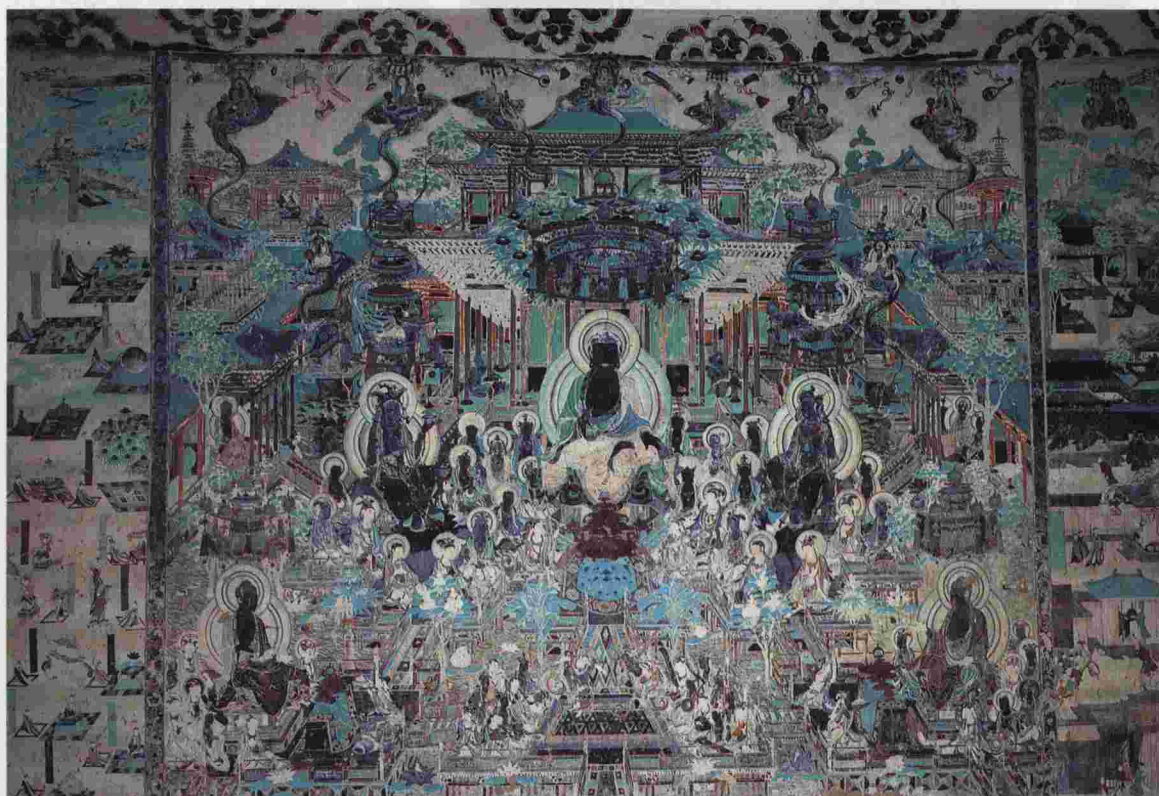


Reborn in Paradise: A Case Study of Dunhuang *Sutra* Painting and its Religious, Ritual and Artistic Context

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(Fig. 1) Illustration of the *Amitayurdhyana Sutra* Dunhuang, Cave 172, south wall Mid 8th century Height 300 cm, width 411 cm

Students of Chinese art will be familiar with Cave 172 at Dunhuang, from which painted scenes are frequently used as evidence of the emergence of a new landscape style during the Tang dynasty (618-907). These scenes are extracted, however, from two extraordinary and seemingly identical murals (Figs 1 and 2). Covering the cave's two side walls, the murals appear to mirror each other. Both illustrate the *Amitayurdhyana Sutra* (*Sutra on Visualizing the Amitayus Buddha*) and both were created around the mid-eighth century when artistic achievement at the Mogao caves reached its zenith. An analysis of these two pictures will reveal some important developments in art and art criticism during the High Tang period (705-81).

The paintings refer to the widespread worship of the Buddha Amitayus (Wuliangshoufo or the Buddha of Infinite Life) and related ritual practices. Their compositions also exemplify a pictorial formula prevalent during the Tang and require a particular method of viewing. However, their divergent drawing methods signify a 'competition' between art schools and styles, a phenomenon that marks a new stage in the develop-

ment of Chinese art that is reflected in contemporary art historical writing.

The iconography of typical Amitayus painting has been well researched. As seen in the two murals, the Buddha Amitayus, the master of the Western Pure Land, dominates the centre of a magnificent architectural complex and is flanked by the two *bodhisattvas* Avalokitesvara and Mahasthamaprapta. Surrounded by crowds of minor divinities, this trio dwells upon a platform rising above a lotus pond. Three smaller and interconnected platforms appear in the foreground. Beautiful dancers and musicians perform on the central platform, while the other two support additional groups of Buddhas with accompanying *bodhisattvas*. Naked children emerging from the lotus flowers in the heavenly pond symbolize souls reborn in paradise.

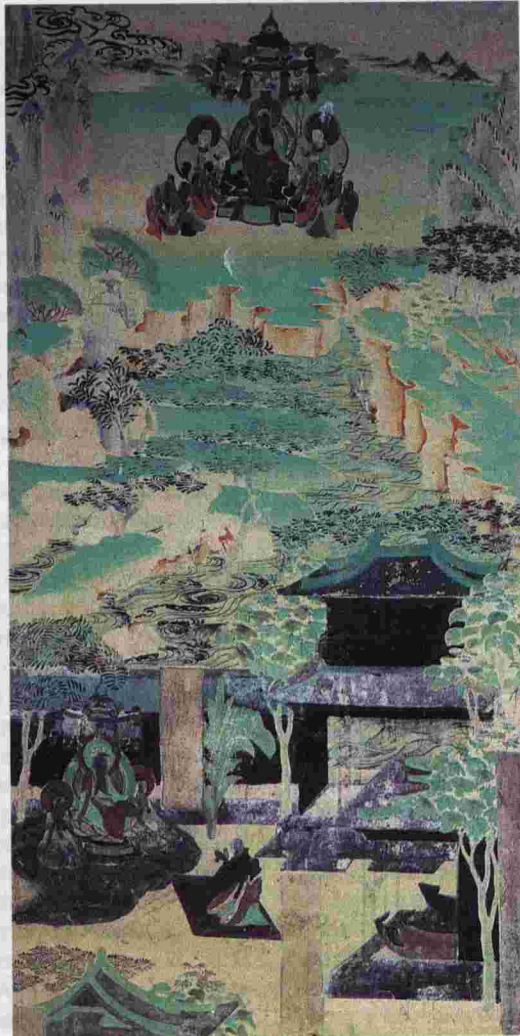
This composition is framed by two strips of miniature scenes. On one side, the legend of the wicked prince Ajatasatru is rendered in a visual narrative proceeding upwards (Figs 3a and b, and 4a and b). The prince arrests his father, King Bimbisara, and locks him inside a city gate guarded by armed



(Fig. 2) Illustration of the
Amitayurdhyana Sutra
Dunhuang Cave 172, north wall
Mid 8th century
Height 300 cm, width 410 cm



(Fig. 3a) Detail of Figure 1, the story of
Ajatasatru, side scenes of the *Amitayur-*
dhyana Sutra



(Fig. 3b) Detail of Figure 1, the story of
Ajatasatru, side scenes of the *Amitayur-*
dhyana Sutra



(Fig. 4a) Detail of Figure 2, the story of Ajatasatru, side scenes of the *Amitayurdhyana Sutra*

(Fig. 4b) Detail of Figure 2, the story of Ajatasatru, side scenes of the *Amitayurdhyana Sutra*



(Fig. 5a) Detail of Figure 1, the sixteen meditations of Queen Vaidehi, side scenes of the *Amitayurdhyana Sutra*

soldiers, hoping that the old man will starve to death. Queen Vaidehi manages to convey food to the king, but her act is discovered by the prince. In a rage, Ajatasatru is about to kill his mother when a wise minister stops him, and instead she is imprisoned inside the palace where she appeals to Sakyamuni, the saviour of suffering beings. The story is continued on the other side, but here the principal character changes from the evil prince to the virtuous queen (Figs 5a and b, and 6a and b). This narrative, read from top to bottom, represents the various stages of her spiritual cultivation rather than a series of dramatic events. Following Sakyamuni's secret instruction of the 'sixteen visions', Vaidehi meditates on the setting sun, on floating water and then on various components of the Western Pure Land. During this process, she gradually discovers the splendors of the Buddha Land, until Amitayus and all his golden host appear before her eyes.

The tripartite structure of the Cave 172 murals exemplifies a new pictorial formula that appeared at Dunhuang during the Tang dynasty. It combined three different pictorial modes with divergent religious significances; a dominant iconic image as the object of worship, a pictorial story as a 'commentary' on the *sutra*, and a narrative of Queen Vaidehi's actions as a visual guide for meditation. The central iconic representation differs markedly from the narrative side scenes in both religious function and visual logic. It is a single-framed, symmetrical picture centered on the Buddha Amitayus. The strong visual centralization is not only caused by the Buddha's frontal position, extraordinary size and solemnity, but is reinforced by the architectural setting which, employing a linear perspective rarely seen in traditional Chinese art, guides the viewer's gaze

toward the Buddha. The most crucial difference between this composition and the side scenes, however, lies in their divergent relationships with the spectator. The side scenes depict events in a narrative and are thus 'self contained' pictures – the significance of each scene is realized in its own pictorial context. The viewer is a witness, not an active participant in the events. In the central iconic composition, Amitayus, the only figure depicted in full frontal view, ignores the surrounding crowds and stares beyond the picture plane. Thus the composition is not self-contained since the Buddha exists not only *within* the composition, but also relies on the existence of a viewer or worshipper *outside* the picture. The design is based on the assumption that there is a direct relationship between the icon and the worshipper. In consisting of these three sections, the two Amitayus murals are not direct and static 'illustrations' of the original *Amitayurdhyana Sutra*, but rather actively interpret the *sutra* and help the worshipper comprehend it through a sequential reading.

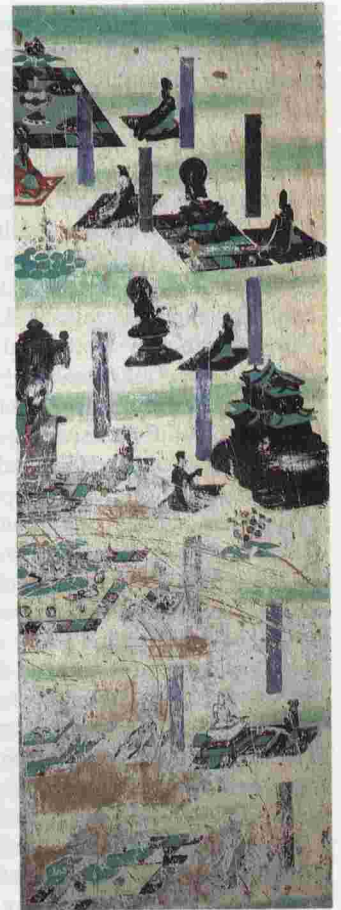
Based on Shunsho's (1255-1335) interpretation of the famous *Taima Mandara* (an illustration of the Western Pure Land, now in Nara, Japan), Arthur Waley has proposed that the Ajatasatru story is depicted in the two Dunhuang murals according to Shandao's (613-81) commentary on the *sutra* (Waley, p. xxi). Shandao, who also produced three hundred Amitayus paintings, interpreted Ajatasatru's evil conduct as a supreme example of 'contradictory causation' (*niyuan*), which eventually leads to good. (Thus, if King Bimbisara had not slain a *rishi*, the *rishi* would not have been reborn as Ajatasatru, and if this had not occurred, Ajatasatru would not have imprisoned his father. If he had not imprisoned his father, his mother could



(Fig. 5b) Detail of Figure 1, the sixteen meditations of Queen Vaidehi, side scenes of the *Amitayurdhyana Sutra*

(Fig. 6a) Detail of Figure 2, the sixteen meditations of Queen Vaidehi, side scenes of the *Amitayurdhyana Sutra*

(Fig. 6b) Detail of Figure 2, the sixteen meditations of Queen Vaidehi, side scenes of the *Amitayurdhyana Sutra*



not have visited him in prison ... and so on, finally leading to the point at which Ajatasatru's crime leads the queen to call upon the Buddha, and hence to her reception of the 'sixteen visions'.) Therefore, the Ajatasatru story both explains human misconduct and offers hope – sin will lead to good if one follows Queen Vaidehi's example portrayed in the second narrative sequence. This sequence also leads to the central composition, which represents the result of her meditation or that of any faithful worshipper – the vision of Amitayus and his wonderland. The sequential reading, from the meditation scenes to the Amitayus paradise, is moreover supported by Vaidehi's final visions of rebirth, which are illustrated not among the side scenes but in paradise. The process of rebirth is symbolized by the newborn infants emerging from lotuses of various shapes – first sealed, then half-open and finally blossoming with a dazzling light (Waley, pp. xxi-xii; Soper, pp. 145-46).

The appearance of Shandao's commentary in the seventh century anticipated a major change in Dunhuang art during the eighth. The earlier Western Pure Land murals composed as a single iconic scene were gradually replaced by Amitayus paintings with explanatory side scenes. This reflects a general shift in Chinese Buddhism during the Tang – both Shandao's commentary and the paintings were related to the increasing popularity of two kinds of ritual and related literature – *jiangjing* (lecturing on a *sutra*) and *guanxiang* (visualizing an icon).

The relationship between art, literature and performance has naturally been a favourite topic of Dunhuang studies, since the site yielded not only a huge number of art works but also the famous 'secret library', which contained many literary works

possibly related to visual art and oral performances. Most scholars, however, have concentrated on the relationship between certain paintings and *bianwen* (transformation texts), a kind of script for storytelling. I would propose a more important link between the art and literature at Dunhuang and Buddhist ritual – the relationship between abundant *sutra* paintings and popular *sutra* lectures.

Unlike *bianwen*, which were performed by and for the laity, a *sutra* lecture was a religious service given by a *dharma* master (*fashi*) to monks or laymen. While *bianwen* are rarely mentioned in Tang documents, abundant records of *sutra* lectures attest to their great popularity. The rituals of *sutra* lecturing were supported by the imperial house and welcomed by the common people. More than one famous Tang poet mentioned such religious activities. For example, Yao He (early 9th century) wrote that when a *sutra* lecture was held in a town, the wineshops and markets became empty and all fishing boats disappeared from nearby lakes. While some intellectuals attacked the vulgarity of popular *sutra* lectures, their criticism reflected the attraction of such religious practices. The eighth century writer Zhao Lin stated, 'dissolute persons egged him [the famous lecturer Wenshu, (act. 820-41)] on and supported him. Doltish men and loose women liked to listen to him. The audience packed themselves in temples, respected and worshipped him, and called him reverend. The music department, in imitation of his tunes, made songs and cantos' (see Xiang Da, vol. 1, pp. 41-69, for textual records of *sutra* lectures).

The popularity of *sutra* lectures matched that of *sutra* paintings, which are abundantly recorded in art catalogues from the Tang and preserved in almost every Tang cave at Dunhuang.

Both lectures and paintings spread Buddhism among people of various classes, and both were predicated upon an understanding that Buddhist teaching should suit different types of audiences. Even before the Tang, the monk Huijiao (497-554) had proposed that in propagating Buddhist doctrines, 'it is necessary to speak incisively of impermanence and to discourse trenchantly on repentance. For rulers and elders it is necessary to cite popular allusions and interweave set phrases. For the numerous mass of commoners, it is necessary to point to events and construct shapes, to speak directly of what is seen and heard. For mountain folks and desert dwellers, it is necessary to use neighbourly works and reproach with terms of guilt' (*Taisho Shinshu Daizokyo* [hereafter referred to as *T*], 2059.50.417). Both *sutra* lectures and *sutra* paintings did employ popular allusions, set phrases, familiar events and concrete shapes and were both exegetical and liturgical – while interpreting a *sutra*, the lecturer or the painter encouraged the audience to pay direct homage to the Buddha.

The ritual process of a *sutra* lecture can be reconstructed on the basis of several texts, including the record of a lecture attended in 839 by the Japanese monk Ennin (794-864) (E.O. Reischauer, tr., *Ennin's Diary: The Record of a Pilgrimage to China in Search of the Law*, New York, 1955, pp. 154-55, 298-99); the 'Ten Methods of a *Sutra* Lecture' by Yuanzhao (1048-1116), a Dunhuang manuscript that teaches how to deliver lectures on the *Vimalakirti* and *Wenshi Sutras* (P3849v), and scripts of various *sutra* lectures also found at Dunhuang. According to this evidence, the service would be conducted by a *dharma* master and a lecturer (*dujiang*), and would proceed through three basic stages. The first was a prelude during which the Buddha and the 'three treasures' were worshipped and Sanskrit prayers were chanted. A 'seat-setting text', which often ended with the sentence, 'You who want to hear the *dharma* please clap your hands; the lecturer is about to sing the heading of the *sutra*', introduced the second and major section of a lecture. The title of the *sutra* was read first, explained and commented on. The lecturer then chanted passages from the *sutra* and the *dharma* master explained them by citing popular analogies and parables. During the third and final stage, the congregation chanted prayers and made vows to save all mankind by transferring the merit of the service to others.

The whole process was punctuated by repeated invocations of the Buddha and *bodhisattvas* and the priests constantly guided the audience to worship the divinities. The Dunhuang *sutra* lectures, for example, instruct the congregation to invoke the Buddha after each step in the service. In a version of the 'Lecture on the *Amitabha Sutra*' from Dunhuang (S.6551), phrases invoking the Buddha and *bodhisattvas* appear regularly, indicating the moments when the lecturer was supposed to call on his audience to pay homage to the divinities. Rituals such as chanting prayers and making vows best reveal the devotional nature of a *sutra* lecture and link it to the art of *sutra* painting.

It is well known that Mahayana Buddhism is essentially a religion of faith, in which great emphasis is placed on the powers of the Buddha to aid those who believe in his teachings. *Sutra* lectures and *sutra* paintings both stemmed from this belief and share many religious elements. Their major difference is one of language. There are structural parallels between the two murals on the *Amitayurdhyana Sutra* in Cave 172 and a *sutra* lecture; between the 'iconic' images of the

Buddha and the 'invocations' of his holy name; between the pictorial and verbal analogies and parables, and between pictures illustrating the 'sixteen visions' and the worshipper's vows and meditation.

It is possible that *sutra* paintings and other visual aids accompanied *sutra* lectures. A passage in the *Sutra of the Righteous King* (*Renwang jing*) states that when a lecture on this *sutra* is being given, 'the ritual ground should be carefully decorated, and one hundred Buddha images, *bodhisattva* images and lion thrones should be placed there' (*Renwang jing*, 'Huguo pin'). This instruction was actually followed by Emperor Daizong (r. 762-79) when he ordered a lecture on the *sutra* in 765 (Sima Guang, *Zizhi tongjian*, *juan* 223). Some seventy-five years later, Ennin visited the Tang capital Chang'an and heard *sutra* lectures in the city's seven most important monasteries. In Zhang Yanyuan's *Famous Paintings of Past Dynasties* (*Lidai minghua ji*) and other Tang texts, it is recorded that important *sutra* murals decorated all these monasteries. Their subjects sometimes coincided with the *sutra* lectures delivered there. For example, in the Bodhi monastery (in Chang'an), where the *dharma* master Jigao lectured on the *Nirvana Sutra*, Dong E (early 8th century) painted the life of the Buddha (Acker, p. 269). Moreover, it was hoped that both *sutra* lectures and *sutra* paintings would arouse the worshipper's emotional response through a display of images and stories. According to Duan Chengshi, Wu Daozi's (act. 710-60) *sutra* murals in the Jinggong monastery 'are powerful and vigorously seething, the shapes transformed and gloomily strange. Beholding it, one's hair imperceptibly stands on end' (*Sui-Tang*, p. 192). His description recalls Huijiao's instruction that a *sutra* lecture should 'reproach with terms of guilt' by presenting 'what is seen and heard'.

It would be wrong, however, to rush to the conclusion that all *sutra* paintings were used in *sutra* lectures, not only because such an argument requires more evidence, but also because the physical condition of many Dunhuang caves would have made lecturing there impossible. In contrast to wooden-framed Buddha halls in monasteries, these caves are carved into a mountain cliff and most of them consist of double chambers connected by a narrow corridor. A wooden facade was then built in front of each cave. The rear chambers of such caves, which contain most of the paintings and statues (including the two Amitayus murals in Cave 172), would have been very dark and it is difficult to imagine that a lecture could have been held in such a narrow space.

Although the parallels between *sutra* lectures and *sutra* paintings indicate their common theological ground and methods of instruction, the religious ceremony directly associated with most Tang *sutra* painting at Dunhuang, and in particular with the Amitayus murals, is not the *sutra* lecture, but the ritual of *guanxiang* or 'visualizing an icon'. This association is suggested by the title *Guan Wuliangshoufo jing* (*The Sutra on Visualizing Amitayus*), which represents an advanced stage in the development of *guan* (visualization) texts. Here the word *guan* refers to a meditation process in which a worshipper visualizes the true images of the Buddha and *bodhisattvas* in his mind's eye, often by initial concentration on a painted or sculpted icon. A number of Mahayana *sutras*, which may have originated in Central Asia or China rather than India, teach such visualization techniques. Although these *guan* texts had existed in China since the mid-fifth century, the great popularity of the visualization practice in the Tang period is indicated by con-

temporary Chinese commentaries on these *sutras* and abundant *sutra* paintings.

The best guide to a proper viewing of the Cave 172 murals is an essay by Shandao, entitled *Methods for the Merit of Samadhi by Visualizing the Image of Amitayus-Amitabha* (*Guannian Amitofo xianghui sanmei gongde famen*, T, 1959.22-30). In his essay, Shandao promises that merit will be accomplished by painting and visualizing the paradise of Amitayus, 'If there is a person who depicts the adornments of the Pure Land in accordance with the *Amitayurdhyana Sutra* and who contemplates this precious land day and night, he will in his present life absolve his multitudinous sins accumulated over eight billion *kalpa*'. The process of visualization may be short or long according to the worshipper's *karma* and intelligence, but such differences will not influence the result, since all who are finally able to see the true image of the Buddha will be reborn in the Western Pure Land. The visualization process required constant effort over a prolonged period because, in Alexander Soper's words, it 'means a systematic building-up of visual images, each as complete and precise as possible, in a sequence from the simple toward the complex' (Soper, 144). In other words, the worshipper was required to recreate the Pure Land with infinite creatures manifested in the Buddha's light through deep meditation.

The question of how such miraculous images could be represented in the Cave 172 murals or any *sutra* painting leads to a reflection on the nature and function of these religious works. Indeed, the term 'representation' has often been wrongly applied to these paintings, since they cannot, at least on a theological level, possibly 'represent' the images of the Buddha and the Pure Land, which can only be found in the mind. Reading Shandao's essay, it becomes clear that these paintings were not conceived as the end result of a creative process, but functioned as stimuli for the reconstruction of the Pure Land through meditation and visualization. He distinguishes two kinds of 'seeing': 'rough seeing' (*cujian*), which refers to the faculty and activity of the eyes and the imagination, and the 'mind's eye' (*xinyan*). Only when the latter opens can one recognize the true beauty of the Pure Land. This is why when recommending that a worshipper meditate in front of a painted or sculptured icon, Shandao instructs him to close his eyes and let his mind alone work. He also warns that the scenes of the Pure Land visualized must be kept secret.

Shandao's essay, however, implies a contradiction; on the one hand, he claims that the Pure Land can be comprehended only through visualization with the 'mind's eye', and on the other, that visualization must be stimulated by concrete images and fashioning such images also promises enlightenment. This second thesis is the subject of a number of Buddhist canons, including the *Sutra of Making Buddha Images* (*Zuo fo xingxiang jing*, T, 693), the *Sutra of Achieving Happiness by Making Buddha Images* (*Zaoli xingxiang fubao jing*, T, 694) and the *Mahayana Sutra of Achieving Merit by Making Buddha Images* (*Dacheng zaixiang gongde jing*, T, 692). Such teachings must have greatly encouraged the construction of cave chapels at Dunhuang, where some seven thousand inscriptions by donors share a central theme of devotion.

For painters and sculptors devotion must also have meant the creation of religious images as fine and beautiful as possible. *The Mahayana Sutra of Achieving Merit by Making Buddha Images* states that an extraordinary icon maker is an incarnation of one of the heavenly kings. The majority of Tang

artists praised by contemporary critics were religious painters who worked in the genre of *sutra* painting, but what was the standard for their artistic excellence? Was there only a single standard or were there many? The two Amitayus murals in Cave 172 have been commonly ranked among the best Dunhuang paintings, but they are actually from different hands and the masters who created them belonged to different schools or traditions. These works cannot therefore be judged simply as better or worse versions of the same theme. They can only be compared on a stylistic level to illustrate divergent goals, emphases, techniques and visual effects.

The most striking difference between the two paintings is their overall visual impact. The mural on the south wall (Fig. 1) appears light, airy and gentle, while that on the north wall (Fig. 2) is heavy, solemn and intense. Such impressions result from the different colour schemes of the murals and the painterly or linear qualities of the images. The basic colours of the southern mural are white and green, but upon closer examination the green is revealed to be mixed with white, yellow, brown and blue, and applied with pale blue and pale purple. Unified in a harmonious whole, these complementary colours increase the subtle quality of the painting. In comparison, the mural on the north wall has strong tonal contrasts. Dark figures and buildings dominate the entire middle ground, which is framed by the white sky above and the water below. The painter used pure colours, mixing them only with white to differentiate tones. Instead of pursuing subtle variations, he juxtaposes large blocks to achieve a dramatic visual effect.

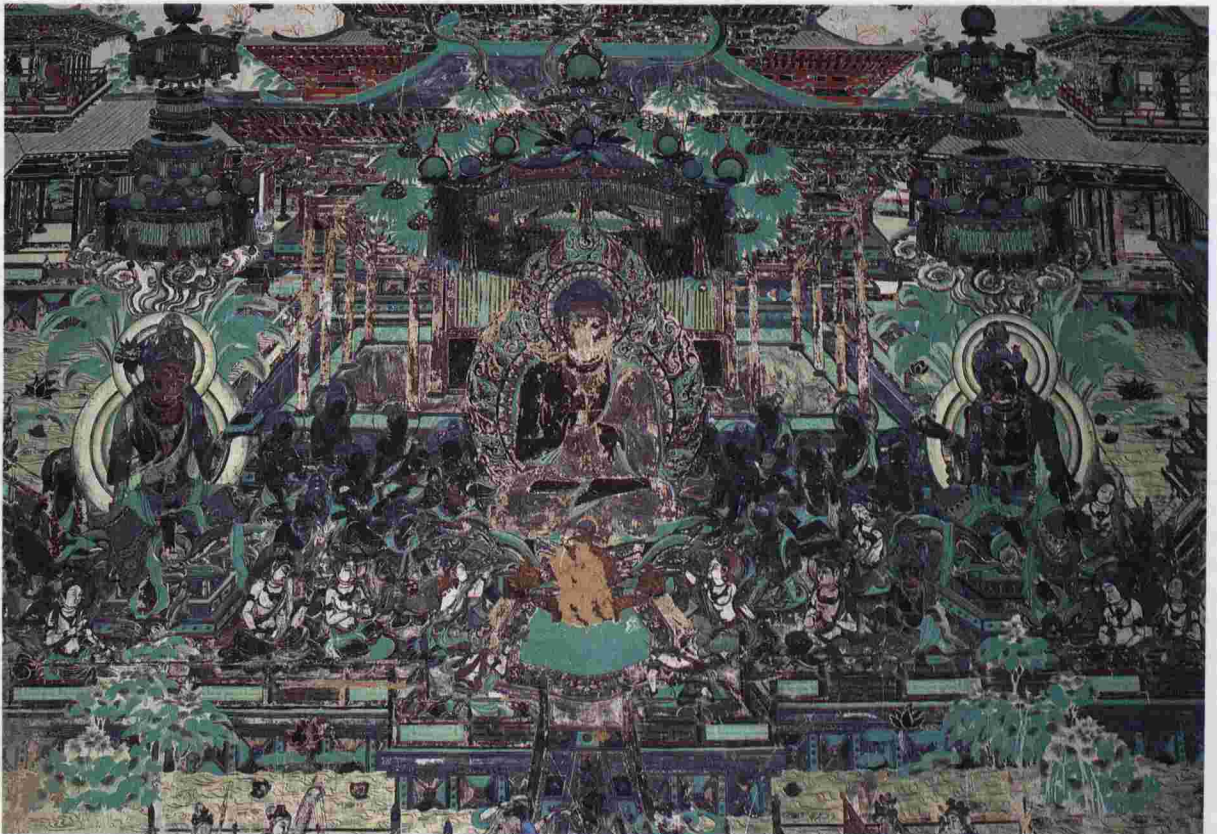
The different figurative style of the two murals is exemplified by their portrayals of Amitayus (Figs 7 and 8). The proportions of the figures vary; in the southern mural the Buddha has sloping shoulders and a wide, stable torso (Fig. 7) – a typical Sinicized Buddha image popular during the High Tang period. The northern image, on the other hand, has a larger head, broad shoulders and a narrow waist, reflecting strong Indian and Central Asian influences. The two Buddhas are attired in different costumes; one bares his right shoulder, his tight monastic robe revealing the shape of the torso (Fig. 8). The other wears a loose robe covering both shoulders and most of the body – the flowing drapery is now the focus of representation. Most importantly, the basic drawing methods differ; the painter of the southern mural favoured fine, even lines, which define the shapes and at the same time create a rhythmic pattern for the whole painting. The other painter stresses volume; the body elements of the Buddha and *bodhisattvas* are round and solid, and the outlines are either omitted or merge into shading.

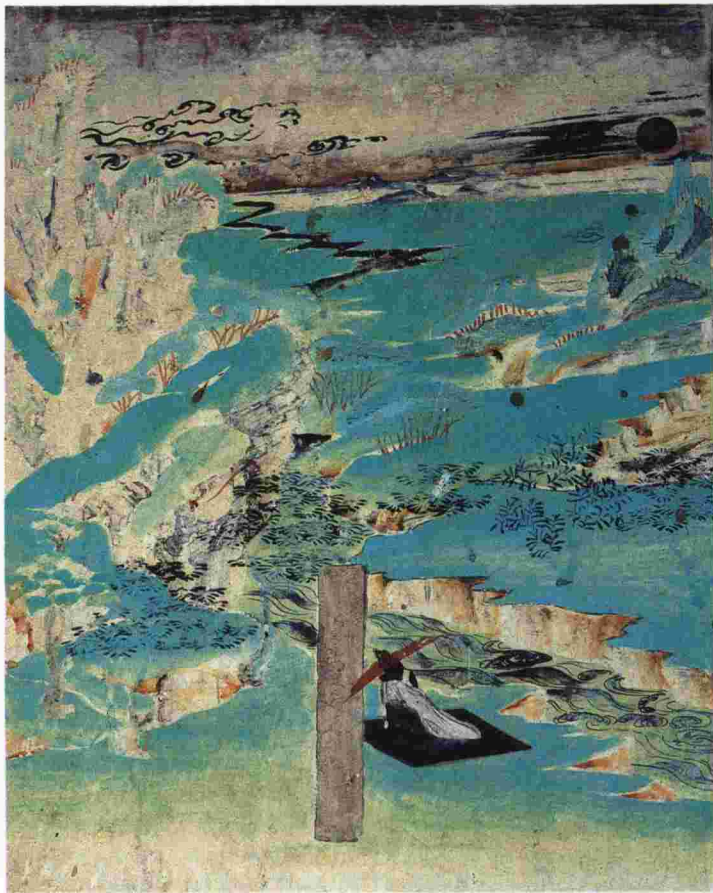
Such stylistic differences are found in all corresponding images in the two paintings – in the architectural drawings, in the pictures of Prince Ajatasatru's story and in the scenes of Queen Vaidehi's meditation (see Figs 1 and 2). It is the two painters' depictions of landscapes, however, that best highlight their divergent styles. The two scenes in Figures 9 and 10 illustrate Vaidehi meditating on the setting sun. The compositions are similar; a river meanders through an expanse of flat terrain, disappearing at the horizon. A verdant cliff stands on one side while on the other a distant mountain rises into the sunset. The scene on the north wall (Fig. 10), rendered in bold brushwork, is dominated by the river delineated in dark, abrupt strokes of ink. In the other scene, the river is conceived of as part of a larger landscape; the fine brush strokes and soft green colouring unify the elements into a coherent whole.



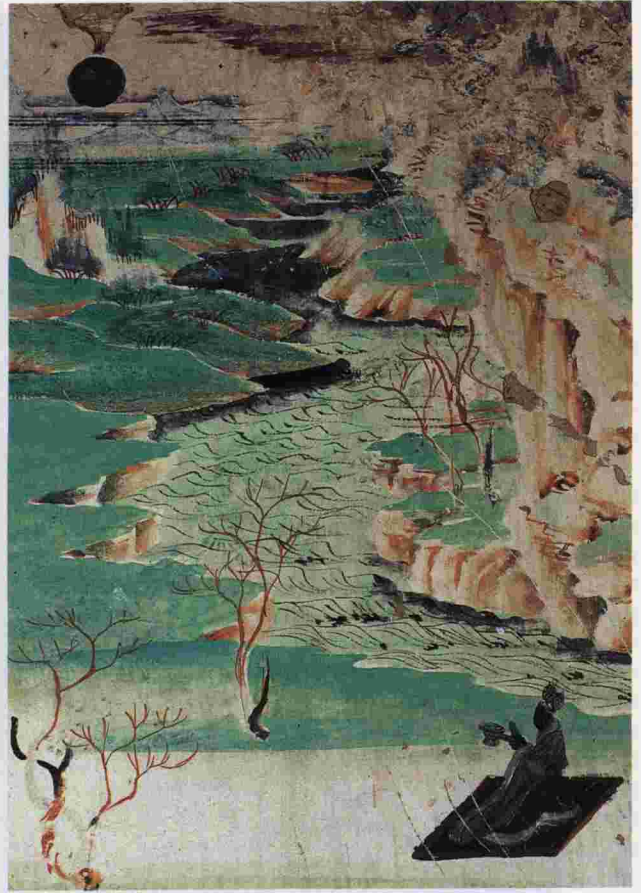
(Fig. 7) Detail of Figure 1, the Buddha Amitayus and attendants

(Fig. 8) Detail of Figure 2, the Buddha Amitayus and attendants





(Fig. 9) Detail of Figure 1, Queen Vaidehi meditating on the setting sun



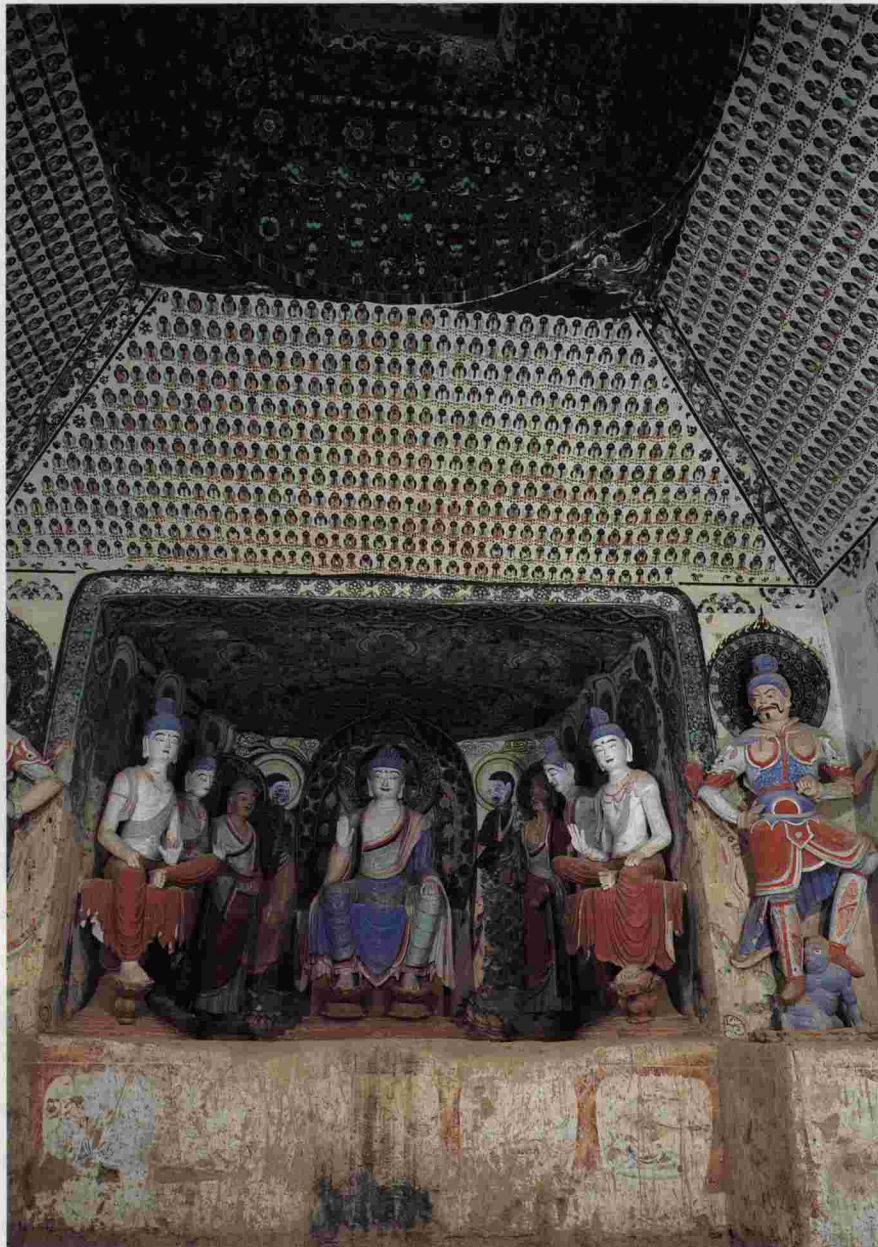
(Fig. 10) Detail of Figure 2, Queen Vaidehi meditating on the setting sun

The juxtaposition and opposition of these murals has two implications. They are similar in their religious function and significance, both being devoted to the Amitayus Buddha and serving as aids for visualizing the Pure Land. They are integral elements of the cave temple, and in keeping with the strict symmetry of the cave's layout, the side scenes in one painting are reversed in the other forming mirror images flanking the central niche on the rear wall (Fig. 11). On the other hand, the different colour schemes, brushwork and overall visual effect signify the artists' independent stylistic preferences. On this level, they were no longer collaborating in the decoration of a Buddhist cave, but were competing for artistic supremacy.

According to Zhang Yanyuan and Zhu Jingxuan, murals in Tang Buddhist temples were often executed by a number of painters, sometimes those of great renown. For example, Wang Wei (699-759), Zheng Qian (8th century) and Bi Hong (act. 767) each painted a wall in the famous Ci'en Monastery in Chang'an, and the seventh century artists Fan Changshou and Liu Xingchen together decorated the Jing'ai Monastery in Luoyang (*Sui-Tang*, pp. 76 and 247). It is also said that when the ninth-tenth century artist Jing Huan saw a painting of a heavenly king by Sun Wei (late 9th century) on the left wall of a temple gate, he 'became excited and created another image of the heavenly king on the opposite wall. The two painters vied with one another through their art, and their paintings were considered masterpieces of the time' (*ibid.*, p. 394). Murals in a temple were often painted by a master with the assistance of his students, but sometimes an outstanding student could dec-

orate a wall independently in his own style. As Zhu Jingxuan (9th century) records, 'Lu Lengjia [act. 730-60] was good at portraying the Buddha. Once he and his teacher Wu Daozi painted divine figures on two opposite walls in the Zhuangyan temple (in Chang'an). He elaborated Wu's style with his own inventions, and his art is still praised by people today' (*ibid.*, p. 227).

In some cases, artists working together tried to keep their techniques secret. Thus when Yang Qidan (act. late 6th century) and Zheng Fashi (6th-7th century) were decorating the Guangming monastery in Chang'an, Yang built a screen around his working area (*ibid.*, p. 25). Another anecdote relates that the monk Yixuan offered gold to the best painter in decorating Guang'ai temple in Luoyang. A contest was held between the two early tenth century artists Ba Yi and Zhang Tu, but the result soon became clear; while Ba was still making sketches on the left wall, Zhang had already completed his mural in one swift movement (*ibid.*, p. 411). A competition between individual artists could also develop into a conflict between regional factions. Zhang Yanyuan (c. 847-74) recorded such a case, in which monks and painters in Luoyang supported Liu Xingchen and those from Chang'an favoured He Changshou (both painters lived from the late 7th to the early 8th century). The latter was finally forbidden to work in Jing'ai monastery in Luoyang (*ibid.*, p. 76). The most extreme competition is illustrated by a tale which recounts that when Wu Daozi saw Huangfu Zhen's (8th century) murals in the Jingyu temple in Chang'an, he was so threatened by Huangfu's art that he murdered him (*ibid.*, p.



(Fig. 11) Central niche
Dunhuang, Cave 172
High Tang period, 705-81 (repainted
at a later date)

192).

Underlying these anecdotes there appears to be a contemporary emphasis on defining an artist by his school and tradition. While most pre-Tang writers evaluated only individual painters and their works, the Tang art critic Zhang Yanyuan devoted a whole chapter in his *Famous Painting of Past Dynasties* to various art schools and their transmission. According to this text, 'in every case there is a tradition from master to pupil, and all in turn follow one another' (Acker, p. 166). His criteria for a tradition were iconography and style (*ibid.*, p. 170).

A close analogy for the collaboration and competition between the painters of the two murals in Cave 172 is found in a famous Tang anecdote (*Sui-Tang*, p. 182). It is said that Wu Daozi and Li Sixun both painted the Jialing river in the Datong hall. Wu finished a landscape of three hundred miles in a day, but it took several months for Li to complete his mural. When their works were finally unveiled, Emperor Xuanzong (r. 712-56) judged the two paintings to be equally good.

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Suggested further reading

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