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**The Thousand Buddha Motif
A Visual Chant in Buddhist Cave-Temples Along the Silk Road**

by

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ABSTRACT

As early as the fifth century C.E., the thousand buddha motif had become a prevalent feature in the art of many cave-temples in Gansu, China. Past scholarship concentrated on tracing the textual sources of the motif and with relating it to the practices associated with the devotion to the three thousand buddhas of the three ages. Past research has not considered how the thousand buddhas may have been a reflection of a wider range of religious practices and popular beliefs nor has it explored the motif's artistic origin.

By demonstrating that the earliest examples of the two-dimensional painted form of the thousand buddhas came from Gansu and that the motif was related to an iconographic and architectural design that existed between several Gansu cave-temple sites, this study proposes that the thousand buddha motif was a Gansu cave-temple art innovation that influenced cave-temple decor in areas west of Gansu. In addition, possible reasons for the prevalence of the motif are suggested by considering that it may have reflected the relationship between the thousand buddhas and meditative practices as well as the acts of chanting and circumambulation .

SOMMAIRE

Dès le cinquième siècle de notre ère, le thème des mille bouddhas devint un motif artistique dans de nombreux temples-cavernes du Gansu, en Chine. Les études précédentes se sont penchées spécialement sur l'origine des sources directes du motif, et également sur les pratiques religieuses reliées à la dévotion des trois mille bouddhas des trois âges. Les recherches antérieures n'ont pas pris en considération la façon dont le thème des mille bouddhas pourrait indiquer des pratiques religieuses plus vastes et des croyances populaires. De plus, ces recherches ont ignoré l'origine artistique du motif.

L'étude présente désire démontrer que les premiers exemples de peintures représentant les mille bouddhas sont d'origine de Gansu. Elle soumet également que le motif était relié aux ressemblances iconographiques et architecturales apparentes dans plusieurs temples-cavernes du Gansu. Cette recherche propose comme thèse que le motif des mille bouddhas fut une innovation propre à l'art des temples-cavernes du Gansu et que cette forme décorative influença le style des temples-cavernes à l'ouest du Gansu. L'importance du motif dans cette région peut s'expliquer en tant que relation entre les mille bouddhas et les pratiques de méditation, telles que psalmodier et déambuler de façon giratoire.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

As early as the fifth century C.E., the thousand buddha motif had become a prevalent feature in the art of many cave-temples along the ancient Silk Road in China. The significance of this motif has frequently been overlooked in studies of Buddhist iconography¹ because of its monotonous appearance, yet it played an integral part of cave-temple imagery and merits further exploration as an artistic innovation and as a reflection of religious practices.

This research is a contribution to Dunhuang Studies, a field that concentrates primarily on the art history of the Mogao caves,² and explores the following points. The thousand buddha motif, painted on the interior walls of the middle Northern Wei period (439-534 C.E.) cave-temples may be

¹The thousand buddha motif is not mentioned in Robert E. Fisher, *Buddhist Art and Architecture* (Singapore: Thames and Hudson, 1993) nor in Lokesh Chandra, *Buddhist Iconography* (New Delhi: Aditya Prakashan, 1987). In Dietrich Seckel, *The Art of Buddhism* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1964) and Chikyo Yamamoto, *Introduction to Buddhist Art* (New Delhi: International Academy of Indian Culture and Aditya Prakashan, 1990) the authors mentioned that the motif decorated pagodas and cave-temples and but did not offer an explanation for the motif's significance.

²The Mogao Thousand Buddha Caves are located 25 km southeast of the oasis of Dunhuang in Gansu and are comprised of 492 caves. Prior to the establishment of the Dunhuang Research Academy in 1944, the most extensive work on the caves was carried out by Sir M. Aurel Stein in 1907 and Professor Paul Pelliot in 1908 who each devised their own numbering system for the caves and retrieved vast quantities of manuscripts and other artifacts from a cache in what is now known as cave #17. For an account of their adventures and others who visited the Mogao site, see Peter Hopkirk's *Foreign Devils on the Silk Road* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980). In addition to the Mogao caves, Dunhuang Studies includes research on the Yulin, West and East Thousand Buddha caves and focuses on textual materials and cave conservation as well as art history. To date there have been four international conferences on Dunhuang Studies. The 1993 conference was co-organized by the Dunhuang Research Academy and the Getty Foundation and concentrated on conservation. Papers presented at the 1987, 1990 and 1994 international conferences focused on textual materials, the archaeology and art history of the caves.

understood as a visual invocation and incantation that developed as part of a regional architectural and artistic design in Gansu province, People's Republic of China, and reflected certain religious practices and beliefs current during the fifth and sixth centuries.

Parameters of the Study

Primary data

The Northern Wei caves #248, 251, 254, 257, 260, 263, 431, 435, 437 at the Mogao cave-temple site prominently feature the thousand buddha motif on their walls and provide the best preserved and most abundant materials for this research. In Chapter Two, the main features of cave #251 are discussed while the other caves are described in the appendix.

Supplementary data

Contemporaneous caves from the Buddhist cave-temple complexes at Bingling Si, Mati Si, Wenshu Shan and West Thousand Buddha Caves in Gansu (figure 1) that share similar iconographic and architectural features with those at Mogao are also examined in Chapter Two in order to support the idea that the motif developed as part of a regional style of cave-temple imagery based on current religious practices and popular beliefs. In addition, Chapter Two includes a brief discussion of Buddhist sites in China's Taklamakan region in Xinjiang province that contain the painted thousand buddha motif (figure 2). These caves are located between Gansu and the areas from which Buddhism was being transmitted to northwestern China and are therefore of significance in tracing the origin of the motif.

The artistic styles in the Xinjiang caves are said to have been influenced by those found in Gandhāra³ dating from the first to the fifth centuries C.E. and subsequently influenced the art at Mogao. Therefore, the view that Buddhist iconography was transmitted from the west to the east along the Silk Road is commonly held, yet the possibility that styles of iconography traveled in the opposite direction has not been raised. A comparison between the Xinjiang and Gansu sites complemented with the most recent chronology proposed by Su Bai of Beijing University⁴ for certain Xinjiang caves will help to demonstrate that the motif may have originated in Gansu.

Two-dimensional thousand buddhas

There are various forms of the thousand buddhas, such as painted, stone-carved, votive plaques, and engraved stelae. In order for the motif to be adequately analyzed, it is necessary to recognize that all thousand buddha motifs are not the same and that it is important to determine what each of the various forms of the motif represented during specific time periods.⁵ Therefore, only the two-dimensional painted form of this motif will be discussed at length with regard to its prevalence in Gansu Northern Wei cave-temples.

³Gandhāra refers to a region that occupied large areas of what today are northwest India, Pakistan and Afghanistan and flourished under the Kushan ruler Kanishka (78-99 C.E.). Its decline began in the fifth century. See Fidaullah Sehrai, *The Buddha Story in the Peshawar Museum* (Peshawar: Fidaullah Sehrai, 1988), 1-5.

⁴Angela Howard, "In Support of a New Chronology for the Kizil Mural Paintings," *Archives of Asian Art* 44 (1991): 69-72.

⁵He Shizhe, "Guanyu Beichao shiku qianfo tuxiang zhu wenti," *Dunhuang yanjiu* 3 (1989): 5.

Past Scholarship

Past scholarship on the thousand buddhas has been primarily concerned with describing the features of the motif and with relating the motif to textual sources such as *Xianjie jing*⁶ (*Present Kalpa Sūtra; Bhadrakalpasūtra*), *Fahua jing*⁷ (*Lotus Sūtra; Saddharmapundarikasūtra*), *Fo shuo guan Yaowang Yaoshang er pusa jing*⁸ (*Sūtra on the Visualization of the Two Bodhisattvas King of Healing and Supreme Healer; Bhaisajjarajābhaisajyasamudgatabodhisattvasūtra*), and *Foming jing*⁹ (*Sūtra on the Names of Buddhas*) all of which mention multitudes of buddhas. In addition, a preliminary effort has been made to establish links between the motif and Buddhist practices associated with these textual sources, namely the devotional acts associated with the devotion to the three thousand buddhas of the three ages. The following is a chronologically organized review of studies and prevailing views concerning the thousand buddha motif.

The textual roots of the motif were discussed by Alexander Soper in *Literary Evidence for Early Buddhist Art in China* (1959). He identified the *Bhadrakalpasūtra* and three additional sutras, each dealing with one of the past, present and future kalpas, as four possible sources for the motif.¹⁰ Each

⁶Alexander C. Soper, *Literary Evidence for Early Buddhist Art in China* (Ascona: Artibus Asiae, 1959), 201; Chen Huihong, *Dunhuang Mogaoku zaoqi de qianfotu* (master's thesis, Taiwan Guoli University Department of Art History, 1994), 33-38.

⁷Chen, *Dunhuang Mogaoku*, 38-46.

⁸Ibid., 46-47; He, "Guanyu Beichao," 4; Ning Qiang and Hu Tongqing, "Dunhuang Mogaoku di 254 ku qianfohua yanjiu," *Dunhuang yanjiu* (1986): 25.

⁹Chen, *Dunhuang Mogaoku*, 49; He, "Guanyu Beichao," 4; Ning and Hu, "Dunhuang Mogaoku," 25. In the Chinese Buddhist canon (*Taishō shinshū daizōkyō*) there are forty-eight entries of *Foming jing* which are texts that list names of past, present and future kalpa buddhas. See Chen, *Dunhuang Mogaoku*, 51. In addition, there exist two versions of *Sanjie sanqian foming jing* which date to the Southern Liang (502-557) and are a compendium of various *Foming jing*. See Ning and Hu, "Dunhuang Mogaoku," 27; Chen, *Dunhuang Mogaoku*, 48.

¹⁰Soper, *Literary Evidence*, 201.

of these texts lists the myriad buddhas that preside over their respective kalpa. In Soper's opinion, the idea of a plurality of deities that was so prevalent in Mahayana Buddhism probably influenced the notion of thousands of buddhas.

Another view was that of A. Ghosh who, in *Ajanta Murals* (1967), mentioned a panel of the thousand buddha motif in Ajantā cave #2 with a sixth century C.E. record that read *buddhāsahasā* meaning 'donation of the thousand buddhas'.¹¹ A significant amount of Buddhist art has been preserved in the famous wall paintings in the cave-temples of Ajantā in India and is frequently referred to when attempting to trace the origins of Gansu and Xinjiang cave-temple murals.

Ghosh wrote that a decline in artistic standards at Ajantā was reflected, for example, in the repetitive subject matter of painted rows of buddhas which represented the story of the Miracles at Śrāvastī,¹² a tale where the Buddha Śākyamuni was said to have performed three miracles, one of which was the projection of multiple images of himself to the heavens. The belief that the motif was a reference to this story was perpetuated in *Buddhism in Afghanistan and Central Asia* (1976) whose authors stated that the motif in the Xinjiang cave-temple site of Kumtura¹³ symbolized the Śrāvastī multiplication miracle and that the repeating buddhas became mechanical and stereotyped.¹⁴

¹¹A. Ghosh, *Ajanta Murals* (New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 1967), 39.

¹²*Ibid.*, 34.

¹³Kumtura is a Buddhist cave-temple site located 28 km west of the oasis of Kuqa in Xinjiang.

¹⁴Simone Gaulier, Robert Jera-Bezard and Monique Maillard, *Buddhism in Afghanistan and Central Asia Part One, Iconography of Religions XII*, 14 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1976), 9 and 24.

A descriptive approach to analyzing the three-dimensional form of stone-carved thousand buddhas in Northern Wei caves was presented by James O. Caswell in his article " 'The Thousand-Buddha' Pattern in Caves XIX and XVI at Yün-Kang" (1975)¹⁵. Caswell stated that he was only interested in the thousand buddhas as subject matter¹⁶ and focused on categorizing the motif into two types, which he called *Type 1* and *Type 11*, based purely on style. Although the nature of his study shed little light on the meaning and function of the motif, it did emphasize that there were variations of thousand buddhas and that studying the motif within a specific context could lead to a deeper understanding of it.

In a similar vein, but far more comprehensive, was Ning Qiang and Hu Tongqing's article "Dunhuang Mogaoku di 254 ku qianfohua yanjiu " (1986) which presented a study of the painted thousand buddha motif in the Northern Wei cave #254 at the Mogao site. In addition to a thorough description of the motif, the authors attempted to determine the textual sources as well a meaning for the motif and stated that the thousand buddhas had a different meaning at different times.¹⁷

Ning and Hu pointed out that in the case of cave #254 a cartouche was painted alongside every image in the motif for the purpose of inscribing a name of a buddha. Based on extant inscriptions, it was discovered that the names corresponded to those found in the *Sanjie sanqian foming jing*.¹⁸

The *Foming jing* form part of what has been called *qianfo xinyang*, or the devotion to the thousand buddhas, which was based on *sanshi sanqianfo*

¹⁵Yungang (Yün-Kang) is a Buddhist cave-temple site situated 10 km from Datong in Shanxi province.

¹⁶James O. Caswell, "The 'Thousand-Buddha' Pattern in Caves XIX and XVI at Yün-Kang," *Ars Orientalis* 10 (1975): 36f.

¹⁷Ning and Hu, "Dunhuang Mogaoku," 25.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 28

xinyang, or the devotion to the three thousand buddhas of the three ages.¹⁹ The authors proposed that the practices of writing names of buddhas and creating buddha images were part of *qianfo xinyang* and that the painted thousand buddha motif with the cartouches embodied these practices.²⁰ In addition, they suggested that the practices of circumambulating the cave's central pillar, chanting, making offerings and paying respect to the Buddha were also related to the motif.²¹

He Shizhe's study of the motif in "Guanyu Beichao shiku qianfo tu xiang zhu wenti" (1989) examined the thousand buddhas in caves dating to the Northern Dynasties (386-581 C.E.) and elaborated on Ning and Hu's approach of focusing on the motif at a particular period of time and of relating it to certain textual sources. He further contributed several explanations for the motif's popularity which were: that the motif adorned the walls of the caves for purely decorative purposes, that the motif was related to beliefs expressed in the *Fahua jing*, the motif was linked to the current practice of chanting the name of the Buddha during the Northern Wei period, and that it reflected Northern Wei practices of thousand buddha worship which consisted of writing, reciting and paying obeisance to buddha names in order to accrue merit and end suffering.²²

The most recent extensive research on the motif was done by Chen Huihong in her thesis entitled *Dunhuang Mogaoku zaoqi de qianfotu* (1994). She identified Chinese textual sources which mention the idea of multiple buddhas and then proposed that an expansion of the concept of multiple buddhas found in these texts took place in the early fifth century C.E..

¹⁹Ibid., 28-29.

²⁰Ibid., 29.

²¹Ibid.

²²He, "Guanyu Beichao," 42

According to Chen, the *Xianjie jing* also included names of past and future age buddhas which increased in number and became *sanjie sanqianfo*, or the three thousand buddhas of the three kalpas.²³

Chen suggested that the expansion of the multiple buddhas developed in three stages and that the motif in Mogao caves #251, 257, 254, 263, 260, 435, which date to the middle period of the Northern Wei and have central pillars, reflected the second stage characterized by the theme of the three thousand buddhas from the three kalpas.²⁴

Based on He Shizhe's article, Chen restated that the buddhas in the motif of Mogao cave #254 represented the thousand buddhas of the past and future kalpa while the present kalpa was represented by statues of Śākyamuni and Maitreya.²⁵ Therefore, Chen proposed that because the images in the motif represented those of past and future kalpa buddhas which complemented the statues of present kalpa buddhas, the motif was integral to the cave's theme of the three thousand buddhas of the three kalpas.

The author also pointed out that the painted scene known as *shuofatu*, or preaching buddha, was also connected with the thousand buddhas since the motif almost always surrounds this scene.²⁶ Although Chen only offered a brief explanation that the relationship between the two was related to meditation,²⁷ she again inferred that the motif should be understood as a component of a larger theme within the cave.

Ghosh's dating and description of the thousand buddha motif at Ajantā as well as He Shizhe's proposed explanations for the popularity of the motif

²³Chen, *Dunhuang Mogaoku*, 46.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 113.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 145. Although Maitreya is the Future Buddha he is mentioned in the *Xianjie jing* (*Present Kalpa Sūtra*).

²⁶*Ibid.*, 102.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 101.

coupled with Ning Qiang, Hu Tongqing and Chen Huihong's observations that the motif was related to other features in the cave have inspired the following ideas which are explored in Chapters Three and Four.

Thousand Buddha Motif - A Gansu Cave-Temple Art Innovation

Since the art in the caves at Mogao is generally perceived to be the result of a fusion of indic and sinitic cultures, research on the art tends to focus on tracing the origins of the subject matter to India, Central Asia or other regions in China. Chapter Three considers the possibility that the thousand buddhas in the two-dimensional artistic form of mural painting originated in Gansu and spread west to the Taklamakan region in Xinjiang and then to India.

The only extant Indian example of the two-dimensional thousand buddha motif is found at Ajantā and, as Ghosh pointed out, dates approximately to the sixth century C.E.. However, the thousand buddhas became a prevalent artistic theme in many cave-temple sites in Gansu where these sites were referred to, and still are, as *qianfodong*, or thousand buddha caves. The earliest paintings of the thousand buddha motif in China are found in cave #169 at the site of Bingling Si and are dated by an inscription to 420 C.E.. In the Taklamakan region, where cave-temple art flourished, there are no remaining examples of the motif which date earlier than cave #169 at Bingling Si or the Northern Wei caves at Mogao.

Further investigation of early Buddhist cave-temple sites in Gansu in addition to Mogao, as well as an examination of a Chinese Buddhist iconographic form with the theme of one thousand, that of the thousand-handed thousand-eyed Guanyin, will help to illustrate that this motif may

have originated in the fifth century in Gansu and influenced cave-temple decor in areas west of Mogao.

Prevalence of the Motif - Thousand Buddhas as Subject Matter

Chapter Four explores the possible influences for the preference of the thousand buddha motif over other painted subject matter as the most prevalent artistic feature in the Northern Wei caves.

The relationship between Mogao art and Buddhist texts is obvious, *Jataka* murals in caves #254, 257, 260 and the motif's connection with the *Foming jing* in cave #254 are clear examples. Another possible link is that between the motif and the *Guan fo sanmei hai jing* (*Sūtra on the Sea of the Samādhi of Buddha Visualization*, hereafter *Sea Sūtra*) which focuses on the visualization of Śākyamuni Buddha and the multiplication of his image filling an entire chamber,²⁸ a scene that recalls the way in which the thousand buddha motif occupies the walls of caves.

In addition, the body of literature consisting of incantations and spells known as *dhāraṇī*, *mantra* and *shenzhou* may have also been related to the motif. The *Gaoseng zhuan* (*Biographies of Eminent Monks*) recorded that Dharmakṣema, a Buddhist monk active in the fifth century C.E. in Gansu, was well-versed in these texts and was known to practice the chanting of spells.²⁹ *Dhāraṇī* texts dating to the fifth century C.E. were found among the manuscripts hidden in Mogao cave #17³⁰ thereby further demonstrating that the practice of chanting incantations was known in Gansu.

²⁸Soper, *Literary Evidence*, 190.

²⁹Hui Jiao, *Gaoseng zhuan*, (Beijing: Zhongguo shuju chubanshan, 1992), 76. Also see Robert Shih, *Biographies des moines éminents (Kao seng tchouan) de Houie-kiao* (Louvain: Institut Orientaliste, 1968), 99.

³⁰Stanley Kenji Abe, *Mogao Cave 254: A Case Study in Early Chinese Buddhist Art* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International), 118. Abe wrote that in the Stein Collection of

In Dharmakṣema's time, it was believed by travelers that the route through which the Silk Road passed was brimming with demons and protective spiritual power was required to ensure a safe journey.³¹ Surrounded by the desolateness of the desert and the perils of the Silk Road, an incantation in the form of a protective spell would seem appropriate for a traveler venturing through this unsafe world. If that chant were to be visually represented in a Buddhist cave-temple set amidst this route, the repeated image of a buddha covering the walls of the cave could symbolize the familiar oral repetition of an incantation.

Building on the idea put forward by Chen, and Ning and Hu that the motif appears to be related to other elements in the caves as well as to devotional practices, the final part of Chapter Four considers how the motif may have been incorporated into practices of chanting and circumambulation which were related to the notion of karma and how a rotation around the pillar could be understood as a passage through time.

The central pillar in the Northern Wei caves suggests that the most basic merit-making act, that of circumambulation, was practiced.³² Another

manuscripts obtained from Mogao cave #17 there were five examples of the *dhāraṇī* *Da fangdeng tuoluoni* which was translated at Zhangye in Gansu under the Northern Liang sometime between 402-413. In addition, he wrote about another Dunhuang manuscript with a Northern Liang regnal date corresponding to 422 that contained a collection of *dhāraṇīs*.

³¹ Michel Strickmann, "India in the Chinese Looking Glass," in *The Silk Road and the Diamond Path*, ed. Deborah E. Klimburg, (Los Angeles: UCLA Art Council, 1982), 53.

³² Seckel, *The Art of Buddhism*, 72. Whether the Buddhist adherents who practiced devotional acts, such as circumambulation, in the caves were clergy or lay, of elite or common background, remains speculative. Abe proposed that the elite class of Dunhuang was the primary supporter of Mogao cave #254 (see Abe, *Mogao Cave 254*, 149) therefore it may be surmised that this class performed rituals in the cave. Some of the practices that may have been performed in the cave, such as visualization meditation which is discussed in Chapter Four, involved practices that only experienced practitioners (either members of the clergy or laypeople) could perform. Since the Northern Wei caves were among the earliest at Mogao and due to the site's location outside of the oasis of Dunhuang and taking Abe's research into account, it does not seem likely that these caves were accessible to everyone.

familiar merit-accruing act, that of reciting sutras, may have also been a part of the devotional practices performed in the caves since the cartouches painted adjacent to the images in the motif in cave #254 were inscribed with names of buddhas from the *Sanjie sanqian foming jing* and appear to have been intended to be chanted.³³ Ning Qiang and Hu Tongqing's study of the inscriptions of names in the cartouches in cave #254 show that, according to a clockwise circumambulation of the pillar (Buddhist tradition calls for clockwise circumambulation in order to bare the right shoulder to the sacred object), the names were arranged in an order of past kalpa buddhas followed by future kalpa buddhas. He Shezhi proposed that the present kalpa was represented by statues of Śākyamuni and Maitreya therefore the three ages were represented in the cave. Ritual calls for several rotations around the pillar, thereby symbolically walking the circumambulator through the three kalpas, turning this passage into a cyclical one by linking future with past. The Buddhist notion of cyclical time is closely linked to the notion of karma and to the doctrine of rebirth. If the practice of circumambulation was performed as a means to accumulate merit and eventually end the round of rebirth, the thousand buddhas as a representation of the ages, could be understood as a symbol of cyclical time and would play an intrinsic part of this process.

The motif may have arisen by combining ideas reflected in several texts, beliefs, and practices and could, therefore, correspond to the needs of a worshiper depending on the practice being performed in the cave. Interpreted in this way, the polyvalent nature of the motif would be fitting subject matter for cave-temple murals.

³³ Although all the caves examined for this research have cartouches, only Mogao cave #254 has extant inscriptions. This matter is discussed further in Chapter Four.

CHAPTER TWO

Data Description

The spread of Buddhism to the oases of Xinjiang and Gansu led to the establishment of cave-temples which developed into religious centres and sites of Buddhist art. In order to emphasize a similarity in the design of these caves, this chapter examines the predominant artistic and architectural features of the Northern Wei caves at Mogao and describes contemporaneous caves in Gansu's Hexi Corridor as well as relevant sites along the Silk Road in Xinjiang.

The Mogao cave-temple site, situated approximately 25 km southeast of the oasis town of Dunhuang in Gansu, houses China's most extensive collection of Buddhist art. The site is comprised of 492 caves and niches hewn from a cliff face at the foot of the Mingsha Mountains. With the exception of the northern group of undecorated caves which probably served as living quarters for monks and artists,¹ the caves were decorated with murals and statuary among which the earliest belong to the Northern Wei period.² The Dunhuang Research Academy dated the Northern Wei caves #248, 251, 254, 257, 259, 260, 263, 431, 435, and 437 based primarily on stylistic criteria³ and placed them between 439-534 C.E.

¹Abe, *Mogao Cave 254*, 1. "Artists" here refers broadly to the draughtsmen, craftsmen, painters and sculptors etc. who participated in decorating the caves.

²The earliest caves are divided into two periods of which the first includes three Northern Liang caves # 268, 272, and 275 and the second refers to Northern Wei caves. See Abe, *Mogao Cave 254*, 41.

³The dating is based on a range of stylistic criteria including the shape of the caves, pigments and drawing techniques employed in the murals, costumes of bodhisattvas, and the form of the statuary etc. In addition, cave #285 contains an inscription dated to the Western Wei and its architecture, murals and statuary also serve as a means to date the Northern Wei caves.

MOGAO CAVES

Architecture

The caves are built on an east-west axis with the entrance facing east. Their interior lay-out consists of two sections which are delineated by the ceiling. The front of the cave has a gabled ceiling and is clearly distinguished from the back section of the cave which has a flat ceiling. The rear section contains a large square pillar which is the central architectural feature of the cave (figure 4). It is a solid piece of the original stone and connects from the floor to the ceiling with carved niches on all four sides in which Buddhist statuary is placed.

Iconography

The iconography is varied and can be categorized as two- or three-dimensional. Throughout this study, the former refers to paintings on the walls and the latter to statues in the pillar niches made from clay modelled over wooden armature.

Two-dimensional:

The north, south, west, and east walls of the interior of the caves are painted with imagery. The murals on the front section of the north and south walls under the gabled ceiling, for the most part, mirror each other. Similarly, the murals on the north and south walls facing the pillar in the back section of the caves are usually symmetrical. The east wall is broken by the entrance to the cave and therefore its wall-paintings do not mirror the mural on the west wall.

The most prevalent two-dimensional form of imagery is the thousand buddha motif and is found on almost every wall in the Northern Wei caves. In addition, the scene known as *shuofatu* (plate 1) frequently adorns the walls

and is a depiction of the Buddha Śākyamuni preaching his teachings surrounded by the thousand buddha motif.

The motif consists of registers of small buddhas seated in meditation (*dhyāna*) in the lotus position (*padmāsana*). Each buddha is placed beneath a canopy and sits on a lotus throne with a halo and mandorla drawn behind the figure. A cartouche is painted to the left of each buddha and measures approximately 1-1.5 cm in width and 6-8 cm in height.⁴ The outlines of the ears, eyes, nose, mouth, and lines around the neck have widened over time due to a fading of a second layer of lighter pigment that was applied to create a shading effect. What now remains is the first layer of a darker colour that causes an unusual effect of large ears and eyes encircled with dark rings (plate 2).

According to Ning and Hu's study, the buddha images in cave #254 are all approximately the same size measuring 17.5 cm in length and 9 cm in width.⁵ There are, however, variations in the images. The figures are either wearing a robe that covers both shoulders and the chest or a robe that covers both shoulders but is open at the chest and reveals the undergarment. The buddhas are also differentiated by alternating colours of clothing, halos, canopies, and lotus thrones.

Lines beneath the thousand buddha motif are clearly visible in the Northern Wei cave #263, indicating that it was painted on the walls with a grid pattern technique (figure 5).⁶ Similarly, in the Western Wei

⁴Ning and Hu, "Dunhuang Mogaoku," 23.

⁵Ibid. These are the approximate measurements for the images in the motif in all the Northern Wei caves at Mogao.

⁶This cave also contains the thousand buddha motif dating to the Western Xia (1038-1227) but the grid pattern underlies the motif dating to the Northern Wei.

(535-557 C.E.) cave #249, which has been reproduced in the Mogao Caves Museum where the motif can be closely examined, the grid pattern has also been preserved. This method of making the motif continued in the Dunhuang area, as is evident from visible grid lines in cave #8 at the West Thousand Buddha Caves (this site is discussed below) which is dated to the Tang dynasty (618-907 C.E.).

Another way of drawing the motif was with a pounce, examples of which were found among the Stein and Pelliot collections of artifacts from Dunhuang. The process involved applying a red powder to a stencil with punctures that outlined the shape of a buddha which then left a trace of red dots on the wall. The dots were then connected to form the full figure of the buddha.⁷

Three-dimensional:

The statuary, which is placed primarily in the niches on the four faces of the pillar, represent images of Śākyamuni Buddha and the future Buddha Maitreya. These statues reflect a strong Gandhāran influence in their wavy hair, round eyes as well as the robe draped over the shoulders with distinctive folds shaped to accentuate the posture. They represent a transitional phase in Chinese Buddhist statuary which incorporated Central Asian and northwestern Chinese styles.

One large niche is carved out of the east face of the central pillar and houses the main icon while smaller buddha statues are situated in the upper and lower niches on the north, west and east faces. Among the caves examined in this study, #259 and #248 are exceptions. The former is the

⁷Sarah Fraser presented a picture of a stencil used to make the motif during her lecture on the relationship between draft sketches and Dunhuang murals at the 1994 Dunhuang International Conference. Also see Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle de Paris, *La route de la soie* (Paris: Arthaud, 1985), 102.

earliest Northern Wei cave⁸ and the first to have a pillar-like structure which appears to have been the proto-type for the four-faced pillars in the other Northern Wei caves (plate 3). It only has an east face that protrudes from the west wall and therefore cannot be circumambulated.⁹ Among the caves with four-faced pillars, #248 is the only cave to have a single tier of niches on the south, west and north faces of its central pillar whereas the other caves have two tiers.

The following is a brief description of the Buddha statues in the pillar niches and the main iconography on the walls of cave #251 (plate 4). Its art and architecture are typical of the Northern Wei caves at Mogao and therefore has been selected as a representative cave while the other nine Northern Wei caves examined in this study are described in the appendix. As the square pillar in the back section of the cave appears to have been intended to be circumambulated since all four faces of the pillar are decorated, therefore suggesting that they were intended to be viewed and the space separating the pillar from the walls creates a passageway, the description that follows corresponds to that which would be seen if one were to walk in a clockwise rotation around the interior of the cave keeping the pillar, which houses the objects of worship, to the right of one's shoulder.

⁸Chen, *Dunhuang Mogaoku*, 95.

⁹The niche on the east face houses the statues of Śākyamuni and the past Buddha Prabhūtaratna. This scene symbolizes the moment when Prabhūtaratna appeared in his stūpa while Śākyamuni preached the *Lotus Sūtra*. Śākyamuni opened the stupa with his finger as a key, entered it, and sat beside Prabhutaratna. Therefore, in this case the pillar does not house images intended for circumambulation, rather it is a reference to faith in Śākyamuni as expressed in the *Lotus Sūtra*.

CAVE #251

Pillar : two tiers

east face:

Seated Buddha with pendant legs and hands on his knees.¹⁰

south face:

(lower niche) Buddha seated in *padmāsana* and *dhyānamudrā*.

(upper niche) Cross-ankled Maitreya with crown.

west face:

(lower niche) Buddha seated in *padmāsana* and *dhyānamudrā*.

(upper niche) Same except hands covered by the robe.

north face:

lower and upper niches same as south face.

Murals :

south wall:

(front section) *Shuofatu* including two bodhisattvas in front section.

(back section) *Shuofatu* surrounded by seven registers of thousand buddha motif.

west wall:

Seven registers of thousand buddha motif.

north wall:

Same as south wall.

east wall:

Thousand buddha motif.

Cartouches are painted next to each buddha image.

Central pillar niches and statues

The central square pillar is situated in the back section of this cave with one large niche housing the largest statue which faces the entrance. The other three faces of the pillar each have two niches, an upper and a lower, and each contain a smaller statue of which those in the north and south faces are symmetrical while the two vertically aligned niches on the west face hold almost identical figures except that the hands of the Buddha are exposed in the lower niche and covered in the upper niche.

¹⁰The head of this Buddha statue dates to the Qing dynasty (1644-1911). See Lin Baoyao, ed., *Dunhuang yishu tudian* (Taipei: Yishujia chubanshe, 1991), 47.

The central position of the larger Śākyamuni Buddha statue in the eastern niche along with the three other smaller Sakyamuni figures on the remaining faces of the pillar indicate that this Buddha was the main focus of reverence in the cave.

Since the Buddha statues in the south, west and north niches were depicted in meditation position, this may indicate that they were intended to be used as visual aids for meditation as described in the *Sea Sūtra*, a text that commented on the use of visual aids in a stupa-like setting to successfully create a mental image of the Buddha during meditation.¹¹ This sūtra was translated by Buddhabhadra between 398-421 C.E. and was most likely known in Gansu due to the translator's reputation as a *dhyāna* master.¹² Furthermore, if the central pillar in the cave represented the pagoda, the pagoda being the Chinese adaptation of the Indian stūpa, the pillar could then be understood as the equivalent of the stūpa.¹³ This cave would then be a suitable place to perform visualization rituals described in the *Sea Sūtra*.

In addition to Śākyamuni, the importance of Maitreya was also reflected in this cave. He is identified by his crossed ankles and crown (plates 5 & 6). Maitreya is referred to as a bodhisattva as well as the Future Buddha and is featured in the upper niches on the south and north faces of the pillar, perhaps simultaneously symbolizing his reign over Tuṣita Heaven where he resides and the anticipation of succeeding Sakyamuni who is represented in the niches below. A Maitreya cult was established by the fifth century C.E. in Gansu as is evident from a stone sutra pillar (52 cm in height) from Wenshu Shan (this site is discussed below), Gansu, dated to the early fifth century. It

¹¹A description of these visualization practices is discussed in Chapter Four.

¹²Hui, *Gaoseng zhuan*, 70. Also see Shih, *Biographies*, 91.

¹³Abe, *Mogao Cave 254*, 17.

features cross-ankled Maitreya figures in its niches and an inscription of a prayer for rebirth in the presence of Maitreya.¹⁴

Furthermore, there were four translations of Maitreya sutras circulating in China by the fifth century C.E.. These texts elaborated on the serenity and beauty of the age into which Maitreya was to be reborn.

Dharmaraksa's translation of *Mile xia sheng jing* (*Sutra on Maitreya's Birth Below*) was completed around 300 C.E., *Zengyi ahan jing* (*Sermons Arranged by Categories in Ascending Numerical Order*) was translated by Dharmanandi in 384-385. In addition, there were *Mile xia sheng cheng fojing* (*Sutra on Maitreya's Birth Below and Becoming Buddha*) and *Mile da cheng fojing* (*Grand Sutra on Maitreya Becoming Buddha*) both translated by Kumarajiva at the beginning of the fifth century.¹⁵

Murals

The striking symmetry of the murals is in itself a repetition of an iconographic theme. The scenes of the preaching Buddha, or *shuofatu*, in the front section of the south and north walls mirror each other. The same scene, framed by seven registers of the thousand buddha motif, is duplicated on the south and north walls of the back section of the cave. As a background, the thousand buddhas draw attention to the main figure in the scene and, at the same time, create a sense of movement throughout the cave by connecting the walls together with the registers of the motif.

HEXI CORRIDOR CAVES

The Hexi Corridor forms most of Gansu province, bounded to the south by the Qilian mountains and to the north by the Tenggli and Badanjilin

¹⁴Alexander C. Soper, "Northern Liang and Northern Wei in Kansu," *Artibus Asiae* 21, 2 (1958): 131-132.

¹⁵Soper, *Literary Evidence*, 213.

deserts and the Mazong, Heli and Longshou mountain ranges. The corridor is more than 1200 km long and is approximately 200 km wide at its broadest and 15 km at its narrowest. The remains of cave-temple sites that were built in this area suggest that these sites were not artistically independent of each other and that a particular style based on iconography and architecture developed in Gansu.

In terms of its art, the Mogao cave-temple complex is considered the most elaborate in the Hexi Corridor reflecting its importance as a Buddhist site. However, because of the poor state of preservation of their art, what now appear to be less significant cave sites in Gansu shared similar artistic and architectural characteristics with the early caves at Mogao. This suggests that a close relationship once existed between them. Therefore, a summary of these sites dating to the Northern Wei period or earlier are discussed below.

Bingling Si Thousand Buddha Caves

This cave-temple site is located on the north bank of the Yellow River in Gansu province, southwest of the present provincial capital, Lanzhou. Geographically, it is not situated within the Hexi Corridor but it is the earliest dated cave-temple site in Gansu and, therefore, cannot be overlooked. The earliest record at the site is an inscription in cave #169 that reads *Jianhong Yuannian* (the first year of the reign of Jianhong), thereby dating the cave to the Western Qin (420 C.E.).¹⁶ As was the case with the Mogao site, these cave-temples flourished during the Tang dynasty (618-907), the colossal Buddha statue measuring 27 m in height being a vestige of the importance of this site.

¹⁶Dong Yuxiang, ed., *Bingling Si yiliujiu ku* (Shenzhou: Haitian chubanshe, 1994), 18.

The art in cave #169 is considered the most representative of the site as well as of early Chinese cave-temple art in Gansu.¹⁷ Among the statuary and murals that adorn the north, south and west walls are Gansu's earliest extant examples of the thousand buddha motif (plate 7).

On the south wall, nineteen registers of the thousand buddhas occupy section #24 and surround three scenes (plate 8 & figure 6). The largest scene is a *shuofatu* and to the left of it is an illustration of the Buddha seated in *padmāsana* and *dhyānamudrā*, flanked by two figures, while a third scene depicts Śākyamuni and Prabhūtaratna debating inside a stupa. The buddhas in the motif differ in size, with those framing the two Buddhas in the stūpa being considerably larger than the rest.

On the west side of the cave there are, in addition to murals and sculptures, two adobe screen-like walls referred to as sections #15 and #19. The former contains nineteen registers of thousand buddhas of which twelve registers have been well preserved and seven are incomplete (figure 7). The latter is not entirely intact but eleven registers are clearly visible (figure 8).

The section referred to as #6 contains painted buddha images with cartouches inscribed with one of the names of the directional buddhas (plate 9). These buddhas preside over the ten directions, namely the eight cardinal directions plus above and below and are mentioned in the *Wuliang shou jing* (*Amitāyus Sūtra; Sukhāvatīvyūhasūtra*).¹⁸ Although it may be argued that these, too, represent the thousand buddha motif because they resemble the images in sections #24, 15 and 19 since they are depicted in *dhyānamudrā* and *padmāsana*, it is my opinion that they are separate since they are not arranged in the same manner of registers as the images in the other sections.

¹⁷Ibid., 1.

¹⁸Ibid., 6.

Wenshu Shan Thousand Buddha Caves

Wenshu Shan is situated southwest of Dunhuang and approximately 15 km south of the oasis of Jiuquan. Among the two caves at this site with preserved art, the Cave of the Thousand Buddhas has remains of murals dating to the fifth century C.E. as well as a central pillar reminiscent of those in Northern Wei caves at Mogao.¹⁹

The south and west walls around the two-tiered central pillar in the Cave of the Thousand Buddhas are painted with registers of the motif including cartouches which date to the Northern Liang (420-439 C.E.) (plate 10).²⁰ Among the thousand buddhas on the west wall is a *shuofatu* very similar in style to those in section #24 of Bingling Si cave #169 (plate 11).²¹

Mati Si

This cave-temple complex is located 62 km south of Zhangye and consists of seven sections, among which certain features in #8 of the Thousand Buddha Caves date to the Northern Wei.²²

This cave houses a square central pillar with four tiers. In the niche on the lowest tier of the south face is a painted scene of Śākyamuni and Prabhūtaratna with a cross-ankled Maitreya hovering above (plate 12). In contemporaneous Mogao caves, a similar iconographic theme with Maitreya situated on a higher level on the pillar frequently appears but in the three-dimensional form. To the left of the niche, as one faces it, six registers of

¹⁹The other cave, known as Ten Thousand Buddha Cave, has a similar architecture to that of the Cave of the Thousand Buddhas and contains murals that date to the Western Xia. It is possible that earlier murals remain beneath those from the Western Xia but this has not yet been determined.

²⁰The motif was dated by the Gansu Cultural Relics and Archaeology Research Institut based on painting style and technique. See Gansu sheng wenwu kaogu yanjiusuo, *Hexi shiku* (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1987), list of plates #114.

²¹*Ibid.*, 11.

²²*Ibid.*, 7.

thousand buddhas resembling the images in the motif at Bingling Si are exposed. To the right, only a few buddhas belonging to the motif are revealed. This is the only extant example in Gansu of the motif painted on the walls of the pillar.

West Thousand Buddha Caves

This site is located approximately 10 km west of Dunhuang and has thirteen caves, the earliest dating to the Northern Wei. Caves #5 and #6 still retain some of their original features. The walls around the single-tiered central pillar in cave #5 are covered with seven registers of thousand buddha with cartouches. The niche facing the entrance of cave #6 houses the main icon statue seated in *padmāsana* and *dhyānamudrā*. The other three faces of the pillar have two-dimensional depictions of the Buddha in a *shuofatu*. The south wall is adorned with a mural of the *parinirvāṇa* scene²³ surrounded by six registers of buddha images with cartouches while the north wall is adorned with uninterrupted registers of thousand buddhas.

XINJIANG PROVINCE

The area known today as Xinjiang Province held a strategic position for the introduction and propagation of Buddhism into northwestern China. In particular, in the region south of the Tian Shan (Heavenly Mountains) cave-temples were established and flourished in the oases surrounding the Taklamakan Desert from the beginning of the first century C.E. and for approximately the following nine hundred years.

²³This scene is depicted with the Buddha reclined and his disciples surrounding him in mourning.

Most of the extant Buddhist art from Xinjiang comes from the cave-temple sites of the oases on the northern periphery of the Taklamakan. The earliest cave-temple art in Xinjiang dates to the fourth century C.E. and comes from Kizil.²⁴

The thousand buddha motif is painted on the ceilings of many Xinjiang caves but these caves are not dated earlier than the mid-sixth century. At Kizil, the motif is associated with stupa-pillar caves surrounded by a tunneled corridor which date, according to Su Bai's research, to the mid-sixth and early seventh centuries²⁵ therefore later than the earliest example of the motif from Bingling Si.

Among the southern oases of the Taklamakan, Khotan was the main centre of Buddhist culture but what remains of its Buddhist heritage is buried beneath the desert sands. At the beginning of this century, the explorer-archaeologist Sir M. Aurel Stein rediscovered and excavated a square cella at the site of Dandan-Uiliq, on the outskirts of Khotan. He described it as having outer walls that had more or less decayed but commented that the inner walls had "traces of fresco decorations showing rows of miniature representations of Buddhas or Bodhisattvas, all uniform except in colouring of dress and background, and evidently stencilled, could just be made out on them (plates 13 & 14)."²⁶ Stein did not propose a date for the cella nor for the motif. Furthermore, I am not aware of any attempts to date this site thereby leaving open the possibility that the buddha images on the cella predate the Gansu examples of the motif. However, based on the chronology discussed in

²⁴Howard, "In Support," 70. The most famous cave-temple sites in Xinjiang are Baizeklik located 56 km from Turpan and the Kizil and Kuntura sites situated 65 km and 28 km respectively from the oasis of Kuqa.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Sir M. Aurel Stein, *Ancient Khotan Volume 1, Text* (New York: Hacker Art Books, 1975), 244.

Chapter Three for other Buddhist temple sites in Xinjiang that feature the motif and the dating of Gansu thousand buddhas, it appears more likely that the motif from Dandan-Uiliq is not earlier than the Gansu examples.

To my knowledge, in Xinjiang there is no other extant example of a pillar-like structure painted with the thousand buddha motif, thereby rendering the Dandan-Uiliq cella an exception reminiscent of the motif-adorned pillar in cave #8 at the Mati Si site in Gansu. A further similarity can be drawn between the cella and Gansu Northern Wei pillars from Stein's description of the space between the cella's outer and inner walls as a passage and his statement that the cella was intended to be circumambulated like the Gansu central pillars. Stein wrote

A careful examination of the remains of walls brought to light on the north and west sides showed that there had been an inner oblong or square cella enclosed by equidistant outer walls, forming a kind of corridor or passage...²⁷ This passage, which undoubtedly served for the purposes of circumambulation or *pradakṣina*, had its entrance from the north, but a little to the east of the centre.²⁸

From the evidence presented above, therefore, the earliest extant example of the thousand buddha motif dates to 420 C.E. and is found in cave #169 at Bingling Si. The Northern Wei caves located in the Hexi Corridor at the sites of Mogao, West Thousand Buddha Caves, Wenshu Shan and Mati Si all contain the thousand buddha motif painted on their walls that face a square central pillar. In addition, the frequency in which the *shuofatu* is depicted among the registers of thousand buddhas suggests that both the motif and the scene of the Buddha preaching were characteristic of Northern Wei cave-temple murals. Finally, in Xinjiang, the motif was also common

²⁷Ibid., 243.

²⁸Ibid., 246.

but from the mid-sixth century onward and at Kizil and Dandan-Uiliq it was related to the square central pillar.

CHAPTER THREE

The Thousand Buddha Motif A Gansu Cave-Temple Art Innovation

A common approach to analyzing early Gansu Buddhist cave-temple art has been to trace the art to Indian and Central Asian textual and material sources since it is generally accepted that Buddhism and Buddhist art were introduced into Gansu from India via Central Asia.¹ For example, in *Literary Evidence for Early Buddhist Art in China*, Soper identified many texts of Indian origin which had been translated into Chinese and related them to the art but neglected to consider the possible local sources that may have contributed to its creation. In addition, many scholars believe that a very important factor in the development of Buddhist art in Gansu was its proximity to Xinjiang, an area where centres of Buddhist art flourished from the first to the sixth centuries C.E.. Howard stated that "At Dunhuang the caves executed under the Northern Liang dynasty (421-439 C.E.) were undoubtedly inspired by the preceding activity at Kizil."²

This chapter considers the possibility that the thousand buddha motif was a Gansu Buddhist cave-temple art innovation rather than an iconographic theme introduced from India or Central Asia. First, a comparison of the motif in early cave-temples in Gansu with those in Xinjiang and India as well as a chronology for these caves is presented. Second, the idea put forward by Ghosh and Brown that the thousand buddha motif was a representation of the Indian story the Miracles at Śrāvastī is

¹Shi Pingting and Shu Xue, "About the Mogao Grottoes," in *The Art Treasures of Dunhuang*, ed. Dunhuang Institute for Cultural Relics, (Hongkong:Joint Publishing Company, 1983), 7.

²Howard, "In Support," 69.

questioned. Third, a comparison with the thousand-handed thousand-eyed Guanyin is undertaken in order to draw parallels with the thousand buddhas and to illustrate the origin of the motif. To begin, the religious, socio-economic and political context in which Gansu cave-temples were developed is summarized below.

Approximately six hundred years after the enlightenment of the Buddha Śākyamuni,³ Buddhism was introduced into the Taklamakan region in Xinjiang province and eventually into Gansu.⁴ The history of the earliest Buddhism from this area began with the closing of the Fourth Buddhist Council held in Kashmir during the first century C.E..⁵

By the first century C.E., both Mahāyānists (followers of the Greater Vehicle) and Hīnayānists (followers of the Lesser Vehicle) were established and were represented at the Council. From Kashmir, missionaries belonging to both Vehicles traveled to the Taklamakan oases of Khotan and Kashgar with canonical texts.⁶ The routes along which the missionaries journeyed came to be known as the Silk Road, a name coined by Baron Ferdinand von Richtofen in the nineteenth century for the ancient trade routes that linked Asia and the West.⁷ Chinese goods were found in the markets of the oases-kingdoms of Central Asia as early as the second century B.C.E.⁸ and the

³It is generally accepted that Śākyamuni preached his first sermon in the fifth century B.C.E. after being enlightened.

⁴Buddhism was also introduced into China via maritime routes and took root in the region north of the Huai river, in eastern Henan, southern Shandong, and northern Jiangsu by the middle of the first century C.E.. See E. Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China* (Leiden: E.J.Brill, 1959), 26.

⁵The First Buddhist Council was held at Rajagriha immediately after the passing of the Buddha. The Second Council was held at Vaisali about one hundred years later. The Third Council was held in the reign of Asoka (272 B.C.E.-236 B.C.E.) at Pataliputra.

⁶Kshanika Saha, *Buddhism and Buddhist Literature in Central Asia* (Calcutta: Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 1970), 17.

⁷John E. Vollmer, E. J. Keall, E. Nagai-Berthrong, *Silk Roads, China Ships* (Canada: McLaren Morris and Todd Limited, 1983), 1.

⁸This was confirmed by the Chinese envoy Zhang Qian after his return from his missions to the Western Regions, a then unfamiliar and vast territory beyond the Jade Gate outside of

channels along which these goods were traded formed the infrastructure not only for the exchange of commodities but also for the propagation of Buddhism.

In Xinjiang, the Silk Road divided into two tracks, namely the southern and the northern routes (figure 3),⁹ which converged at their eastern extremity in Dunhuang. The former route linked the oases irrigated by the Kunlun mountain range on the southern periphery of the Taklamakan desert where Khotan was the cultural centre. The route's northern counterpart connected the oases from Shanshan to Kashgar, among which Kuqa developed as the cultural centre. From Dunhuang, the Silk Road continued through the dry landscape of the Hexi corridor which was broken by the oases of Jiuquan, Zhangye, and Wuwei.

Travel accounts, such as those of two famous monks Faxian¹⁰ and Xuanzang,¹¹ described the journey overland from China to India as well as recorded which Buddhists held sway in the oases they visited in the Taklamakan region. Faxian wrote in *Foguo ji (A Record of Buddhistic Kingdoms)* that in Shanshan:

Dunhuang. Zhang Qian's missions, the first in 139 B.C.E. and the second in 115 B.C.E. were sponsored by the Han emperor Wudi (141-87 B.C.E.). The envoy visited numerous countries in Central Asia and reported on the interest they all had in Chinese products. See Jacques Gernet, *A History of Chinese Civilization* tr. J.R. Foster, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 120.

⁹The northern route branched out into two routes at Hami in Xinjiang with one route following the oases of the northern periphery of the Taklamakan and the other skirting the northern foot of the Tian Shan.

¹⁰Faxian became a full monk at the age of twenty and set out for India in 399 C.E. when he was twenty-five. He died in China at the age of eighty-eight. See James Legge, *A Record of Buddhistic Kingdoms* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1965), 2-3.

¹¹Xuanzang was fully ordained at the age of twenty and at the age of twenty-six began his journey to India in the year 629. See Samuel Beal, *Buddhist Records of the Western World* (Delhi: Oriental Books Reprint Corporation, 1969), xviii.

The king professed (our) Law, and there might be in the country more than four thousand monks, who were all students of the hīnayāna. The common people of this and other kingdoms (in that region), as well as śramanas, all practise the rules of India, only that the latter do so more exactly, and the former more loosely.¹²

He also recorded that in the country of Woo-e¹³ there were more than four thousand monks, all students of Hīnayāna.¹⁴ However, the situation in Khotan appeared to have been different according to Faxian's observations:

The inhabitants all profess our Law, and join together in its religious music for their enjoyment. The monks amount to several myriads, most of whom are students of the mādhyāna.¹⁵

Xuanzang commented that in the northern route oases of Karashar, Kuqa, Aksu, and Kashgar priests and followers belonging to the Little Vehicle of the school of the Sarvāstivādas¹⁶ numbered two thousand, more than five thousand, approximately one thousand, and ten thousand respectively,¹⁷ whereas in Khotan there were some five thousand followers of the Greater Vehicle.¹⁸

Faxian and Xuanzang's records give the impression that the northern oases of the Taklamakan were Hīnayāna territory and that in the largest oasis on the southern route, Khotan, Mahāyāna prevailed. However, this division may not have been as clear cut as they made it appear. Prior to Faxian's accounts were those of Zhushixing, a Chinese monk who set out from Luoyang to India in search of Mahāyāna texts, and who witnessed the competitiveness of the Mahāyānists and the Hīnayānists. According to his

¹²Legge, *A Record*, 13-14.

¹³Woo-e may have referred to Karashar, or between that and Kuqa. See Legge, *A Record*, 9-10.

¹⁴Ibid., 14-15.

¹⁵Ibid., 16.

¹⁶These Buddhists were concentrated in Kashmir and their teachings became very influential in the oases of the northern route, as Xuanzang observed.

¹⁷Beal, *Buddhist Records*, 18-19, 24, 307.

¹⁸Ibid., 309.

biography, he arrived in Khotan around 260 C.E. and obtained the sūtras he sought but was confronted by Khotanese Hīnayānists who did not want him to send scriptures of the Greater Vehicle back to Luoyang. The account goes on to describe how the monk challenged his opponents thereby emphasizing the animosity that existed between adherents of both Vehicles.¹⁹

Events from the life of the famous Buddhist monk Kumarajiva (350-413 C.E.), a native of Kuqa, also suggested that the Buddhism practiced in the oases of the Taklamakan was not exclusive to one Vehicle or another. By the age of seven, Kumarajiva could recite the *Abhidharma*²⁰ which represented the earliest compilation of Buddhist philosophy and psychology and was an important text for the Sarvāstivāda Buddhists who were considered Hīnayānists.²¹ Since Kumarajiva was acquainted with the Sarvāstivāda text this suggested that he was being instructed in the Hīnayāna tradition. Kumarajiva left Kuqa and spent three years in Kashmir where he studied under the famous master Bandhudatta²² and focused on the Hīnayāna sūtras, especially the canon of the Sarvāstivādins.²³ From Kashmir, he went to Kashgar where he continued his studies until Suryasoma, a prince from Yarkand,²⁴ introduced him to the sutras of the Greater Vehicle, whereby he became convinced of their superiority.²⁵ He then returned to Kuqa and began a period of about twenty years during which he concentrated on Mahāyāna

¹⁹Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest*, 62-63.

²⁰Hui, *Gaoseng zhuan*, 46.

²¹For a summary of the history of the Sarvāstivādins, see Edward Conze, *A Short History of Buddhism* (Bombay: Chetana Ltd., 1960), 17-22.

²²Hui, *Gaoseng zhuan*, 46. Also see Shih, *Biographies*, 62-63.

²³Kenneth Ch'en, *Buddhism in China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), 81.

²⁴Yarkand is situated between Kashgar and Khotan and is considered to be on the southern route. See Roderick Whitfield and Anne Farrer, *Caves of the Thousand Buddhas* (London: British Museum Publications, 1990), 10.

²⁵Hui, *Gaoseng zhuan*, 47. Also see Shih, *Biographies*, 65.

sutras.²⁶ Therefore, it may be surmised that in Kumarajiva's time, both Hīnayānists and Mahāyānists lived in Kuqa and Kashgar.

Approximately four hundred and fifty years later, when Xuanzang visited Kuqa, he recorded in his *Da Tang Xiyouji* (Records of the Western World Under the Great Tang) that "[t]here were about one hundred convents (*sanghārāmas*) in this country, with five hundred and more disciples. These belong to the Little Vehicle of the school of the Sarvāstivādas (Shwo-yih-tsai-yu-po)."²⁷ Yet wall paintings from Kizil with Mahāyāna themes suggest that both Vehicles may have existed simultaneously in certain periods. Evelyn Nagai wrote:

The Lotus Sūtra is one of the bulwarks of the Mahāyāna, and this depiction of Śākyamuni and Prabhūtaratna in the standard format such as that seen at Tun-huang (Dunhuang) proves that Kucha (Kuqa) was far from the exclusive province of the Lesser Vehicle. The Mahāyāna and Hīnayāna are not artistically incompatible, and the presence of the Lotus Sūtra in the Kirish cave demonstrates the fallacy of relying too heavily on the biased, if devout, word of a Chinese pilgrim.²⁸

If followers of both Vehicles were active in Kashgar, Khotan and Kuqa, then it is possible the same situation also existed in the other oases of the Taklamakan.

The form of Buddhism that developed in the Hexi Corridor, where many cave-temple sites were built, was a fusion of that which was introduced from Xinjiang and the Buddhist activities that surrounded what is now known as Wuwei (formerly called Guzang and Liangzhou) which was the capital of both the Former Liang (314-376) and Northern Liang (421-439 C.E.) kingdoms. Stanley Abe referred to it as "Liangzhou Buddhism" and considered the important aspects of it to be thaumaturgy, penance and

²⁶Ch'en, *Buddhism*, 82.

²⁷Beal, *Buddhist Records*, 19.

²⁸Evelyn Haruye Nagai, *Iconographic Innovations in Kuchean Buddhist Art vol. 1* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1977), 52.

confession rituals, concern with karmic action and acquiring merit, and meditative practices.²⁹ He argued that this regional form of Buddhism played a decisive role in the choice of imagery that adorned the interior of cave-temples.

Theories regarding the artists who decorated the cave-temples remain speculative. One theory was that artists from Central Asia and Gandhāra arrived in Gansu and trained disciples thereby explaining the diversity of styles.³⁰ Another explanation was that of Soper who suggested that the local character of the style in early Mogao caves was "the work of craftsman-monks from the local monastic communities, rather than itinerant artists."³¹ Abe proposed that at Mogao the artists were not monks but were individuals skilled in painting and sculpture who formed part of the lay workforce that was readily available to the monastic community.³²

Certain conditions unique to the cave-temples in the Hexi Corridor led to innovative techniques in sculpture and mural preparation which reflected the skills of local artists. Since the nature of the stone from which the caves were hewn was too soft for carving images, a technique of modelling clay on an armature of wood or bundles of tamarisk twigs was developed. In addition, in order to have a smooth surface to paint the murals, a clay stucco was applied to the walls of the caves to create a level surface. Although these innovations were more technical than artistic, they reflected a local creativity which I believe was also echoed in the ways in which subject matter was depicted. For example, the Tiger *jātaka* in cave #254 was not painted in a scroll-like format nor in a single scene as were narrative compositions in

²⁹Abe, *Mogao Cave 254*, 116-122.

³⁰Muséum, *La route de la soie*, 102.

³¹Soper, "Northern Liang," 157.

³²Abe, *Mogao Cave 254*, 110.

earlier or contemporaneous caves. Rather, the first scene of the story was placed in the centre of the painting, then the narrative continued to the right, up and then down and ended in the upper left corner.³³ Another artistic innovation may have been the thousand buddha motif. This possibility is discussed below.

Support from political rulers was a contributing factor to the development of Buddhism and cave-temple sites as was the case with the king of the Northern Liang, Juqu Mengsun, who controlled Gansu for thirteen years in the early fifth century C.E.(421-433).³⁴ He was said to have encouraged the spread of Buddhism by initiating the creation of Buddhist monuments and by sponsoring translations of key portions of the Buddhist canon into Chinese. Dharmaksema, a monk of Central Indian descent, was patronized as a translator by Juqu Mengsun and through the fame of the Northern Liang ruler's "Mahāyāna Library," these Buddhist texts were known west of the Hexi Corridor and in southern China.³⁵

Several centuries after Mengsun's death in 433 C.E.,³⁶ the seventh century monk-historian Daoxuan praised him for building temples and pagodas in his capital instead of merely squandering his wealth on such perishable things as palaces.³⁷ The sixteen-foot stone Buddhist image Juqu Mengsun had made on behalf of his deceased mother was one of many artistic endeavors that reflected his devotion to the teachings of the Buddha.

Daoxuan also wrote about two cave-temple complexes, Tianti Shan (Celestial Ladder Mountain) and a site "thirty li or so southeast of the present Sha-chou, on San-wei Shan or Three Perils Mountain ... where the cliffs are

³³Ibid., 111

³⁴Soper, Northern Liang, 133.

³⁵Ibid., 141.

³⁶Ibid., 132.

³⁷Ibid., 141-142.

two li high, it is said that there are two hundred and eighty Buddhist images, whose niches gleam with radiance."³⁸ He implied that both sites were believed to be work carried out by the Northern Liang king.³⁹ Soper wrote "The second of Tao-hsüan's (Daoxuan) sites is manifestly the "Caves of the Thousand Buddhas" near Tun-huang (Dunhuang)."⁴⁰ Although the Mogao site, which was also known as the Caves of the Thousand Buddhas, was located on Mingsha Shan and not on Sanwei Shan (San-wei Shan), they were very close to each other, and since Juqu Mengsun gained control of the Dunhuang area in 420 C.E. where the Northern Liang reigned until his son's surrender to the Northern Wei in 439 C.E.,⁴¹ it is possible that the Northern Liang king was involved in the hewing of the first caves at the Mogao site since the earliest ones date to his time.⁴²

In brief, the oases of the Taklamakan and Hexi Corridor prospered as trading centres⁴³ and it was with the flourishing of commercial activity and the wealth that derived from it coupled with the patronage of local ruling families, and the increasing number of Buddhist pilgrims that led to the building of cave-temples. Anxious merchants wishing to invoke protection for their caravans or to give thanks for their safe returns, the powerful and rich desirous of gaining merit for the deceased and living members of their families, and the pious bonzes and their followers in need of a place to rest

³⁸Ibid., 142.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Ibid., 133.

⁴²The three earliest caves are # 268, 272, 275 and date to the Northern Liang.

⁴³Goods traded in these oases included dates, pistachio nuts, peaches, pears, walnuts, oils of frankincense and myrrh from Persia; almonds, jade, lapis lazuli, and horses from Central Asia; lotus and sandalwood from India; and millet, anise, green ginger, roses, cassia, peonies, and mulberry trees from China. See Judy Bonavia, *The Silk Road* (Lincolnwood: Passport Books, 1988), 52.

and worship motivated the hewing of cave-temples in the oases of the northern Silk Road and in Gansu province.

Thousand Buddhas in India, Xinjiang and Gansu

Buddhist paintings in the cave-temple sites in Central Asia and Northwestern China are said to have their beginnings in the murals of the Ajantā cave-temple complex⁴⁴ located near the source of the Waghora River in Hyderabad state in India. These caves date to the first century C.E. and experienced their greatest days of artistic activity under the rule of the Vakata and Chalukya dynasties, from the fourth to the seventh centuries.⁴⁵ Their wall paintings represent a transitional stage where the earliest ones reflected the philosophical and moral concepts of Hīnayāna, while the later murals depicted Mahāyāna themes.⁴⁶ The most typical subject matter in the earlier caves was drawn from the *Jātaka* tales which were illustrated in narrative panels and described the virtuous acts and martyrdoms of Śākyamuni in previous incarnations. The murals in the later caves depicted bodhisattvas and anthropomorphic representations of the Buddha which were considered Mahāyāna themes.⁴⁷

The thousand buddha motif in the two-dimensional form appears in only one Ajantā cave that dates to the sixth century and is associated with a decline in artistic standards.⁴⁸ A wall of the ante-chamber in cave #2 was painted with one thousand and fifty-five buddha figures, measuring about eight inches in height, and seated on lotus flowers in *padmāsana* position showing various mudras (plate 15). The mural was a donation as indicated by

⁴⁴Benjamin Rowland, *The Ajanta Caves, Early Buddhist Paintings from India*, (New York: The New American Library of World Literature, Inc., 1963), 5.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 7.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 9.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 9-10.

⁴⁸Ghosh, *Ajanta*, 34.

fragments of its inscription which recorded 'the meritorious gift of the Śākya devotee R...'⁴⁹ and '*buddhāsahasa*' meaning the thousand buddhas.⁵⁰

In addition to the murals of the Ajantā caves, Gandhāran art was said to have had an influential role in the development of Buddhist cave-temple imagery in Xinjiang and Gansu.⁵¹ This art was characterized by an amalgamation of Graeco-Roman, Iranian, and Indian artistic styles that adorned monasteries and temples in the Kushan⁵² empire with stone sculptures, carved stucco, and paintings. Borrowing of iconographic themes and styles of art from Gandhāra as well as from the Buddhist cave-temple site of Bāmiyān,⁵³ whose art was influenced by that of Gandhāra, was evident in the Taklamakan region, particularly in the murals of the Kizil caves (plates 16 & 17) and in Gansu where a Gandhāran influence was reflected in Mogao statuary from the Northern Wei (plates 18 & 19).⁵⁴

The idea of artistically representing great numbers of buddha images, which was common in Gansu and Xinjiang, does not appear to have been introduced from Gandhāra. Those who decorated Gandhāran stūpas and other monuments instead depicted small groups of sculpted buddha images, often numbering four. Benjamin Rowland stated that these groups of images represented:

Again, single images of Buddhas, either of the four Buddhas of the Past or the four Mystic Buddhas, were often placed at the four sides of

⁴⁹Ghulam Yazdani, *Ajanta, Part II Text* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 64.

⁵⁰Ghosh, *Ajanta*, 39.

⁵¹Madeleine Hallade, *Gandharan Art of North India* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1968), 168-172.

⁵²The Kushan dynasty ruled from the first to the fifth centuries C.E.. The centre of the empire was Gandhara and extended to the Oxus River and over the Pamir Mountains. Large numbers of Kushan coins were found in Kashgar and Khotan. See Hallade, *Gandharan Art*, 29.

⁵³This site is located approximately 200 km northwest of Kabul and stretches for almost 2 km.

⁵⁴This influence is discussed in Chapter Two.

stūpa bases to symbolize the Paradises of these Tathāgatas at the four points of the compass.⁵⁵

Furthermore, Hallade's comprehensive work *Gandharan Art of Northern India* does not mention the thousand buddha motif, nor have I come across any published photographs of it from any Gandhāran sites. Seckel wrote that on the side walls of the niche housing the colossal Buddha at Bāmiyān there were many rows of painted seated buddhas which he referred to as the thousand buddhas.⁵⁶ However, I have not been able to verify this since, to my knowledge, the paintings have not been published nor described in any other publication. With no extant examples of the thousand buddha motif from Gandhāra and only one possible representation of it from Bāmiyān, it may be concluded that the motif was not common in the Gandhāra region.

In searching for the origin of the thousand buddha motif, the caves in Kuqa play a decisive role. Kuqa has been described as a linguistic frontier; "to the west Sanskrit was read, to the east Chinese."⁵⁷ Similarly, the art in the cave-temples surrounding Kuqa echoed this linguistic frontier, placing these caves at the border of Gandhāran and Chinese artistic traditions. Based on the unpopularity of the motif in India and Gandhāra, it appears probable that the motif was not introduced into Xinjiang from there, leaving open the possibility that it was created in Xinjiang or Gansu where the motif adorned many cave-temples.

A new chronology for the Kizil caves established by Su Bai of Beijing University is based on thirty years of analyzing the artistic styles and structure of the caves⁵⁸ as well as the results from carbon 14 testing.⁵⁹ His research

⁵⁵ Benjamin Rowland, "Gandharan and Early Christian Art: The *Homme-Arcade* and the Date of the Bimaran Reliquary," *The Art Bulletin* 28 (March 1946): 47.

⁵⁶ Seckel, *The Art of Buddhism*, 186f.

⁵⁷ Gaulier et al., *Buddhism in Afghanistan*, 4.

⁵⁸ Howard, "In Support," 69.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 71.

sheds light on the dating of the thousand buddhas in these caves and consequently on the dating of the motif in Northern Liang and Northern Wei caves at Mogao.

Su Bai proposed a time span of approximately 350 years for the caves beginning in 300 C.E. thereby disregarding the traditional dating ascribed by the German archaeologists and art historians, Alfred von Le Coq and Ernst Waldschmidt, who claimed that artistic activity began no earlier than 500 C.E.. They based their chronology on their predecessor Grünwedel's classification of materials according to styles, but further relied on archaic Turkestan-Brahmin inscriptions available in a few caves and proposed that the art dated from 500-650.⁶⁰

Su Bai grouped the caves and their structure into four types which were then divided into three time periods. Type 1 was characterized by caves with a stūpa-pillar surrounded by a corridor; type 2 were caves with monumental clay cultic images of the Buddha; type 3 were monastic cells often equipped with fireplace and window, and type 4 were squarish caves with the lantern roof design on the ceilings.⁶¹ The first period, or phase, corresponded to 300-395 C.E. , the second phase covered the fifth century and the early sixth century, and the third period spanned the mid-sixth to the early seventh centuries. The four types of caves existed in each of the phases.⁶²

Su Bai's research showed that in the third phase the plan of the caves was expanded and the decor was simplified, but was of larger scale in comparison to the decor of the second phase.⁶³ He pointed out that new decorative motifs were introduced, in particular the thousand buddha motif

⁶⁰Ibid., 68. For a summary of theories on the chronology proposed by the Germans and others, see Nagai, *Iconographic Innovations vol. 1*, 39-47.

⁶¹Ibid., 69-70.

⁶²Ibid., 70.

⁶³Ibid.

and large apsaras were painted on the corridor's ceiling of type 1 caves at Kizil and were especially popular at the cave-temple site of Kumtura.⁶⁴ According to Su Bai, the majority of the Kizil caves were hewn and decorated in the first two phases, while artistic activity had already begun to decline by the third phase.⁶⁵

Therefore, the thousand buddha motif is associated with stūpa-pillar caves dating to the final phase at Kizil, a centre of Buddhist art believed to have influenced Mogao cave-temple art. Howard stated that the Mogao caves dating to the Northern Liang (421-439) were undoubtedly inspired by the earlier activity at Kizil.⁶⁶ However, Su Bai's chronology places the motif in his third phase from the mid-sixth to the early seventh centuries, therefore later than the earliest decorated caves #268, 272, and 275 at the Mogao site. According to the Dunhuang Research Academy, these caves belong to the Northern Liang period and the former two caves have registers of thousand buddhas painted on their walls. Furthermore, the succeeding group of caves to be hewn and decorated were those of the middle period of the Northern Wei and date to 439-534 C.E.,⁶⁷ again earlier than Su Bai's third phase and, as previously discussed, all Northern Wei caves at Mogao and a significant number of contemporaneous caves at other Gansu sites⁶⁸ illustrate the thousand buddha motif on their walls.

In sum, Su Bai dated the thousand buddha motif at Kizil between the mid-sixth and the early seventh centuries yet the motif was already common at Mogao in the first half of the fifth century and was found in cave #169 at

⁶⁴Ibid.

⁶⁵Ibid., 71.

⁶⁶Ibid., 69.

⁶⁷Chen, *Dunhuang Mogaoku*, 95.

⁶⁸See Chapter Two for a description of the motif in Mogao cave #251 and contemporaneous Gansu sites that contain the motif. Also see the appendix for a description of the additional Northern Wei caves at Mogao with the motif.

Bingling Si which was dated to 420. In addition, the motif at Kizil was painted primarily on the ceilings of the caves whereas at Mogao the motif was moved to the ceilings only after the Northern Wei, during the Northern Zhou (557-581 C.E.) and early Sui (589-618 C.E.) periods⁶⁹ which correspond to Su Bai's third phase. Therefore it appears that the thousand buddhas at Mogao predate those at Kizil and, based on similarities between the motif in Su Bai's third phase and the thousand buddhas in contemporaneous caves at Mogao, the motif may have been introduced into the Kuqa area from Gansu during the mid-sixth century.

⁶⁹It is interesting to note that in the earlier Mogao caves the motif was painted on the walls but in most later caves it was moved to the ceiling. This is perhaps explained by the introduction of new themes for subject matter, such as Paradise scenes, that were displayed on the main sections of the walls where the thousand buddhas in the Northern Wei caves had been illustrated. The motif, having become an integral part of the decor in the earlier caves was kept, but was pushed upward to the ceiling.

Miracles at Śrāvastī

After the Buddha Śākyamuni experienced enlightenment, he was often challenged by leaders of other religious groups to prove that his dharma was superior to their law. At times, these competitions involved performing feats of magic and, on one such occasion, the Buddha was challenged in the city of Śrāvastī where he defeated his opponents with several magical acts which became known as the Śrāvastī miracles.⁷⁰ The miracles the Buddha performed were the instantaneous growth of a mango tree, the multiplication of himself up to the heavens, and the simultaneous emissions of fire and water from his body.⁷¹ The thousand buddha motif has been identified as a representation of the Śrāvastī multiplication miracle.⁷²

Two traditions of iconographic representation based on texts have been distinguished for the Śrāvastī miracles, one focused on the *Dhammapadathakathā* and *Jātakas* written in Pali, and the other on the *Divyāvadāna* written in Sanskrit.⁷³ Common to both the Pali and Sanskrit traditions was the *yamakapratiharya*, or twin miracle, which consisted of the emission of fire from the Buddha's shoulders and water from his feet as he rose into the air, the finest example being a Gandhāran stone carving (plate 20). The mango tree episode and the multiplication miracle were emphasized in the Pali and Sanskrit texts respectively.

⁷⁰Robert L. Brown pointed out that there were, in fact, several miracles performed during the event at Śrāvastī and that it was misleading to call the entire scene, as it has frequently been referred to, as the Śrāvastī "miracle" and therefore changed it to the plural "miracles." See Robert L. Brown, "The Śrāvastī Miracles in the Art of India and Dvāravatī," *Archives of Asian Art* 38 (1984): 79.

⁷¹Ibid.

⁷²Ghosh, *Ajanta Murals*, 34 & 39. Also see Gaulier et al., *Buddhism in Afghanistan*, 9; Brown, "The Śrāvastī Miracles," 83.

⁷³Brown, "The Śrāvastī Miracles," 79.

The tradition that followed Pali texts most often depicted an aniconic scene with a mango tree symbolizing the event where the Buddha predicted that he would perform a miracle while seated under a mango tree (plate 21). In order to thwart his plans, his opponents destroyed all the mango trees in the area, only to be outwitted themselves when the Buddha had a mango seed planted that immediately grew into a large fruit-bearing tree.⁷⁴

The Sanskrit tradition illustrated the multiplication miracle during which the Buddha produced numerous likenesses of himself, as described in the *Divyāvadāna* :

On this [the lotus] the Buddha sat in *paryāṅkāśana* creating before, behind and on both sides [of him] a group of Buddhas reaching up to Akanistha Heaven.⁷⁵

A well-known example of the Śrāvastī multiplication miracle, now housed in the Indian Museum, in Calcutta, was found at Sārnāth and dates to the fifth century C.E. (plate 22). It portrays a main Buddha image with slightly smaller Buddha figures either standing or sitting on lotuses while rising above the main icon.

Ghosh and Brown identified other iconographic representations of the Śrāvastī multiplication miracle at Ajantā. Ghosh stated in *Ajanta Murals* :

Cave 2 contains painted panels with rows of Buddhas one over the other...the same subject, in cave 7, follows the *Divyāvadāna* version, according to which the two naga (serpent) kings Nanda and Upananda created a miraculous lotus on the pericarp of which the Blessed One seated himself.⁷⁶

Regarding the painted panels in cave #2 Ghosh added:

⁷⁴Ibid.

⁷⁵Ibid., 80.

⁷⁶Ghosh, *Ajanta Murals*, 34.

A fragmentary painted record on the back wall of the antechamber to the right of the shrine-door in cave 2 may record the donation as that of the 'Thousand Buddhas' (Buddhāsahasas).⁷⁷

Robert Brown, in his article "The Śrāvastī Miracles in the Art of India and Dvāravati," also identified the multiplication scene at Ajantā but in cave #17 (plate 23) and wrote it was "apparent from the placement and form of the depictions at Ajantā that the multiplication has here become related to the Thousand-Buddha theme."⁷⁸

A few questions concerning Ghosh and Brown's association of the multiplication miracle with the thousand buddha motif can be raised. Although the sculpted buddhas in cave #7 (plate 24) and the wall painting of repeating buddha images in cave #2 mentioned by Ghosh resemble each other because the images are displayed in rows, they appear to be representing two different iconographic themes. In cave #7, the images are depicted sitting and standing on lotuses with hands in various *mudrās*, similar to the Sārnāth stele, and with two nagas placed at the bottom of the scene, as described in the *Divyāvadāna*. The mural in cave #2 only illustrates seated buddha figures and does not resemble any other scenes that have been identified as the multiplication miracle nor does it include any characteristics described in the written sources.

Brown discussed "Buddhas arranged in rows" and referred the reader to a photograph taken in cave #17 of rows of painted buddhas seated and standing on lotus thrones and related these multiple images to the "Thousand-Buddha theme." Oddly, Brown did not compare them to the sculpted images in cave #7, with which there is a visual resemblance. Nor did he mention the mural in cave #2 of one thousand and fifty-five buddha

⁷⁷Ibid., 39.

⁷⁸Brown, "The Śrāvastī Miracles," 83.

images arranged in registers with the inscription 'thousand buddhas' (*buddhāsahasā*) which, if drawing a connection between the thousand buddha motif and the rows of buddha images in cave #17, would seem obvious.

Therefore, Ghosh and Brown each identified a Sravasti multiplication scene in different caves, which resembled the scene on the stele from Sāmāth, and related them to the thousand buddha motif, it would seem, because the numerous figures in the motif called to mind the multiple images the Buddha created of himself at Śrāvastī. Yet the mural of the thousand buddha motif in cave #2 does not include one main larger figure of the Buddha from which the smaller images were created (all the images in the motif are approximately the same size) nor any other symbols, such as standing and sitting buddha figures, the two nagas, the Buddha emitting fire and water or a mango tree, that would indicate it was the Śrāvastī multiplication miracle. This suggests, therefore, that the motif did not represent the same scene as those in caves #7 and #17.

As previously mentioned, Gandhāran themes and styles of art influenced those in Xinjiang and Gansu. The Śrāvastī Miracles were depicted in Gandhāran art but the multiplication miracle did not appear to have been common. Foucher, who wrote about the Śrāvastī miracles as early as 1909,⁷⁹ identified a number of Gandhāran-style reliefs as representations of the multiplication miracle, but several scholars criticized his identifications, as discussed by Brown.⁸⁰ Furthermore, Hallade wrote in *Gandharan Art of North India* :

⁷⁹Alfred Foucher, *The Beginnings in Buddhist Art* tr. L.A. Thomas and F.W. Thomas, (Paris and London: Paul Geuthner and Humphrey Milford, 1914), 147-184.

⁸⁰Brown, "The Sravasti Miracles," 81.

In the steles (sic) of Kapisa dedicated to the Great Miracle of Śrāvastī, the countless prodigious feats accomplished by Sākyamuni to confound the leaders of other heterodox sects are only briefly recalled. Two small seated Buddhas alone invoke the many magic figures in his image called up by the Blessed One to the amazement of the crowd. Greater importance is attached to the tongues of fire and fountains of water which the Master caused to spring in turn from his shoulders or the lower part of his body.⁸¹

Foucher also claimed to have identified the multiplication miracle in China. He stated that the buddha images in the mandorla (*tejas*) of the colossal Buddha in front of cave 20 at Yungang represented this miracle:

...innumerable [sic] figures of the Blessed One, superposed upon a kind of band, which form nimbus and aureoles on the flamboyant background of the *tejas*, finally convince us that we have to deal with a representation of this miracle in the traditional form of the multiplication of Buddhas.⁸²

Convinced as Foucher may have been that he had identified a Śrāvastī scene in China, it would appear that artistic representations of the miracles were not popular in China. To date, only three examples have been found of what may possibly be identified as a multiplication miracle, one at the site of Rawak near Khotan, one at Kizil and one from the cache of Mogao cave #17. The first is of a standing Buddha made of modelled clay with smaller buddha figures standing erect and radiating from the body of the main image (plate 25). It was excavated by Stein and Foucher identified it as the multiplication miracle. The second is of a similar scene but in the two-dimensional form of a wall painting from Kizil (plate 26) and the third is from a silk painting which Stein obtained from cave #17 and which, based on Foucher's identification of the Rawak statue, Stein also claimed represented the

⁸¹Hallade, *Gandharan Art*, 102.

⁸²Foucher, 166-167.

miracle.⁸³ However, it should be noted that their identity as a Śrāvastī multiplication scene may be questioned since the main Buddha image is standing and not seated on a lotus created by the nagas as indicated in the *Divyāvadāna* text, nor are there seated buddha images among the standing ones that surround the main figure.

Foucher's identification of the multiplication miracle at Yungang can further be questioned since there are other examples at Mogao (caves #272, 260, 439, 297, 296, and 244, for example), Bingling Si (cave #169) and Mati Si of mandorlas and halos decorated with small buddha figures yet they have not been related to the Śrāvastī miracles, Foucher being the only one to propose that connection.

The thousand buddha motif, which commonly appeared painted on the ceilings of many cave-temples situated along the northern periphery of the Taklamakan in Xinjiang has also been related to the Śrāvastī miracles. In reference to a wall painting of the motif in the caves at Kumtura, Gaulier et al. wrote:

The multiplication of Buddha had already been represented in an earlier period by the miracle of Śrāvastī, but this theme had not become as all-embracing as it was to be in the sixth and seventh centuries.⁸⁴

The earlier period of Śrāvastī representations these authors referred to were the ones from Rawak and Kizil mentioned above. Therefore, they proposed that two completely different iconographic representations of the multiplication miracle, the Rawak and Kizil style of a standing Buddha with smaller images radiating from it as well as the thousand buddha motif, existed in Xinjiang.

⁸³ Aurel Stein, *The Thousand Buddhas, Ancient Buddhist Paintings from the Cave-Temples of Tun-Huang on the Western Frontier of China, Text* (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1921), 27 and plate xiv.

⁸⁴ Gaulier et al., *Buddhism in Afghanistan*, 9.

In brief, in India the Śrāvastī Miracles were depicted in a variety of ways but in Gandhāra only the twin miracle can be unquestionably identified. In Xinjiang, it was proposed that only the multiplication miracle was depicted and, according to Gaulier et al., this miracle was illustrated in two completely different styles, the thousand buddha motif being one of them.

Yet, in Gansu cave-temples where the thousand buddhas were prominently featured, the earliest predating those in Xinjiang, the motif was not associated with the Śrāvastī miracles. Soper, Ning and Hu, He, and Chen did not mention the Miracles at Śrāvastī in their discussions of the textual origins of the motif. In addition, the other iconographic representations of the miracles of the mango tree and the Buddha emitting fire and water from his shoulders and feet, do not appear to have been popular in Gansu or in other areas in China, as there are no extant examples of either iconographic form. Finally, the motif does not include any other symbols that would indicate it represented the multiplication scene, such as standing and sitting buddha figures or the two nagas, therefore suggesting that in Gansu, Xinjiang and at Ajantā cave #2, the thousand buddhas and the Śrāvastī multiplication miracle were two separate iconographic themes unrelated to each other.

Theme of One Thousand

The theme of one thousand in Chinese Buddhist iconography was not exclusive to the motif. Avalokiteśvara, a bodhisattva of Indian origin, was introduced into China and eventually became known as *Guanshiyin* (Observer of the sounds of the world) or *Guanyin* (Observer of sounds). In China, in a multi-limbed manifestation, this bodhisattva was called *qian-shou qianyan Guan(shi)yin* (thousand-handed thousand-eyed Guanyin) or *Dabei*

(Great Compassionate One) and was one of the bodhisattva's esoteric or Tantric forms.⁸⁵

Although many Indian deities were portrayed with multiple limbs, no image of the thousand-handed thousand-eyed Avalokiteśvara has been identified in India.⁸⁶ Furthermore, in India, "there is no exact form of divinity to apply to this conception of Avalokiteśvara."⁸⁷ In China, however, the Indian monk Quduotipo was recorded to have painted the first *qianshou qianyan Guanshiyin* in 618-626 which was presented to the first Tang emperor.⁸⁸ In Mogao cave #3 (Yuan dynasty 1279-1368), there is an example of this iconographic form (plate 27).⁸⁹ Furthermore, sutras on the thousand-handed thousand-eyed Guanyin, none of which survived in India, were translated into Chinese from Sanskrit and contain Sanskrit hymns in transliteration.⁹⁰ For example, the *Qianshou qianyan Guanshiyin pusa mu tuoluoni shen jing* (*Dhāraṇī Sūtra on the Thousand-handed Thousand-eyed Mother Bodhisattva Guanshiyin*) translated by Bodhiruci in 709 C.E.⁹¹ as well as other translations by Zhitong (627-649), Bhagavaddharma (650-661),

⁸⁵Chün-fang Yü, "Guanyin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokiteshvara," in *Latter Days of the Law*, ed. Marsha Weidner, (Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas, 1994), 155. Tantric here refers broadly to the third Vehicle of Buddhism called Vajrayana meaning Diamond Vehicle. The religious practices of this Vehicle emphasize chanting and visualization meditation with the use of mandalas as well as esoteric scriptures and elaborate rituals. Tantric art is generally characterized by multi-limbed deities, erotic art and an emphasis on icons and the plurality of icons. Guanyin, or Avalokiteśvara, has several Tantric forms, one with eleven heads, another holding a lasso, and a third with a Dharma wheel and the wish-granting jewel.

⁸⁶Lokesh Chandra, *The Thousand-Armed Avalokitesvara* (New Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, 1988), 48.

⁸⁷Alicia Matsunaga, *The Buddhist Philosophy of Assimilation* (Tokyo and Vermont: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1969), 124.

⁸⁸Ibid.

⁸⁹I have been informed that another bodhisattva, Manjusri, is represented with a thousand arms and a thousand bowls in Mogao cave #99 (Five Dynasties 907-960) and in cave #361 (Tang dynasty 618-907), but I have not been able to confirm this.

⁹⁰Chandra, *The Thousand-Armed*, 48.

⁹¹Matsunaga, *The Buddhist Philosophy*, 124.

Vajrabodhi (731-736), and Amoghavajra (723)⁹² which were completed after Quduoitipo's work inspired many more artistic representations of the bodhisattva. Since there appear to have not been any Indian iconographic prototypes for the *qianshou qianyan Guanyin*, it is possible that, like the motif, it was a Chinese innovation.

There is a visual similarity between the thousand buddha motif and the *qianshou qianyan Guanyin*. In both cases, their repetitive aspect serves as a backdrop for the main figure. The buddha images in the motif frequently surround the principal mural scene which features the Buddha and, as such, forms a background that frames the scene while drawing the viewer's eye to the Buddha image in the foreground. Similarly, the numerous arms and eyes encircling Guanyin appear to wave gently in the background and call the viewer's attention to the main icon. In addition, both iconographic forms share a quality of symmetry. All of Guanyin's hands and eyes are equally divided and reflect one another on each side of her body. Likewise, the images in the motif in Mogao Northern Wei caves reflect one another on their opposite walls.

In addition, it is interesting to note that the thousand buddha motif and the *qianshou qianyan Guanyin* appear on mandalas which are diagrammatic representations of the realm of enlightenment and are employed as visual aids for meditation by practitioners of esoteric Buddhism. The Diamond World mandala⁹³ is composed of three squares and a circle in the centre, of which the middle square is bordered on each side by two hundred and fifty tiny buddha images amounting exactly to one thousand

⁹²Chandra, *The Thousand-Armed*, 48.

⁹³The Diamond World mandala is one of a pair of mandalas, the other being the Womb World mandala, that were introduced into Japan from China by the monk Kūkai in 804 C.E.. See Elizabeth ten Grotenhuis, "The Power of Buddhist Multiplicity," (Unpublished manuscript, Boston University, Department of Art History), 7.

buddhas.⁹⁴ Several Japanese mandalas of thousand-armed Guanyin, of which the collection of four mandalas compiled by the monk Kōnen in 1187 C.E. are well known, clearly illustrate the bodhisattva's centrality to the visualization practice associated with these mandalas.⁹⁵

Furthermore, both the motif and the *qianshou qianyan Guanyin* were related to the practice of chanting. In Chapter Four, the relationship between the thousand buddhas and chanting is discussed more thoroughly, but in brief, it appears that the names of the buddhas inscribed in cartouches adjacent to the images in the motif were intended to be recited and may have reflected the practice of chanting invocations and spells. By the fifth century C.E., Guanyin was prominent in the esoteric scriptures that promoted the chanting of *dhāraṇīs*.⁹⁶ In the esoteric text *Dabei zhou* (*Great Compassion Dhāraṇī*), dating to the Tang dynasty, Guanyin was said to promise "freedom from fifteen fearful conditions of death leading to unfavorable rebirth and enjoyment of fifteen favorable conditions of good death to the devotee who chants the *dhāraṇī* faithfully."⁹⁷

Although the *qianshou qianyan Guanyin* dates to the Tang dynasty, therefore approximately two centuries later than the thousand buddha motif, it shared a similar iconographic representation to that of the motif, it was related to the practice of chanting as were the thousand buddhas, and both the motif and the thousand-handed thousand-eyed Guanyin appeared on mandalas. It appears that their similarities reflect Tantric characteristics and

⁹⁴Ibid., 8. For an illustration of the mandala, see Adrian Snodgrass, *The Matrix and Diamond World Mandalas in Shingon Buddhism* vol.2 (New Delhi: Aditya Prakashan, 1988), 577&635 (fig. 299).

⁹⁵For illustrations of Kōnen's mandalas see Chandra, *The Thousand-Armed*, 80-83.

⁹⁶Yü, "Guanyin," 154.

⁹⁷Ibid., 155.

perhaps in future studies the thousand buddha motif should be examined in the context of a proto-Tantric form of iconography.

To summarize, the theme of one thousand in Chinese Buddhist iconography, reflected in the motif and *qianshou qianyan Guanyin*, appear to have been Chinese artistic innovations. Furthermore, evidence from Bingling Si and other Gansu cave-temple sites where the motif was featured as early as 420 C.E., together with Su Bai's chronology of the Kizil caves and the sixth century inscription that accompanies the thousand buddha motif in Ajantā cave #2, suggest the possibility that the motif originated in Gansu. Finally, although the multiplication miracle performed by the Buddha at Śrāvastī calls to mind innumerable buddhas, its relationship with the thousand buddha motif should be critically reconsidered.

Chapter Four

Prevalence of the Motif

Thousand Buddhas as Subject Matter

The Mogao caves have been called "an art gallery in the Gobi."¹ This appreciation of the statuary and wall-paintings only views them as "works of art" without considering the religious context in which they were conceived, that being that the caves were adorned in order to create a sacred space for the purpose of performing religious acts.

The relationship between the cave-temple art and popular beliefs and religious practices performed in the caves may be explained by the subject matter of the paintings and statues. Furthermore, if an interplay between the art and architectural features like the central pillar of the cave is considered, subject matter such as the thousand buddha motif may be understood as an integral part of both the design and function of the cave.

This chapter examines the possible relationships that existed between the motif and the practices of visualization meditation, chanting and circumambulation, which led to the prevalence of the thousand buddhas as subject matter in the Northern Wei caves. To begin, the relationship between the motif and the *Sanjie sanqian foming jing* (*Sūtra on the Names of the Three Thousand Buddhas of the Three Kalpas*) as well as the possible connection between visualization meditation advocated in the *Sea Sūtra* are discussed to determine how the motif may have reflected certain practices associated with these texts. Second, the possible connection between the thousand buddhas and the tradition of chanting incantations and spells is

¹Mildred Cable and Francesca French, *The Gobi Desert* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1943), 42.

considered. Third, the relationship between the motif and the central pillar is examined and how the thousand buddhas may have been incorporated into the merit-making act of circumambulation. To conclude, an interpretation of the thousand buddha motif as a reflection of the Buddhist notion of cyclical time related to the doctrine of rebirth and to the act of circumambulation is proposed.

The clearest connection the motif had with texts related to religious practices was drawn between the inscriptions of names of buddhas in the cartouches adjacent to the images in the motif and *Sanjie sanqian foming jing*. Ning Qiang and Hu Tongqing discovered that the inscriptions corresponded to names mentioned in these texts.² *Sanjie sanqian foming jing* were related to *sanshi sanqianfo xinyang* (devotion to the three thousand buddhas of the three ages) which involved five devotional practices of (1) reciting and (2) writing the names of buddhas, (3) painting buddha images, (4) making offerings of incense, flowers and heavenly musicians (the musicians were painted on the upper part of the walls), and (5) sincerely performing rituals, all of which were performed in order to end suffering and accumulate merit.³ Ning and Hu associated the act of writing and painting with the inscriptions in the cartouches and the motif's images respectively, therefore, the thousand buddha motif was closely related to devotional practices performed in the caves.

Another possible connection between the motif and practices described in texts may have been the relationship between the thousand buddhas and meditation. Alan Sponberg's opening words in his article "Meditation in Fa-hsiang Buddhism" commented on how meditation and Buddhism have

²Ning and Hu, "Dunhuang Mogaoku," 27.

³Ibid., 29.

become virtually synonymous.⁴ Indeed, the Buddha himself sat in meditation until he was enlightened. He Shizhe claimed that Dunhuang was associated with meditation since many *dhyāna* masters came from or visited Dunhuang, for example Zhufahu (Dharmarakṣa), Zhufacheng, Yudaosui, Zhutanyou, Dandaokai, Daoshao, Shidaofa, Shifaying, Shishaobian, and Shihuiyuan.⁵ In addition, evidence from Mogao indicates that meditation was practiced in the earliest caves. Northern Liang cave #268 is a narrow rectangular cave with four cells⁶ which, according to He, served without a doubt for meditation purposes, as did the four cells in Western Wei cave #285.⁷ On the ceiling of the latter cave thirty-five buddha images seated in meditation were each painted in individual cave-like cells thereby clearly illustrating this practice (plate 28).

Among the terms associated with the earliest Chinese Buddhist meditation is the word *chan*.⁸ He Shizhe argued in his article "Dunhuang Mogaoku Beichao shiku yu chan" that the form of *chan* practiced in the Hexi region during the fifth and sixth centuries C.E. was a form of *guan*,⁹ which refers to a visualization meditation that required the practitioner to concentrate all thoughts on visualizing every aspect of the Buddha's body.¹⁰

⁴Alan Sponberg, "Meditation in Fa-hsiang Buddhism," in *Traditions of Meditation in Chinese Buddhism*, ed. Peter Gregory, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1986), 15.

⁵He Shizhe, "Dunhuang Mogaoku Beichao shiku yu chan," in *Dunhuang yanjiu wenji* ed. Dunhuang Research Institute, (Gansu: Gansu Renmin chubanshe, 1982), 126.

⁶These four cells are numbered caves #267, 269, 270, 271.

⁷He, "Dunhuang Mogaoku," 127-128.

⁸Other Chinese terms for meditation are *chanding*, *siweixiu*, and *jinglü*. See He, "Dunhuang Mogaoku," 124. *Dhyāna* and *samādhi* are Sanskrit terms which refer to meditation of which the former, in its broadest etymological sense, means to think closely upon an object while the latter signifies to bring or put together and more often refers to the resultant state of mental concentration than to the activity itself. See Sponberg, "Meditation," 18.

⁹He, "Dunhuang Mogaoku," 124.

¹⁰Soper, *Literary Evidence*, 144.

The *Sea Sūtra* belongs to a group of texts known as the *guan* sutras¹¹ and advocates the practice of *guan* in a stupa.¹² Abe pointed out that this form of meditation could also be performed in a stūpa-cave¹³ and since it is generally accepted that the central pillar represented the pagoda¹⁴ and the pagoda was the Chinese adaptation of the stupa,¹⁵ pillar-caves would also be a suitable place for performing the *guan* described in the *Sea Sūtra*. Soper wrote that one of the basic points in this sūtra was its recognition of the importance of images as an aid to personal devotion and he identified at least six passages insisting that the practitioner seek the assistance of an artistic image if he found the process of visualization particularly difficult.¹⁶

Soper translated sections of the *Sea Sūtra* based on the Chinese version attributed to Buddhabhadra who translated it between 398-421 C.E.. The origin of the text is still undetermined, but Soper proposed it may originally have been composed in southeast Afghanistan because special emphasis in the sūtra was given to the episode in the Buddha's life where he triumphed over the evil Naga king at Nagarahara (near modern Hadda in southeast Afghanistan).¹⁷ He explained this emphasis "as the result of some Nagahara writer-monk's desire to give the highest honors to his local cult."¹⁸ Abe

¹¹Ibid., 184. The other five texts which make up the *guan* group are: (1) *Guan Mile pusa shang sheng dou shuai tian jing* (Sutra on the Visualization of Maitreya Bodhisattva's Rebirth Above in Tuṣita Heaven), (2) *Guan Wuliang shou fo jing* (Sūtra on the Visualization of Amitāyus Buddha), (3) *Guan Yaowang Yaoshang er pusa jing* (Sūtra on the Visualization of the Two Bodhisattvas King of Healing and Supreme Healer), (4) *Guan Xukongzang pusa jing* (Sūtra on the Visualization of the Bodhisattva Akāśagarbha), and (5) *Guan Puxian pusa xingfa jing* (Sūtra on the Practice of Visualizing the Bodhisattva Samantabhadra). See Abe, *Mogao Cave* 254, 126-127.

¹²Abe, *Mogao Cave* 254, 128.

¹³Ibid., 129.

¹⁴Ibid., 17.

¹⁵For a discussion of the metamorphosis of the stūpa into the pagoda, see Seckel, *The Art of Buddhism*, 103-132.

¹⁶Soper, *Literary Evidence*, 188-189.

¹⁷Ibid., 185.

¹⁸Ibid.

suggested the text may have been a Central Asian or Chinese work since there is no evidence that the *Sea Sūtra* nor any of the *guan* sūtras were of Indian origin and because translations of 711 the *guan* sūtras were attributed to Central Asians.¹⁹

The *Sea Sūtra* was devoted primarily to stories about Śākyamuni's life while the main part of the text was a discussion between the Buddha and his father, king of the Śākyaas, and explained the reasons and the procedures for engaging in the practice of visualizing Śākyamuni. The father asked :

After the Buddha's Nirvāṇa the beings of later ages will say : 'How are we to visualize the Buddha's body with its phenomenal attributes, and know the Buddha's radiance and His habitual measurements?' I only pray that the Heaven-honored One may explain this point today for me and for posterity... After the Buddha's Nirvāṇa, should there be those among the four classes of beings, or the gods, Nagas, Yaksas, etc., who wish to fix their thoughts, to reflect, to practise meditation, to attain the status of true recipients of *samādhi* , the mystic ecstasy...²⁰

Śākyamuni replied :

They must be taught step by step this [process of] fixing their thoughts, in accordance with their powers of mental seeing. ...What is meant by 'fixing thoughts'? Suppose, now, that someone wished to fix his thoughts on visualizing the top of the Buddha's head...on His hair...on the intervals between His hairs...on His forehead, in its breadth, flatness, and regularity...[etc.]²¹

The sūtra continues with a description of what follows after the practitioner has visualized a complete image of the Buddha.

When he can see a single figure perfectly he will go on to imagine two...and then three...and then ten...and then a whole chamber completely filled with Buddha images, so that no space remains between them. ...He who carries out this [process of] visualization

¹⁹Abe, *Mogao Cave 254*,

²⁰Soper, *Literary Evidence*, 186-187.

²¹Ibid., 187.

will be absolved of the sins accumulated during sixty millions of *kalpas* of reincarnation... In the time to come the acuteness of his mental powers will permit him to meet the Thousand World-honored Buddhas of this Bhadrakalpa, and They will be His teachers...²²

The walls painted with the thousand buddha motif in fifth century Gansu pillar-caves recall the scene described in this passage. Although it does not seem plausible that the individual images in the motif served as visual aids for this meditation since they do not delineate all the Buddha's attributes required for the visualization, the overall effect of the thousand buddhas encircling the room illustrates one of the goals in the process of visualization described in the *Sea Sūtra*.

In addition, the motif was associated with meditation in its broadest sense since all the images in the motif were depicted in *dhyānamudrā*. Furthermore, Chen argued that the *Xianjie jing* was related to *samādhi* practices and that because the motif was linked to that sutra the thousand buddhas were also related to meditation.²³ She then added that the connection between the motif and *shuofatu* was linked to meditation as well since in cave #169 at Bingling Si the motif surrounds a *shuofatu* and a scene of a meditating Buddha.²⁴ Finally, she commented that Buddha statues in the pillar niches depicted in *dhyānamudrā* faced the walls of the motif thereby further emphasizing the relationship between the thousand buddhas and meditation.²⁵

The practice of reciting *mantras*, *dhāraṇīs* and *shenzhou*, and their possible relationship with the motif has not yet been researched. These are rather ambiguous terms that refer to a form of chant. The former two were

²²Ibid., 190.

²³Chen, *Dunhuang Mogaoku*, 100-101.

²⁴Ibid., 101.

²⁵Ibid., 127.

introduced from India while the *shenzhou* was a Chinese term found frequently in Buddhist texts from the third century C.E. onward and incorporated the meaning of both *mantra* and *dhāraṇī*.²⁶ These terms are not generally discussed in relation to one another and, furthermore, their definitions have not won universal acceptance. That which follows is Strickmann's explanation for all three terms and how they were related to each other thereby offering a comparison between these three forms of chant.

It is well known that *dhāraṇīs* are supposed to have been unique to Buddhism. They were said to encapsulate vast quantities of doctrine in concentrated form, and their recitation is found described as a mnemonic device as well as a means of protection. Mantras, in contrast, are shared by Buddhism with other Indian religions. They exhibit a remarkable linguistic and paralinguistic spectrum, ranging from directly intelligible phrases to seemingly meaningless single syllables; structurally they may resemble birdsong, music, baby talk, or the utterances of the insane. Ōmura Seigei has already demonstrated from Chinese sources how mantras and *dhāraṇīs* were early confounded and intermingled in Buddhist practice, the term "spirit-spell" (*shen-chou*; *shenzhou*) being used for both. Yet no examples of this very natural fusion are quite so striking as those discernable in our fifth-century scripture. Here we find genuine *dhāraṇīs* taken from other, earlier texts being entirely translated into mantra-like lists of gods, with separate syllabic groupings personified and deified.²⁷

The fifth century scripture Strickmann is referring to is the *Guan ding jing* (*Book of Consecration*), a Chinese Buddhist apocryphal text. The contents of this book are composed of twelve individual *sūtras*, of which six are on protective rites, two on salvation rites, two on therapeutic rites, one on divination, and one on exorcistic rites, all of which contain spells or incantations.²⁸ The last *sūtra* in this compilation is the *Yaoshi(fo) jing* (*Sūtra*

²⁶Michel Strickmann, "Magical Medicine; Therapeutic Rituals in Mediaeval China," (Strickwick Papers and Ananda Panda Ashram, Ltd., 1987), 22.

²⁷Michel Strickmann, "The Consecration *Sūtra*: A Buddhist Book of Spells," in *Chinese Buddhist Apocrypha*, ed. Robert E. Buswell (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990), 80-81.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 82.

on the Master of Healing; *Bhaiṣajyaguru*). The Master of Healing is frequently referred to as the Medicine Buddha and presides over the Eastern Paradise. Soper wrote that this Buddha evolved from the status of a bodhisattva and that prior to the fifth century C.E. he existed as the pair of lesser physician bodhisattvas *Bhaiṣajyarajā* and *Bhaiṣajyasamudgata*.²⁹

These two bodhisattvas were known in China as early as the first half of the fifth century C.E. through the *Fo shuo guo Yaowang Yaoshang er pusa jing*. This sutra was translated into Chinese by Kalayasas, a monk from the Western Regions, sometime during 424-442, and is the earliest known text to mention the three thousand buddhas of the three kalpas. Furthermore, this sutra was identified by Chen,³⁰ Ning and Hu³¹ as a textual source for the thousand buddhas as well as by Soper who stated that the combination of knowing and invoking the names of kalpa buddhas was responsible for the selection of both the three thousand buddhas of the three kalpas and the buddhas of the ten quarters. The sūtra reads:

Through the supernatural power attained by having heard the names of these two Bodhisattvas, such persons whenever they may be born during the 500 *asaṅkhyas* of *kalpas* will never lapse into any of the evil forms of rebirth.³²

This is followed by an incantation:

Bhaiṣajyarajā says of His that just this kind of divine spell was spoken by the eighty millions of Buddhas in the past; is being spoken in the present time by the Buddha Śākyamuni; and will be spoken in the future by the Thousand Buddhas of this Bhadrakalpa. After the Buddha's Nirvana if any monk or nun or lay convert, whether male or female, hears this spell, chants it, and keeps it; purifies himself from all hindrances of past *karma* ...in his mortal body practises the various mystic ecstasies, seeing the Buddha's phenomenal body in

²⁹Soper, *Literary Evidence*, 173.

³⁰Chen, *Dunhuang Mogaoku*, 46.

³¹Ning and Hu, "Dunhuang Mogaoku," 25.

³²Soper, *Literary Evidence*, 205.

every thought; and until the end never forgets the unexcelled complete Enlightenment; then not any of all the kinds of evil demons that devour men's vital spirits, not *yaksas* ... [etc., etc.] will be able to break in and harm him, anywhere. And at the end of his life, the Buddhas of the Ten Quarters will all come to welcome him, and he may go to be reborn wherever he wishes, in any of Their foreign Paradises.³³

The practice of chanting *dhāraṇīs*, an important aspect of Liangzhou Buddhism during the fifth century C.E., was performed by Buddhist monks among whom Dharmakṣema was recorded to have been particularly skilled. Abe wrote that this monk was a central figure in Liangzhou Buddhism and was sponsored by the Northern Liang king Juqu Mengsun as a translator and thaumaturgist.³⁴ Dharmakṣema's biography, recounted in the *Gaoseng zhuan*, recorded that in the Western Regions he was known as a *dhāraṇī* master since he was well versed in the art of *dhāraṇīs* and his chants were always effective.³⁵ In addition, it recorded that one day he told Juqu Mengsun that demons had entered the capital and that calamities and disease were certain to follow. The king did not believe him and wanted to see the demons himself whereupon Dharmakṣema cast a spell on the king that enabled him to see the demons. The monk then proceeded to purify himself and chase away the demons with a *shenzhou* followed by three days of chanting *dhāraṇīs*.³⁶

Not only was the Northern Liang capital vulnerable to demons, evil spirits were also lurking in the rest of Gansu. During his sojourn in Dunhuang (T'un-hwang) in the first year of the fifth century, C.E. the Chinese monk Faxian wrote:

Le Hao, the prefect of T'un-hwang, had supplied them with the means of crossing the desert (before them), in which there are many evil

³³Ibid.

³⁴Abe, *Mogao Cave 254*, 116-118.

³⁵Hui, *Gaoseng zhuan*, 76. Also see Shih *Biographies*, 99.

³⁶Ibid., 78. Also see Shih *Biographies*, 101.

demons and hot winds. (Travellers) who encounter them perish all to a man. There is not a bird to be seen in the air above, nor an animal on the ground below. Though you look all around most earnestly to find where you can cross, you know not where to make your choice, the only mark and identification being the dry bones of the dead (left upon the sand).³⁷

Others who travelled through the perilous areas along the route connecting China with India agreed "...the desert was animate, the Silk Route alive with phantoms, and protective spiritual power was no idle, abstruse notion."³⁸

The inherent dangers along the Silk Road were evident and protective rituals including the chanting of *dhāraṇīs* as a talismanic measure undertaken by people traveling or living in Gansu appears to have not been uncommon. Among the manuscripts hidden in the cache in Mogao cave #17 were a number of *dhāraṇī* texts dating to the fifth and sixth centuries C.E., five of which are now in the Stein Collection.³⁹

Visually, the buddha images in the motif repeated over the walls of a cave could symbolize the familiar oral repetition of a chant while the actual chanting appears to have been done by reciting the names of the buddhas that were inscribed in cartouches adjacent to each image. In the *Foming jing*, which list names of buddhas that corresponded to the inscriptions, every buddha name is prefixed by two characters pronounced *namo* or *namah* therefore distinctly indicating that the names were intended to be chanted. Many Buddhist incantations still begin this way, for example the Pure Land practice of invoking Amitābha Buddha is done by repeated chanting of *namo Amitofo* (*namah Amitābha* in Sanskrit). Viewed in this way, the thousand buddhas would be an ingenious way of artistically representing the verbal

³⁷Legge, *A Record*, 12.

³⁸Strickmann, "India in the Chinese," 53.

³⁹Abe, *Mogao Cave* 254, 118.

formula of a *dhāraṇī*, *mantra* or *shenzhou* and would be an appropriate subject matter for Silk Road cave-temple murals.

It should be noted that, although it is likely that the names were intended to be chanted, it does not seem plausible that the inscriptions were read from the cartouches as the names were being recited. The reason for this is that, in the case of the Mogao caves, the caves are quite dark and even assuming that natural light entered them it would not illuminate the inscriptions on all four walls. Furthermore, as Strickmann pointed out, the recitation of *dhāraṇīs* was described as a mnemonic device. Therefore it may be possible that the lists of buddha names were memorized. Another possibility is that the names were read directly from a text.

In addition to visualization meditation and chanting, another important aspect of the religious practices and beliefs in Gansu during the fifth and sixth centuries was the notion of karma. Abe wrote:

A concern with karmic action, arguably the central issue for early Chinese Buddhists, was the basis for many of the practices associated with Liangzhou Buddhism... That this was a major interest for most Buddhist adherents, clergy or lay, of elite or common background, is clear from textual evidence.⁴⁰

Improving one's karma to ensure a better life for the next incarnation and to end eventually the rounds of rebirths into this world required the Buddhist to perform merit-making acts. Circumambulation of the central pillar housing statues of Śākyamuni and Maitreya would be one way to accrue merit.

Based on the design of the Northern Wei caves in Gansu and, in particular those at Mogao, Ning Qiang and Hu Tongqing suggested that the front section of the cave may have been a room for making offerings and paying respect to the main icon placed in the pillar niche facing east while the

⁴⁰Ibid., 118-119.

back section of the cave housing the central square pillar appears to have served as a circumambulatory path (*raoxing*).⁴¹

The merit-making practice of circumambulation (*xingdao*; *pradakṣina*) was well-attested in the Indian tradition and was associated most frequently with walking around a stūpa.⁴² In stūpa-caves, such as the earliest ones at Ajantā,⁴³ the stūpa was moved inside the communal place of worship called the chaitya hall and placed at the rear of the cave with adequate room for ritual circumambulation⁴⁴ which involved walking around a sacred monument or image several times.

Based on a reference found in the *Sea Sūtra* to entering a stūpa (*ru ta*), Abe proposed that the central pillar in Chinese Buddhist caves represented the shaft of a pagoda and that "logically, the only early Chinese Buddhist structures which could accommodate such a ritual were pagodas with internal circumambulation paths and central pillar caves such as cave #254."⁴⁵

Ning and Hu discussed how the thousand buddha motif in Mogao cave #254 synthesized the five main aspects of *sanshi sanqianfo xinyang* (mentioned above) and argued that circumambulation and visualizing images were part of the rituals related to the devotion to the three thousand buddhas of the three ages performed in the cave.⁴⁶

Although there remains no indisputable evidence to indicate that circumambulation formed part of the Buddhist activities performed in Gansu during the Northern Wei, such as a fifth century Chinese Buddhist text

⁴¹Ning and Hu, "Dunhuang Mogaoku," 29.

⁴²Seckel, *The Art of Buddhism*, 72.

⁴³It is generally accepted that cave #10 was the earliest stupa-cave at Ajanta. See Rowland, *Ajanta*, 5 and Fisher, *Buddhist Art*, 53.

⁴⁴Fisher, *Buddhist Art*, 53.

⁴⁵Abe, *Mogao Cave 254*, 18.

⁴⁶Ning and Hu, "Dunhuang Mogaoku," 29.

describing circumambulation practices in caves, the structure of the caves with the central pillar and the passageway around it suggest that *xingdao* was practiced. In addition, the *Gaoseng zhuan* recorded that the monk Dharmarakṣa (266-308), who translated the *Xianjie jing* (*Present Kalpa Sūtra*) and the *Zhen Fahua jing* (*Lotus Sūtra*) in 291 C.E. and 286 C.E. respectively, practiced circumambulation assiduously.⁴⁷

The thousand buddha motif may have been related to the practice of circumambulation. Ning and Hu discovered that the names inscribed in the cartouches alongside the images in the motif in Mogao cave #254 corresponded to the names of past, present and future buddhas.⁴⁸ Assuming that circumambulation of the central pillar was performed in the cave, they realized that a sequence could be established for the inscriptions. Cartouches on the east (entrance), south wall and half of the west wall were mostly inscribed with names of past buddhas while the remaining section of the west and north wall contained primarily names of future buddhas.⁴⁹ Since the Buddhist tradition calls for clockwise rotations around sacred objects like stūpas and icons, an order of past to future was determined for the names in the cartouches. Names of the present kalpa buddhas have not been indisputably identified due to unclear inscriptions, but Ning and Hu stated that it cannot be ruled out that they were never included.⁵⁰ He Shizhe claimed that regardless of the lack of present kalpa buddha names in the cartouches, the present kalpa was represented by the Śākyamuni and Maitreya statues in the pillar niches and by murals illustrating episodes of the

⁴⁷Hui, *Gaoseng zhuan*, 24. Also see Shih, *Biographies*, 35.

⁴⁸Ning and Hu, "Dunhuang Mogao," 25. Also see Abe, *Mogao Cave 254*, 30.

⁴⁹Ibid., 30.

⁵⁰Ibid., 25.

Buddha's life.⁵¹ Therefore the three kalpas of the past, present and future were represented in the cave.

It should be noted that although all the Gansu Northern Wei caves examined for this research contain the motif with cartouches adjacent to the buddha images, only Mogao cave #254 has inscriptions that can be clearly read. There are two possible explanations for this: the empty cartouches never contained an inscription or the inscription faded over time. In addition, if the latter is indeed the case, it is impossible to prove at the present time that the empty cartouches once contained the name of a kalpa buddha. It should also be noted that the possibility that the cartouches were added to the motif at a later date does not seem likely since there is ample space for each cartouche whereas if they had been added at a later date the motif would not look as uniform as it does. Furthermore, if the cartouches were not originally a part of the motif, this would imply that cartouches would have been painted on at a later time in all the Northern Wei caves in the Hexi Corridor examined in this study, a possibility that does not seem reasonable.

Ning and Hu, He, and Chen presented convincing evidence that the motif was related to the devotion to the three thousand buddhas of the three kalpas which required the worshiper to pay respect to the names of kalpa buddhas, to paint their images and to perform chanting. In addition, the striking similarity between all the Gansu Northern Wei caves which have the combination of the motif and a square central pillar incline me to believe that the motif with inscribed cartouches was an integral feature in an architectural and artistic design in Northern Wei Gansu cave-temples and that all the cartouches originally contained kalpa buddha names.

⁵¹He Shizhe, "Guanyu Beichao," 5. Although Maitreya is the Future Buddha, he is considered a present kalpa Buddha.

In addition to Ning and Hu's research on the relationship between the thousand buddhas and the central pillar, Chen also proposed that the motif was related to other features in a cave. She argued that the motif was a part of a meditation theme and was also related to the *shuofatu* since registers of thousand buddhas frequently surrounded this scene at Bingling Si, Wenshu Shan and Mogao.⁵² Chen implied that the motif should not be analyzed as an isolated motif but rather as a component related to other iconographic features in the cave. Abe's study proposed that the imagery and architecture in Mogao cave #254 created a "setting for a number of closely interrelated Buddhist practices that was understood by the various users of the cave as a cohesive complex of beliefs and rituals."⁵³

Building on Chen and Abe's approach, an interpretation for the thousand buddhas based on the motif's relationship to the pillar and to the merit-making act of circumambulation may be that the thousand buddhas reflected the Buddhist notion of cyclical time. Judging from the space it occupied and the attention paid to carving niches and filling them with statuary and paintings, the pillar was clearly central to the activities performed in the cave. The importance of accruing merit to improve one's karma in order to end the rounds of rebirth into this world appeared to have been essential to the Buddhist practices in Gansu during the fifth and sixth centuries, as Abe discussed.

If one were circumambulating to gain merit the rotation around the pillar could symbolize a passage through time. Since Śākyamuni signified the present and the double temporal aspect of Maitreya symbolized the present and the future, while the images in the thousand buddha motif may have

⁵²This was also the case at West Thousand Buddha Caves. See Chapter Two.

⁵³Abe, *Mogao Cave 254*, 148.

represented either the past, present or future age, all three kalpas then existed within a cave. According to the sequence of the thousand buddha images established by Ning and Hu, the circumambulator would symbolically walk through the past, present and, future. Since ritual calls for several circumambulations,⁵⁴ the next rotation of the pillar would then create another cycle of time. The Buddhist notion of cyclical time is intimately related to the doctrine of rebirth. If one does not accrue enough merit to extinguish the bad karma that results in rebirth, one will be bound to yet another life of suffering caused by desires and will go through the cycle of samsara which is to grow old, become ill, die and to be born again.

The cycle of past, present, future and past symbolized in rotations around the pillar may have paralleled the round of samsara by representing the merit-making circumambulator's previous, current and future lives. The motif, as an integral part of the representation of three ages in this cycle, played an intrinsic part in accumulating merit to build good karma and ultimately to ending the rounds of rebirth.

Therefore the thousand buddha motif, as a popular choice for subject matter in Gansu Northern Wei caves, reflected several religious beliefs and practices local to Gansu. Its polyvalent nature as an illustration of an important process in the visualization described in the *Sea Sūtra*, as a two-dimensional form of a chant, as an integral aspect of merit-making acts, and as a representation of Buddhist cyclical time allowed the motif to take on a different meaning depending on the activity being performed in the cave.

⁵⁴Ning and Hu, "Dunhuang Mogaoku," 30.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

Current studies on Mogao art are moving in the direction of analyzing the art from local socio-religious perspectives (Abe's study) as well as questioning how it was incorporated into practices performed in the caves rather than relating the art entirely to textual materials (Ning and Hu, and He's research). This thesis attempted to explore the significance of the thousand buddha motif from a local perspective and to propose how it was related to the process of the activities performed in the caves.

I considered the artistic origin of the thousand buddha motif by attempting to demonstrate that it was a Gansu cave-temple art innovation by pointing out that the caves in the Hexi Corridor dating to the Northern Wei were comprised of a central pillar and wall-paintings primarily covered with the thousand buddhas and reflected a regional cave-temple design. In addition, based on Su Bai's chronology for certain stūpa-caves in Xinjiang which contained the motif together with the observation that the thousand buddhas were not popular in India or Gandhāra, I suggested that the motif may have originated in Gansu and was transmitted west to Xinjiang. Furthermore, I questioned whether the multiple images in the motif were a representation of the Śrāvastī Miracles and proposed, rather, that they were related to the theme of 'one thousand' found in the thousand-handed thousand-eyed Guanyin which also appears to have been a Chinese iconographic innovation.

Possible explanations for the prevalence of the motif revealed that the thousand buddhas may have been related to current religious practices and beliefs during the fifth and sixth centuries. The motif's connection to the

devotional acts of painting buddha images and paying respect to their names are said to have been embodied in *sanshi sanqianfo xinyang* and the meditative stage of visualizing an entire chamber filled with buddhas described in the *Sea Sūtra* may have been represented by the registers of the motif covering the walls of the cave-temple. The popular belief in chanting spells for protective purposes and the recitation of buddha names from *Foming jing* may have been related while the repetitive verbal formulae of the chants may have been visually illustrated by the repeating buddha images in the motif. Finally, the thousand buddhas, as representations of kalpa buddhas, coupled with the motif's connection to the central pillar and hence to the practice of circumambulation may be interpreted as a passage through Buddhist cyclical time related to the notions of merit-making and rebirth.

This study did not consider the possible Daoist influence that may have been related to the thousand buddha motif. It is well-known that Buddhism and Daoism shared similar concepts and that the Buddhists adopted Daoist vocabulary to propagate the Dharma. Since there were commonalities on a doctrinal level there also may have been iconographic similarities. In addition, I only explored the relationship between the motif and the central pillar. However, its relationship to other artistic and architectural features in the caves, such as the connection between the motif and *shuofatu*¹ or the importance of how the thousand buddhas were positioned on the walls, may shed more light on the significance of this motif.

Finally, the thousand buddha motif, understood as a Gansu iconographic innovation and as a reflection of religious practices and beliefs

¹Chen attempted to draw a connection between the motif, *shuofatu* and meditation, as discussed in Chapter Four, however, her explanation was brief. Since the motif and the *shuofatu* are frequently illustrated together their relationship merits further exploration.

should no longer be considered a monotonous backdrop for the caves' murals and statuary. Rather, it should be appreciated as an integral part of the imagery and interrelated to the activities performed in the caves.

APPENDIX

Description of caves #248, 254, 257, 260, 263, 431, 435, 437*

CAVE #248

Pillar : single tier

east face :

Buddha on lotus throne seated in *padmāsana*. Right hand in *abhayamudrā*.
(hand gesture granting the absence of fear).

south face:

Buddha seated in *padmāsana* and *dhyānamudrā*.

west face:

Emaciated Buddha seated in *padmāsana* and *dhyānamudrā*. Hands covered by the robe.

north face:

Same as south face.

Murals :

south wall:

(front section) *Shuofatu* including bodhisattvas and two flying celestial beings called *apsaras*.

(back section) covered with seven registers of the thousand buddha motif.

west wall:

Thousand buddha motif.

north wall:

Same as south wall.

east wall:

Thousand buddha motif.

Cartouche painted next to each buddha image in the motif.

* asterisk indicates information is lacking.

CAVE #254

Pillar : two tiers

east face:

Cross-ankled Buddha.

south face:

(lower niche) Buddha seated in *padmāsana* and *dhyānamudrā*.

(upper niche) Cross-ankled Maitreya with crown.

west face:

(lower niche) Buddha seated in *padmāsana* and *dhyānamudrā*.

north face:

Lower and upper niches same as south face.

Murals :

south wall:

(front section) Five registers of thousand buddha motif surrounding an upper niche. Below the niche is a depiction of *Mara's* assault.

(back section) The Tiger *jātaka* followed by a *shuofatu* including two bodhisattvas and surrounded by five registers of thousand buddha motif.

west wall:

White-robed Buddha flanked by two bodhisattvas and surrounded by ten registers of thousand buddha motif.

north wall:

(back section) Same as south wall.

(front section) The Sibi *jātaka* followed by the story of *Nanda* and five registers of thousand buddha motif surrounding an upper niche.

east wall:

Nine registers of thousand buddha motif.

Other features

: Cartouches with inscriptions of names of buddhas.

: On the upper south and north walls facing the pillar are eight niches each containing a statue of a Buddha. The first and third images from the front are in *abhyamudrā* and the second and fourth in *dhyāna mudrā*. All are seated in *padmāsana*.

: The upper niches in the front sections of the south and north walls each contain a cross-ankled Maitreya.

CAVE #257

Pillar : two tiers

east face:

Seated Buddha with pendant legs.

south face:

(lower niche) Emaciated Buddha seated in *padmāsana* and *dhyānamudrā*.

(upper niche) Maitreya seated in *siwei* (pensive) posture.

west face:

(lower niche) Buddha seated in *padmāsana* and *dhyānamudrā*.

(upper niche) Same.

north face:

(lower niche) Buddha seated in *padmāsana* and *dhyānamudrā*.

(upper niche) Same as south face.

Murals :

south wall :

(front section) *

(back section) Thousand buddha motif surrounding scene of the Buddha in *chakramudrā* (teaching gesture) on top part of wall. Story of a *śramana* who kills himself to preserve chastity on bottom part of wall.

west wall :

Thousand buddha motif surrounding scene of the Buddha in *chakramudrā* on top part of wall. Deer *jātaka* on bottom part of wall.

north wall :

(back section) Thousand buddha motif surrounding scene of Buddha in *chakramudrā* on top part of wall.

(front section) same as south wall.

east wall : Nothing remains.

Cartouche painted next to each buddha image in the motif.

CAVE #260

Pillar : two tiers

east face :

Seated Buddha with pendant legs.

south face :

(lower niche) Emaciated Buddha seated in *padmāsana* and *dhyānamudrā*.

(upper niche) Maitreya in *siwei* posture.

west face :

(lower niche) Buddha seated in *padmāsana* and *dhyānamudrā*.

(upper niche) Buddha.

north face :

(lower niche) Buddha seated in *padmāsana*, holding his robe in left hand and right hand resting on his leg.

(upper niche) Same as south face.

Murals :

south wall :

(front section) Thirteen registers of thousand buddha motif surrounding scene of *Mara's* assault.

(back section) Thousand buddha motif surrounding a *shuofatu* including two bodhisattvas.

west wall :

Thousand buddha motif surrounding a fully robed Buddha in *dhyānamudrā*, flanked by two bodhisattvas and disciples.

north wall :

(back section) Same as south wall.

(front section) Thousand buddha motif surrounding scene of the Buddha's first sermon, with two deer and three wheels at the base of the Buddha's seat.

Cartouche painted next to each buddha image in the motif.

CAVE #263

This cave has a central pillar and the walls are primarily covered with the thousand buddha motif. During the Western Xia (1038-1227), statues were restored and some murals were painted over but several registers of the motif dating to the Northern Wei were left untouched and grid lines beneath the buddha images are still visible.

CAVE #431

Pillar : two tiers

east face :

Seated Buddha with pendant legs.

south face :

(lower niche) Buddha seated in *padmāsana* and *dhyānamudrā* .

(upper niche) Same.

west face :

(lower and upper niches) Same as south face.

north face :

(lower and upper niches) Same as south face.

Murals :

south wall :

(back section) Thousand buddha motif surrounding a *shuofatu* including two bodhisattvas.

west wall :

Thousand buddha motif surrounding a white-robed buddha seated in *padmāsana* and his right hand in *abhayamudrā*.

north wall :

(back section) Same as south wall.

east wall :

Traces of thousand buddha motif.

Other features:

:Cartouche painted next to each buddha image in the motif.

:The statuary in the pillar niches as well as the front section of the cave were redone during the Song Dynasty (960-1127).

CAVE #435

Pillar: two tiers

east face : Seated Buddha with pendant legs.

south face :

(lower niche) Buddha seated in *padmāsana* and *dhyānamudrā*.

(upper niche) Cross-ankled Maitreya with crown.

west face :

(lower niche) Buddha seated in *padmāsana* and *dhyānamudrā*.

(upper niche) Same.

north face :

(lower niche) Same as south face except hands are concealed beneath the robe.

(upper niche) Same as south face.

Murals :

south wall :

(front section) *Shuofatu* .

(back section) Six registers of thousand buddha motif.

west wall :

Thousand buddha motif surrounding a white-robed Buddha.

north wall:

(back section) Same as south wall.

(front section) Same as south wall.

east wall :

Thousand buddha motif.

Cartouche painted next to each buddha image in the motif.

CAVE # 437

Pillar : two tiers

east face :

Seated Buddha with pendant legs.

south face :

(lower niche) Buddha seated in *padmāsana* and *dhyānamudrā*.

(upper niche) Cross-ankled Maitreya with crown.

west face :

(lower niche) Same as south face.

(upper niche) Buddha seated in *padmāsana* and *dhyānamudrā*. Pleated robe flowing over the lotus seat.

north face :

(lower niche) Same as south face.

(upper face) Same as south face.

Murals :

south wall :

(front section) *

(back section) Four registers of thousand buddha motif.

west wall : *

north wall : *

Other features:

:No cartouches.

:Thousand buddha motif redone possibly during the Western Xia.

CHINESE TERMS

Amitofo 阿彌陀佛

chan 禪

chanding 禪定

Dabei 大悲

Dabei zhou 大悲咒

Da fang deng tuoluoni 大方等陀羅尼經

Da Tang Xiyouji 大唐西遊記

Dandaokai 單道開

Daoshao 道韶

Dunhuang 敦煌

Fahua jing 法華經

Foguo ji 侯國記

Foming jing 佛名經

Fo shuo guan Yaowang Yaoshang er pusa jing 佛說觀藥王藥上二菩薩經

Gaoseng zhuan 高僧傳

Guan ding jing 灌頂經

Guan fo sanmei hai jing 觀佛三昧海經

Guan(shi)yin 觀(世)音

Jianhong Yuannian 建弘元年

jinglü 靜慮

Mile da cheng fo jing 彌勒大成佛經

Mile xia sheng cheng fo jing 彌勒下生成佛經

Mile xia sheng jing 彌勒下生經

Mingsha 鳴沙

Mogao 莫高

namo 南無

qianfodong 千佛洞

qianfo xinyang 千佛信仰

qianshou qianyan Guan(shi)yin 千手千眼觀世音

raoxing 繞行

sanjie sanqianfo xinyang 三劫三千佛信仰

sanshi sanqian foming jing 三世三千佛名經

sanshi sanqianfo xinyang 三世三千佛信仰

shenzhou 神咒

Shichaobian 經超禪

Shidaofa 釋道法

Shifaying 釋法頌

Shihuiyuan 釋慧遠

shuofatu 談法圖

siweixiu 思維修

Tian Shan 天山

Tianti Shan 天梯山

Wuliang shou jing 無量壽經

Xianjie jing 賢劫經

xingdao 行道

Yaoshi(fo) jing 藥師(佛)經

Yudaosui 于達邃

Zengyi ahan jing 增一阿含經

Zheng Fahua jing 正法華經

Zhufacheng 竺法乘

Zhufahu 竺法护

Zhushixing 朱士行

Zhutanyou 竺曇猷

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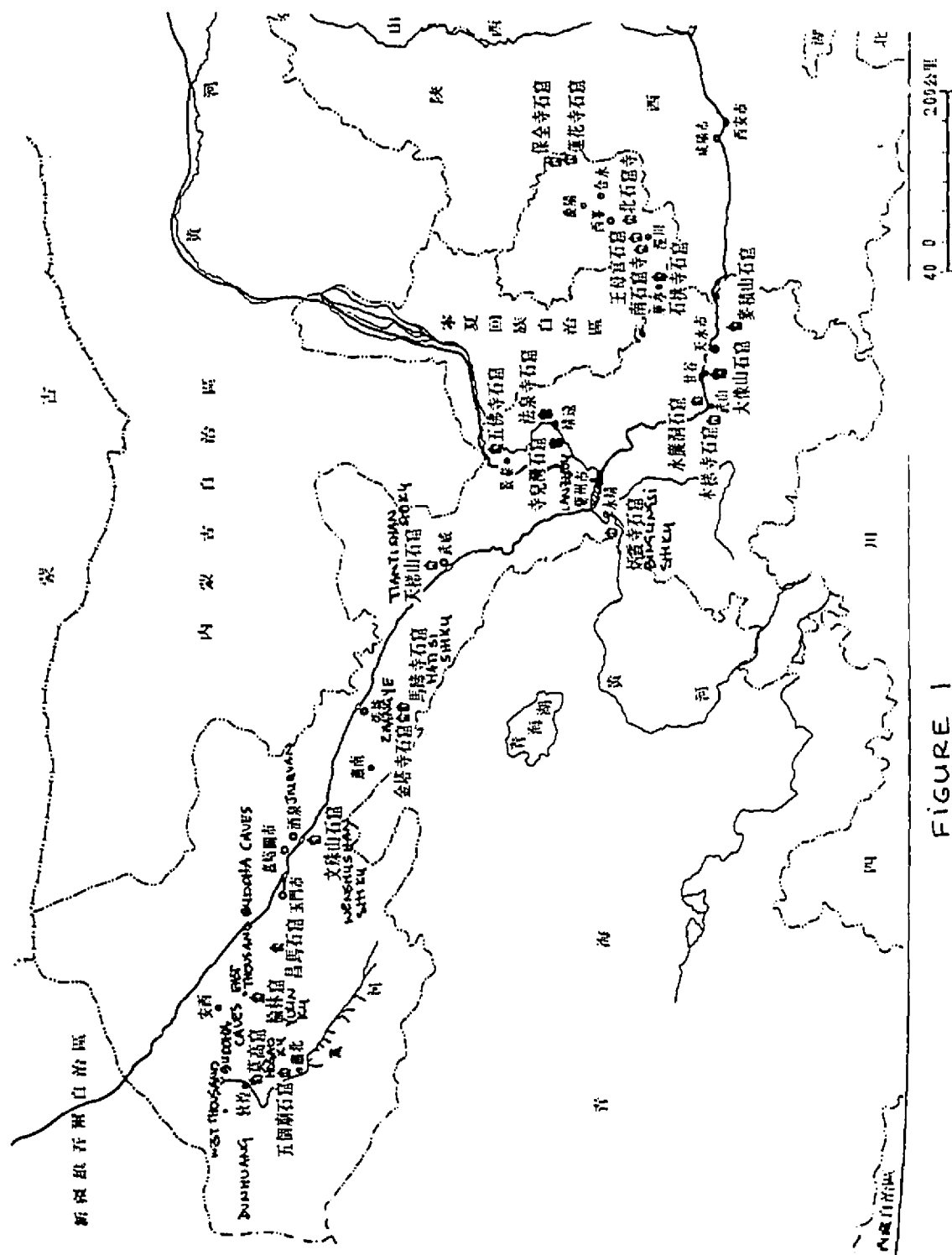
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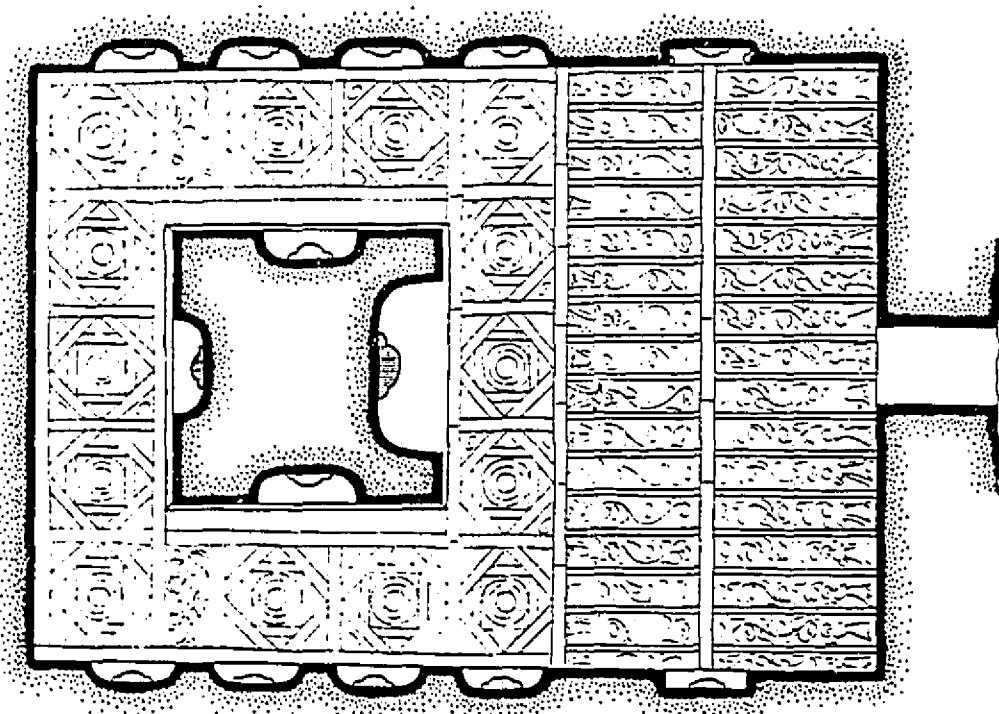
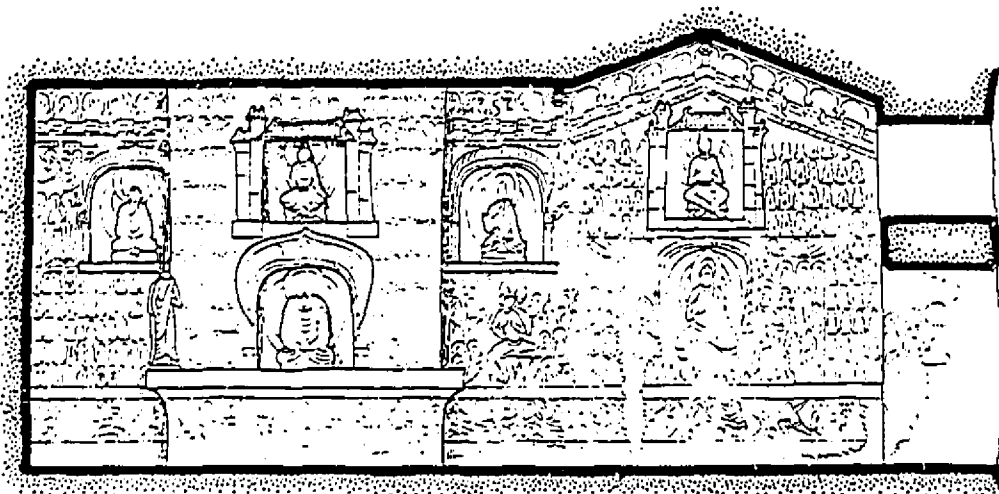


FIGURE 4

LAYOUT OF MOGAO CAVE #254

100 0 100 200cm

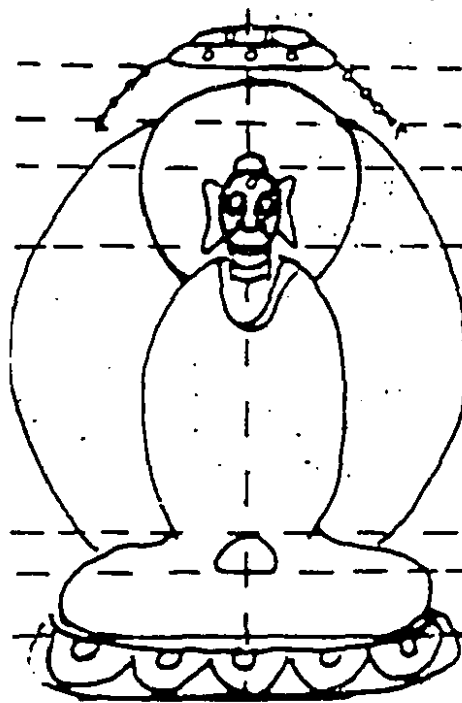


FIGURE 5
MOTIF IMAGE ON GRID PATTERN

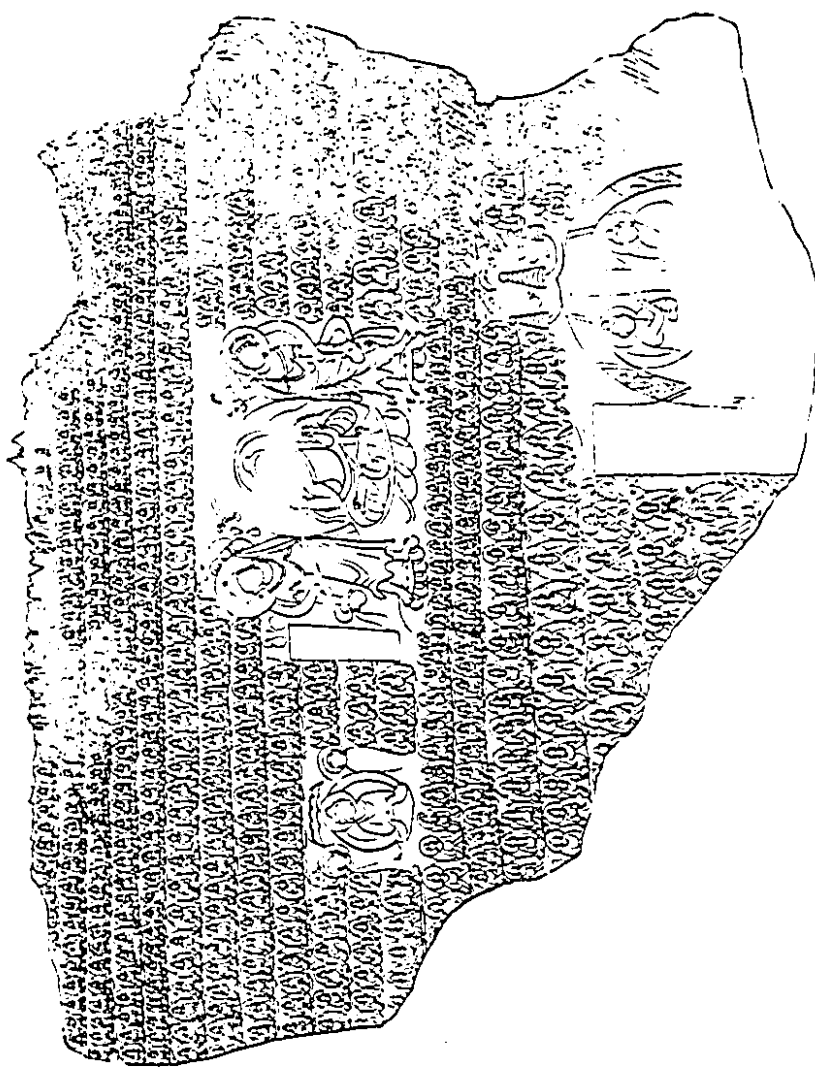


FIGURE 6

BINGLING SI CAVE #169 - SECTION 24

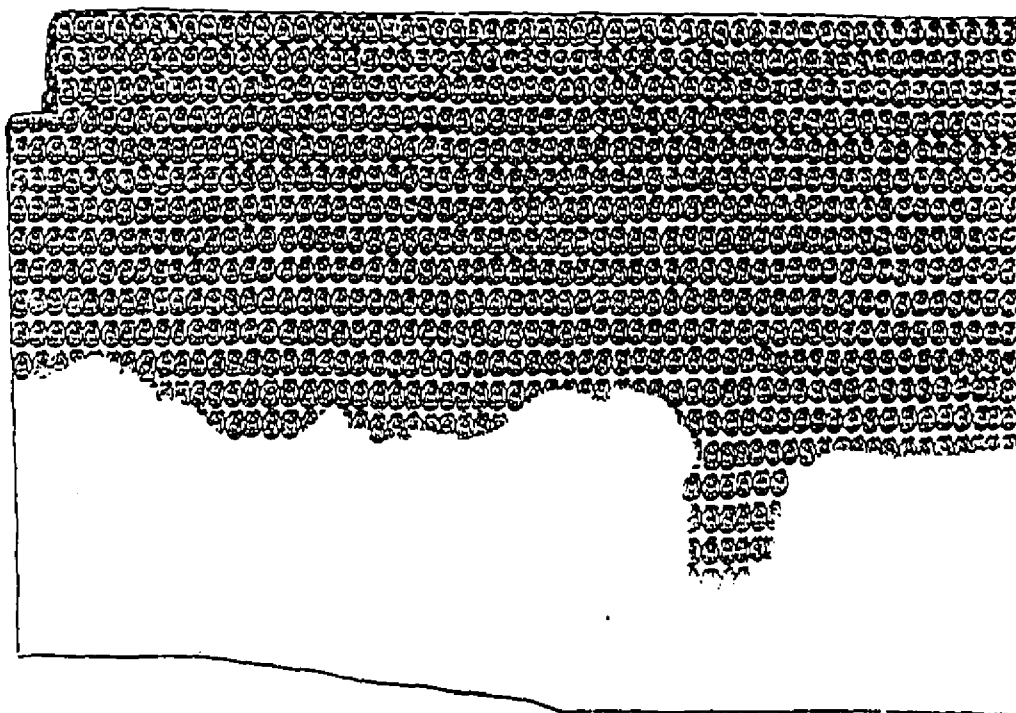


FIGURE 7

BINGLING SI CAVE #169 - SECTION 15

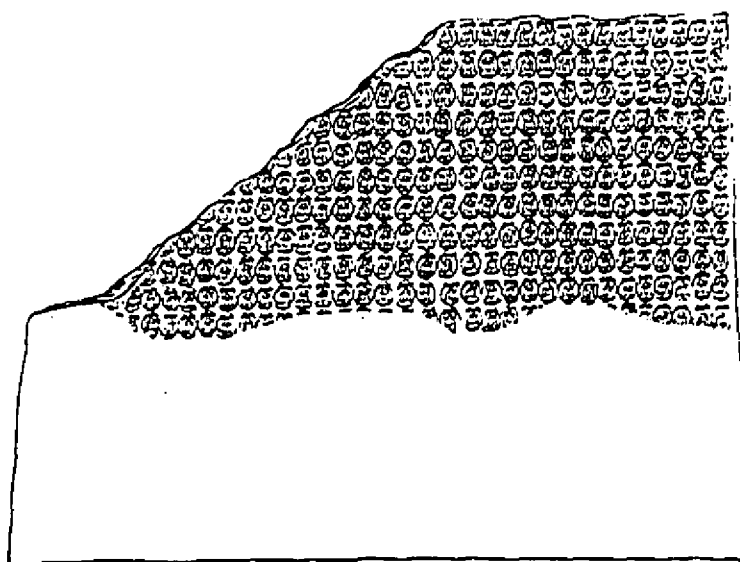


FIGURE 8

BINGLING SI CAVE #169 - SECTION 19



PLATE I

SHUOFATU - HOGAO CAVE # 251



PLATE 2
THOUSAND BUDDHA MOTIF

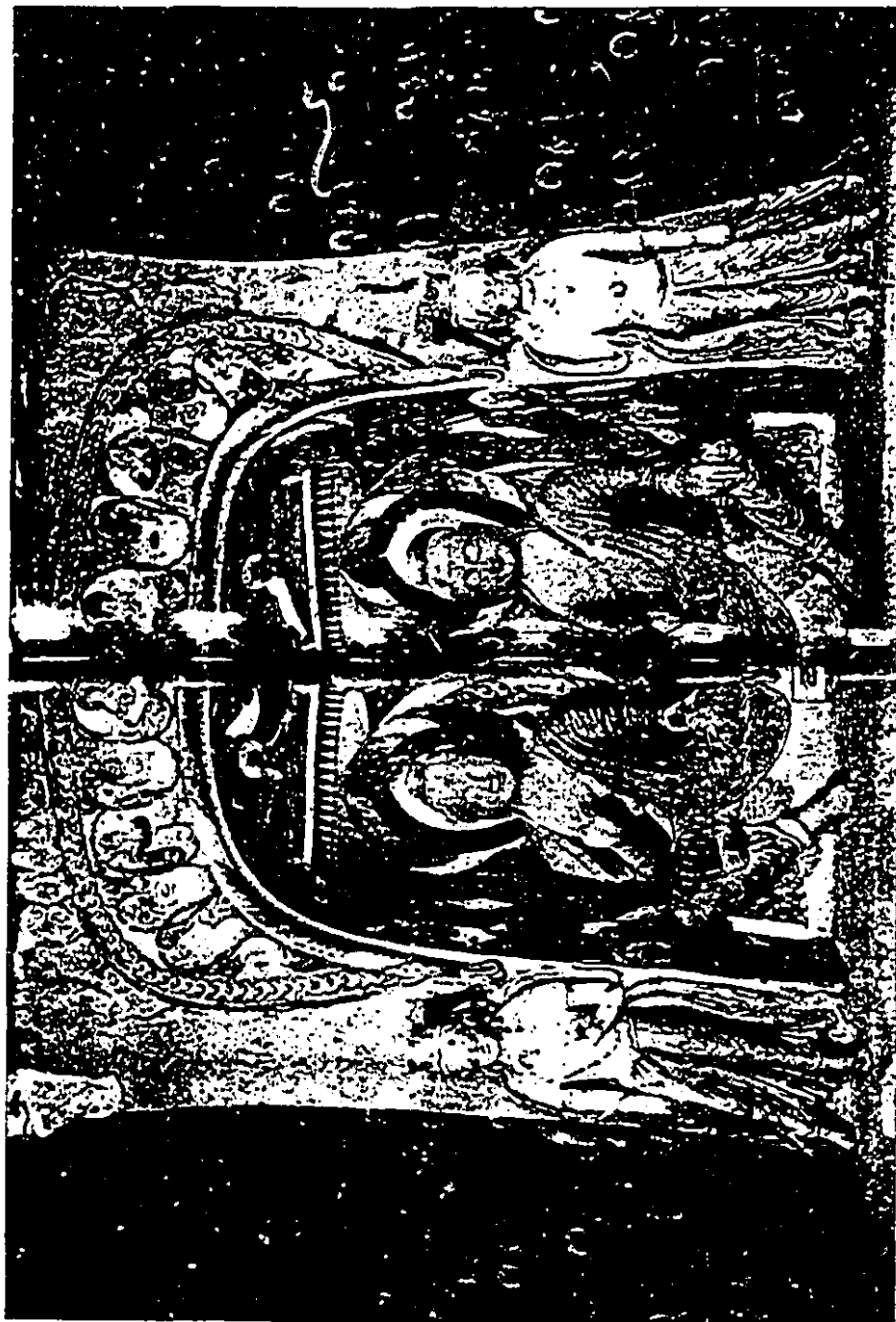


PLATE 3
EAST FACE PILLAR - NOGAD CAVE # 259

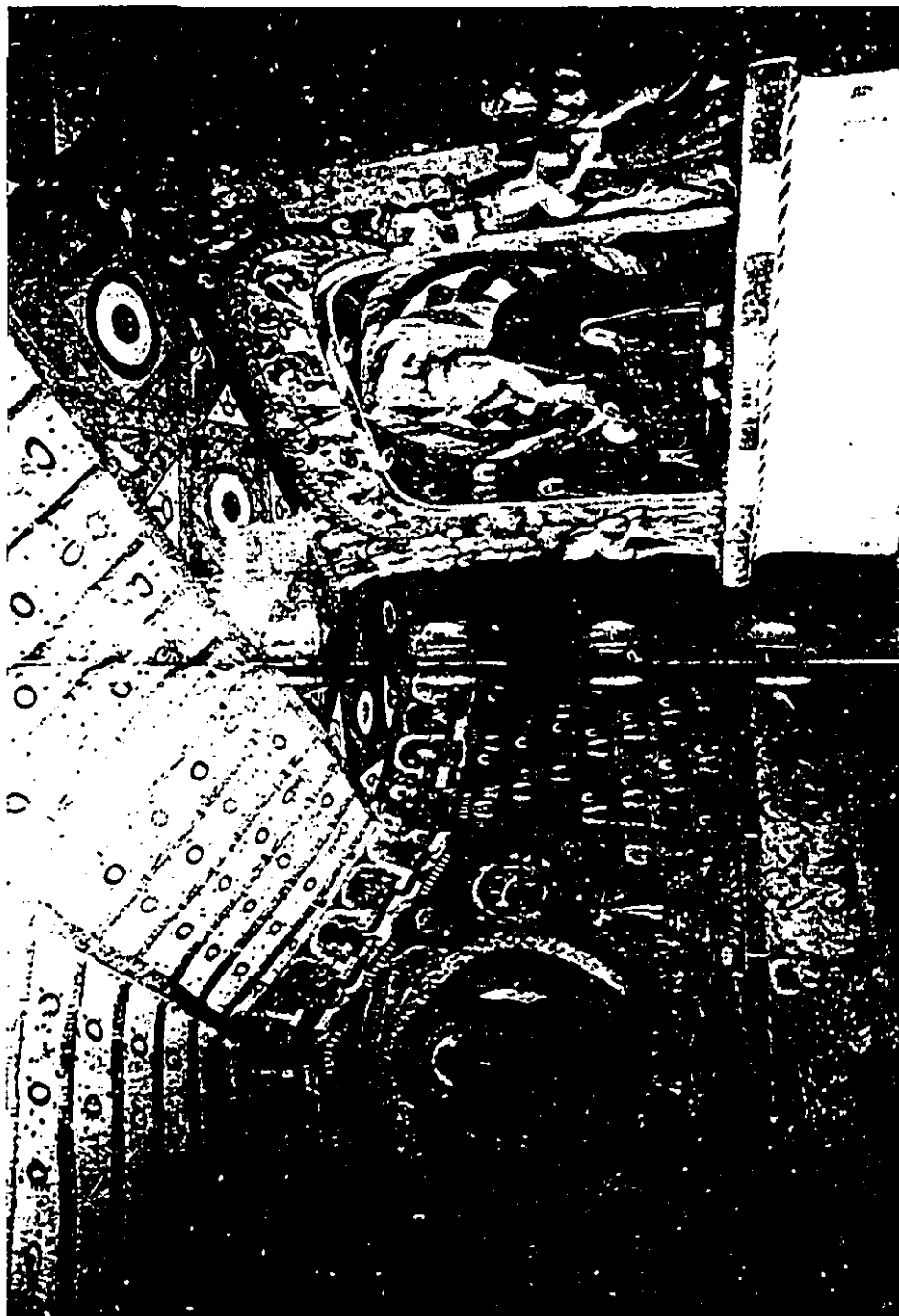


PLATE 4
NOGAO CAVE #251



PLATE 5
MAITREYA, MOGAO CAVE #437



PLATE 6

MAITREYA, NOGAO CAVE #254

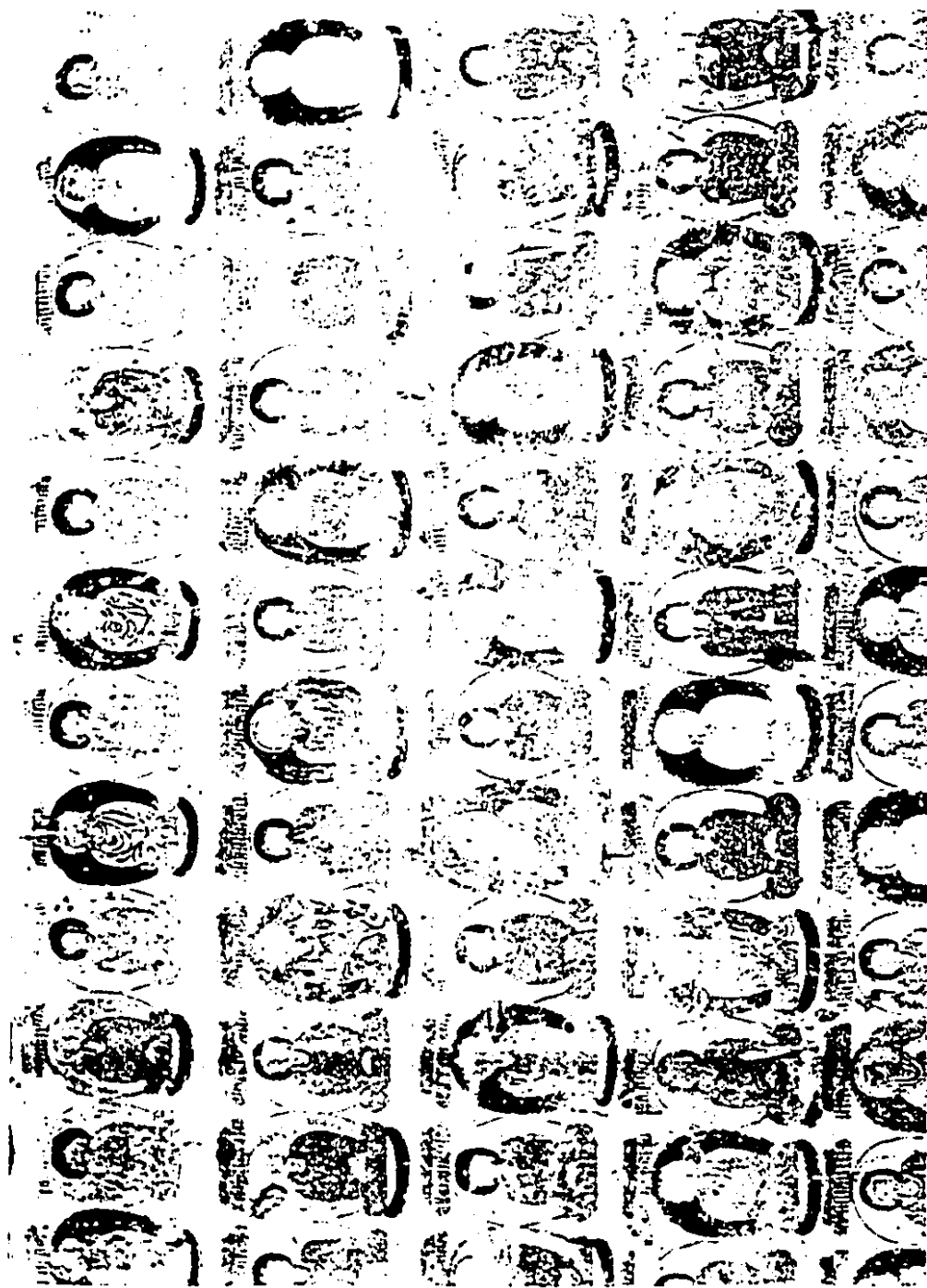


PLATE. 7

THOUSAND BUDDHA MOTIF - BINGLING SI CAVE #169

—上— 千佛圖 石壁 西壁 佛龕全形一六九號



PLATE 8
BINGLINGSI CAVE #169 - SECTION 24

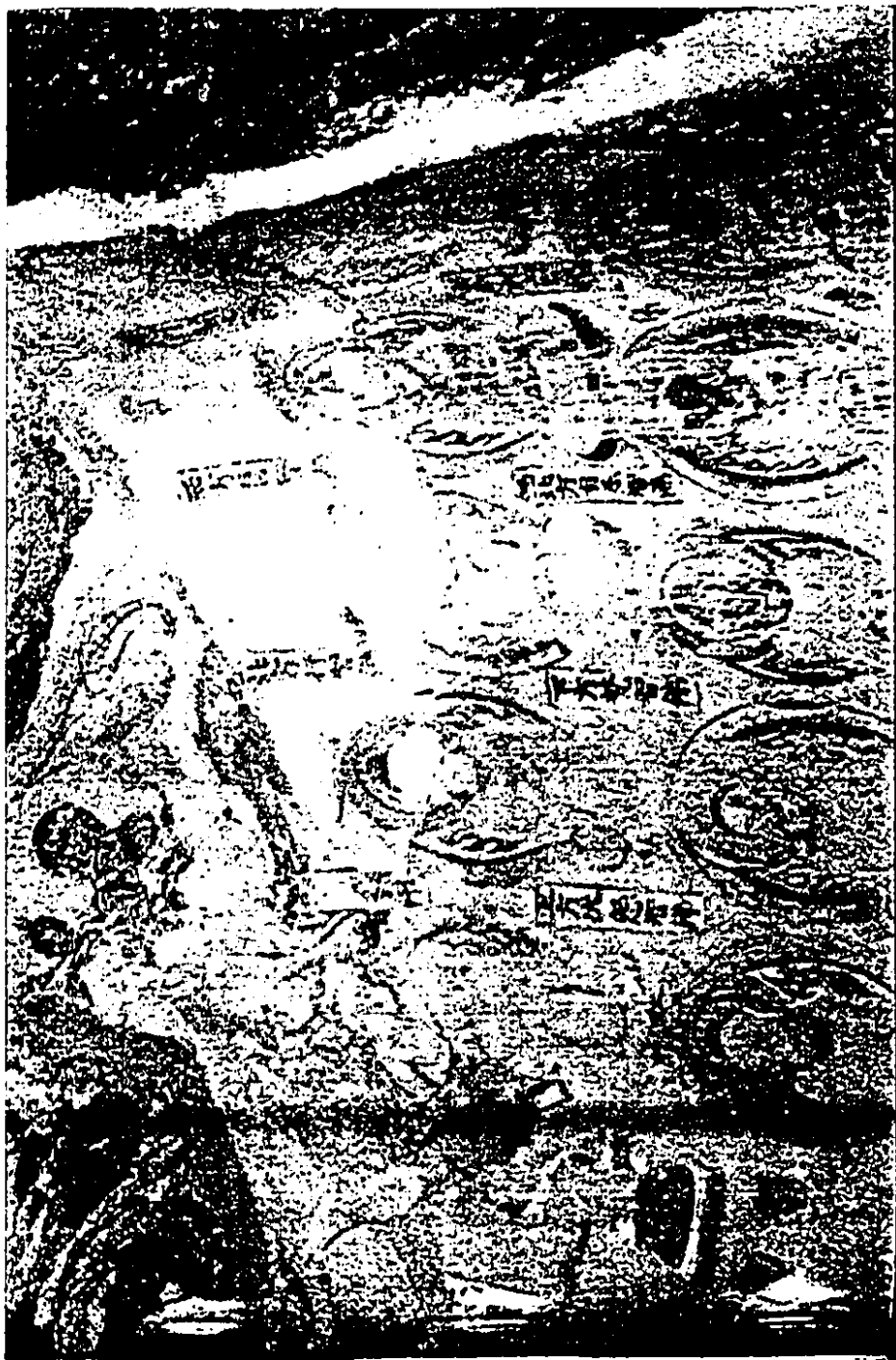


PLATE 9

DIRECTIONAL BUDDHAS - PSINGLING SI CAVE #169



PLATE 10
THOUSAND BUDDHA NOTIF - WENSHU SHAN



PLATE II
SHUOFATU - WENSHU SHAN



PLATE 12

ŚAṅKHA AND PRAJÑĀ SURROUNDED BY THE THOUSAND BUDDHA MOTIF
MATH 51



PLATE 13

THOUSAND BUDDHA MOTIF ON CELLA, DANDAN-UULIQ



PLATE 14

THOUSAND BUDDHA MOTIF ON CELLA, DANDAN UULIQ



PLATE 15
THOUSAND BUDDHA MOTIF - AJANTA CAVE #2



PLATE 16
WALL-PAINTING, BĀMIYĀN



PLATE 17
WALL-PAINTING, KIZIL



PLATE 18
EMACIATED BUDDHA, GANDHĀRA



PLATE 19
ENACIATED BUDDHA, MOGAO CAVE #248



PLATE 20
TWIN MIRACLES



PLATE 21
ANICONIC MANGO TREE MIRACLE



PLATE 22
ŚRĀVASTĪ MULTIPLICATION MIRACLE
SĀRNĀTH



PLATE 23
MULTIPLICATION MIRACLE, AJANTĀ CAVE #17



PLATE 24
MULTIPLICATION MIRACLE, AJANTA CAVE #7

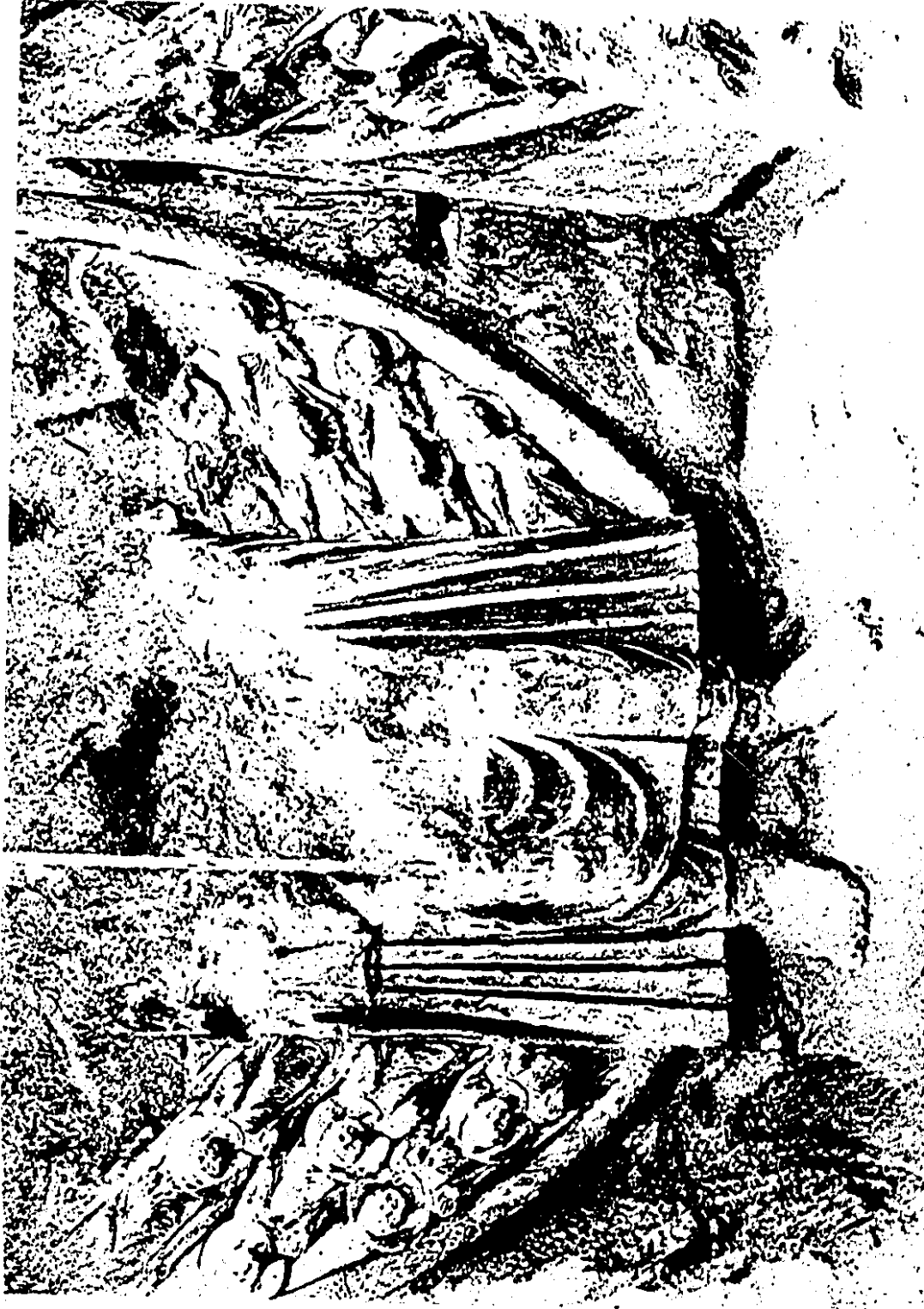


PLATE 25
MULTIPLICATION MIRACLE, RAWAK



PLATE 26
MULTIPLICATION MIRACLE, KIZIL



540

PLATE 27

THOUSAND-HANDED THOUSAND-EYED GUANYIN
MOGAO CAVE #3

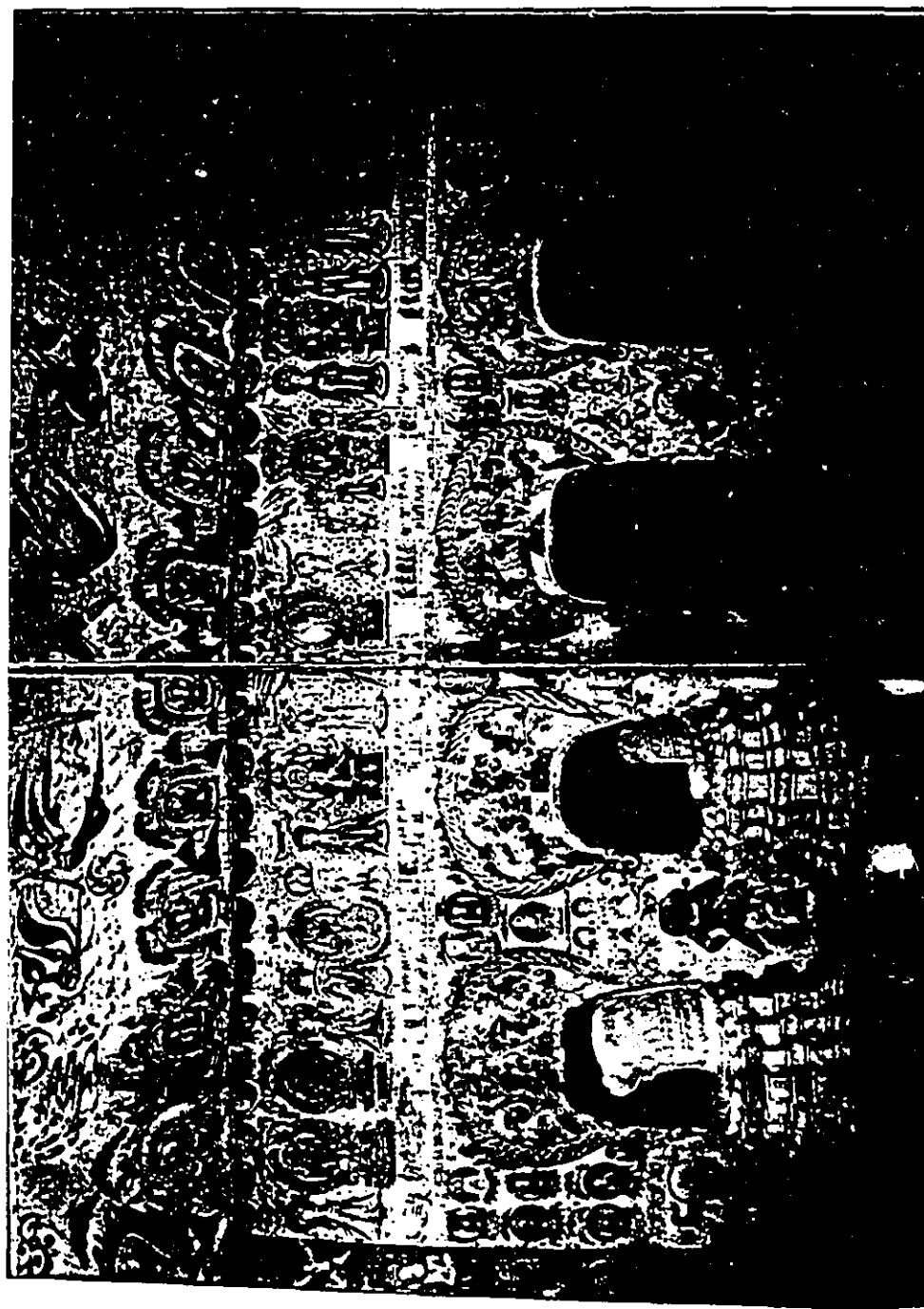


PLATE 28
MEDITATION CELLS - MOGAO CAVE # 285