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Images of Hell and Salvation in a Late Seventh Century Cave in Dunhuang, Gansu Province, China

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The murals of Dunhuang Cave 321 commissioned by the Yin family at the end of the seventh century have two very special illustrations—one of Dizang, *Kṣitigarbha*, the Bodhisattva of Hell, and the other of an Eleven-headed Guanyin, a manifestation of the Bodhisattva of Compassion, Avalokiteśvara. These extraordinary illustrations have garnered a great deal of interest and several scholarly interpretations. This article will begin by analyzing the depictions of hell and rescue in the cave murals and compare them to the scriptures that describe Dizang, who on account of his great compassion, offers the faithful redemption. Call on him and he will save you from a number of perils including the torments of hell; he can assume up to forty-four manifestations to facilitate his purpose. Salvation, released from *karma*, is also the primary message of the Eleven-headed Guanyin, Ekādaśamukha Avalokiteśvara. The creation of both images reflects the Buddhist teachings at the court of Empress Wu (武后 624-705, r. 684-705). With her generous patronage, Buddhist art burgeoned and such new iconographical themes based on new translations of sūtras found expression. Her court, an important city on the silk road, was a cosmopolitan one where an international and metropolitan style prevailed for both religious and secular themes which became a standard style in China and traveled to East Asia. Thus, the décor of Cave 321 presents new iconography in an international Tang style accomplished with the support of Empress Wu.

Keywords: Dunhuang, Dizang Bodhisattva, Hell, Eleven-headed Avalokiteśvara, Empress Wu, Amitābha, Paradise of the West

Dunhuang Cave 321

Commissioned by the Yin family at the end of the seventh century, Dunhuang Cave 321 has two distinctive and early illustrations of hell and salvation. Salvation, release from *karma*, is the primary message of the murals. One wall features representations associated with Dizang, *Kṣitigarbha*, the Bodhisattva of Hell; the other shows the salvific figure of the Eleven-headed Guanyin, a manifestation of the Bodhisattva of Compassion, Avalokiteśvara. We begin with a description and analysis of the depictions and then consider the scriptures on which they were based. Later is a consideration of their impact on contemporary Buddhist art. The creation of both images reflects the Buddhist teachings at the court of Empress Wu (武后 624-705, r. 684-705). A magnanimous patron, the Empress undertook a number of projects in addition to sponsoring the creation of monuments. She entertained visiting monks from India and elsewhere, ordered the scriptures be translated and disseminated, had a dictionary of terms be compiled, and wrote prefaces to the scriptural translations. As a result, new iconographical themes based on new translations of sūtras found expression. Her court, an important city on

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Constructed in the late seventh century, Cave 321 is a large five-meter squarish room with several important iconographical themes of great complexity and detail. Although the cave was repainted twice after its initial construction, in the Five dynasties and the Qing era, the murals on the side walls date to the original period. At first sight, the general theme of the iconography is the various means to paradise through the agency of the Buddha of the Western paradise and Guanyin, whose images adorn the cave.[1]

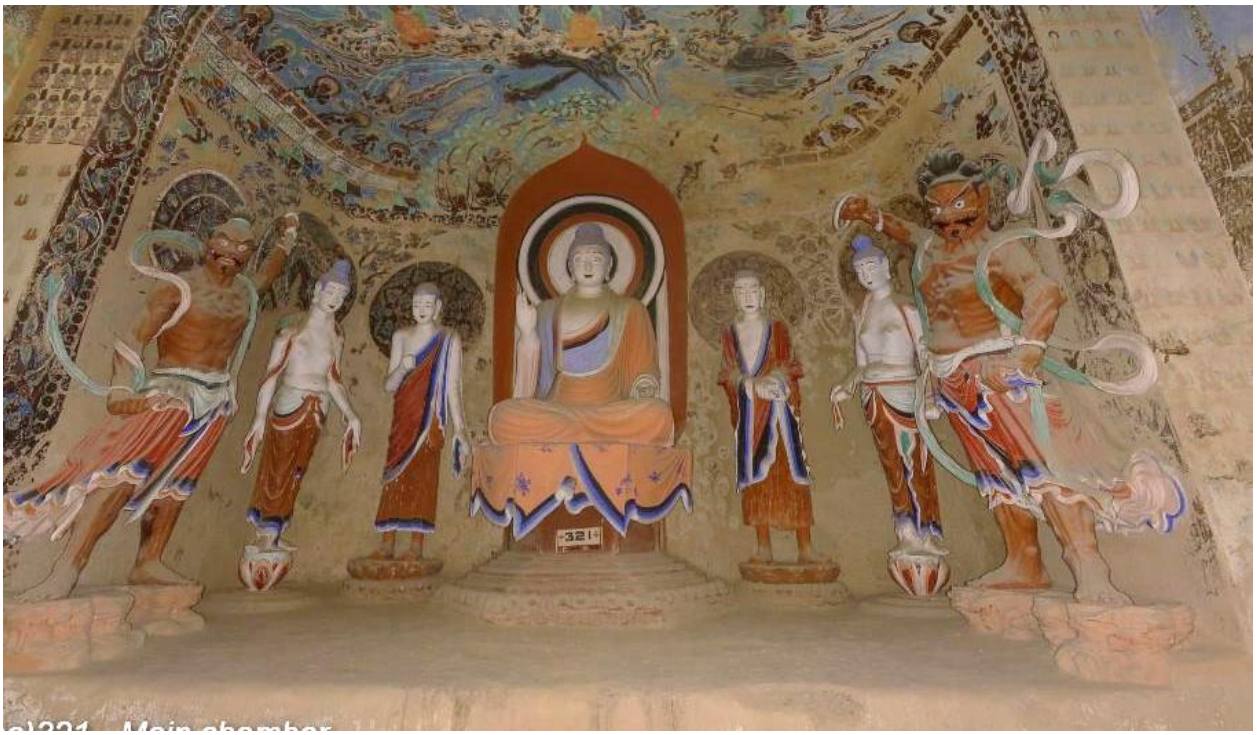

Figure 1. Cave 321 Dunhuang west wall main icon (Digital Dunhuang 2020 artwork in the public domain).

We begin with a general description of the cave décor, which can be seen online at Digital Dunhuang. A niche at the back of the west wall houses a septet as the main icon (Figure 1). The central Buddha is the original early Tang work, but Qing dynasty restorations damaged the appearance of the flanking statues of the disciples, bodhisattvas, and aggressive guardian warriors. Untouched by restoration efforts are the paintings in the upper wall area above the niche: a double-layered railing against which a row of celestials in active poses lean over to see below (Figure 2). The paint used for these celestials seems to have turned black due to a chemical reaction, but the other figures in the cave have varied skin tones which is evidence of new figure types introduced from India. The artists convincingly rendered the various graceful but active poses of the celestials and their lively engagement with the activities below. Behind them a blue sky is home to three cloud-borne Buddha triads attended by descending apsaras, their slender scarves animated by the wind of their rapid descent. The truncated pyramidal ceiling features a large central medallion surrounded by the draperies of twisted vines and half medallions; its four sloping sides bear the thousand Buddha motifs (a part of the south slope is damaged).

[1] See Digital Dunhuang, https://www.e-dunhuang.com/cave/10.0001/0001.0001.0321.

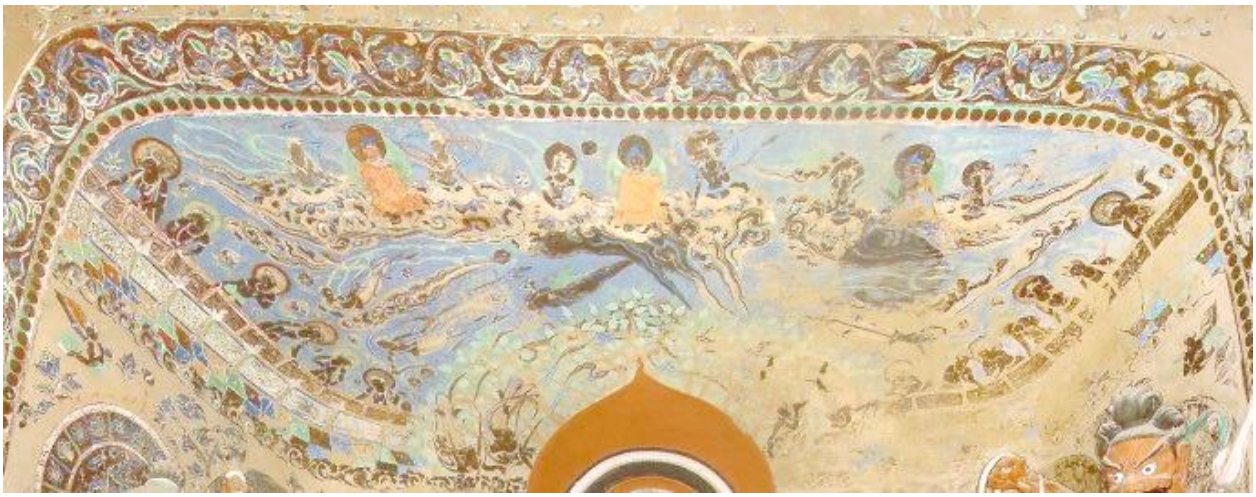

Figure 2. Cave 321 Dunhuang west wall alcove, three Buddha triads float in the sky; celestials look down from a balcony (Digital Dunhuang 2020 artwork in the public domain).

The sides walls each have a painting of a celestial paradise: on the north is the paradise of Amitābha envisioned as an architectural complex: Buddha, seated at center on a colorful tiled terrace has two flanking groups of bodhisattvas. An aqua blue lotus pond in which reborn believers splash and play surrounds three sides of the terrace. In the foreground is a jeweled tiled terrace with a celestial orchestra; at center stage, dancers strike dramatic poses, their scarves swirling about them. Many-tiered jeweled towers occupy either side of the central figural disposition. On the upper wall are cloud banks supporting Buddhas assembled to hear the preaching and a celestial palace. These details delineate the vision presented in a scripture that described the paradise of the Buddha of the West, the *Smaller Amitābha sūtra* (Figures 3 and 4).

Figure 3. Cave 321 Dunhuang North wall, Paradise of Amitābha, celestial dancers in lower midground (Digital Dunhuang 2020 artwork in the public domain).

Figure 4. Cave 321 Dunhuang, North wall Amitābha paradise detail lotus pool (Digital Dunhuang 2020 artwork in the public domain).

> The Land of Ultimate Bliss has the Pool of seven jewels, filled with the eight waters of merit and virtue. The bottom of each pool is pure, spread over with golden sand. On the four sides are stairs of gold, silver, lapis lazuli, and crystal; above are raised pavilions adorned with gold, silver, lapis lazuli, crystal, mother-of-pearl, red pearls, and carnelian. In the pools are lotuses as large as carriage wheels: green colored of green light; yellow colored of yellow light; red colored of red light; white colored of white light; subtly, wonderfully, fragrant, and pure[2] (Epstein, 1970, pp. 11-21)

On the opposite wall are illustrations of the *Ten Wheel Scripture* devoted to the Bodhisattva Dizang and the torments of hell from which he saves the faithful. Dizang, who, on account of his great compassion, offers redemption to the faithful. Call on him and he will save you from a number of perils including the torments of hell; he can assume up to forty-four manifestations to facilitate his purpose. The depiction of Hell is a relatively new theme in early medieval Chinese Buddhism. In ancient Buddhist India, hell was not an important doctrine. Stephen Teiser explains, for them Hell was just the lowest level of rebirth: in those early texts, hell was an "expedient device to encourage the cultivation of morality and to hasten the transformation of *samsāra* into *nivāna*."[3] (Teiser, 1988, p. 436; D. Matsunaga & A. Matsunaga, 1972, p. 75). Pictures of Hell in early Buddhism

[2] *The Amitābha Sūtra*, Introduction and Translation by Ronald Epstein, *Vajra Bodhi Sea*, No. 9 (Dec., 1970), pp. 11-21. Reprinted in Hua, *A General Explanation of the Buddha Speaks of Amitābha Sūtra*. San Francisco: Buddhist Text Translation Society, 1974. See https://huntingtonarchive.org/resources/downloads/sutras/04AmitābhaPureland/SV%20Short.doc.pdf.

[3] Stephen Teiser, "Having Once Died and Returned to Life, Representations of Hell in Medieval China," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* (1988) vol. 48 no. 2: 433-464, see 436ff. Stephen Teiser, discusses another text that discusses hell was written in India in

are so-far lacking. There is a fragment from Gandhāra, ca second century, in the Chandigarh Museum in Haryana, India with a figure bent over at the waist to escape the flames (presumably of hell),[4] and Stephen Teiser (2006, p. 64) found an example at Ajantā, but it is extensively damaged. It is important to note that the wheel is not depicted in Cave 321. In addition, Stephen Teiser (1994) translated and studied a non-canonical scripture popular in the later Tang, the *Ten Kings of Hell*, in which offerings to these underworld magistrates may mitigate going to hell. Originating in the Tang dynasty, depictions of the Ten Kings present them as individual magistrates wearing silk gowns and tall caps. They sit behind a desk and in smaller scale are their attendants and the sinners brought before them for judgement, as seen in a tenth century illustration on ink and paper that was found in Cave 17 at Dunhuang that is now in the British Museum[5] (Soper, 1950, p. 10).

In contrast, the murals on the south wall of Dunhuang Cave 321 illustrate the *Great Expansive Sūtra of the Ten Wheels* (大乘大集地藏十輪経): a scripture associated with *Kṣitigarbha* Bodhisattva (地蔵菩薩 Dizang), which was first translated in the Northern Liang period and later by two eminent monks at Empress Wu's (武后) (624-705, r. 684-705) court Xuanzang (玄奘, 596-664) and Śikṣānanda (652-710)[6] (Junjrō & Kaigyoku, 1924-1932, p. 681). Briefly stated, the scripture explains that Dizang can save the faithful from the perils of life and the horrors of hell. With his miraculous powers, he can take on forty-four incarnations including that of a Buddhist priest, or Judge of Hell to intercede for the worshiper. Recently Wang Huimin discovered a blurry three-line inscription that he used to identify the sūtra. "At the time, the Ksatriya King often dined and entertained the nationals without suspicion and observed the laws together, which was the fourth wheel." (Wang, 2010, p. 4). The Sūtra begins with the Buddha extolling the virtues of Dizang, the rewards reaped by his devotees and the torments from which he offers respite. The Northern Liang version of the *Great Expansive Sūtra of the Ten Wheels* reads as,

> There are thirteen ways he offers releif from sufferings and difficulties, namely: If there are sentient beings suffering from immeasurable kinds of miseries, hunger and thirst, and they call the name of Kṣitigarbha Bodhisattva, they will be made able to eat well, eliminate all sufferings, and set themselves on the path of Nirvāna, and they will all be happy. If there are sentient beings who lack clothing, precious crowns, necklaces, sickness, emaciation, medicine, and various tools, if they call the name of Earth Store Bodhisattva, they will be provided with whatever they want, and they will live peacefully on the path of Nirvana and obtain the first bliss. If there are sentient beings who suffer from disease in body and mind, they can call the name of Kṣitigarbha Bodhisattva, and all the suffering in body and mind will be healed, and they will be placed in Nirvāna, and they will get the first happiness…If there are sentient beings burned by floods, raging fires, or falling onto high rocks…stung by poisonous snakes and beasts or harmed by various poisons they can call the name of Kṣitigarbha Bodhisattva. The one who takes refuge with one heart is liberated from all fears…If any sentient beings are captured by a variety evil spirits...If there are sentient beings who commit all kinds of evil and ten unwholesome karma, they can say Kṣitigarbha Bodhisattva's name…all sentient beings will have a compassionate heart and a heart of benefit. (Junjrō & Kaigyoku, 1924-1932, p. 681)

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the 4th-5th century and survives only in Chinese and Tibetan translations. It describes eight levels of Hell. See also Daigan Matsunaga and Alicia Matsunaga, *The Buddhist Concept of Hell* (New York, Philosophical Library, 1972), p. 75.

[4] The scene is identified as a hell scene by the curators of the Chandigarh Museum in Haryana, India, inv. No. 2038.

[5] For the illustration of the Ten Kings found by MA Stein, 1919,0101,0.80, see https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/A_1919-0101-0-80; There is also the record of the great Tang painter Wu Tao Tzu (*Wu Daozi*, c. 685-758 CE) who rendered depictions of Hell that frightened the townspeople. See Alexander C. Soper, "T'ang Ch'ao Ming Hua Lu," *Archives of the Chinese Art Society of America*, 1950, Vol. 4 (1950), 5-28; p.10.

[6] *Great Expansive Sūtra of the Ten Wheels*, 大乘大集地藏十輪経, translated anonymously during the Northern Liang dynasty (397-439) in Takakusu Junjrō and Watanabe Kaigyoku, eds., *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 太正新修大正 藏经, 85 vols. Tokyo: Taishō Issaikyō Kankōkai, 1924-1932, vol. 1, no. 13, p. 681.

Wang Huimin (2004; 2005) has written extensively on Cave 321 reattributing the illustrations to the *Ten Wheels Sūtra* in his studies of early Tang images of Dizang[7] (Moretti, 2019). Wang (2005, p. 19) finds the earliest surviving Ksitigarbha statue at Longmen Yaofang Cave in Luoyang (the first year of Linde, 664). It is important to note that Empress Wu made Luoyang the capital in 664. In his study Wang (2005, p. 20) defines a range of seven ways artists depict Dizang according to the ways the texts describe him, finding *Ten Wheels Sūtra* the most relevant to Cave 321's murals[8]. First Dizang is shown as a monk, among the retinue of the Buddha seated at the center of the mural on the south wall (Wang, 2005, p. 20) (Figure 5). One of the characteristics of the iconography of Dizang present in the scripture is that he is not yet a Buddha, and so categorized as a bodhisattva, but is shown as a monk. Secondly, the scripture also suggests that Dizang holds the wish fulfilling jewel in his hands which appears in the upper area of the wall.

"Moreover, there are [his] two hands holding the wish-fulfilling pearl, and a large amount of jewelry falls from the sky, as if it were raining." ("又復皆悉見其兩手有如意珠，雨如意寶", Junjrō & Kaigyoku, 1924-1932, p. 681).

Figure 5. Cave 321 Dunhuang, center mural on the south wall (Digital Dunhuang 2020 artwork in the public domain).

As Wang points out this is how he is shown elsewhere at Dunhuang. Also conforming to the text is the rendering of his blessings portrayed as jewels and flowers that float in the sky. In addition, in the upper part of the mural are images of the Buddhas of the Ten Directions, accompanied by bodhisattvas, celestials like Asura, and monks.

Higher up on the west side of the wall, are small-scale paintings of some of the forty-four manifestations of Dizang, including esoteric forms conforming to the scripture: three-headed, six-armed, Guardian Kings, and more.

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[7] Wang Huimin, "Research on the *Ten Wheel Sūtra* Variations in Dunhuang Caves 321 and 74", *Art History Research*, 6, 2004; Wang Huimin, "Investigation of Dunhuang Ksitigarbha Images in the Early Tang Dynasty" (*Institute of Archaeology, Dunhuang Academy*, Dunhuang, Gansu, 2005), pp. 18-25; Constantino Moretti, "Scenes of Hell and Damnation in Dunhuang Murals", *Arts Asiatiques* (2019) Vol. 74: 5-30, mentions the representations of Cave 321, but does not analyze them in detail.

[8] Wang (2005, p. 20) gives the detail of Dizang portrayals and the scriptural sources.

Below are scenes of the perils that appear as small vignettes accompanied by empty cartouche. Set in a green landscape of rolling hills, the portrayals include saving people from such disasters as imprisonment, flood, fire, attack by demons (upper left), or from falling from a cliff to death. Near each peril, Dizang floats down on a cloud to answer the call for help (Figure 7). Scattered about the upper wall and greatly abbreviated in detail, these narratives are not easy to identify.

This illustration of the torments of hell may be unique as such depictions are exceedingly rare in this early period[9] (Zhao & Ledderose, 2020, p. 32), but it is interesting to note that the format for the representations of the perils and manifestations of Cave 321 prefigure the later, eighth-century narratives of Guanyin's powers painted on the south wall in Dunhuang Cave 45. There, in a more organized fashion, the manifestations of the Bodhisattva of Compassion appear, flanking a large painting of him[10] (Murase, 1971, pp. 39-73). Painted in the upper area, and arranged in neat rows, are the thirty-three forms Guanyin assumes to save people paired with a worshiper; while in the lower area, occupying a green landscape of rolling hills, are the perils from fire, wild animals, jail, and more. These narratives, told in the *Lotus Sūtra* perhaps compiled around the first century, were first translated into Chinese in 255 and was retranslated five more times[11] (Hurvitz, 1982, p. 9).

On the south wall of Cave 321, Wang (2010, p. 7) also identified an illustration of the "Jataka Buddha as the Elephant King" in the "Chapter of Ksatriya Chandra Showing Wisdom" in Volume 4 of the *Ten Wheels Sūtra*, there is also the scene of five monks killing an elephant, which represents the story.

Figure 6. Cave 321 Dunhuang, South wall, detail upper area are two hands holding wish fulfilling pearls and the blessings of jewels and flowers he bestows.

[9] One illustration of the scripture now too damaged to make out was discussed by Zhao Rong and Lothar Ledderose, *Buddhist Stone Sūtras in China. Shaanxi Province* (Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften, Wiesbaden Harrassowitz Verlag, 2020), see Volume 1: Jinchuanwan Cave, East Wall. Shaanxi Institute for the Preservation of Cultural Heritage, p. 32.

[10] Miyeko Murase wrote an important article on the depictions of Guanyin and the perils in Chinese and Japanese art, including Cave 45 from the Tang era; see Miyeko Murase, "Kuan-yin As Savior of Men", *Artibus Asiae* (1971) vol. XXXIII: 39-73.

[11] A latter translation occurred in 601, see Hurvitz, 1982, p. 9.

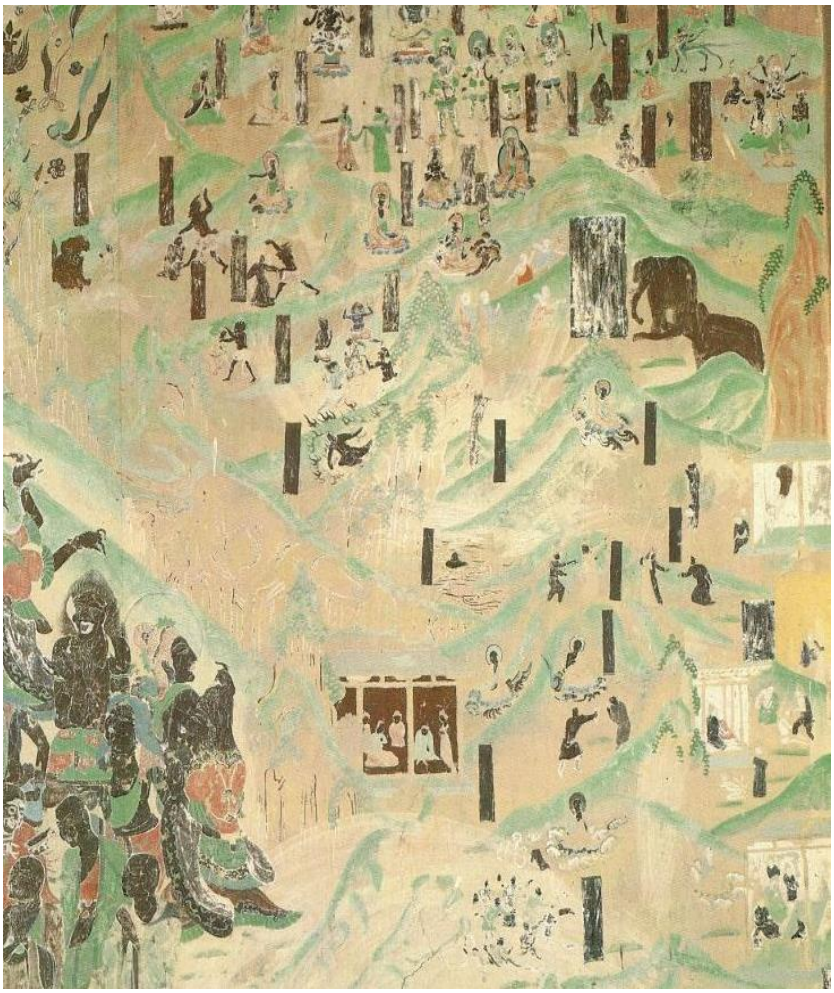

Figure 7. Cave 321 Dunhuang South wall, upper west side Punishments of Hell, upper right Manifestations of Dizang (Digital Dunhuang 2020 artwork in the public domain).

Cave 321's Mural of the Eleven-Headed Guanyin Ekādaśamukha Avalokiteśvara

The other unusual theme of Cave 321 is the mural on the entrance wall of the cave, an image of the eleven-headed Guanyin (Ekādaśamukha Avalokiteśvara, 十一面觀音(菩薩)), Bodhisattva of Compassion[12] (Tay, 1976; Yü, 2001). We will see that this manifestation had special meaning for Empress Wu who commissioned many icons and had the scriptures dedicated to him translated. The *Lotus Sūtra* introduced Avalokiteśvara in a chapter dedicated to the bodhisattva. Distinguished by great compassion, he has the ability both to save the faithful from various perils and to fulfill their wishes (Hurvitz, 1982, p. 311). In India, he was first an attendant to the Buddha of the Western Paradise and by the Guptan era (fourth to seventh century), he was an independent icon. For example, outside the fifth-century Cave Seven at Ajantā is a large bas relief stele of the Litany of Avalokiteśvara: the Bodhisattva stands at the center of a large panel; carved on either side of the square frame are small-scale depictions of the perils from which the faithful will be saved (Huntington, 1993, p. 266).[13] By

[12] See C. N. Tay, "Kuan Yin: The Cult of Half Asia:, *History of Religions*, vol. 16.2 (1976): 247-277, and Chünfang Yü has written a definitive study on Avalokiteśvara in China. See Chünfang Yü, *Kuan-yin The Chinese Transformation of Avalokiteśvara* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

[13] See Susan Huntington, *The Art of Ancient India* (New York, Weatherhill, 1993), Cave 7, Fig. 12.29, p. 266.

the time of the early sixth century, there is an esoteric form, first seen at the Kãnheri caves near Mumbai in India. Kãnheri, a teaching center, has many representations of Avalokiteśvara (Gokhale, 1987, p. 373; Bautze-Picron, 2004; Ganvir, 2012-2013), but in Cave 41 is a very rare eleven-headed form that stands near the image of Amitābha Buddha. Four-armed, the icon has eleven heads piled one atop each other forming a tall conical shape. The upper right hand is in *abhayā mudrā* (fear-not gesture), and the upper left hand holds a lotus. The remaining two hands are mutilated (Gokhale, 1991, p. 24). Apparently, there are no other such icons in India in this early period.

The Eleven-headed Guanyin painted on the entrance wall in Dunhuang Cave 321, is among the earliest in China (Figures 8 and 9). Located on the Silk Route, the art of these caves reflects new iconographies and western stylistic influences based on the images and texts brought east by monks and merchants. In addition to the introduction of the new icon, western stylistic characteristics are apparent. Resembling Guptan era Indian Buddhist art, the Dunhuang dark-skinned figures have sensuous bodies and stand in hip slung poses; also, there is careful rendering of the intricate details of their ornate crowns, fine jewels, scarves, and garments. Even the painting of a Buddha on the other side of the entrance wall is dark-skinned, full bodied, and stands in a more relaxed pose, turning slightly to his right, he looks down at his attendant, a posture seen in the Buddha carved on the façade of Ajantā Cave 19 in Aurangabad, Maharashtra, India from the fifth century (Huntington, 1993, p. 245).

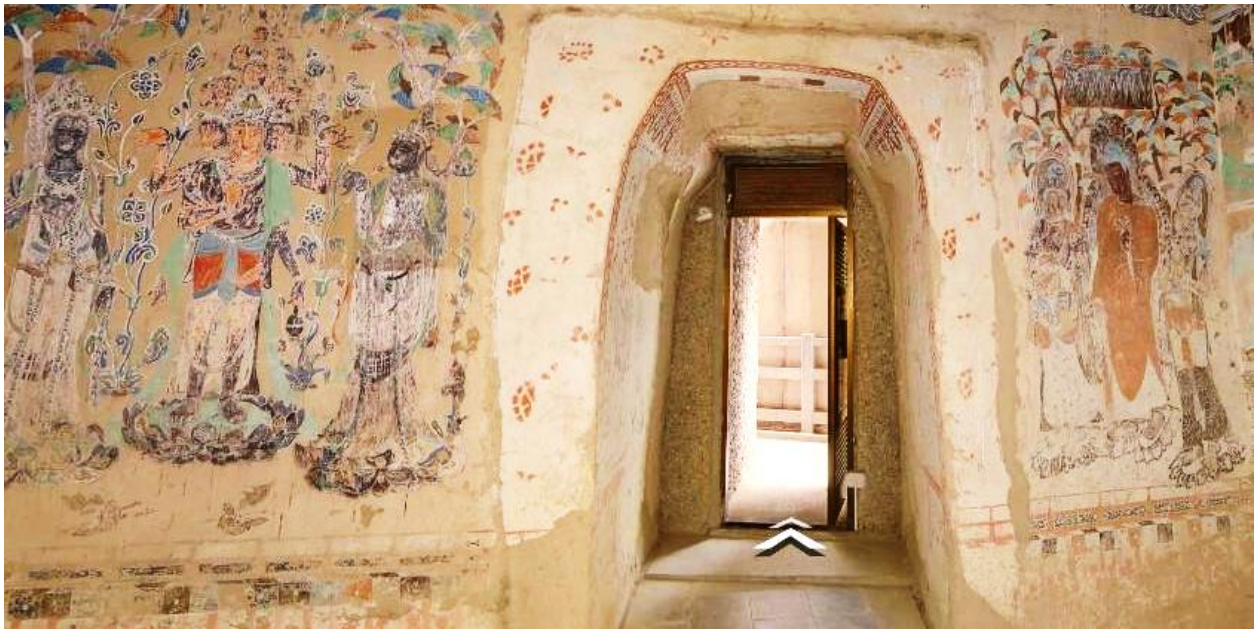

Figure 8. Cave 321 Dunhuang, entrance wall (Digital Dunhuang 2020 artwork in the public domain).

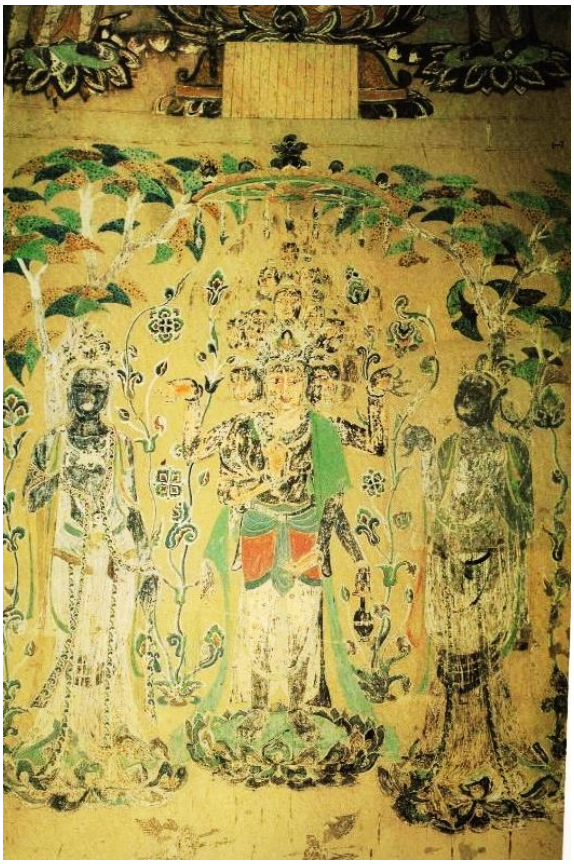

Figure 9. Eleven-headed Guanyin Cave 321, Dunhuang late seventh century, entry wall.

The Dunhuang representation of Ekādaśamukha Avalokiteśvara is not unique, in fact many representations of the icon proliferated during Empress Wu's reign (Lee, 2008, p. 179). Her cosmopolitan court was home to foreigners and visiting Buddhist masters, who, with her support, translated a number of important scriptures, among which is the *Eleven- headed Avalokiteśvara Sūtra*. In 655 Xuanzang, one of the preeminent monks at her court (Weinstein, 1987, p. 44) translated the *Heart-dhāraṇī of Avalokiteśvara-ekadaśamukha Sūtra* (佛說十一面觀世音神咒經)[14] (Nanjio, 1883). In their article on the Eleven-headed Guanyin, Sherman Lee and Waikam Ho (1959) include an excerpt from *Avalokiteśvara Ekadaśamukhadhdrānī.*[15]

> The body is one "foot" and three "inches" tall with eleven heads. The three faces that face forward are Bodhisattvas; the three faces on the left side are to be given angry faces; and the three faces on the right should be given faces resembling those of Bodhisattvas but with canine tusks projecting upwards. On the rear is another head which must be represented laughing out loud, and on the top of the main head is still another which must be a Buddha face... Kanzeon holds a water jar (kuṇḍikā) in his left hand, from the mouth of which a lotus flower projects, and he extends his right hand grasping his pendant chains of jewels and makes the abhāya-mudrā. (Lee & Ho, 1959, p. 122)

Of the many images of the Eleven-headed Guanyin that Empress Wu had made are seven extant bas relief sculptures from her the Qibaotai pagoda (七寶臺), a 32 multi-faced pillar in Guangzhai Temple (光宅寺) located

[14] See Bunyiu Nanjio, *A Catalogue of the Chinese Translation of the Buddhist Tripika: The Sacred Canon of the Buddhists in China and Japan* (London, Clarendon Press, 1883), see Xuanzang's translation, p. 345, Nanjio No. 328.

[15] Sherman E. Lee and Wai-Kam Ho, "A Colossal Eleven-Faced Kuan-yin of the T'ang Dynasty", *Artibus Asiae*, Vol. 22, No. 1/2 (1959): 121-137, p. 122. "The earliest complete iconographic description of the Eleven-faced Kuan-yin occurs in a Sanskrit sūtra translated into Chinese by Yasogupta in 561-577 A.D."

slightly south of the Daming Palace in Chang'an (modern Xi'an). Several bear inscriptions dating from her reign (703-704, and a late one dated 724). Currently, there are two in the Freer Gallery Washington, D.C. (Figures 10 and 11);[16] one in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts;[17] two in the Tokyo National Museum (Figures 12);[18] one in the Nara Museum;[19] and one in the Nezu Museum in Tokyo.[20] These figures all have two arms, unlike the Dunhuang example which has four. Sherman Lee and Waikam Ho (1959) identified a contemporary damaged half figure now in the Cleveland Museum that is colossal in size; intact, it stood over 11 feet high.[21] One significant difference between the Cleveland sculpture and those from Qibaotai, besides its immense size, is the clear articulation of its several angry heads and the more sculptured approach to the definition of its figure, head, and adornments

All the bas reliefs from Qibaotai show the naturalistic crown-like arrangement of the eleven heads from the frontal view one can see a lower row of five topped by four heads with a Amitābha Buddha at the top; some faces suggest the range of expressions delineated in the text. In western style, they all have slender, very sensuous, soft bodies in hip sway posture with slightly protruding bellies. They have the Guptan style attribute of beauty—three rings of flesh at the neck, a rich array of sumptuous jewels, and a slight tilt of their heads as they look down, alert to the cries of humans in trouble. Such western style characteristics may be attributed in part to the western artists who worked in Empress Wu's atelier[22] (Cahill, 1977, p. 19; Lee, 2008, 182ff). At first sight all the figures look identical, but they are not, beginning with the shape of the halo which may be plain or scalloped or filled with a rinceau pattern or flame designs. The rendering of descending flying angels flanking the head also displays contrasting treatments of their postures. Moreover, the petals of the lotus base on which they stand may have ornate raised floral designs. Their jewels differ too, from a three-pendant necklace to more complicated filigree design; some have arm bracelets, some do not. The articulation of the drapery as it winds around and ties at the waist also varies. Moreover, the hand positions are not uniform: some hold the water jar in the left hand, or in the case of the one in the Nara Museum which holds the vase in the right hand. Usually, the right hand holds a lotus in reference to the epithet of Avalokiteśvara as Padmapāṇi, the lotus holder. This was the primary attribute of the bodhisattva since the first articulation of the icon in Gandhāra and is evident in sculptures that have not lost their hands, which most of them have.

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[16] Guanyin with eleven heads dated Tang dynasty, 703. Limestone H × W × D: 108.8 × 31.7 × 15.3 cm (42 13/16 × 12 1/2 × 6 in.) Freer Gallery Accession Number F1909.98. https://asia.si.edu/object/F1909.98/#object-content. The second Guanyin with eleven heads, is broken, lacking the bottom half of the figure, is dated 703. Limestone H × W × D: 77.8 × 31.5 × 18.8 cm (30 5/8 × 12 3/8 × 7 3/8 in.), Freer Gallery of Art Accession Number F1914.55. https://asia.si.edu/object/F1914.55/.

[17] Eleven-headed Guanyin, Boston Museum of Fine Art, 117.7 × 27.9 cm (46 5/16 × 11 in.), Inv. No. 06.1905 https://collections.mfa.org/objects/24276.

[18] Eleven-headed Guanyin Limestone. Total H 108.5, total W 29.8, total depth 13.8, Image H 85.8, Tang period/8th century, Tokyo National Museum TC-719, see https://emuseum.nich.go.jp/detail?langId=en&webView=&content_base_id=100867&content_part_id=0&content_pict_id=0 and see also https://inf.news/en/culture/c12aa6296d3e6db4f8bd31493241fc26.html. In the grand entry gallery the 11-headed style is in the company of 12 plaques of Buddha triads also from Baoqingsi and five dated in Wu's reign—703, 703,704.

[19] Standing Eleven-headed Guanyin, Nara Museum, Stone, Total H 85.1 cm, Tang dynasty, China, 8th century, see https://www.narahaku.go.jp/english/collection/1277-0.html.

[20] Standing Eleven-headed Guanyin, Nezu Museum China Tang dynasty, 7th century Stone (limestone) H: 107.0 cm (20341), see https://www.nezu-muse.or.jp/en/collection/detail.php?id=20341.

[21] Eleven-headed Guanyin, early 700s Gray sandstone. Overall: 129.6 × 63.6 × 25.4 cm (51 × 25 1/16 × 10 in.). Cleveland Museum, Gift of Severance and Greta Millikin 1959.129.

[22] One example being Yuchi Yiseng, a Khotanese artist who lived in Chang'an during the second half of the seventh century. See James Cahill, *An Index of Early Chinese Painters* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1977), p. 19. See also Lee, 2008, 182ff.

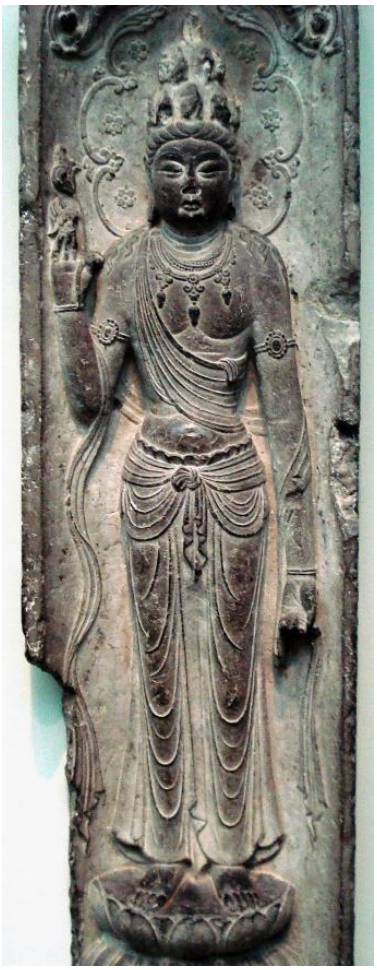

Figure 10. Limestone-carved relief of Eleven-headed Guanyin, from Xi'an (Chang'an), Shaanxi Province, Tang Dynasty, dated c. 703 AD. Limestone H × W × D: 108.8 × 31.7 × 15.3 cm (42 13/16 × 12 1/2 × 6 in.) Freer Gallery, Washington D.C. inventory No. F1909.98 (Image in the public domain).

Figure 11. Damaged limestone-carved relief of Eleven-headed Guanyin H × W × D: 77.8 × 31.5 × 18.8 cm (30 5/8 × 12 3/8 × 7 3/8 in.) China, Shaanxi Province, Xi'an, Qibaotai Pagoda, Guangzhai Temple, Freer Gallery, Washington D.C. inventory No. F1914.55 (Image in the public domain).

Yasuo Inamoto (n.d.) points out that the sculpture from the Nara Museum uniquely has in its right hand a seal inscribed with two characters: 滅罪, which means "extinguish one's sin" indicating the salvific power of the Avalokiteśvara. This is a particular power of the eleven-headed esoteric form of the Bodhisattva of Compassion. In regard to the seal holding Guanyin, Dorothy Wong (2012) explained, "Esoteric Avalokiteśvaras also became favorite deities for confession rituals, no doubt because of the bodhisattva's magical power to alleviate the sufferings of sentient beings." (p. 232). Wong (2012) further noted that "at the time of the death of Emperor Gaozong, Empress Wu also commissioned one thousand embroidered images of the Eleven-Headed Guanyin for commemoration," (p. 232) perhaps to help with his karma. What is more, Sherman Lee attested that "...judging from the testimony of early monastic and official documents of the Nara period in Japan, we know the Eleven-faced Kuan-yin (Guanyin) was also a devotional object for confessions and the redemption of one's sins." (Lee & Ho, 1959, p. 129). In addition, as an esoteric icon, the Eleven-headed Guanyin had a special role in the protection of the state in times of trouble and the threat of bad weather (Yan, 2006, p. 101). Yan Juanying

(2006) found that one of the seven Eleven-headed Avalokiteśvara statues has an inscription by a monk Degan involved in the execution of the commission, which reads, "Dedicated to the country, the Eleven-headed Avalokiteśvara that I erected with the wish that the emperor's foundation will last forever, and the holy life will be long. September 15th in the third year of Chang-an." (Yan, 2006, p. 100). The image, once formulated according to the scriptures, spread throughout the Tang sphere of influence. It appears frequently at Dunhuang. Lee Yumin (2008, p. 176), in an article on Cave 231, surmised that the scripture was important to the empress, and that like the *Dayun Sūtra* she had it disseminated throughout the empire, perhaps with illustrations like that of the *Dayun Sūtra*, which were carved on a stele in Taiyuan, Shanxi, a distance from the capital[23] (Soper, 1959a). Lee (2008) points out that the empress had a policy of promoting immigration to the borderlands "with large allocations of human and natural resources to the Dunhuang area." (p. 185). Due to the Tang political and cultural interactions with East Asia, similar images appear abroad. Sherman Lee and Waikam Ho cited examples of icons of the Eleven-headed Guanyin in a Chinese Eleven-headed Guanyin that was brought to Japan[24] (Wong, 2012, p. 238). It is well known that the Japanese court at Nara adopted Tang style, an international style that began in Guptan India and journeyed east through China[25] (Lee, 1994, 171ff). As Korea is part of the Chinese mainland, Chinese influence was prevalent since ancient times. With Tang China's sphere of influence, traffic of the Silk Road, and the visit of Korean tribute bearers to the Tang court, intercourse was frequent (Lee, 1994, p. 187). Indeed, Koreans appear as emissaries attending a funeral in a mural from the tomb of Li Xian, in Xi'an in 706 CE (Shaanxi Provincial Museum, 1989, p. 106, 117). So, in Korea, as well, there also are examples of the Eleven-headed Guanyin, although they are few in number. For example, at the built granite cave at Sokkuram, Kyongju, Korea (751-754)[26] (Harrell, 1995, pp. 318-335) one appears among the procession of fifteen figures carved on the circular main hall[27] (Kim, 2005, pp. 80-81). Looking at the sculpture, stylistic differences are not significant, but the figure is not as deeply carved, and the anatomical features are less naturalistic. Although the iconographical attributes are nearly exact, there is an added haloed standing Buddha on the lowest level of the headdress (Figure 13).

[23] Alexander C Soper, "A T'ang Parinirvāṇa Stele", *Artibus Asiae*, Vol. 22, No. 1/2 (1959a): 159-169. Illustration of the scripture appear on a Tang stele in Taiyuan.

[24] Wong (2012, p. 238) cites the Chinese Eleven-headed Guanyin, brought to Japan by Jyōe? in 665. Wood with pigments. Height 42.1 cm. Tokyo National Museum. From Nara National Museum 2005, Pl. 4.

[25] Sherman Lee, *Far East Asian Art* (New York Prentice Hall, 1994) see the chapter on the International Style. Chapter 7, p. 171ff.

[26] Mark Harrell, "Sokkuram: Buddhist Monument and Political Statement in Korea", *World Archaeology*, Vol. 27, No. 2, Buddhist Archaeology (Oct., 1995): 318-335. Sokkuram is a stone temple designed for the worship of a principal iconic representation of Buddha. It was constructed 19 km east of the city of Kyongju in South Korea between AD 751 and AD 754, forming part of the capital area of Unified Silla (688-935 AD).

[27] Lena Kim, *Buddhist Sculpture of Korea* (New Jersey, Hollym 2005) illustrates two examples, an Eleven-headed Guanyin with six arms from Samyeonseokbul p. 80, Fig. II-22a; and one from the eighth-ninth century in the Kyongju National Museum, p. 81, Figs. 11-23.

Figure 12. Eleven-headed Avalokiteśvara from Baoqingsi temple, Xi'an, Shaanxi province, China, Tang dynasty, dated 703 CE, limestone, Tokyo National Museum, Tokyo (author's photo).

Figure 13. Granite relief of Eleven-headed Guanyin, limestone, Sokkuram, Kyongju, Korea, completed in AD 751 and AD 754 over 2 meters tall (Image in the public domain).

Conclusions

Buddhist art reflects a complicated evolution of teachings, a complex iconography, and regional styles. Looking at Chinese medieval Buddhist art reveals the many traditions subsumed in its development. From its earliest aniconic days in sixth century BCE in India to the invention of anthropomorphic icons of the Buddha created in northern India in the first millennium, Buddhist art, in accord with regional artistic traditions and its patrons, changed greatly. In India, it was King Aśoka (c. 268 to 232 BCE), who, as a generous patron of Buddhism, commissioned the erection of stone monuments—stupas, pillars, and edicts—throughout his empire as testimony to his beliefs and as an inspiration to his people (Strong, 2002, pp. 101-132). In this and other ways, he not only unified the country under the banner of Buddhism but, in tandem with the core teachings, spread the religion abroad. In Asia, rulers followed his example as a grand patron and a national ruler. He was well known in China

especially to Empress Wu who commissioned images of him and acted in a similar fashion[28] (Strong, 2002, p. 132; Soper, 1959b, p. 271; Su, 1991, p. 145; Henansheng Wenwu Yanjisuo 1989, p. 231).

Whether categorized as pre-*Mahāyāna*, *Mahāyāna*, or Vajrayāna, the various visual embodiments of the doctrines and the image of the Buddha are largely recognizable throughout the sphere of Buddhist influence, but at the same time, they reflect the culture in which they were produced. Thus, with the transmission of the image eastwards, whether south through southeast Asia or north along the silk road, Buddhist art took on local characteristics as artists drew upon their native pictorial and religious traditions. Moreover, in times of political chaos, when regional power was strong, Buddhist art relied more on local teachings and visual traditions. While, in times of a strong, centralized, political government, a conformity of style prevails. That is, a national style emerges and is disseminated throughout the empire. Aśoka accomplished this in India, and in medieval China it was Empress Wu who espoused Buddhism and commissioned a multitude of extravagant projects.

Much has been written about Empress Wu, the Tang empress famous for being the only female in Chinese history to reign in her name and infamous for her cruelty, and lavish expenditure on Buddhist projects, often colossal in scale[29] (Guisso, 1978; Fitzgerald, 1956; Twitchett & Wechsler, 1979, 280ff; Rothschild, 2015). Later historians, fearful of future female rulers, besmirched her name, casting her as a usurper of the Tang dynasty and as a meddlesome woman of extreme brutality[30] (Twitchett, 1992). Current studies tend to see her in a more favorable light[31] (Chen, 1995, pp. 77-116); there seems to be a consensus of her skill as a ruler evident in the great prosperity of her reign bolstered by maintaining the recent geographical expansion of the empire and resultant prosperity resulting from tribute and trade along the Silk Route. Empress Wu proved to be an able administrator who supported the acquisition of rank and influence by an intellectual elite chosen on the basis of state exams, and thereby limiting the power held by aristocratic members of the court (Wills, 2012, pp. 128-148). Using historical materials preserved in Japan, Denis Twitchett attests to these accomplishments, but points out many were initiated by her husband, Tang Gaozong (r. 649 to 683) in the early part of his reign and that a great many intrigues and murders, even of members of her family, were undertaken by her order[32] (Twitchett, 2003). For the modern reader these are shocking, but such crimes were not uncommon in Chinese history. Indeed, earlier in the dynasty the second Tang emperor, Taizong (r. 626-649) had his brothers, potential heirs to the throne, killed[33] (Wills, 2012, p. 130).

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[28] See Strong (2002, p. 132) and Alexander Soper, *Literary Evidence for Buddhist Art in China* (Ascona: Artibus Asiae 1959b), p. 271 who discussed the famous Aśoka reliquary and its fame in China. Empress Wu commissioned images of Aśoka in 659 at Longmen, see *Zhongguo Shiku: Longmen Shiku*, 中國 石窟 龍門石窟, ed. Su Bai (Beijing Wenwu Chubanshe, 1991), p. 145 Fig. 148, and at Gongxian, see *Zhongguo Shiku Gongxian Shikusi* 中國 石窟 鞏縣石窟寺 (Henansheng wenwu yanjisuo (Beijing Wenwu Chubanshe, 1989), p. 231, Fig. 259. The image is carved outside of Cave 5.

[29] A great many studies focus on Wu Zetian: R. W. L. Guisso, *Wu Tse t'ien and the Politics of Legitimization in T'ang China* (Bellingham, Washington: Western Washington University, 1978); C. P. Fitzgerald, *Empress Wu* (London: Cresset Press, 1956); Denis Twitchett and Howard Wechsler, "Kao Tsung and the Empress Wu: the inheritor and the usurper", *Cambridge History of China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), vol. III. 280ff. N. Harry Rothschild, *Emperor Wu Zhao and Her Pantheon of Devis, Divinities, and Dynastic Mothers* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2015).

[30] Denis Twitchett, *The Writing of Official History under the T'ang* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992), 143ff, points out that it was not until the ninth century the historians questioned her legitimacy.

[31] Chen Jo-shui, "Empress Wu and Proto-Feminist Sentiments in T'ang China," *Imperial Rulership and Cultural Change in Traditional China*, Frederick P. Brandauer and Chun-Chieh Huang (Washington, University of Washington Press, 1995), pp. 77-116, does an impressive job of detailing a multitude of historical actions of Empress Wu's political activities as acts of feminism.

[32] Denis Twitchett, "Chen Gui and Other Works Attributed to Empress Wu Zetian", *Asia Major* (Third Series), Vol. 16, No. 1 (2003): 33-109. See the discussion of the Scholars of the Northern Gate, p. 52.

[33] The so-called "Incident at the Xuanwu Gate", see Wills, 2012, p. 130.

What is not in dispute is Empress Wu's patronage of Buddhism and the vast scale of her Buddhist projects. In the later anti-Buddhist era that followed Emperor Wu's (r. 840 to 846) persecution of the religion that began in 841, these projects also came under severe criticism for their waste of resources, outlandish display, and devotion to a foreign teaching at odds with the Confucian culture. Empress Wu's support of Buddhism was not limited to commissioning monumental art projects, she wrote several essays[34] (Twitchett, 2003, p. 33), and not only ordered the translation of scriptures brought to court by Buddhist monks but wrote the prefaces for some of them. Among the monks at court were Xuanzang (玄奘, 602-664), Divākara (地婆訶羅, 613-687), Bodhiruci (Putiliuzhi 菩提流志, d. 722), (義淨, 635-713), Fazang (法藏, 643-712), and Śikṣānanda (Shichanantuo, 實叉難陀, 651-710) (Weinstein, 1987, p. 44). Wu Zetian sponsored the compilation of a catalogue of the canon, *Great Zhou Catalogue of Buddhist Scriptures*; when it was completed in late 699, she personally composed a preface (Rothschild, 2015, p. 202). A number of her Buddhist writings are listed by Denis Twitchett (2003). Moreover, she assisted in the creation of a thousand-word Buddhist loan word dictionary, and worshiped the famed fingerbone relic of Famen (Chen, 2002, p. 33).

Then as now, Buddhism was not a monolithic belief, but an array of doctrines, rituals, and images based on various scriptures and their expression in art. As for these, Wu showed special interest in Amitābha (Amitofo) the Buddha of Eternal Life and Light in the West; of Avalokiteśvara, (Guanyin), the Bodhisattva of Compassion; and Vairocana (Dàrì Rúlái), the cosmic Buddha and various other esoteric and Zen teachings. In addition, in his book, Harry Rothschild discussed the many ways Wu Zetian identified with the Buddha of the future Maitreya (Mile), the Cosmic Buddha, and a pantheon of female deities: "…Wu Zhao built a pantheon of female divinities carefully calibrated to meet her needs at court. Her pageant was promoted in scripted rhetoric, reinforced through poetry, celebrated in theatrical productions, and inscribed on steles." (Rothschild, 2015, p. 226). Certain scriptures translated by monks at her court became the focus of intense study. Not the least among these was the Dayûnjing which many believe prophesied her coming to power as an enlightened ruler[35] (Forte, 1976; Guisso, 1978) and the *Avatamsaka Sūtra* (Wong, 2012, pp. 222-260). To these we can now add the *Great Expansive Sūtra of the Ten Wheels and the Eleven-headed Avalokiteśvara Sūtra.*

Many scholars have examined the murals and their iconographical import. Among them is Wang Huimin who made several detailed studies of the cave and the scriptures that informed their décor. Chenchen Lu (2012) offered an erudite explanation of the iconographic program of the entire cave in terms of images of salvation in an eschatological environment. Others included the cave in their studies on medieval Chinese Buddhist Art. It is fascinating how many interpretations these illustrations generated. In sum, the décor of Dunhuang Cave 321 reflects the many trends in Buddhist art in medieval China and the accomplishments in the development of Buddhism and its art at Empress Wu's court. We have the translation and illustration of many Indian Buddhist scriptures by monks under her directive. The art not only illustrated their contents but exhibited a new "International style" derived from Guptan India, with its new naturalistic ideal of beauty: multinational, variegated skin color, sensuous fleshy bodies in supple hip-slung postures, three rings of skin at the throat, and an emphasis on jeweled adornments. In the case of Cave 321, we see the appearance of such unlikely themes as multi-headed, multi-

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[34] Wu Zetians's writings, Buddhist and personal, are listed and discussed by Twitchett 2003:33ff.

[35] The *Commentary on the Meanings of the Prophecies About the Divine Sovereign in the Great Cloud Sūtra (Dayunjing shenhuang shouji yishu 暚黎醛稍妹佑蓼). This text provided a number of prophecies to legitimize her rule.* See Antonino Forte, *Political Propaganda and Ideology in China at the End of the Seventh Century* (Naples: Istituto Universitario Orientale, 1976); and Guisso, 1978.

appendaged icons, and hellish imagery that defy the strictures of Confucian aesthetics. In addition, we have seen these new images and teachings exhibited in Xi'an and Luoyang and disseminated as far north as Dunhuang and East Asia. The political role of Buddhist art is evident not only in Empress Wu's endeavors, but in those of the Yin family of Dunhuang who sponsored half a dozen caves there, as Ning Qiang (2004, p. 110, 114) showed.[36]

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[36] Ning Qiang, *Art, Religion and Politics in Medieval China* (Honolulu: Univerity of Hawi'I Press, 2004), p. 110, see also p. 114 for an extended description of the iconography of the *Treasury Rain Sūtra* (雨經變 *Baoyu jing*). Ning studied the illustrations in the context of the donors, the Yin family, an eminent and multigenerational presence in Dunhuang who supported Empress Wu by commissioning six caves at the site, including importantly Cave 96 with its colossal, seated Buddha of the Future.

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