarship, the north wall mural is usually called a “Bhaisajya-guru transformation tableau” (*yaoshi jingbian* 藥師經變) or “Medicine Buddha tableau”.

As for the identification of the south wall, scholars still have not reached a consensus (Fig.1-18). The mural clearly depicts the Western Pure Land – a marvelous realm, which in an extreme sense, is truly “to die for”. It would not have been a surprise that such an image

⁴⁵ T.14, 0449.

would have bewitched the young Shandao and inspired quite a few incidences of religious suicide. Nonetheless, when dealing with such a spectacular tableau, scholars cannot agree upon which of the three Pure Land sutras this mural is based. With colored birds, tall buildings, flying instruments, fluttering banners, jeweled trees, music and dance, the composition includes most of the motifs that are associated with the Western Pure Land. However, Amitābha Buddha and his attending bodhisattvas are placed within a large lotus pond and connected by lotus vines – an “odd” composition, since usually they are seated on land and are facing a lotus pond in front of them. More peculiarly, nine reborn souls in the form of babes in lotus flowers are also connected by lotus vines in the water.

Matsumoto Eiichi names Cave 220’s south wall as an “Amitābha Pure Land Tableaux” (*amituo jingtu jingbian* 阿彌陀淨土經變). Matsumoto created the first categorization of Dunhuang Pure Land tableau in 1937. He came up with a binary division between Pure Land tableaux that contain images of the Ajātaśatru Narrative and the Sixteen Meditations and those that do not. Since the Sixteen Meditations and Ajātaśatru Narrative are specifically related to the *Meditation Sutra*, murals that include these components are called “Meditation Sutra Tableaux” (*guanjing bian* 觀經變), and those that do not, like Cave 220, are called “Amitābha Pure Land Tableaux”. In Matsumoto’s division, only the former is named specifically after a sutra and the latter is not.⁴⁶ In her survey of Pure Land art at Dunhuang, Shi Pingting set out to link categories of Pure Land transformation tableaux directly to the three canonical Pure Land Sutras, namely the shorter *Amitābha Sutra* and longer *Amitāyurdhyāna Sutra*, and the *Meditation Sutra*. In this way, she tried to further divide Matsumoto’s “Amitābha Pure Land Tableaux” into two categories based on two sutras. The main division between the two types is whether or not the composition includes

⁴⁶ Matsumoto Eiichi, 5-7.

images of reborn souls in the lotus pond, which is specifically mentioned in the *Amitāyurdhyāna Sutra*, but not in the *Amitābha Sutra*. Hence, with clear images of reborn souls in Cave 220's south wall, Shi Pingting has named it an "Amitāyurdhyāna Sutra Tableau" (*wuliangshou jingbian* 無量壽經變).⁴⁷ This view has been again challenged by Ning Qiang, who claims that the nine reborn souls connected by vines are tied to the system of "Nine Grades of Rebirth" (*jiupin wangsheng* 九品往生). The "Nine Grades of Rebirth" only appear in the *Meditation Sutra*, therefore the mural is a "Meditation Sutra tableau", regardless of the inclusion of the Ajātaśatru Narrative or the Sixteen Meditations.⁴⁸

From "Amitābha Pure Land Tableau", "Amitāyurdhyāna Sutra Tableau", to "Meditation Sutra tableau", the south wall of Cave 220 has been given many names in the past eighty years, yet its identity remains a conundrum. Such iconographic debates are typical of the study of Pure Land art, as scholars tend to mine textual sources to decipher Buddhist murals. Perhaps we may pause here for a moment and ask – What would a 7th century viewer call this tableau? The image that Shandao saw during his youth was called a "Western Tableau" (*xifang bian* 西方變), whilst the two hundred images that he made were called "Pure Land Tableaux" (*jingtu bian* 淨土變), and in all medieval sources the two terms are interchangeable. Throughout medieval China, the Pure Land tableau was never divided based on the three Pure Land sutras. The renowned poet Bai Juyi 白居易(772 – 846) once commissioned the artisan Du Zongjing 杜宗敬 to create an image of the Western Pure Land

⁴⁷ Shi Pingting 1999, 17-53. Also see, Shi Pingting 施萍婷, "Guanyu dunhuang bihua zhong de wuliangshou jingbian 關於敦煌壁畫中的無量壽經變," *Dunhuang Research* 102, no.2, (2007):1-5. Sun Xiashen 孙修身, "Dunhuang bihua zhong de guanwuliangshoujing bianxiang 敦煌石窟中的觀無量壽經變相," in *Dunhuang yanjiu wenji: : dunhuang shiku jingbian pian* 敦煌研究文集: 敦煌石窟經變篇, ed. Dunhuang Academy (Lanzhou: Gansu renmin chubanshe, 2000), 263-292.

⁴⁸ Ning Qiang 2004, 37-45.

based on *both* the *Amitābha Sutra* and *Amitāyurdhyāna Sutra*. Shi Pingting uses this source to claim that Pure Land tableaux could be based on a combination of different Pure Land sutras, and Gong Weizhang went further to propose that Pure Land tableaux in Dunhuang could be different combinations of two of the Pure Land sutras.⁴⁹ However, it is highly likely that, as Wang Huimin has suggested, all three Pure Land sutras could serve as a basis for the Pure Land tableau. By retrospectively separating these images into different categories, we risk surrendering the complexity and richness of Pure Land imagery to the textual authority of sutras.

So what kind of relationship do murals have with Buddhist scriptures? As art historians, must we always pit images against texts? Indeed, the transformation tableau image type has a complicated relationship with Buddhist scriptures especially during this 7th century moment. The diverse subjects of wall painting in caves have become increasingly tied to specific Mahayana sutras. There are in fact Dunhuang murals that are clearly based on the *Lotus Sutra*, the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sutra*, the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa Sutra*, etc. – just to name a few.⁵⁰ Transformation tableaux were frequently named after specific sutra texts and they became a major mode of Buddhist art in the Tang period. Scholars have argued that they should be understood as visual counterparts of important religious texts rather than their illustrations.⁵¹ This new way of arranging pictorial programs in cave interiors was significantly different from previous cave construction at Dunhuang, which focused on

⁴⁹ Gong Weizhang 公維章, “*Mogaoku di 220 ku nanbi wuliangshou jingbian zhaji* 莫高窟第 220 窟南壁無量壽經變札記,” *Dunhuang Research* 75, no.5 (2002): 8-12.

⁵⁰ T. 7, 1. T. 374, 12. T. 376, 12. T. 14, 0475.

⁵¹ For literature on Transformation Tableaux, see Wu Hung, “What is Bianxiang? -On The Relationship Between Dunhuang Art and Dunhuang Literature,” 111-192. Victor H. Mair, “Records of Transformation Tableaux (pien-hsiang),” *T’oung Pao*, Second Series 72 Livr.1/3 (1986): 3-43. Eugene Y. Wang 2005, xxi-xxii. Zhou Yiliang 周一良, “*Dunhuang bihua yu fojing* 敦煌壁畫與佛經,” *Wenwu cankao zoliao* 文物參考資料 2.4 (1951): 90-106.

individual deities, scenes from the life of the Buddha, preaching compositions, and Jataka narratives (Fig.1-26). It is not a far stretch for scholars to be so adamant about seeking the correct sutra source for the south wall of Cave 220 in the same way. Perhaps this ongoing debate actually reveals to us something rather special about the Pure Land tableau – it is more focused on *showing* us the Pure Land, rather than illustrating any specific Pure Land sutra.

These debates on the iconography of the murals have created a paradoxical situation. Scholars agree upon the apparent novelty of Cave 220's image program in both content and style, but at the same time, many find themselves perplexed when the murals do not conform to iconographic tropes. For instance, the Lapis Lazuli Pure Land of the East should not have included a lotus pond, because it was not mentioned in the *Bhaisajyaguru Sutra*; having the Amitābha triad placed in the water of the lotus pond strikes us as being “odd”. In this set up, images in Cave 220 are deviating from a presupposed norm. However, as we shall see in the following chapters, the 7th century is a time when such image types were themselves in the process of formation and experimentation. It is hard to claim that something is departing from a standard, when such a standard had not yet been formulated. In our case, Pure Land imagery itself took several different forms at Dunhuang in the early Tang period. Cave 220 showcases the first full-wall Pure Land composition inside a standard truncated-pyramid ceiling cave with a western niche, but different types of Pure Land related imagery also could be found in different cave structures around this time.

The earliest images that are directly related to the *Meditation Sutra* at Dunhuang are found in Cave 431 (Fig.1-27). Images of the Ajātaśatru Narrative, Sixteen Meditations and Nine Grades of Rebirth are organized on a continuous panel that wraps around the north, west and south walls of the cave. Cave 431 was originally created in the Northern Wei period (525-545) as a typical central-pillar cave that was common during the 5th and early 6th century. Cave 431 was positioned adjacent to the Northern Zhou (557-581) Cave 428 and Sui

period (581-618) Cave 427, which were two of the largest structures at Dunhuang and were the center of the cliff façade (Fig.1-28). Cave 428 was possibly built by Yu Yi 于义(534-583), the Duke of Jianping, as a powerful political statement in the Northern Zhou (Fig.1-29). Cave 427 was purposefully built next to Cave 428 and enshrines three colossal Buddha triads that symbolize the power of the new Sui regime (Fig.1-30). The two caves continued to be the absolute focal point of the cliff facade throughout the Sui dynasty until the Yin family constructed a colossal Buddha in 695 to the southern end of the complex. Cave 431 underwent refurbishment in the mid-7th century during the early Tang. The ground of the cave was sunken lower, and a new panel of *Meditation Sutra* related images were added. The absence of an image of the Pure Land in this cave might strike us as being “odd”, but again, there is no evidence to show that such illustrations should feature a large full wall composition of the Pure Land like that of Cave 220 in the first place. Constructed near the focal point of the Mogao complex, Cave 431’s 7th century renovation with new Pure Land images participated in a direct dialogue with Dunhuang’s religious and political past, whilst Cave 220, which was positioned in a new zone to the far south of the cliff façade was clearly trying to break with tradition in a bold way.

Beyond Cave 220’s Pure Land tableau and Cave 431’s newly painted *Meditation Sutra* panel, Cave 209 also introduces new Pure Land imagery to the Dunhuang region around the same time (Fig.1-31). Cave 209 is a truncated-pyramid ceiling cave, but instead of having a dug-in western niche, the cave has a long platform on the west end of the main chamber. The cave features various Buddha preaching scenes that can be frequently found in older Sui dynasty caves, and large panels of landscapes are shown around the long altar. Historians of Chinese landscapes have often noted how such large mountain formations are

entirely new in the Tang period, representing a new Tang style of landscape painting.⁵² Within the mountain formations are vignettes from the Ajātaśatru Narrative. Although historians have frequently used mountain images from Cave 209 to represent the rise of landscape painting in Tang China, few scholars of Pure Land art have considered these narrative passages from the *Meditation Sutra*. As we shall see in Chapter Two, Cave 209 created a space for viewers to participate in the Ajatasatru Narrative through forms of Buddhist repentance.

The first Pure Land images thus arrived in Dunhuang in various forms and were presented in diverse types of caves in different sections of the cliff façade. The full-wall tableau in Cave 220 is paired with the Healing Ritual in the Medicine Master Buddha's Eastern Paradise of Lapis Lazuli, Cave 431's new panel of *Meditation Sutra* images reorients the interior space of the 6th century cave, while the Ajatasatru Narrative is dispersed in large mountain formations in Cave 209 (Fig.1-27, 1-31). There was no consistent format for Pure Land images at Dunhuang during this period, and we cannot say that Cave 220's composition is "odd" because it does not conform to an iconographic trope, which does not yet exist.

Where did this plethora of new images come from? Again, discussions surrounding the origins of Tang Pure Land images at Dunhuang pivot around the figure of Shandao and his entry into Chang'an. Ning Qiang argues that 5th-century sutras that focus on the practices of meditation (*guan* 觀) or *dhyāna* (*chanding* 禪定) all emphasize the importance of meditating on the figure of the Buddha or bodhisattvas (*zunxiang* 尊像). It is only in Shandao's 7th commentary where we see a paradigm shift from meditation on the Buddha to

⁵² Akiyama Terukazu 秋山光和, "Tangdai dunhuang bihua zhong de shanshui biao xian 唐代敦煌壁畫中的山水表現," in *Zhongguoshiku: dunhuang mogaoku diwujian* 中國石窟: 敦煌莫高窟 第五卷 Vol.5, ed. Dunhuang wen wu yanjiu suo 敦煌文物研究所 (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1982), 195-209.

meditation on the Pure Land. Thus, the 7th century proliferation of the “mature” Pure Land tableau is attributed to Shandao’s new theorization of the *Meditation Sutra*.⁵³ However, as Shi Pingting points out, Shandao did not leave for Chang’an until 645, and Cave 220 had started its construction in 642. Therefore, the image did not have anything to do with Shandao. The same type of debate takes place upon the *Meditation Sutra* images in Cave 431, and bifurcates in two directions around the figure of Shandao. Ning Qiang follows the earlier studies of Miyaji Akira, in which he compares Sixteen Meditations images in Cave 431 with meditating monk images in Toyok, Turfan.⁵⁴ He argues that these images could only have arrived in Dunhuang after the Tang imperial army took over the Kingdom of Karakhoja and a cultural and religious linkage was established between Turfan and Dunhuang after 640. On the contrary, Zhang Jingfeng looks eastward to Chang’an and Shandao’s commentary on the *Meditation Sutra*. Against Ning Qiang’s hypothesis that looks westward, Zhang believes that Cave 431’s refurbishment could not have been made before Shandao had reached Chang’an in 645 and gained wide influence in the capital.⁵⁵ It is clear that Shandao is frequently portrayed as the creator of Tang Pure Land transformation tableaux, and all early Tang Pure Land images are measured against whether or not they could have a relationship with Shandao’s writings after he achieved fame and influence in the Tang capital.

As we have discussed at length earlier, I suggest that we should see Shandao as someone who was deeply affected by Pure Land images during his lifetime and learned how

⁵³ Ning Qiang 1996, 148. For debates on the English translation of *guan* into “visualization”, see Eric Greene, “Meditation, Repentance and Visionary Experience in Early Medieval Chinese Buddhism,” Ph.D., diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2012

⁵⁴ Ning Qiang “Visualization Practice and the Function of the Western Paradise Images in Turfan and Dunhuang in the Sixth to Seventh Centuries,” *Journal for Inner Asian Art and Archeology* 2 (2007): 133-142.

⁵⁵ Zhang Jingfeng 张景峰, “Mogaoku di 431 ku chuting guan wuliangshou jingbian yu shandao zhi famen zai dunhuang de liuchuan 莫高窟第 431 窟观无量寿佛经变与善导之法门在敦煌的流传,” *Dunhuang Research* 122 , no.4 (2010): 34-46.

to successfully make use of them in his proselytization of Pure Land practices. Shandao's writings should be seen as a way for him to theorize and make sense of what he saw and what he practiced in 7th century China, rather than the other way around. Images, and not just Pure Land ones, were part and parcel of medieval religious life, and the highly populated and prosperous city of Chang'an was becoming a "metropolis of vision" - public spaces for worship, where commoners, the elite, and foreigners mingle, were saturated with new sights and sounds made possible by a newly centralized and ever-expanding empire. It was a city of cross-dressing princesses, swirling Sogdian dancers, Zoroastrian fire rituals, green-eyed courtesans, magic painters, lantern festivals, self-immolating monks, Daoist wizards, and shape-shifting fox spirits that taught the newcomer Shandao about new possibilities for representation and illusionism.⁵⁶ And it was probably Shandao the great preacher of public sermons. who incited the urban masses to long for a paradise that could possibly be more sumptuous and magnificent than their own city.

Moving away from a narrative centered on Shandao, Rong Xinjiang's recent essay provides us with a more dynamic picture of cultural exchange along the Silk Road specifically during the period of Cave 220's construction between 642 and 662.⁵⁷ Although there were several military campaigns and tumultuous uprisings in the early years of the Tang dynasty as the imperial forces moved west, this did not interfere with the movement of

⁵⁶ Sun Yinggang 孫英剛, "Xiangxiang zhong de zhenshi: suitang changan dhe mingjie xinyang yu chengshi kongjian 想像中的真實: 隋唐長安的冥界信仰與城市空間," *Tang Studies* 唐研究 15, (2009): 139-169. Also see, Linda Rui Feng. "Youthful Displacement: City, Travel and Narrative Formation in Tang Tales," PhD diss., (Columbia University, 2008). Feng, Linda Rui, "Chang'an and Narratives of Experience in Tang Tales," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 71, no.1 (2011): 35—68. For Tang Tales, see, *Tales from Tang Dynasty China: Selections from the Taiping Guangji*, eds. Alexei Kamran Ditter, Jessey Choo, and Sarah M. Allen (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2017), 1-30.

⁵⁷ Rong Xinjiang 榮新江, "Zhenguan nianjian silu wanglai yu zhajiaku huangyangde laili 貞觀年間絲路往來與翟家窟畫樣的來歷," [Silk Road Cultural Exchanges and the Origin of the Cave Wall Paintings Sponsored by the Zhai Family in the Zhenguan Era of the Tang Dynasty]. *Dunhuang Research* 167, no.1 (2018): 1-8.

diplomats, officials, monks, and tributary goods along the Silk Road. The presence of the imperial political system and network of tributes folded Dunhuang into the fabric of the larger empire. One important Tang general that conquered Karakhoja was Liu Demin 劉德敏, who also became the Prefect of Shazhou (*shazhou cishi* 沙洲刺史) (the Dunhuang area was established as Shazhou, or “Prefecture of Sha” by the Tang), directly governing the Dunhuang region. The Liu clan was a noble family from the Central Plains of China and had close ties to the Tang aristocracy. Liu Demin’s own daughter married the prime minister Pei Yan 裴炎 (?-684), while his nephew Liu Yanjing’s 劉延景 daughter married the future Emperor Ruizong 唐睿宗(662 – 716). It is possible that the affluent Liu family gave painters of Cave 220 access to images and paintings directly from the court. The Zhai family that constructed Cave 220 also enjoyed this new rapport with the imperial court. Rong believes that a specific Zhai Tong 翟通 might have been the person that retrieved paintings or artisans back to his hometown. In the Tang tribute system, men that were educated in the Confucian classics based in local regions were allowed to travel to the capital with local tribute after passing an examination. Given the title “Erudite of Dunhuang” (*dunhuangboshi* 敦煌博士), Zhai was probably the most learned person in Shazhou, and it is highly possible that he traveled to the capital with local tribute around 642. Furthermore, on his way back from India, the pilgrim monk Xuanzang passed by Dunhuang in 644, when Cave 220 was still actively under construction. We know that Xuanzang not only brought back Buddhist scriptures, but also many Buddhist icons and paintings from India. The Emperor Taizong specifically ordered a royal welcoming for Xuanzang to return to the capital and Dunhuang officials were in charge of seeing him through the area. Interestingly, Rong notes that images of Cave 220 were drawn distinctly in a Tang style, and it was unlikely that Xuanzang opened up his treasured boxes of Indian images for local artisans to see. The painting style of Cave

220 might also have arrived at Dunhuang with the royal welcoming party that came to fetch Xuanzang back to the capital.

Approaching the figure of Shandao in such a new light, we are able to gain a more comprehensive view of the world from which the Pure Land transformation tableau emerged. The murals of Cave 220 provide a hint of the types of images that Shandao would have encountered in the capital, and it might have also resembled that Pure Land tableau from his youth. These temple murals - painted by illustrious artists from around the empire and across the Eurasian continent, were made possible by the new sights and sounds that Chang'an displayed. The creation of Cave 220 was in turn a conscious introduction of cosmopolitan opulence to the Dunhuang region by the Zhai family, whose members dynamically participated in new forms of geopolitics between Central Asia and the Central Plains of China. New images were brought in from urban temples and re-appropriated for the Dunhuang cave. In Cave 220, we witness an ongoing process of translation of pedigree art forms into new modes of Dunhuang art. Cave 220 had a great impact on how Dunhuang caves were made from the 7th century onward. A new type of cave space developed from this process and reorients the programming of Buddhist art at the Mogao grottoes. What is this transformation and how do we trace it? In the following sections, we will review ways in which cave interiors are studied in modern scholarship, and explore new methods for studying Dunhuang art.

1.4 Suspended Animation: Cave Space and Ritual

Why did the Zhai family choose to combine an image of the Amitābha's Western Pure Land with a mural of the Medicine Buddha's Eastern Pure Land in Cave 220? Ning argues that the Healing Ritual painted on the north wall was painted to cure the wounded and sick, whilst in case of death, the south mural could help the dead souls reach Amitābha's paradise. The two murals were created to heal the wounded and appease the dead after the conquest of Karakhoja, and also produce merit for the living family members. The murals could have been used as "visual aids" during rituals that might have taken place inside the cave.⁵⁸ In Ning's own words,

[We] can deduce that the Zhai family might have performed some parts of the Healing Ritual such as lighting lamps and reading the *Bhaisajya-guru Sutra* in the cave. Because the image-making part of the ritual had been done on the wall, the patrons did not have to do additional things except lighting lamps and chanting the names of the Healing Master to complete the ritual.⁵⁹

Ning Qiang uses the *Bhaisajya-guru Sutra* and the *Meditation Sutra* to explain the two respective transformation tableaux that cover the north and south walls of Cave 220. He then embeds the interior of Cave 220 into a ritual framework, in which the cave interior is understood as a space for specific rituals to take place. Like many art historians working on Buddhist caves, Ning turns to ritual to stitch together and make sense of the various iconographic themes that coexist within the same cave – it is clear that he is interested in how the cave *functioned*.

Using ritual as a critical framework has been highly productive for explaining the content of Dunhuang caves, yet the "function" of these ornamented religious spaces is still

⁵⁸ "The actual participants in the ritual are missing from the painting. The absence of patrons and monks or nuns suggests that this painting may have been used as a visual aid for actual ritual participants." Ning Qiang 2004, 26.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 36-37.

unclear. The problem with this approach is that Buddhist ritual easily becomes the catchall interpretive framework for art historians to analyze objects, images, and architecture, without paying close attention to the nature of the cave interior, bypassing important questions of visibility, material, scale, and color.⁶⁰ The ritual approach swings between the more traditional iconography considered with the symbolic meaning of images within the cave, and the phenomenological approach, in which we assume that images and objects of such caves were actually “gazed upon” in certain rituals.

It is true that art history’s current use of ritual is, as Jas Elsner laments, “stuck in its pre-1980s imagination”, in which ritual is always taken to be sacred, formalized, traditional, and meaningful. Conversely, recent studies in ritual have become interested in the formation of distinctions between the sacred and profane, underscoring processes of ritualization, the role of the human body, and the agency of ritual objects and spaces. Using textual sources to create ritual frameworks of religious objects and spaces, not only reduces ritual itself to mere texts, but also situate religious images and objects as expressions or reflections of these texts. As we have seen in the various debates over Cave 220, art historians are constantly puzzled by the incongruity between religious text and Dunhuang murals, and such moments of incongruity are largely regarded as deviations rather than the norm. Questioning the problematic primacy of textual sources in the study of religious art, Elsner argues that, “the world of ritual – a sophisticated propositional world of living theology in its own right – to which this combination of material gives us (limited) access, is to itself no more than the

⁶⁰ Jas Elsner, “Material Culture and Ritual: State of the Question,” in *Architecture of the Sacred: Space, Ritual, and the Experience from Classical Greece to Byzantium*, eds. Wescoat and Ousterhout (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 1-26. “...we cannot automatically trust any of our normal assumptions about the organization of space (in architecture) through contiguity, sight lines, apparent processional orchestration, structural order, and so forth.” Elsner, 18. Also see, Robert H. Sharf, “Art in the Dark: the Ritual Context of Buddhist Caves in Western China,” *Art of Merit: Studies in Buddhist Art and its Conservation*, eds. David Park, Kuenga Wangmo, and Sharon Cather (London: Archetype Publications, Courtauld Institute of Art, 2013), 38-65.

temporally, physically and performatively instituted thinking of a culture about its relations and mediations with the divine.”⁶¹ What we must always bear in mind is that images, texts, and ritual are all *equally* theologically propositioned.

Recent scholarship has turned our attention towards ritualization, which is, according to Catherine Bell, embedded within the dynamics of the body defined within a symbolically structured environment.⁶² Writing about East Asian Buddhist ritual, Robert Sharf further introduces Gregory Bateson’s concept of play and fantasy that occurs on a metalinguistic level during ritual scenarios, in which the differentiation or confusion between ritual/non-ritual takes place in the physiological framework of play.⁶³ The magic of ritual lies in its capability to create an *as-if* world through metalinguistic framing technologies. The ritualized body is always engaging in the metalinguistic play of its environs, ritual objects, and ritual space. This new emphasis on play and cognition turns our attention to the creation of such *as-if* worlds through technologies of framing.

Images mentioned in ritual texts are usually referred to as “adornments of the ritual precinct” (*zhuangyan daochang* 莊嚴道場).⁶⁴ Like a precinct fashioned through objects and images, the human body could also become adorned by wearing amulets that contain inscriptions of Buddhist spells called *dhāraṇīs*. The material efficacy of such *dhāraṇī* amulets, as a sort of adornment, can fundamentally transform human bodies, in the same way that spiritual ornamentation could, as Paul Copp writes, “remake them at the level of essential

⁶¹ Elsner, 15.

⁶² Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 74

⁶³ Robert Sharf, “Ritual,” in *Critical Terms for the Study of Buddhism*, ed. Donald S. Lopez Jr. (University of Chicago Press, 2005), 245-270.

⁶⁴ David B. Stevenson, “Text, Image and Transformation in the History of the Shiulu fahui, the Buddhist Rite of Deliverance of Creatures of Water and Land,” in *Cultural Intersections in Later Buddhism*, ed. Marsha Smith Weidner (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001), 30-70.

substance from the fleeting imperiled stuff of humanity into the diamond-like luminosity of the truly real.”⁶⁵ This means that images were not simply used as “visual aids” to help a person meditate during rituals, but were inherently *part of* the ritual precinct. In a comparable way, esoteric Buddhist mandalas have become a prime example for scholars to reconsider the primacy of sight in regard to the sensorial relationship between ritual performers and ritual objects.⁶⁶ Mandalas compose the adornment of the sanctuary, working with the ritual performers’ cognitive capacity to transform environments into a stage-like sacred precinct, where the mandala acts as an “active prop” rather than a passive “visual aid”.⁶⁷ It is the distributed agency between a ritualized body and its environment (the presence of relics, flesh-body icons, the esoteric mandala) that allows for a type of “suspended animation”, which makes possible, in Bernard Faure’s words, “all the oscillations of belief and unbelief, ritualism and anti-ritualism”.⁶⁸

Pure Land images are sometimes called “Transformation of Pure Land Adornment” (*jingtu zhuangyan bian* 淨土莊嚴變).⁶⁹ The famous Pure Land tableau that reached Japan in

⁶⁵ Paul F. Copp, *The Body Incantatory: Spells and the Ritual Imagination in Medieval Chinese Buddhism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 140. For dhāraṇīs also see Eugene Y. Wang, “Ritual Practice Without a Practitioner? Early Eleventh Century Dhāraṇī Prints in the Ruiguangsi Pagoda,” *Cahiers D’Extrême-Asie* 20 (2011): 127-60.

⁶⁶ Robert H. Sharf, “Introduction: Prolegomenon to the Study of Japanese Buddhist Icons,” and “Visualization and Mandala in Shingon Buddhism,” in *Living Images: Japanese Buddhist Icons in Context*, eds. Robert H. Sharf and Elizabeth Horton Sharf (Stanford: California: Stanford University Press), 1-18, 151-198. For studies of early Buddhist mandalas, see Michelle C. Wang, *Manḍalas in the Making: The Visual Culture of Esoteric Buddhism At Dunhuang* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 31-50.

⁶⁷ This analogy between the ritual precinct and the stage resonates with Jiří Veltruský’s theory of the dialectic antinomy between man and object on the stage, in which props may take up the agency of human actors and propel the narrative action within the stage. See Jiří Veltruský, “Man and Object in the Theater,” in *A Prague School Reader on Esthetics, Literary Structure, and Style*, ed. and trans. Garvin, Paul L (Georgetown: Georgetown UP, 1964), 83-91.

⁶⁸ Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*, (Oxford: New York: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, 1998), 96-121. Bernard Faure. “The Buddhist Icon and the Modern Gaze,” *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 3 (Spring, 1998): 770.

⁶⁹ “依觀經等畫造淨土莊嚴變”; T.47, 1959: 25a08

the 8th century was called a the Taima Mandala (Jpn: *taima mandara* 當麻曼荼羅) by the 11th century (Fig.1-32). This mix-up in appellation might indicate a close affiliation between Pure Land transformation tableaux and mandalas as they arrived in Japan.⁷⁰ Rethinking the ontological status of Japanese mandalas during Buddhist rituals, Sharf went on to argue in a sweeping fashion that Dunhuang murals, which are positioned in dark caves, were created in a similar way – as adornment for the Buddhist cave, carefully crafted, but never to be *seen*.⁷¹ For some, it might be hard to imagine a history of art that was not meant to be seen, yet such “unseen” images and objects open up for us a different type of critical ground for art historical scholarship that focuses on processes of image-making, systems of representation, conditions for visibility, and memory. The creation of unseen images and objects has an incredibly rich history in pre-modern funerary and religious art in China --from Buddhist statues stuffed with mirrors, bells, spiders, prints, medicine, and remains of cremated monks, to massive royal tombs elaborately covered with large murals of imperial processions, rolling hills, and beautiful court ladies.⁷² Buried underground inside a pagoda’s relic crypt or nested inside multiple coffin caskets, “to be unseen” is simply one, albeit important, condition for the life of such objects, images, and spaces. In the logic of image making, to adorn a dark

⁷⁰ The reason why Pure Land transformation tableaux were called *mandara* in Japan since the 11th century might have been related to the prominence of the Diamond and Womb Mandala that was supposedly introduced to Japan from China by the monk Kūkai. However, in Michelle C. Wang’s recent book she claims that there have been no traces of esoteric mandalas found in China that resemble Kūkai’s two mandalas. Michelle C. Wang 2018,11. Elizabeth ten Grotenhuis, *Japanese Mandalas Representations of Sacred Geography* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai’i Press, 1999), 3, 13-32. *Nihon Jōdo Mandara No Kenkyū: Chikō Mandara, Taima Mandara, Seikai Mandara O Chūshin to Shite* 日本浄土曼荼羅の研究：智光曼荼羅・当麻曼荼羅・青海曼荼羅を中心として, ed. Gangōji Bunkazai Kenkyūjo 元興寺文化財研究所 (Tōkyō: Chūō Kōron Bijutsu Shuppan, 1987), 12-15.

⁷¹ Sharf, “Art in the Dark: the Ritual Context of Buddhist Caves in Western China,” 38-65.

⁷² For Buddhist reliquaries and concepts of framing, see Seunghye Lee, “Framing and Framed: Relics, Reliquaries, and Relic Shrines in Chinese and Korean Buddhist Art from the Tenth to the Fourteenth Centuries,” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 2013). For Tang tombs, see Jonathan Hay, “Seeing through Dead Eyes: How early Tang tombs Staged the Afterlife,” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, no.57/58 (Spring/Autumn 2010): 16-54.

cave with Buddhist sculpture and murals was not entirely different from sealing painted palaces and figurines deep inside a tomb - a *potential* for visibility (by the living, the dead, demons, and gods) rather than actual visibility itself is key for us to understand such spaces.⁷³ For one to create a glittering Pure Land tableau, a type of image defined by its enchanting visual force, inside a dark cave and therefore make it “unseen” —this seemingly paradoxical act itself provides us a discourse on the nature of Dunhuang caves.⁷⁴

Ning Qiang’s own hypothesis for the function of Cave 220’s *Bhaisajya-guru Sutra* transformation tableau hints at the possible dialectical relationship between what is depicted in the mural and what sort of activity it encourages. He essentially believes that the act of painting seven Buddhas on the north wall already serves as a stand-in for part of the Healing Ritual, in which adepts are instructed to create “seven images of the Tathāgata”. Those that enter the cave could simply light a few lamps and the ritual would be complete. For him, ritual still needed a physical practitioner inside the cave to make things work, yet a short cut is provided through the creation of the mural – what emerges is a new abbreviated form of ritual action. Nevertheless, we should keep in mind that lamps are also featured in the mural, and heavenly beings are shown lighting them up. There is, in fact, a dynamic interplay between depicted action in the mural and real action that could be performed by bodies inside the cave. The tableau informs us about what to do and how to look. As we shall see in Chapter Four, rather than being activated by bodies chanting in front of murals, the carefully crafted image program makes Cave 220 a new type of *as-if* world that is illuminated by its

⁷³ Eugene Y. Wang, “Why Pictures in Tombs? Mawangdui Once More,” *Orientalism* 3 (2009): 3, 27-34. Wu Hung, *The Art of the Yellow Springs: Understanding Chinese Tombs* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2010), 10.

⁷⁴ For question of visibility in the pre-modern world, see, Mary Weismantel, “Slippery and Slow: Chavan’s Great Stones and Kinaesthetic Perception,” in *Sensational Religion: Sensory Cultures in Material Practice*, ed. Sally M. Promey (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 605-623. Eugene Wang also discusses the rhetoric of “mystic vision” (*xuanlan* 玄覽), See Eugene Y. Wang 2005, 292-309.

potency for light and water.

The novel image program of Cave 220 is both “ritualized and ritualizing”. Such spaces of representation were perhaps once products of ritual behavior; yet at the same time, their striking visual forms were also potent enough to generate new behaviors and structures. The power of a transformation tableau can change a person’s life in real ways, like our monk Shandao. The new tableau format also created new definitions for cave space at Dunhuang. This ritualizing process had the force to create a “visual culture of the Pure Land”, which could be substantiated by the studies of material culture, ritual contemplation, visionary and material experiences, material and immaterial forms of image production. As we shall examine in more detail in this dissertation, mental constructs, dreams, bodies, cave interiors, and transformation tableaux all become interacting entities playing a part in the matrix of a localized and trans-regional visual mode of the Pure Land.

Indeed, Cave 220 started a new trend of cave production at Dunhuang, and the truncated-pyramid cave with full wall depictions of transformation tableaux became the dominant form at Dunhuang throughout the 7th and 8th century. However, when the Tibetan forces took over Dunhuang in the late 8th century, a profound shift in the general design of cave interiors occurred. The heightened sense of illusionism in the 7-8th centuries gave a way to a new type of cave interior, in which fictive multi-panel screens are used to divide and organize wall surfaces. Instead of featuring two or three transformation tableaux on its north, south, and east walls, the 9th century cave became interested in covering its wall surface with multiple transformation tableaux organized in fictive panels. Each cave presented a “collection” of icons and transformation tableaux. Shifts in cave space design indicate that fundamental changes occurred at this moment.⁷⁵ When examining a 7-8th century or 9th

⁷⁵ The history of Dunhuang cave interiors is still based on a three-step teleology. The first period from the 4th - late 6th century, witnessed the emergence of three basic cave types: the *dhyana* or “meditation” cave type, the central-pillar/gable-roof type and the “hall” type. The second phase is

century cave, art historians have also split into two approaches: one is what I call a “phenomenological approach”, and the other a “analog approach”. The former considers the viewer’s visual and bodily experience within caves, and this method is used mostly structures made in the 7-8th century. The latter reflects on how cave space is constructed as a simulacrum or meta-structure that refers to a certain architectural entity beyond the cave. This approach deals with caves from the 9th century onwards.

The phenomenological approach addresses the physical features of cave interiors to elucidate certain interpretive goals that put the bodily experience of the viewer into question. Using the *Lotus Sutra* as his conceptual framework, Eugene Wang emphasizes the continuity amongst different domains of experience, which fosters a holistic and *multi-sensorial* approach to visual representations.⁷⁶ He ruminates on a wide variety of visual experiences in the Tang period, in which the act of seeing alludes to piercing, shadows, mirrors, dreams, and mystic visions. Moving from the tableau to cave spaces, Sonya Lee has argued how the central-pillar layout of the 7th century Cave 332 literalizes the discourse of “survival” by conditioning circumambulatory activity inside the cave (Fig.1-33). With an image of the Buddha in the state of nirvana set in the dark space behind the pillar, the darkness reminds the viewer of the symbolism of death as seen in the reclining icon, and also addresses the possibility for “survival” as one emerges from the dark during his or her circumambulation.⁷⁷

situated between the late 6th century to the early 8th century, which is the Sui and Early Tang period, when we see a combination of different types. There is a rise of monumental caves, and the truncated-pyramid “hall” cave took a dominating role, with large transformation tableaux that occupy the entirety of the north and south walls. The last phase spans across six centuries from the 9th to 14th century, and is regarded as a mature period for cave design, in which the truncated-pyramid cave becomes the dominant form. See Sun Yihua 孫毅華 and Sun Ruxian 孫儒聞, *Shiku jianzhu juan* 石窟建築卷, *Dunhuang shiku quanji* 敦煌石窟全集, Vol.22, ed. Dunhuang Academy (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Commercial Press, 2003), 83-112.

⁷⁶ Eugene Y. Wang “Oneiric Horizons and Dissolving Bodies: Buddhist Cave Shrine as Mirror Hall,” *Art History* 27, no.4 (September 2004): 494- 521.

⁷⁷ Sonya Lee, *Surviving Nirvana: Death of the Buddha in Chinese Visual Culture* (Hong Kong University Press, 2010), 139-207

As we arrive in the 9th century, scholars turn their focus to the fictive screen panels and their capacity to *simulate* experiences beyond the cave unit (Fig.1-34). The notion of “analogy” runs through studies of *trompe l’oeil* elements in the 9th century Dunhuang cave. Traditionally, the proliferation of quotidian objects and architectural forms (canopies, brackets, screens, drapery) depicted in *trompe l’oeil* effect were understood as the result of secularization that occurred after height of religious zeal in the early Tang period – the religious cave was being transformed into a space full of quotidian forms. Arguing against secularization, Neil Schmid calls attention to how depictions of fabrics, screens, canopies, niches, and platforms evoke a unified, functional space filled with real-life objects.⁷⁸ Such attention to material details emphasizes a certain type of realism, familiarity, and accessibility of the *trompe l’oeil* elements in the cave space that point to the living world beyond the cave. Schmid believes that this is related to popular performances of exegesis that took place in the Dunhuang region. These fictive screens, in an analogical sense, function like Buddhist tales that bring narrative into doctrine. As narratives establish the particular terms of time and space, the *trompe l’oeil* screens give abstract and universal principles a concrete form. Examining the screen as a “spatial devise”, Ping Foong approaches cave space through the concept of the simulacrum.⁷⁹ If wall paintings in the 7th century functioned more as pictorial vehicles for spatial representation or illusionism, which dissolve their material support, fictive screens in the 9th century cave call attention to the materiality of the wall surface. The fictive screens function as a vehicle for a type of “spatial knowledge”. Like real screens, the

⁷⁸ Neil Schmid, “The Material Culture of Exegesis and Liturgy and a Change in the Artistic Representations in Dunhuang Caves, ca. 700-1000,” *Asia Major* 29 (2006): 171-210.

⁷⁹ Winston Kyan, “Family Space: Buddhist Materiality and Ancestral Fashioning in Mogao Cave 231,” *The Art Bulletin*, XCII, nos 1-2 (March-June 2010): 61-82. Also see, Ping Foong, “Multipanel Landscape Screens as Spatial Simulacra at the Mogao Caves, Dunhuang,” in *Bridges to Heaven: Essays on East Asian Art in Honor of Professor Wen C. Fong*, eds. Jerome Silbergeld and Dora C. Y. Ching (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2012), 533-56.

fictive ones divide spaces in the front of them (the cave interior) and the realm behind them (an imagined supernatural realm).

This narrative tells of a transition from illusionism in the 7-8th century cave that prized the transformation tableaux to a between-and- betwixt experience of simulacra evoked by encounters with fictive architectural parts in the 9th century cave. In this framework, early Tang caves are retrospectively defined against their 9th century counterparts. But how did this interest in illusionism come about? This is one question that this dissertation will try to answer; through the study of Pure Land transformation tableau and the new spaces and experiences it creates. As we shall see in more detail in Chapter Two, murals in the Tang have *always* been caught in the paradigm between pictorial illusionism and material reality of the cave interior – the theme of entrapment and salvation is materialized within a cave by the presence of Pure Land imagery. This dilemma is embodied in the Pure Land transformation tableau —a type of image technology that eagerly explores new possibilities of optical illusionism, and at the same time reminds us of our bodily condition through the theme of rebirth.

1.5 Jeweled Links and Dead Stars: The “Original Cave” as Prime Object

The following chapters will trace the metamorphosis of Pure Land art and Dunhuang caves in the 7-8th century, which mark the beginning and end of Tang imperial presence in the region, whilst the regime maintained close cultural and diplomatic ties with forces in Central Asia and South Asia through Buddhism, military alliances, and tributary systems. The scholarship that we have just reviewed in this chapter has largely come from case studies of Dunhuang caves that have developed in the last two decades. My own work is indebted to this new methodology and will attempt to “give shape to” Pure Land art by identifying and analyzing a few “special” caves at Dunhuang. These “special” caves, in current academic discourse on

Dunhuang can be called “original caves”, which are important constructions at the site that led to new visual forms.

The idea of “original caves” at Dunhuang, came from Wu Hung’s case study of Cave 323, which proposed a new way of studying Dunhuang art based on the interpretation and research on individual caves as integral entities. For example, Cave 323 was created in the second half of the 7th century and is known for featuring narrative scenes of Buddhist history and images of miraculous images on the upper portion of the cave’s north and south walls (Fig.1-35). Scholars have studied the murals extensively, identifying their rich narrative content individually, but have never looked at the cave as a whole. Paying close attention to the relationship amongst the narrative tales, miraculous icons and depictions of monastic disciplines, Wu Hung argues that the passages were specifically related to Daoxuan, who was an important compiler and editor of Buddhist historical texts. The cave, in turn, represented a history of Buddhism in China that was designed to make the Tang Empire a divine Buddhist land —a view strongly advocated by Daoxuan at court. Based on this understanding, although now lost, Wu Hung claims that the original central icon of the cave was a “Miraculous image of Liangzhou” (*liangzhou ruixiang* 涼州瑞像) —a type of divine icon that was symbolically tied to dynastic change and good governance. The Liangzhou image was highly popular in the Hexi Corridor region, and the image was frequently copied by pilgrim monks or painted on cave murals at Dunhuang (Fig.1-36). Moving beyond the identification of isolated iconographic themes, the intricate interplay between history, politics, and religious icons in Cave 323 can only be brought to light by using the entire cave as an analytical framework.

With this case study, Wu Hung further encourages scholars to rewrite the history of Dunhuang art based on the study of what he calls “original caves” (*yuanchuangxing dongku*

原創性洞窟). “Original caves” are ones that show unprecedented new designs in their construction at Dunhuang. In some cases, “original caves” imbue the region with new artistic forms, and we see a rippling effect in later cave construction. In other cases, such caves remain highly unique and do not generate a formal sequence. A good example of the previous type of “original cave” would be Cave 220, a dated monument, which we know caused full wall depictions of Pure Land transformation tableau to take off at the Mogao grottoes, becoming the most widely depicted type of tableau in the Tang period. On the contrary, caves like Cave 323, created a one-off situation at the site. It remains the only cave that contains depictions of miraculous events that are closely associated with Daoxuan’s writing of Buddhist history in China. By bringing the cave unit back in to focus, with a special attention to “original caves”, we can set out to work through the four hundred and ninety-two Buddhist caves built over a millennium at Mogao and write a new history of Dunhuang art.

Writing specifically for a scholarly audience in China, Wu Hung’s proposal was an attempt to introduce new art historical methods and theories to the field. In the 20th century, most studies of Buddhist complexes were divided between archeologists that surveyed the site and historians that worked with historical texts and excavated manuscripts. Though not the main focus of this dissertation, it is important to point out significant shifts in the historiography of Dunhuang cave studies. The establishment of the “Dunhuang Institute of Art” in 1943 first introduced a team of historians, artists, and archeologists to Dunhuang, and transformed the caves into a multi-faceted site of national cultural heritage during the Sino-Japanese war. “Dunhuang cave art” (*dunhuang shiku yishu* 敦煌石窟藝術) became professionally subdivided into several academic fields that have greatly conditioned research methods in the following decades. Su Bai’s 1962 foundational lecture series is representative

of this type of professional divide.⁸⁰ He pushed his students to study wall paintings and sculptures through the narrative of stylistic development, the dating of architectural remains, and sequencing of caves. Beyond urgent needs for scientific conservation of the grotto site, establishing an accurate periodization of the caves was the main goal of research since the establishment of the academy. The 1980s-1990s witnessed the publication of numerous catalogues and collections of the academy's research results in the previous decades, along with the first issue of *Dunhuang Research* (*Dunhuang yanjiu* 敦煌研究) in 1983. Naturally, these catalogues divided the study of Dunhuang caves into art history and architectural history with a strong focus on stylistic development and iconography. "Dunhuang Art" is further divided into genres of sculpture, sutra paintings, landscape painting, figural painting and decorative patterns.

The methodological shift towards the cave unit is analogous to what Wu Hung has argued for Chinese tomb studies. In modern archeology in China, the subfield called "archaeology of burials (*muzang kaogu* 墓葬考古) primarily focused on collecting, organizing and analyzing archeological data for future research.⁸¹ In this process, tomb contents were also studied in separate fields of wall painting, objects, architecture, etc. Bringing objects, materials, and images back into the time-space of the Chinese tomb, Wu Hung devised large analytical frameworks for art historians to discuss the spatiality, materiality and temporality of tombs. In a similar way, like the reconceptualization of the Chinese tomb, the Dunhuang cave is revisited as a coherent spatial construct and embodiment of cultural and social activities.

⁸⁰ Su Bai 宿白, "*duhuang xueshu jiangzuo* 敦煌学术讲座" (unpublished manuscript, 1962).

⁸¹ Wu Hung 2010, 7-16.

With “original caves” and production series in mind, Wu Hung brings George Kubler’s idea of “prime objects and replication” into the field of Dunhuang cave studies. Kubler’s *The Shape of Time* was a bold attempt to reject the concept of style in art history. Using models drawn from the scientific realm, such as “invention and variation” or “formal sequences”, Kubler rebuked biographical or biological models for interpreting art, and turned towards the existence of things in space and time. Rather than writing histories of art based on Wölfflinian categories of “archaic, classic, baroque” phases of development, Kubler believes that the history of things should be based upon the sequencing of “prime objects” and their “replication.” The mathematical term “prime numbers” is borrowed to describe works of art that “resist decomposition in being original entities.”⁸² Such works of art, as prime objects, have the capacity to generate an entire system of replicas, copies, reproductions, and variants. Instead of thinking through biological models of stylistic development, Kubler turns our attention to dynamic formal sequences composed of constellations of replicas and singular dated monuments.

Prime objects and replications denote principle inventions, and the entire system of replicas, reproductions, copies, reductions, transfers and derivations, floating in the wake of an important work of art...[P]rime objects likewise resist decomposition in being original entities. Their character as primes is not explained by their antecedents, and their order in history is enigmatic.”⁸³

Unlike his predecessors and contemporaries, such as Henri Focillon or Meyer Schapiro, Kubler was keen on expanding the horizon of art historical inquiry beyond its Eurocentric canon. One can even say that wall paintings at archeological complexes, such as those at Dunhuang, have a close relationship with Kubler’s analytical framework, for Mesoamerican murals from Bonampak and Indian Buddhist caves at Ajanta were very much on his mind

⁸² George Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks On the History of Things* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), 39.

⁸³ Ibid.

when he compared prime objects to “distant stars” that emit light from the past.⁸⁴ Moving beyond Western traditions, his theory was actively picked up by historians of Chinese art. Wen Fong was the first to apply “prime objects and replicas” to the study of Chinese landscape painting, in an attempt to give shape to its history while dealing with large amounts of replicas, forgeries and undated Chinese paintings that filled museum collections in post-war America.⁸⁵ With Kubler’s method, though formalist by nature, Wen Fong was able to rescue the large amount of replicas -an important part of Chinese painting history, from types of Western centered value systems that prized originals. In Dunhuang studies, by conceptualizing important Buddhist caves as Kublerian prime objects, the Buddhist cave is allowed to become a “work of art” for the art historian. Piecing together sequences of Dunhuang caves as such, we start to see how its history starts to, in Kubler’s own words, “resemble a broken but much-repaired chain made of string and wire to connect the occasional jeweled links surviving as physical evidences of the invisible original sequence of prime objects.”⁸⁶

Conclusion

Departing from Shandao in the capital Chang’an, we have traced early Pure Land images in China, and arrived at Dunhuang with Cave 220, the first “family cave” at Dunhuang. This was the first time a full-wall depiction of the Western Pure Land was

⁸⁴ “We know of their existence only indirectly, by their perturbations, and by the immensely detritus of derivative stuff left in their paths. We shall never know the names of the painters of Bonampak and Ajanta, like the Etruscan tomb murals, are probably only pale reflections of a lost art that graced the more urban halls of living princes.” Kubler, 40.

⁸⁵ Wen Fong 1969.

⁸⁶ Kubler, 40

introduced to the Mogao grottoes. Cave 220 has provided us an opportunity to grasp the complex social-political and cultural interactions that took place at the frontier oasis in the mid-7th century, and through Cave 220, we have traced how modern historians, buddhologists, and art historians have approached the Dunhuang cave in terms of iconography and ritual studies. In the following chapters we will visit a few caves with Pure Land imagery that might be understood as “original caves” and trace the intricate rippling effect they have caused at the Mogao site. As we have mentioned earlier, the mid-7th century, Cave 209 contains some of the earliest images related to the Pure Land at Dunhuang, which take the form of Ajātaśatru Narrative passages embedded in large landscape scenes that wrap around the altar platform on the west wall. This is the first time that large landscape images appear on the main west wall in Dunhuang caves. The early 8th century Cave 217 will also be discussed in detail, for its north wall contains the first Pure Land transformation tableau that has both images of the Sixteen Meditation and the Ajātaśatru Narrative. The neighboring Cave 171 and Cave 172 form a pair on the southern side of the cliff faced. Cave 172 holds two Pure Land transformation tableaux on its north and south walls painted in different styles, whilst Cave 171 contains three Pure Land transformation tableaux on its north, south and east walls that seem to be identical. All of such caves mentioned above had great impact on cave design at Dunhuang, and we can trace their importance through the various ways in which painters appropriated their images into new cave designs.

Paying close attention to the image program of cave interiors, and process of replication and adaptation, we will turn towards two important frameworks for the Pure Land tableau. The first are the representations of the Ajātaśatru Narrative, the Buddhist karmic tale that serves as a Preface of the *Meditation Sutra*. Although Shandao’s exegetical writing of this tale focuses on “karmic causation”, as we shall see in the next chapter, the visual

tradition is predicated upon the importance of Vaidehī's physical imprisonment and the ability of Shakyamuni to come to her devotional space.

CHAPTER TWO

THE IMPRISONED QUEEN: LANDSCAPE AND VISION

Paintings in Cave 172 illustrate a familiar Dunhuang theme: an expanse of flat terrain through which a river zigzags back, in one case to lose itself in the desert sand, in the other to disappear behind an overhanging cliff, leading the eye back to where a distant mountain rises into the sunset sky; in the foreground, seated on a rug with censer in hand, Queen Vaidehī meditates upon the huge orb of the setting sun, now blackened by oxidization. In both panels the landscape is boldly painted in washes of mineral color: greens for the flat expanse, reds for the exposed earth of the cliff and river banks – a color harmony familiar to anyone who knows the countryside of west China. The painter of the Queen Vaidehī scene has broken his washes to give modeling and texture to the cliff, making broad chopping strokes with the side of the brush, an anticipation of the later big axe-cut texture stroke (*da fu pi cun*).... there is here a new flexibility in the movement of the brush and in the modulating color tone within the brushstroke. Some of the strokes are ambiguous, and the texture does not define the form very clearly; but whether this is due to the painters' lack of skill or to the fact that this is an early effort in a new direction, we cannot, of course, be sure. The importance of this detail is that for the first time, the painter seems absorbed in the new possibilities, both descriptive and expressive, of the medium. There is a new freedom in the manipulation of the tone, a new spontaneity of touch. The technical language has not yet become codified, but it is taking shape.¹

Michael Sullivan
*Chinese Landscape Painting: The Sui and
T'ang dynasties, 1980*

The history of Chinese landscape painting cannot be told without a mysterious figure named Lady Vadehī (Fig.2-1). The noble woman is seated in front of an open vista. A river dashes towards the distant horizon under a setting sun. The receding space and flickering brushstrokes are, as masterfully described by Michael Sullivan, constantly taken as hallmarks of Tang dynasty landscape painting and its rise as an independent genre. The scene discussed by Sullivan is called the “Meditation on the Sun”, which is the first of the Sixteen Meditations – a meditation practice that the historical Buddha Shakyamuni teaches Vaidehī when she was imprisoned by her son, Prince Ajātaśatru. By mastering the Sixteen

¹ Michael Sullivan, *Chinese Landscape Painting: The Sui and T'ang Dynasties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 117-118.

Meditations, the Lady and her five hundred female attendants are reborn in Amitābha's Western Paradise. This visual pairing of Lady Vaidehī as a lay female viewer and various phenomena that she meditates upon is a new pictorial invention during the Tang period. In Chapter Three, we will deal with practices of visualizing meditative phenomena, while in this chapter, our main goal is to understand the role of Lady Vaidehī in Pure Land imagery and the relationship between her body and landscape painting.

Representations of the "Sun Meditation" have given us some of the finest examples of landscape painting from the Tang period, however, for historians of Buddhist art, the inclusion of landscape here is in fact rather odd. In the *Meditations Sutra*, the Sixteen Mediations does not mention elaborate mountains and waters at all. The absence of a scriptural basis has led some scholars to suggest that Daoist beliefs of reclusion and a Chinese cult of mountains intersected with Buddhist iconography.² In other cases, scholars of funerary art have connected the Sun Meditation with ideals of "reclined wandering" —a mode of experiencing mountains and waters that played a central role in Chinese landscapes aesthetics.³ As we shall see in this chapter, such theorizations are based on misconceptions of the Sun Meditation. If we were familiar with the circumstances of Lady Vaidehī's fate as

² Katsuki specifically points out that the *Meditation Sutra* never mentions any form of landscape in the Sun Meditation passage. With no scriptural basis, Katsuki believes that such "landscape motif" came of Chinese ideas of reclusion which is rooted in Chinese landscape aesthetics. In other words, the Sun Meditation shows how a Chinese landscape culture that made its way in to Buddhist iconography. Katsuki Genichirō 勝木言一郎, "Shotō seitoki tonkō ni okeru amidajōdo zu no kenkyū 初唐 盛唐期の敦煌における阿弥陀浄土図の研究," (PhD diss., University of Tsukuba, 2004), 315.

³ Some scholars have discussed these images in terms of contemporary religious culture and practices. For Eugene Wang, the meditator's gazing at the sun and the free-flight in deep space that prompts mental sauntering represent to deep rooted religious activities in China, one is ganying, i.e., "sympathetic resonances"; the other is you, or "mental peripatetic." See Eugene Y. Wang, "Watching the Steps: Peripatetic Vision in Medieval China", *Visuality Before and Beyond the Renaissance: Seeing As Others Saw*, ed. Robert S. Nelson, (Cambridge, U.K. ; New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 116-143. Zheng Yan 鄭岩, "Tang hanxiu mu bihua shanshui tu zouyi 唐韓休墓壁畫山水圖芻議," *Gugong bowuyuan yuankan 故宮博物院院刊* [Palace Museum Journal] 181, no.5 (2015): 87-109, 159.

described in the *Meditations Sutra*, we would know that she was neither seated in landscape nor directly looking at it at all. Locked up by her own son, she was imprisoned deep within palace quarters. The Buddha instructs Vaidehī to sit down, face towards the west, and focus on the setting sun. The Lady is not looking *at* landscape, but rather seeing *through* landscape.

Lady Vaidehī's perspective had a profound influence on the development of landscape aesthetics in East Asian art. At the same time, she provides a key to understanding how Buddhist caves were experienced. Images like the "Sun Meditation" were central to a new mode of image-making and viewing in medieval China. Widely depicted in medieval art, the figure of Lady Vaidehī is portrayed as an important viewer/meditator. What then, one might ask, is her relationship with landscapes that are so elaborately depicted yet not to be gazed upon? What art historians have generally overlooked in previous studies on the "Sun Meditation", is that the visual consumption of landscape has always been predominantly understood through masculine discourses of subjugation and adventure. An important goal of this chapter is to rethink theories of Tang landscape through the figure of Lady Vaidehī as a lay female viewer and Buddhist meditator. Who is she? What does she see? What does it mean to see through her eyes? We will come to understand how landscape in Pure Land art exists within a visual structure that is specially defined through the position of Lady Vaidehī and architectural enclosures. As most art historians have only focused on landscape elements, we will rethink spatial structures that are constituted by both landscape and architecture, and how they bring about new modes of seeing in Tang Pure Land art. The relationship between landscape and Vaidehī is particularly activated by the presence of water and a potential viewer framed by architecture. This structure led to profound shifts in how a viewer *sees through* pictorial space. Vaidehī, as a viewer *par excellence* trains viewers of a Pure Land tableau how to see and how to act.

Sullivan's detailed analysis represents ways in which art historians have studied the "Sun Meditation". It also reveals methodological problems that have led to general misconceptions of landscape art at Dunhuang in general. Sullivan's seminal study on the birth of Chinese landscape is based upon complex formalistic analysis of landscape images in various archaeological contexts. However, he focuses solely on painting techniques and brushstrokes. When describing the "broad chopping strokes" that contour the rock cliffs, he quickly associates them with specific brush techniques ("big axe-cut texture stroke") that were described in later painting treatises. Sullivan keenly notes a sense of self-awareness of the brush-wielding painter – someone that is excited about and absorbed by new possibilities that could be achieved by his brush. However, this moment of eighth-century enthusiasm and spontaneity is forcefully tamed by discourse. Sullivan wraps up by claiming how this entire affair was merely the formation of a "codified technical language". Cropped out of its original context, the visualization of an important Buddhist meditation is reduced into an artistic practice that is largely regarded as secular.

This chapter will try to return landscape imagery back into the Tang Buddhist cave, while rethinking the impact that later landscape aesthetics had on the study of Pure Land related representations of landscape. The "Sun Meditation" discussed by Sullivan is located on the north wall of Cave 172, as a small detail from a full-wall Pure Land transformation tableau (Fig.1-15b). The mid-eighth century Cave 172 is notable for having two Pure Land tableaux doubly portrayed on its north and south walls. On both tableaux, landscape elements only appear at the top of the two side strips: on the right is the beginning of the Sixteen Meditations (Fig.2-1), and on the left, the dramatic ending of a Buddhist tale – the Ajātaśatru Narrative, which is also the preface to the *Meditations Sutra* (Fig.2-16). Bound by similar mountains and waters, the two passages form an apparent pair, with one showing the lady postured and calm, and the other full of action and pathos. The fate of Vaidehī is specifically

described in the Ajātaśatru Narrative and understanding representations of the narrative will be key for us to recognize the relationship between Vaidehī and representations of mountains and water.

We will examine the earliest representations of Lady Vaidehī at Dunhuang in three caves: two mid-7th century grottoes Cave 431 and Cave 209, and also the early 8th century Cave 217. By closely analyzing images of the Ajātaśatru Narrative in these three caves, we will realize how Vaidehī's body and viewpoints create a new mode of seeing that is the result of major political transformations in the period as the Tang Empire sought to make itself the heartland of Buddhism. The cave became a space that could compress impossible spatial and temporal distances, creating a new vision of Chinese and Indian sacred geographies. Lady Vaidehī became a vehicle through which this new vision was constructed and experienced. First, we will review theories of landscape art in medieval China, as well as methodological concerns that have brought about misconceptions of the Sun Meditation. Second, we will look at the changing role of Vaidehī in Buddhist commentaries on female salvation and examine how she became a vessel through which anyone could be reborn in paradise. Third, I look at how Vaidehī creates a pivoting of perspectives in mural painting, tracing a shift from modes of viewing linear narrative sequences to a new penetrating gaze that can see through architectural space. Finally, I show how the cave is reimagined as a portal that brings together sacred time and geography, inviting the viewer to become Lady Vaidehī.

2.1 Lady Vaidehī and Landscape Aesthetics

The 7th century was a critical time for the history of landscape painting in China, and this history is often told through images of mountains and water in Pure Land related imagery at Dunhuang. Landscapes had already become an independent painting genre – “*shanshui* 山水

水” by this time, but the scale of landscape representation became much larger, and ideas of naturalism and pictorial space came to the forefront of art historical inquiries.⁴ However, with few surviving works in the portable scroll or painted screen format, earlier studies on the history of Tang landscapes have foregrounded textual records on landscape aesthetics and biographies of painters, while relying on mural paintings from a few early 8th century royal tombs and objects from the Shōsoin repository that houses image-bearing objects from Tang China. Specialists of Dunhuang art have greatly contributed to our knowledge of 7th-8th century landscape representation, but as most scholars search for precursors to the monumental ink landscapes of the Northern Song (960 – 1127) court, landscape specialists have often treated Dunhuang landscape imagery during this period as “no more than background to figure subjects.”⁵

There are two main problems with such earlier studies of landscape painting in the Tang: 1) Art historians tend to rely on textual records and employ aesthetic discourses that were developed after the Tang. 2) Landscape specialists tend to decontextualize archeological evidence found in tombs, caves, and decorative objects by analyzing representations of landscape as if they were similar to painted scrolls. Such methodological problems reveal to us ways in which misconceptions were developed when dealing with the relationship

⁴ “In the Sui and Tang, landscape comes down to earth, or rather the landscape painter is now able to translate his knowledge of the real landscape into forms that match his experience. The age of innocence is left behind, and something of the wonder and magic is gone; but in the process landscape painting, by the end of the eighth century, has found itself as an expressive art form... The seventh century, then, may be seen as the period of breaking away from the artificial, elegant style of the sixth century as the period when a new sense of space and a new breadth of design were achieved. Now for the first time (at least in wall-painting) different styles and techniques can be distinguished.” Michael Sullivan 1980, xiv, 109. Also see Terukazu Akiyama, 195-209, Wang Bomin 王伯敏, *Dunhuang shanshui bihua yanjiu* 敦煌壁畫山水研究 (Hangzhou: Zhejiang renmin meishu chu banshe, 2000), 88-95, Zhao Shengliang 赵声良, “*Shilun mogaoku tangdai qianqi de shanshui hua* 试论莫高窟唐代前期的山水畫,” *Dunhuang Research* no.3 (1987), 14-20.

⁵ Sullivan 1980, 107.

between Lady Vaidehī and landscape imagery in Dunhuang caves. We will revisit aesthetic categories of landscape representation that existed prior to or were current during the Tang period.

The discovery and excavation in the past decade of a plethora of 8th century tombs surrounding the Chang'an area has led to new interest in Tang landscape painting. Large representations of landscape situated inside painted frames or organized in fictive screen panels were found as mural paintings in the main chambers of elite tombs, adjacent to the body of the deceased. Foregrounding archeological evidence, Li Xingming has tried to reexamine longstanding histories of Tang landscapes that we have uncritically inherited from the later Song period.⁶ Polychrome Tang images of mountains and water, like Dunhuang murals, were traditionally called “Blue and Green” (*qinglü* 青綠) or “Gold and Blue” (*jinbi* 金碧) landscapes by modern scholars. This was a particular style of painting that was attributed to a father and son pair called Li Sixun 李思訓 (651–716) and Li Zhaodao 李昭道 (675–758), who were kin of the ruling Li family and were known to be accomplished painters (Fig.2-2). The “Blue and Green” style of landscape painting – promoted by the “Two Lis” (*erli* 二李), represented aristocratic taste during this time. Li Xingming, however, reminds us that such appellations were invented in the Song (960-1127) to differentiate polychrome landscapes from a new category of monochrome ink landscapes that were later developed in the second half of the 8th century.⁷ Li suggests that we should rethink 7-8th century landscapes based on archeological evidence, beyond painting discourses that were developed

⁶ Li Xingming 李星明, *Tangdai mushi bihua yanjiu* 唐代墓室壁畫研究 (Xi'an : Shanxi ren min mei shu chu ban she, 2005), 336.

⁷ Li Xingming, 334.

after the 9th century by the art collector, biographer and critic Zhang Yanyuan 張彥遠 (814 - 877), or painting treatises developed at the Song court.

Landscape specialists, like Sullivan, tend to focus only on painting techniques and styles of the representation of mountains and water, without taking into consideration the material and spatial contexts of these images. Resituating such “mountain images” back into medieval tombs and Buddhist caves will give us a better picture of how this visual mode was constructed and understood. Landscape representation and funerary art have always intersected with each other in the Chinese pictorial tradition. Chinese tomb interiors were designed to inscribe the deceased into a universe that would, to borrow from Jessica Rawson, “guarantee permanence on a cosmic scale.”⁸ Playing an important role in constructing a coherent universe within the tomb interior, painted landscapes that started to emerge in Tang tomb chambers served three main functions: 1) Located near the body of the deceased or his/her tomb stone, the painted landscape serves as a frame for the tomb owner, 2) Frequently portrayed as a fictive screen, it gives the illusion of dividing physical space between what is in front of the image and a hidden space behind it. 3) As a meta-picture, the landscape subject matter plays with pictorial illusionism and the craft of painting.

The widely discussed 8th century tomb discovered in 1994 in Zhujiadao, Fuping, Shaanxi province gives us a good sense of how landscape images were positioned in a tomb chamber (Fig.2-3). The tomb murals cleverly play with pictorial frames to enact a dynamic interplay between real and fictive spaces. In the main chamber, six painted panels of landscape were found on the west wall (Fig.2-4). Also framed within painted rectangular enclosures, are an image of a lion, some cranes, and an ox tamed by a foreigner (Fig.2-5).

⁸ Jessica Rawson, “The Origins of Chinese Mountain Painting: Evidence from Archaeology,” in *Proceedings of the British Academy*. London: Published for the British Academy (Oxford University Press, Volume 117: 2001), 7.

The body of the deceased, now lost, would have been placed on the dais-like platform in front of the painted landscape panels. Across the chamber on the east wall are depictions of a live orchestra with dancing performers. Unlike the landscape and animals, the performance is unframed, and this is the same for painted servants that appear in the spaces between painted frames. Most remarkably, one of the figures poses as a painter, lifting his brush against the frame of the ox painting, while two attendants next to the landscape screens are holding bowls of water and ink – basic devices for painting and calligraphy (Fig.2-6). In this sense the Zhujiadao tomb landscape images are portrayed as fictive screens that might have been common in interior settings to partition domestic space, and now serve as a backdrop that frames the body of the deceased. The subject of landscape itself is also deeply connected with ideas of immortality and transcendence. And as Zheng Yan has argued, the conspicuous paintbrush wielded by the painted servant—a highly reflexive and radically new type of tomb imagery in the Tang period- shows how the act of painting for both the dead and living actively intersect with each other in the tomb chamber.⁹

Images of landscape in the guise of painted screens played an important role in constituting a world for the deceased within Tang tombs. How should we, then, understand the role of landscape in Buddhist caves? When tracing the development of Tang landscapes, Pure Land images from Cave 209, Cave 217, and Cave 172 are frequently discussed by painting scholars and experts of funerary art as evidence for larger claims about the history of landscape painting and the development of medieval tombs. However, few have discussed the role of landscape in 7-8th century Dunhuang caves and how they constituted or led to new visual modes and conceptions of cave interiors. We have a better view of things happening in

⁹ Zheng Yan 鄭岩, “Yazai huakuang shang de bijian – shilun muzang bihua yu chuantong huihuashi de guanlian 壓在“畫框”上的筆尖——試論墓葬壁畫與傳統繪畫史的關聯,” in *Shizhe de Mianju: Han Tang Muzang Yishu Yanjiu* 逝者的面具：漢唐墓葬藝術研究 [Masking Death: Funerary Art of Medieval China] (Beijing: Beijing da xue chu ban she, 2013), 352-377.

6th century caves, in which mountain images were used to demarcate the boundaries of heavenly realms in Western Wei caves (Fig.2-7). Cave 249 is known for containing new images of the heavens and the cosmos on its four sloped ceilings. Forming a celestial canopy, the ceiling of the cave is covered with winged horses, wind gods, and flying immortals that resemble those found in Han dynasty tombs. A similar layout can be found in a 4-5th century tomb in Dingjiazha, Jiuquan, not far from Dunhuang (Fig.2-8). The mountain rims portrayed at the bottom of the ceiling slopes in Cave 249 clearly separate the space of Buddhist iconography below, and the heavenly realm of transcendence above.¹⁰

The image of Lady Vaidehī meditating on the setting sun that surfaced with Pure Land transformation tableaux in the 7th century presents a very different type of landscape – it is a landscape with a viewer. Using the “Sun Meditation” in Cave 172 as a comparison, Zheng Yan suggests that there is a structural relationship between the “Sun Meditation” images and the large landscape image found in the mid-8th century tomb of the minister Han Xiu 韓休 (?-740), which also featured a river running towards the horizon through rocky banks, with the sun in the middle of the sky on the back wall of the tomb chamber (Fig.2-9,10). Zheng Yan further implies that this particular motif is related to the idea of “reclined

¹⁰ He Shizhe 贺世哲, “Dunhuang mogaoku di ersijiu ku kuding bipi bihua neirong kaoshi 敦煌莫高窟第二四九窟窟頂西披壁畫內容考釋,” *Dunhuangxue jikan* 敦煌學輯刊, no.3 (1983): 28-32. Duan Wenji 段文傑, “*Daojiao tici shi ruhe jinru fojiao shiku de - mogaoku 249 ku kuding bihua neirong tantao* 道教題材是如何進入佛教石窟的——莫高窟 249 窟窟頂壁畫內容探討,” in Duan Wenjie 段文傑, *Dunhuang shiku yishu lunji* 敦煌石窟藝術論集 (Lanzhou: renmin meishu chubanshe, 1988), 318-334. Ning Qiang 寧強, “*Shang dengxian tu yu weimo jie jingbian - mogao ku di 249 ku kuding bihua zaitan* 上登仙圖與維摩詰經變 — 莫高窟第 249 窟窟頂壁畫再探,” *Dunhuang Research*, no.1 (1990): 30-37. Zhang Yuanlin 張元林, “*Jingtu sixiang yu xianjie sixiang de heliu - guanyua mogaoku 249 ku kuding xibibihua dingming de zaisikao* 淨土思想與仙界思想的合流 — 關於莫高窟第 249 窟窟頂西披壁畫定名的再思考,” *Dunhuang Research* 80, no.4 (2003):1-8. Sha Wutian 沙武田, “*Beichao shiqi fojiao shiku yishu yangshi de xichuan jiqi liuban de quxuxing tezheng - yi maijishan di 127 ku yue mogagoku di 249, 285 ku de bijiao* 北朝時期佛教石窟藝術樣式的西傳及其流變的區域性特征——以麥積山第 127 窟與莫高窟第 249、285 窟的比較,” *Dunhuang xue jikan* 敦煌學輯刊 no.2 (2011): 86-106.

wandering” (*woyou* 臥遊) in medieval China. The term “reclined wandering” was coined in the biography of Zong Bing 宗炳’s (375–443), a painter and musician who is most well-known for penning the earliest theory of landscapes in Chinese history - the *Preface of the Landscape Painting* (*hua shanshui xu* 畫山水序). His biography in the *Book of the Song* (*songshu* 宋書), a late 5th century text, describes how when old and sickly, Zong Bing painted all the famous mountains on the walls of his room, so he could “wander through them when reclining” (*woyi youzhi* 臥以遊之).¹¹

The concept of “wandering in recline”, which perfectly combines a sedentary viewer with a peripatetic mode of vision, triggers fantasies of imaginary journeys that are leisurely, philosophical, playful or adventurous.¹² The idea of “*you*” originates from the philosophical ideals in Zhuangzi’s *Inner Chapters*, which Michael Crandell defines as a type of wandering that “allows one to shift back and forth between various perspectives and view opinions without the friction of conflict and emotional upset.”¹³ In the context of Zong Bing’s biography, this mode of activity is without a clear destination, a type of free spirit mental wandering in the images of famous mountains. This idea became tremendously important in the aesthetics of Chinese landscape painting, and Zheng Yan uses this concept to theorize Han Xiu’s tomb landscape and the Sun Meditation of Lady Vaidehī. However, the discourse on “reclined wandering” only gained momentum as an aesthetic category in the Song period, and was rarely addressed in Tang sources.

¹¹ Zheng Yan, 2015.

¹² Paul Kroll, ‘On “Far Roaming”,’ *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 116, no. 4 (Oct. - Dec., 1996): 653- 669.

¹³ Michael Mark Crandell, “On Walking without Touching the Ground: “Play in the Inner Chapters of the Chuang-tzu,” *Experimental Essays on Chuang-Tzu* (Asian Studies at Hawaii, No. 29), ed. Victor H. Mair (University of Hawaii Press, 1983), 101–124.

Nevertheless, sophisticated Tang urbanites did, in fact, enjoy sojourning in mountains and viewing landscape, and frequently wrote about such experiences in their poetry.¹⁴ What art historians have generally overlooked is that this particular enjoyment of landscape was predominantly a male activity. A Shosoin biwa panel shows two men sitting on a large rock boulder surrounded by water (Fig.2-11 ab). Both men are gazing at the large mountain across the water surface. A stream flows down the mountain crease, and the hilltops are covered with vegetation and trees. Mist and clouds float above the mountain peak. Apparently, this leisurely delight in landscape scenery is also an occasion for artistic creativity. The man shown in profile is holding an open scroll in his left hand (Fig.2-12). In his right hand, he holds an ink brush, which he had probably just dabbed in the pool of ink that is held by the inkstone placed in front of him. A small inkcake sits beside the inkstone, and ink was perhaps freshly ground with the mountain stream water that surrounds them. Whether these lofty gentlemen were about to write a poem or paint a picture, water from the mountain – the very substance of this landscape - is directly transformed into a product of poetic and artistic inspiration.

As shown in this biwa panel, in the Chinese artistic tradition, landscape was largely a poetic and political space for male action. In the realm of “mountain and waters”, one would usually find such lofty gentlemen, but also noble huntsmen, meditating monks, dissident hermits, or love-struck princes that fall for river nymphs. Female figures were bound with the flora and fauna of such spaces, as erotic fairies or magic queens. Close copies of Gu Kaizhi’s 顧愷之 (345- 406) *Nymph of the Luo River* epitomize such gender dynamics in landscape aesthetics (Fig.2-13). As the scroll unfolds, the viewer of the painting follows the Prince Cao Zhi’s viewpoint and experiences his romantic dalliance with the female river nymph. In their

¹⁴ Paul Kroll, “Lexical Landscapes and Textual Mountains in the High T’ang,” *T’oung Pao*, Second Series 84, Fasc. 1/3 (1998): 62-101.

first encounter, the body of the nymph is not only surrounded by landscape, but is inherently part of her environment. The painting is based on a poem composed by the prince that recounts the love affair, and features of the nymph's physique are famously described through a series of metaphors. She moves with the "sinuous grace of soaring dragons at play" and is "luminous like lotus rising from clear waves." In the painting, both the "soaring dragon" and "clear waves" have been directly transformed into pictorial elements in the landscape that surrounds her body.¹⁵ The poet prince/viewer's poetic consumption of the nymph's physical beauty is coupled with our visual consumption of landscape imagery. The wandering male poet looks and experiences what is before him, while the ethereal female nymph, embodying her environment, is being looked upon as the potentially conquerable other.¹⁶

This impulse of domination and subjugation over nature or wilderness runs through representations of mountains in the medieval period of China. Eugene Wang has traced landscape imagery related to the *Lotus Sutra* on the back of 6th century steles through topographical visual modes that are rooted in early Chinese representations of otherworldly, supernatural and numinous realms of wilderness that could be found on Shang ritual bronzes and Han mountain shaped incense burners (Fig. 2-14). Landscape, portrayed under topographic impulses is designed to reveal the spirits and demons that dwell beyond civilization and in turn control and subjugate them (Fig. 1-6). This particular mode in which

¹⁵ David Hawkes, *The Songs of the South: An Ancient Chinese Anthology of Poems By Qu Yuan and Other Poets*. (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England ; New York, N.Y., U.S.A.: Penguin Books, 1985), 106-109. Chen Pao-chen 陳葆真. *Luoshenfu tu yu zhongguo gudai gushihua 洛神賦圖與中國古代故事畫* (Taipei Shi: Shi tou chu ban gu fen you xian gong si, 2011), 31-36, 173, 187-189.

¹⁶ W.J.T. Mitchell, "Imperial Landscape," in *Landscape and Power*, ed. W.J.T. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 5-34.

earlier conceptions of landscape as talismanic intermingle with new Buddhist worldviews that were introduced into China during the final years of the Han dynasty.¹⁷

Found in 8th century tombs, 6th century Dunhuang caves or Tang dynasty musical instruments, representations of “mountains and waters” fulfilled impulses for aesthetic consumption, philosophical reflection and political domination of others and otherworldly realms. Indexing immortality and transcendence, they mark the boundaries between the realms of the human and the supernatural. Against these preexisting conceptions of landscape representation, the portrayal of landscape and Lady Vaidehī as a female viewer brings us into an uncharted terrain. What, one might ask, does it mean for a woman to look at mountains and waters?

2.2 Lady Vaidehī and the Ajātaśatru Narrative

As we have mentioned earlier, the idea of Vaidehī looking at landscape in the Sun Meditation is an entirely paradoxical situation. As an imprisoned queen, landscape was entirely out of her reach. The “Sun Meditation” instructs Lady Vaidehī to sit down, face towards the west, and focus on the setting sun. Once Vaidehī is able to keep the image of the sun in her mind, even when her eyes are closed, she is instructed to move her attention to the next Meditation on Water. Neither does she focus on the landscape, nor is she encouraged to mentally roam through the mountains and waters. Clear instructions are given at every step, and each meditation is purposeful, with a strict agenda. As we shall see in detail later in this chapter, the Lady attains visions of the Western Pure Land through intense acts of repentance. This mode of seeing is very different from the “you” tradition that emphasizes free-spirited and

¹⁷ Eugene Y. Wang 2005, 182-237.

purposeless roaming, which takes landscape as a destination to wander about in. It is also different from male-oriented activities of aesthetically consuming or politically subjugating landscape for self-preservation and fulfillment.

And yet, the prevailing presence of landscape imagery, so brilliantly and gracefully portrayed in Cave 172, is hard for us to ignore. If we have understood dominant landscape aesthetics in medieval China through the viewpoint of a male actor and viewer, would it be possible to rethink Tang landscape through the eyes of Lady Vaidehī? Our first task is to understand the significance of this figure in medieval art and literature. As a widely depicted figure in Pure Land art, there seems to be very limited interest in her in Buddhist literature. If we look at Buddhist or Jain narratives that feature Lady Vaidehī, her role in the *Meditation Sutra* strikes us as being highly unique. It is the only version of the story that features the royal consort as a protagonist; yet, at the same time, Vaidehī's female gender was posed as a problem for theologians, who frequently attempted to fold her identity into discourses of Pure Land claims for universal salvation.

The Ajātaśatru Narrative and the Sixteen Meditations seem to have been two separate entities that were combined together in the *Meditation Sutra*. According to Yamada Meiji, the appellation of the Buddha in the *Meditation Sutra* consistently alternated between “Amitābha” (*Amituo fo* 阿彌陀佛) and “Amitayus” (*Wuliangshou fo* 無量壽佛) in different sections of the text, which point to different origins.¹⁸ As a well-known tale in both Buddhist and Jain traditions, the Ajātaśatru Narrative has a rich textual history of its own, with up to forty different sources of various languages and traditions. Within this textual tradition, the *Meditation Sutra* version is highly distinctive. In all other versions, Ajātaśatru is the *de facto*

¹⁸ Yamada Meiji 山田明爾, “Kangyōkō: Muryōjubutsu to Amidabutsu 觀經攷: 無量壽仏と阿彌陀仏,” *Journal of Ryukoku University 龍谷大学論集* 408, no.4 (1976), 76-95.

protagonist, while in the *Meditation Sutra*, the story shifts half way and centers on Ajātaśatru's mother, Lady Vaidehī.

The narrative of Ajātaśatru could be found in a variety of Buddhist texts translated into Chinese in early medieval China, such as the *Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* 大般涅槃經, *Shisong lü* 十誦律, and the *Foshuo Weishengyuan jing* 佛說未生冤經, translated by Zhi Qian 支謙(222–252 CE).¹⁹ In all Chinese and Sanskrit versions of the story, the protagonist of the narrative is always the prince Ajātaśatru (*adushi* 阿闍世), who usurped the throne, imprisoned, and eventually killed his own father King Bimbisāra (*pingsha wang* 瓶沙王, *pinpo suoluo* 頻婆娑羅), and became the king of Magadha 摩竭陀, which is a realm located in current day Northern India. The moralizing narrative takes place during the lifetime of the historical Buddha Shakyamuni, and primarily focuses on the prince's act of patricide/regicide, and his final repentance, in order to illustrate the mechanisms of karmic retribution.

A general outline of the Ajātaśatru narratives goes as follows: King Bimbisāra kills a forest sage, and when the Queen became pregnant, fortunes are told about how the newborn would cause harm to the King. In Rājagṛha, when the Prince grows up, under the influence of Devadatta (the Buddha's arch enemy), he imprisons his father King Bimbisāra and takes the throne for himself. His mother Lady Vaidehī secretly smuggles food to the King, but is discovered by the Prince who stops his mother from visiting again. Deprived of food, the King engages in religious activity and views the Buddha on the Vulture Peak through a window of his prison cell, and the joy sustains his life. The prince learns about this and has the King's feet cut (or blocks the window), so he could not see outside the window. One day,

¹⁹ T. 1, 7. T. 23, 1435. T. 14, 0507.

when the Prince is enjoying the company of his new born son, his mother reminds him how his father the King had been kind to him as a child. This causes the Prince to repent. He then decides to release the King. The King learns that Ajātaśatru is approaching, but not knowing that the Prince is actually coming to free him, he dies of fright or commits suicide. The King is then reborn in heaven (sometimes as Vaisravana's son).²⁰

The Prince's mother, Lady Vaidehī plays a rather minor role in this narrative, and remains an ambivalent character caught between the power struggle between her husband and son. The figure of Lady Vaidehī is never mentioned outside the corpus of Ajātaśatru narratives and has no independent storyline. In this light, the *Meditation Sutra* is exceptionally unique, for it is the single text that takes Vaidehī as the narrative's central protagonist, in which the second half of the story solely focuses on her fate and eventual salvation through the Buddha's intervention.²¹

The *Meditation Sutra* tells a different kind of story: In the city of Rājagṛha, under the influence of Devadatta, the Heir Apparent Ajātaśatru imprisoned his father King Bimbisāra and confined him in a "room with walls seven deep" (*qizhongshi nei* 七重室內).²² The King's consort Lady Vaidehī smuggled food and drink to the King. Facing Vulture Peak, the King asked Mahāmaudgalyāyana to give him the eight precepts, and Mahāmaudgalyāyana "flew swiftly as a hawk" (*ru yingsun fei* 如鷹隼飛) to the King and together with Pūrṇa, another disciple of the Buddha, taught him the eight precepts for many days.²³ Ajātaśatru

²⁰ For a details study of the different versions of the Ajātaśatru Narrative, see Michael Radich, *How Ajātaśatru Was Reformed: The Domestication of "Ajase" and Stories in Buddhist History*. Tokyo: International Institute for Buddhist Studies of the International College for Postgraduate Buddhist Studies, 2011

²¹ Radich, 33-47

²² T.12, 0365: 341a04-05.

²³ T.12, 0365: 341a20-a21

learned that his father still had not died after three weeks of starvation, and the prison guards told the Heir Apparent about his mother’s activities. This made him furious and he “drew his sharp sword, intending to kill her 即執利劍欲害其母” (*jizhi lijian yuhai qimu*).²⁴ Two ministers came forth and advised the Heir Apparent not to kill his own mother for his sins will become unredeemable. He spares Lady Vaidehī’s life and imprisons her instead. The distraught royal consort faced Vulture Peak and worshiped the Buddha from afar, asking him to send in Ānanda and Mahāmaudgalyāyana to comfort her. At that time, the Buddha was on Vulture Peak and felt her thoughts, so he immediately dispatched Ānanda and Mahāmaudgalyāyana “to come to her through the air” (*congkong erlai* 從空而來), while he himself “disappeared from the mountain and reappeared in the royal palace” (*cong qidujue shan mo yu wanggong chu* 從耆闍崛山沒於王宮出).²⁵ Lady Vaidehī raised her head and saw Śākyamuni Buddha in front of her. She “tore off her ornaments and prostrated on the ground” (*zijue yingluo jushen toudi* 自絕瓔珞舉身投地), and asked the Buddha what karmic relations led to her fate, and beseeched the Buddha to teach her how to visualize a land of pure karmic perfection.²⁶ The Buddha showed Vaidehī the “Buddha lands of ten directions” (*shifang fogue* 十方佛國),²⁷ and the Lady selected the Buddha Land of Amitāyus. The Buddha smiled, and rays of light from his mouth shined on King Bimbisāra’s head. The King’s mind’s eye saw the Buddha in the distance, and gained spiritual progress to reach the stage of non-returner. At the end of the preface, the Buddha begins to teach the Lady the

²⁴ T.12, 0365: 341b09

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ T.12, 0365: 341b13-b14

²⁷ T.12, 0365: 341b23

Sixteen Meditations, and at the end of the sutra, the Buddha assured Lady Vaidehī and her five hundred female attendants that they would all be reborn in Amitābha's Pure Land.²⁸

What was the importance of Lady Vadehi being a woman? She comes last amongst the four groups of Buddhist followers, after monks, nuns and laymen. The *Mediation Sutra* itself seemed barely concerned of her role as a laywoman, yet her direct entry into the Pure Land in female form was at the heart of Buddhist debates concerning female salvation in medieval China. In such debates, Vaidehī becomes a vehicle for discourses to be layered upon. Her identity remained unclear throughout the commentary tradition.

In Buddhist soteriology, the impurity of a woman's body was constantly regarded as a liability. In earlier forms of Buddhism, a woman's ability to achieve enlightenment was hindered by the so-called "Five Obstacles" (*wuzhang* 五障), which refers to five type of rebirths that are out of reach for women: rebirth as the god Brahma, Śakra, Māra, as the Wheel Turning King (*cakravartin*), and the Buddha.²⁹ Instead, women had to first be reborn as men to take on the path towards enlightenment. The ascent of Mahayana discourses on the universality of Buddha-nature in medieval China led to new possibilities concerning the enlightenment of women. Perhaps the most well-known is the tale of the dragon-girl in the *Lotus Sutra*.³⁰ As a young girl, she confronted Śāriputra's objection that female bodies were hindered by their defiled state, and her female body immediately transformed into that of a man, and quickly attained Buddhahood. This dramatic episode of sudden change of sex led to

²⁸ T12, 0365.

²⁹ Lin Hsin-Yi 林欣, *She hui gui zhen : zhong gu Han di Fo jiao fa mie guan yu fu nü xin yang* 捨穢歸真：中古漢地佛教法滅觀與婦女信仰 (Banqiao Shi: Dao xiang chu ban she, 2008), 182-187. Also see, Alan Sponberg, "Attitudes toward Women and the Feminine in Early Buddhism," in *Buddhism, Sexuality and Gender*, ed. José Igancio Cabezón, (State University of New York Press, 1992), 3-36.

³⁰ Diana Y. Paul and Frances A. Wilson. *Women in Buddhism: Images of the Feminine in Mahāyāna Tradition* (Berkeley, Calif.: Asian Humanities Press, 1979), 185-193.

several debates on the question of the transformation of the female body and the possibilities for women attaining Buddhahood with great expediency.³¹

The vows of Amitābha eliminated gender differences in the Pure Land all together, for all women and men are to be reborn in paradise in male form.³² Amitābha's Western Pure Land was purposefully ranked higher than Maitreya's Tusita Heaven because the Tusita Heaven included women, and the Western Pure Land did not.³³ This flattening of genders was of great concern for Pure Land commentators. Vasubandhu, a 4th-5th century monk from Gandhara wrote specifically in his *Rebirth Treatise* (*Wuliangshou youpo tisheng yuansheng jie* 無量壽經優婆提舍願生偈) (sometimes known as *Wangsheng lun* 往生論), that “Women, the disabled, and those of the Two Vehicles (the Śrāvakas and the Pratyekabuddhas) will not attain rebirth (*nürenuji quegen, ershseng zhong busheng* 女人及根缺, 二乘種不生).”³⁴

Vasubandhu's treatise was translated into Chinese by Bodhiruci 菩提流支, an Indian monk at the Northern Wei (368-535) court in the early 6th century. Vasubandhu's stance on who could or could not be reborn stirred quite a bit of confusion, and Chinese commentators often felt

³¹ Jan Nattier points out that in this episode of the *Lotus Sutra*, what alarmed skeptics such as Śāriputra was not the species of the dragon-girl (a non-human dragon), but her gender. The sex change in the dragon-girls enlightenment was still required, and in this way, the *Lotus Sutra* is simply following traditional views of gender in Buddhism. What is special is the expediency of the dragon-girls transformation into male form and her enlightenment. See Jan Nattier, “Gender and Hierarchy in the Lotus Sutra,” in *Readings of the Lotus Sutra*, eds. Stephen F. Teiser and Jacqueline I. Stone (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 83-106. For sex change, also see Stephanie Balkwill, “The Sūtra on Transforming the Female Form: Unpacking an Early Medieval Chinese Buddhist Text,” *Journal of Chinese Religions* 44, no.2 (2016): 127-148.

³² “If, when I attain Buddhahood, women in the immeasurable and inconceivable Buddha lands of the ten directions who, having heard my Name, rejoice in faith, awaken aspiration for enlightenment, and wish to renounce womanhood should after death be reborn again as women, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.” “設我得佛，十方無量不可思議諸佛世界，其有女人聞我名字，歡喜信樂，發菩提心，厭惡女身，壽終之後復為女像者，不取正覺”；T.12, 0360: 0268c21-c24. English translation, see Gomez, 170.

³³ “兜率雖是天宮。由有女人。故名之為穢。極樂雖是地界。由無女人。故號之為淨”；T. 47, 1963: 100b02-b03

³⁴ T. 26, 1542: 0231a14.

obliged to clarify his point. These exegetical attempts explicitly drew upon Vaidehī's femininity as evidence.³⁵ Jingying Huiyuan 淨影慧遠(523 – 592), a Sui dynasty (581-619) monk born in Dunhuang, who wrote one of the first extensive commentaries of the *Meditation Sutra*, established two main approaches to make sense of the seeming contradiction between Vasubandhu's treatise and Vaidehī's rebirth: 1) What Vasubandhu actually meant was that *after* rebirth in the Pure Land, there will be no women.³⁶ 2) Vaidehī is in fact a “great bodhisattva” (*da pusa* 大菩薩) and her form is only manifested as a woman to convey Buddhist teachings towards “common beings” (Chinese: *fanfu* 凡夫, Sanskrit: Prthagjanas).³⁷

Huiyuan's contemporaries, such as Zhiyi 智顓 (538 – 597) and later commentators commonly refer to his two arguments on the status of Lady Vadehī.³⁸ Huiyuan's second

³⁵ Women, the disabled, and those that reject Mahayana Buddhism are placed together in these commentaries. For our purposes in this chapter, we will only focus on the issue of Vaidehī's gender. Kenneth K. Tanaka specifically discusses how commentators such as Jingying Huiyuan, discussed the status of Vaidehī as either a Prthagjanas (mortal being) or a Āryapudgalas (noble person or great bodhisattva). The status of Vaidehī was crucial for commentators to justify whether or not the Sixteen Meditations were meant for common mortal beings or noble persons. See Kenneth K. Tanaka, 80-81.

³⁶ “A questions is asked, “According to the texts such as the *Rebirth Treatise*, it is stated that women and those with deficient faculties are not reborn [in the Pure Land]. This Sutra, however, speaks of Vaidehī and her five hundred female attendants all being reborn. How do you account for this?” That can be explained as follows. When the commentary states that women and those with deficient faculties do not attain rebirth, they are referring to after rebirth in the Pure Land. There are no women in the Pure Land because those who are reborn in that country have pure rewards and are freed from desires.” “問曰：依如《往生論》中宣說女人根缺不生，此經宣說韋提希等五百侍女同皆往生，是義云何。釋言：論說女人根缺不得生者就後為言，生彼國者淨報離欲故無女人”； T.37, 1749: 184b21-25. English translation Tanaka, 186

³⁷ In sub segment five, “The Buddha saying to Vaidehī, ‘You are a Prthagjana,’” refers to her capabilities. ‘You are unable to see far’, reveal what Vaidehī is incapable of. Vaidehī is in reality a great Bodhisattva. As this encounter, “She obtained the Insight of Non-arising” reveals how [the Buddha] know that she was not of the small [vehicle] but that she manifested as a Prthagjana. “第五段中告韋提希汝是凡夫彰其分齊，不能遠觀彰所不堪。韋提夫人實大菩薩，此會即得無生法忍。明知不小亦化為凡”； T.37, 1749:179b16-24. English translation Tanaka, 152

³⁸ “問論：女人根缺不生，此經韋提希及五百侍女，同皆往生。釋言：論說女人根缺不生者。就彼為言，生彼國者淨根離欲故，無女人身根精上故，無根缺經語初往故，有善心一切得往”； T. 37, 1750: 193b17-b21. “問曰。韋提希是大菩薩。為化眾生。現受女身。生於逆子。豈實是凡

argument demonstrates how the status of Vaidehī remained highly ambiguous in the commentarial tradition. For theologians expounding the universal claim of the Mahayana as a “Greater Vehicle” (*dasheng* 大乘) for all sentient beings, it was important that Vaidehī was an unenlightened common being. In the *Meditation Sutra*, Buddha specifically tells Vaidehī, “You are unenlightened and so your spiritual powers are weak and obscured. Since you have not yet attained the divine eye, you cannot see that which is distant. But the buddha tathāgatas have special ways to enable you to see afar (*yuanguan* 遠觀).”³⁹ However, thus stated, it was still difficult for commentators to rationalize how a laywoman like Vaidehī could be personally taught by the Buddha and attain rebirth in the Western Pure Land in female form. To make sense of this, they persistently state that Vaidehī was in fact a great bodhisattva, but it was only when receiving the Buddha’s teachings that she fulfilled her final fate. When she was receiving such teachings she had to remain a common being.

Shandao’s commentary on the *Meditation Sutra* follows his predecessors on this issue of Vaidehī’s femininity. His own inconsistencies lay bare this sort of dilemma concerning such matters. Also referring to the same quote from Vasubandhu’s *Rebirth Treatise*, Shandao expands Huiyuan’s argument and lodges Lady Vaidehī in the system of Nine Grades of Rebirth.

Question: If they say that ordinary beings and minor sages are able to be reborn [in the Pure Land], why did Vasubandhu say in the *Rebirth Treatise* that women, those

夫耶。答曰。縱令實是菩薩。現受女身化眾生者。必須隱其實德。現同凡夫攝化同類。如五百侍女佛記得往生，並未來一切女人及諸男子，悉是凡夫。並是所攝。亦得往生。如諸菩薩，或現地獄身，即引地獄眾生也；如方等經中婆藪仙人等，或現畜生身，即引畜生眾生；如涅槃經中蜂王鵝王蟻王等，或現作五逆，即引五逆眾生；如阿闍世王提婆達多等，此並能化者是假，所化者實也。韋提希既現在凡夫身，居五濁，當知，即引五濁凡夫，往生極樂也。故觀經云：佛告韋提希，汝是凡夫，未得天眼，不能遠觀，如來有異方便，令汝得見也。復次法藏比丘四十八大願，初先為一切凡夫，後始兼為三乘聖人。故知，淨土宗意，本為凡夫，兼為聖人也”； T. 47, 1963: 0090c02-c18.

³⁹ “佛告韋提希：汝是凡夫，心想羸劣，未得天眼，不能遠觀；諸佛如來有異方便，令汝得見”； T.12, 0365: 0341c22. English translation see Hisao, 68.

with physical impairment, and those of the Two Vehicles will not attain rebirth? Today those of the Two Vehicles appear in the Pure Land, how do you explain this?

Answer: You read the text but do not understand its logic. You add in confusion, and therefore cannot comprehend it. Now I will cite the teachings of the Buddha to explain this and relieve you from skepticism. Which teachings? From the three levels of the Lowest Grades in the *Meditation Sutra*. How do we know this? As said in the Highest Level of the Lowest Grade (*xiapin shangsheng* 下品上生): “If there are sentient beings who commit various evil acts and do not feel ashamed. When a foolish person such as this is about to die and happens to meet a good teacher and preaches to him the Mahayana, and teaches him to chant the name of Amitābha. When he chants the name of the Buddha, transformation buddhas and bodhisattvas will appear before him, and canopies of gold light will retrieve [him] back to the Land.

問曰：若言凡夫小聖得生者，何故天親《淨土論》云：“女人及根缺、二乘種不生？”今彼國中現有二乘，如斯論教若為消釋？”

答曰：子但誦其文不闡理，況加以封拙懷迷，無由啟悟。今引佛教以為明證，却汝疑情。何者？即《觀經》下輩三人是也。何以得知？如下品上生云：或有眾生，多造惡法，無有慚愧。如此愚人命欲終時，遇善知識為說大乘，教令稱阿彌陀佛。當稱佛時，化佛菩薩現在其前，金光華蓋迎還彼土。⁴⁰

In the commentarial tradition, Shandao is known for expanding the classes of beings that are allowed to be reborn in Amitābha’s Pure Land. The main debate is centered on the classifications of the Nine Grades of Rebirth. Taking a more conservative stance, Jingying Huiyuan did not elaborate on the three levels of the Lowest Grades in his commentary on the *Meditation Sutra*, while Shandao and his contemporary Jiakai fiercely argued for the expansion of the class of beings allowed into the Lowest Grades.⁴¹ The Nine Grades of Rebirth encompassed gender differences through a hierarchy of one’s karmic conditions. This multi-tier scheme included beings from all walks of life—from sages to criminals. Laywomen simply fall in the Lower Three Grades. Vaidehī’s femininity makes her a vehicle to demonstrate how all Pure Land devotees are able to reach the Pure Land. However, when

⁴⁰ T. 37, 1753: 0251a09-a19.

⁴¹ Zeng Yaomin 曾堯民, “Beichao guan wuliang shou jing guan –yi sengchou xiaonanhai shiku yu jingying huiyuan guanwuliangshou jing yi shu wei zhongxin 北朝《觀無量壽經》觀——以僧稠小南海石窟與淨影慧遠《觀無量壽經義疏》為中心,” *Chung-Hwa Buddhist Studies*, no. 18, (2017): 41-81. Pas, 277-306.

dealing with the status of Lady Vaidehī, Shandao contradicts his claims of universalism by following Huiyuan’s lead in labeling her as a great bodhisattva.

The queen is an ordinary person and not a saint; because she is not a saint, she puts her hope exclusively in the invisible help of the spiritual power [of the Buddha]. Although she obtained a distant vision of that Land, this only means that the Tathāgata is afraid that sentient beings would foster delusions [if] he said that he queen is a saint and not an ordinary person. If doubts arise, one would become nervous and weak. *However, in fact Vaidehī is a Bodhisattva and nominally manifests an “ordinary body”*. We, sinful persons, have no way to compare [with her]. In order to dispel these doubts, therefore [the text] says: “you are an ordinary person.”

夫人是凡非聖。由非聖故，仰惟聖力冥加，彼國雖遙得觀。此明如來恐眾生置惑，謂言夫人是聖非凡。由起疑故，即自生怯弱。然韋提現是菩薩，假示凡身。我等罪人，無由比及。為斷此疑，故言汝是凡夫也。⁴²

Julian Pas, a renowned scholar on Shandao’s exegetical corpus, finds his argument surprising in this very paragraph.⁴³ Shandao repeatedly emphasized the fact that as a main interlocutor between the Buddha and his followers, Vaidehī must be an ordinary mortal because the Pure Land was primarily *for* common beings. Yet, on the issue of whether or not Vaidehī was already an enlightened being, Shandao appears to be incapable of making up his mind.

This ambiguity of Vaidehī’s identity corresponds with another set of ideas of womanhood as an “expedient means” (Chinese: *fangbian* 方便, Sanskrit: *upāya*) for bodhisattvas, for which gender, like all form, becomes a fluid and empty category in Mahayana discourses. In the *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra*, when questioned why she did not transform her female body, the female devi (*tiannü* 天女) Vimaladattā questioned why Maudgalayājna had not changed his male body, and declared that enlightenment is achieved neither through a male nor through a female body. The devi figure in the same sutra is also understood to be a bodhisattva, in a higher state of being beyond gender, and only manifests

⁴² T. 37, 1753: 260c12-c16. For English translation, see Pas, 290-291.

⁴³ Pas, 291

herself in female form in order to teach the unenlightened.⁴⁴ In the late 7th century, the idea of “gender as manifest form” animated the tense political struggles at court, when Empress Wu ascended the throne as the first woman in Chinese history in 690. She was famous for aggressively employing Buddhist ideology, symbolism and ritual to justify her rule as a woman. By purposefully manipulating commentaries of the *Great Cloud Sutra* (大雲經 *Mahāmeghasutra*), she assumes the identity of the reincarnation of the Devi of Pure Radiance (淨光天女 *Vimalaprabhā*), who the Buddha predicted would reign as a powerful monarch in female form. In this sense, Wu Zetian’s female appearance was justified as a manifestation, and an expedient means for beings of a higher existence.⁴⁵

The figure of Vaidehī, as a helpless and distraught wife and mother imprisoned in the royal palace, cannot be more different from Wu Zetian, who triumphed in power struggles at court and took the throne for herself. In the commentarial tradition, Vaidehī’s identity remained ambiguous, either taken as a defiled being (a woman) to demonstrate the power of Amitābha’s vows, or a bodhisattva, whose goal was to use her human form to bring teachings of the Buddha to our world of common mortals. Nevertheless, Vaidehī, as a domesticated married laywoman and devout Buddhist follower resonated with a class of female beings, described in several Buddhist sutras, that were trapped deep inside royal palaces or households yet aspired to meet with the Buddha. There is Queen Śrīmālā, the daughter of King Prasenajit of Śrāvastī, who was married off to be queen of a distant kingdom. Śākyamuni Buddha manifested himself to her at the palace to expound the theory of the “One

⁴⁴ T.14, 0475. Also see, Paul and Wilson, 217-223.

⁴⁵ Rothschild, 209-211, Chen Ruoshui 陳弱水, “*Chutang zhengzhi zhong de nvxing yishi* 初唐政治中的女性意識,” in *Tang song nvxing yu shehui* 唐宋女性与社会, ed. Deng Xiaonan 鄧小南 (Shanghai: Shanghai cishu chubanshe, 2003), 659-694.

True Vehicle” and the dharmakāya.⁴⁶ There is also Sumāgadhā who was married off to heretics against her will. Trapped, she ascended a tall building and beckoned the Buddha to visit her. The Buddha and his disciples went into meditation and flew to her location performing visionary miracles and converted the city of heretics.⁴⁷ In Jiakai’s tales of rebirth, all six women that achieved rebirth in the Western Pure Land were “married women” (*funü* 婦女).⁴⁸ Most lay female religious activities took place in domestic settings and were facilitated through family members. Textual sources on female religious life in the Tang periods have traditionally been scarce, but recent studies of Tang epitaphs and excavated manuscripts reveal a variety of religious activities carried out by elite laywomen in the 7th -8th century. Many of such activities were domestically oriented in households (*zaijia xiuxing* 在家修行): women would burn incense, chant or copy Mahayana sutras such as the *Lotus Sutra*, the *Vimalakīrti-Nirdeśa-Sūtra*, or the *Diamond Sutra*, patronize the making of Buddhist images and the construction of temples, assume a new Buddhist name, receive precepts at home, or request a modest burial after death according to Buddhist practices.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ T. 12, 0353. see Alex Wayman and Hideko Wayman, *The Lion's Roar of Queen Śrīmālā: A Buddhist Scripture On the Tathagatagarbha Theory* (New York ; London: Columbia University Press, 1974).

⁴⁷ T. 02, 0128a.

⁴⁸ T. 47, 1963: 0099b27- 0100a13.

⁴⁹ Wu Minxia 吴敏霞, “*Cong tang muzhi kan tangdai nvxing fojiao xinyangjiwi tedian* 从唐墓志看唐代女性佛教信仰及其特点,” *Foxua yanjiu* 佛學研究[Research of Buddhism] n.11 (January 2002): 256 – 267. Jiao Jie 焦杰, “*Cong tangdai muzhi kan tangdai funv yu fojiao de guanxi* 从唐代墓志看唐代妇女与佛教的关系,” *Shanxi shifan daxue xuebao (zhexue shehui kexueban)* 陕西师范大学学报 (哲学社会科学版), no.3 (2000): 95-98. Su Shimei 苏士梅, “*Cong muzhi kan fojiao dui tangdai funv shenghuo de yingxingxiang* 从墓志看佛教对唐代妇女生活的影响,” *Shixue yuekan* 史学月刊 no.5 (2003), no.5, 84-88. Yan Yaozhong 严耀中, “*Muzhi jiwen zhong de tangdai funv fojiao xinyang* 墓志祭文中的唐代妇女佛教信仰”, in *Tang song nvxing yu shehui* 唐宋女性与社会, ed. Deng Xiaonan 邓小南 (Shanghai: Shanghai cishu chuban she, 2003), 467-492.

Our purpose here is not to provide a comprehensive study of female religious activity in the Tang period, but to show that Vaidehī's identity posed an unresolved problem for theologians in Pure Land soteriology. Her ambiguous status only comes to the foreground in a Pure Land framework, for among the history of Ajātaśatru Narratives, it is only in the *Meditaiton Sutra*, that Vaidehī assumes the role of a protagonist, who meets the Buddha and eventually leads her five hundred female attendants to be reborn in Amitābha's Paradise.⁵⁰ For scholars focusing only on commentarial traditions and Buddhist scriptures, it is difficult to make sense of this odd arrangement. However, as a widely depicted narrative in Pure Land imagery, Dunhuang caves reveal to us the reason why Vaidehī is central to Pure Land Buddhism. The importance of the Ajātaśatru Narrative in the *Meditaiton Sutra* hinges upon one crucial episode, in which the Buddha leaves Vulture Peak to visit Vaidehī in her confinement – and one could even say that she was created for this very moment. When she is imprisoned she is described as distraught and tormented, and as the Buddhas reveals himself, she prostrates on the ground and weeps. Such performative gestures come directly from Buddhist rites of repentance, in which adepts must weep and confess their previous sins.⁵¹ Compositions of this scene in Buddhist caves are designed to allow viewers to experience the narrative from the viewpoint of Vaidehī. The underlying reason for this alignment of Vaidehī's viewpoint with that of the viewer is to clarify and emphasize the

⁵⁰ Scholars claim that the dramatic repackaging of this tale in China was tied to the religious, social and political context of 5th century China. Mahāyāna Buddhism increasingly gained force, and the claim of the universality of Buddha-nature lead to the popularity of ideas of achieving salvation in the Pure Land in the degenerate age of the dharma (*mofa*) that people of that time believed that they were living in. The Queen's prostration in front of the Buddha and weeping was very much connected to Buddhist confession rites that were on the rise in early medieval China, which was aimed at expiating previous sins and getting ride of karmic obstructions. The palace coup between royal family members also brought out themes of Buddhist ideas of kingship, and the fraught relationship between Buddhism and Chinese filial piety. All these issues were perhaps deeply related to the tumulus political environment in China when the sutra was translated (created) in Jiankang around the early 5th century. See, Radich, 48 -61.

⁵¹ Ibid, 54-55.

spatial relationship between the architectural enclosure within which the Lady is trapped, and a transcendental landscape – in the form of the historical Buddha’s abode, Vulture Peak, which prevails beyond the palace quarters. These structures materialize themes of imprisonment and enlightenment. The threshold space between these two realms is constructed through gateways and water.

2.3 Lady Vaidehī, Vulture Peak, and the Architecture of Pure Land Art

In the commentarial tradition, Lady Vaidehī’s identity was a conundrum, and Pure Land theologians illustrate Pure Land perspectives of rebirth through her shifting status between a commoner and an enlightened being. Images of Vaidehī show her as an organizing force in the visual programming of cave interiors and Pure Land tableaux. Her identity as an internal viewer created dramatic shifts in the pictorial tradition in medieval China, as well as cave space design at Dunhuang. The construction of pictorial space *pivots* around her, allowing us to see *through* illusionistic spaces. Images of the Ajātaśatru Narrative, as the preface of the sutra, needed to orient the viewer and provide a framework for understanding the entire tableaux. The painters had to fulfill three different tasks: First is to provide a narrative flow for the story to unfold, the second is to maintain a structural relationship between the location of the Queen inside the palace, and that of the Buddha’s assembly on the Vulture Peak, and the third is to fit the narrative within the larger composition of the entire Pure Land tableau or cave interior.

In the north wall tableau of Cave 172, the Ajātaśatru Narrative is located on the left side of the composition and unfolds in several courtyards stacked on top of each other, with the first scene of the king’s imprisonment at the bottom with a large gate tower (Fig.1-15b). The narrow side strip of the tableau can be seen as an abstracted palace, and to follow the

story, the viewer's gaze has to pierce through each architectural enclosure (Fig.2-15). In other words, to go up is also to go deeper into the palace, and to be further trapped in it, echoing the narrative's theme of imprisonment. Yet surprisingly, at the very back of the palace is a gateway that is wide open (Fig.2-16). Above, we can see the Buddha on Vulture Peak with surrounding cliffs. Before the gateway, we see the imprisoned Queen leaping out to meet with the Buddha.⁵² This open gateway is the main focus of the scene, linking the palace courtyard and mountain realm beyond, and facilitating a possible view that Vaidehī might have of distant landscape.

A closer look at the composition shows that the mountains, water, and the gateway is structured as a pathway to *see through*. The tall mountain cliffs frame the body of water, while the Buddha's entourage is seated on a trapezoidal platform that is set behind this mountain valley on a flat ground.⁵³ The tall gateway's rooftop obscures the front of the waterbank but we can see faint traces of distant mountains on the horizon behind the Buddha's canopy. As an architectural historian, Sun Yihua points out that the side strip contains (starting from the bottom): a palace gate (*gongmen* 宮門), a palace hall (*dian* 殿), a multistory pavilion (*louge* 樓閣), and an imperial park (*yuyuan* 御苑). For her, the last courtyard represents the back of the palace, and the two-story gateway is a pavilion (*ge* 閣)

⁵² Shi Pingting claims that the dark figure next to the Lady is her shadow. However, the dark figure next to her appears to be a monk figure, but he could also be Vaidehī's imprisoned husband King Bimbisāra. The King's later fate is not commonly dealt with in Dunhuang murals, but it is possible that Cave 172 is trying to reconcile the bifurcating storylines in the *Meditations Sutra*. See Shi Pingting 1999, 186.

⁵³ Zheng Yan has discussed how this "one water two banks" (*yishui liangan* 一水兩岸) composition in Tang landscape painting. See Zheng Yan 2015, 90-98, also see Ge Chengyong 葛承雍, "*Chuxiao richu: tang dai shanshui hua de jiaodian jiyi – hanxiu mu chutu shanshui bihua yu riben chuanshi pipa shangshui hua huzheng* 初曉日出: 唐代山水畫的焦點記憶—韓休墓出土山水壁畫與日本傳世琵琶山水畫互證," *Art Research*. 美術研究 no. 6 (2015): 22-28.

located near a pond in the imperial park.⁵⁴ Reviewing this scene in other Dunhuang caves, this identification of a “park” is unlikely, but what Sun acutely points out is that although this palace enclosure is abstracted, it is still constructed with a coherent architectural language.

The multistory pavilion was specially meant for distant viewing, and in many cases the viewing of landscape. The openness of the gateway is designed to be conspicuous – the painter not only draws in detail the wooden pillars that buttress the hallowed passageway, but also shows us the balustrades on the waterfront. This “see-through” structure exposes the water waves on the other side. The revealing nature of the pavilion gateway is doubled by the openness of its second story. The upper level of the pavilion also has an open front that reveals the interior timber frame structure. At the back of the room, next to the damaged wall surface, three faint ink lines can still be found – showing us that water could also be viewed from the upper level. The window is small in size, but necessary (Fig.2-17). If we look at the same passage from the Pure Land tableau on the south wall of the same cave, the structure between mountains, water, gateway and the Buddha is consistent (Fig.2-18). The pavilion’s opening is half obscured by the building in front, but we can still discern its “see-through” structure by the faint traces of vertical pillars and horizontal balustrades. The flowing water waves, drawn in long elegant ink lines are clearly visible on the other side of the gateway. Here, the mountain cliffs and waterway are more spread out vertically, and show how the Buddha is really located on the other side of the landscape. Similar to the north wall, small mountain hills also mark the horizon. Although shown to be in the far distance and situated on the other side of the landscape, the figures in both Buddha assemblies are depicted in the same size as Vaidehī in the courtyards. In other words, they are distant figures shown in close-up. Both entourages are situated on flat ground surfaces (a trapezoidal platform for the

⁵⁴ Sun Yihua 2001, 161.

north wall), and what we are given is a “zoomed-in” view of the Buddha on top of Vulture Peak.

Vaidehī’s courtyard space and the Buddha’s entourage are connected through a form of embodied vision. The imprisoned Lady *could* lodge upon the balustrade and “look afar”, but water stops her from going forward. In this way, her only access to the Buddha in the distance is through a type of vision that transverses landscape. It is the open gateway, as well as the water, that make this sort of vision possible. The idea of seeing the Buddha on Vulture Peak through a gateway was life sustaining in the larger textual history of the Ajātaśatru Narrative. As mentioned earlier, in several versions of the story, when deprived of food and water, the imprisoned King was able to stay alive by simply looking at the Buddha on Vulture Peak, through the prison gateway.

Bound to the gate of the prison, [King Bimbisāra] faced towards the Vulture Peak. From afar he could see the World-Honored One and the bhikṣu-saṃgha, Śāriputra, Maudgalyāyana, Aniruddha, Ānanda, Jinpilu, going up and down the mountain. The King attained traces of enlightenment, and when he saw the bhikṣu-saṃgha he was delighted and did not mind his hunger and thirst. The King Ajātaśatru asked his ministers, “Is my father still alive?” They replied, “He is alive”. The King asked his ministers, “How does he stay alive?” The minister Mātsarya replied, “It is because, every day he faces the Thus Come One and pays respects to him.” The King said, “You should immediately go and build a high wall in front of the prison, do not let him see Vulture Peak.”⁵⁵

所繫獄門向耆闍崛山，遙見世尊與比丘僧舍利弗、目犍連、阿那崙陀、難提、金鞞羅，上山下山。王得道迹，見比丘僧歡喜，無有飢渴想。王阿闍世問傍臣：“父王猶活乎？”答言：“王活。”王問傍臣：“以何故活？”傍臣嫉妬答言：“日向如來謁拜，以是故活。”王告曰：“汝促往築高牆障獄前，莫令見耆闍崛山。”

The king’s view of the Buddha’s abode through a gateway comes up consistently in various versions of this Buddhist lore. In Rajgir, India, the original site of the palace coup, remains of a square shaped fort-like structure were found half a kilometer west of the eastern gate of

⁵⁵ T.24, 1464:0871a15-a22.

what is believed to be the Old Rajagriha city (Fig.2-19). In the early twentieth century, V.H. Jackson believed that this enclosure was Bimbisāra's prison precisely because it had a good view of the Gṛdhrakūṭa Hill (Vulture Peak) to the northeast, and used the Ajātaśatru Narrative to justify his claim (Fig.2-20).⁵⁶ There is no direct evidence to prove that the enclosure was in fact where Bimbisāra was imprisoned, but this shows how the "view of Vulture Peak" was central to the imagination of the tale. And currently in Rajgir, the tourist site is labeled as "Bimbisāra's Jail."⁵⁷

The passage above does not appear in the *Meditation Sutra* itself, but it shows how the trope of the King's vision of the Buddha on Vulture Peak through a gateway still had strong currency in the conception of the karmic tale and reminisces of it were subsumed into Vaidehī's storyline. In non-Pure Land traditions of the text, blocking this view would kill off the King. This is also where the *Meditation Sutra* made significant changes. As the open gateway and landscape in Cave 172 create a potential view through landscape, but at the same time negate physical access, the Buddha leaves Vulture Peak and infiltrates into the Queen's palace. In this way, the King's life-sustaining view was compensated for by a new Pure Land situation: it was the Buddha that came into the palace quarters to visit Vaidehī. Vaidehī takes up and fulfills the king's role: the king dies in non-Pure Land versions of the Ajātaśatru Narrative, while Vaidehī is saved by the Buddha in the *Meditation Sutra*. The imprisoned Queen's view of Vulture Peak through a gateway *causes* the Buddha to come and save her (Fig.2-21). This is a new cause and effect relationship between seeing the Buddha and being saved by him – and this two-way dynamic will be central to understanding Pure

⁵⁶ V.H. Jackson, "Notes on Old Rajagriha," in *Annual Report of the Archaeological Survey of India*. Part I, 1913-14: 269.

⁵⁷ Satyendra Kumar Jha and Kashi Prasad Jayaswal Research Institute, *Rājagṛha: The City of Eminence* (Patna: K.P. Jayaswal Research Institute, 2011), 45-46.

Land related landscape imagery.⁵⁸ Through this reorientation, the viewer, like Vaidehī, moves from acknowledging the limits of the palace wall to seeing through and penetrating it. As we shall see in the last section of the chapter, in a similar way, the Buddhist cave can be understood as simultaneously a prison, a palace interior, and a gateway through which access to the sacred is made possible.

In the visual tradition of the Ajātaśatru Narrative, what takes center stage is the dramatic meeting between Vaidehī and the Buddha. The spatial relationship between the location of the historical Buddha on Numinous Vulture Peak and the Queen's confinement within the palace poses a conceptual problem for those that hoped to pictorialize this narrative. In Cave 172, the Buddha's entourage at Vulture Peak on top of the composition disrupts the narrative flow of the tale that generally moves upwards from the city gate at the bottom of the composition (Fig.2-15). The Buddha on Vulture Peak folds together two different timeframes. The *Meditation Sutra* begins with the Buddha preaching to his assembly on Vulture Peak, and then half way through the narrative the Buddha recounts his departure from Vulture Peak to visit Vaidehī. Positioned on top of the composition in Cave 172, the assembly on Vulture Peak doubly represents both moments. In the first instance it shows the Buddha on Vulture Peak recounting the tale, while in the second he is an actor within the narrative. This creative negotiation of spatial storytelling led to dramatic yet often overlooked shifts in the compositional development of the Western Pure Land tableaux. This relational structure between exterior and interior, between enlightenment and entrapment,

⁵⁸ For Eugene Wang, the meditator's gazing at the sun and the free-flight in deep space that prompts mental sauntering represent to deep rooted religious activities in China, one is ganying, i.e., "sympathetic resonances"; the other is you, or "mental peripatetic." See Eugene Y. Wang, "Watching the Steps: Peripatetic Vision in Medieval China," *Visuality Before and Beyond the Renaissance: Seeing As Others Saw*. Ed. Robert S. Nelson (U.K. ; New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 117-118. Also see Kiyohiko Munakata, "Concepts of Lei and Kan-lei in Early Chinese Art," in *Theories of the Arts in China*, eds. Susan Bush, Christian F. Murck, and American Council of Learned Societies. Committee on Studies of Chinese Civilization (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983), 105-131.

was an important problem to think through pictorially and spatially. We can clearly observe different ways in which the earliest representations of Lady Vaidehī at Dunhuang (Cave 431, Cave 209 and Cave 217) were clearly experimenting with different spatial strategies, and in the following sections we will trace how this visual rhetoric was constructed. Landscape and architecture frame a viewer’s experience in medieval cave design. All of these caves are known for containing a new style of Tang landscape imagery, and we will examine how these Buddhist paintings of landscape shaped changing ideas of the Tang Empire as a new center in the Buddhist world. These new visual modes are anchored around the body and viewpoints of our protagonist – Lady Vaidehī.

The earliest images of the Ajātaśatru Narrative can be found in Cave 431, a standard Northern Wei (525-545) central pillar cave that was carefully repainted in the mid-7th century, during the early years of Tang imperial presence at Dunhuang (Fig.2-22).⁵⁹ The ground floor of the cave seemed to have been sunken lower, and this is why the relief images and niches on the central pillar look much higher than other caves of the same type. In Northern Wei central pillar caves, the lower sections of the four walls of the cave are usually occupied by images of yakṣas (nature-spirits in Indian mythology), but in Cave 431, the lower sections are repainted with images from the *Meditation Sutra*. These images are organized counter-clockwise on three walls of the cave (Fig.2-23), with the Ajātaśatru Narrative on the north wall (Fig.2-24), the Sixteen Meditations on the west wall (Fig.2-25),

⁵⁹ Zheng Jingfeng notes that Cave 431 was built between 525-545. The neighboring Cave 432, built in the Northern Zhou period (557-581) also underwent refurbishment around the same time. The interior of Cave 432 was largely repainted in the Tangut period of the Dunhuang (1067-1227), but a 7th century inscription was found on the ceiling of the front chamber. Stating that two brothers Yin Yiben 陰義本 and Yinyiquan 陰義全 were responsible for the refurbishment of Cave 432 the twenty-second year of the Zhenguan period (648). Following He Shizhe, Zhang believes that Cave 431 was also renovated around the same time. See Zhang Jingfeng, 2010, p.35, Zhang Jingfeng 張景峰, “*Dunhuang yinshi yu mogaoku yanjiu* 敦煌阴氏与莫高窟研究” (PhD.diss., Lanzhou University, 2014), 61-64. Zhang Jingfeng 張景峰, *Dunhuang yinshi yu mogaoku yanjiu* 敦煌阴氏与莫高窟研究 (Lanzhou: gansu jiaoyu chuban she, 2017), 114-118.

and the Nine Grades of Rebirth on the south wall (Fig.2-26). Four images of Heavenly Kings (Lokapalas) are on the east wall, with two on each side of the doorway (Fig.2-27).⁶⁰ No image of the Pure Land itself can be found in the cave. Thus, unlike a standard 8th century Pure Land transformation tableaux that typically included a main image of the Pure Land accompanied with the Sixteen Meditations and the Narrative Scenes, the program of Cave 431 and its repainting project seems to be highly peculiar.⁶¹

The north wall starts with an assembly of the historical Buddha Sakyamuni in the mountains of Vulture Peak, while the main events of the story take place within a large palace that occupies most of the lower section of the repainted north wall (Fig.2-28). We are invited into this palace intrigue through a tall opened gate on the city wall facing the Buddha assembly. The palace is roughly divided into three courtyards from the right to the left. In the first segment, we see Lady Vaidehī entering into a smaller courtyard to visit her imprisoned husband (Fig.2-29). We see her again inside the small building within the enclosure, supposedly smuggling food to King Bimbisara. Above this building, Mahāmaudgalyāyana, the disciple of the Buddha, twirling on clouds and descending into the palace. The middle courtyard encloses a larger palatial building, and this is where the turning point of the story takes place (Fig.2-30). The prince learns of his mother's surreptitious activities and becomes infuriated. He wields a sword at his own mother, while the Lady calmly bends forward with her hands held together to accept her tragic fate. Two ministers rush forward to stop the prince and advise him not to kill his own mother. The last and largest courtyard illustrates the climax of the narrative, which shows the Buddha meeting with Lady Vaidehī (Fig.2-31). The meeting of the Queen and the Buddha is shown in threefold from right to left: two of the

⁶⁰*Mogaoku neirong zonglu*, 176-177. Zhang Jingfeng 2017, 85-113.

⁶¹ Zhang Jingfeng 2010, 34-43.

Buddha's disciples Mahāmaudgalyāyana and Pūrṇa appear in the courtyard, the queen rushes out from her room and prostrates on the ground. The Buddha is flying in upon clouds. Next, the Buddha is seated within the courtyard, and the Queen is kneeling upright, listening to the Buddha's teachings. Finally, the Buddha shows the Queen the Pure Lands of ten different directions and asks her to choose from one of them. The ten Pure Lands are shown in the most unique form – ten little squares floating into the courtyard hovering upon the palace wall, each containing a small building shown in frontal view with foliage around the rooftop (Fig.2-32).

Landscape—the rolling green hills that surround the palace—has often been regarded as a common backdrop for the narrative to take place. However, medieval painters were actively interrogating the relationship between different realms— one of drama and narrative, and one eternal and supernatural. This interrelationship is made clear through the open gateway attached to the palace structure. The odd position of the door significantly reconfigures the contours of the entire palace (Fig.2-28). With a closer look, we can see how the lower portion of the palace wall on the right side of the image is obscured by mountain hills, and the position of the open doorway pushes back the left side of the palace contours. This makes the outer side of the wall visible to the viewer. The mountain formations continue towards the left of the image, underscoring how the entire place is actually engulfed within a mountain range that is rich with flowers, trees and other vegetation. Through this open door, our viewpoint shifts from focusing on the interior of the palace in the previous half of the narrative to seeing it from the outside, pushing us to realize the mountainous environment in which the palace is situated. With this subtle pictorial device, the external world outside the palace not only becomes conceivable, but also accessible—there is a path into this landscape. Drawn in the same color and situated in a similar slanted perspective, a closed door is seen slightly above the open gateway, which signifies the queen's imprisoned (Fig.2-33). To

borrow from Bernhard Siegert, the door, as a “cultural technique,” always points to the symbolic—an open door is both open and also the sign of this openness, and vice versa for a closed door. Doors are “operators of symbolic, epistemic, and social process, that articulate space”.⁶² The open door below and the closed door above form a symbolic pair—the Lady’s entrapment behind closed doors allows her to open up another door into a new world.

Medieval painters were attempting to grapple with this binary relationship between palace and mountain in narrative art, which is time-based and episodic. As episodes of the tale unfold in a series of courtyards, the Ajātaśatru Narrative in Cave 431 is designed to have the viewer follow the story by making sense of the depicted architectural space. This is the first time in Dunhuang art that an architectural setting is coherently pictorialized, and is specifically designed to orient the narrative flow of the story. At Dunhuang, earlier narrative art that depicted Jataka tales used architectural settings to demarcate locations of certain moments within a certain tale, but never encompassed the entire narrative (Fig.1-26). Put differently, this is the first time in Dunhuang or in Chinese art, that a viewer’s spatial imagination of entering into a palace while passing through courtyards is doubled with the narrative flow of the Buddhist tale. The beginning of the tale is also the entryway into the palace structure. This composition actively makes use of the central pillar cave’s interior. The palace is horizontally elongated, spanning across the north wall from east to west. And as there is very limited space between the illustrated narrative and the central pillar, a full view of the entire palace is impossible – in order to follow the story, one must walk from the east side of the mural to the west side (Fig.2-24). The “peripatetic mode” of vision enhances the alignment between the spatial unfolding of the palace structure and the temporal progression

⁶² “In the same way, the gate does not simply connect inside and outside nor the door one space and another; rather, the door puts inside and outside into a special relation in which the outside first becomes properly outside and the inside first becomes properly inside.” Bernhard Siegert, “Doors: On the Materiality of the Symbolic,” trans. John Durham Peters, *Grey Room*, no. 47 (Spring 2012), 8-9.

of the tale.⁶³ The visual movement through the palace courtyards and gateways is actualized as the viewer walks around the central pillar. In this way, the odd open door that we have discussed above becomes more than a mere symbol for liberation and enlightenment—it also addresses an ambulatory viewer.

The entire 7th century refurbishment project of Cave 431 takes stock of the older central-pillar cave structure. 5-6th central pillar cave designs were created to foster and materialize meditative practices. For example, the Northern Wei Cave 254 is understood as a space for meditation practices described in the *Sūtra on the Sea of the Samādhi of Buddha Meditation (Sea Sūtra)*—an important text that instructs adepts on how to meditate on the body of Shakyamuni Buddha.⁶⁴ Both Cave 254 and the 6th century original portions of Cave 431 contain an image of a “white-robed Buddha (*baiyifo* 白衣佛) in the dark space behind the central pillar. This is a type of special iconography mainly related to meditational experiences and repentance rites (Fig.2-34).⁶⁵ Such experiences were activated by circumambulation around the central pillar, and the new 7th century images are organized to directly make use of the older structure of Cave 431. The *Meditation Sutra* images are depicted counter clockwise on the north, west, and east walls of the cave – beginning at east end of the north wall that depicts the Buddha on Vulture Peak and ending at the east end of the south wall, where the Buddha tells Vaidehī that she will be reborn in the Western Pure Land.⁶⁶ In this way, as a viewer circumambulates the cave, he/she follows the textual

⁶³ Eugene Y. Wang, 2000, 116-142

⁶⁴ Stanley Abe, “Art and Practice in a Fifth-Century Chinese Buddhist Cave Temple,” *Ars Orientalis* 20 (1990): 1-31, Also see Stanley Abe, “Mogao Cave 254: A case study in early Chinese Buddhist art,” (PhD. Diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1989), 107.

⁶⁵ Eugene Y. Wang, “Painted Statue in an Optical Theater: A Fifth-Century Chinese Buddhist Cave,” *Notes in the History of Art* 30, no. 3, Special Issue: Superficial? Approaches to Painted Sculpture (Spring 2011): 25-32.

⁶⁶ It is true that clockwise circumambulation is usually regarded as the norm, because in this way the right side of the person’s body (a more venerable side) is closer to the deity/pillar in the middle.

narrative of the *Meditation Sutra*. This is the first time at Dunhuang that a central pillar cave's circumambulatory route is programed to follow the textual flow of a Buddhist sutra. The refurbishment project not only added the *Meditation Sutra* images, but also repainted the lower section of the north, west, and south sides of the central pillar. The north and south sides are preaching scenes (Fig.2-35), while the west wall depicts the meeting of Shakyamuni and Prabhūtaratna in the Treasured Stupa chapter of the *Lotus Sutra*. Furthermore, the lower halves of the *Meditation Sutra* murals are covered with images of donors. Divided by gender, the north half of the cave contains forty-three male figures led by four monks (Fig.2-36), while the south half contains twenty-three females led by one nun (Fig.2-37). The new seventh-century patrons of the cave, who have included their own portraits in this project, reconfigured Cave 431's program by innovatively reusing its early 6th century central-pillar structure. The noted absence of a large perspectival view of the Pure Land turns out to be not an absence at all. Walking around the central pillar also means reading and viewing the *Meditation Sutra*, as well as experiencing the Ajātaśatru Narrative. The 6th century circumambulatory space that was designed for older forms of religious activity was transformed a century later to facilitate a new type of practice related to Amitābha's Western Paradise.

As noted in the previous chapter, the mid 7th century is when we witness a variety of Pure Land related images at Dunhuang for the first time. There were no standardized rules for depicting the Ajātaśatru Narrative, the Sixteen Meditations, the Nine Grades of Rebirth, or the Pure Land tableau. The distinctly new images that were brought into Dunhuang were not

However, there is no evidence to directly prove that circumambulation in central pillar caves should always be carried out in a clockwise fashion. There are no image programs at Dunhuang that are specifically designed for clockwise circumambulation. This makes Cave 431 rather unique, because the illustration of the *Meditation Sutra* creates a clear counter-clockwise orientation. And this is the only central-pillar cave that actively provides such a directional requirement.

simply copied from elsewhere, but, as Cave 431 makes clear to us, were tailored to fit within a pre-existing central-pillar cave type that was unique to the Dunhuang region. The Ajātaśatru Narrative in Cave 431 was designed to address a circumambulating viewer. And as one moves across the cave space, visual devices such as open gateways help the viewer rationalize the time and space of the narrative. We enter the story and travel *with* Lady Vadehī through the large palace structure, and through her experiences of imprisonment, we discover new entry points into rolling landscapes.

The early 8th century Cave 217 is also one of the first caves at Dunhuang to include images of the Ajātaśatru Narrative (Fig.1-16). With a truncated-pyramid ceiling and a carved-in western niche, Cave 217 shares a similar architectural structure to Cave 220, which had become a standardized cave type by the 8th century (Fig.2-38). On the north wall is a Pure Land tableau, and on the south wall is the *Incantation of Glory Sutra* tableau (Fig.2-39). The east wall contains scenes from the Universal Gateway of Avalokiteśvara chapter from the *Lotus Sutra* (Fig.2-40).⁶⁷ The Yin family of Dunhuang created Cave 217 sometime between 707-710 C.E.⁶⁸ As an ambitious clan that quickly rose to prominence during the late 7th century, the Yin family members were known for their political shrewdness and closely followed the pulse of the capital.⁶⁹ Like the Pure Land tableau, the *Incantation of Glory Sutra*

⁶⁷ The south wall tableau had been previously identified as a Lotus Sutra tableau, however, in 2004 Shimono Akiko has argued that the tableau actually depicts the *Incantation of Glory Sutra* (Uṣṇīṣa Vijaya Dhāraṇī Sūtra 佛頂尊勝陀羅尼經) T. 967, 19. See Shimono Akiko 下野玲子, “Mokaoku di 217 ku nanbi jingbian xinjie 莫高窟第 217 窟南壁經變新解,” *Dunhuang Research* 126, no.2 (2011): 21-32. *Mogaoku neirong zonglu* 莫高窟內容總路 1996, 85-86. For studies on Cave 217, see Eugene Y. Wang, 2005, 67-310. Zhang Jingfeng, 2014, 73-155.

⁶⁸ Eugene Wang suggests that the murals in Cave 217 might be related to the Jingai Temple in the city of Luoyang due to Zhang Yanyuan’s records, while images of the north wall address certain political coups, which happened in Chang’an in the early few years of the 8th century. Furthermore, the high quality of the draftmanship and the introduction of new painting themes also suggest a direct relationship with religious art produced in the capital. See Eugene Y. Wang, 2005, 112-181.

⁶⁹ If, according to Zhang Jingfeng, the family responsible for the renovation of Cave 431 was also the Yin family, it is possible that this particular family had a long tradition of bringing new images back to their hometown. For more information on the Yin family’s patronage of Cave 217 and their

tableau of the south wall is also completely new. The Preface of the sutra notes that the new Chinese translation of the text is attributed to Buddhapālita (*fotuoboli* 佛陀波利), who was instructed by the bodhisattva Mañjuśrī in the guise of an old man at Mt. Wutai to retrieve the sutra from “western countries”. The sutra was brought to the Tang court in 683 and translated into Chinese.⁷⁰ This means that the tableau was based on a new translation of the sutra and the iconography of it was newly invented.

The north wall of Cave 217 has the first full-wall Western Pure Land tableau in medieval China that includes the Sixteen Meditations and the Ajātaśatru Narrative on the outer rims of the main Pure Land image. With no circumambulating viewer like that of Cave 431, the representation of the Ajātaśatru Narrative in Cave 217 is noticeably different. The Preface narrative occupies the left side of the Pure Land, and also wraps around horizontally on the bottom, while the Sixteen Meditations are shown on the right side of the main image. As we shall see below, although the composition of Cave 217’s Pure Land tableau was entirely new, painters of the Ajātaśatru Narrative, like those of Cave 431, were greatly concerned with making sense of both the temporal flow of the narrative and the spatial relationship between the imprisoned Queen and the Buddha on Vulture Peak.

The binary structure between landscape and architecture is clearly demonstrated in the stark juxtaposition between the Buddha’s assembly on Vulture Peak and the large palace composition directly under it (Fig.2-41). The ruined condition of the lower rim of the tableau has prevented scholars from analyzing the narrative scenes below the main Pure Land image (Fig.2-42). The setting of the narrative vignettes below seems discontinuous and contorted.

political ambitions. See Zhang Jingfeng 2014, 1-18, 73-156. Eugene Y. Wang, 2005, 139-145, 176-178.

⁷⁰T.19, 967. Copp, 158-166.

Nevertheless, this effect comes from the painter's constant impulse to sustain the same binary structure between mountain and palace in these narrative vignettes.

Most scholars believe that the Preface narrative flows from the upper left towards the lower right in a linear fashion. However, if we keep in mind this strong binary between landscape and palace, an entirely new understanding of this composition comes to light. The left side of the tableau almost functions like an “establishing shot” for the lower register. The juxtaposition between landscape and architecture on the left sets the scene for the entire narrative (Fig.2-41). On top of the composition is Vulture Peak, where the Buddha's assembly is surrounded by mountain hills and waterways. The assembly is positioned on a flat ground surface, and as we have seen in Cave 172, the landscape elements are set *in front of* the Buddha's assembly. A large formation of rock cliffs soars upwards on the left side of the composition, and the rocks obscure the halos of two figures in the assembly, showing how the mountain formations are closer to the viewer. Water also plays an important part in demarcating different realms. A thin waterfall gushes from the rock boulders and flows into a pool (or river?) below. The painters made sure that this body of the water horizontally cut through the entire composition – thus completely dividing the Buddha's assembly from the scenes below. Waterfalls are largely regarded as thresholds to supernatural realms, and in the *Incantation of Glory Sutra* tableau on the south wall, Buddhapālita's encounter with an old man came directly after a scene that shows him prostrating in front of a waterfall on Mt. Wutai (Fig.2-43). Returning to the Pure Land tableau on the north wall, an imposing palace structure occupies the lower half of the composition. The front of the palace gates is action-packed—we see military forces confronting each other, and the treacherous prince, seated on a horse, is ordering his father to be taken away. Inside the palace walls there is a single building (Fig.2-44). The building is partially obscured by the tall palace gate, but the painter still insisted on showing the interior of the building through an open door, which reveals an

arrangement of screens on the back wall. The open door is flanked by two large green window panels. A bamboo curtain is curled up and fastened under the eave. The white screen panels are partitioned by red rectangular frames, and painted with flowers and plants. The open-door building invites the viewer to enter inside the palace and follow the narrative within it. Nevertheless, as one enters the palace, as the overall composition shows us, one is reminded of the larger landscape beyond the city walls.

This impulse to map architectural space onto narrative is similar to what we have seen in Cave 431. In a central pillar cave, the Ajātaśatru Narrative unfolds in a large palace structure and addresses a peripatetic viewer by using painted doorways as a visual device. For this full-wall tableau in Cave 217, we no longer have a circumambulating viewer that is able to simultaneously pace through pictorial space, cave space, and narrative. In this new 8th century format of a full-wall tableau, painters employed a variety of disjunctive viewpoints to activate supernatural experiences and visualize complex world systems described in sutra texts.⁷¹ In the *Incantation of Glory* tableau, the sutra begins with a narrative about the God Shanzhu (善住天子), who foresaw his terrible fate and asked Śakra for help. Śakra went into meditation, left his celestial realm, and flew to the Buddha to ask for advice, thus prompting the Buddha to expound the benefits of the *Incantation of Glory*.⁷² In the tableau format, this narrative is depicted within a row of small celestial buildings on top of Mt. Sumeru (Fig.2-45). We can see Śakra entering into meditation in a building to the far right of the celestial realm (Fig.2-46). A trail of clouds comes out of his body, and by following the cloud, we find him again, at the bottom rim of the Shakyamuni assembly in the middle of the tableau (Fig.2-47). A dramatic change of scale and the ambiguous spatial relationship between the upper

⁷¹ For mapping and mirroring impulses in medieval Buddhist visual culture, see Eugene Y. Wang 2005, 182-316.

⁷² Copp, 166-168.

narrative and the central preaching scene show that medieval viewers had no problem dealing with such disjunctive space-times in the transformation tableaux and indulged in their marvelous visual effect.

In a similar way, we could perhaps call narrative scenes on the lower rim of the Pure Land tableau a sort of “folding-out” of the large palace structure on the left. We are first enticed to enter into the palace enclosure, then, the interior of the palace opens up and the narrative scenes are laid out for us on the bottom rim. The viewer is, in other words, experiencing the palace/narrative in an *inside-out* manner (Fig.2-48). The first scene on the lower left shows Vaidehī visiting her husband in prison (Fig.2-49). This section is played out in two parts. On the right, the king is seated on a dais in the middle of an open-door building inside a courtyard. The screens on the back of the room, and the green window panels echo that of the single building inside the city walls we have just examined (Fig.2-44). The visual echoing indicates that this open-door building *is* the same one on the left side of the tableau. Painted in profile, Vaidehī is shown approaching the King. On the left side, Vaidehī has entered the room and is seated next to the King. This “folding-out” mechanism is not only played out in architectural components, but, more crucially, in the landscape of Vulture Peak. To the left of the open door building that encloses both the King and Queen, there are large boulders rising up sharply. It is easy to simply regard such rocks as palace garden design, but a closer look shows that these rock formations are not only structural, but also supernatural.

Moving forward to the right, the next episode takes place in the same “courtyard - open building” composition (Fig.2-50). Cloud trails on the upper left show Mahāmaudgalyāyana flying in “like a hawk”, and below the clouds are two monks, Mahāmaudgalyāyana and Purna, perched on high seats (*gaozuo* 高坐) and preaching to the King. To the right of the courtyard is another large rock formation that soars up from the

bottom of the composition, and pierces through the color tiles of the lower rim of the main Pure Land image. The location of the mountain formations is highly arbitrary and ambiguous, and the boulders' vertical form directly echoes that from Vulture Peak. Throughout the entire strip that runs horizontally below the main Pure Land image, such rock formations continuously cut through the narrative scenes, and also cut through architectural enclosures (Fig.2-51). This shows how the painters were persistent in trying to remind the viewer of the dualistic relationship between landscapes and built architectural environments.

The courtyard that portrays the meeting between the Buddha and Vaidehī betrays the purpose of this strange spatial overlay of mountain structures (Fig.2-52). The Buddha's entrance into Vaidehī's confinement was specifically described as "The Buddha disappeared from Vulture Peak and came out in the palace." A small image of the Buddha is shown in the rocks with his legs obscured, and he is then shown again on a lotus seat with two disciples in front of Lady Vaidehī. Vaidehī is again represented three times, first prostrating, second flinging herself to the floor, and finally kneeling upright. The Buddha should be disappearing from the mountain, yet the entire mountain is being manifested here – a vanishing Buddha is coupled with an apparitional mountain. Meshed together, the two entities create an ontologically unstable pictorial object. In effect, the miraculous teleportation of the Buddha has *pulled* his entire mountain abode into the palace interior. As painters are representing the teleportation of the Buddha, the result image shows the mountain *inside* Vaidehī's courtyard. The mountain forms signify *both* Vulture Peak as well as the Buddha. In this way, the apparitional mountains that show up throughout the narrative courtyards, function like a foreshadowing device— a constant reminder of another possible level of existence for the imprisoned Queen. For the painters, the temporal dimensions of the narrative become less important and Lady Vadehi's spatial relationship with the Buddha becomes more critical.

Was this really the way in which medieval painters understood the tale? The gateway and the apparitional mountains speak to the multiple ways in which medieval painters interrogated the spatial condition of Vaidehī's spiritual journey. A history of reception might be traced in subsequent caves, where painters actively appropriated images from Cave 431 and Cave 217 in their versions of Pure Land tableaux. Painters soon sought to create new compositions of the narrative that would not only clarify the relationship between palace and Vulture Peak, but also shift and rotate visual devices to align Vaidehī's viewpoint with ours. For example, the Pure Land tableau of Cave 208 has incorporated many scenes from Cave 217 into a new composition (Fig.2-53).⁷³ As the large palace of the Ajātaśatru Narrative in Cave 217 was folded "inside-out" for us, painters of Cave 208 have tried to fold individual narrative vignettes *back into* the palace enclosure (Fig.2-54). This newly invented Ajātaśatru Narrative is rearranged into a vertical composition. The vertical layout breaks the linear direction of the narrative that used to unfold in a series of horizontal compounds. The restacking of narrative courtyards creates, instead, a soaring bird's eye view of the entire palace, with the Buddha and his assembly positioned in a far off mountain beyond the palace walls.

The doorway motif is found again at the bottom of the composition. Two gateways are aligned to invite the viewer into the palace, and the second doorway is clearly half open. Perhaps taking a cue from Cave 431, the meeting between Vaidehī and the Buddha takes place directly next to the open doorway. And in a fashion similar to Cave 217, a large apparitional mountain breaks through the courtyard, looming awkwardly on the far right. Exactly like that of Cave 217, a small Buddha figure, with his lower body obscured, is shown within this mountain structure. The restacking of courtyards shows how the painters were

⁷³ *Mogaoku neirong zonglu*, 83.

exclusively interested in clarifying the relationship between the palace and Vulture Peak, even at the expense of narrative clarity. The narrative begins in the upper left corner of the palace and zigzags downward. The frontal gateways—posed as the main entryway into the palace, should have been aligned with the beginning of the tale. However, while painters attempted to imitate how the open door was positioned in Cave 431, they ended up painting the gateway next to the culminating episode.

Painters of the 8th-century Cave 215 have tried to streamline the temporal and spatial clarity of the Ajātaśatru Narrative (Fig.2-55).⁷⁴ In terms of the iconography of individual vignettes, most of the scenes from the Pure Land tableau of Cave 215 are quotations from Cave 431 (Fig.2-24), but the spatial logic of their arrangement follows that of Cave 217(Fig.1-16).⁷⁵ This time the task for the painters is to transform Cave 431's Ajātaśatru Narrative into something that would fit into a full-wall Pure Land tableau composition like that of Cave 217. In order to rearrange the Ajātaśatru Narrative into a vertical configuration, the painters ingeniously *pivoted* the long palace structure in Cave 431 exactly 90 degrees—towards the viewer (Fig.2-56). Like the restacking of courtyards in Cave 208, we end up with a birds-eye view of a large palace, in which the narrative unfolds. As in Cave 217, the Buddha's assembly on Vulture Peak is placed on top of the composition. The rotated palace structure now has its city gate at the bottom of the composition, which directly faces the viewer. Like Cave 217, the military confrontation is staged in front of the gateway and marks the beginning of the tale. The narrative gradually moves upwards until we reach the back of the palace that is marked by a tall yellow wall. This is where the ending of the Ajātaśatru

⁷⁴ *Mogaoku neirong zonglu*, 85. Also see Ōnishi Makiko 大西磨希子 *Saihōjōdo hen no kenkyū* 西方浄土變の研究 [Study of the Western Pure Land tableau] (Chūōkōron bijutsu shuppan, 2007), 302-306. See Shi Pingting 1999, 154.

⁷⁵ The passage where Ajātaśatru confronts his mother comes directly from Cave 217. So the painters were actively combine images from both Cave 217 and Cave 431.

Narrative takes place—the Buddha has infiltrated into Vaidehī’s palace quarters and is now manifesting the Buddha worlds of the ten directions for Vaidehī to choose from (Fig.2-57). Each Buddha Land is represented as a small Buddha seated in front of a small building. This scene comes almost directly out of Cave 431, where the ten card-like Buddha Lands behind the Buddha are just about to float across the back wall of the palace (Fig.2-32). The passage in Cave 215 unmistakably reenacts the same detail—the painter even made sure that the Buddha Lands were positioned above the wall, while the Buddha is seated within the walled enclosure. And just like that of Cave 431, rolling mountains hills are visible beyond the wall, leading to the Buddha on Vulture Peak. This new image of the Buddha revealing the Buddha Lands is shown in frontal view—as if directly addressing the viewer

This new configuration of the meeting between Vaidehī and the Buddha again reveals this kind of spatial pivoting and 90-degree rotation of the palace—from a horizontal one in Cave 431 to a vertical one in Cave 215. The “pivoting” attempt in Cave 215 is to compensate for the loss of a peripatetic viewer that Cave 431 once afforded. It is also an experimental effort to appropriate images from Cave 431 to fit into a full-wall Pure Land tableau. As the peripatetic viewer in Cave 431 paces through the Ajātaśatru Narrative by following Vaidehī and walking along the palace depicted on the mural, here in Cave 215, the static viewer in front of a large tableau is invited to *see through* the palace and follow the story. The very last frontal view of the Buddha emanating Buddha Lands is striking—for at this very moment, we suddenly realize how we are experiencing the narrative *through* the eyes of Vaidehī herself—and the painters made sure we were able to take the cue. The effect of this looking through is designed to align Vaidehī’s viewpoint with ours.

What Cave 208 and Cave 215 allow us to recognize are the dynamic modes of artistic creativity that take place at Dunhuang. Painters were keenly aware of how images “worked” in different cave structures, and were able to reconfigure preexisting iconographic modes and

compositional structures for new projects. Both Cave 208 and Cave 215 are modest in size and painting quality, and were likely produced locally, without introducing foreign new iconographies. The painters reinvented murals that they had seen in older caves and repurposed them for new projects. Both caves were built near Cave 217, and it is evident that painters for the two 8th-century caves had knowledge of Cave 217, as well as the earlier mid 7th- century Cave 431 that is located further to the north side of the cliff (Fig.2-58). Cave 431 and Cave 217 were important projects that brought in new iconographies, and Cave 215 and Cave 208 contain local replications. By looking at the relationship between these two sets of caves, we witness a living visual memory of the Ajātaśatru Narrative at Dunhuang. Cave 431 and Cave 217 were important for those at Dunhuang, and their artistic ingenuity caused a rippling effect in cave production. However, there are cases when images are not replicated and do not travel to other cave projects. As one of the three earliest caves to include images of the Ajātaśatru Narrative, the mid 7th century Cave 209 has remained entirely unique.

2.4 *Becoming Lady Vaidehī*

At the beginning of this chapter, we revisited theories of Tang landscape painting through problematizing the figure of Lady Vadehī as a female viewer and Pure Land meditator. In the commentary tradition of the *Meditation Sutra*, the status of Lady Vadehī remained a conundrum and theologians attempted to label her both a “common being” and a “great bodhisattva”. Her identity was central to debates about whether or not the Pure Land soteriology was suitable for a wide range of sentient beings. Analyzing the earliest representations of the Ajātaśatru Narrative at Dunhuang, we see a semantic alignment between Shakyamuni Buddha, Vulture Peak and mountain images. Mountains were depicted as a counterpoint to architectural spaces— Vaidehī’s palace. The palace is where the

narrative unfolds, and also signifies Vaidehī's condition of being imprisoned. A new visual mode of spatial storytelling is created in this process, and painters purposefully designed murals for different cave spaces.

Cave 209 was intentionally designed to make viewers within the cave space identify with Lady Vadehī at the very moment she came face to face with Shakyamuni (Fig.2-59). If the overlay of *Meditation Sutra* images in Cave 431 was to transform and narrativize the central-pillar cave interior for Pure Land devotion, Cave 209 was newly designed to materialize the most important moment in the Ajātaśatru Narrative. Landscape imagery and the architecture of the Buddhist cave itself were used to instantiate the enlightenment/imprisonment binary we have seen throughout all Ajātaśatru Narrative representations. When meeting the Buddha, Lady Vadehī threw herself onto the ground, and dramatically repented. Taking stock from this narrative moment, Dunhuang painters have created a Buddhist cave specifically for repentance rites.

Archeologists believe that Cave 209 was created during the first phase of cave construction in the Tang period and was built sometime between 618 and 662.⁷⁶ This means that Cave 209 might have predated the renovation of Cave 431 and possibly contains the earliest representation of the Ajātaśatru Narrative at Dunhuang. The cave interior is 5.85 meters wide, 6 meters deep, with the ceiling sloping starting from 4 meters and rising up to 5.6 meters. The cave has a truncated-pyramid-shaped ceiling with four trapezoidal slopes. Instead of a carved-in niche on the west wall, Cave 209 has a 1.4-meter-wide and 0.8-meter-high platform raised along the west wall. Four panels of landscapes surround the platform altar. Remains of a large halo dominate the west wall, while the three knobs from which statues

⁷⁶ Fan Jinshi 樊錦詩 and Liu Yuquan 劉玉權, “*Dunhuang mogaoku tang qianqi dongku fenqi* 敦煌莫高窟唐前期洞窟分期,” in *Dunhuang yanjiu wenji (dunhuang shiku kaogu pian)* 敦煌研究文集 (敦煌石窟考古篇) (Lanzhou: Gansu renmin chubanshe, 2000), 144.

were attached to the wall are still visible in old photographs (Fig.2-60). On the south wall is an image of “Maitreya Preaching as a Bodhisattva”, and below this there are ten small bodhisattva figures (Fig2-61). On the north wall is a “Buddha Preaching” scene, and below this image are also ten small bodhisattva figures. On the east wall, there are three preaching scenes on top of the doorway, and one preaching scene on each side of the doorway (Fig.2-62a). The south, east and north ceiling slopes each depicts a preaching scene (Fig.2-62b).⁷⁷ In total, there are ten preaching scenes in this cave.

In terms of painting style, Cave 209 follows an older Sui dynasty tradition, but this is also the first time that landscape appears around the main altar space. The panels are filled with scenes from the Ajātaśatru story. Landscape specialists have frequently discussed the large size of the landscape and used it to delineate the rise of naturalism in the Tang dynasty.⁷⁸ On the contrary, the Ajātaśatru Narrative here—very likely its earliest appearance in Dunhuang—has never received much attention from historians of Buddhist art. This is the only time that the Ajātaśatru Narrative existed in a cave independently without other images of the Pure Land or the Sixteen Meditations. And scholars have found it difficult to decipher the iconographic content of the individual scenes.⁷⁹ The reason for the strange neglect of such an important cave is due to the fact that most art historians have treated landscape during this period as mere backdrops. A more productive approach is to study the cave space as a whole.

⁷⁷ *Mogaoku neirong zonglu*, 83

⁷⁸ Zhao Shengliang 赵声良, *Dunhuang bihua fengjing yanjiu* 敦煌壁画风景研究 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2005), 65-68, Li Xingming, 322, Akiyama Terukazu, 197-198.

⁷⁹ Liang Weiyong 梁蔚英, “*Guanjing liuyuan bianxiang shishuo* 觀經六緣變相釋說”, *Dunhuang Research*, no.2 (1998): 20-27. Tokiya Koki 釋舍幸紀, “*Kankyōhen ni tsuyite - tonko-bakukokutsu 209 kutsu wo tyushin toshite* 觀經變について——敦煌莫高窟二〇九窟を中心として”, *Indogaku Bukkyogaku kenkyu* 印度學佛教學研究 [Journal of Indian and Buddhist Studies] 48, no. 2 (2000): 35-42.

The panel images are divided according to three stages of the Ajātaśatru Narrative: 1) images to the left of the halo depict the imprisonment of the King (Fig.2-63aa'), 2) images to the right of the halo depict the imprisonment of the Queen (Fig.2-63bb'), and 3) the two side panels portray the meeting between the Buddha and Shakyamuni (Fig.2-64ab). The main icon of the cave was presumably the historical Buddha Śakyamuni. On the two sides above the halo on the ceiling slopes are symbolic images that are tied to crucial moments of the Buddha's life (Fig.2-60). On the left is the Buddha riding on an elephant, indicating the moment when he entered into his mother's womb. On the right is the Buddha, still a prince, riding on a horse to leave the royal palace in pursuit of enlightenment. With these two indicators, the central image must have been Śakyamuni Buddha, and the two other statues were probably two of his disciples. The combination of the Buddha and landscape with the Ajātaśatru Narrative scenes strongly suggests that the mountain in the altar space represents Vulture Peak. Perhaps not out of coincidence, the number of preaching scenes is also exactly ten, which matches the Buddha lands of ten directions that were shown to Lady Vaidehī.⁸⁰ This means that the entire cave reenacts the critical moment when Śakyamuni Buddha left Vulture Peak and appeared in front of Vaidehī, and this is only made possible if the viewer assumes the role of the imprisoned Queen.

Narrative passages in the landscape on the north and south panels openly address the encounter. Three images of the Buddha preaching to Vaidehī are shown on the south panel, while there are two more on the right side (Fig. 2-64ab). In the middle section of the north panel, there is a figure standing by an open door, looking at a running river (Fig.2-65). Liang Weiyang has identified this passage as Vaidehī secretly visiting her husband, while Wang

⁸⁰ Although Maitreya is still a bodhisattva, his realm in the Tusita heaven was in direct competition with Amitābha's Western Pure Land.

Huimin identifies the figure as a guard outside Vaidehī's prison.⁸¹ However, the "Imprisonment of the King" is already depicted on the left side of the halo, and this interpretation would break the organizing logic of the images. As we have previously reviewed the common visual structures that compose the crucial meeting between the Buddha and the Lady, we perhaps should see this detail not as a specific moment within the narrative but a symbolic representation of Vaidehī's state of being. She has arrived at a place between an open doorway and flowing water – both index thresholds of enlightenment. The identity of the figure also seems ambiguous. In all the five scenes of Vaidehī meeting the Buddha, she wears a bi-color outfit with her skirt's color different from her upper robe or shawl. In contrast, the solitary figure is wearing a monochrome outfit that resembles a monk's robe. The identity of this person is possibly an enlightened Vaidehī, a monk, or the nominal viewer inside Cave 209. This further suggests that the person entering into the cave is conditioned to embody Lady Vaidehī.

The cave's image program straddles the divide between the diachronic and the synchronic modes of representation. On the one hand, through the participation of a viewer, the cave reenacts an exact moment within the Ajātaśatru Narrative; on the other hand, it reconfigures the viewer's relationship with the Buddha and his abode in Vulture Peak. Mountain images, which have become drastically more sophisticated during this period, were never decorative backdrops, but visual statements of new philosophical ideas about Buddhist realms.

Vulture Peak was where Shakyamuni Buddha preached many important Mahayana scriptures, such as the *Lotus Sutra*, and its introduction created epistemic shifts in the

⁸¹ Liang Weying, "Guanjing liuyuan bianxiang shishuo 觀經六緣變相釋說," 22-23, Wang Huimin "Xifang jingtubian xingshi de xingcheng guocheng he wancheng shijian", 84.

medieval Chinese worldview.⁸² In early medieval sources, the Indian mountain Gr̥dhraakūṭa is phonetically translated as “*dujue shan*” (閻崛山) but is often referred to as “Numinous Vulture Peak” (*lingjiufeng* 靈鷲峰), either because real vultures gather around the mountain or the mountain evoked the shape of the bird (Fig.2-66). Named “Numinous Vulture Peak”, the imagination of this foreign sacred hill was wedded to early Chinese ideas of numinous mountains. The site was greatly important for Buddhists in China, and the pilgrim monk Faxian 法顯 (334-420) visited the sacred hill during his travels in the Buddhist holy land. Images of the Buddha on Vulture Peak already started to circulate in China prior to the 7th century and Eugene Wang suggests that its iconography resembled Chinese representations of sacred mountain realms. A “Numinous Vulture Monastery” was founded in Jiankang, the capital city of the Southern Dynasty of Liu Song (420 – 79). In 423, a monk named Huihao 惠豪 created an image of Vulture Peak inside the shrine (*kan* 龕) of the temple that was “thirty-eight [Chinese] yards [zhang], east-west, in depth, and forty-four feet [chi] north-south.”⁸³ The image was full of “miraculous transformations” (*qibian* 奇變), and featured animals, gods and celestial creatures within mountains forests. The installation caused a nationwide sensation and many subsequent shrines were modeled after it. In the north, Tuoba Gui 拓跋珪, Emperor Daowu of the Northern Wei (371-409) also created an image of “Gr̥dhraakūṭa Mountain” (*dujue shan* 閻崛山).⁸⁴ Śakyamuni was closely linked to his

⁸² Eugene Y. Wang, 2005, 192-205. For Buddhism and Chinese mountain culture, see Wei-Cheng Lin, *Building a Sacred Mountain: The Buddhist Architecture of China's Mount Wutai* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2014), 53-55.

⁸³ “宋景平元年。瓦官寺沙門帛惠高。造靈鷲寺。有沙門釋惠豪。智見通敏。巧思絕倫。於中製靈鷲山圖。奇變無方。儼似覩真。其山林禽獸之形。天龍八部之狀。歷代未有。自茲始出。龕成之後。傾國來觀。後世造龕。皆以豪為式。其龕東西深三十八丈。南北四十四丈四尺”； T.51, 2067:0013b04-b09. English translation see Eugene Y. Wang 2005, 194.

⁸⁴ “後魏太祖道正皇帝拓跋珪。天興元年。造耆闍崛山圖一所。加以續飾。莫不嚴具焉”； T.51, 2067:0013b10-b11.

mountain abode and this formed a standard iconography. Xuanzang retrieved a “golden replica of the image of the Buddha preaching the Lotus Sutra and other scriptures at Vulture Peak from the Kingdom of Magadha” during his pilgrimage in India.⁸⁵ Paintings showing Śakyamuni with Vulture Peak in the background can be found in Heian Japan, and such images were usually transmitted from Tang China (Fig.2-67). What Cave 209 presents is, then, a sort of iconography of Vulture Peak that was first invented in medieval China that was now updated to include narrative vignettes of the Ajātaśatru Preface.

In the 7th century, the Tang Empire was establishing itself as a new political force and new conceptions of mountains played an important role in the geopolitics of the Asian continent. The imperial realm was reimagined and divided by mountains in the early phases of the Tang dynasty. In 627, Emperor Taizong divided his territory into “ten circuits” (*shidao* 十道) based on the geography of mountain ranges, and this new division of territory was designed for the distribution of armed forces.⁸⁶ Tang military forces conquered Central Asian kingdoms, and at least fifty embassies were exchanged between courts of India and China between 619 and 753. Between 641 and 658, seven imperial embassies were sent between the Tang court and the Kingdom of Kanauj to form military alliances against the rising force of Tibetans and Arabs (Fig.2-68). Rājagṛha was the first capital of the kingdom of Magadha, and by the 7th century was within the borders of Kanauj. The Indian regime had many sacred sites related to the life of the Buddha that were visited by Xuanzang. Buddhism was productively used to form political alliances between the two courts. In 645, the famous

⁸⁵ “擬摩揭陀國鷲峯山說《法花》等經像，金佛像一軀”；T. 50, 2053: 0252b29-c01.

⁸⁶ “開元二十五年，敕令中書門下對朝集使隨便條革，以為定準，故備存焉。分十道以總之。” *Tang liudian* 唐六典, comp. Zhang Jiuling 張九齡 et al. 30 *juan* in vol. 595 of SKQS, 3. 26a. Shi Nianhai, 史念海, *Tangdai lishi dili yanjiu* 唐代歷史地理研究 (Beijing : Zhongguo she hui ke xue chu ban she, 1998), 27-62.

diplomat Wang Xuance 王玄策 placed an inscribed tablet at the foot of Vulture Peak during an imperial embassy to the kingdom of Kanauj.⁸⁷

In this context, Buddha images with landscape emerged as an iconographic model in the 7th century. The miraculous image of Fanhe—a type of icon, whose physical condition was symbolically tied to the fate of empires, was promoted by Daoxuan in his *Record of Miraculous Responses to the Three Jewels in China*. The lore of Fanhe was popularized as a divine testimony to the young regime’s legitimate rule and prosperity. An image of Fanhe was carved in the west wall of Cave 203 at Dunhuang (Fig. 2-69). Cave 203 was built around the same time of Cave 209, and was located not too far away from it (Fig.2-70). Both caves featured mountain realms on the west wall, with sculptural icons positioned on a long platform. In Cave 203, mountain ranges carved in relief are shown inside the niche around the statue’s full body halo. The legs of the archaic statue awkwardly protrude outwards towards the viewer—indicating how the “icon burst out as the mountain cracked”(shanlie xiangchu 山裂像出), as described by Daoxuan.⁸⁸ The Fanhe image was also the main icon in Cave 323, a mid 7th century cave that feature various narrative scenes on the upper half of its north and south walls (Fig 1-35). The narratives feature miraculous events related to Buddhism in Chinese history. These narratives are depicted in a continuous landscape that stretches across the two walls (Fig.2-71). The landscapes here do not refer to any specific mountains but represent the land of the Tang Empire as a sacred Buddha land. The “mountains and waters of China” painted in Cave 323 are granted a divine legitimacy

⁸⁷ Sen, 16-25.

⁸⁸ T.52, 2107: 0437b13.

through the appearance of the Fanhe statue that manifested itself on a hilltop outside the city of Liangzhou.⁸⁹

The Buddhist community's efforts in fashioning China into a sacred Buddhist land were not simply carried out in the realm of representation. Throughout the medieval period sutra carvings on cliffs, stupa caves, and colossal mountainside statues, in Wei-cheng Lin's words, "literally altered, marked and transformed mountains into a sacred site."⁹⁰ Mt. Wutai (*wutaishan* 五臺山), or "Mountain of Five Peaks" in current day northern Shanxi province was reinvented as the bodhisattva Mañjuśrī's sacred abode (Fig.2-68).⁹¹ The transformation of Mt. Wutai into a sacred Buddhist mountain in China was to bridge the distance between China and the Buddhist heartland in India.⁹² Mt. Wutai was promoted as a Chinese sacred Buddhist mountain during the Tang period to deal with the anxiety of China being a far off hinterland of Buddhism during the decline of the dharma. The *Ancient Records of [Mount] Qingliang* 古清涼傳 was compiled by the monk Huixiang 慧祥 around 680.⁹³ Huixiang created a new topography of the "five peaks" with the Taihuai valley at its center. The largest monastery at Mt. Wutai is located in this valley, and was named "Monastery of Great Faith in Vulture Peak" (*dafu linagjiusi* 大孚靈鷲寺), directly alluding to Vulture Peak in India. This

⁸⁹ Wu Hung, "Dunhuang 323 ku yu dao xuan 敦煌 323 窟與道宣," in Wu Hung 巫鴻, *Liyi zhong de meishu : Wuhong zhongguo gudai meishushi wenbian* 禮儀中的美術：巫鴻中國古代美術史文編 [Art in Its Ritual Context : Essays On Ancient Chinese Art By Wu Hung], trans. Zhen Yan, Wang Rui, (Beijing Shi: Sheng huo, du shu, xin zhi San lian shu dian, 2005), 418-430. Also see Wu Hung, "Rethinking Liu Sahe: The Creation of a Buddhist Saint and the Invention of a 'Miraculous Image,'" *Orientalism* (November 1996): 32-43. Koichi Shinohara, 2004, 180-222.

⁹⁰ Wei-cheng Lin, 2014, 90.

⁹¹ Sen, 76-86. Wei-cheng Lin, 111-120.

⁹² Nataka Mie 中田美繪, "Tangdai zhongguo fojiao de zhuanghuan —yi biantu, zhongxinyishuweiqierudian 唐代中國佛教的轉換——以邊土、中心意識為切入點" [Transitions of Chinese Buddhism during the Tang Period: From the Prospective of Peripheral Consciousness and Sino-centrism] *Tang Studies* 唐研究 18 (2012): 333-335.

⁹³ T.51, 2098.

monastery was where Mañjuśrī manifested his holy presence. And this new topography transformed the center of Mt. Wutai into a locus of the bodhisattva's "transformative manifestations" (*bianxian* 變現).

Images of Vulture Peak and Mt. Wutai played an important role in this new worldview that was promoted by the Tang court in the late 7th century. In Cave 217, the landscape of Vulture Peak in the Pure Land tableau on the north wall (Fig.2-72a) is intentionally paired with an elaborate landscape of Mt. Wutai in the *Incantation of Glory Sutra* tableau of the south wall (Fig.2-72b). Both mountain images depicted numinous waterfalls and mark specific locations mentioned in the prefaces of the two sutras. On the north wall, Vulture Peak is shown in the Ajātaśatru Narrative—the preface of the *Meditation Sutra*, while on the south wall, Mt. Wutai is described in the preface of the *Incantation of Glory Sutra* as the location where Buddhapālita encountered bodhisattva Mañjuśrī in the guise of an old man. This deliberate pairing elevates the status of the Chinese Mt. Wutai into a sacred Buddhist realm like Vulture Peak in India, just as Vulture Peak was re-imagined as a Chinese immortal mountain throughout medieval China (Fig.2-73). In this context, the image of the Buddha that is in effect *pulling* Vulture Peak into Vaidehī's courtyard becomes highly important. The teleporting Buddha and apparitional mountain that miraculously cut through Vaidehī's courtyards materializes a numinous divine presence that could be in the reach of an imprisoned lay women.

Landscape imagery was employed in Buddhist caves as an intentional project of empire. As an important oasis town, painters of Dunhuang were particularly aware of their position within this Buddhist world—monks, mercenaries, and merchants from these locations would have constantly traveled through the oasis city, and an influx of new imagery came to

Dunhuang during the 7th century.⁹⁴ Therefore, to elaborately depict Vulture Peak was to help produce this new sacred geography of Buddhism across Asia. As we have previously discussed, the presence of Sakyamuni Buddha is deeply intertwined with Vulture Peak. Just as the apparitional mountain is pulled into Vaidehī's courtyard through the power of the Buddha in Cave 217, Vulture Peak is brought into the altar space in Cave 209. The narrative vignettes that layer the landscape indicate the time of the Buddha's life and the distant location of Vulture Peak in India. The sculptural icons on the altar platform represent another spatial-temporal situation of here and now. The relational dynamics between icon and viewer unlocks a visionary moment when the historical Buddha has departed from his sacred abode and has transported himself into the presence of Lady Vaidehī. By assuming the position of Vaidehī, those that enter the cave inhabit a conceptual space that negotiates their body's relationship with the heart land of Buddhism. The binary structure of landscape/enlightenment and palace/imprisonment is mapped out inside the Buddhist cave.

The interior of Cave 209 can also be regarded as a performative space that conditions how the body should act. In Ajātaśatru Narrative scenes, when facing the Buddha, Vaidehī is dramatically prostrating on the floor and weeping (Fig.2-52). This physical and emotional drama is connected to ritualistic gestures in repentance rites.⁹⁵ The possibility of attaining a vision of the Buddha depended on the efficacy of ritual confessions. Prostrating (*wuti toudi*

⁹⁴ Sha Wutian 沙武田, "Jiaose zhuanhuan yu lishiji yi – mogaoku di 323 ku zhangqian chushi xiyutu de yishushi yiyi 角色转换与历史记忆: 莫高窟第 323 窟张骞出使西域图的艺术史意义," *Dunhuang Research* 143, no.1 (2014), 21-27. Shi Nianhai 1998, 496-533. Li Bingcheng 李并成, "Shengtang shiqi hexizoulang de quweitedian yukai fa 盛唐时期河西走廊的区位特点与开发," in *Tangdai diyu jigou yu yunzuo kongjian 唐代地域结构与运作空间*, ed., Li Xiacong (Shanghai: Shanghai Cishu Chubanshe, 2003), 60-95.

⁹⁵ Cuong T. Mai, "Visualization Apocrypha and the Making of Buddhist Deity Cults in Early Medieval China: With a Special Reference to the Cults of Amitābha, Matireya, and Smantabhadra" (PhD diss., Indiana University, 2009), 298-306. Also see Hong, De. "The Development of Buddhist Repentance in Early Medieval China" (PhD diss., University of the West, 2015), 35-38,

五體投地) is an important process in the preparation for meditation for it is intimately connected with the act of repentance and confession. In his *Commentary on the Meditation Sutra*, Shandao tells us that in the process of confession, it is “most important that tears of sadness flow down as raindrops” (*beiti yuqi* 悲涕雨淚), and that a feeling of deep sorrow should penetrate “to the mind and the marrow of the bones in self-reproach” (*qiegu zize* 切骨自責).⁹⁶ As one can only obtain the Amitābha vision through the power of the Buddha, the clearing of karmic obstacles in the form of repentance was crucial for a successful meditation and attaining a divine vision. In a famous description of Xuanzang’s experience in the Shadow Cave in Nagarahāra, we see how the submission of the body and weeping functioned as an important incentive for obtaining a vision of the divine,

[He] did not see anything. [He] blamed himself for his own spiritual obstacles that prevented him from seeing the shadow and wept with regret and repentance. [He] then recited the *Śrīmālādevī Siṃhanāda Sutra* and other sutras with all his heart, and sang hymns to praise the Buddha. He eulogized the Buddha as he worshipped it, and prostrated himself for more than a hundred times. Then he saw a bright light the size of an alms bowl appear on the eastern wall, but it disappeared in an instant... When he had prostrated himself gain more than two hundred times, the whole cave became brightly illuminated and the Tathataga’s shadow was clearly seen on the wall, just like a gold mountain becoming visible when the clouds and mist disperse. Its wonderful features were lustrous with a divine and brilliant appearance.

一無所見，自責障累，悲號懊惚，更至心禮誦《勝鬘》等諸經、讚佛偈頌，隨讚隨禮，復百餘拜，見東壁現如鉢許大光.....如是更二百餘拜，遂一窟大明，見如來影皎然在壁，如開雲霧忽睹金山，妙相熙融。⁹⁷

The passage above shows that the reduction of spiritual obstacles through repentance and the gaining of divine visions was a common mechanism, and Xuanzang undoubtedly understood

⁹⁶ T.37, 1753: 0262a12-13, For English translation see Pas, 182.

⁹⁷ T.50, 2053: 0230a. For the English translation, I consulted, Eugene Y. Wang 2005, 255. For more on the Shadow Cave, see Eugene Y. Wang, “The Shadow Image in the Cave: Discourse on Icons,” in *Early Medieval China: A Sourcebook*, eds. Wendy Swarz, Robert Campany, Yang Lu (Columbia University Press, 2014), 405-427.

how this worked. Shandao greatly emphasized the importance of repentance rites. To prepare oneself for meditating on the Pure Land, one must expiate previous sins through ritual confession. In one section, he quotes passages from the *Meditation Sutra* to demonstrate how Lady Vaidehī's performances of repentance led her to come face to face with the Buddha, and once she does see the Buddha, she continues such ritualistic acts of confession. This helps us understand the experience painters were trying to grapple with.

In the palace, whenever [Vaidehī] desired to see the Buddha, she would face Vulture Peak from afar and sadly weep and worship [him]. The Buddha felt this from afar, and he disappeared from Vulture Peak and appeared inside the palace. The Lady lifted her head and immediately saw the World-Honored-One, in gold color, sitting on a lotus flower, flanked by his two disciples. When the Lady saw the Buddha, she prostrated on the ground and started to wail and sob, seeking pity from the Buddha and repenting.... If there are ones that desire to see [the Buddha], follow the Lady and wish for the Buddha sincerely, and you shall see [him] without doubt.

如觀經說云，摩竭提國王夫人名韋提希，每在宮內願常見佛，遙向耆闍崛山悲泣敬禮。佛遙知念，即於耆山沒王宮出現，夫人已舉頭即見世尊，身紫金色坐寶蓮華，目連阿難立侍左右，釋梵臨空散華供養。夫人見佛，舉身投地號泣，向佛求哀懺悔……但使有心願見者。一依夫人至心憶佛。定見無疑。

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Lady Vaidehī, who repents, sees the Buddha, and follows his instructions to practice the Sixteen Meditations, becomes the ritual adept par excellence. Shandao openly tells adepts to imitate her behavior. Through creating a momentary scenario in the Ajātaśatru Narrative, the cave provides a direct relationship between the icon of Śakyamuni and the act of repentance, through the figure of Vaidehī as an intermediary. Furthermore, the ten small bodhisattva figures on the bottom rim of the north and south roles are frequently depicted in late Sui and early Tang caves (Fig.2-74). Zhao Xiaoxing has argued that this type of iconography is directly related to the *Sūtra on Removing Sins through Repentance and Universal Ornament of Attaining Buddhahood* (大通方廣懺悔滅罪莊嚴成佛經), and is closely related to

⁹⁸ T.47, 1959.

repentance rites.⁹⁹ Such bodhisattvas also appear in larger forms on the north and south walls in Cave 323 below the large narrative scenes depicted in continuous landscapes.¹⁰⁰ One method of repentance described in this sutra is to venerate all the Buddhas in their own Buddhalands, and encourages adepts to receive dreams of traveling in the Pure Lands. This connection adds another link between the iconography of the small bodhisattvas and the ten Buddha worlds depicted in Cave 209.

Creatively intersecting the diachronic with the synchronic, the design of Cave 209 actively invites those that enter it to become Lady Vaidehī. Landscape and the icon of the Buddha play a central role in turning the cave interior into a space for encounters. This also brings to light a drastically new understanding of cave space and landscape imagery. As we have seen earlier in this chapter, the open gateway and palace enclosure actively frame the relationship between Vaidehī and the realm of the divine. This important relational structure in Pure Land Buddhism, which binds viewer and landscape, is choreographed through a Buddhist cave interior. As we assume the identity of Vaidehī, the cave becomes a palace, a prison, but also a gateway to Vulture Peak and the Buddha.

Conclusion

Through the figure of Lady Vaidehī we have traced the emergence of a new way of seeing in medieval China. Images from Chinese art history have often privileged a male gaze over

⁹⁹ T.85, 2871. See Zhao Xiaoxing 赵晓星, “Mogaoku di 401 ku chutang pusa lixiang yu datong fanguang jing 莫高窟第 401 窟初唐菩薩立像與《大通方廣經》,” *Dunhuang Research* 123, no.5 (2010): 47-52.

¹⁰⁰ Yen Chuan-ying 顏娟英, “Cong liangzhou ruixiang sikao dunhuang maogaoku 323ku, 332ku 從涼州瑞像思考敦煌莫高窟 323 窟、332 窟,” in *Dongya kaoguxuede zaisi- zhang guangzhi xiansheng shishi shizhounian lunwenji* 東亞考古學的再思——張光直先生逝世十週年紀念論文集 (Taipei: zhongyang yanjiuyuan lishi yuyan suo, 2013), 443-471.

feminine space—the male viewer dominates or consumes the landscape. Different from “reclined wandering”, which has been prominently posed as a leisurely and masculine activity, viewing here means seeing through conditions of imprisonment and realizing a larger landscape that is always already present. Rather than imagining oneself roaming off in distant mountains, Vulture Peak is brought into the presence of Vaidehī through the power of the Buddha.

An important 6th century commentator of the *Meditation Sutra*, Jizang 吉藏 (549—623) theorizes the meeting between the Buddha and Vaidehī through the force of “resonant [or sympathetic] response” (*ganying* 感應). He writes, “When the Lady was imprisoned, there is feeling (*gan* 感) and there is response (*ying* 應)...When the Lady prayed and felt, Buddhas of the ten directions responded.”¹⁰¹ Mountains start to partake in this “sympathetic response” relationship between the Lady and the Buddha. In Kiyohiko Munakata’s seminal reading of Zong Bing’s *Preface of the Landscape Painting*, he brings the concept of “response of kinds” (*ganlei* 感類) to the forefront of theories of art. Analyzing Zong Bing’s essay on landscapes aesthetics, he claims that, “the requirement for the artists in the paintings of sacred mountains, ‘icons’ so to speak, is to attain the essential nature (*lei* 類) of the mountains, so as to cause a mystical karmic interaction between the spirit of the viewer and spirit of the sacred mountain depicted.”¹⁰² And as we have seen clearly in Cave 217, a semantic alignment was formed between Shakyamuni and his mountain abode—creating a visionary object that manifests itself in Vaidehī’s courtyard.

¹⁰¹“然前父王被幽閉中有感有應。今夫人被執亦有感有應。前父王祈感。目連富樓那聖弟子應。今夫人祈感。十方諸佛應”；T.37, 1752: 0240b21-b23.

¹⁰² Kiyohiko Munakata, 127.

What this chapter shows is that by the mid 7th century, this relationship of “sympathetic response” between viewer and landscape was given a new form through Pure Land related landscape imagery. All landscapes painted in this new “Tang style” between the mid 7th century and early 8th century at Dunhuang were images of specific places—Vulture Peak, Mt. Wutai, or the lands of China. They constituted a new worldview at Dunhuang that was created by the Tang Empire as it expanded its territory and fostered connections with courts in India. As the Tang Empire fashioned its domain as a divine land, being able to resonate with landscapes takes on a new meaning – it provided proof that Tang subjects were dwelling in a numinous realm and sacred topographies were transportable. Vulture Peak, a sacred abode, was portrayed as a counterpoint to the architectural space of Vaidehī’s palace. As mountains and palaces shift and rotate to align the viewer with the figure of Vaidehī, a new type of pictorial space is created. Sophisticated perspectives were developed in Chinese painting with a focus on Vaidehī’s viewpoints. Architecture, doorways, mountains and water streams were created as threshold devices that one must learn to see beyond. Her ability to grapple with imprisonment and look through architectural structures became the foundation for visual representations of the Pure Land. She sees through gateways to the sophisticated landscape beyond, with a distant horizon and continuous ground -a new mode of recessive space. She starts the Sixteen Meditations by looking at the setting sun, the beginning of a meditation that will lead her to paradise. The Imprisoned Queen’s view ultimately leads her to look through visual phenomena—the subject of the following chapter.

CHAPTER THREE

WATER TRANSFORMATION AND THE SIXTEEN MEDITATIONS

The “Sixteen Meditations (*shiliuguan* 十六觀)” is one of the most widely practiced Buddhist meditations in East Asia – a ritual activity that enables adepts to “see” a Buddhist Paradise and enter into it after death. In the *Meditation Sutra* the historical Buddha Shakyamuni teaches the female protagonist Lady Vaidehī how to be reborn in the Western Pure Land of the Buddha of Infinite Life – *Amitāyus* (*wuliangshou fo* 無量壽佛) (also known as *Amitābha*, “Buddha of Infinite Light” *wuliangguang fo* 無量光佛).¹ As a defining feature of Pure Land Buddhism, this meditation practice developed in seventh-century China in tandem with the growing popularity of large Pure Land transformation tableaux. The Pure Land tableau, as a new mode of painting invented in the recently established Tang Empire, produced sophisticated new perspectival views, drawing the viewer’s gaze through large palatial complexes. How, this chapter asks, should we understand the relationship between Buddhist meditation and these monumental painted vistas? How does one depict meditative experience?

In the *Meditation Sutra*, Shakyamuni teaches Lady Vaidehī the Sixteen Meditations. It starts with the Lady meditating on the sun, then water, the lapis lazuli ground of the Pure Land, its trees, ponds, and buildings. Once the Pure Land realm is established, Vaidehī is instructed to meditate on the heavenly beings within the Pure Land. The Lady starts by focusing on the flower throne of the Buddha, and then the images of the Buddha and the bodhisattvas Avalokiteśvara and Mahāsthāmaprāpta. After this is accomplished, she moves on to meditate on the true bodies of *Amitābha* and the two bodhisattvas. Then, she imagines

¹ The palace coup is also known in different textual traditions as the “Narrative of Ajatashatru”, for more information see Michael Radich, 2011.

herself attaining rebirth in the Pure Land, as a babe in lotus flower inside the jeweled ponds of the Land of Bliss. After this, she meditates on a six-foot (*zhang*)-tall golden image of Amitābha on the surface of a water pond. As the first thirteen meditations comes to an end, the Buddha tells her how to meditate on the Nine Grades of Rebirth – completing the final three. Practitioners (*xingzhe* 行者) should follow these instructions that the Buddha taught Lady Vaidehī. In Dunhuang caves, sometimes only the first thirteen meditations are portrayed. In some cases, the last three meditations are expanded into a separated iconographic category dedicated to the Nine Grades of Rebirth.

While traditional functionalist approaches take Pure Land tableaux as “visual aids” for (individualistic, inner, psychological) meditation, these marvelous painted vistas, as efficacious constructions, actively create Buddhist worlds and divine visions for the meditator/viewer. In modern scholarship, Buddhist meditation has largely been imagined as a private psychological event, yet recent histories of art and religion have sought to rethink Buddhist meditation as the ritualization of experience, in which, as Robert Sharf suggests, “[meditation] doesn’t engender a specific experiential state so much as it *enacts* it.”² In this chapter, we will come to see how representations of the Sixteen Meditations are choreographed to “externalize the interior drama” of meditation processes.³ The Sixteen Meditations chart out for us how this “disciplining of the senses” is regimented, materialized, and routinized in painting and architecture.⁴

What might an “illustrated guide” to meditation actually look like in medieval China?

² Robert H. Sharf, “Buddhist Modernism and the Rhetoric of Meditative Experience,” *Numen* 42, Fasc. 3 (October 1995), 269.

³ Eugene Y. Wang, “Painted Statue in an Optical Theater: A Fifth-Century Chinese Buddhist Cave,” 28.

⁴ Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 37-38.

And should we regard these images as such? We have previously discussed the significance of Lady Vaidehī as a viewer and her power to see through spaces; in this chapter, we will examine the various phenomena that she meditates upon. As mentioned before, the pairing of meditators and meditative content is a 7th century pictorial invention in China. There is an earlier tradition of meditating monk images or representations of divinities that might have been the focus of meditation processes, which can be traced to the 5th century, when several Buddhist sutras on meditation were translated into Chinese (Fig.3-1, 3-2).⁵ However, the 7th century depiction of the Sixteen Meditations is entirely new, for its main visual trope is the pairing of Lady Vaidehī—a laywoman, and the various things that she takes as her focus (Fig.3-3).⁶ We not only witness her in meditative action, but also catch a glimpse of what she is meditating upon. As we shall see in this chapter, rather than function as an “illustrated step-by-step guide” for meditation, this symbiosis between meditator and “mental object” deals with the very act of meditative vision itself.⁷

The most remarkable aspect of these Sixteen Meditation illustrations is the passage that represents the “Water Mediation (*shuixiang* 水想)”, which shows Lady Vaidehī sitting on top of a mat with her hands held together. Placed in front of her is a large orb suspended

⁵ See Greene, “Meditation,” 30-40. Eugene. Y. Wang, “Painted Statue,” 25-32. Abe, “Art and Practice,” 2-4.

⁶ I will discuss the significance of Lady Vaidehī as a lay, female meditator in a different chapter.

⁷ There are images of monks and meditative states in the caves of Toyok, what predate the Dunhuang examples. Their relationship with the earliest Sixteen Meditations images of Lady Vaidehī in meditation found in Cave 431 at Dunhuang is unclear. Some scholars such as Miyaji Akira and Yamabe Nobuyoshi believe the Toyok images predate the Sixteen Meditations at Dunhuang, while others such as Zhang Jingfeng believe that the Cave 431 images only came after Shandao arrived in the capital in Chang’an and was eventually imported into Dunhuang from the capital. For our purposes, we will only be discussing examples at Dunhuang. See Yamabe, “The Sutra on the Ocean-like Samadhi,” 1999. Miyaji, “*Turufan*,” 38-83. Chinese translation see Miyaji Akira, 2009. Zhang Jingfeng 張景峰, “*Mogaoku di 431 ku*,” 34-43. Ning Qiang, “Visualization Practice,” 133-142. Lai Wenyong 賴文英, “*iu,qi shiji gaochang fojiao de jingtu changuan – yi tuyugou changuan tuxiang wei li* 六、七世紀高昌佛教的淨土禪觀--以吐峪溝禪觀圖為例,” *Yuanfang foxue xuebao*, no.7 (2002): 113-134.

above a rectangular pool (Fig.3-3). The shading effect highlights the spherical shape of the orb, while the rims beyond its heavy outline are left blank, creating an effect of glowing. Cubical colored tiles line the rectangular pool, and inside it a mottled texture is created by freehand dots – the substance within the pool is no longer water, but lapis lazuli. This passage seemingly straddles a paradox in visual logic –the orb’s minimal delineation shows a particular interest in formal abstraction, while the freehand dots in the pool strive to create palpable textures and surfaces. What is this orb? Why is no water shown in the “Water Mediation”? How should we make sense of such an image?

Although largely overlooked by iconographers, the image of Vaidehī gazing at an enigmatic orb over a textured pool marks an important turning point in Chinese art history. It represents a moment when medieval painters started to explore sophisticated representational strategies to make sense of a new type of visionary experience that is codified through the Sixteen Meditations. Yet to fully understand this, we must first revisit methodological problems in iconographic studies of the Sixteen Meditations to open new critical ground. It is important to note that the incongruity between the scriptural foundation of the Sixteen Meditations and its pictorial representations should be regarded as a productive disjunction, one that activates the Pure Land tableau as an efficacious object. It not only reveals how the Sixteen Meditations is a process of spatial-temporal unfolding (an event that *creates* a Buddhist world, rather than a description of its physical details), but also provides a reflexive critique of the Pure Land tableau itself as an image, one that has the power to “think back”.

Although the goal of Sixteen Meditations is to achieve a vision of Amitābha Buddha and the supernatural realm that emanates from his power, in Pure Land transformation tableaux, the most critical moment in the Sixteen Meditations is the “Water Meditation”. Through a detailed analysis of the manifold ways in which this single meditation is portrayed, we will see how this particular meditation and efforts to capture it in pictorial form reflect

medieval attitudes towards visual phenomena, material substance, representational space, the nature of images, and theories of vision. What emerges from this study is a new discourse on the multifaceted representational strategies employed by medieval painters to visualize as well as choreograph meditational experiences. Fascinated by geometric shapes, kinetic surfaces, effects of light, and the expanded possibilities of synesthesia, the medieval painter's brush is bound up with strategies of world making in the medieval imagination.

3.1 Object/Event: Sixteen Meditations as a Conceptual Program

The earliest images of the Sixteen Meditations – surviving in twenty 7-8th century grottoes at Dunhuang – frequently appeared on the sides of Pure Land transformation tableaux (See Appendix).⁸ The first images of Lady Vaidehī meditating on an orb above a square pool come from the mid-8th century Cave 172, which uniquely has the same type of Pure Land transformation tableau painted twice on its north and south walls. The architectural complexes portrayed in these murals have often led art historians to reconstruct imperial palaces and Buddhist monasteries in Tang China (Fig.1-15abc).⁹ Their extraordinary accuracy in delineating timber-frame structures and advanced use of perspective mark them as the finest depictions of the Western Pure Land in medieval China (Fig.3-4). The doubly portrayed subject matter in different painting styles on opposite walls (and possibly by different hands) also point to a thriving atmosphere of artistic competition in the Dunhuang region, in which new artistic modes were widely copied and appropriated. Trend-setting, later cave constructions often repeated depictions of the Sixteen Meditations from this particular

⁸ Jin Weinuo, “*Xifang jingtubian*,” 30-34. Wang Huimin, “*Dunhuang xifang jingtu xinyang ziliao yu jingtu tuxiang yanjiu*,” 12-19, Wang Huimin, “*Xifang jingtu bian xingcheng de guocheng yu wancheng shijian*,” 76-85.

⁹ Xiao Mo, 72.

cave. And yet surprisingly, the iconography of the Sixteen Meditations in this cave is notoriously inconsistent with the sutra text.

In Ōnishi Makiko's latest study, she categorizes the Sixteen Meditations in Cave 172 as a type that "contains special images, but preserves the logic of the illustrations".¹⁰ The appearance of the orb was precisely one of these "special images" that Ōnishi believed was difficult to understand. For Ōnishi, although the imagery in Cave 172 "preserves the logic of the illustrations", only three Dunhuang caves and a silk banner painting perfectly match the sutra passages.¹¹ This is a common way in which previous scholars have weighed the Taima Mandala orthodoxy over different possibilities of depicting the sutra. The limitation of previous interpretive frameworks rests upon two basic assumptions: 1) the images *should* faithfully represent the Sixteen Meditation as described in the *Meditation Sutra*; 2) the Taima Mandala (*taima mandara* 当麻曼荼羅) -a large gold *kesi* (縹絲) tapestry that came to Japan from China in the 8th century represents the most orthodox method of pictorializing the *Meditation Sutra* (Fig3-5).¹² Such assumptions impede our ability to treat the earliest Dunhuang examples as untidy and creative attempts to represent meditative experience by different medieval painters. Furthermore, reading the *Meditation Sutra* as a mechanical template and fragmented textual basis, also reduces our prospect of understanding the multi-

¹⁰ Ōnishi Makiko samples fifteen caves from Mogao and Yulin caves that contain images of the Sixteen Meditations and two such silk banners from the Stein collections. She categorizes these works in to 5 different groups (Type A, Type A', Type Ax, Type B, and Type Bx) based on how the images follow the text of the Meditation Sutra. Cave 172 is placed in Type B, in which, according to Ōnishi are to be understood as "contains special images, but maintains the logic of the illustrations" "特殊な図像を含むが、図像的合理性を保つもの". See Ōnishi Makiko 2007, 117

¹¹ Ibid, 124

¹² Ōnishi Makiko also claims that the original Taima Mandala, which was kept in the Taima Monastery in Japan, was a faithful copy of a late 7th century Pure Land transformation tableau that Emperor Wu Zetian created in the imperial workshops and then distributed to 400 prefectures throughout the Tang empire. See Ōnishi "Fojiao yishu yu tangchao gongtin", 251-270. Nakamura Koji, "Ribei de jingtu bianxiang yu dunhuang," 210 – 221. Ten Grotenhuis 1999, 13-32.

sensorial world described in the sutra. Taken as a whole, the creation of the Pure Land is a process of spatial unfolding, and elements and spaces are in constant flux. Although the *Meditation Sutra* charts out sixteen stages of the contemplative process, it is uncertain how each stage could be represented in symbolic forms, if not arbitrarily defined. In fact, the standardization of these symbolic forms was only consolidated in the mid-8th century, and before this moment, the representation of different stages often varied. Likewise, rather than following a linear sequencing, in which the meditator focuses on a series of objects, the set of pictorial symbols chosen to represent each meditation was relatively fluid, and could be stretched or condensed in order to emphasize moments of metamorphosis or the phasing of meditative thresholds.

Driven by the sectarian interests of the Japanese Pure Land sect, in modern scholarship, the Taima Mandala has acquired a canonical status for understanding all images of the Sixteen Meditations in East Asia.¹³ However, according to legend, the tapestry was only rediscovered in the 13th century by leaders of the Pure Land movement in Kamakura Period Japan (1185 -1333), and then gained an orthodox status. Many painted and woodblock copies of the Taima Mandala that survive today were made from the 13th century onwards (Fig.3-6).¹⁴ Like earlier 8th century murals found at Dunhuang, the Ajātaśatru Narrative scenes and the Sixteen Meditations are found on the two sides of the main Pure Land image. Although labeled as the Sixteen Meditations, only the first thirteen meditations are portrayed in the Taima Mandala. The last three meditations on the “Nine Grades of Rebirth” are folded into the “Welcoming Descent of the Nine Grades of Rebirth” (Chines: *jiupin laiying* 九品來迎 Japanese: *kubon raigō*) on the bottom rim. Each mediation scene is self-contained in a

¹³ Ōnishi 2007, 187-191

¹⁴ Elizabeth Ten Grotenhuis, *The Revival of the Taima Mandala in Medieval Japan* (New York: Garland Pub., 1985), 21-29, 94-152. Ōnishi 2007, 59-191

rectangular space, and the divisions between neighboring units are clearly demarcated. In each scene, Lady Vaidehī is seated in profile, facing the “object” of meditation (Fig.3-7). The size of Vaidehī is much smaller than the “meditative object”, which is shown in a frontal position that directly faces the viewer. As modern studies of Pure Land iconography have prioritized the iconography of the Taima Mandala, the majority of Sixteen Meditation images at Dunhuang fall out of this orthodox classification (even though they predate or were contemporaneous with the 8th century original Taima Mandala). Many are labeled as either disordered or illogical in both imagery and sequencing.

If we routinely prioritize vague notions of textual accuracy, we also hinder our ability to perceive the manifold ways in which medieval painters dealt with questions of representation – especially in these earliest images of the Sixteen Meditations. To revisit this problem we should perhaps set off with a different set of questions: What does it mean to represent a meditative action? What is the “visual logic” of such illustrations? How do painters negotiate between different representational strategies? How do representational efforts reveal understandings of the Pure Land tableau beyond textual traditions? What kind of world is created through such artistic endeavors? As we shall see, Cave 172’s “inconsistencies” with the Sixteen Meditations in the sutra text have a longer history, which can be revealed through a detailed look at the “Water Meditation”- the second stage and an important threshold moment in the meditative procedure. In the meantime, the floating orb – this “special image” that begs further inquiry –brings to light profoundly new conceptions of how a Buddhist world comes in to being in ritual processes.

As many Dunhuang examples show, the Sixteen Meditations, which took form around the mid-7th century, were more likely constructed as a conceptual program rather than a rigid iconographic regime. What complicates the iconographic traditions of the Sixteen Meditations is the intricate and dynamic system of meditative phenomena described in the

sutra. One popular understanding of the Sixteen Meditations among art historians is that Lady Vaidehī is instructed to focus on sixteen different “objects”, which mark out a clear-cut step-by-step sequencing of the entire process. However, in reality, representations of individual stages could be expanded or subtracted, while the number *sixteen* remains constant, and in each case *sixteen* figures of Vaidehī are shown.¹⁵

In this sense, the Sixteen Meditation as a whole constitutes a *conceptual program*, in which individual stages of the meditative process are interlocked with or embedded within each other in a hierarchical fashion. In other words, the idea of “sixteen” is important in the images, while individual meditative units frequently shift and change. For modern scholars, the “object” that Vaidehī focuses on in each individual step is usually imagined to be self-contained and static, and this has guided art historians in iconographical studies. For our purposes, we shall first shift our focus from studying the representation of a meditative *object* to analyzing the strategies of illustrating a meditative *event*.¹⁶

This ambiguous relationship between object and event can be found in Tang period appellations for the Sixteen Meditations. In Duan Chengshi’s 段成式(803?–863) 9th century compilation of legends and hearsay, *Miscellaneous Morsels from Youyang*, there is a chapter devoted to “Records of Temples and Pagodas” that describes a Pure Land tableau in the Duke of Zhaojing Monastery (*zhaojinggongsi* 趙景公寺) in the Tang capital of Chang’an. This is a

¹⁵ The last three meditations are about different types of rebirth, and this section is sometimes folded in the another pictorial tradition called the “Nine Grades of Rebirth”, thus, sometimes instead of sixteen, thirteen figures of Lady Vaidehī is shown.

¹⁶ Nobuyoshi Yamabe notes how the Sixteen Meditation images at Dunhuang are different from the Toyok images of meditating monks, precisely because they look like they are illustrating the narrative of the Meditation Sutra. He writes, “This point gives us the impression that these paintings were intended as narrative scenes rather than as meditative scenes. Since the arrangements of the scenes also largely follow the contents of the Visualization Sūtra, these paintings seem to suggest that the Visualization Sūtra was already accepted as a scriptural authority.” Nobuyoshi Yamabe, “Practice of Visualization and the Visualization Sūtra,” 141.

rare case in which Duan Chengshi specifically mentions the Sixteen Meditations independently, while in most instances this component is subsumed under the larger composition of the “Western Pure Land Transformation Tableau”, which does not specify whether or not the image includes a Sixteen Meditations segment.

In the western corridor of the Precinct of the Three Stages Fan Changshou painted Western Paradise illustrations, including the *Sixteen Objects of Meditation*. His Jewel Lake was most marvelously rendered, so that even under careful scrutiny the water seemed to be penetrating deeply into the wall.

三階院西廊下，范長壽畫西方變及十六對事，寶池尤妙，絕諦視之，覺水入深壁。¹⁷

In most cases the Sixteen Meditations is referred to as “*shiliuguan* 十六觀”, but here it is called the “*shiliu duishi* 十六對事”. Alexander Soper translates this as the “Sixteen Objects of Meditation”, but he has left out the term *dui* 對, which means to “correspond”.

Furthermore, the Chinese term *shi* 事, which denotes “phenomena or affairs of the world”, can also be translated into “event” instead of “object”.¹⁸ For our purposes, it is more helpful to translate this term into the “Sixteen Corresponding Events of Meditation”. The emphasis lies on the action and movement of phenomena rather than the physical characteristics of each object, which problematizes our search for a distinct physical object to represent or symbolize each procedure that is constantly in motion.

This “object / event” dichotomy is tied to different ideas about the agency of the meditator in modern scholarship. Buddhist meditation practices that focused on “imagining”

¹⁷ Duan Chengshi 段成式, *Youyang zazu jiaojian* 酉陽雜俎校箋, ed. Xu Yimin 許逸民 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2015), v. 4, 5. 1776. English translation, see Alexander Soper., “A Vacation Glimpse of the T’ang Temples of Ch’ang-an. The Ssu-t’a Chi by Tuan Ch’eng-shi,” *Artibus Asiae* 23, no.1 (1960): 23

¹⁸ In Buddhist contexts, *shi* 事 can also be understood as “phenomenal [ritual] activity”, against *li* 理 “noumenal principle”. See Daniel B. Stevenson, “The Ties that Bind: Chinese Buddhist Rites” for Securing Rebirth in the Pure Land”, in *Hōrin: vergleichende Studien zur japanischen Kultur* 15 (2009): 181.

or “envisioning” deities were based on a group of sutras that centered around the activity “*guan* 觀”. This Chinese word is usually translated into the English term “visualization”. The most widely used definition of Buddhist visualization comes from Alexander Soper himself, who writes, “*Guan* means a systematic building-up of visual images, each as complete and precise as possible, in a sequence from the simple towards the complex.”¹⁹ The text that Soper was specifically referring to was none other than the *Meditation Sutra*.²⁰ Soper’s idea of the “systematic building-up of visual images” implies that in the practice of meditative “visualization”, the adept maintains full agency when he/she concentrates on certain mental images. In this respect, Lady Vaidehī is believed to actively *construct* different visual elements in the Pure Land, such as mentally creating an adorned lotus throne for Amitābha.

If we look closely at 5th century Buddhist meditation texts, the agency of the meditator does not hold through the entire process. In a fashion similar to divination, East Asian meditation is an activity in which human agency and supernatural signs constantly intermingle with one another. A large portion of phenomena described in meditation sutras should be understood as “confirmatory visions” (*jingjie* 境界) — signs that will miraculously appear to verify whether or not the adept had followed the procedure correctly.²¹ In Buddhist contexts, the emphasis is usually directed towards how such signs (*xiang* 相) reveal one’s karmic obstructions (*yezhang* 業障), thus indicating a need for repentance.²² And it is true

¹⁹ Alexander C. Soper, “Literary Evidence for early Buddhist art in China,” *Artibus Asiae*, Supplementum (1959): 144.

²⁰ T. 365, 1.

²¹ Green translates *jingjie* 境界 as “verificatory visions”, Greene, “*Meditation*,” 10.

²² In his recent study on vision and visualization in Buddhist meditation in China, Eric Greene questions the agency of the meditator in commonly understood visualization practices.²² The idea of the meditator holding full agency in visualization was not formulated until the 19th century, during debates about the relationship between sanity and the occurrence of visions in Europe. Visionary experience was related to hallucination, which was commonly negative, pathological and indicated a total lack of agency for an individual. A breakthrough in psychological understanding took place in

that repentance rites were commonly staged as preparations for elaborate meditation rituals. The first “(1) Meditation on the Sun” in the Sixteen Meditations is a classic example for demonstrating the workings of the “confirmatory vision”.

Shandao’s commentary on this procedure reveals how adepts were particularly concerned with the interpretation of such signs. Lady Vaidehī is told to actively focus her mind on the sun, but the “setting sun like a floating drum” is the confirmatory vision that she passively sees, which further becomes an imprint in her mind that could be seen with her eyes open or closed.²³ Shandao’s commentary provides detailed descriptions on signs that one might see, and even deciphers the possible appearance of clouds in different colors that refer to different types of karmic obstructions.

“When the vision [of the sun] appears it will be as big as a coin, or else as big as the face of a mirror. On its bright surface you will see for yourself the signs (*xiang* 相) [indicating] the extent of the practitioner’s karmic obstructions (*ye zhang* 業障). The first of these is the black obstruction, like a black cloud shading the sun. The second is the yellow obstruction, like a yellow cloud shading the sun. The third is the white obstruction, like a white cloud shading the sun. It is because of this cloud obstruction that the sun could not reveal itself clearly. The karmic obstruction of sentient beings is indeed like this.”

當境現時，或如錢大，或如鏡面大。於此明上，即自見業障輕重之相。一者黑障，猶如黑雲障日。二者黃障，又如黃雲障日。三者白障，如似白雲障日。此日猶雲障故不得朗然顯照，眾生業障亦如是。²⁴

such debates and led to the idea that a healthy individual could also have visions and was also able to control such experiences productively. The spiritualist undertones of “visualization” became folded into modern studies of Buddhist meditation in the early 20th century, even though Buddhist meditation commonly entails sensory perception beyond the visual. Greene, “*Meditation*,” 199-256. For literature on repentance in Chinese Buddhism also see Mai, “Visualization Apocrypha,” 48-58.

²³ “見日欲沒，狀如懸鼓。既見日已，閉目開目皆令明了”；T.12, 365: 0342a03-a04. Eric M. Greene, “Visions and Visualizations: In Fifth-Century Chinese Buddhism and Nineteenth-Century Experimental Psychology,” *History of Religions* 55, no.3 (2016): 315.

²⁴ T.37, 1753: 262a02-a07. Greene translation with slight variations, Greene, “Visions and Visualizations,” 316

The resemblance of meditative visualization to something like divination is important to the study of Buddhist images, because art historians commonly use meditation texts, especially their rich visual descriptions, for the study of iconography. However, if the term “visualization” denotes a purely visual experience, which is fully controlled by the adept, then the English term itself falls short of the rich multi-sensory experience of the activity of *guan*. Actual meditations are divided into a variety of processes, such as “imagining”(xiang 想), “vision”(jian 見) and “Samādhi”(sanmei 三昧).²⁵ In this chapter, when referring to efforts of pictorial representation, we will use the term “visualization”, and when speaking of the activity of *guan*, the term “meditation” or “contemplation” will be used. For art historians, the representation of the Sixteen Meditations provides a unique opportunity to understand the intricate interplay between meditative agency and theories of Buddhist imagery in medieval China. As we shift focus from defining the formal qualities of meditative objects to understanding the development of meditative events, how does this new framework help us understand new visual modes in Pure Land art?

3.2 Depicting Metamorphosis: The Multiplicity of the Water Meditation

Following the “(1) Sun Meditation”, the “(2) Water Meditation” is one of the most complex sequences in the Sixteen Meditations: 1) as a continuously unfolding development in which objects and phenomena are in constant flux, the representation of this process is multifaceted; 2) as water is imagined to transform into lapis lazuli (*liuli* 琉璃)—the material substrate of the Pure Land, this procedure presents the first important threshold moment in the meditation sequence. Captivated by this supernatural process, medieval painters innovatively “stretched”

²⁵ Pas, 175-179.

the iconography of the “(2) Water Meditation,” intentionally multiplying it, revealing the inner stages of a single meditation, and charting out the three-step metamorphosis of water. The idea of metamorphosis and transformation was so potent in early 8th century imagination that such a threshold scene was enthusiastically “stretched” to chart out its marvels.

The earliest instance of such iconographic “stretching” can be found in the early 8th century Cave 217(Fig.3-8)). There are in total sixteen figures of Lady Vaidehī, but only the first of the thirteen Meditations are depicted. As a carefully crafted political statement, the construction of the cave imbued the Dunhuang region with new pictorial inventions of exquisite craftsmanship that most likely came from the capital. Instead of one, there are *three* passages that compose the entire “(2) Water Meditation” in Cave 217, which fed into the numerological discrepancies of the iconography of the Sixteen Meditations (we will return to this issue at the end of the chapter) (Fig.3-9).²⁶ The passage describing the “(2) Water Meditation” in the *Meditation Sutra* shows how instead of taking the substance of water as a static “meditational object”, the entire process focuses on the myriad transformations of water into different materials and forms that construct the contours of the Pure Land. In other words, the “(2) Water Meditation” is a threshold *event*, in which a seemingly definite object transforms into a network of expanding architectural forms in unfolding space.

²⁶ The most apparent iconographic instability can be found in the last three of the Sixteen Meditations, which mostly deal with the three levels of rebirth (*sanbei shengxiang* 三輩生想). Different from the previous thirteen, the last three sections of the text do not explicitly provide any visual object to focus on, and is more concerned with the currency of karma and signs that testify to the attainment of different modes of rebirth. Therefore, as we have already seen in the Taima Mandala, the last three are dropped out from the sequence and incorporated in another section on the Nine Grades of Rebirth (*jiupin wangsheng* 九品往生). The Sixteen Meditations in the mid-7th century Cave 431 and 8th century Cave 45 clearly follow this trend by only depicting the first thirteen meditations. However, all of the three *Meditation Sutra* tableaux in Cave 171, choose to depict images of the three levels of rebirth, in which Lady Vaidehī witnesses Amitābha’s entourage of heavenly beings carrying off infant-like souls on a lotus flower or diamond seat. However, to evenly fill up the last two slots of the evenly divided grids, up to *five* images of this scene are included rather than the standard three.

Imagine and see (*xiangjian* 想見) the western direction as entirely flooded by water. When you see (*jian* 見) the water become clear and pure, let (*ling* 令) this vision be distinctly perceived. Keep your thoughts from being distracted. Once you see (*jian* 見) the water, you should begin (*qi* 起) the contemplation on ice. Once you see (*jian* 見) the ice as transparent to its depth, begin (*qi* 起) the contemplation on lapis lazuli. When this contemplation is complete, you will see (*jian* 見) the lapis lazuli ground shine brilliantly, inside and out. Underneath are golden banners made of diamond and seven kinds of jewels, which support the lapis lazuli ground. These banners have eight sides and eight rims, and each side is adorned with a hundred kinds of jewels. Each jewel emits a thousand rays of light; each ray of light has eighty-four thousand colors. As they are reflected upon the lapis lazuli ground, they look like a thousand *koṭis* of suns, impossible to see in detail. The lapis lazuli ground is inlaid with crisscrossing golden threads, and clearly divided by the seven types of jewels. Within each jewel there is the light of five hundred colors, and this light is like flowers, or like the stars and the moon. [The ground] is suspended in the sky and becomes a platform of light, from which ten million buildings and pavilions are created by a hundred types of jewels. Each of the two sides of the platform is adorned by a hundred *koṭis* of flowered banners and innumerable musical instruments. As eight types of pure breezes arise from the light and play the musical instruments, they proclaim the truths of suffering, emptiness, impermanence, and no-self. This is the visualization of the water and is known as the second contemplation.

想見西方一切皆是大水，見水澄清，亦令明了，無分散意。既見水已當起冰想，見冰映徹作琉璃想。此想成已，見琉璃地內外映徹，下有金剛七寶金幢，擎琉璃地。其幢八方八楞具足，一一方面百寶所成，一一寶珠有千光明，一光明八萬四千色。映琉璃地，如億千日不可具見。琉璃地上，以黃金繩雜廁間錯，以七寶界分齊分明。一一寶中有五百色光，其光如花，又似星月。懸處虛空成光明臺，樓閣千萬百寶合成，於臺兩邊各有百億花幢無量樂器，以為莊嚴，八種清風從光明出，鼓此樂器，演說苦空無常無我之音。是為水想，名第二觀。²⁷

The “(2) Water Meditation” is rich with visual imagery and full of motion. Water transforms into ice, and ice transforms into lapis lazuli. Lapis Lazuli forms the ground of the Pure Land, from which a variety of elements appear: gold banners stretch out from below the ground, jewels begin to emit light, golden cords divide the lapis lazuli ground, a platform of light rises up in space, buildings take shape, and instruments start to play music automatically. The meditation on water starts with the practitioner imagining water, but arrives at a general silhouette of the Pure Land—a vision that is constantly taking shape and becoming

²⁷ T.12, 0365: 0342a06- a19.

increasingly clear and vivid. Multiple senses beyond vision partake in this event, from the tactile knowledge of water freezing over, to the experience of sound. Most of the visual and acoustic elements are not what the meditator is instructed to actively imagine. The meditator is supposed to think about water, until he *sees* (*jian* 見) the water become clear, which is the confirmatory vision for this section. Then he imagines this calm water surface turn into ice, and once this meditation is fulfilled, he will *see* (*jian* 見) the ice transform into lapis lazuli. Once this metamorphosis from water to ice to lapis lazuli is complete, we arrive at a long description of a variety of elements that will automatically appear as a vision.

Notably, the description of the lapis lazuli ground is placed within this passage. Although the following meditation, the “(3) Meditation on the Ground” is actually dedicated to the ground of the Pure Land, it provides no visual description and simply summarizes the previous passage, “When the water meditation is complete, it is called the rough view (*cujian* 粗見) of the ground of the Land of Utmost Bliss.”²⁸ To have this “rough view” of the Pure Land is significant, and the “(3) Meditation on the Ground” describes how upon achieving such a vision, “the sins that would bind one to life and death for eighty *koṭis* of *kalpas* will be extinguished, and one will certainly relinquish his body and be reborn in the Pure Land.”²⁹ Therefore, the “(3) Meditation on the Ground” explains the important mechanism of reducing karmic debt. The achievement of this “rough vision” of paradise guarantees successful rebirth in the Pure Land.

It is important to point out that within the commentary tradition, the “(2) Water Meditation” was newly fashioned as a threshold moment in the second half of the 7th century.

²⁸ “水想成已，名為粗見極樂國地”；T. 12, 0365: 0342a22-a23

²⁹ “除八十億劫生死之罪，捨身他世，必生淨國”；T. 12, 0365: 0342a27-a28

The entire Sixteen Meditations were first categorized into separate parts according to the theory of “dependent rewards” (*yibao* 依報) and “main rewards” (*zhengbao* 正報) by Huiyuan (See Appendix). In Huiyuan’s system, the first seven meditations were considered “dependent rewards”, while the latter nine were the “main rewards.” This is because the first seven meditations are about the Pure Land realm, and the latter ones are about Amitābha. And since the Pure Land exists through the power of Amitābha, the meditations on the latter nine are “main results” (*zhengguo* 正果) that come from Amitābha, and the first seven are a result from his emanating power.³⁰ Shandao inherited this system from Huiyuan, but further divided the two parts into subcategories.³¹ He argues that the “(2) Water Meditation” was an important threshold phase in the entire meditation sequence.³² Within the category of “dependent rewards”, the “(1) Sun Meditation” and “(2) Water Mediation” are singled out as “nominal dependent rewards” (*jia yibao* 假依報), whereas the “(3) Meditation on the Ground”, the “(4) Meditation on the Trees”, the “(5) Meditation on the Pond of Eight

³⁰ “此十六中初之七門觀其依報。後之九門觀彼正報。前言汝當諦觀彼國是初七觀。淨業成者是後九觀”; T. 37, 1749:0178c09-c11. Pas, 158-159

³¹ The first seven meditations from that on the sun to that on the flower throne are considered forms of “circumstantial karmic response” (*yibao* 依報), whereas from the “(7) Meditation on the Icon” to the “(13) Miscellaneous Meditation” (*zaxiang* 雜想) are considered “direct karmic response (*zhengbao* 正報)”. This division takes the holy triad of Amitābha (which includes the Amitābha Buddha and his two assistants the bodhisattvas Avalokiteśvara and Mahāsthāmaprāpta) as its focus, and puts it in a different category from the surrounding environment- the Western Pure Land.

³² “又言人法者是所觀之境。即有其二：一者依報，二者正報。就依報中即有其三：一者地下莊嚴，即一切寶幢光明互相映發等是。二者地上莊嚴，即一切寶地池林寶樓宮閣等是。三者虛空莊嚴，即一切變化寶宮華網寶雲、化鳥風光動發聲樂等是。如前雖有三種差別，皆是彌陀淨國無漏真實之勝相。此即總結成依報莊嚴也。又言依報者，從日觀下至華座觀已來總明依報。就此依報中即有通有別。言別者，華座一觀是其別依，唯屬彌陀佛也。餘上六觀是其通依，即屬法界之凡聖，但使得生者共同受用故言通也”; T. 37, 1753: 0246c04-c17.

Virtues”, and “(6) Total Meditation” are labeled under “true dependent rewards” (*zhen yibao* 真依報).³³ In explaining his reason for such a division, Shandao writes,

When speaking of the “nominal” ones, the meditation on the sun, on water and on ice are “nominal dependent rewards” (假依報); it is because they *resemble* (*xiangsi* 相似) the appearance of objects that are visible in this realm (*cijie* 此界). When speaking of the “true” ones, from the “Meditation on the Lapis Lazuli Ground” to the “Meditation on the Jeweled Buildings” they are “true nominal rewards” (真依報). This is because they *are* the true and detached objects that are visible in that realm (*biguo* 彼國).

言假者，即日想水想冰想等，是其假依，由是此界中相似可見境相故。言真依者，即從瑠璃地下至寶樓觀已來，是其真依，由是彼國真實無漏可見境相故。³⁴

In Shandao’s explanation, the section on ice is singled out, and the “(2) Water Meditation” is split into two halves, with one half consisting of things that bear likeness to objects in the Pure Land, while the other half actually *becomes* elements of the Pure Land. As a contemporary to Shandao, Jiakai also ventures further to categorize the first six meditations. He also notes the division between the “(2) Water Meditation” and “(3) Ground Meditation”,

If sentient beings desire to be reborn [in the Pure Land], they only need to practice the meditation on images and existence. Within the meditation on images and existence, there are nominal ones and true ones. You must first practice the meditation on the nominal [images] and make them clear and distinct. Then you begin the meditation on the true [images]. Like in the Sixteen Meditations, the two meditations on the sun and water are nominal contemplations (*jiaxiang* 假想). Once you pass the meditation on the ground, it is all achieved in samādhi, and they are called “true meditations” (*shiguan* 實觀).

若眾生欲往生者，唯須作相生觀。就相生觀中，有假有實。先須作假想觀，使了了分明，然後始得作實觀。如十六觀中，日水二觀，是其假想。地觀已去依三昧成，名為實觀。³⁵

³³ T. 37, 1753: 0246c17-c21.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ T. 47, 1963: 0103b01-b05.

Unlike Shandao, who divides the first six meditations based on an ontological difference between objects of meditation, Jiakai's argument is based on the status of the meditator. He argues that because the "(3) Ground Meditation" is achieved in the state of samādhi, it should be seen differently from the previous two sections. Compared to earlier commentators like Huiyuan, who were more concerned with the division between the body of Amitābha and his larger environment, Shandao and Jiakai single out the "(1) Sun Meditation" and "(2) Water Meditation" from the rest of the Pure Land environment. The "(3) Water Meditation" was newly conceived as a threshold event within the Sixteen Meditations in Tang China.

As we have discussed in the previous chapter, as a result of new conceptions of landscape and pictorial space in the second half of the 7th century, the "(1) Sun Meditation" in the 8th century starts to show Lady Vaidehī seated in front of an open vista that consists of mountains and a running river. Rather than looking at the landscape, she is seeing through it to the sun above. In this new framework, we start to grasp the importance of this is running river. As it flows to (or from) the distant horizon, it channels the viewer's gaze towards the far distance, while at the same time, the substance of the river —water, leads us to the "(2) Water Meditation". In Cave 209, which is likely the earliest cave at Dunhuang that includes images from the *Meditation Sutra*, we encounter an ambiguous figure that is standing outside an open-door building and facing a stream of flowing water (Fig.2-65). This figure might be Lady Vaidehī, a monk, or a practitioner of the Sixteen Meditations. Framed by a doorway and flowing water, the figure is suspended in a threshold space – this is someone that has left his/her confinement and is ready to meditate on the Pure Land by looking at flowing water. If the illustrations of the "(1) Sun Meditation" show how Vaidehī is looking afar through pictorial space, then the figure looking at water shows how a person could see through natural phenomena – starting from water in our world, which, according to Shandao, *resembles* the stuff of the Pure Land. Shandao famously provides a long passage in his

commentary on the “(2) Water Meditation”, in which he instructs the practitioner to watch the ripples of water in a bowl become calm enough to see one’s reflection.

The practitioner must go to a quiet spot, fetch a bowl of water, and fill it to the brim. He should put it on the floor in front of his bed and sit down on the bed. Between his eyebrows he should place a white object that is the size of a bean. Lowering his head close to the surface of the water, he watches the white spot [in the water] with fixed attention, without permitting any distracting thoughts. At first the water below shows ripples and is not at rest, [so that] when lowering the face to inspect, he cannot perceive the image of his face. If he keeps inspecting without ceasing, the face will appear...He has only to grasp the white spot and inspect it clearly and distinctly. He must retain and protect [this] right mindfulness without losing his concentration. While perceiving this, the mind gradually becomes still, and the clear nature of the water appears.

行者等於靜處取一碗水，著床前地上好滿盛之，自身在床上坐，當自眉間著一白物如豆許大，低頭臨面水上，一心照看此白處，更莫異緣。又水初在地波浪不住，臨面觀之不見面像，為觀不休漸漸面現.....唯取白處了了觀之，正念守護勿令失意異緣。當見此時心漸得住，水性湛然也。³⁶

In Shandao’s instructions for the “(2) Water Meditation”, water is not only theorized as something that is ontologically similar to the Pure Land, but is also used as a metaphor for the process of achieving samādhi. The classic Buddhist trope of comparing the mind to a mirror and to calm water is evoked here.³⁷ He uses a series of similitudes to explain this procedure.

The bowl symbolizes the body; the water symbolizes the mind; the ripple and waves symbolize the confused thought [imagination] and passion-delusions. The gradual coming to rest of the ripples symbolize the control and rejection of all distractions and concentration of the mind on one object. The appearance of the object through tranquillization of the water means that the mind keeps control of distractions and is without confusion.

³⁶ T. 37, 1753: 0262c05-c17. English translations with variations, see Pas, 191

³⁷ Paul Demieville, “The Mirror of the Mind,” in *Sudden and Gradual: Approaches to Enlightenment in Chinese Thought*, ed. Peter N. Gregory (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987), 13-40.

言椀者即喻身器也。言水者，即喻自心水也。言波浪者，即喻亂想煩惱也。言漸漸波浪息者，即是制捨眾緣住心一境也。言水靜境現者，即是能緣之心無亂。³⁸

No commentator before the Tang period has used the “(2) Water Meditation” to mark the division between the first two and the rest of the Sixteen Meditations, so it is evident that this was something newly devised by Shandao and Jiakai.³⁹

We should keep in mind that the “(2) Water Meditation” is *not* a meditation on water *within* the Pure Land, which is covered by the “(6) Meditation on the Pond of Eight Virtues” (*bagongde shuixiang* 八功德水想). The “(2) Water Meditation” shows how water in *this world* could be transformed into the Pure Land. This vision of water turning into lapis lazuli, gives rise to a crucial visionary process that sparks the appearance of the basic contours of another realm. The meditation that starts with water, leads us to the multi-dimensional scaffolding of the Buddhist Paradise. It not only brings meditators through a threshold from *resemblance* to *substance*, but also drafts the spatial contours of the Pure Land. In this case, how does one portray objects incessantly in transformation? How does one depict the Pure Land coming into being?

Painters of the Sixteen Meditations in Cave 217 seem to be grappling with a dichotomy between depicting a single object or illustrating the entire process of material transformation (Fig.3-9).⁴⁰ The “(3) Meditation on the Ground” is depicted generically as a rectangular slab of colored tiles and contained within a single passage. On the contrary, the “(2) Water Meditation” is repeated up to three times. The first image shows Lady Vaidehī

³⁸ T. 37, 1753: 0262c24-c28. English translations with variations, see Pas, 191-192

³⁹ This is one of the only two similes used by Shandao throughout this commentary. The other one is the “Parable of the White Path”, see Pas, 192.

⁴⁰ Wang Zhi believes in the second passage, Lady Vaidehī is looking at nothing, and the third passage is the “(7) Meditation on the Lotus Throne.” Wang Zhi, “*Kongjian biaoda yu yuyi*,” 101.

sitting in front of a rectangular pool lined by multicolored tiles, the crisscrosses in the pool show that water had already turned into ice. Little palaces sit on top swirls of clouds that seem to have emerged from the pool. The second image depicts Lady Vaidehī sitting by a pool of water in landscape. The third image also shows Lady Vaidehī looking at a rectangular pool that is filled with lotus flowers and aquatic birds. Four multicolored banners are placed on each corner of the pool and are adorned with a flaming jewel on top. On the two sides of the pool, large flaming jewels are emitting rays of light.⁴¹ Each image could be chosen to represent the “(2) Water Meditation”, but depicts only part of the entire process. The first image portrays ice, but skips the formation of lapis lazuli. The second image depicts Lady Vaidehī looking at water under rock boulders, which indicate that this is water from our world. The third image shows the moment when the adorned banners start to appear and jewels start to emit light as described in the last phase of the “(2) Water Meditation”. Interestingly, although in the sutra text, the banners around the water pool are described to support the lapis lazuli ground, any representation of the lapis lazuli ground is suppressed in the “(2) Water Meditation”. In the *Meditation Sutra*, the appearance of the lapis lazuli ground is intertwined with the “(2) Water Meditation”, but the painters deliberately decided to keep the two visual passages separate from one another.

What these passages show us is the complete arbitrariness of pictorial elements that were selected to visualize the “(2) Water Meditation” (as well as the “(3) Ground Meditation”). Instead of trying to fit each image into a distinct iconographic category, what I

⁴¹ Lady Vaidehī in this section is dressed in a different garb and wears a different headdress. In the other fifteen figures of Lady Vaidehī, she is wearing a red dress with blue rims, over an undergarment that is white. She is also portrayed with her hair tied in a high knot, which is decorated by a single flower. In the third scene of the “(2) Water Meditation”, she is dressed in a long white robe, and wears a crown that is decorated with clouds. The significance of this unusual outfit is still unclear. Cave 103, which copied several pictorial elements and iconographic scenes from Cave 217 show all of the sixteen images of Lady Vaidehī wearing a cloud crown and a white robe.

want to trace are the innovative strategies in which the “(2) Water Meditation” *could be* depicted by the early 8th century. The multi-step iconographic “stretching” of the “(2) Water Meditation” in Cave 217 becomes more apparent when compared to the earliest images of the Sixteen Meditations in Cave 431. In the 7th-century Cave 431, the first thirteen meditations are represented on the west wall of the cave behind the central pillar (Fig.2-25). The “(2) Water Meditation” is contained within a single passage, in which the Lady is seated in front of a rectangular pool that is lined by multi-color tiles (Fig.3-10). Like the third passage of the “(2) Water Meditation” in Cave 217, four banners are erected on the four corners of the water pool. Above the pool, there are two sets of buildings floating upon clouds and a few musical instruments. Between Cave 431 and Cave 217, what we see are two distinct methods for visualizing the “(2) Water Meditation”, with the former one containing the meditation in a single pictorial passage, and the latter one using three pictorial passages to represent a single meditation.

As we have seen in the previous chapter, the impact of Cave 431 and Cave 217’s innovative iconographies can be traced in several 8th century caves, such as that of Cave 208 and Cave 215. Painters of the two more modest constructions took stock from the earlier Cave 431 and Cave 217, and we can see how painters dealt with the “(2) Water Meditation” in diverse manners. Many passages of Cave 208’s Sixteen Meditations directly resemble that of Cave 217 (Fig.2-53), but when drawing the “(2) Water Meditation”, the painters did not follow Cave 217’s multi-step method. Instead, they used a single pictorial passage to represent the “(2) Water Meditation” (Fig.3-11). The Lady is shown seated in front of a rectangular water pool, with four banners at its four corners. This not only resembles the third passage of the “(2) Water Meditation” of Cave 217, but also the singular “(2) Water Meditation” of Cave 431. This means that 8th century painters clearly understood how the

“(2) Water Meditation” in Cave 217 was represented in a multi-step manner, but intentionally choose not to do so.

On the contrary, what we see in Cave 215 is executed in a reverse logic (Fig.2-55). As mentioned earlier, Cave 215’s iconography directly came from the refashioning of images from Cave 431. However, as the “(2) Water Mediation” is represented only once in Cave 431, painters of Cave 215 have creatively expanded the “(2) Water Meditation” into multiple passages (Fig.3-12). The Sixteen Meditations start on the right side of the Pure Land tableau, directly above the Ajātaśatru Narrative. In this composition, the landscape that surrounds the Buddha’s assembly on Vulture Peak is blended in with the landscape in which Lady Vaidehī starts the “(1) Sun Meditation”. The “(1) Sun Meditation” and “(2) Water Meditation” are depicted in a continuous realm of “mountains and water” – we can see rock formations on the left side of the composition. Like that of Cave 217, the “(2) Water Meditation” is intentionally multiplied. Immediately under the figure of Vaidehī meditating on the sun, there is an image of her seated in front of a light grey area (likely a body of water). This image is followed by another segment that shows the Lady seated in front of a dark grey area (also likely a body of water). The two pool-like areas have suffered from de-colorization, but they are still shown in two different shades, marking how water has transformed into different substances (water to ice?).⁴² Surprisingly, painters continue to expand the “(2) Water Meditation”. Moving across the Pure Land tableau to the left side, we see two sections that show Lady Vaidehī seated in front of a slab of multicolored tiles (Fig.3-13). The one on the left represents the “(3) Ground Meditation”, but what about the one to the right? Onishi points out that the multi-colored slab to the right has objects suspended from its three

⁴² Onishi states that the images with Vaidehī in front of areas that have “wavy outlines” possibly represents the Water Meditation. However, there is a third image of Vaidehī seated directly under the mountain range to the left side of the composition. It is unclear what she is seated in front of, and which meditation this represents. Onishi 2007, 303.

corners.⁴³ Shown in the form of three darkened blobs, they are likely the banners that uphold the lapis lazuli ground, which appear in the last phase of the “(2) Water Meditation”.

This means that unlike the painters of Cave 431, those of Cave 215 expanded the “(2) Water Meditation” to at least three passages and divided them into two parts on the left and right side of the Pure Land tableau (Fig.3-13a). The reason why the “(1) Sun Meditation”, and half of the “(2) Water Meditation” were kept on the right side of the Pure Land tableau near the Ajātaśatru Narrative is not random but highly meaningful. This division of the “(2) Water Meditation” almost directly follows Shandao and Jiakai’s theorization. If Jiakai characterized the “(2) Water Meditation” as the threshold of samādhi (and the lapis lazuli ground could only be seen in the state of samādhi), then in a similar logic, the composition of the Pure Land tableau is divided according to the meditative state of the *Meditation Sutra*’s protagonist – the right side of the tableau shows Vaidehī before samādhi, while the left side show her in the state of samādhi. Like that of Cave 217, representations of the “(2) Water Meditation” in Cave 215 were expanded and “stretched” to demonstrate the crucial moment in which the Pure Land is created from water of *this world*. Fascinated by moments of flux and material transformation in meditative experience, medieval painters invented a new visual language to capture and describe this process of metamorphosis.

3.3 Depicting Light: Beyond Metaphors and the Limits of Visibility

The representation of the “(2) Water Meditation” was reinvented when the construction of Cave 172 introduced an entirely new style of depicting the *Meditation Sutra* by the mid 8th century (Fig.3-14). This novel style of visualizing the Sixteen Meditations

⁴³ Ibid, 303.

demonstrates a new relationship between meditative vision and transformation tableaux. As newly mastered techniques of perspective led to the construction of monumental vistas and palace compounds in Pure Land tableaux, painters became increasingly interested in questions of visibility. Fundamentally, the Sixteen Meditations is a ritual process that codifies ways of experiencing the Pure Land and trains adepts in constructing and acquiring divine visions. In the following section, we will look at ways in which medieval painters invented different modes of portraying light and luminescence.

In Cave 172, a total of sixteen images of Lady Vaidehī are depicted to represent the Sixteen Meditations, yet, similar to Cave 217, the “(2) Water Meditation” is expanded into three independent scenes. In Cave 172, both “(2) Water Meditations” on the north and south walls start with Vaidehī sitting in front of a square pool of water with large lotus blossoms. In the next scene, crisscrosses show that the water had turned into ice. The third scene, as we have seen at the beginning of this chapter, shows the Lady in front of a large orb looming over a square pool. As previously mentioned, scholars have argued that the orb might be related to the moon and stars, due to its spherical shape.⁴⁴ The orb is regarded as a visualization of a metaphor used to describe the light emitted by jewels in the Pure Land, which comes from the phrase, “Within each jewel there is light of five hundred colors, and this light is like flowers, or like the stars and the moon”.⁴⁵ It is true that metaphors of flowers, stars, and the moon have been pictorialized in transformation tableaux on several occasions, yet this twinkling light effect is predominantly achieved through multiplicity, or the depiction

⁴⁴ In later 9th to 10th century examples, such as the silk banner EO.1128b, the disc in front of the Lady Vaidehī contains images of a tree and rabbit, which clearly refers to the moon. In other Song dynasty caves the orb is depicted like a flower with petals. However, I believe this is a later misunderstanding of the orb images, through the copying of the certain type of Sixteen Meditations, which Caves 320 and Cave 172 introduced to Dunhuang. Onishi also points this out, See Ōnishi 2007, 124, Shi Pingting 1999, 237

⁴⁵ “一一寶中有五百色光，其光如花，又似星月”；T.12, 0365: 0342a14- a15.

of a scattered array of miniature forms. To simply identify the orb with such visual metaphors is to miss the complexity of visionary experience that medieval painters strived to express through pictorial forms.

The Western Pure Land was understood as an otherworldly realm governed by the “Buddha of Infinite Light”, and mural painters became critically concerned with representing such marvelous luminescence. The association of Amitābha’s Pure Land as a “World of Light” was wide spread in the Dunhuang region, and Chinese Manichaean hymns that sought to appeal to a Chinese audience would borrow similar Buddhist terminologies, portraying the Manichaean “World of Light” in a similar fashion to the Western Pure Land.⁴⁶ In the earliest full wall illustration of the Western Pure Land in the mid-7th century Cave 220, countless jewels can be found in the painting scattered all across the ground of the Pure Land (Fig. 1-18). Each jewel is shown in a spherical shape with red on the outer rim, followed by white, green, and finally the color blue at the center (Fig.3-15). Such jewels are also depicted across the sky, many of which are rendered in the shape of flowers (Fig.3-16). The sheer density of scattered jewels in Cave 220 creates a kinetic and almost intoxicating effect that resembles that of a starry night sky, whereas the flowers in the sky also play with the idea of “rain of

⁴⁶ Some scholars have suggested that the images of meditating monks at Toyok were related Manichaeism. Yamabe Nobuyoshi has argued against this hypothesis and analyzed the images within the framework of Buddhism. But we could also show how both Pure Land devotionism and Manichaeism shared a cult of light. See Nobuyoshi Yamabe, “Implications of the ‘Manichean’ Caves at Toyok, Turfan, for the Origins of the *Guan wuliangshou jing*,” in *Rennyō Shōnin no sōgōteki kenkyū* 蓮如上人の総合的研究 (Daishin Tokunaga, ed., Kyōto-shi : Nagata Bunshōdō, 1997), 250-280. Chao Huashan 晁華山, “*Xunmi yanmo qiannian de dongfang monijiao si* 尋覓淹沒千年的東方摩尼教寺,” *Zhongguo wenhua* 中國文化 no.8 (1993), 1-20. For Manichaeism in Asia, see Tsui Chi, trans., “Mo Ni Chiao Hsia Pu Tsan; ‘The Lower (Second?) Section of the Manichæan Hymns,’” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 11, no. 1 (1943): 174–219. W.B. Henning, “A Fragment of the Manichaean Hymn-Cycles in Old Turkish,” *Asia Major* (London) N.S. 7(1959):122-124. Gunner B. Mikkelsen, “Skillfully Planting the Trees of Light: The Chinese Manichaica, Their Central Asian Counterparts, and Some Observations on the Translation of Manichaeism into Chinese,” in *Cultural Encounters: China, Japan, and the West*, ed. Søren Clausen, Roy Starrs, and Anne Wedell-Wedellsborg (Aarhus, Denmark: Aarhus University Press, 1995), 83–108.

flowers” (*yuhua* 雨華) —a trope commonly associated with Buddhist paradises. This glittering effect is reinforced by the freehand brushstrokes that give the lapis lazuli ground a speckled surface (Fig.3-17). This same type of mottled texture could be found in the pools of the third “(2) Water Meditation” passage on both walls of Cave 172 (Fig.3-3). This unique texture shows how painters demarcated threshold moments through signposting the transformative state of substances – cracked ice in the water pool has turned into glimmering lapis lazuli. The textured pool alludes to the twinkling effect of the lapis lazuli ground, and the metaphors of flowers, stars and the moon are always achieved through multiplicity, rather than being symbolized by a single celestial object.

It is true that the orb resembles a mani jewel —a sacred object that fills the Pure Land with light.⁴⁷ In Cave 172, the large orbs are carefully shaded to create a three-dimensional effect, with the top slightly darker than the bottom, highlighting their spherical shape and luminescent substance (Fig.3-3). Mani jewels were known for their capacity to emit light, as described in the *Sutra on the Seven Jewels of the Wheel-turning King*, “There is great brightness, and the [light of the mani jewel] is round and abundant. Its light is all encompassing and illuminates everything...In the king’s palace, if there were such a jewel, then at night, even without lamps, when the jewel emits light, the radiance will come naturally, like sunlight.”⁴⁸ Mani jewels are not only known for emitting light, but also have the power to manipulate water and make it become clear, which is directly connected to the

⁴⁷ Wang Zhi believes that the orb is a mani jewel, and this is related to the “(5) Meditation on the Jeweled Ponds” that states how the “there are ponds of water possessing the eight excellent qualities, each made of the seven kinds of jewels that are soft and pliable. The water, springing from a wish-fulfilling king mani-gem, forms fourteen streams.” Wang Zhi, “*Kongjian biaoda yu yuyi*,” 102

⁴⁸ “輪王出時復有大摩尼寶出現。彼摩尼寶，最上色相妙好殊勝，有大光明圓滿具足，其光廣大普照一切，有大功能。於王宮中若有是寶，而彼夜暗非燈所照，寶出光明自然照曜猶如日光”；T. 01, 0038: 0822a05- a09.

transformation of water substance in the “(2) Water Meditation”.⁴⁹ Many spherical objects are portrayed in the main Pure Land image of Cave 172, and the way in which shading is used to depict the mani jewels is highly similar to that of the suspended orbs in the Sixteen Meditations (Fig.3-18). However, these jewels are usually framed by flames and petal stands, marking them as decorative objects above the Buddha’s canopy or on the ground of the Pure Land (Fig.3-9), while the looming orbs in the “(2) Water Meditation” do not possess such trappings.⁵⁰

Rather than trying to decipher what these orbs symbolize, it is perhaps more helpful to look at their function in these pictorial compositions. The iconography of the third “(2) Water Meditation” passage was not intended to be a mystery. Through a three-step iconographic “stretching”, painters show how water changes into ice, ice into lapis lazuli, and elements of the Pure Land start to take shape—things are set in motion and countless jewels start to emit radiant light. As the brightness of sunlight is regularly used to describe a mani jewel, the blinding radiance of the Pure Land is also frequently compared to that of the sun. Shandao describes this vision in the following terms, “The various lights diffuse colors that are so bright they overcome that of the sun disc. When newcomers look at it, it is indeed difficult to comprehend it clearly and entirely”.⁵¹ The Sun disc is often used as a metaphor to describe the experience of blinding light at the moment of rebirth in Paradise, as Jiakai writes, “When reaching the end of one’s life, you will see a gold lotus flower that is like the sun disc stopping in front of you, and within a single thought, you will be reborn in the Land of

⁴⁹ “摩尼珠德巍巍自在，持著何所，著水中水便隨作摩尼珠色，持繒裹著水中，水便如摩尼珠色，正使持若干種繒裹著水中，水便如摩尼珠色，水濁即為清，摩尼珠德無有比”；T. 8, 0224: 0436a10-a15.

⁵⁰ For images of flaming jewels at Dunhuang see Guo Junye 郭俊葉, “*Dunhuang huozhu tuxiang tanwei 敦煌火珠圖像探微*,” *Dunhuang Research* 70, no.4 (2001): 43-49.

⁵¹ “眾光散彩，映絕日輪，新往者覩之，卒難周悉”；T. 37, 1753: 0263a13-a14.

Bliss.”⁵² In Vasubandhu’s *Rebirth Treatise*, the Pure Land is described in similar terms, “The brightness of the pure light is full and abundant, as if mirroring the sun and moon disc.”⁵³ The dark tones of the orbs in Cave 172 come from the color change of lead substance in white or red/orange pigments.⁵⁴ The orbs in Cave 172 were likely painted in an orange – reddish color, but have darkened due to the passage of time. This darkening effect is similar to that of the red colored sun disc in the previous “(1) Sun Meditation”, in which pigments used to color the sun have also turned grey in a similar fashion (Fig.2-1). The orbs are not a simple representation of visual metaphors, such as dazzling flowers, twinkling stars or the silver moon, but an attempt to depict the very *effect* of incessant motion and blinding light. The orb looming over the pond presents the potent moment when the Pure Land starts to take shape in the last phase of the “(2) Water Meditation”.

This idea of the Pure Land gradually coming into being is palpable in the small palaces buttressed on top of clouds in Cave 320 (Fig. 3-19, Fig.3-20). The Pure Land tableau on the south wall closely resembles the painting styles of Cave 172 and the Sixteen Meditations in Cave 320 also includes a looming orb in the third scene of the “(2) Water Meditation” (Fig.3-21). Although the miniature palaces appear to be unfinished, faint traces of ink can be found outlining the building structure under the grey and green rooftops. Such cloud-bound palaces are sometimes depicted in the “(2) Water Meditation”, indicating how the Pure Land is gradually appearing above a water pool (Fig.3-22). With distinct grey rooftops, the two miniature palaces in Cave 320 actively mimic the contours of the actual palatial complex of the main Pure Land image (Fig.14).

⁵² “命終之後。見金蓮華猶如日輪住其人前。如一念頃。即得往生極樂世界”; T. 47, 1963: 0092c13-c14.

⁵³ “淨光明滿足，如鏡日月輪”; T. 26, 1524: 0230c24.

⁵⁴ This identification is made by a conservator at the Conservation Department of the Dunhuang Academy based on his knowledge and first hand observation of Tang murals at Dunhuang. This requires further investigation. One helpful comparison is the burnished color of the sun disc in the first meditation, which we can compare with the shading on the moon disc.

Buttressed upon clouds, these small palaces can be regarded as liminal objects that appear through transformation (*huaxian* 化現). Shi Pingting also marveled at how the two cloud-bound palaces in Cave 320 are depicted so elegantly that they seem like floating mirages (Fig.3-20).⁵⁵ And indeed, the visual effect of the Pure Land in Cave 320 is gentle and elegant, especially when compared to the rich and intoxicating visual field in the earlier 7th century Cave 220 (Fig.1-18). To create the effect of incomprehensible light in the Pure Land, the painting of Cave 220 is saturated with countless flowers, jewels, textures, patterns and colors (Fig3-23abc). One can even say that the impossibly detailed depictions of *everything* in the Pure Land, transforms the painting into an animated surface that challenges the very visibility of its own image. Viewers of this type of mural are forced to focus their attention from detail to detail, and as Shandao puts it, for newcomers, the Pure Land is indeed “difficult to comprehend clearly and entirely.”

On the contrary, the mid 8th century Cave 320, along with Cave 172, creates a completely different visual experience (Fig.3-19). If the Pure Land tableau in the 7th century Cave 220 challenges visibility with a marvelous and sensuous painting surface; here, the new mechanism of a perspectival view through a palatial complex emphasizes a type of spatial clarity that situates objects, figures and buildings in order. This effect of lucidity in Cave 320 creates a sense of coolness and elegance—a totalizing vision of a Buddhist Paradise, in which all could be seen clearly and distinctly at once. In order to address the effects of the marvelous and the limits of visual comprehension that was so elaborately executed in Cave 220, we see here how it was achieved economically and gracefully through clever visual cues such as the suspended orb and the cloud-bound mirages in Cave 320. The orb represents the undifferentiated state of the Pure Land coming into being, which is difficult to visually

⁵⁵ Shi Pingting 1999, 169.

comprehend, while the cloud-bound palaces together with the main image of the Pure Land, point to a refined mode of seeing that emphasizes clarity and distinction. The *Meditation Sutra* regularly describes how, for the meditator, there is a constant oscillation between being temporarily overwhelmed by visual and sensorial stimuli and then gaining the ability to comprehend elements of the Pure Land in great clarity. The two types of Pure Land tableaux in the 7th and 8th centuries, represented by the mid-7th century Cave 220 and the mid-8th century Cave 320 are willfully emphasizing different moments of this meditative experience.

In this framework, the experiences of visual clarity achieved in meditative states come hand in hand with new achievements in creating perspectival views in Pure Land transformation tableaux. Such perspectival views are constructed through fundamental geometric forms. The “(2) Water Meditation”, which represents the generative kernel of the Pure Land, provides us with an opportunity to understand how medieval painters understood the basic spatial set-up of the Pure Land in terms of geometric forms.

3.4 Depicting Space: A Kaleidoscopic Matrix and the Geometric Construction of the Pure Land

Compared to the previous representations of the Sixteen Meditations, this new visual mode introduced by Cave 320 and Cave 172 is remarkable for its simplicity. As the suspended orbs demonstrate, earlier interests in multiplicity, animation, and surfaces are replaced with a new preference for singularity, wholeness, and spatial clarity. Dynamic meditational moments become condensed and crystalized into distinct representational objects. However, this method of representing meditative experience was not the only trend that prevailed at Dunhuang, and the mid-8th century moment witnessed another mode of representing the Sixteen Meditations that emphasized a new fidelity towards the *Meditation Sutra* text. In Cave 171, painters specifically moved against tendencies of condensation, and

each stage of the Sixteen Meditations is expanded into a visually packed vignette that strives to contain all that is described in the correlating sutra passage.

A comparison between the “(3) Meditation on the Ground” in Cave 320 and Cave 171 distinctly illustrates the underlying object/event dichotomy in representational strategies (Fig.3-24, Fig.3-25). As mentioned before, the “(3) Meditation on the Ground” summarizes the mechanisms of karmic reduction and provides no visual content, whereas the appearance of the lapis lazuli ground is embedded within the previous “(2) Water Meditation”. That is to say, the iconography of the “(3) Meditation on the Ground” is entirely arbitrary. In Cave 171, painters chose to represent a crucial moment of the “(2) Water Meditation” to represent the “(3) Ground Meditation” (Fig.25). The passage in the sutra describes how gold banners will appear underneath the lapis lazuli ground, and it is from this suspended “platform of light” that a myriad of buildings and palaces start to emerge. In Cave 171, a slab of colored tiles sits above several banners around a lotus pond. Jewels and flowers are scattered on the ground, and birds are flying in the sky. In such a limited small space, it is clear that the painter is trying to fit all visual elements mentioned in the sutra within the same unit.

On the contrary, the visual complexity of “(3) Ground Meditation” that we have just examined is reduced to Lady Vaidehī looking at a single banner in Cave 320 (Fig. 3-24). With no depiction of colored tiles, this unconventional representation has often led iconographers to misidentify this image. The relationship between the banner and the “(3) Ground Meditation” appears to be arbitrary at first sight, however, gold banners are intimately connected to the movement and action carried out in the “(2) Water Meditation”—they are the very foundations of a rising lapis lazuli ground. The multitude of banners seen in Cave 171’s “(3) Meditation on the Ground” also indicates their importance. In other words, the banner signifies the appearance of the lapis lazuli ground. Through this

comparison, we could perhaps regard the single banner in Cave 320 as a synecdochical representation of the saturated cubical matrix found in Cave 171. The abbreviated form of the banner in Cave 320 and the densely illustrated passage in Cave 171 seem to sit perfectly at the two ends of the same semantic spectrum.

The division between these two modes of representing the Sixteen Meditations is not only based on different understandings of objects and events, but also ideas of the Pure Land taking form through basic geometric forms. If the orbs in Cave 172 depict the initial appearance of the Pure Land as an undifferentiated sphere of light (Fig.3-3), in Cave 171, a three-dimensional cube becomes the kernel of the Pure Land (Fig.3-25). With square pools of water, multi-colored tiles, and perpendicularly erected banners around such structures, this cubical structure reveals ways in which medieval painters imagined the Pure Land in spatial terms. The fundamental form of a cubical matrix drawn in parallel perspective is critical, for it is also a primary geometrical shape that is used to pictorially construct architectural modules in the Pure Land.

The mastering of cubical forms was essential for a painter's training. As we will discuss in Chapter Four, the threefold repetition of the *Meditation Sutra* tableau on the north, south, and east walls of Cave 171 seems to have been done by different hands in the same workshop (Fig.3-26). The painting quality of the unconventional east wall is significantly lesser than those on the south and north walls. A main feature that singles out the east wall is the painter's frequent inability to portray the house where Lady Vaidehī was imprisoned. In the "(2) Water Meditation", the foreshortened rooftop sits awkwardly on top of the main body of the building drawn in parallel perspective (Fig.3-27a). If we look at how Lady Vaidehī's house is portrayed on the north and south walls, this awkward coordination between building body and rooftop shows how the novice painter of the east wall was trying to combine the effectively foreshortened rooftops seen on the north wall with the parallel

perspective buildings on the south wall (Fig. 3-27b). This unsuccessful hybrid product can be found in several places on the east wall, and from this we know that effectively rendering a rectangular building —be it foreshortened or drawn in parallel perspective —was truly a task for a novice painter to learn and master.

The cubical matrix created in the “(3) Meditation on the Ground” is always drawn in parallel perspective, and when placed next to the house of Lady Vaidehī in Cave 171, the pictorial unit is structured as a dialogue between different methods of presenting three-dimensional architectural forms (Fig.3-28). This dialogue between the pictorial representations of geometric forms is significant, for the palatial setting of the Western Pure Land became increasingly prominent during the course of the 8th century. Given the modular system of Chinese timber-frame architecture, the sophisticated palatial complexes seen in Pure Land murals are in fact based on a series of basic cubical structures —foreshortened or drawn in parallel perspective —just like the different variations of Lady Vaidehī’s house. The ability to manipulate such matrixes was essential for the mural painter or workshop when creating an image of the Western Pure Land, and by the mid-8th century, painters have gone to great lengths to outdo each other in creating monumental vistas.

With double images of the Pure Land on its south and north walls, Cave 172 contains perhaps the most complex manipulation of architectural modules of its time (Fig.3-29). However, in both instances, the Sixteen Meditations specifically does away with the cubical imagination of the “(2) Water Meditation”, and shows the Pure Land beginning from a sphere of light (Fig.3-14). On the contrary, the neighboring Cave 171, built around the same time as Cave 172, embraces the geometric arrangement of elements in terms of squares and cubes, from the cubic matrix used as a stand-in for the “(3) Ground Meditation”(Fig.3-28), to its excessive use of grids to organization of wall surface and cave space (Fig.3-26). As discussed in Chapter Two, the relationship between the Pure Land image and the viewer is channeled

through Lady Vaidehī's body. Large compositional shifts of Pure Land imagery start to “pivot” around her viewpoints throughout the 7th and 8th century, thus aligning her perspective with that of the viewer. These “pivoting” tendencies are only made possible through a new interest in creating pictorial spaces through geometrical structures.

3.5 The Disappearing Image: Meta-pictures, True Bodies, and a Tableau of Self-Reference

At the beginning of the chapter, we discussed how the Sixteen Meditations was a conceptual program. Although certain iconographic segments are manipulated, painters of the sequences still try to uphold the coherent number of *sixteen* meditating figures of Lady Vaidehī. This inevitably causes a mathematical problem: with the addition of two extra scenes in the “(2) Water Meditation”, two other passages in the sequence must be reduced to maintain the number sixteen. There are a variety of ways in which sequences are manipulated to fulfill this numerical requirement. In our case here, we will only focus on Cave 172. This set of Sixteen Meditations has included the last three meditations on the Nine Levels of Rebirth, however, as the “(2) Water Meditations” has been expanded, there are still sixteen figures of Vaidehī (Fig.3-30). What is consistently found to be absent in the two Pure Land tableaux in this cave are the “(7) Meditation on the Flower Throne” (*huazuo xiang* 華座想) and the “(8) Meditation on Images” (*xiang xiang* 像想). Why are these two meditations purposefully omitted? What does this tell us about the Pure Land tableau?

Taken as a pair, the “(7) Meditation on the Flower Throne” and the “(8) Meditation on Images” brings us to the second important threshold in the Sixteen Meditations. The core of the Sixteen Meditations is the meditation on the true body of Amitābha Buddha in the “(9) Meditation on the Body and Light of Amitayus Buddha” (*wuliangshou fo shenxiang guangming xiang* 無量壽佛身相光明想), while Meditations (7) and (8) prepare us for the

climax of the sequence. In the commentary tradition, the “Dependent Rewards” — the building up of the Pure Land realm covered in the first six meditations comes to an end, and the “(7) Meditation on the Flower Throne” marks the beginning of the meditations that focus on Amitābha, which are categorized as “Main Rewards”. Through meditating on the flower throne and then images of the holy triad, Lady Vaidehī moves on to meditate on the true bodies of the three principle deities of the Western Pure Land.

Huiyuan was first to devise the division between “Dependent Rewards” and “Main Rewards” in the Sixteen Meditations, but in this process, he took note on the special status of the “(7) Meditation on the Flower Throne” (Appendix). He writes,

Now with regard to the passages [on the meditations], the first six meditations are to be discussed together as a set, while the latter ten meditation gates are to be counted as another set. The [seventh] meditation on the flower throne should actually be discussed with the first six, but is included in the latter [nine] because it functions to initiate the [subsequent] meditations of the Buddha.

然今文中初之六觀一處論之，後十觀門一處而辨。華座之觀應與前六一處論之，以與佛觀相起義便故在後說。⁵⁶

Huiyuan’s scheme was largely adopted by commentators, in which the first six meditations were grouped together, and the “(7) Meditation on the Flower Throne” marked the beginning of the meditations that were considered as “Main Rewards”.⁵⁷ Huiyuan was not sure if the flower throne should be regarded as an accouterment of Amitābha, or an object of the Pure Land environment. Perhaps responding to Huiyuan’s earlier concerns, Shandao’s more

⁵⁶ T. 37, 1749: 0178c13-c14. English translation by Tanaka, 150.

⁵⁷ “初六觀觀其依果。次七觀觀其正報。後三明三輩九品往生也”; T. 37, 1750: 0191c13-c14. “第一有六觀觀無量壽國。第二有七觀觀無量壽佛身。觀無量壽國中若樹若池。觀無量壽佛中佛與菩薩。又觀無量壽國土則觀依果。觀無量壽佛觀正果”; T. 37, 1752: 0242b13-b16. First there are six meditations for meditating on the Land of Amitābha; secondly there are seven meditations for meditating on the body of Amitābha; the former consist of meditations on the trees, the lakes, etc. within the Land; the latter of meditations on Amitābha Buddha and the Bodhisattvas. Again, the former are the “dependent effects”; the latter are the “true effects”. Pas, 159

elaborate schema was created to address the special status of the “(7) Meditation on the Flower Throne” and the “(8) Meditation on Images.”⁵⁸

Unlike Huiyuan, Shandao placed the first seven meditations in the category of “Dependent Rewards”, which now included the “(7) Meditation on the Flower Throne”. He then created a new set of criteria based on ideas of the “general” (*tong* 通) and the “special” (*bie* 別). Amongst the first seven meditations that he categorized as “Dependent Rewards”, he singled out the “(7) Meditation on the Flower Throne” as a “Special Dependent Reward” (*bieyibao* 別依報), while the other six are “General Dependent Rewards” (*tongyibao* 通依報). Among the following six meditations that he labeled as “Main Rewards”, the “(8) Meditation on Images” and the “(9) Meditation on the True Body of Amitābha” are categorized as “Special Main Rewards” (*biezhengbao* 別正報), while the other four are “General Main Rewards” (*tongzhengbao* 通正報). In Shandao’s schema, amongst the “Dependent” and “Main Rewards”, the “(7) Meditation on the Flower Throne”, the “(8) Meditation on Images” and the “(9) Meditation on the True Body of Amitābha” appeared to be bundled together as rewards that are “special” (*bie* 別), while the rest are “general” (*tong* 通).⁵⁹

This bundling of the seventh, eighth, and ninth meditations can be understood through the narrative within the *Meditation Sutra*. The Sixteen Meditations takes the form of a

⁵⁸ For Shandao’s discussion on the seventh to eight meditations, see Pas, 195-201.

⁵⁹ “就此依報中即有通有別。言別者，華座一觀是其別依，唯屬彌陀佛也。餘上六觀是其通依，即屬法界之凡聖，但使得生者共同受用故言通也...又就此正報中亦有通有別。言別者，即阿彌陀佛是也，即此別中亦有真有假。言假正報者，即第八像觀是也。觀音勢至等亦如是，此由眾生障重染惑處深，佛恐乍想真容無由顯現，故使假立真像以住心想，同彼佛以證境故言假正報也。言真正報者，即第九真身觀是也.....言通正報者，即觀音聖眾等已下是也。向來所言通別真假者，正明依正二報也”；T. 37, 1753: 0246c13 – 0247a05.

dialogue between Lady Vaidehī and Shakyamuni Buddha, with each meditation starting with the phrase “The Buddha said to Ānanda and Vaidehī...(佛告阿難及韋提希)”. However, at the beginning of the “(7) Meditation on the Flower Throne”, this pattern is interrupted by Lady Vaidehī, who asks a question back to Shakyamuni Buddha. She does so after suddenly gaining a vision of Amitābha and the two bodhisattvas Avalokiteśvara and Mahāsthāmaprāpta standing in the sky (*zhuli kongzhong* 住立空中). The Lady acknowledges the fact that she has obtained such a vision through the power of Shakyamuni and beseeches him to instruct sentient beings how to achieve such a vision.⁶⁰ The Buddha then starts to instruct her on how to inspect the lotus throne, the images of the three deities, and finally reaching the true body of Amitābha.

The two meditations on the flower throne and images are interlocked with each other because the “(8) Meditation on Images” builds upon the previous “(7) Meditation on the Flower Throne”. The practitioner first meditates on a flower throne, then in the “(8) Meditation on Images”, the practitioner begins by imagining a golden image of Amitābha, which should then be placed upon the flower throne from the previous meditation. Once the golden image is seated on the throne, a confirmatory vision of the Pure Land arises. Within this vision the mediator is instructed to mentally add the two bodhisattvas to each side of Amitābha, thus forming an *image* of the holy triad. What we have here is a constant interaction between the actively visualized image and passively seen visions.

When you imagine (*xiang* 想) the Buddha, you should first imagine (*xiang* 想) his image. Whether your eyes are open or closed, perceive (*jian* 見) a jeweled image of him, who is the color of gold from the Jambu River, sitting on that flower throne. When the image is seated [on the flower], your mind’s eye will open and you will clearly and distinctly see (*jian* 見) the seven-jeweled glorious objects of

⁶⁰ “說是語時，無量壽佛住立空中，觀世音大勢至，是二大士侍立左右……時韋提希見無量壽佛已，接足作禮，白佛言：“世尊，我今因佛力故，得見無量壽佛及二菩薩。未來眾生，當云何觀無量壽佛及二菩薩”；T.12, 0365: 0342c16–c22.

the Land of Utmost Bliss, including the seven-jeweled ground, the jeweled ponds, the rows of jeweled trees covered with heavenly-jeweled curtains, and jeweled nets spreading over the sky. Perceive (*jian* 見) these as clearly and distinctly as if you were seeing an object in the palm of your hand. After you have seen this event (*shi* 事) take place, create (*zuo* 作) on the Buddha's left a large lotus flower, which is exactly the same as the one described above, and then create (*zuo* 作) another large one on his right. Imagine (*xiang* 想) an image of Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara sitting on the flower seat on his left, sending forth a golden light just like the Buddha image described above, and then imagine (*xiang* 想) an image of Bodhisattva Mahāsthāmaprāpta sitting on the flower seat on his right. When you have attained this vision, images of the Buddha and bodhisattvas will send forth golden rays, which illuminate the jeweled trees. Under each tree there are also three lotus flowers with images of a Buddha and two bodhisattvas sitting on them, so that the land is completely filled with such images.

想彼佛者，先當想像。閉目開目，見一寶像，如閻浮檀金色，坐彼華上。像既坐已，心眼得開，了了分明，見極樂國七寶莊嚴，寶地、寶池、寶樹行列，諸天寶縵彌覆樹上，眾寶羅網滿虛空中。見如此事，極令明了，如觀掌中。見此事已，復當更作一大蓮華在佛左邊，如前蓮華等無有異。復作一大蓮華在佛右邊，想一觀世音菩薩像坐左華座，亦放金光如前無異。想一大勢至菩薩像坐右華座。此想成時，佛菩薩像皆放妙光；其光金色，照諸寶樹。一一樹下亦有三蓮華，諸蓮華上各有一佛二菩薩像，遍滿彼國。⁶¹

Similar to the first major threshold moment in the “(2) Water Meditation”, a vision of the Pure Land eventually arises after the meditator concentrates on a singular object – previously water, and here an image. The meditation starts with a single image of Amitābha Buddha and then arrives at an image of the holy triad, which also multiplies and fills the space of the entire Pure Land.

Following the narrative of the *Meditation Sutra*, the “(7) Meditation on the Flower Throne” and the “(8) Meditation on the Image” create an interesting plot loop based on the Amitābha triad. First, Lady Vaidehī gains a vision of Amitābha and the two bodhisattvas at the beginning of the “(7) Meditation on the Flower Throne”, and this prompts her to ask the Buddha how to perceive such a vision. Then, the Buddha provides her details of how to attain

⁶¹ T.12, 0365: 0343a24-b06.

a vision of the Amitābha triad *as an image* (which also includes a flower throne). The result of the “(8) Meditation on Images” is the achievement of such a triad (in the form of an image), which was foreshadowed by Lady Vaidehī’s previous vision. Through the Amitābha triad —first as a vision and then as an image, this narrative loop closely binds the two meditations together as a unit.

The object/event dichotomy that we have discussed earlier in this chapter is brought to the forefront in the representations of the “(7) Meditation on the Flower Throne”, whilst the representation of the “(8) Meditation on Images” creates a situation in which painters must depict meta-pictures of deities in the Sixteen Meditations.⁶² In the earliest images of the Sixteen Meditations of Cave 431, the passage that depicts the “(7) Meditation on the Flower Throne” completely omits the depiction of a singular flower throne (Fig.3-31).⁶³ Instead, we see a holy triad of Amitābha, Avalokiteśvara, and Mahāsthāmaprāpta floating upon clouds. The portrayal of Lady Vaidehī is also unique — in all other passages, she is shown seated upright upon a mat, and holding her hands together (Fig.2-25), while in this scene, she is fully prostrating (this detail is also copied in Cave 215) (Fig.3-32). This passage illustrates the moment when she obtained a vision of the holy triad and beseeched Shakyamuni Buddha to teach her how to obtain such a vision. In other words, when painters represented the “(7) Meditation on the Flower Throne”, they were inclined to depict a moment within an *event*, rather than showing the lotus throne as a meditative object.

Unlike Cave 431, in which painters completely omitted the flower throne to emphasize the narrative nature of the sutra, painters of the 8th-century Cave 171 combined

⁶² For metapictures, see W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays On Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 35-82. For metapictures in Chinese art see, Wu Hung, *The Double Screen: Medium and Representation in Chinese Painting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.), 237-259.

⁶³ Shi Pingting 1999, 103

both the narrative flow of the sutra and the meditative object described in this passage (Fig.3-33). The “(7) Meditation on the Flower Throne” of Cave 171 is visually packed —the vignette not only portrays the lotus throne, but also two Buddha triads. The triad to the right of the flower throne shows Shakyamuni and his two disciples, while the triad slightly behind the throne shows Amitābha and the two bodhisattvas. Similar to that of Cave 431, the Amitābha triad is placed upon clouds — indicating its status as a vision in the sky. Painters of Cave 171 not only depicted the object of meditation (the flower throne), Vaidehī’s vision of the Amitābha triad, but also Shakyamuni, who is teaching Vaidehī how to interpret visions and then recreate them.

Due to this narrative loop surrounding the “Amitābha triad”, the iconography of the “(8) Meditation on Images” is also unstable. Like the “(2) Water Meditation”, the “(8) Meditation on Images” is also an unfolding event, in which we move from meditating on a single image of Amitābha, to achieving an image of the holy triad. In Cave 431, the painters chose to depict a golden image of Amitābha seated on a lotus flower in a water pond — the initial focus of the meditation (Fig.3-34); while in Cave 171, the painters chose to depict a holy triad of Amitābha and two bodhisattvas within a water pond— the end result of the meditational event (Fig. 3-35). Depending on the different methods in which painters choose to portray the “(8) Meditation on Images”, a doubling effect is achieved (or avoided) when representing the following three meditations, in which each is dedicated to the meditation on the “true body” (*zhenshen* 真身) of the three deities.

The three following meditations are the “(9) Meditation on the Body and Light of Amitayus Buddha”, “(10) Meditation on Avalokiteśvara” and the “(11) Meditation on Mahāsthāmaprāpta”. In Cave 45, both the “(8) Meditation on Images” and “(9) Meditation on the Body and Light of Amitayus Buddha” are represented by a seated Buddha, thus creating a

doubling effect between image and deity (Fig.3-36). This doubling effect shows Lady Vaidehī meditating on the Buddha *twice*, first as a meta-picture of the Amitābha Buddha image, and the second as the true body of the same deity. This frequently confuses iconographers, for it becomes almost impossible to differentiate between the deity and its image. To avoid this, painters also try to illustrate the “(7) Meditation on Images” and the following three meditations in a clear hierarchy. In the late 8th century Cave 148, the “(8) Meditation on Images” shows Lady Vaidehī in front of a holy triad, while the following passages show Vaidehī individually meditating on the Amitābha Buddha, Avalokiteśvara, and Mahāsthāmaprāpta (Fig.3-37). When organized in this manner, it clearly shows how the triad should be understood as “images”(or meta-pictures) of three deities, and the three following passages actually reveal the “true bodies” of the three heavenly beings. The difference between image and true body is carefully taken into consideration: the three following passages show the deities emitting light with small “transformation buddhas”(huafo 化佛) around their halos – a supernatural quality tied to a being’s divinity, while the deities within the triad do not have this feature.

Painters experiment with this dialogue between the “true bodies” of deities and their images through the form of meta-pictures — an effort that calls to question the very nature of the Pure Land transformation tableau. The absence of “(7) Meditation on the Flower Throne” and the “(8) Meditation on Images” in Cave 172 is striking. Within Shandao’s schema, as the first threshold phase between Nominal and True “Dependent Rewards”, the iconography of the “(2) Water Meditation” is expanded and “stretched”. However, as the second (and more important) threshold phase between “Dependent Rewards” and “Main Rewards”, the “(7) Meditation on the Flower Throne” and the “(8) Meditation on Images” are willfully negated. The subtle yet highly sophisticated manipulation of this iconographic program shows a tightened relationship between the representations of the Sixteen Meditations and the Pure

Land transformation tableau. It reveals the ontological understanding of the Pure Land tableau as an *image* of the Pure Land. Not just any image of Amitābha’s realm *per se*, but a visual threshold to the Buddhist Paradise.

When the adept accomplishes the “(8) Meditation on Images”, we actually arrive at a total *image* of the Western Pure Land as portrayed in the main Pure Land image. The following three meditations on the true body of Amitābha and the two bodhisattvas feature supernatural elements of the deities, which are beyond their visible physical appearances. In the following two meditations, the “(12) Comprehensive Mediation” (*puxiang guan* 普想觀) and the “(13) Miscellaneous Meditation” (*zaxiang guan* 雜想觀), the practitioner is no longer building up the Pure Land environment, but starts to imagine oneself being reborn into the Pure Land in a lotus flower. Therefore, as we reach the “(8) Meditation on Images”, all visual phenomena of the Pure Land should be complete. The absence of the final two steps that complete the total vision of the Western Pure Land is significant — it transforms the Pure Land transformation tableaux in Cave 172 into images with a heightened sense of “self-knowledge”.⁶⁴

The plethora of visualization strategies surrounding the “(8)Meditation on Images” at Dunhuang reveals the nature of the pictorial representations of the Sixteen Meditations itself — as the product of the constant drafting of incomplete meta-pictures of the main Pure Land image. One could say that the representation of each visual phenomenon that Vaidehī meditates upon is a synecdoche for the main Pure Land tableau. Each of them represents parts of it, but never completely. In this light, the Sixteen Meditations cannot be seen simply as a “visual aid” that helps mediators visualize the Pure Land. Instead, we should regard them

⁶⁴ Mitchell 1994, 57.

as a sophisticated visual commentary on meditative experience and a theorization of the ontological status of Pure Land transformation tableaux. They were always “pictures about pictures”.

This status of the Pure Land transformation tableau as an image and threshold to the Pure Land is hinted at in the small Sui dynasty Cave 393 (Fig.1-10). Often hailed as the first “Pure Land transformation tableau” at Dunhuang, the cave has a full-wall depiction of the Pure Land on the main west wall. The mural is currently blocked by sculptures that were later added to the cave.⁶⁵ The main wall painting shows Amitābha Buddha, Avalokiteśvara, and Mahāsthāmaprāpta seated on flower thrones in a lotus pond. The lower rim of the pond is cut off by the frame of the mural, showing us how the body of water extends to the space of the viewer. Inside this pond, there are reborn souls (*huasheng* 化生) in the form of babes in lotus flowers (Fig.3-38).

Remarkably, there are four additional Amitābha triads in smaller sizes placed on the ground in the distance. Each of them is seated under a tall tree. Shi Pingting points out that the four triads under trees are a unique case at Dunhuang.⁶⁶ The peculiar composition of this mural actually corresponds with an important detail described in the “(8)Meditation on Images”. When a vision of the image of Amitābha’s triad is achieved, light from the image will illuminate the jeweled trees in the Pure Land as a confirmatory vision. The sutra specifically mentions how multiple images of this triad will appear under trees, and states, “Under each tree there are also three lotus flowers with images of a Buddha and two

⁶⁵ *Mogaoku neirong zonglu* 莫高窟內容總錄, 1996, 160, Shi Pingting 1999, 20-30.

⁶⁶ Shi Pingting categorizes this as a transformation tableau of the Amitayus Sutra 無量壽經變, and uses the sutra text to identify the four triads. She claims that the triads refer to the Buddhas and bodhisattvas from the Buddha worlds of the ten directions 十方世界諸佛). Shi Pingting 1999, 20. Wang Huining has connected this mural with the Meditation on Images. Wang Huimin, “*Xifang jingtubian xingshi de xingcheng guocheng he wancheng shijian*,” 82-83.

bodhisattvas sitting on them, so that the land is completely filled with such images.”⁶⁷ In the sutra text, all of these triads are understood as “images” (*xiang* 像) of Amitābha Buddha, Avalokiteśvara, and Mahāsthāmaprāpta. This means that the mural in Cave 393 essentially depicts a confirmatory vision that signals the completion of the “(8) Meditation on Images.” What the painters drafted on the west wall of the cave is not a simple representation of an Amitābha triad, but a specific confirmatory vision described in the Sixteen Meditations. If we regard this mural as the earliest “Pure Land transformation tableau” at Dunhuang, then it might be possible to further suggest that all Pure Land transformation tableaux could be regarded as a comprehensive sum of all the confirmatory visions in the Sixteen Meditations. In this way, to look at a Pure Land tableau, is to receive an ultimate confirmatory vision of the Buddhist paradise.

It is perhaps not a coincidence that painters of Cave 172’s Pure Land transformation tableaux used the absence of the “(7) Meditation on the Flower Throne” and “(8) Meditation on Images” to compensate for the three-fold stretching of the “(2) Water Meditation.” The painters’ capacity in depicting sophisticated perspective views and architectural detail in the two Pure Land tableaux of Cave 172 are unprecedented in medieval China. Its mastery in draftsmanship and the representation of pictorial space are coupled with a highly sophisticated visual commentary on the nature of images through the Sixteen Meditations. If the looming orb in the last scene of the “(2) Water Meditation” is a visual experiment in capturing the meditative experience of witnessing the Pure Land coming into being, then the negation of the “(7) Meditation on the Flower Throne” and “(8) Meditation on Images” calls into question the nature of Pure Land tableaux as an image and visual threshold.

⁶⁷ “一一樹下亦有三蓮華，諸蓮華上各有一佛二菩薩像，遍滿彼國”；T.12, 0365: 0343b05-b06.

Conclusion

The “(2) Water Meditation” was newly fashioned as an important threshold moment in the Sixteen Meditations during the second half of the 7th century. As Shandao and Jiakai started to theorize this new understanding of the transformative power of water, we witness how painters sought to “stretch” and expand the iconography of this single meditation. Water in our world resembles the Pure Land, but can also transform into the substance of the Pure Land. At the same time, the meditator, through achieving the state of samādhi can also be transformed into a new type of being. The metamorphosis of water—a natural substance, into lapis lazuli, the stuff of the Pure Land, is coupled with the transfiguration of a practitioner of the Sixteen Meditations — from a common being into someone who now has the capacity to be reborn as a babe in Paradise.

This fascination with material substances, visionary experience, meta-pictures, and new forms of pictorial space — a particular Tang mentality, is captured in the manifold ways in which painters sought to capture the “(2) Water Meditation” as an unfolding process and meditative event. Through analyzing how the “(2) Water Meditation” was depicted at Dunhuang, we come to realize how the representations of the Sixteen Meditations were an active visual commentary on questions of vision and representation.

The complexity of the iconography of the Sixteen Meditations precisely show how they could not have been “visual aids”, as most art historians have portrayed them. As an entirely new artistic form, there were no precedent image types as such in early China, and it did not prompt the invention of other types of “visual aids.” The very act of visualizing each of the Sixteen Meditations posed all sorts of challenges for the medieval painter. And as we have seen throughout this chapter, painters did not simply choose a static object to symbolize

a meditative event. The ways in which painters portrayed the Sixteen Meditations were not standardized at this time, but multifaceted. Even when later painters copied and replicated earlier examples, they altered the images to make sense of their own understanding of the Sixteen Meditations.

What remains consistent within the Sixteen Meditations is the image of the lotus pond. Many scenes show Lady Vaidehī seated in front of a rectangular water pool that is framed by multi-colored tiles. Inside this pool, there are lotus flowers and aquatic birds, which signify the pool as the water ponds of the Pure Land. The rectangular pool first appears in the “(2) Water Meditation” and the visual phenomena that the Lady is meditating upon are usually shown floating in or hovering about the water pool. Put differently, the lotus pond serves as a structural frame for each of the meditations. The rectangular pool, which distinguishes water from mountains streams and rivers in natural environments, serves as a basic visual trope that allows us to understand the larger constructed nature of the Pure Land tableau. We have already examined Lady Vaidehī as an internal viewer, and have studied the representational strategies that were carried forth in depicting the various visual phenomena that she meditates upon. In the last chapter, we will focus on the lotus pond as an architectonic framework that brings together the viewer and Pure Land transformation tableau.

CHAPTER FOUR

REFLECTIONS ON A LOTUS POND

How should we understand a Pure Land transformation tableau? In the previous chapters, we have discussed how the portrayal of Lady Vaidehī in the Ajātaśatru Narrative led to new ideas of imperial space, and how the multifaceted ways of visualizing the “(2) Water Mediation” in the Sixteen Meditations addressed changing attitudes to material substances and meditative phenomena. As framing devices of the Pure Land tableau, these two visual modes created new possibilities for seeing through pictorial space and sensorial phenomena.

In this chapter, we will analyze the Pure Land tableau through the problem of the lotus pond. By examining how painters dealt with the lotus pond as a pictorial, spatial, and conceptual scheme, we will see how the Pure Land tableau allowed medieval people to come to terms with a sensing body in a new imperial space—one that could see, hear, sit, fly, walk, dream, sin, become trapped, and finally transform. We will look at the Pure Land tableau through four interrelated frameworks, namely through ritual, the phenomenology of urban space, the visual rhetoric of a miraculous image, and the historical materiality of Dunhuang caves. The Sixteen Meditations provide us with precise instructions for experiencing the Pure Land from the viewpoint of a newborn soul in the lotus pond. However, contradicting these prescriptive descriptions in the *Meditation Sutra*, 7th century records of miraculous rebirth and visionary dreams show how the Pure Land tableau directly fed into ways in which the Pure Land was imagined. The flatness of the surface of water ponds and the lapis lazuli ground in the Pure Land tableau are blended together to form a leveled horizon. The metamorphosis of the Pure Land tableaux from the 7th to the 8th century was stimulated by experiences of new urban spaces, and sustained through constant experimentation with visual forms. Painters used subtle manipulations of architectural details, foreshortening, and playful

depictions of internal viewers to bring the supernatural sights and sounds of the Pure Land to life.

The “Amitābha and Fifty Bodhisatvas” is a miraculous image that was widely circulated in China around the same time the Pure Land tableau was formulated. The two image types are related in subject matter, but their visual effects are diametrically opposed. If the Pure Land tableau uses illusionism to draw viewers into a painting, the miraculous image reaches out from its material confinements, colonizes space, and “engulfs” the viewer. The formal rhetoric of these two image types is mutually constitutive, revealing the two sides of Pure Land visibility. These two visual modes come together in the 8th century Cave 171, which includes a “Amitābha and Fifty Bodhisatvas” image in the main niche and three Pure Land transformation tableaux. As a unique structure at Dunhuang, Cave 171 creates an *aquatic imaginaire* for the viewer to come to terms with his or her own imprisonment in the phenomenal world and the saving power of Amitābha.

4.1 The Lotus Pond: Entering the Pure Land

The lotus pond can be understood as a portal into Amitābha’s Paradise and early depictions of the Pure Land were centered on water pools. In the 6th century stela from Wanfosi, Sichuan, a bridge is depicted across a lotus pond, connecting the Pure Land in the upper half and scenes from the *Lotus Sutra* in the mountainous Sāha world below.¹ Superimposed above the water, the bridge visualizes the threshold function of the lotus pond (Fig.1-6) In the late-6th century frieze relief at Xiantangshan, a rectangular lotus pond serves as the focus of the composition (Fig.1-8). Amitābha sits directly in front of it, while Avalokiteśvara and

¹ Dorothy Wong, “Four Sichuan Buddhist Steles,” 67. Eugene Y. Wang, 2005, 219-228.

Mahāsthāmaprāpta are seated on its left and right sides. Inside the lotus pond, there are four babes: one lotus bud shows a babe within it, another flower is half open and reveals the torso of a child, while two other babes are seated on top of the flowers. Depicted in different states of being reborn, the pond emphasizes constant movement, showing how the infants are emerging from the water surface.

In the representations of the Sixteen Meditations, the rectangular lotus pond in each vignette served as a framing device for meditative phenomena. The lotus pond was imagined as a generative horizon for paradisiacal phenomena and a spatial threshold between worlds. In the Sixteen Meditations, when the intricate building up of the Western Pure Land comes to an end, the adept goes on to imagine him/herself entering into the rich sensorium of Amitābha's realm. The "(12) Comprehensive Meditation" (*puxiang guan* 普想觀) explicitly describes the process of Lady Vaidehī imagining herself reborn in the Pure Land as a male babe in a lotus flower. Several images of this meditation show Lady Vaidehī meditating on a naked babe seated in a large lotus blossom in a rectangular pool. In Cave 66, the blossom is still a bud, but the silhouette of an infant is shown through the semi-transparent enclosure (Fig.4-1). In Cave 171, the lotus has fully blossomed, exposing the infant to the flying Buddhas, magical beings, and heavenly birds above (Fig.4-2). The infant functions as a proxy that will help her imagine herself being reborn. Unlike previous meditations that concentrate on different aspects of the Pure Land, this meditation makes a sudden object-subject shift, and focuses on the rich perceptual experience of the meditating adept.

After you have contemplated thus, next perceive yourself as born in the Western Land of Utmost Bliss sitting cross-legged upon a lotus flower. Imagine this lotus flower as closed; imagine this lotus flower as open. As the lotus flower opens, five hundred rays of colored light illuminate your body; then your eyes open and you see buddhas and bodhisattvas filling the sky and hear the sounds of the water birds and trees, and the voices of the buddhas all expounding the wonderful Dharma in accord with the twelve divisions of the scriptures. When you rise from

meditation, keep those things in mind and do not forget them. Seeing them thus is known as the seeing of the Land of Utmost Bliss of Buddha Amitāyus.

見此事時當起想作心，自見生於西方極樂世界，於蓮華中結跏趺坐，作蓮華合想，作蓮華開想。蓮華開時，有五百色光來照身想；眼目開想，見佛菩薩滿虛空中，水鳥、樹林及與諸佛，所出音聲，皆演妙法，與十二部經合。若出定時憶持不失。見此事已，名見無量壽佛極樂世界。²

Shandao further codifies this immersive somatic, optical, and acoustic experience into nine stages.³ In former meditations, the meditator actively imagines objects and also passively bears witness to confirmatory visions unfold into an increasingly more comprehensive and detailed image of the Pure Land. In the “(12) Comprehensive Meditation”, however, the emphasis of the meditation becomes perception itself. All the elements of the Pure Land — the lights, colors, jewels, trees, birds, etc., are repeated here —not as descriptions of new phenomena, but accounts that re-orient the meditator. Now they are seen from a coherent point of view. The meditator finally occupies a *place* in paradise. The meditator also perceives the Pure Land through a new body. This type of birth is known as a “transformation birth (*huasheng* 化生)”, a heavenly rebirth that is no longer tied to a flesh-bound womb or egg.⁴

As shown in 7th century “Tales of Rebirth” (*wangshengzhuan* 往生傳), the lotus pond was crucial in terms of how monks claimed to have experienced the Pure Land in dreams or ritual scenarios.⁵ Monks claiming to have been sojourning through the Pure Land in *samādhi*

² T. 12, 0365: 0344b14-b21. English translation, Hisao, 78-79 with variations.

³ “正明凝心入觀即常作自往生想，即有其九。一明自生想，二明向西想，三明坐華想。四明華合想，五明華開想，六明寶光來照身想，七明既蒙光照作眼開想，八明眼目既開作見佛菩薩想，九明聞法想”；T. 37, 1753: 0269b24-b29. English translation, see Hisao, 78-79

⁴ Zhao Xiaoxing 趙曉星, “敦煌壁畫中的化生童子”(unpublished manuscript), 1. Yang Xiong 楊雄, “Mogaoku bihuazhong de huasheng tongzi 莫高窟壁畫中的化生童子” *Dunhuang Research*, no.3 (1988): 81-89.

⁵ For more information on “Tales of Rebirth”, see Lai, 173-232.

later became a common trope in tales of rebirth.⁶ The transformation tableau most certainly fed into ways in which such otherworldly Buddhist paradises were imagined. These tales tell of visions suddenly obtained in dreams, sickness, and heightened states of ritual practice that repeatedly match distinct features of the Sixteen Meditations. Of the tales of six monks that attained rebirth in Jiakai's records, the first of them was a monk called Fangqi 方啟, who had series of peculiar dream voyages to the Pure Land in the year 637. Fangqi's dreams reveal a disjunction between the scriptural descriptions of the Pure Land and contemporary imaginations of the Buddhist Paradise. To prove the teachings of the *Meditation Sutra*, the monk made a vow to see the Pure Land in his dream, and the descriptions of his dream flights closely resemble what we would find in 7th century Pure Land tableaux (Fig.4-3).

The first dream took place at a large pool. To its southwest there was a tall building. The monk went down the building, and to the northeast bank of the pool, there he saw a jeweled tent that was taller than two *zhang* facing east. The monk suddenly flew into the tent. Only half of his body reached in, but then [he] came out again. He went over to the west side of the tent and there was a large hall. Within this hall, there was a monk of great merit who told him: "If you follow the Pure Land practices, you too will be born in this tent." The monk suddenly woke up, and at another hour he had another dream. He was at the north bank of the pool and [he] could see Avalokiteśvara. The bodhisattva sat with his feet down and faced to the north. The monk then picked up the bodhisattva's feet and put them on top of his own head. [He] saw that under the bodhisattva's feet there were the signs of the thousand-spoke wheel. The body of the bodhisattva was the color of the golden sands on the bank of the river running through the groves of the jambū trees. Suddenly [he] woke up from his slumber and at another hour [he] had another dream. [He] was standing at the south end of the pool, facing west. To the west of the pool, there was endless water that was filled with lotus flowers. Suddenly, [he] saw Amitābha coming forth from the west and arriving in front of him... Another night [he] had a dream that he was seated inside a flower throne of a hundred treasures. [He] faced south, and sat with his feet dangling down, and achieved samādhi.

初夢在一大池，西南有一高樓。此僧從樓而下，至池東北岸上，見一寶帳高二丈餘，面東開門。此僧忽爾飛入帳中，半身得入，還出，下至帳西，有大殿宇。中見一大德告云：“但修淨土行，並生此帳中也。”遂即睡寤，復更作夢。在池北岸，見觀世音菩薩，面向北方，垂脚而坐。此僧遂以手捧菩薩

⁶ “定中遊淨土”; T. 49, 2035: 0283b07. There are numerous examples in Zhipan's biographies of eminent monks and nuns that achieved rebirth in the Pure Land.

足，頭上載之，見足下有千輻輪相，其菩薩身作閻浮檀金色也。忽然睡覺，更復作夢，於池南面，向西而立。自池已西，總皆是大水，滿中蓮華，忽見阿彌陀佛從西而來，至此僧前……又於別夜夢見。自身坐百寶蓮花王座，面向南方，垂腳而坐，成正覺也。⁷

The monk's constant entering and exiting of dreams is not unlike the series of visions that one goes through during the Sixteen Meditations. In his well-known treatise on meditation the *Great Calming and Insight* (*mohe zhiguan* 摩訶止觀), Zhiyi specifically describes how mediation on Amitābha's realm should be compared to oneiric experience.⁸ Following Zhiyi, late 7th century theorists such as Jiakai and Shandao also started to elaborate on dream visions of the Pure Land. For Shandao, Amitābha will manifest himself within an adept's mind during meditation or in dreams.⁹ Jiakai treats dream visions of the Pure Land as a prophetic confirmatory vision, in which by attaining such a dream, the adept will know that they will be reborn in the Western Pure Land. He also encourages those who achieve dream visions of the Western Pure Land to widely recount their experiences.¹⁰

What is remarkable about Fangqi's dream is that it provides us with a rare instance of how the space of the Pure Land is experienced in the 7th century. The dream sequence is

⁷ T. 47, 1963: 0097a28-c03.

⁸ “自念一切所有法皆如夢。當如是念佛，數數念莫得休息。用是念當生阿彌陀佛國，是名如相念”；T. 46, 1911: 0012c13-c15. T. 46, 1911: 0054b09-b17. Also see, Eugene Wang, “Oneiric Horizons,” 507. Michael Strickmann, “Dreamwork of Psycho-Sinologists: Doctors, Taoists, Monks,” in *Psycho-Sinology – The Universe of Dreams in Chinese Culture*, ed. Carolyn T. Brown (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 1988), 25-47.

⁹ “言法界者，是所化之境，即眾生界也。言身者，是能化之身，即諸佛身也。言入眾生心想中者，乃由眾生起念願見諸佛，佛即以無礙智知，即能入彼想心中現。但諸行者，若想念中、若夢定中見佛者，即成斯義也”；T. 31, 1753: 0267a13-a18.

¹⁰ “欲生無量清淨平等寶國中。有其三輩。第一輩者。去妻子斷愛欲。作沙門。不與女人交通。行六波羅蜜。齋戒清淨。至心不斷。夢中見佛。則得往生也”；T. 47, 1963: 0088c10-c13. “譬如若男若女，於其夢中見種種事。所謂金銀珍寶，是人夢中所見，或違或順或憂或喜，是人寤已為他廣說。追憶夢中，便生憂喜。如是賢護。彼善男子善女人，想彼阿彌陀佛，如是相好，如是威儀，如是大眾，如是說法。繫念思惟，或一日，或一夜，具足念故。是人必觀阿彌陀佛。若於晝時不能見者，於睡夢中，阿彌陀佛必當現也”；T. 47, 1963: 0089a08-a15.

based on the different banks of a large water pool, in which the monk goes from one building to another and encounters different heavenly beings. There is great attention paid towards the four cardinal directions. The monk's movement within this space is not only horizontal, but also vertical; he descends from tall buildings, flies across water, and temporarily dips in and out of places. He sees things from afar, as when he simply describes the height of buildings, but also sees things in great detail, such as holding up the bodhisattva's feet and discovering images under them. This detailed procedure of inspection echoes the sutra instruction that the practitioner should see things "clearly and distinctly as if gazing at them in your own palm".¹¹ This mode of looking that pans out and zooms in is very much like how one encounters a large mural of the Pure Land, when spatial structures only become clear when seen from afar, but must also be inspected closely to uncover rich details within the image. It is the water pond that orients the narrative of the dream sequences, and a few days later, Fangqi finds himself sitting inside a lotus flower, which is the same position that a meditating adept should imagine oneself assuming in the "(12) Comprehensive Meditation". Centered on a water pond, this dreamland that Fangqi experiences bears a strong resemblance to images of the Pure Land painted in the 7th century.

4.2 Pond to Palace: Horizons of an Ideal Monastery

The lotus pond was central to the iconography of all early depictions of Amitābha and his realm. Water always played a vital role in Pure Land imagery, and the visual form of the Pure Land tableau emerged from a constant structural negotiation between bodies of water on the ground level and palace buildings that rise up around it. Many have pointed out that there was

¹¹ "悉令明了，如觀掌中"; T.12, 0365: 0344a16.

a gradual shift in the composition of Pure Land tableaux between the mid-7th century and the 8th century.¹² 7th century tableaux are organized by interconnected platforms that are surrounded by water, yet from the early 8th century onwards, painters started to emphasize the architectural setting of the Pure Land. This formal transition has been the core of art historical scholarship on representations of the Pure Land. Foregrounding such a teleological narrative, historians of Buddhist art have commonly treated the Pure Land tableau as a representation or reflection of Pure Land doctrines, while architectural historians use the Pure Land tableau to reconstruct the magnificent palatial or monastic complexes in the city of Chang'an.¹³ Yet, as Fangqi's dream shows us, imaginations of the Pure Land were directly inspired by Pure Land images. Shandao became committed to Pure Land practices after seeing an enchanting tableau, and this happened around the same time of Fangqi's dream. The metamorphoses of Pure Land tableaux from the 7th to the 8th century stemmed from new visual and aural experiences of monastic spaces, while at the same time attesting to a constant experimentation with pictorial space. The management of ground planes and buildings were central to these painterly experiments.

One distinct feature of the Western Pure Land is that it is completely flat. The Pure Land sutras, however, never directly describe the Pure Land as being flat, and this conceit only started to surface in textual sources during the second half of the 7th century. Again, Shandao and Jiakai provide us with the best details. In his commentary on the "(2) Water Meditation", Shandao discusses this particular spatial imagination of the Pure Land,

¹² Wang Zhi 王治, "Kongjianbiaoda yu yuyi," 72-91. Yagi Haruo 八木春生, "Chutang zhi shengtang shiqi dunhaung mogaoku xifang jingtu bian de fazahn 初唐至盛唐時期敦煌莫高窟西方淨土變的發展", trans.姚瑤 Yao Yao, *Dunhuang Research*, 161, no.1 (2017): 35-53.

¹³ Wang Zhi, "Kongjianbiaoda yu yuyi," 75, Sun Yihua 2001, 71-92, 115-146, Xiao Mo, 1-94.

Question: Previously the [Buddha] taught the Meditation on the Sun. In order to learn about one's karmic conditions, [he] let [Vaidehī] meditate on the Sun. Now in this meditation, [he] teaches the Meditation on Water. Why is this so?

Answer: The sun disc is always shining; this represents how the Land of Bliss is eternally luminous. However, [the Buddha] is afraid of [giving misconceptions] of that land as being uneven, just like the unclean world that has high and low [places]. Only the sun can illuminate the dark chambers of the Sāha world. This realm (the Pure Land) does not have any hills and valleys or spaces that are uneven. [The Buddha] takes water as something that can achieve complete flatness, and he uses it to demonstrate the evenness of [the Pure Land], which is like the lapis lazuli ground of that world.

問曰：“前教觀日，為知業相等，故令觀日。今此觀中，又教觀水。有何所以？”

答曰：“日輪常照，以表極樂之長暉。復恐彼地不平，類此穢國之高下。但以娑婆閻宅，唯日能明。此界丘阬未無高下之處，欲取能平之者，無過於水。示斯可平之相，況彼瑠璃之地也。”¹⁴

As we have discussed in the previous chapter, water here again becomes an important substance that allows Shandao to make sense of the features of the Western Pure Land. None of the three Pure Land sutras explicitly state that the Pure Land is completely flat, nor does any commentator before the Tang dynasty. The levelness achieved by water surfaces is creatively used by Shandao to describe the flatness of Pure Land. In this way, the aquatic nature of the lotus pond, which commonly serves as the anchoring force in compositions of Pure Land tableau, is expanded to the entire ground plane of Amitābha's realm. The visualization of the Pure Land being flat predates Shandao's theorization. The 6th century Wanfosi stele already shows this conflation between the flatness of the ground and levelness of water (Fig.1-6). Not only do the lotus-filled waterways mark the entry point to the Pure Land, they also reveal the horizon in the distance. The orthogonal lines that form the convergent perspective of the composition are also delineated with water canals. This means that the flatness of the Pure Land is entirely achieved through the mapping of water. The flatness of the supernatural realm starkly contrasts with the mountainous Sāha world below.

¹⁴ T.37, 1753: 0262b20-b26, also see Pas, 190

In most 7th century Pure Land tableau at Dunhuang, a similar sort of smooth horizon not only marks the leveled surface of water, but also the flatness of the Pure Land ground. This view of a flat horizon comes up again in Fangqi's dream sequences, and is directly contrasted with the unevenness of mountains.

This monk had a dream another night: [He] was positioned within the Sāha world, and [he] turned his head to gaze towards the west. He saw Amitābha's Buddha land *as flat as the surface of a mirror*. [He] saw how the Sāha world was full of mountains and valleys. [The mountains and valleys] divided east and west, and [he] gazed towards the south, where he saw a southern plateau. Within the valley there were fifteen jeweled tents moving westward. All of them were made of the seven treasures, but only the middle one had a silver tent. [The space] under the tent was full of music that sang songs and praised [the Pure Land]. This monk asked, "What tent is this?" Someone under the tent replied, "Here are the souls that will be reborn [in the Pure Land]." The monk was delighted. He leapt into the air, and flew westward.

又此僧復於別夜夢見,自身在娑婆世界,迴頭向西而望,見彌陀佛土平坦如鏡。見娑婆世界,唯是山川。東西而別,向南而望,見南坪。川中有十五箇寶帳向西而去,餘者皆是七寶,唯中央一箇,是其白銀帳。帳之下皆有音樂,歌詠讚歎。此僧問云:“此是何帳?”帳下人答云:“此是並往生人也。”此僧歡喜,躡身在空中,飛向西去。¹⁵

Fangqi's dream provides us again with an embodied perception of the Pure Land. The presence of the Pure Land is indicated by sound and music and the monk has the capacity to fly in the air. Unlike his previous dream, in which he finds himself inside the Pure Land, this time he is situated in our world and gazing towards the Pure Land from the outside. Just like how Shandao uses the levelness of water to describe the ground of the Pure Land, Jiakai compares it to the surface of a mirror. Similar to how Lady Vaidehī sees through mountains and looks beyond her confinement in the palace, Fangqi is situated in the Sāha world and looks through mountains and valleys to the Pure Land beyond.

Experiencing the extreme flatness of a fully paved ground was always difficult in the medieval world. Even in Chang'an, where both Jiakai and Shandao resided, the wide earthen

¹⁵ T. 47, 1963: 0097b20-b27.

avenues between wards were unpaved and uneven. When it rained, road conditions were so terrible that court assemblies were cancelled because horses and carriages could not trudge through the deep mud of the streets.¹⁶ Only the roads adjacent to the royal palace were paved.¹⁷ The topography of the city itself was not flat either, for it was built on a sloping hillside according to geomantic protocols (Fig.4-4).¹⁸ The highest point of the city was its southeast corner, where the city's largest reservoir of water the Serpentine Pond (*qujiang* 曲江) was created as the hub for the Chang'an's myriad canals and waterways (Fig.4-5). The lowest point of the city was in the northwest, which drops approximately fifty meters below the level of Qujiang. The change of altitude was also unevenly distributed, with the height variation most visible in the Xinchang Ward (*xinchang fang* 新昌坊) close to the east city walls. Located in the ward, the Qinglong Monastery (*qinglong si* 青龍寺) was frequented by poets who wrote about their elevated views from the temple (Fig.4-6).¹⁹ Zhu Qingyu's 朱慶餘 (796-837) describes his view of the city from a tall building, in his poem "Written on the Qinglong Temple" (*ti qinglongsi* 題青龍寺),

寺好因崗勢， 登臨值夕陽。 青山當佛閣， 紅葉滿僧廊。 竹色連平地， 宏聲在上方。	The temple is fine as it leans upon the ridge's rise, I summit and gaze far, facing the sunset. Green hills face the Buddhist halls, Red leaves fill up the monk's corridors. Bamboo's luster stretches across the [flat] ground. The piping of insects come from above.
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¹⁶ Yang Hongnian 楊鴻年, *Suitang liangjing kao* 隋唐兩京考 (Shanghai : Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1999), 177-180

¹⁷ Ibid, 181-182.

¹⁸ Victor Cunrui Xiong, *Sui-Tang Chang'an: A Study in the Urban History of Medieval China*. Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies (University of Michigan, 2000), 43-53.

¹⁹ Linda Feng, "Negotiating Vertical Space: Walls, Vistas, and the Topographical Imagination," *T'ang Studies* 29 (2011): 31-34

最憐東面靜， 為近楚城牆。	I am most fond of the quietness in the east, As it is close to the city walls of the Chu. ²⁰
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Like Fangqi and Lady Vaidehī, Zhu Qingyu is gazing west towards the direction of the setting sun. As he is located at an elevated position in the east of the city, his gaze westward provides him with a panoramic view across the entire capital. Furthermore, the “green hills that face the Buddhist halls” likely describe the view of the Zhongnan Mountains (*zhongnan shan* 終南山) that are visible to the south of the city (Fig.4-7). Looking down, inside the quarters of the Qinglong Monastery, the bamboo stretches across a flat ground. We could probably say that Zhu Qingyu has described a reverse view of the dreaming monk. As Fangqi is located in the uneven terrain of mountains, he gains sight of a mirror-like paradise in the form of a built environment, while Zhu is situated in a monastery with a flat ground, and is looking at the mountain realms beyond the city. This duality between architecture and mountains is something we have discussed extensively in Chapter Two. We see how Fangqi’s dream sequences were directly inspired by new views made possible in the capital, and his first dream flight into the Pure Land directly relates to Pure Land transformation tableaux.

Similar to the space described in Fangqi’s dream, the composition of the Pure Land tableau in Cave 220 is centered on a large lotus pond. Drawn in the shape of an isosceles trapezoid, the left and right banks of the water pool create a pair of orthogonal lines that point towards a vanishing point far beyond the mural’s picture plane. Lined by balustrades, the backside of the water pool marks the horizon of the composition (Fig.4-8). The extreme flatness of both water and the ground of the Pure Land are demonstrated by this visible horizon. The main deities are submerged within a large water pool that dominates the

²⁰ Zhu Qingyu 朱慶餘, “*Ti Qinglong si*” 題青龍寺, in *Quan Tang shi* 全唐詩, comp. Peng Dingqiu 彭定求 et al. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1960), 514. 5868. English translation see Linda Feng, “Negotiating Vertical Space,” 33-34.

composition. Amitābha is shown in the middle with two standing bodhisattvas, while Avalokiteśvara and Mahāsthāmaprāpta (the two bodhisattvas of slightly larger size) are seated to his left and right. All deities are seated on lotus flowers that buttress them above the water surface.

Various forms of architecture surround the lotus pond in Fangqi's dream, and the dream starts with the monk finding himself on top of a tall building to the southwest of the water pool. In Cave 220, two two-story pavilions can be found on the far left and far right sides of the tableaux (Fig.4-9). Shown in a three-quarter view, these tall buildings are aligned with the vertical surface of the mural wall, and are propped up against the horizontal ground plane of the Pure Land. With their outer sides cut off from the mural, they demarcate the spatial boundaries of the image, and function almost like *que* (闕) gate-towers that open into supernatural realms.²¹

This type of composition, featuring a lotus pond in the middle with tall buildings on the two sides, is found in most pre-Tang depictions of the Western Pure Land. The buildings represent the numerous jeweled buildings in the Pure Land. However, in Cave 220 the two edifices not only mark the borders of the tableau, but also provide us with alternative internal viewpoints represented by heavenly beings occupying the buildings that look out towards Amitābha's assembly in the middle of the composition (Fig.4-10). Potential access to the pond is materialized by the depiction of small staircases that extend from the first story of the buildings. On the one hand, small multicolor tile platforms create two small openings on the two side balustrades of the lotus pond. On the other hand, two curvilinear staircases bend down towards the viewer (Fig.4-11). Through these devices, the buildings are interconnected

²¹ Xiao Mo, 95-115.

with the larger environment of the Pure Land. Like the dreaming monk, one can descend from such towers and freely traverse space in the Pure Land.

Most remarkably, the different floors of the buildings blend the use of parallel perspective on the ground floor and foreshortening on top (Fig.4-12). The composite structure heightens the effect of receding space. This is the first time in Chinese pictorial art that buildings are depicted with a foreshortening effect — on the top floors, the lower balustrades gently tilt upward, while the eaves tilt downwards. In all architectural drawings prior to the 7th century, buildings were always portrayed as a box-like structure in parallel perspective. The slight downward tilt of the eaves in Cave 220's buildings points to an entirely new mode of portraying space in Chinese pictorial art — this is a visual effect that directly calls into question the position of the viewer. The eaves of the two buildings are painted roughly two meters above the ground floor. That is to say, as one is looking up at the second story of the buildings, one is given a glimpse of the underside of the eaves. The famous *que* gate-towers painted in 706 on the two sides of the corridor of Prince Yide's 懿德 tomb are also foreshortened with the same technique (Fig.4-13a).²² Just as these tall buildings mark the boundaries of the Pure Land tableaux, the gate-towers here mark the entrance of the prince's tomb, symbolically and structurally dividing the space between the living and the dead (Fig.4-13bc).²³

By the 8th century, painters have fully mastered this visual convention, but as we have seen in the previous chapter, this technique was still something a novice painter had to learn

²² Li Chongrun 李重潤 (682 – 701) was executed by Wu Zetian in 701, and was reburied in 706 after his father Emperor Zhongzong posthumously gave him the title as “Heir Apparent Yide”.

²³ Wu Hung 2010, 213-217. Hay, “Seeing through Dead Eyes,” 18-19.

and master.²⁴ Painters were enchanted by this new visual effect of receding space, and in perhaps all late 7th century murals of the Western Pure Land, we can find these multi-story pavilions that blend the use of parallel perspective and foreshortening (Fig.4-14). Moving beyond their initial structural role in the composition of Cave 220's tableau, these buildings were recycled as templates in various Pure Land tableaux. Most late-7th century Pure Land tableaux maintained a visible horizon that is marked by balustrades, and the Pure Land is usually composed by interconnected platforms that are surrounded by waterways. Although the convergent perspective of the platforms creates a strong sense of receding space, the composition is never depicted with a centralized vanishing point or coherent spatial logic. The pavilions were drawn in additively—individually, they achieve the effect of receding space, but they were never integrated with the ground plane. Beyond architecture, most pictorial elements of the Pure Land tableau are drawn in this additive fashion (Fig.4-15). Emphasizing clarity, there are very limited instances of overlapping, and each pictorial object is contained in its own spatial world. As mentioned in Chapter Three, when Duan Chengshi marveled at Fan Changshou's mural of the Pure Land in Chang'an, rather than mentioning any jeweled buildings, he only remarked how the "water seemed to be penetrating deeply into the wall". As a 7th century painter, Fan Changshou was skilled in drawing landscapes, rocks and trees, and animals, but not architecture.²⁵ The effect of water "penetrating deeply into the wall" was likely created by the convergent perspective of the water-bound platforms in 7th

²⁴ Gombrich, 74. Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 13-35.

²⁵“範長壽，國初為武騎尉，善畫風俗，田家景候、人物之狀，人間多有。今屏風是其制也。凡畫山水、樹石、牛馬，畜產，屈曲遠近，放牧閑野，皆得其妙。各盡其微，張僧繇之次也。又僧彥悰《續畫品》雲：“其博瞻繁多，未見其親跡，可居妙品。”時又有何長壽，亦與齊名，近代少見其畫也。”Zhu Jingxuan 朱景玄, *Tangchao minghua lu* 唐朝名畫錄, 1 *juan* in vol. 812 of SKQS, 1. 369b.

century Pure Land tableaux. This odd comment about the relationship between representations of water and the medium of the wall surface also points to how Duan, as a 9th century viewer, was coming to terms with archaic forms of pictorial illusionism.

The composite character of Pure Land tableaux is most vividly attested to in the late 7th century Cave 329 (Fig.4-16). There are six buildings that are shown in a three quarter view — two on the right, two on the left, and two in the middle that face each other. Although located at different distances from the viewer, all six buildings are shown in a similar size. Like Cave 220, the four buildings on the edges of the tableau have their outer sides cut off from the mural. The two on the right side successfully blend the use of parallel perspective on the bottom, while showing the effect of foreshortening on top — shown in three-quarter view, the balustrades of the second level slightly bend upward, while the eaves tilt downward. The painters of the two on the right seem to be struggling with this technique. The eaves effectively tilt downward, but the balustrades of the second level are almost completely horizontal, creating an awkward spatial effect. The arbitrariness of this set up is demonstrated most drastically in the pair of pavilions on the platform behind Amitābha. Facing each other in three quarter view, the buildings create a strong sense of receding space. Together with the frontal hall in the middle, the three architectural components create an ambiguous enclave that frames the canopy of Amitābha. The entire structure sits awkwardly on the platform —none of the orthogonal lines of the buildings are aligned with the tiles on the ground, suggesting that these buildings were not coherently designed with the ground plane of the Pure Land.

The Pure Land tableau of Cave 217 introduced a noticeably more sophisticated technology of perspective, which allowed painters to depict the Pure Land as a colossal palace complex (Fig.1-16). As the distant horizon vanishes in Cave 217, the tall pavilions

also disappear from the edges of the tableau.²⁶ Instead, the distant horizon is completely obscured by layers of tall buildings that serve as a backdrop for the Amitābha assembly. Although individual buildings are still composed by the same intersection of parallel perspective and foreshortening, there is a drastic new sense of pictorial space. Apsaras used to be drawn additively in late-7th century tableaux and they gracefully floated in the blue skies of the Pure Land. On the contrary, in Cave 217, they aggressively fly through buildings and around structures (Fig.4-17). If the visual gimmicks of the pavilions in the 7th century tableau were devised to achieve an effect of receding space, here, the apsaras in flight embody a new mode of visual perception. As they dash in and out of windows and balconies, the buildings become porous structures that can be penetrated. Just as half of Fangqi's body reached inside buildings and then came out again in his dreams, we see the bodies of apsaras half emerging from doorways (Fig.4-18). At the same time, similar to the open door buildings in the Ajātaśatru Narrative that we have discussed in Chapter Two, open doors invite viewers into the painted architectural space (Fig.4-19, Fig.2-44). The trails of clouds left behind by the apsaras enable us to comprehend the spatial and material dimensions of painted architectural spaces and unlock mysteries of pictorial wonder. Not only do they make the spatial and architectural complex thinkable, they also guide our eyes towards places of concentrated looking. Furthermore, the apsaras also embody the aural dimension of the Pure Land. On top of a bell tower, a monk holding a baton stands by a large bell (Fig.4-17). As the bell chimes, an apsara glides around the instrument and soars upward, joining a flying drum and string instrument, mimicking the movement of sound.

This new composition was created by experiences of monastic and aristocratic space in the capital. The architecture of secular residences and religious temples were formally akin

²⁶ Wang Zhi, "*Kongjian biaoda yu yuyi*," 85.

to each other, because a large number of monasteries in Chang'an were converted from the private mansions of elite households (Fig.4-20). As Rong Xinjiang has pointed out, the conversion of private mansions into temples prefigured the growth of new public spaces.²⁷ As we have discussed above, access to these complexes provided city-dwellers with new views of urban space. The bodily movement of individuals within the city was not only horizontal, but also vertical. Even though Chang'an's ward system strictly regulated urban space through layers of high walls, tall pavilions and multi-story pagodas allowed city-dwellers to rise beyond walled spaces and view their city from above (Fig.4-21).²⁸ Many monasteries were famous for their ponds, trees, and gardens — they were microcosms of Chang'an's ecosystems and were part and parcel of the social life of its inhabitants.²⁹ The “Southern Pond” (*nanchi* 南池) of the Great Ci'en Monastery (*dacien si* 大慈恩寺) was a popular source of poetic inspiration, while urbanites flocked to the Ximing Monastery (*ximing si* 西明寺) to see blossoming peonies.³⁰ The city's complex canal system not only provided fresh water for their lotus ponds, but also facilitated the movement of goods and supplies through the market place.³¹ Large monasteries were spaces for public sermons and held stages for performances.³² Monastic bells and drums were struck according to the time of day and also

²⁷ Rong Xinjiang, “*Cong wangzhai dao siguan*,” 68-88.

²⁸ Feng, “Negotiating Vertical Space,” 35-68.

²⁹ Rong Xinjiang 榮新江, “*Suitang chang'an the siguan yu huanjing* 隋唐長安的寺觀與環境” [The Buddhist & Daoist Monasteries and Environment in Sui-Tang Chang'an], *Tang Studies* 15 (2009): 3-21.

³⁰ *Ibid.* 11-15

³¹ Shi Nianhai 史念海, “*Tang chang'an cheng de chizhao yu yuanlin* 唐長安城的池沼與林園”, in *Shi nianhai quanji* 史念海全集, Vol.7, (Beijing Shi : Ren min chu ban she, 2013), 527-554. Yang Hongnian, 102-109

³² Hou Chong 侯沖, “*Sujiang xinkao*,” 118-124. Xiang Da 向達, “*Tang dai sujiang kao* 唐代俗講考,” *Yanjing xuebao* 燕京學報 [Yenching Journal of Chinese Studies] no.16(1934): 119-132.

announced the gathering of assemblies for public sermons (Fig.4-22).³³ A mischievous emphasis on internal viewers in Pure Land tableaux brings to life this collective fascination of wondrous sights and sounds. The south mural of the mid-8th century Cave 445 is a playful reinterpretation of archaic 7th century Pure Land tableaux (Fig.4-23). Like 7th century Pure Land tableaux, the mural exposes a visible flat horizon, and two pavilions are positioned at the two ends of the wall painting. Instead of heavenly beings, several surprised monks occupy the pavilions (Fig.4-24). They are leaning out of the balcony, waving their arms, pointing outside, and eagerly looking at the Pure Land. There are five monks in a small palace directly above the Buddha (Fig.4-25). Two of them are enthusiastically leaning forward and looking at the world before them. They are internal viewers, enthralled by the sight of the Pure Land, just like the dreaming Fangqi, who suddenly found himself in a visionary paradise.

This rich sensorium of urban space can be seen through Daoxuan's writings. In the year 667, shortly before his death, Daoxuan wrote the *Illustrated Scripture of Jetavana Vihāra of Śrāvastī in Central India* (*zhongtianshu weisheguo qiyuansi tujiang* 中天竺舍衛國祇洹寺圖經), in which he describes the Jetavana Monastery where the historical Buddha used to reside and preach.³⁴ Fashioned as an ideal space for religious devotion and monastic life, Daoxuan's description of the Indian monastery was more likely based on his understanding of Chinese palaces and devotional spaces in Chang'an.³⁵ As Puay-peng Ho and many have argued, the conflation of the spatial organization of Chang'an with its royal palaces and that of the Jetavana Monastery was intentionally designed to create equivalence between an

³³ Anne Feng, presentation at Chang'an Studies Workshop at Peking University, 2014.

³⁴ T. 45, 1899.

³⁵ Puay-peng Ho, "The Ideal Monastery: Daoxuan's Description of the Central Indian Jetavana Vihāra," *East Asian History*, no.10, (December 1995),1-18. Wei-cheng Lin, 102-107.

earthly monarch (the emperor of the Tang) and the Universal Monarch (the Buddha).³⁶ Like Chinese temples, the monastery described by Daoxuan was based on a series of individual cloisters (Fig.4-26). The main cloister features three multistory Buddhist halls with terraces on the central axis, two bell terraces, and a square lotus pond right in front of the main gate (Fig.4-27).³⁷

Many have pointed out the formal similarities between Daoxuan's textual monastery and 8th century Pure Land tableaux at Dunhuang.³⁸ Daoxuan describes the cascading effect of the three Buddha halls of the central cloister, "The three halls and terraces are each higher than another and gazing north the view is not executed by mortal humans."³⁹ The layered effect of buildings that obscure the distant horizon is indeed an innovative feature of Cave 217's Pure Land tableau (Fig.1-16). In both Pure Land tableaux in Cave 172, the painters show the Buddha assembly before a large hall. Behind this large hall we can see the rooftops of two extra buildings (Fig.1-15ab). The middle building is much taller than the rest, whilst the sides of the rear hall can be seen in the distance. Although parts of the two rear buildings are visible from the ground floor, the spatial arrangement of the three rooftops was intentionally designed to be ambiguous. The painters cleverly manipulated the pair of small ornaments (*chiwen* 鸱吻) that are usually found on the apex of palatial rooftops. The third structure is set far behind the tall middle building, but its two small *chiwen* gently overlap the underside of the middle building's rooftop (Fig.4-28). Following the spatial layout of the three structures, these ornaments should have been blocked by the tall rooftop of the middle

³⁶ Ho, 7.

³⁷ Ibid, 6-12.

³⁸ Xiao Mo, 63-94.

³⁹ "極北重閣三重又高前殿, 花飾秀峙晃朗太虛。此三殿閣次第重映, 北望極目殆非人謀;" T. 45, 1899: 0890b03-b04.

building, but the painters intentionally brought them to the forefront. This effect is repeated in both Pure Land tableaux in Cave 172 (Fig.4-29), and for painters that were skilled in depicting architecture like never before, this small detail could not have been a mistake. The subtle manipulation transposes palatial architecture into the realm of the fantastical—the two buildings behind the main hall are caught in a between-and-between state of spatial uncertainty, constantly brought forth yet pushed back at the same time. The “cascading effect” of the three Buddhist halls that Daoxuan describes in his text comes to life in the Pure Land tableaux. The layered rooftops are set into a rolling motion, just as one makes sense of changing views and distances when moving through a palatial complex (Fig.4-30).

Spectacular new buildings were indeed created in the capital, shortly before Daoxuan finished his writing of the *Jetavana Vihāra*. The Daming Palace, a large complex located to the northeast of Chang’an was significantly expanded in 662 by Emperor Gaozong 唐高宗 (628 -683), and the royal family moved there the following year (Fig. 4-31). Two of the largest new constructions were the Hanyuan Hall (*hanyuan dian* 含元殿) and the Linde Hall (*linde dian* 麟德殿) (Fig.4-32).⁴⁰ Both of them might have been related to the monumental buildings in the Pure Land tableaux. Constructed in 662, Hanyuan Hall was the central structure of the Daming Palace and sat on its north-south axis (Fig.4-33). Set on a naturally elevated plateau, the pounded-earth base of the hall measured 76.70 meters east and west, and 42.60 meters north and south.⁴¹ Flanked by a drum tower and a bell tower, the main hall was

⁴⁰ Yang Hongxun 楊鴻勳, “*Zailun tangzhangan hanyuandain chaotang de yuanzhuang* 再論唐長安含元殿的原狀,” in *Jianzhu kaogu xue lunwenji* 建築考古學論文集 (Beijing: Tsinghua University Press, 2005), 433-457. Yang Hongxun 楊鴻勳, “*Tang daminggong hanyuandian chaotang fuyuan tantao* 唐大明宮含元殿朝堂復原探討,” in *Jianzhu kaogu xue lunwenji* 建築考古學論文集 (Beijing: Tsinghua University Press, 2005), 458-460. Yang Hongxun 楊鴻勳, “*Tang changan daminggong lindedian fuyuan yanjiu jiduan baogao* 唐大明宮麟德殿復原研究階段報告,” in *Jianzhu kaogu xue lunwenji* 建築考古學論文集 (Beijing: Tsinghua University Press, 2005), 461-475. Xiong, 79-97.

⁴¹ Yang Hongxun, “*Zailun tangzhangan hanyuandain chaotang de yuanzhuang*,” 437.

connected to ancillary buildings on its two sides through “flying corridors” (*feilang* 飛廊). The Xiangluan Pavilion(*xiangluan ge* 鸞翔閣) and Qifeng Pavilion(*qifeng ge* 栖鳳閣), to the west and east of the core structure, were set on 15-meter platforms above the ground. The monumental hall served ceremonial functions for the emperor. This is where he held court, met with ministers, and publicly received tribute from foreign envoys.⁴² Finished between 663 and 665, the Linde Hall was located to the west of the Daming Palace (Fig.4-34). The pounded-earth base of the structure was 5.7 meters high, 131.55 meters wide and 80.20 meters deep.⁴³ The design of the hall was highly unusual. The core of the building was created by three interconnected halls on the north-south axis, and the complex was nicknamed the “Three Halls” (*sandian* 三殿) (Fig.4-35). The front hall was slightly lower than the middle and rear hall, but all three had individual rooftops – thus providing a layered effect when one approaches the complex from the south. Tang emperors frequently held lavish banquets within its large interior, at times accommodating 3,500 guests in a single feast. The space held all sorts of spectacles, from performances with dancing horses, to Buddhist rituals in which palace courtiers would dress up as buddhas and bodhisattvas.⁴⁴ Created for court assemblies, public ceremonies, lavish banquets, and spectacles, the two new monumental structures were designed to be highly visible amongst those that had access to the palace.

Working closely with the court, Daoxuan frequently went into the imperial palace quarters. The Ximing Monastery, of which Daoxuan became head monk (*shangzuo* 上座) of shortly after Xuanzang’s death in 664, was itself converted from a prince’s mansion in the

⁴² Ibid, 434

⁴³ Ibid, 463

⁴⁴ Ibid, 462

Yankang Ward (*Yankangfang* 延康坊) in 658, directly under the supervision of Emperor Gaozong and Empress Wu (Fig.4-36).⁴⁵ With “long corridors and broad halls” (*changlang guangdian* 長廊廣殿), the imperially sponsored monastery was one of the most extravagant religious complexes in the city. Archaeologists excavated the remains of the monastery in Xi’an. The pounded-earth platform for the main hall measured 50.34 meters east-west and 32.14 meters north-south (Fig.4-37).⁴⁶ The monastery was not only famous for its peonies, but also its lotus blossoms. The Yong’an canal (*yongan qu* 永安渠) flowed to the west side of the complex, and provided its lotus ponds with fresh running water.⁴⁷ In Su Ting’s 蘇頌 (670-727) stele inscription for the “Pagoda of the Ximing Monastery of Tang Chang’an” (*tangchangan ximingsi tabei* 唐長安西明寺塔碑), he describes how the high profile monastery had “cascading pavilions and layered halls”, which “moved gracefully like dragons and phoenixes”, while “gods and demons gazed upon it”. “Covered in jewels”, it shone brightly, while its “lapis lazuli was clear and transparent” and its “lotus flowers gleamed iridescently”.⁴⁸ The monastery sounded its *jianchui* bell (*jianchui* 槌) during the day, while its *zhongtuo* bell (*zhongtuo* 鍾柝) sang in the night.⁴⁹ The eulogy was meant to be flattering, but as it embraces the fantastical, it portrays the monastery as a supernatural realm

⁴⁵ Luo Xiaohong 羅小紅, “*Tang chang’an ximingsi kao* 唐長安西明寺考,” *Kaogu yu wenwu* 考古與文物, no.2 (2006): 76-80. Fujiyoshi Masumi, 150-155.

⁴⁶ Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan kaoguyanjiusuo xi’an tangcheng gongzuodui 中國社會科學院考古研究所西安唐城工作隊, “*Tang chang’an ximing si yizhi fajue jianbao* 唐長安西明寺遺址發掘簡報,” *Kaogu* 考古, no.1 (1990): 45-55.

⁴⁷ Luo Xiaohong, 77.

⁴⁸ “叢倚觀閣，層立殿堂，虬鳳天矯而相承，鬼神睚眦而欲起：罔不珠綴窳，旋題照燭，琉璃洞澈，菡萏紛敷”；Su Ting 蘇頌, “*Tang Chang’an Ximing si tabei*” 唐長安西明寺塔碑, in *Wenyuan yinghua* 文苑英華, comp. Li Fang et al. 1000 *juan* in vols. 1333–1342 of SKQS, vol. 1341, 855. 434a–434b.

⁴⁹ “日靜槌，夜鳴鍾柝；” Ibid.

similar to what one might find in the Pure Land, with cascading grand halls, singing bells, shimmering jewels, transparent lapis lazuli, and lustrous lotus ponds.

As architectural historians have reconstructed the spatial layout of Daoxuan's textual monastery, they have often left out the narrative focus of his text. We should instead, as James Robson as argued, rethink religious architecture in East Asia as more than neutral "containers" of images, reliquaries and stupas, but as efficacious sacred spaces in their own terms.⁵⁰ Each individual cloister of Daoxuan's ideal monastery was described as a self-sufficient microcosm (Fig.4-38). Like Chang'an palaces and monasteries, each compound was always "filled with water ponds, flowers, and trees" (*linchi huashu chongman* 林池花樹充滿)—also a common feature of Pure Land tableaux. Most importantly, each compound is centered on a spectacular self-sounding instrument. Visually marvelous and crafted by divine forces, they emit the sounds of the dharma. For each instrument, Daoxuan describes its location, the building within which it is housed, its divine creator, its visual qualities and mechanism, the quality of its sound and how far it could reach. More than creating a discourse on monastic space through architecture and topography, Daoxuan was also defining its ideal soundscape. In the vihàra, there are celestial drums (*tiangu* 天鼓), celestial conch shells (*tianluo* 天螺), celestial harps (*tiankonghou* 天箏篋), stone chimes (*shiqing* 石磬), bronze chimes (*tongling* 銅鈴), etc. Beyond common instruments, seven gold roosters inside a glass bottle can also start to make Sheng-like sounds (*shengsheng* 笙聲) whenever a dragon

⁵⁰ The siting of the monastery, the setting (natural landscape), the structure (architectural elements), the content (relics, statuary, paintings, powerful deities) and the history (eminent monks associated with the site, key political recognition) of those sites are all crucial aspects for study. James Robson, "Introduction", in *Buddhist Monasticism in East Asia: Place of Practice*, eds. edited by James A. Benn, Lori Rachelle Meeks, James Robson (Routledge, 2009), 1-16. James Robson, "Monastic Spaces and Sacred Traces: Facets of Chinese Buddhist Monastic Records," in *Buddhist Monasticism in East Asia: Place of Practice*, eds. edited by James A. Benn, Lori Rachelle Meeks, James Robson (Routledge, 2009), 3-64.

king passes by, while king mani-jewels (*moni zhuwang* 摩尼珠王) emit light and sound at the same time.⁵¹ All of these supernatural instruments are musical automatons— they self-sound (*ziming* 自鳴), just as the musical instruments of the Pure Land “self-sound without anyone striking [them]” (*bugu ziming* 不鼓自鳴).⁵² Daoxuan’s monastery was not only a monumental architectural structure, but also a cacophony of sounds. Like the monastic bells and drums in Chang’an, they played a vital role in how religious spaces were experienced both visually and acoustically in medieval China.

Daoxuan was obsessed with bells in the Indian monastery, describing at least forty-three bells—more than all the other instruments combined—made of precious materials such as bronze, gold, and silver, but also fantastical ones made of stone, bamboo, and glass. This is almost certainly linked to the bronze bell that was commissioned by the ten-year-old prince Li Xian 李賢 (654 – 684), the second son of Wu Zetian, in 664 for the Ximing Monastery, three years before Daoxuan completed his text.⁵³ The sounds of bells described in Su Ting’s stele inscription likely came from the same instrument. The bronze bell weighed ten thousand *jin* (斤) (approximately 75 tons), and its construction was imbued with imperial symbolisms fit for a royal prince. The precious alloy minerals were quarried in southwest China from the Han River (*hanshui* 漢水) and the Shu Mountains (*shushan* 蜀山), then the bell was cast in the Central Plains around Yuzhou 虞州 and Jinzhou 晉州. The instrument was ornately decorated with flying dragons (*xianglong* 翔龍) and crouching beasts (*yanshou* 偃獸). Struck

⁵¹“又內一瑠璃寶瓶。瓶內善七金雞。龍至便鳴聲聞三億里。娑竭龍王來時七雞俱鳴。自餘龍至但一雞鳴。其餅內外映徹。金雞形如此山雞音如笙聲”；T. 45, 1899: 0885a02-a05. “摩尼珠王放大光明。光中出聲音作十三問”；T. 45, 1899: 0889a26-a27.

⁵² Forte, 40-50.

⁵³ Fujiyoshi Masumi, 408-412

in the early morning and at night, its sound could flow across the world and echo in the heavens.⁵⁴ Like the casting of ancient ritual vessels, the creation of the bell embodied imperial power and the control of resources in the imperium.⁵⁵ At the same time, its chiming sound—like the power of the throne—was far-reaching, emanating across heaven and earth. The bell’s ancient ritual vessel-like nature is brought a step further when tales were told of how the inanimate instrument was able to take revenge on those they caused it harm. After the An Lushan Rebellion in 755, the monastery fell into disarray and a thief started to gradually chisel bronze from the instrument and sold pieces of it in the market place every day. This went on for years, until the thief mysteriously disappeared and was soon found dead under the vengeful bell.⁵⁶

In Daoxuan’s description of the Jetavana Monastery, he makes explicit references to the prince’s bell. One bronze bell weighed thirty thousand *jin* and its “shape was similar to the ones of China” (*xingru handi zhe* 形如漢地者). It was made by the Four Heavenly Kings, and Maudgalyāyana would strike it to gather assemblies. The bell in the “Cloister of the Ordination Platform” (*jietanyuan* 戒壇院) weighs a hundred thousand *jin*, and is decorated

⁵⁴ “維大唐麟德二年，歲躔星紀，月次降婁，二月癸酉朔，八日庚辰，皇太子奉為二聖於西明寺造銅鍾一口，可一萬斤。發漢水之奇珍，采蜀山之秘寶，虞倕練火，晉曠飛爐。帶龍虞而騰規，應鯨桴而寫制。聲流九地，遐宣厚載之恩；韻徹三天，遠播曾旻之德。寤群生於覺路，警庶類於迷途。業擅香垣，功齊塵劫，式旌高躅，敢勒貞金。頌其銘曰：青祇薦祉，黃離降精。渦川毓德，瑤嶺飛英。吹銅表性，問寢登情。興言淨業，載啟香城。七珍交鑄，九乳圖形。翔龍若動，偃獸疑驚。制陵周室，規逾漢庭。風飄旦響，霜傳夜鳴。仰延皇祚，俯導蒼生。聲騰億劫，慶溢幹齡。”Li Xian 李賢，“Ximing si zhong ming” 西明寺鍾銘, in *QTW*, 99. 446c. “唐東宮皇太子西明寺鐘銘” T.52, 2103: 0322a09.

⁵⁵ Wu Hung 1995, 4-11.

⁵⁶ “長安城西明寺鐘，寇亂之後，緇徒流離，闖其寺者數年。有貧民利其銅，袖鎚鑿往竊鑿之，日獲一二斤。鬻於闐闐。如是經年，人皆知之，官吏不禁。後其家忽失所在，市銅者亦訝其不來。後官欲徙其鐘於別寺，見寺鐘平墮在閣上，及仆之，見盜鐘者抱鎚鑿，儼然坐於其間。即已乾枯矣。” “Xi Ming si” 西明寺, in *Taiping guangji* 太平廣記, ed. Li Fang 李昉, 500 *juan* in vols. 1043–1046 of SKQS, v. 1043, 116. 638.

with nine inter-coiling dragons (*jiulong xiangpan* 九龍相盤). Another bell had the shape that was “similar to the ones created in Jinzhou in this realm” (*ru citu jinzhou chuzhe* 如此土晉州出者)—the exact same location where the prince’s monumental instrument was cast. On the one hand, the politically minded Daoxuan was repackaging sophisticated imperial symbolism in a Buddhist text; on the other hand, like his fellow urbanites, his experience of monastic spaces was conditioned by the city he lived in. It was the murals he viewed, the terraces and pagodas he climbed, the new palace quarters that he was summoned to, and the bells and drums that he heard everyday that inspired his writing. The same could be said about painters that created the Pure Land tableau. As a longstanding iconography, heavenly musicians appear in all Buddhist art, and we can find them in the earliest caves at Dunhuang. In painted form, they visually depict the soundscape of cave interiors. At the same time, musical automatons were always associated with the Pure Land, for they were essential to the Pure Land tableaux. The swirling apsaras and singular large bell depicted in Cave 217 represent yet another daring attempt to make sound visible (Fig.4-17).

As we have seen in Chapter Three, the Sixteen Meditations prescribe how one constructs and experiences the Pure Land in Buddhist meditation. Following Vaidehī, a practitioner is supposed to first construct the Pure Land, and then enter into it as a new born babe inside the lotus pond. There is a clear distinction between viewing the Pure Land from the outside, and then entering into it, experiencing it from within. In one of Fangqi’s dreams, he does end up seated on a flower in the lotus pond. However, as his entire dream sequence shows us, the prescriptive distinction of being outside or inside the Pure Land was never formally upheld by monks, writers, or mural painters.

By using the nature of water to make sense of the mirror-like flatness of the Pure Land, this new conception theorized by Shandao was likely inspired by the ever-visible

distant horizon in 7th century Pure Land transformation tableau. As the surface of water is blended with the ground plane, the lotus pond becomes a conceptual problem that painters had to think through. The bird's eye view created by convergent perspective invites viewers to enter into the Pure Land tableau. However, another important form of Pure Land imagery coexisted with the Pure Land tableau. Creating distinctly different visual experiences, the two types of images were mutually constitutive in Tang visual culture. As the evermore-fantastical Pure Land tableau draws viewers into pictorial space, the “Amitābha and Fifty Bodhisattvas” miraculous image —also developed through the lotus pond — reaches beyond its painted frame, extending outwards towards the viewer.

4.3 Pond and Portal: The Miraculous Image of Amitābha and Fifty Bodhisattvas

The “Amitābha and Fifty Bodhisattvas” is a distinct type of image that can command surrounding space and turn it into a pool of water. The image usually shows Amitābha connected to fifty minor bodhisattvas through lotus vines in a tree-like fashion (sometimes fifty-two bodhisattvas, if Avalokitesvara and Mahāsthāmaprāpta are included). The entire composition floats above water. There are only three of these images at Dunhuang, yet the formats of all three cases are drastically different from each other (Cave 23, Cave 171, Cave 323).⁵⁷ Although the three examples are of the same subject matter, the medium and contexts of each image varies widely. The particular nature of the image embraces spatial ambiguity —its sprawling lotus vines that float above water actively blends the space between image and viewer. This powerful image pushed painters to experiment with different material and spatial forms. As most scholars only focus on the subject matter of Buddhist images, the

⁵⁷ This motif is also found in Cave 23 and Cave 332 at Dunhuang. Shi Pingting, 247-249.

medium of the “Amitābha and Fifty Bodhisattvas”, which is essential to this type of imagery, is lost in studies of iconography. The “Amitābha and Fifty Bodhisattvas” came into being around the same time of the first images of the Pure Land. Created as a type of Pure Land representation that is related to the Pure Land tableau in terms of subject matter, yet conceptually opposite from it, the combination of the two image types in Cave 171 brings to light a new discourse on how Tang painters and viewers thought about the craft of painting and the nature of cave architecture.

The “Amitābha and Fifty Bodhisattvas” aggressively challenges its own status as an image. In the mid-8th century Cave 23, the miraculous image is located on the northern slope of a truncated-pyramid ceiling (Fig.4-39). At the center are Amitābha Buddha, Avalokitesvara, and Mahāsthāmaprāpta. The triad is surrounded by fifty bodhisattvas, and all the deities are connected to the Buddha through a web of lotus vines (Fig.4-40a). Amitābha anchors the entire composition, for all the vines originate from the thick stem below his lotus seat. The triad is separated from the bodhisattvas by a rectangular brocaded frame in the middle of the composition. The frame obscures the shoulders of the two principle bodhisattvas, demonstrating how the main deities are set within the receding space behind the frame’s borders (Fig.4-40b). The lotus pond again becomes a problem for painters. Small ripples at the foot of the triad show how the three deities are floating above water. The bottom rim of the frame is lined with multicolored tiles. Amongst the six vines that spring out from the base of Amitābha’s lotus throne, four reach out from the framed space, connecting the bodhisattvas to Amitābha. The vines freely traverse the frame, but the water refuses to spill out from it. The water surface indicates pictorial depth, while the frame problematizes the painting’s material surface. The two aspects uphold a coherent spatial structure, which is immediately broken by the flowing lotus vines. Together, they create a sense of spatial ambiguity.

The image is a playful riff on the sort of pictorial illusionism that had become a fad by the 8th century. In the Tang period, three-dimensional Buddhist sculptures were commonly framed by architectural doorways in deep niches, which create an illusionary effect through darkness and shadows. (Fig.4-41) The architectural frame makes the Buddhist sculpture, in Eugene Wang's words, "ever so illusory, apparitional, and provisional according to the dimming and brightening of daylight."⁵⁸ The niche frame theoretically blends with the picture frame, and as Higashiyama Kengo has proposed, the Pure Land tableaux are related to 6th – early 7th century preaching scenes that became more elaborate in depicting the space of the Buddha assembly.⁵⁹ The extended pictorial depth of these compositions was often achieved through the presence of water at the bottom of the frame. In the 8th century, painted brocade frames around image compositions or architectural niches, were *not* designed to separate representational space from real space, instead, they were always created to be broken. In Cave 217, a thick brocade frame circles around the main niche, but the life-size painted bodhisattvas on the two sides of the niche intentionally break through it (Fig.2-38). This is most visible in the bodhisattva on the right, who gently glides forward (Fig.4-42). Holding a lotus flower, the deity's right elbow slightly overlaps the brocade frame, while his skirt below also softly brushes over it. There is ample empty space to the right of the figure, which means that the painter's decision was not based on a problem of size or space. The two sides of the niche are met with two square platforms that are the same height of the ground floor of the niche. The platforms are usually meant for sculptures, but in Cave 217, the murals on the south and north walls are painted with no intention of accommodating freestanding sculptures that might have blocked the tableaux if actually installed. This means that the two painted bodhisattvas are *posing as sculptures* instead. Their implied three-dimensionality is achieved

⁵⁸ Eugene Y. Wang, 2005, 279

⁵⁹ Higashiyama, 51-52.

through the overlapping of the brocade frame. This visual strategy can be found everywhere in 8th century caves at Dunhuang.

Painters of the miraculous image in Cave 23 were undoubtedly toying with this painting tradition. However, as the painted bodhisattvas pose as sculptures, this miraculous image teasingly acknowledges its own status as a picture. As the brocaded frame boldly wedges through the composition, the image bursts out from it, posing as something that is full bodied and real. The frame is crafted as a pictorial statement, showing how images have the capacity to enter into the space of the viewer in an exceptionally physical manner. Almost like an “anti-tableau”, rather than using the technology of perspective to solicit imaginations of roaming in Amitābha’s Paradise— a key operative mode for the Pure Land tableau, the miraculous image in Cave 23 shows how Amitābha is reaching out from the realm of the pictorial and into a palpable *here and now*.

Merging the space of the viewer and depicted deity, the vine-bound miraculous image often conflates the relationship between image, frame, and viewer. The image is represented in such a way that it “colonizes” surrounding environments⁶⁰. Two of the most famous examples of the “Amitābha and Fifty Bodhisattvas” image can be found in Jingshansi cave (*jingshansi* 淨善寺) and Wanfosi cave (*wanfosi* 萬佛寺) at the Longmen grottoes. Funded by the Empress Wu Zetian herself, the former was completed between 661 and 663, while the latter was finished in 680.⁶¹ In Jingshansi, the main icon of Amitābha is enshrined in the middle of the back (west) wall of the cave (Fig.4-43). The vine-bound bodhisattvas not only occupy the entire back wall (Fig.4-44), but also spill into the north and south walls of the

⁶⁰ Here I am using “colonize” as defined in the Dictionary by Merriam-Webster, “to move into and live in (a place) as a new type of plant or animal,” Merriam-Webster, s.v. “colonize (v.),” accessed July 27, 2018, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/colonize>.

⁶¹ *Zhongguoshiku longmen shiku* Vol.1, 273, 277. Wang Huimin, “*Yifo wushi pusa tuyuan kao*” 531.

cave, filling in the empty space between the larger bodhisattvas and heavenly kings (Fig.4-45). In this way, the miraculous image melds with the cave space. The Buddhist cave is hollowed out on the rock cliff to contain the image, yet the image — hydraulically spreading its lotus vines — colonizes the entire space. The cave becomes the image, and the image becomes the cave. When entering into the grotto, one is immediately surrounded by numerous bodhisattvas that cover the entire wall surface. Designed as such, walking into the cave is the same as entering *into* the miraculous image. This effect is achieved at Wanfosi through a different strategy (Fig.4-46). This time, the minor bodhisattvas are limited to the western wall behind the main icon. A large lotus flower hangs above the ceiling, looming over a potential viewer, as if one might be engulfed by it.⁶² Notably, a lotus flower also hangs above the ceiling of Jingshansi (Fig.4-44), which constantly reminds viewers of the image's aquatic nature. If the image is supposed to be floating on water, then as one walks into the image, the cave interior is conceptually transformed into an aquatic space.

The image colonizes the cave space in order to engulf its viewer, but why must such an image take us in? The lotus vines of the miraculous image materialize the tangible bond between Amitābha and his subjects. It actively gestures towards a radically intimate connection between image and viewer, deity and worshiper. The most discussed example of the “Amitābha and Fifty Bodhisattvas” is found in the late 7th century Cave 332. The “Amitābha and Fifty Bodhisattvas” image is located on the south side of the east wall of the

⁶² *Zhongguoshiku longmen shiku* Vol.1, 273-277.

main chamber (Fig.4-47).⁶³ The main deity and the cluster of bodhisattvas are floating on water.⁶⁴

The miraculous image's colonizing impulses is achieved through the depiction of water. The image is purposefully paired with a preaching scene of Sakyamuni on Vulture Peak on the other side of the doorway. The ground of the preaching scene of Sakyamuni, which is usually solid land, is liquefied into a pool of water (Fig.4-48). Not only are the two buddhas on both sides of the doorway seated with the same "wheel-turning mudra," the unusual ripples of water in the preaching scene resonate with the water that surrounds the miraculous image. Furthermore, on top of the doorway, there is an assembly of bodhisattvas that appear to be floating on water. The main figure holds the same wheel-turning mudra (Fig.4-49).⁶⁵ The entire east wall of Cave 332 is connected through the presence of water (Fig.4-50). The three water bound compositions on the east wall transform the cave entrance into an aquatic portal, connecting the interior and exterior of the grotto, while binding together Shakyamuni and Amitābha.

The most intriguing aspect of this image is the frontally depicted newborn babe directly below Amitābha (Fig.4-51). The painting is frequently compared with the sixth mural of the Kondo in Horyuji (Figs.4-52).⁶⁶ This infant figure is never found in any other

⁶³ *Dunhuang mogaoku neirong zonglu*, 67-68.

⁶⁴ The image was previously identified as a "Pure Land tableau", based on the presence of Amitābha's triad. Also see, Sofukawa Hiroshi 曾布川寛, "Ryūmon sekkutsu ni okeru tō dai zō-zō no kenkyū 龍門石窟における唐代造像の研究", *Tōhō Gaku-hō* 東方學報 60 no.3 (1988): 324.

⁶⁵ *Dunhuang mogaoku neirong zonglu*, 136.

⁶⁶ Dorothy Wong "Reassessing the Wall Paintings of Horyuji," in *Horyuji Reconsidered*, eds. Dorothy C. Wong and Eric M. Field (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), 49-98. Also see Katsuki Genichirō 勝木言一郎, *Chūgoku ni okeru amida sanson gojitsu bosatsu-zu no zuzō nitsuite - garyūzan senbutsugen no sakurei shōkai to sono igi* 中国における阿弥陀三尊五十菩薩図の図像について-臥竜山千仏巖の作例紹介とその意義," *Bukkyō geijutsu* 仏教芸術 *Ars Buddhica*, no.5 (1994): 61-73.

compositions, except for the mural in Japan. Based on line drawings, we can still see three small infants under the lotus seat of Amitābha in the Horyuji mural (Fig.4-53). Notably, the infant in the middle of the Horyuji mural is also facing the viewer.⁶⁷ In most Pure Land tableaux, newborn babes in the lotus pond are usually facing Amitābha Buddha. Yet, unlike the mischievous children that play about in celestial pools, the infant here sits in a devout cross-legged posture and faces the viewer. The features of the child are blurred, but we can clearly see his two eyes. As representations of the “(12) Comprehensive Meditation” show us, the infant materializes the moment when a new soul opens its eyes to see Amitābha in the Pure Land. Seated frontally, the wide-eyed naked infant beckons the viewer to assume their place and imagine oneself being born in the presence of Amitābha. The reason why the “Amitābha and Fifty Bodhisattvas” miraculous image colonizes its environment is to materialize this physical connection between image and viewer, deity and practitioner. The effect of this colonization of image environments means that painters were interrogating the relationship between pictorial representation and the materiality of the Buddhist cave.

The compelling effect of the image made it widely known in the capital during the Tang dynasty. There are two textual records concerning the “Amitābha and Fifty Bodhisattvas”, one from a stele inscription and another one from Daoxuan’s writings. A stele dated to 634 records the origins of the “Amitābha and Fifty Bodhisattvas” enshrined in Niche 3 at the grottoes of Wolongshan 臥龍山, in Sichuan (Fig.22).⁶⁸

Record of “Amitābha and Fifty-two Bodhisattvas”, Text written by Deng Yuanjue, Niche and characters carved by Yang Zishang.

The “Amitābha and Fifty Bodhisattvas” image is a miraculous image from the western regions. In that country, at the Kurkuṭārāma Monastery, the Bodhisattva

⁶⁷ Katsuki, 65.

⁶⁸ Wang Huimin, “*Yifo wushi pusa tuyuan kao*,” 530. Hu Wenhe 胡文和, *Sichuan daojiao fojiao shiku yishu* 四川道教佛教石窟藝術 (Chengdu: Sichuan renmin chubanshe, 1994), 246.

of Five Channels went to the Land of Bliss and said to the Amitābha Buddha, “World-Honored One, the Sāha world does not have your image. Today we would like to receive one and worship it as if it were you.” The Buddha said, “Approved. You should go [back], and you will find ... [unclear].” The bodhisattva went back, and just as he arrived in the Sāha world, the image was already there. It was a buddha and fifty bodhisattvas, each seated on a lotus flower, painted upon a tree and leaves. [The image] stood before the bodhisattva, and the bodhisattva took it and worshipped it. This is how India first obtained this miraculous image. Afterwards, Emperor Ming of the Han dispatched Cai Yin to travel to India through the southern route around the snowcapped mountains. He invited the Tripiṭaka dharma master Kāśyapa Mātāṅga to Luoyang, and built him a vihāra. Soon after, a śramaṇa who was the son of Kāśyapa Mātāṅga’s sister carried this miraculous image from India and came here. This is how China first obtained this image. Soon after, he took the image back [to the western regions]. At that time the image fell into obscurity. Since the Wei and Jin period, many years have passed, many trends of Buddhism and practices came out. In the first year of the Sui dynasty (581), the dharma master Mingxian said he received a body [of the image] from the dharma master Daochang. He spoke of its origins, which did not deviate from its roots. Based on this, the image was copied, and spread widely. In the sixteenth year of the Kaihuang period (596), the Prefectural Governor Zheng of Yuzhou painted a body of the image in his prefecture, and recorded its story. He took it into the capital, and it is now worshipped and transmitted at the Zhenji Monastery. This is how the capital first obtained this image. The fourteenth day of the seventh month, eighth year of the Zhenguan (634).

阿彌陀佛並五十二菩薩傳 鄧元覺書 作龕及鑄字 揚子尚

阿彌陀佛五十菩薩像者，蓋西域之瑞像也。傳雲彼國雞頭摩寺有五通菩薩至安樂世界，白阿彌陀佛言：“世尊，娑婆世界無世尊像，今願得之，按彼供養。”佛言：“可。爾汝且前去，尋遣送□。”菩薩即還，適到娑婆，其像已至，有一佛五十菩薩各坐蓮花，於樹葉上圖寫，在菩薩前立，菩薩隨取供養，於是彼國始有此瑞像焉。至後漢明帝使郎中蔡暗從雪山南懸度道而入天竺，請三藏法師迦葉摩騰至此洛州，為立精舍。於後有三藏弟子法師□從彼至持此像來，於此漢地始有此像。其弟子法師未盈幾時，還將此像而復還，至今此土不廣流布。自魏晉已來，歲月久遠，佛流行慮口相並出。至大隋開皇元年，明獻(憲)法師言從道齊長法師所得此一軀，說其因起，與本無別，是已遂更圖寫流布。至十六年，有豫州刺史鄭，在州畫得一軀，並本傳，遂將入京，在真寂寺流通供養。於是京師始有斯像。貞觀八年七月十四日。⁶⁹

The image descended to the human world upon the request from a “Bodhisattva of Five Channels” (*wutong pusa* 五通菩薩) to the Amitābha Buddha. Emperor Ming of the Han

⁶⁹ Stele transcription from Wang Huimin, “*Yifo wushi pusa tuyuan kao*”, 533-534.

dynasty 漢明帝 (28-75) dreamed of this image and dispatched his envoy to retrieve it from the India. The image was lost after the fall of the Han empire, but was regained by a certain dharma master Daochang (*daochang fashi* 道長法師), during the first year of the Sui dynasty in 581 and subsequently started to flourish in the capital of Chang'an.⁷⁰ According to Wang Huimin, the dharma master Daochang was the teacher of the renown Pure Land monk Tanluan 曇鸞(476—542), and he was active in the Northern Qi (550-577) capital of Ye (*yecheng* 鄴城). Daozhang had another disciple named Mingzhan 明瞻(559-628), who became highly influential in Luoyang. Mingzhan might have been the one that brought the image to Chang'an. The prefectural governor Zheng from Yu county must have obtained the image from Luoyang and brought it to Chang'an. Notably, the year in which the image arrived in the Zhenji Monastery (*zhenjisi* 真寂寺), was also the same year that Fayán 法彥 (?-607) hosted the preaching of the *Great Treatise on the Perfection of Wisdom* (*dazhidulun* 大智度論) at the same monastery under the imperial edict in 596.⁷¹ Like many narrative tales that circulated during this time, the resurfacing of the “Amitābha and Fifty-two Bodhisattvas” was directly related to Emperor Wen of the Sui's 隋文帝 (541-604) avid promotion of Buddhism after unifying the realm.⁷²

The first half the narrative clearly takes stock of the popular story of Emperor Ming of the Han dynasty, who sent envoys to India after seeing a mysterious golden effigy in a dream. The envoys brought back images of the Buddha and spread his visual form in China.⁷³ In his

⁷⁰ 道長法師 appears in the Daoxuan entry. The stele entry 道齊長法師 might have been a mistake. See Wang Huimin, “*Yifo wushi pusa tuyuan kao*,” 540.

⁷¹ T. 1509, 25. Ibid, 541-42.

⁷² Koichi Shinohara, “Changing Roles for Miraculous Image,” 159-161.

⁷³ Fan Ye 范曄, *Hou Han shu* 後漢書, ed. Li Xian 李賢 et al. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1965), ce 14, zhuan 12, 78. 2921.

Biography of Eminent Monks (*gaosheng zhuan* 高僧傳), the monk Huijiao 慧皎 (497-554) uses this incident as a founding tale for the famous “White Horse Monastery” (*baimasi* 白馬寺) at Luoyang, the legendary first Buddhist temple in China.⁷⁴ The incidents set forth by Emperor Ming’s dream constituted a popular theory of how Buddhism arrived in China for the first time. The stele narrative makes direct references to Huijiao’s version of the story, such as mentioning a vihāra that was built for Kāśyapa Mātāṅga, which is in fact the “White Horse Monastery”. By folding the origins of the “Amitābha and Fifty Bodhisattvas” into this narrative, the miraculous image obtains a mythical pedigree.

This story is also recorded in Daoxuan’s *Collected Records of the Three Jewel Miracles in China* in 664. Wang Huimin believes the stele version was the one that was commonly circulated, and the Daoxuan’s entry is based on the inscription.⁷⁵ As collator and editor, Daoxuan streamlined the story. Subtle changes to the text reveal how Daoxuan thought about the transmission of Buddhist images.

This is a miraculous image from India. In ancient times, at the Kurkutārāma Monastery in India, the Bodhisattva of Five Channels went to the Land of Bliss to invite Amitābha Buddha. [He said], “The sentient beings of the Sāha world want to be reborn in the Pure Land, but [they] do not have the form and image of the Buddha. Through the power of your vows, please bestow upon them [an image].” The Buddha said, “You should go back, and what you seek will be manifested there.” The bodhisattva returned [to the Sāha world], and the image was already there. It was a buddha and fifty bodhisattvas, each seated on a lotus flower, upon the leaves of a tree. The bodhisattva took the leaves, and depicted it. The image spread near and far. Emperor Ming of the Han had a resonating dream, and dispatched an envoy to implore about the way. [The envoy] retrieved Kāśyapa Mātāṅga and company back to Luoyang. Soon after, the son of Kāśyapa Mātāṅga’s sister, who became a śramaṇa, carried this miraculous image to our country, and it was copied. After a while, the image was taken back to the western regions, and it fell into obscurity. Since the Wei and Jin period, many years have passed, and [the realm] suffered from persecution of the dharma. Many sutras and images were destroyed, and there were no traces of this miraculous image. When the Emperor Wen of the Sui dynasty restored

⁷⁴ T. 50, 2059: 0322c20-a07.

⁷⁵ Wang Huimin, “*Yifo wushi pusa tuyuan kao*,” 533

Buddhism, a śramaṇa named Mingxian received a copy [of the image] from the dharma master Daochang, and learned about its origins. Based on this, the image was copied widely, and spread across the realm. At that time, there was a Northern Qi painter named Cao Zhongda, who was good at painting. [Cao] imbued the Indian image with wonder, and copied it extensively. The image was well received in the capital, and that is why today you can find a true model of it in the Central Yang position of many temple walls.

西域天竺之瑞像也。相傳云：昔天竺雞頭摩寺五通菩薩往安樂界請阿彌陀佛：“娑婆眾生願生淨土，無佛形像，願力莫由，請垂降許。”佛言：“汝且前去，尋當現彼。”及菩薩還，其像已至，一佛五十菩薩各坐蓮花，在樹葉上。菩薩取葉，所在圖寫，流布遠近。漢明感夢，使往祈法，便獲迦葉摩騰等至洛陽。後，騰姊之子作沙門，持此瑞像，方達此國，所在圖之。未幾，齋像西返，而此圖傳不甚流廣。魏晉已來年載久遠，又經滅法，經像湮除。此之瑞跡殆將不見。隋文開教，有沙門明憲，從高齊道長法師所得此一本，說其本起與傳符焉。是以圖寫流布，遍於宇內。時有北齊畫工曹仲達者，善於丹青。妙盡梵跡，傳模西瑞，京邑所推。故今寺壁正陽皆其真範。⁷⁶

Although major events in the narrative unfold in the same manner, there are considerable differences between the two versions. The divergence of the two records lies in the two last lines. In the Daoxuan version, the image only becomes popular because of the talented painter Cao Zhongda. Daoxuan made other small, yet important changes to how the image was described in the stele version. The stele version emphasizes how the image should be worshipped, whilst Daoxuan is consistent in making sense of how an image should be preserved, copied, and disseminated. In the stele version, when confronted with the divinely manifested image, the Bodhisattva of Five Channels, “took it and worshipped it” (*suiqu gongyang* 隨取供養). In Daoxuan’s text, instead of venerating the image, the bodhisattva, took the image, *depicted* it, and disseminated it. When the image was carried to China from India, the stele version only emphasizes how this was the first time China obtained the image, whilst in Daoxuan’s text, the original image is again *copied* in China. The stele version only starts to mention the act of copying when the image resurfaced in the Sui dynasty, and when it reached the capital it was disseminated by and worshipped at the Zhenji Monastery. The

⁷⁶ T. 52, 2106: 0421a17-b03.

Daoxuan version again consistently emphasizes the act of copying in the dissemination of the image in the capital.

Amongst Daoxuan's extensive records of miraculous images, the entry on the "Amitābha and Fifty Bodhisattvas" is peculiar. It barely mentions the image's material form or substance, or whether or not the miraculous icon could in fact produce miracles. This entry on "Amitābha and Fifty Bodhisattvas" is Daoxuan's thirty-seventh record of miraculous images from ancient times up to his present day. There are four entries devoted to the Sui dynasty, besides the Amitābha image, two are about bronze icons with miraculous features, and one is about a crystal that contains the shadow of the Buddha.⁷⁷ The "Amitābha and Fifty Bodhisattvas" image differs from the other three for it does not originate from a material object, but a divine manifestation. In both narratives, we do not know if the original image was a picture or a sculpted icon. In the Daoxuan version, the counter for the image is "one version" (*yiben* 一本), whilst in the stele text it is "one body" (*yiqu* 一軀).

Unlike other miraculous images, the shape-shifting tendency of the serpentine image, poses an unusual challenge for the painter. How does one visualize a treelike image that could also "engulf" the viewer? Neither of the two texts mentions how the image is connected to water. Using water as a conceptual and artistic fanning device allows painters and sculptors to explore the representational powers of the image. According to Daoxuan, its popularity in the capital was not attributed to any magical healing power or auspicious anomaly, but to the skills of Cao Zhongda. Cao was famous 6th century painter of Central Asian descent, and was noted for painting closely clinging drapery that made figures look as

⁷⁷ Entry 36 is about a bronze triad: "當陽丈六金銅大像并二菩薩, 俱長丈六;" T. 52, 2106: 0421a06-a07. Entry 38 is about a crystal containing the shadow of the Buddha. "其像八楞紫石英色。高八寸徑五寸。內外映徹;" T. 52, 2106:0421b04-b05. Entry 39 is about a bronze Buddha: "此佛銅身高三尺餘;" T. 52, 2106:0421b27.

though they had been drenched in water (*caoyi chushui* 曹衣出水). He was also a celebrated mural painter, and this image seems to be well known in the capital precisely because it was visible to the public as wall paintings (or installation?) in several monasteries in Chang'an.⁷⁸ The description in both versions spurred a tree-like imagination of this miraculous image. In Japan, a picture shows fifty-two bodhisattvas scattered on top of a tree in the *Kakuzen shō* 覺禪抄 (Fig.4-54).⁷⁹ Daoxuan's retelling of the narrative turns it into a tale about artistic practices, in which religious images, moving around and across worlds and empires, are systematically copied, disseminated, and sometimes given new life by skilled artists or enlightened emperors. One might suspect that the popularity of this miraculous image resides not in its supernatural qualities, but its capacity to enchant its viewers as an image – a kind of power of art – blending the relationship between viewer and icon and transforming surrounding spaces into aquatic realms.

4.4 Aquatic Rebirth: Cave 171 as a Lotus Pond

What is the relationship between the Pure Land tableau and the “Amitābha and Fifty Bodhisattvas” image? Close in subject matter, yet drastically different in form and effect, how do these two important types of Pure Land imagery tell us about Tang visual culture? In what way do they reveal complex modes of crafting pictorial representation, architecture, and cave spaces? As we have discussed above, water – or more specifically the *imagination* of water – played a vital part in understanding the creation and experience of cave interiors. The interior of the mid-8th century Cave 171 was conceptualized as a lotus pond through a unique

⁷⁸ Zhang Yanyuan 張彥遠, *Lidai minghua ji* 歷代名畫記, 8 *juan* in vol. 812 of SKQS, 8. 337b–338a.

⁷⁹ Kakuzen-shō 覺禪抄, T.Zuzōbu, 5:1-692, also see Katsuki Genichirō, ““*Chūgoku ni okeru amidasanzon goju bosatsuzu no zuzō ni tsuite*,” 70-71.

combination of one “Amitābha and Fifty Bodhisattvas” image and three Pure Land transformation tableaux.⁸⁰ This idea of cave-as-water pond is contingent upon one’s bodily movements inside the cave. The concentration of Pure Land themes has led scholars to nickname Cave 171 a “Pure Land Cave”(jingtudong 淨土洞).⁸¹ Despite its common layout and moderate size, it is the only cave at Dunhuang that has the Pure Land tableau painted three times in a single cave, each covering the entire surface of the north, south and east wall (Fig.4-55).⁸² The tableaux on the north and south walls form a mirroring pair, while a doorway penetrates the middle of the third tableau on the east wall. The west wall contains the third, and only “Amitābha and Fifty Bodhisattvas” image that is enshrined in the main niche of a Dunhuang cave.

Cave 171’s triple tableaux and miraculous image have only been discussed separately.

We should instead approach Cave 171 as a coherent project. This distinctive and

⁸⁰ Fourth Period of the Early Half of the Tang period 唐前期第四期 See Fan Jinshi and Liu Yuquan, “Dunhuang mogaoku tang qianqi dongku fenqi,” 172-181 *Dunhuang mogaoku neirong zonglu*, 67-68.

⁸¹ Cave 171 has often been called a “Pure Land Grotto” (淨土洞 *jingtudong*), due to the fact that most of the imagery in the cave is devoted to the theme of the Western Pure Land. However, this appellation is a modern construction that was inspired by the famous Pure Land Hall (淨土堂 *jingtutang*), which was constructed at Longmen in the year 694. Shi Pingting is the first to coin this title for Cave 171, and she also claims that it is a *typical* one. There are, however, no historical sources to show that Cave 171 was understood as a “Pure Land Cave”, and there is a lack of evidence that would help describe this particular type of cave, except for the one in Longmen, which shares the same title yet is drastically different from Cave 171 in both its context and configuration. Several scholars continue to use this definition, but we fail to understand what makes Cave 171 “typical.” Sun Xiushen does not use the “Pure Land Cave” designation for Cave 171, but still regards its Pure Land tableaux to be the most standard of their kind. Frequently regarded as “typical” or “standard”, Cave 171, along with its triple Pure Land Sutra tableaux, is taken to be the epitome of the development of Western Pure Land images at Dunhuang of the 8th century. In this narrative, the final product of Cave 171 as a “Pure Land Cave” marks the triumph of Pure Land imagery that prevailed in China throughout the Tang dynasty. However, rather than following this line of thought that treats Cave 171 as a cave that embraces the “typical” and the “standard”, my chapter hopes to rethink Cave 171 as a spatial and architectural construct that should be seen as “unique” or “original” at Dunhuang. See Shi Pingting 1999, 123-124. Sun Xiushen, 263-292. Sofukawa Hiroshi, 313-328. Li Song 李淞, “Lun longmen shiku tangdai jingtutang de tuxiang 論龍門石窟唐代淨土堂的圖像”, *Xin Meishu* 新美術, no.4 (1996): 21-25.

⁸² Shi Pingting 1999, 136, 247-249.

experimental assemblage of murals, architecture, and sculpture lays bare a particular rumination on the nature of cave interiors in the medieval mind. Framed as a lotus pond, the cave interior creates a space in which one is caught between moments of enchantment and disenchantment, and it is this playful yet philosophical oscillation between these two states that allows adepts to participate in meditations on Buddhist worlds and their representations. Entering Cave 171, one occupies two spatial axes (Fig.4-56) – one formed by the two mirroring Pure Land tableaux on the north and south walls, and one formed by the doorway on the east wall and the main niche to the west. The north-south axis highlights the nature of images, mirrors and artificiality, while the east-west axis creates a space of thresholds, encounters, and transformation.

All three Pure Land tableaux are situated in a grid system, which enhances the tableau's status as a picture on the wall, rather than an illusionistic threshold to another realm (Fig.4-57). The thick lines flatten and geometricize the wall surface of Cave 171. Compared to the elegantly painted brocade frames of the tableaux in Cave 172, the unusually thick grids rigidly divide each wall surface into five areas (Fig.1-15).⁸³ The main Pure Land image is in the middle of the composition. On its two sides are thirty-two grids for the Ajātaśatru Narrative, and eighteen grids for the Sixteen Meditations. Below the main image are nine grids for the Nine Grades of Rebirth. Donor images are painted on the lowest part of the north and south walls (Fig.4-58).⁸⁴ The chessboard-like grids underscores how painters dealt with the material surface of the wall.⁸⁵ This division of wall surface in Cave 171 anticipates

⁸³ The color of these grids is dark brown in current condition. We are not sure of the original colors.

⁸⁴ Shi Pingting 1999, 139.141.

⁸⁵ Shi Pingting 1999, 155-124. Sun Xieshen, 263-292.

the screen panels that divide wall surfaces in 9th century caves (Fig.1-34).⁸⁶ Like the rigidly sectioned mural surface of Cave 171, the fictive screens or panels in later caves beckon the viewer to come to terms with the spatial reality of cave interiors – they point to our confinement within this *Sāha* world.

What is special about paired Pure Land transformation tableaux in Dunhuang caves is that they are executed as mirror images. In Cave 172, on the south wall, the Sixteen Meditations are on the left side of the composition, while the Ajātaśatru Narrative is placed to the right. On the north wall, the two sections are positioned in reverse. In this way, the Sixteen Meditations in both tableaux are on the east end of the cave, while the Ajātaśatru Narratives are depicted to the west side of the cave (Fig.1-15). The Pure Land tableaux on the north and south walls in Cave 171 are also paired in this mirroring way (Fig.4-59). Unlike Cave 172, in which the two tableaux are painted in different styles, the north and south tableaux in Cave 171 are identical. Stepping into Cave 171, the viewer is thrust into a double vision of the Pure Land tableaux.

The mirror was a common metaphor used to expound the illusionistic nature of vision, the inter-penetrability of the phenomenal world, and the relationship between the self and the Buddha.⁸⁷ The paired Pure Land tableaux undoubtedly resonate with the flourishing mirror analogy in Tang dynasty visual culture. In the capital, a possible Mirror Hall (*jingdian* 鏡殿) was constructed by Wu Zetian in the Bodhi Precinct (*putiyuan* 菩提院) at the Jianfu Monastery (*jianfusi* 薦福寺). All four walls of the room were covered with mirrors, which

⁸⁶ Kyan, “Family Space,” 61-82. Foong, “Multipanel Landscape Screens as Spatial Simulacra at the Mogao Caves, Dunhuang,” 533-56.

⁸⁷ Eugene Y. Wang 2005, 247-292.

made multiple reflections of a person inside it (Fig.4-60).⁸⁸ A mirror installation was also created to endlessly reflect the image of the Buddha.⁸⁹ Shandao uses the water analogy to teach adepts how to pacify the mind like the still surface of water, thus turning one's mind into a mirror. The *Meditation Sutra* itself frequently uses mirror allusions. The meditative visions were repeatedly explained as “seeing one's image in the mirror.” When the Buddha teaches the Lady Vaidehī how to visualize the Pure Land, he uses the mirror image as a metaphor,

By the power of the Buddha, all will be able to see the Pure Land as clearly, as if one were holding a bright mirror and looking at one's own reflection.

以佛力故，當得見彼清淨國土，如執明鏡自見面像。⁹⁰

This philosophical and literary trope was pervasive in medieval China, and as Eugene Wang has discussed extensively, the creation of images and mirror halls, were ways in which the medieval mind came to terms with the elusiveness of the bodies of Buddhas and divine beings.⁹¹

By the mid-8th century, Pure Land tableaux were so pervasive that artistic competition amongst painters was inevitable. As a notable example, Cave 172 is famous for having two Pure Land tableaux on its north and south walls.⁹² Drawn in different styles, the two master painters desperately tried to best one another. In doing so, they created two of the most

⁸⁸ “三月，辛卯，匪舒又為上造鏡殿，成。上與仁軌觀之，仁軌驚趨下殿。上問其故，對曰：“天無二日，土無二王，適視四壁有數天子，不祥孰甚焉！”上遽令剔去；” Sima Guang 司馬光, *Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑒 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2007), 282. 2471. Also see Wang, p.257

⁸⁹ Eugene Y. Wang 2005, 256-262.

⁹⁰ T. 12, 0365: 0341c20 – c21. For English translation see Pas, pp.191-192.

⁹¹ Eugene Y. Wang 2005, 245

⁹² Wu Hung, “Reborn in Paradise,” 52-60.

sophisticated Pure Land tableaux of the medieval period. Perhaps, in the same spirit of artistic competition, the creators of Cave 171 sought to outdo its neighbor by entirely changing the rules of cave design. Instead of probing the limits of pictorial illusionism – an 8th century vogue, creators of Cave 171 went towards an intentional “anti-illusionism” through the grid framework. To borrow from Rosalind Krauss’ reflection on the materiality of painting, “Unlike perspective, the grid does not map the space of a room or a landscape or a group of figures onto the surface of a painting. Indeed, if it maps anything, it maps the surface of the painting itself.”⁹³ The thick lines of Cave 171 flatten its wall surfaces, while the use of gold applique underlines a palpable physicality of the mural (Fig.4-61). Against fashionable trends of pictorial illusionism, instead of using the brush to probe the powers of representation and create Buddhist paradises, the grid layout of Cave 171 creates a cavernous sense of disenchantment – a caged space, a hall of mirrors, a mirage of doubles - glittering with gold yet perpetually inescapable.

This feeling of confinement is constructed by the mirroring Pure Land tableaux, however, when stepping into Cave 171, this spell of disenchantment is immediately broken by the cave’s east-west axis. The third tableau turns the cave interior into a lotus pond — a site of transformation and entry point into the Pure Land. The third tableau is strategically located on the east wall, as the doorway fragments the painting composition (Fig.3-26). The middle area of the tableau is deliberately pushed above, allowing Amitbha’s assembly to sit on top of the cave entrance (Fig.4-62). This makes the upper portion of the painting appear awkwardly compressed. The doorway is superimposed against the lotus pond in Amitābha’s Pure Land — balustrades commonly drawn around the water pool can be found on the outer rims of the doorway (Fig.4-63). This clever arrangement instantly transforms one’s

⁹³ Rosalind Krauss, “Grids, ” *October* 9 (Summer, 1979): 52.

movement in and out of the cave into a highly symbolic one: when one is facing the third tableau and walking out of the cave, the bodily movement through physical thresholds literalizes the imagination of entering into illusionistic mural paintings—a popular trope in contemporary tales of the strange and treatises on painting aesthetics. On the other hand, walking through the doorway into the cave metaphorically becomes one's emergence from the lotus pond—the same way souls are reborn in the Amitābha's Paradise.

This playful rendition of the east wall is boldly experimental. As discussed in Chapter Three, the east wall of Cave 171 was executed by a novice painter. Landscape and objects are jumbled together disproportionately, while buildings are awkwardly foreshortened. This is the only instance in Dunhuang that a Pure Land tableau is painted on the east wall of a cave. Usually the last section to be completed in cave construction, the east wall was a natural site for experimentation. The east wall is frequently protected by images of guardian deities or apotropaic beings. Images of the Eleven-headed Avalokiteśvara (*shiyimian guanyin* 十一面觀音), a new type of iconography with protecting powers, first enter into the repertoire of Dunhuang imagery by appearing on the east wall of several 7th century Dunhuang caves (Fig. 4-64).⁹⁴ Above most doorways, there usually sits one or several preaching scenes of the Buddha. This is a critical threshold space, and if the entire east wall were covered by Thousand Buddha motifs, the only place adorned with an image would be the area above the doorway (Fig.14). Interacting with the physical entryway into the cave space, these images transform one's movement into and out of the cave into a symbolic action.

The doorway can also be understood as the opening of a pond. The 6th century Pure Land frieze of Xiangtangshan was positioned above the entrance of a cave temple (Fig.1-9).⁹⁵

⁹⁴ Zhang Jingfeng 2017, 326-337.

⁹⁵ Katherine R. Tsiang, Richard A. Born, David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery (Smithsonian Institution). *Echoes of the Past: The Buddhist Cave Temples of*

Above the entrance of Cave 172, there is an Amitābha triad seated above a pool of water lined by multicolor tiles (Fig.4-65).⁹⁶ Eighteen smaller bodhisattvas accompany the triad and each deity is connected to the Buddha through lotus vines. Every minor bodhisattva is playing a different instrument —the image is also a musical orchestra (Fig.4-66). The Dunhuang Academy catalogue labels it as a “Pure Land tableau”, but the iconography of this passage remains unclear.⁹⁷ Rather than a Pure Land tableau, the image shares many similarities with the “Amitābha and Fifty Bodhisattvas”. Although the number of bodhisattvas does not match the miraculous image, the visual logic of the passage clearly resembles it. The composition embraces spatial ambiguity. At the first look, it is hard to discern whether the figures are portrayed inside the water pool or on its dry banks. Taking a cue from how the miraculous image often plays with pictorial space and painted frames, the deities in this passage are neither inside nor outside the pool — they are hovering *above* it. Like in many Pure Land tableaux, the central water pool is drawn in convergent perspective —marking the ground plane of the composition and showing pictorial depth. The cluster of deities in the middle — like the shape-shifting miraculous image— breaks through distinctions of inside and outside, above and below, foreground and background. In many cases at Dunhuang, the large rectangular doorways of Tang dynasty caves were reduced in size in later periods. In Cave 172, extra layers of mud were plastered over the old corridor around the 10-11th century (Fig. 4-67). The newly added portions are painted over, but the shape of the original doorway remains visible. The bottom rim of the water pool is obscured by these later reconstructions, but we can still see how the lower rim of the rectangular pool

Xiangtangshan (Chicago: Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago: Distributed by the University of Chicago Press, 2010), 215.

⁹⁶ The bodhisattvas on the right as a miniature image of Amitābha Buddha, a key feature in Avalokiteśvara iconography. This means three principle deities are a Amitābha triad.

⁹⁷ *Dunhuang shiku neirong zonglu*, 69.

was designed to accommodate the width of the original 8th-century doorway. The blending of the water pool and the doorway is again made manifest not just symbolically but also structurally. Just as how water of the “Amitābha and Fifty Bodhisattvas” spills over the entire east wall of Cave 332, this image in Cave 172 is entering into the space of the doorway, and turning it into a portal of water. This aquatic imagination is reinforced by the entourages of Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī and Bodhisattva Samantabhadra on the two sides of the doorway, who are shown flying in from a distant landscape and floating upon rolling waves.

Both Cave 171 and Cave 172 mark the doorways of their inner chambers as an aquatic portal. Painters of Cave 171 went a step further and transformed the entire cave interior into a lotus pond. When passing through the entrance of Cave 171, one emerges from a lotus pond and encounters the miraculous image of “Amitābha and Fifty Bodhisattvas” in the western niche (Fig.4-68). The multimedia assemblage looks like it is floating within a water pond inside the niche. The flourishing lotus vines that sprout from the base of the main icon of Amitābha are deliberately painted against the multicolor tiles at the base of the central niche (Fig.4-69). This effect is very similar to that of the 8th century Tachibana Shrine in Japan, in which thick lotus vines under the triad sprout out from a horizontal water surface (Fig.4-70). Small lotus blossoms can be seen within the swells of the pond (Fig.4-71). Marking a water pond below, the small shrine and the large cave niche achieve a similar effect.

As we have seen above, the “Amitābha and Fifty Bodhisattvas” miraculous image has the tendency to colonize its surrounding environment. If we imagine the brocade frame of the main niche as the frame for a painted image, then the vine-bound installation within the niche has the potential to break through it— just as the sprawling lotus vines burst through the painted frame in Cave 23. This effect is implied on the west wall— images of laymen are pulled closer to major deities—boundaries and hierarchies are broken down around the

miraculous image. Donor images are usually shown in the lower portions of the cave space. However, images of laymen are given prominent places in Cave 171. To the left of the niche, a woman stands at the feet of a large Medicine Buddha, while to the right of the niche, a male and female figure stand at the feet of Avalokitesvara (Fig.4-72). Their attire matches the standard donor images at the foot of the four walls (Fig.4-73). Notably, these lay figures are depicted *in front* of the larger deities in an overlapping method. If the grids of the south and north walls rigidly arrest pictorial elements upon the wall surface, the intentional use of overlapping transforms the west wall into a space for movement and illusionism.

The Pure Land tableaux in Cave 171 also tend to this heightened sense of movement and transformation by repeatedly portraying the process of rebirth. The Nine Grades of Rebirth are painted three times in a single tableau (Fig.4-74).⁹⁸ The triple iterations of the process of rebirth are linked into a continuous sequence. First, they are shown in the last part of the Sixteen Meditations, as a form of meditational phenomena. Then, they are depicted below the central image organized in nine panel units, in the form of nine welcoming descents of Amitābha and his entourage to retrieve souls. Finally, the main image shows the arrival of reborn souls in the lotus pond of the Pure Land. Notably, each reborn soul is accompanied by a cluster of small buddhas flying on clouds (Fig.4-75). They closely resemble the heavenly entourage that retrieves souls in Amitābha's paradise. In other words, by portraying the processes of rebirth, the tableau visualizes what is supposed to happen inside the cave.

This overt self-reflexivity runs through the entire Pure Land tableaux. Cave 171 is the only place where Vaidehī is always portrayed inside a building in the Sixteen Meditations. In most representations of the Sixteen Meditations, Vaidehī is usually shown in open air and

⁹⁸ Shi Pingting 1999, 141.

directly in front of the object of her mediation (Fig.2-1). The portrayal of architecture was difficult for a novice painter, and showing Vaidehī inside a building within individual passages of the Sixteen Meditations was challenging (Fig.3-37). The painters insisted in keeping Vaidehī inside a house in order to remind viewers of her imprisonment (Fig.4-76). In a similar fashion, imprisonment was also a theme that was visualized in Cave 217's Pure Land tableau. An image of Vaidehī locked inside a building is strategically placed at the interface between the Ajātaśatru Narrative and the Sixteen Meditations (Fig.4-77, Fig.3-8). The Lady is locked up in a building in a secluded courtyard separate from the rest of the narrative passages. She sits in solitude in the middle of the room. Distraught, she is about to pray to the Buddha or practices the Sixteen Meditations. This crucial detail in Cave 171 brings together the imprisonment of the Lady, our own confinement inside a grid-filled cave interior, and the general condition of how sentient beings are trapped in the Sāha world.

The passages of the Ajātaśatru Narrative that depict Vaidehī's meeting with Shakyamuni Buddha are also given extensive attention. Amongst the thirty-two grids that contain the entire narrative, the meeting between Vaidehī and the Buddha is stretched across a total of *eight* individual units (Fig.4-78). In these units, we see her body in various modes of worship: at first she is on all fours praying on a square mat, then she is standing towards the Buddha triad with her hands held together. At other times, she is completely prostrating in front of the deity. Paying close attention to the Lady's postures, these images map out different modes of devotional behavior in front of the Buddha. The triad of Shakyamuni is presented in a very peculiar manner. The Buddha and his two disciples are seated on lotus flowers, which are then connected by green vines with several leaves. The three figures are thus conceived as an interconnected body. This sort of representation is not found in any other versions of the Ajātaśatru Narrative at Dunhuang. In terms of iconography, the Buddha here should be the historical Buddha Shakyamuni and his two disciples, but it also resembles,

in a striking way, the “Amitābha Buddha and Fifty Bodhisattvas” image in the cave’s main niche. As the eight narrative grids visualize the meeting between Vaidehī and Shakyamuni Buddha, they also demonstrate how one should interact with *such* a particular type of image that is enshrined in the main niche. The formal affinity between the two types of images breaks down iconographic distinctions. In the *Meditation Sutra*, Shakyamuni provides Vaidehī a pathway into the Pure Land. In a similar fashion, the “Amitābha and the Fifty Bodhisattvas” image can be understood as a proxy to the divine. If Shakyamuni provides an expedient means for sentient beings to reach the Pure Land, then operating in an analogous way as a proxy, this image brings viewers inside the cave closer to Amitābha and his realm

A recent discovery will help us understand the importance of such vine-bound deities that do not fully adhere to any iconographic categories. Within the lotus ponds of the three Pure Land tableau in Cave 171 there are small Buddha assemblies seated on interconnected lotus flowers (Fig.4-79). The Buddha is attended by two beings on his sides, all facing the viewer, while another three or five figures are seated on lotus flowers facing the Buddha. The small tree-like images show the Buddha *surrounded* by beings in a three-dimensional manner. There are two of these small assemblies in each pond of the three tableaux, and they are purposefully placed within the enclaves on the two sides of the main platform under Amitābha (Fig.4-80). More importantly, on the east wall, the two small groups of figures are placed on the two sides of the doorway (Fig.4-81). Similar examples are found in the Sichuan region. Comparable tree-like compositions of lotus vines with heavenly beings on each individual leaf are found on the two sides of Pure Land transformation tableau niches. At Shisunshan 石筍山, Qionglai 邛崃, on the two sides of niche No.6, we can clearly see large tree-like arrangements of the heavenly beings that are interconnected by lotus vines, in which

tree-trunks can be unmistakably detected (Fig.4-82).⁹⁹ Another typical example is Danleng 丹棱, Zhengshan 鄭山, Niche No. 62, where two enormous tree-like configurations flank the two sidewalls of the tableau (Fig. 4-83).

These small lotus-bound assemblies are unique to Cave 171 at Dunhuang. As mentioned above, this program of visual cues allows us to understand the miraculous image as a proxy to the divine or a gateway to the Pure Land. Cave 171 is carefully designed as a unified whole, from its main icon, to its paintings, and architectural space. The entire cave is constructed to enshrine the “Amitābha and Fifty Bodhisattvas” image and facilitate its special powers. Forever reaching out, colonizing surrounding environments, collapsing spatial structures, and merging image and viewer, the “Amitābha and Fifty Bodhisattvas” desires a full pictorial and architectural program to put its powers into action. If Cave 172 presents the triumph of pictorial illusionism in the Pure Land tableau, then Cave 171 brings forth its potential failure. When placed against the miraculous image in Cave 171, the Pure Land tableau is rendered secondary — it is doubled or broken through.

Why should a cave become a lotus pond? Why did the miraculous image tap into medieval Pure Land imaginations in East Asia? The rich sensorium of the Pure Land is effectively embodied by the transformation tableau. However, the miraculous image that has the power to transform its immediate surroundings into aqueous environments goes even further. It directly pulls those in its presence towards this crucial scenario of rebirth. This sprawling water-bound image can function like a portal key, drastically reconfiguring the distance between viewer, meditator, and the newborn babe in a divine lotus pond.

⁹⁹ *Zhongguo sichuan tangdai de moya zaoxiang: pujiang qionglai diqu diaocha yanjiu baogao* 中國四川唐代的摩崖造像：蒲江邛崃地區調查研究報告, eds. Lu Ding 盧丁 and Lei Yuhua 雷玉華, Hida Romi 肥田路美 (Chongqing: Chongqing chubanshe, 2006), 280-281.

Importantly, it is the capacity of the viewer to conceptualize water within caves – an *aquatic imaginaire* —that makes this transportation possible. Water is imagined to engulf and connect the divine icon, the cave interior, and human body, transmuting into different substances and while at the same time, transforming the status of the adept.

This *aquatic imaginaire* runs through the various ways in which Pure Land tableau interacts with architectural spaces that contain them. In perhaps Dunhuang’s earliest Pure Land tableau in Cave 393 (Fig.1-9,10), the picture frame obscures the lower rim of the water pond. The fragmented water pool gestures towards its extension into the cave space. The small cave is only 1.8 x 1.72 x 2 meters large (Fig.4-84). When entering the cave, the viewer is squeezed against the painted mural, forcing one to come to terms with his/her position inside the cave and the painted water pool. This process of visual hydraulics is also how Cave 220’s two murals interact with each other (Fig.1-18, Fig.1-25). Water ponds are prominently featured in both the Pure Land mural on the south wall, and the Medicine Buddha tableau on the north wall. As Ning Qiang has pointed out, there are no textual bases for the lotus pond in any versions of the *Bhaiṣajyaguru Sutra*.¹⁰⁰ The Pure Land tableau also features the Amitābha triad inside the lotus pond, which is extremely rare at Dunhuang. These iconographic inconsistencies have led to ongoing scholarly debates. If we move away from individual details within the mural and turn our focus to the cave architecture, a new approach might illuminate what kind of space the two murals were designed to create.

In the *Bhaiṣajyaguru Sutra* lighting devices are described as devotional objects for the Medicine Buddha. However, as Sha Wutian has argued, in Cave 220, the large “lantern tower”(*denglou* 燈樓) and “lantern wheels” (*denglun* 燈輪) are portrayed not as devotional

¹⁰⁰ Ning Qiang 2004, 26.

objects, but as lighting devices for music and dance (Fig.4-85).¹⁰¹ This combination of lanterns and performance comes directly from various forms of nighttime entertainment that took place in Chang'an. The royal family regularly displayed extravagant lighting devices at lantern festivals in the palace, while elite households often held nighttime banquets with performances of the "Whirling Dance of the Hu" (*huxuanwu* 胡旋舞). As such lamps are associated with nighttime revels, the darkness of the cave interior becomes a precondition for this painted lighting ambience. If the grid layout of Cave 171 is a visual statement about imprisonment, then the lighting devices painted in the Medicine Buddha tableau speak to the darkness of the cave. The sensuous glittering effect of the murals in Cave 220 that we have discussed in Chapter Three was devised to work with the darkness of the cave interior. The water of the lotus pond, which spills through both tableaux binds together the cave interior and allows for an *aquatic imaginaire* to take place.

The *aquatic imaginaire* engendered by Cave 220 and Cave 172 was well received at Dunhuang. Images from these two caves were important to the local community. Elements of them were copied and reorganized in a mid-8th century Cave 66. Like Cave 172, this cave features two Pure Land tableaux on its north and south walls. On the north is a Pure Land tableau that contains the Ajātaśatru Narrative and the Sixteen Meditations, while on the south wall, the Pure Land tableau do not contain these two units. Unlike Cave 172 or Cave 171, in which paired Pure Land tableaux were designed as a coherent project, the tableaux in Cave 66 were created through selective copying and creative reinvention (Fig.4-86). The Sixteen Meditations on the north wall are organized in a grid structure and clearly resemble that of

¹⁰¹ Sha Wutian 沙武田, "Yifu zhenguide tang cahngan yejian yuewutu – yi mokaogu di 200 ku yaoshi jingbian yuewutu zhong deng weizhongxin de jiedu 一幅珍貴的唐長安夜間樂舞圖——以莫高窟第220窟藥師經變樂舞圖中燈為中心的解讀," *Dunhuang Studies*, 153, no.4 (2015), 34-44. Also see English translation, Sha Wutian, "An Image of Nighttime Music and Dance in Tang Chang'an: Notes on the Lighting Devices in the Medicine Buddha Transformation Tableau in Cave 220, Mogao Dunhuang", trans. Anne Feng, *The Silk Road*, 14 (2016): 19-41.

Cave 171(Fig.4-87). In the “(7) Meditation on the Flower Throne”, Amitābha and two bodhisattvas are flying in on clouds, and a vine-bound Shakyamuni triad is floating above a lotus pond (Fig.4-88). As we have discussed in Chapter Three, the “(7) Meditation on the Flower Throne” is a crucial moment that blends meditative action with narrative detail. Cave 171 is unique for portraying both the Amitābha triad and the Shakyamuni triad in the same scene (Fig.3-33), and Cave 66 is the only place that this occurs again. However, unlike the way in which the Lady is portrayed inside a house in Cave 171, Vaidehī is seated outdoors in front of rock boulders.

Instead of mechanically copying images, 8th century painters were creatively inventing new artistic forms. The south wall of Cave 66 is undeniably an 8th century interpretation of Cave 220’s Pure Land tableau (Fig.4-89, Fig.1-18). In the Pure Land tableau of Cave 66, Amitābha Buddha and his entourage are seated within a large water pool, and each deity is seated on a lotus flower. The odd placement of Amitābha inside the lotus pond was unique to Cave 220, and Cave 66 also presents the only other instance of this at Dunhuang. As in Cave 220, Amitābha is flanked by two standing bodhisattvas in Cave 66. However, the water pool is depicted much smaller than the one in Cave 220. In Cave 220, Avalokiteśvara and Mahasthamaprapta, are seated inside the pond, while in Cave 66, they sit on the banks outside. Because of the awkward foreshortening of the lotus pond, the right and left balustrades in Cave 220 fail to line up with the small platforms that open on to the waterfront (Fig.4-11). A small wooden platform can be glimpsed on the right side of the water pond in Cave 66. This time, the painters have streamlined the connection between the balustrade and the platform into a coherent perspective (Fig.4-90). The tall buildings connected to the small platforms in Cave 220 have also disappeared in Cave 66. These double-story buildings with the effects of foreshortening were crucial for creating illusionistic space in 7th century Pure Land tableaux, but our 8th century painters were no longer interested

in these trite gimmicks. Instead, all the buildings in Cave 66 are pushed into the background. In Cave 220, the edge of the water pool marked the distant horizon of the ground plane, whilst in Cave 66 the horizon is largely obscured by architecture. Approaching Cave 66 in this new light, we see a different type of “Pure Land Cave” with double (or triple) images of the Pure Land. The triple installment of Pure Land tableau in Cave 171 was carefully crafted to accommodate the “Amitābha and Fifty Bodhisattvas”. The doubly portrayed tableaux in Cave 172 point to 8th century ruminations on artistic craftsmanship and representational techniques. In Cave 66, we see how Dunhuang painters understood their own artistic legacy through creative interpretations of earlier caves. Like the way that Daoxuan theorized on the promulgation of the “Amitābha and Fifty Bodhisattvas”, Cave 66 shows us how important images are copied and given a new life by skilled painters.

Conclusion

The Pure Land tableau inspired devotion, dreams, and new discourse on the sights, sounds and spaces of the phenomenal world. It was a way in which medieval people came to terms with new experiences in urban space, and new understandings of Buddhist worlds and empires. At the same time, the tableau was shaped through generations of painters experimenting and testing new possibilities with their paintbrush. The lotus pond, as a painter’s device, was used to probe the limits of representation. The Pure Land tableau, as well as the “Amitābha and Fifty Bodhisattvas” image are created for an active viewer. The transmuting and free flowing nature of water and the rectangular frame of the lotus pond bring together visual modes of the hydraulic and the architectonic, spontaneity, and structure.

CODA

At its height the Pure Land tableau was one of the only forms of Chinese Buddhist art that traveled west of Dunhuang.¹ At the cave site Kumutula outside Kucha in current day Xinjiang, a few 8th century caves contain Pure Land images, including a mural of Amitābha's paradise in Cave 14, and a few mural fragments of the Sixteen Meditations and the Ajātaśatru Narrative from Cave 16.² Stylistically, they diverge significantly from the Kuchean painting tradition, and are clearly representations of Chinese imagery from the Tang Empire.

Territories were always shifting in the western frontier: in 670 Tibetan forces swept through the Tang garrison towns, which were only taken back by Tang forces in 692. The Tang Empire maintained control over Kucha until it fell to Tibetan forces again in 791. These Chinese images of the Pure Land were products of a system of Chinese Buddhist monasteries that were established at the four frontier garrisons in Central Asia in the late 7th century.³

When the Sillan monk Hyecho 惠超 (704-783) passed by Kucha on his way to India in 727, there were two Chinese monasteries in town. The three monks he met at the “Great Cloud Monastery” (*dayun si* 大雲寺) all came from Chang'an.⁴ In this way, the Pure Land tableau — a distinct artistic invention made possible by the Tang Empire — was used to disseminate its influence west of traditional Chinese territories.

¹ Ma Shichang 馬世長, “*Kumutula de hanfeng shiku* 庫木吐喇的漢風石窟,” in *Zhongguo shiku kumutula shiku* 中國石窟·庫木吐喇石窟 (Beijing: wenwu chubanshe, 1992), 203-224.

² *Ibid.*, 205, 209-209.

³ Rong Xinjiang 榮新江, “*Tangdai xihu de hanhua fosi* 唐代西域的漢化佛寺,” *Qiuci wenhua yanjiu* 龜茲文化研究, No.1(2005):130–137.

⁴ Ma Shichang, 219. Lopez, Donald S., Jr., Rebecca Bloom, Kevin Gray Carr, Chun Wa Chan, Ha Nul Jun, Carla M. Sinopoli, and Keiko Yokota. *Hyecho's Journey: The World of Buddhism*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), 1-45.

The triumph of the “Amitābha and Fifty Bodhisattvas” in Cave 171 foreshadows the gradual decline of the illusionistic Pure Land transformation tableau. This transition came with new concepts of cave space and religious forms. At Dunhuang, the typical 9th century cave went on to portray transformation tableaux of various themes within fictive panels on the wall surface.⁵ The Pure Land tableau was only one of the many pictures collected within each cave, but by this time most transformation tableaux featured a large palace that frames a Buddha — a composition made popular by the Pure Land tableau. The marvelous view of the Pure Land also vanished with the destruction of Chang’an and its magnificent views at the end of the Tang dynasty. The ward system of the capital gave way to open commercial streets in the prosperous Song capital of Bianliang and the many urban centers that flourished in south China.

However, the Pure Land tableau lives on in East Asian visual culture in different forms. The imagination of rebirth led to the many images of Amitābha’s welcoming descent that spread from the Tangut Khara-Khoto, to the southern Chinese port of Ningbo, and then to Korean and Japanese monasteries.⁶ The descent of Shakyamuni into Vaidehī’s palace and the descent of Amitābha’s welcoming entourage led to new forms of ritual imagination that privileged and ritualized the invocation of deities to appear in elaborate rites of universal salvation called the “Water Land Ritual” (*shuilu fahui* 水陸法會) that became widespread in middle and late imperial China.⁷ Rather than having practitioners sojourn in the distant Pure

⁵ Sha, Wutian 沙武田, *Tubo tongzhi shiqi Dunhuang shiku yan Jiu* 吐蕃統治時期敦煌石窟研究 (Beijing: She hui ke xue wen xian chu ban she, 2013), 6-25

⁶ Okazaki Jōji, *Pure Land Buddhist Painting*, trans. Elizabeth Ten Grotenhuis (Tokyo ; New York: Kodansha International, 1977), 94-102

⁷ Phillip E. Bloom, “Ghosts in the Mists: The Visual and the Visualized in Chinese Buddhist Art, ca. 1178,” *The Art Bulletin*, no.3 (2016): 98.

Land, deities were invited and made present in the ritual precinct. These new images of descending pantheons emphasized the physical presence of deities.

Throughout this dissertation, water has been a consistent theme, from the running rivers in the Sun Mediation, the expanded transformation of water in the Sixteen Meditations, and the ubiquitous lotus pond. Water — as a natural substance— was used repeatedly by Buddhist theologians to make sense of the Western Pure Land. Numinous waterfalls mark sacred presence in mountains, the levelness of the water created the mirror-like flatness of Amitābha’s realm, while lotus ponds served as a portal for reborn souls. Beyond the repertoire of Pure Land art, cosmic oceans, perilous sea monsters, and lotus flowers are widespread imagery in both Buddhist writings and visual representations. In Buddhist physiognomy, the human body is comprised of the “Four Great Elements” – earth, fire, water, air – bodily components that are mentally dispersed in preparation for meditation practices. As one of the four elements, water also plays a crucial role in mediating between the human body and its environments in meditation practices.

There appears to be something special about depicting such a plethora of aquatic imagery at a Buddhist cave site like Dunhuang. Representations of water or implications of its existence facilitate an *aquatic imaginaire* inside Buddhist caves. From Michael Sullivan to Wang Bomin, many art historians of Chinese landscape painting have pointed out how landscape imagery in Dunhuang murals might refer to the desert terrain outside the caves. The green and beige hues in Cave 172’s Sun Meditation create, in Sullivan’s own words, a “color harmony familiar to anyone who knows the countryside of west China.”⁸ Wang Bomin’s foundational study of Dunhuang landscape painting has an entire section dedicated

⁸ Sullivan, 117

to “inspirations from dessert scenery”.⁹ This is a not a claim that medieval painters at Dunhuang suddenly embraced a new type of naturalism in landscape depiction by portraying their desert environment. However, given how several murals that we have examined in this dissertation present moments of acute self-reflexivity (details in the tableau referring to what should be happening inside the cave), was there a connection between the Buddhist paintings inside the caves and their larger natural environment?

Painting aquatic imagery in desert cave sites seems like a paradoxical maneuver and could easily be regarded as a mundane desire for water in an arid environment. However, this conception of Buddhist cave sites as dry and remote comes from a modern impression of archeological sites in west China, when early 20th century European explorers sought to recover relics of lost civilizations beneath shifting sand dunes. Aural Stein and Paul Pelliot’s expeditions were rife with imperialist and romantic undertones, and this was the same for many that followed.¹⁰ Involvement from the Chinese side in the 1940s was also a nationalist project, in which artists and archeologists went west to retrieve lost lands and histories of a war-torn country. Early 20th century life at the western frontiers was harsh, and the only potable water was usually unbearably bitter. Today, many Buddhist cave sites like Dunhuang in west China are located in remote locations rarely reached by modern facilities for water and electricity. The harsh lifestyle at such sites is a reality for many modern individuals.

However, in pre-modern times, it was a privilege to dwell close to water sources. Although some have dried up, many Buddhist cave sites were initially created in important river valleys. Usually situated a day’s travel by foot from a major pre-modern oasis town,

⁹ Wang Bomin 王伯敏, *Dunhuang bihua shanshui yanjiu* 敦煌壁畫山水研究, Zhejiang renmin chubanshe, 2000, 44

¹⁰ Stanely K. Abe, “Inside the Wonder House: Buddhist Art in the West,” *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism under Colonialism*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 63-107.

Buddhist cave sites like Dunhuang were spiritual aquatic spaces reserved for elite religious professionals that managed the cave chapels for elite patrons and lay organizations (*she* 社). They also occasionally facilitated religious festivals and rituals for the local community. Caves were next to clean water sources, and monks lived and died in this vicinity. The affinity between Buddhist caves and river valleys runs from Ajanta in India, to Bamiyan in Afghanistan, Kizil in Xinjiang, Dunhuang in west China, to Longmen in the Central Plains in China. The “Great Spring River” (*daquan he* 大泉河) runs through the valley of the Mogao Grottoes. It was the water source that facilitated daily life at the religious site, but it also poses great danger for the site itself, with frequent flash floods in the summer that still threaten the caves today.¹¹ Water —its life-giving force and power of destruction— was part and parcel of medieval life at the Mogao grottoes. The mineral pigments and ink used by Dunhuang artisans were likely blended with water from the same river, and even today replica painters mix local loess with water to prime painting surfaces to create an earthy effect for mural replicas. Throughout Asia, the connection between Buddhist cave art in and river water is not only based on iconography and representation, but also their own materiality.

Located in an arid terrain, oasis towns like Dunhuang, were largely agricultural rather than commercial.¹² Irrigation systems were crucial for organizing agricultural production and the livelihood of the community.¹³ Local gazetteers of the Dunhuang region in the Tang period usually start by describing the myriad waterways of the region, recording some

¹¹ Yao Lufeng 姚魯烽, Peng Jinzhang 彭金章, “*Dunhuang daquan he de hechuang yanbian jiqi dui mogao ku yati de yingxiang* 敦煌大泉河的河床演變及其對莫高窟崖體的影響,” *Dunhuang Research* 105, no.5 (2007): 87-92.

¹² Hansen, 4.

¹³ Li Bingcheng 李并成, “*Tang song shi qi dunhuang wenshu dangan zhong suojian de guangai quxi* 唐宋時期敦煌文書檔案中所見的灌溉渠系,” *Dang’an* 檔案, no.3 (1989): 41-42

historical legends of water springs and recent problems with menacing river dragons.¹⁴ The management of canals was a crucial project for emperors of the Sui dynasty, once the realm was united under a single regime. On a metaphorical level, the hydraulics of the Tang Empire that followed created a robust system of local tribute to facilitate the circulation of human bodies, tribute goods, and images. As shown in this dissertation, it was the many canals in the city of Chang'an that made views of lush lotus ponds possible in its monasteries. The Pure Land transformation tableau would not have been possible without the condition of water in the Tang regime.

Viewing the substance of water and its management in this new light, there is possibly something more to images of an imprisoned Queen gazing at mountains, rivers, and transformative water pools. The mysterious figure in Cave 209 caught between an open-doored building and a stream of flowing water in landscape perhaps can be seen more than mere symbols of Buddhist enlightenment, but a clear reflection of the Mogao grottoes as a space for enlightenment. The viewer that prostrates and repents in front of the Buddhist icon turns and exits the dark cave, only to arrive in front of a running river that flows towards the horizon under the sun — features of the Pure Land. Paradise is made possible by this very site/sight.

¹⁴ Wang Zhongluo 王仲犖, “*Dunhuang shishi chutu shanzhou dudud fu tujing canjuan kaoshi* 敦煌石室出土《沙洲都督府圖經》殘卷考釋,” *Zhongguo lishi dili luncong* 中國歷史地理論叢 no.1 (1992):1-20

APPENDIX
CATEGORIZATION OF THE SIXTEEN MEDITATIONS

Huiyuan's Categorization of the Sixteen Meditations

	Meditation Topic		Categorization
1	日觀	Meditation on the Sun	Dependent Rewards 依報 The Pure Land Environment
2	水觀	Meditation on Water	
3	地觀	Meditation on the Ground	
4	樹觀	Meditation on the Trees	
5	池觀	Meditation on the Ponds (or Lake)	
6	總想觀一切樓樹池	Total Meditation (or Mediation on the Jeweled Buildings)	
7	華座觀	Meditation on the Flower Throne	Main Rewards 正報 Amitābha Buddha
8	佛菩薩像觀	Meditation on the Image of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas	
9	佛身觀	Meditation on the Body of (Amitayus) Buddha	
10	觀世音觀	Meditation on Avalokitesvara	
11	大勢至觀	Meditation on Mahasthamaprapta	
12	自往生觀	Meditation on Self-Rebirth	
13	雜明佛菩薩	Miscellaneous Mediation	
14	上品生觀	Meditation on the Upper Level of Rebirth	
15	中品生觀	Meditation on the Middle Level of Rebirth	
16	下品生觀	Meditation on the Lower Level of Rebirth	

Zhiyi's Categorization of the Sixteen Meditations

	Meditation Topic		Categorization
1	日觀	Meditation on the Sun	Dependent Effects 依果
2	水觀	Meditation on Water	
3	地觀	Meditation on the Ground	
4	樹觀	Meditation on the Trees	
5	池觀	Meditation on the Ponds (or Lake)	
6	總觀	Total Meditation (or Mediation on the Jeweled Buildings)	
7	華座觀	Meditation on the Flower Throne	Main Rewards 正報
8	佛菩薩像觀	Meditation on the Image of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas	
9	佛身觀	Meditation on the Body of (Amitayus) Buddha	
10	觀音觀	Meditation on Avalokitesvara	
11	勢至觀	Meditation on Mahasthamaprapta	
12	普往生觀	Meditation on Self-Rebirth	
13	雜明佛菩薩觀	Miscellaneous Mediation	Nine Grades of Rebirth 九品往生
14	上品生觀	Meditation on the Upper Level of Rebirth	
15	中品生觀	Meditation on the Middle Level of Rebirth	
16	下品生觀	Meditation on the Lower Level of Rebirth	

Jizang's Categorization of the Sixteen Meditations

	Meditation Topic		Categorization	
1	日想觀	Meditation on the Sun	Dependent Effects 依果 Amitābha's Realm 觀無量壽國	無量壽觀 Amitayus 觀果 Mediation on Results
2	水想觀	Meditation on Water		
3	地想觀	Meditation on the Ground		
4	樹想觀	Meditation on the Trees		
5	八功德水想觀	Meditation on the Pond of Eight Virtues		
6	總觀想	Total Meditation (or Mediation on the Jeweled Buildings)		
7	華座想	Meditation on the Flower Throne	Main Effects 正果 觀無量佛身 Amitābha Buddha and Bodhisattvas	
8	像想	Meditation on the Image		
9	無量壽佛身相 光明想	Meditation on the Body and Light of Amitayus Buddha		
10	觀世音菩薩想	Meditation on Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara		
11	大勢至菩薩想	Meditation on Bodhisattva Mahasthamaprapta		
12	普觀想	Comprehensive Meditation		
13	雜想觀	Miscellaneous Mediation		
14	上輩生想	Meditation on the Upper Level of Rebirth		九輩觀 Nine Grades of Rebirth 觀因 Meditation on Causes
15	中輩生想	Meditation on the Middle Level of Rebirth		
16	下輩生想	Meditation on the Lower Level of Rebirth		

Shandao's Categorization of the Sixteen Meditations

	Meditation Topic		Amount of Karmic Expiation	Categorization		
1	日想觀	Meditation on the Sun	Not mentioned	Nominal Dependent Reward 假依報	General 通依	Dependent Reward 依報
2	水想觀	Meditation on Water	Not mentioned			
3	地想觀	Meditation on the Ground	800,000 kalpas of karma, rebirth assured	True Dependent Reward 真依報		
4	樹想觀	Meditation on the Trees	Not mentioned			
5	八功德水想觀	Meditation on the Pond of Eight Virtues	Not mentioned			
6	總觀想	Total Meditation (or Mediation on the Jeweled Buildings)	Innumerable kalpas of karma, rebirth assured			
7	華座想	Meditation on the Flower Throne	500 kotis of karma, rebirth assured		Special 別依	
8	像想	Meditation on the Image	Innumerable kalpas of karma, rebirth not mentioned	Nominal Main Reward 假正報	Special 別正	Main Reward 正報 The Amitābha Triad
9	無量壽佛身相光明想	Meditation on the Body and Light of Amitayus Buddha	Not mentioned	True Main Reward 真正報		
10	觀世音菩薩想	Meditation on Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara	Not mentioned		General 通正	
11	大勢至菩薩想	Meditation on Bodhisattva Mahasthamaprapta	Not mentioned			
12	普觀想	Comprehensive Meditation	Rebirth assured			
13	雜想觀	Miscellaneous Mediation	Rebirth assured			
14	上輩生想	Meditation on the Upper Level of Rebirth				
15	中輩生想	Meditation on the Middle Level of Rebirth				
16	下輩生想	Meditation on the Lower Level of Rebirth				

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