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Development of Buddhism: A Case Study of the Buddhist Art in the Tang Dynasty

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Abstract: Buddhism and Dunhuang Mo Gao Cave have long been hot topics among studies; however, there are few researches done connecting specific paintings to the development of Buddhism in general, drawing a connection between the artistry and the history of the development of the religion. Taking the painting on the southern wall of Cave number 172 for example, finally proving the painting's capability of reflecting the transformations Buddhism experienced in China, this essay completed an interdisciplinary analysis from the following three aspects: the cultural symbol of Pure Land, the visual presentation techniques used, and the historical event that contributed significantly to the development. In this way, this essay manages to touch upon the hot topic of the sinicization of Buddhism and the overall adaptive responses made throughout this course. Taking place specifically during the Tang dynasty, when Buddhism underwent a crucial phase of development, these adaptive responses also provide insights into the question of how ultimatrly Buddhism managed to get juxtaposed with Confucianism and Taoism, both already dominating in Chinese culture for years when Buddhism was relatively peripheral.

Keywords: Mo Gao Cave, Pure Land, Buddhism, Dunhuang.

1. Introduction

Buddhism, originating from India, entered China during the Han Dynasty. However, during this period, it was often conflated with practices of divination and mysticism due to the prevailing popularity of prophetic arts (谶纬之学 the study of chen wei). It was not until the fall of the Han Dynasty and the subsequent social upheavals of the Three Kingdoms and Jin Dynasties that Buddhism found fertile ground for propagation, eventually rising to prominence alongside Confucianism and Daoism, forming the Three Teachings that would dominate Chinese thought. With the patronage of the two emperors of the Sui Dynasty, Buddhism by the Tang Dynasty had adapted well to the contemporary Chinese cultural context after centuries of integration.

Located in the border region of Gansu Province, Dunhuang—the last oasis at the crossroads of China, Central Asia, India, and Persia—witnessed the gradual changes occurred to Buddhism along with its acceptance by the Chinese commoners. This change was visible in the shifted focus of depictions of the Western Pure Land—the ultimate destination for those who transcend the worldly existence —within Buddhist caves that were sponsored by various patrons seeking to accumulate their merits. Specifically, from the recorded sighting of the Buddha's enlightenment by monk Lezun to the magnificent imitation of the Western Pure Land that integrated architecture, sculpture, and

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murals, people began to use secular language to depict the transcendental world.[1] That is, as the ultimate spiritual pursuit of believers, Pure Land was increasingly visualized as a realm of worldly treasures, described as a terrestrial paradise "composed of gold, silver, lapis lazuli, coral, amber."[2]

However, the depictions of the Western Pure Land were not the only ones changed. In his analysis of donor portraits in the Mogao Caves, Zhang Xiantang notes the shift from a distinct separation between donor portraits and depictions of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas before the Tang Dynasty to a more interactive relationship in the Tang period.[3] Before the Tang, the relationship between believers and Buddhas emphasized the reverence and devotion, but during the Tang, the interaction began to signify a reliance on the Buddhas for worldly gains.

Focusing on the artistic phenomena, specifically, the southern wall of Mo Gao Cave number 172 constructed during the Tang dynasty, this essay aims to explore the factors behind the transformation of the Buddhist religious focus and to sustain them with historical evidence, finally reaching the conclusion that the fresco reflects how Buddhism have adapted to the soil of Chinese culture.

1.1. Cultural adaptations of Buddhism: Pure Land as a symbol appealing to the mass

The term "Pure Land" originates from the Sanskrit “buddhakṣetra”, meaning "a pure and adorned world," which is the ultimate destination for those who transcend worldly existence. And this pursuit of rebirth in the Pure Land is universal among different Buddhist sects, though sects differ from each other in the magnitude of their target audience; for instance, both Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism aspire to the state of "purity," while Mahayana Buddhism focuses on the purity of all beings, Theravada Buddhism emphasizes the individual purification.[4] Noting the significance of the concept Pure Land, the illustrations of the Western Pure Land served as a concrete expression of the followers’ ultimate pursuit, visually depicting the imagined paradise of the believing people. On the southern wall of Mo Gao Cave number 172 is exactly one of these illustrations, and thus a brief understanding of the contemporary’s pursuit can be obtained through the analysis of it.

First of all, the scope and component of Buddhism’s followers needed to be defined to address to the thesis of the universality of this religious shift from devoting to the Buddha to devoting to the Buddha’s kingdom.

First, it is essential to clarify that Buddhism was not distant from the lives of the people. During the Northern and Southern Dynasties (222-589 CE), the practice of lecturing on the scriptures, an activity involving reasoning and debate, began to emerge. Two speakers would engage in a question-and-answer format to explain Buddhist teachings. By the tenth century, these activities further evolved into "popular lectures," marking the beginning of early vernacular literature.[5] This illustrates how Buddhist activities’ interdependent nature deeply intertwined with the lives of the commoners: the activities influenced the commoners’ thoughts and beliefs while being re-interpreted by the commoners using their Chinese cultural background.

The Pure Land Sect, founded by Tanluan during the Northern Wei and further systematized by Daochuo, is a particularly representative example of surviving by gaining public agreement, with its practices and teachings appealing to the commoners.[6] The primary practice involves chanting "Namo Amitabha Buddha," with the promise that "even a lifetime of sins can be absolved with ten chants at the moment of death," ensuring rebirth in the Pure Land.[7] This accessibility allowed anyone to participate and gain some level of spiritual benefit, and the practice’s high reward relative to the minimal effort required gained the Pure Land sect wide populace. In addition to the low entry threshold to adapt the practice, the Pure Land Sect’s understanding threshold was demotic as well. For instance, the Pure Land Sect addressed people’s fear of death by preaching "if one chants Amitabha Buddha’s name, it eliminates sins accumulated over eighty billion eons of birth and death" and "when this life ends, rebirth in the Pure Land begins."[8] Using scriptures to replace the abstract language of nirvana with direct responses to the basic needs for peace and security during times of

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turmoil, the sect promises followers a posthumous arrival in a Pure Land that "surpasses all other worlds."[9] In this way, Buddhism was translated into secular and comprehensible language opened to the people of the bottom class, with the transcendental world transformed into a utopian mirror image of the mundane one.

2. Visual adaptations in the illustration: artistic expressions and cultural norms

In addition to the cultural adaptations Buddhism made (as exemplified by the Pure Land Sect), focusing on the depiction of the Pure Land on the southern wall of Cave 172, the mural's composition adopts traditional Chinese techniques for expression as well—such as the diagonal spatial perspective, a compositional method that matured during the Han Dynasty. Early examples of this technique include the Banquet Scene from the first century CE, found on the southern part of the western wall of a tomb chamber. This representation of three-dimensional space, derived from Han Dynasty art Niue to Chinese Buddhist art, is also known as "parallel perspective."[10] Additionally, regarding the composition of the Pure Land fresco of Cave 172, the symmetry of the composition is further enhanced compared to earlier Indian Buddhist reliefs, where the symmetrical layout around the Buddha is used to create a sense of solemnity and order. [11]

At the same time, the Ancient Chinese norm of "round heaven and square earth" is also reflected in the Pure Land mural on the southern wall, as visual presentation evidence for the blending of Chinese culture. Huang Liufang points out that the square shape of the mural, "with the gabled roof pavilion as the turning point," connects to the "Buddha transformations on either side of the jeweled earth," while the round shape centers on the central Buddha, passing through the Buddhas of the ten directions on the roof and the side halls and bridges below. [12] The "round heaven and square earth" worldview, considered the earliest cosmological concept in China, was recorded in the Western Han text Zhou Bi Suan Jing, which states: "The square belongs to the earth, and the round belongs to the heaven."[13] The geometric elements of "round heaven and square earth" used here represent the natural world's presence in the Pure Land, a presence that aligns perfectly with the Pure Land's order rather than being in opposition, as with natural disasters that undermine people' lives. By externalizing the ideal of rebirth and the goal of self-nirvana onto all beings and nature itself, the Pure Land concept is further illustrated through the traditional Chinese "round square" geometry.

Another noteworthy cultural norm is the presence of the performers at the bottom of the mural, where a group of sixteen musicians is arranged in a double-row V-shaped pattern. In the center, one person dances while beating a drum, and another dances while playing the pipa. The front row on the left consists of four percussionists, while the front row on the right consists of four plucked instrument players.[14] Such a composition is not deigned unintentionally. Records from the Western Zhou period in China already indicate the presence of organized formations for musical ensembles in formal ceremonies, like the grand archery ceremonies. Moreover, the musical ensemble depicted in the Han dynasty stone carvings in Shandong, which accompanies a dance performance, is even more direct, showcasing a formation where the ensemble faces the dancer. The arrangement of the eight-member ensemble in the murals of the tomb of Su Sixu in Tang dynasty Xi'an is strikingly similar to that of the Pure Land transformation scene in Cave 172—an arrangement of a horizontal double-layer formation with six people on the left, five on the right, and a dancer in the middle. In conclusion, the arrangement of the musical ensemble in the Pure Land mural of Cave 172 likely drew upon established paradigms in previous Chinese art creations of musicians and dancers.[15]

This indicates that the Pure Land concept in the Tang China was imbued with the cultural characteristics of the region. The distant otherworldly realm was imagined and constructed using the knowledge from this world: just as the mundane world has its treasures and expansive landscapes, so too does the Pure Land. In this sense, the underlying message of the Pure Land illustration is the

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secularization of Buddhism, where the Pure Land becomes synonymous with an ideal world envisioned by the people.

3. Historical event: Wu Zetian's utilization of Buddhism for political interest

Pure Land is an important Buddhist concept; however, previously, grottoes constructed before the Sui and Tang primarily centered on statues of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, with mural content often depicting stories and teachings, and the shifted focus to the Western Pure Land only occurred later during the Tang dynasty. The specialness of Tang dynasty within the course of Chinese Buddhism's development was connected with the transformation of Buddhism from a religious belief into a political instrument within a unified empire by the empress Wu Zetian.

Admittedly, after the establishment of the Tang dynasty, Confucianism and Daoism were upheld, as Emperor Taizong of Tang once stated, "The stability of the empire relies on the merits of non-action (无为, a Taoist concept)," and "The Way of Yao and Shun, the teachings of Zhou and Confucius."[16] However, in the early Tang period, the civil service examination promoting the learning of Confucianism and Taoism was limited in scale, with no more than forty Jinshi and one hundred ten Mingjing passing each year, thus leaving space for other religions and philosophies to spread.[17] A legacy carried over from the previous era of chaos, Buddhism experienced a flourishing period with its eight major sects becoming well-established, and many festivals came to bear the imprint of Buddhist influence during the Tang dynasty's zenith.

The turning point came when Empress Wu Zetian propelled Buddhism to its pinnacle. In her quest to rename the Tang dynasty to the Zhou dynasty, she sought to abolish the teachings of Confucianism and Daoism, which had been revered by the Li royal family. Her move was particularly motivated by the Confucian notion of male superiority, which posed a significant obstacle to her assumption of the throne. In contrast, Buddhist scriptures contain references to women becoming rulers, as evidenced in the *Mahāvaipulya Mahānirvāṇa Sūtra*, which Wu considered as potentially useful her legitimization of her rule.[18] That is to say, to solidify her position, Wu Zetian turned Buddhism into a political tool, fabricating Buddhist edicts and commissioning monks to "forgery" scriptures.[19] As a result, Buddhism effectively became the state religion of the Tang dynasty, with Buddhist-related activities, such as the worship of Buddha relics, becoming significant political events.

Under Wu's reign, buddhist belief began to permeate the secular lives of the faithful, allowing them to "gain benefits" in the mundane world. For instance, her ascent to power through the fabrication of Buddhist edicts, the legal immunity granted to Buddhist clergy and their families, and the elevated social status of monks and nuns (higher than commoners, but below the aristocracy) all illustrate this trend.[20] As Buddhism's utility gradually eclipsed its religious essence, it is not surprising that donor portraits in Tang dynasty Buddhist caves often depict devotees in a posture of supplication and reliance on bodhisattvas and the desire for the Buddha's kingdom ultimately supplanted the faith in the Buddha's teachings—Buddhism had become an integral part of the secular life of the Tang people, resonating with the earlier discussion on the secularization of Buddhism.

4. Conclusion

From the illustration of the Western Pure Land on the southern wall of Cave 172 at Mogao Caves, we gain insight into the cultural shift Buddhism experienced as spreading though China and entering the scope governor's vision. In conclusion, there are three aspects from the fresco from Mo Gao Cave number 172 to focus on that demonstrates how Buddhism have taken root in the Chinese culture during the Tang dynasty: the pursuit of the Pure Land, the visual presentations following Chinese artistic traditions, and the underlying historical event that provoked such a religious shift. After the Tang dynasty, the tripartite balance of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism was firmly established,

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and the influence of Buddhism never reverted to its inferior position during the Han dynasty, since the establishment and refinement of the Pure Land ideal provided Buddhism with a firm foothold in China.

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