The Material Culture of Exegesis and Liturgy and a Change in the Artistic Representations in Dunhuang Caves, ca. 700–1000

INTRODUCTION

The Mogao Caves near Dunhuang embrace a variety of stylistic elements and iconography that reflect a thousand years, and more, of Buddhist trends and influences from both Central Asia and the heartland of China. But within that span, an important specific change took place from about the mid-eighth century (or High Tang era) to about the 1000s, with the advent of Xixia influence in Dunhuang. In style and content, the upper registers of the caves now contained large murals representing scriptures 仙境 (or, 仙相: “transformation tableaux”), while screens (or, panels: 屏風) depicting scenes from karmic and other narratives occupied the lower registers together with donor figures. (See figures 1 and 2, overleaf.) The centerpiece of many of the caves, that is, the western niches that contain statues of the Buddha, bodhisattvas, and disciples, changed dramatically in form as well. Instead of a rounded hollow (figures 3 and 4), the recesses now become a rectangular platform with either a gabled or flat roof and an interior of surrounding screens (figure 5). These niches were now relatively more lifelike, with frequent trompe l’œil stylization: large wall-tableaux replicating hanging silk paintings with...
brocade borders and temple paintings adorn the upper registers, while the bottom registers hold a succession of individual scenes framed as if they were winged screens, that is folding vertical screens. Fabrics and valances, scalloped openings for the mock platforms (figure 6), even hinges painted on the mock screens (figure 7) all add to the illusion of a room filled with usable objects. The earlier of the Mogao Caves lack such an elaborated set of conventions and frames that delineated particular elements constituting a pictorial space. From the mid-Tang period forward, the painted interiors present specific items carefully rendered with the proportions and details of real-life objects. As such, the depictions are not merely paintings but represent experiential and kinesthetically accurate fixtures found in ritual settings. Moreover, in contrast to previous caves with walls dominated by pictures or statues of buddhas expounding the Buddhist law (figures 3 and 8) the murals now contain what was expounded – scriptures – together with representations of the very objects that enabled instruction.¹

These transformation tableaux, screens, platforms, and fabrics serve to evoke a unified, functional space. Together the elements and their presentation institute a definitive change in the art of the Mogao Caves, remaining constant until the beginning of the Xixia period in the eleventh century. Such a dramatic and fundamental shift in the content and style of pictorial program would seem to imply changes at the ritual and conceptual levels that ultimately structured these spaces. Furthermore, the shift in artistic program served to create a ritual setting, one that foregrounded objects that were lifelike in proportion and detail. The realism, familiarity, and accessibility of these items in fact indexes their association with the living, an association asserted in the transformation of the accompanying painted donor-figures, which grew in size and prominence during the period.

How then does the aesthetic and conceptual transformation of the caves’ interior space reflect changes in the beliefs and practices of the patrons themselves? Given the nature of these caves as religious structures created at great expenditure by the local population, the question is vital: the answer may tell us much about fundamental developments in medieval religious life and, moreover, about the specifics of what that life consisted of in ways meaningful to those who lived it. Remarkably,

¹ Cave 159 strikingly exemplifies this complete transformation of style with its highly delineated presentation of items — zhang, murals, and winged screens — within the pictorial program as discrete objects. See Zhongguo shiku: Dunhuang Mogaoku 1–5 中國敦煌莫高窟 (1–5) (Beijing: 1999; hereafter, DHMGK) 4, pIll. 75–93. Other caves that illustrate such changes by including a zhang-type platform, bianxiang, and screens of this distinct style are: nos. 113, 148 (high-Tang); nos. 197, 159, 361, 237 (mid-Tang); nos. 18, 107, 9, 192 (late-Tang).
Figure 1. Transformation Tableaux and Screens, Mogao Cave 231
North wall; mid-Tang (ca. 839). From DHSKQJ 22, pl. 8.

Figure 2. Plan and Elevation, Mogao Cave 361
Mid-Tang. Note shape of left-most niche with 3 screens (marked here by grey border), and the 2 tableaux marked in larger area at right. From DHMGK 4, p. 235.

Figure 3. Plan and Elevation, Mogao Cave 381
High-Tang; before change in styles. Note rounded hollow areas in the bird’s-eye view (top) and rounded corners shown in cut-away (bottom). From DHMGK 4, p. 233.
Figure 4. Western Niche, Mogao Cave 57
Early-Tang; before style change. Note the scooped-out, rounded hollow in which the sculpture sits. From DHMGK 3, pl. 8.

Figure 5. Western Niche as Zhang, Mogao Cave 231
Mid-Tang, ca. 839; post-style change. Note squared-off niche as zhang. From DHSKYS 154, pl. 121.

Figure 6. Western Niche as Zhang, Mogao Cave 361
Mid-Tang. The light-colored scalloped openings shown on bottom horizontal tier in effect define the front six legs of the chuangzhang, or platform. From DHMGK 4, pl. 117.
Figure 7. Interior of Zhang, Mogao Cave 159
Mid-Tang; western niche. The two walls show winged screens and valances. Note the trompe l’oeil screen hinges: the vertical row of faint black dots, in the corner between statues. From DHMGK 4, pl. 77.
no Western or Asian scholar has examined the changes as an integrated phenomenon. Additionally, the in-depth and consistent use of a style depicting lifelike objects and the style’s significance remain unstudied. The introduction of new artifacts into a ritual setting is significant; the participants now relate to the space, to each other, and to the divinity represented in new ways. The question of what went on these caves is often raised, and this transitional moment together with its set of features presents a critical opportunity to examine how different structural and aesthetic forms indicate altered ritual practices and new beliefs.

This article examines specific depicted objects – the western niche as a mock platform, the large painted murals as hanging silk paintings, and the faux winged screens – in order to establish how the caves were conceptualized in ritual terms. My finding is that the platform element, that is, the caves’ western niche occupied by a statue of a Buddha, was in fact a replication of the literati zhang (chuangzhang), a tent-like structure mounted on a platform that was used from the fourth century BC onwards as a seat of authority and instruction. This object with its scholarly associations, notably of textual exegesis, marks the interior of the cave as a place of learning and rearticulates the Buddha as a classical literatus. The zhang as a teaching platform works together with
the format and scriptural content of the mural paintings to establish a programmatic correlation with materials and texts used in the then-current exegetical styles of sūtra lectures (jiangjing 講經), while the caves as a whole replicate the liturgical scene of sūtra lectures and of the lay or “popular lecture” (sujiang 俗講) that developed during the Tang and Five Dynasties periods.

These large-scale and private lectures on Buddhist scriptures were officiated by clergy and funded by donors for the wellbeing of family, community, and polity. They provided a fundamental means of transmitting Buddhist doctrine and functioned as an essential merit-making event. Furthermore, Dunhuang documents indicate that lectures were held as part of premortem (yuxiu 預修) and postmortem rituals for family members and for political figures, namely, the Seven Feasts 七七齋, or in some cases, the Feast of One Hundred Days 百日齋, during the liminal period immediately after death. In their creation of meritorious karmic bonds, or affinities (jieyuan 結緣), such ceremonies and their efficacies united all involved: clergy, donors, and dedicatees, as well as the devotional figure in the form of a painting or statue. In their ability to establish relations across time and space, these rituals became powerful tools in expediting a variety of socio-religious agendas. Understood as spaces reflecting lay-oriented rituals, the caves participated in the larger, vernacular changes in the medieval religious landscape in China in which transformations in ritual practice and beliefs rendered the divine more accessible to the general populace. Dunhuang caves provide examples of these developments in exceptionally vivid and concrete terms. But the caves also demonstrate their vernacularity, as seen in their uniqueness as local creations reflecting the needs and understandings of Buddhist life at Dunhuang, in its social complexity.

In what follows, I demonstrate that “family caves” (jiaku 家窟) from the Tang and Five Dynasties periods articulate in visual and spatial terms the socio-religious complexities embodied in the proselytizing ritual, while simultaneously reflecting changes generally in the religious landscape. Inside the caves, the ritual setting and objects of the liturgical event are represented through spatial configurations and trompe l’œil painting. The zhang, tableaux, and screens are each explicitly and deftly framed as such with, respectively, delineated structures, brocade borders, and connected panels. In turn, they both frame and empower the reality of the event. By funding the construction of caves, the patrons and donors in fact funded the implementation of the implied ritual. As a liturgical setting, the cave established a space that united the living and the dead, the familial and socio-political, and the human
and divine through the collapse of time and space into a singular ritual event. However, here in the Mogao Caves the ritual is implemented virtually and permanently, with such ephemera as silk and wood—like the patrons themselves—now set timelessly in paint. By collapsing the momentary and eternal, the patrons create a site of everlasting merit-making for their relations and for themselves. In the discussion which follows, I examine the lifelike material objects—the zhang, murals, and screens—and their rich associations configured to the local context at Dunhuang, which together can be seen as grounding and rendering conceivable the immateriality of the ritual.

EARLY HISTORY OF THE ZHANG

The zhang usually depicted at Dunhuang have a lengthy tradition, with origins in pre-Han furnishings. During the Han period, chuang (platform) and zhang (canopy, or tent) were considered such a fundamental and important part of day-to-day experience that the section of the Han-era lexicon Explanation of Names (Shiming 释名) devoted to furnishings is entitled “Explanations of Platforms and Canopies” 释床帐. The compendium, attributed to Liu Xi 劉熙 (fl. 200 AD), was created in order that “names corresponded to reality so that each was right and proper.” A zhang is not simply any covering or tent-like structure but, according to Shiming, one that is used on a platform 施於床上也. The text then distinguishes a “smaller zhang, the shape of which is an inverted dipper 小帳曰斗形如覆斗也.” Portable platforms in early China were multi-purpose, “used for both daytime activities and sleeping 人所坐臥曰床,” and the term “bed” sometimes used to describe them is misleading. Archeological evidence indicates that tested platforms


4 Zhang are to be distinguished from Ming and Qing canopy beds 架子床 and similar beds with a cane webbing 棕床. Although both derive from ancient and medieval canopied platforms 床帐, they lack the early ideological associations and were used exclusively indoors. With regard to the zhang and its symbolic uses, roughly analogous structures exist in the western Christian tradition, i.e., the early medieval ciborium and the Renaissance baldacchino. Anneliese Bulling, “The Decoration of Some Mirrors of the Chou and Han Periods,” Artibus Asiae 18.1 (1955), pp. 20–45, discusses canopies and umbrellas (pp. 36–40) as symbols of sacred power and authority in the Warring States and Han periods.
were in use as early as the Warring States and constructed of wood and bronze joints, easily assembled and disassembled. The tomb of prince Liu Sheng 劉勝 (d. 113 BC) provides examples of fasteners and joints used to erect such a structure, allowing for the reconstruction of the framework (figure 9). These remains measure approximately 2.5 by 1.5 meters for the bottom planar area, 2 meters high, and were four-postered. Unfortunately no Han-era platforms on which the zhang would be placed are extant, although we do possess similar pieces from the Warring States period. Nonetheless, the configurations and proportions of both the platform and the canopy remained standard for the next 800 years.

Along with the configuration, the symbolism and ceremonial function of the zhang also took shape during the Han. The object became associated with the eminent classical scholar Ma Rong 馬融 (79–166), renowned for his private academy and learned exegeses of the classics. In the History of the Later Han, Ma Rong’s biography states that as a highly successful teacher drawing thousands of students, he would set up a canopied platform in crimson silk. The expression “to set up a zhang” became a common metonym for teaching. The language of that account is seen in other standard idioms us-

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6 Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan kaogu yanjiusuo and Hebei sheng wenwu guanlichu 中國社會科學院考古研究所河北省文物管理處, Mancheng Hanmu faju baogu 滿城漢墓發掘報告 (Beijing: Cultural Relics Publishing House, 1980) 1, pp. 160–78. See Wu Hung, Monumentality in Early Chinese Art and Architecture (Stanford: Stanford U.P. 1995), p. 133 (fig. 2.44b) for the way silk covered tents were situated within the tomb.

7 For illustrations of a Han zhang and its accoutrements, see Sun Ji 孫機, Handai wuzhi wenhuaxiliao ziliao tushuo 漢代物質文化資料圖說 (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1991), pl. 56.

8 Henan sheng wenwu yanjiusuo 河南省文物研究所, Xinyang chumu 信陽楚墓 (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1986), pl. 30.1.

ing the term zhang related both to classical scholars and teaching: “Ma Rong’s zhang 马融帐,” or simply 马帐, meant a scholar’s study or place of instruction in classical texts; metonymical expressions include “crimson zhang 紅帳” and “crimson gauze 红紗,” both of which came to mean “a teacher’s seat.” In continual use for the next thousand years, the expression “crimson zhang” also was an accepted term in medieval Buddhist discourse for this item of furniture, such that it merited an entry in Daocheng’s 道誠 (fl. 1019) lexical compilation Shishi yaolan 释氏要覽. In the section on proselytizing, “Expounding and Listening [to the Dharma]” 說聽篇, the entry, by way of definition, references the expression’s provenance – Ma Rong’s biography and that of the much-later woman scholar named Lady Song 宋氏 (mother of Wei Cheng 韦程). In the annotation following however, Daoxuan attempts to make an ideological distinction, clarifying that this expression used with its historical associations is not exactly appropriate.11

THE ZHANG-PLATFORM IN BUDDHIST ART

The earliest evidence for zhang in Buddhist contexts occurs in reliefs at Yungang 云冈 and Longmen 龙门 dating from the Northern Wei (386–535).12 In keeping with the literati connotations and didactic functions of the zhang discussed above, the depiction of covered platforms at these sites appears in illustrations of the Vimalakirti sūtra 維摩詰経. Indeed, outside of illustrating this particular scripture in pre-Tang art, the zhang is rarely used in early Chinese Buddhist painting or sculpture.14

11 It reads, s.v. “織帳”：織赤色也。岱嶽後漢書云。馬融造生任意性不拘織者之節。常坐高堂施織帳。前授生徒。後列女樂。或稱馬帳。又督書宣文君宋氏。即織帳母也。立講堂。隔織紗帳授學徒。今釋子稱織帳等。有所不宜。智者思之) (Tno. 2127, vol. 54, p. 295a–b). Interestingly, when Xuanzang wrote to explain to the emperor his travels to India for scriptures and learning, he invoked Ma Rong as the paradigmatic teacher for whom people traveled great distances; see Da Tang da censi sanzang fashi zhuan 大唐大慈恩寺三藏法師傳; Tno. 2053, vol. 50, p. 251c.
12 According to Jin Weinuo 顧維諾, “Dunhuang bihua Weimo bian de fazhan” 敦煌壁畫維摩壁畫的發展, WW 1959-2, p. 4, the earliest depictions of the Vimalakirti sūtra are in Caves 1, 2, and 7 at Yungang. He Shizhe 賀世哲, “Dunhuang Mogao ku bihua zhong de Weimojie jingbian” 敦煌莫高窟壁畫中的維摩詰經變, Dunhuang yanjiu 研究 2 (1982), p. 63, cites a painting of Vimalakirti (without Manjušrī) in Binglingsi 碧靈寺, Cave 169, as the earliest, dating from 420.
14 Illustrations of the Vimalakirti scripture specifically highlight the protagonist’s seat as a
Yet the appearance of the *zhang* in the context of the *Vimalakīrti sūtra* would easily follow from the scripture’s portrayal of the socially successful Vimalakīrti as a “retired scholar 居士.” The scripture resonated especially well among the élite of southern China during Eastern Jin (317–420), with the exchange between Mañjuśrī and Vimalakīrti echoing the scholarly depth and rigor of contemporaneous intellectual discourse known as “pure conversation 清談.” 15 Although now contested, scholars long held that the first picture of Vimalakīrti emerged from the hand of the painter Gu Kaizhi 龔雲之 (344–ca. 406), known for, among other images, portraits of the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove 竹林七賢.16 Originally painted as a mural in Waguan’si 瓦官寺 in Jiankang 建康, Gu Kaizhi’s portrait of Vimalakīrti won praise for its masterful depiction of the protagonist.17 Of interest to us is that Gu’s painting may have influenced Longmen illustrations of the *Vimalakīrti*, providing an additional set of stylistic and iconographical elements from the scholarly milieu of the south to those already present at the northwestern site. Whereas previous fourth- and fifth-century reliefs of Vimalakīrti at Yungang and Longmen typically place both him and Mañjuśrī either in trapezoidal arches based on Gandharan prototypes or Chinese dwellings, though in each case dressed in western attire,18 early sixth-century carvings and paintings, most clearly in Binyang 賓陽 Cave (503–524) at Longmen, demonstrate a southern influence, thought to

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be specifically that of Gu Kaizhi’s masterpiece. In addition to the sophisticated lines and Han clothing characterizing these later depictions, the most prominent change is the ongoing adoption of a zhang to frame Vimalakirti. In contrast, Manjūṣrī is placed on a lotus seat often under a parasol or sometimes in a tiled-roof building, thereby foregrounding the symbolic differences between the two debaters. Each holds his representative symbol: Manjūṣrī a ruyi 如意 (scepter indicating authority and eloquence in debate) and Vimalakirti a deer-tailed fan (zhuwei 噸尾), both favored accoutrements of literati and qingtan adepts. But in one sense, these objects were optional – the illustrators of the scripture were not constrained in their portrayal of the characters or their setting; the two relevant extant Chinese translations of the scripture provide no detailed description of either. There is, however, one item of importance remaining after Vimalakirti has emptied the house in expectation of the arrival of Manjūṣrī and his entourage: his couch 床. Like both Manjūṣrī and Vimalakirti, this crucial piece of furniture is not described (the word used in each text is simply “bed, or platform 床”). Nonetheless, the iconographical significance of this and the deer-tail fan as defining features of Vimalakirti frame him squarely within the Chinese literati tradition.

Other pre-Tang representations of Vimalakirti seated in a zhang are found carved on steles and include additional elements further ex-

19 Ibid.; see also A. C. Soper, “South Chinese Influence on the Buddhist Art of the Six Dynasties Period,” *BMFEA* 32 (1960), p. 78, who cites the fall of Southern Qi and movement of artisans north as instrumental in the change of styles in Binyang cave. For illustrations, ibid., pp. 43, 67.

20 Zhang, *Longmen Fojiao zaoxiang*, pp. 80 (top left corner), 82, 87.


tending the Buddhist adept’s connection with Chinese literati. Most importantly folding or winged screens pingfeng now surround Vimalakirti on three sides, as in a stele from Henan dated 527.25 In use since the Warring States period, screens, winged and singular, were instrumental in defining both space and authority.26 Their inclusion in images of Vimalakirti elaborates the associations with the literati and court, and becomes a standard, henceforth iconographic, feature. Zhang were a standard item of the courtly world as exemplified by Shen Yue’s poem “Singing of the Zhang” (“Yong zhang shi” 詠帳詩).27

**Zhang at Dunhuang: Vimalakirti**

Depictions of scenarios from the *Vimalakirti sūtra* appear at Dunhuang in the Mogao Caves beginning in the Sui dynasty (581–617) era and remain prominent in the pictorial program there for the next 500 years. A total of sixty-seven illustrations of the scripture exist, ranging from small pictures in the recesses of niches to large-scale transformation tableaux dominating entire walls.28 Equally popular were copies of the scripture itself: over 800 different manuscripts of differing portions and editions of the text, in addition to ancillary texts such as poems and commentaries, were discovered in the Library Cave (cave 17).29 Sui depictions of the debate, mentioned above, place both Mañjuśrī and Vimalakirti in Chinese buildings with tiled roofs,30 or in one unique case, simply standing.31

25 See Osvald Siren, *Chinese Sculpture from the Fifth to the Fourteenth Century* (London: Benn, 1925) 2, pl. 152 (Henan stele dated 527 in the ISMEO Collection). Other e.g.: Matsubara Saburo 松原三郎, *Chūgoku Bukkyō chōkoku shi kenkyū* 中國佛教影刻史研究 [Tokyo: Yoshikawa kobunkan, 1969], p. 101, fig. 79.


29 Dunhuang Research Academy, eds., *Dunhuang yishu zongmu suoyin xinbian* 敦煌遺書縱目索引新編 [Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2000], pp. 134–38 provides a list.

30 For a photo of cave 433, see *DHSMK* 2, p. 168, pl. 69 (cave 419); pl. 78 (cave 514); pll. 135, 136 (cave 380); pll. 188, 189.

31 Cave 276, *DHSMK* 2, pll. 122, 123.
Cave 220 built by the Zhai family in 642 marks a radical shift in style and content in regard to the *Vimalakirti sutra*, establishing the paradigm to be followed for the remainder of its depiction at Mogao. The Zhai family cave as a whole is unique in that it is the earliest "family cave" constructed at Dunhuang and is the first to illustrate a single sutra per wall using the format of the sutra tableaux *jingbian*, a configuration that, expanded, would dominate the artistic programs of nearly all Tang, Five Dynasties, and Song caves to follow. It is highly significant that this format first occurs in a family cave, a point that I elaborate, below. In Cave 220 the *Vimalakirti sutra* occupies the east wall, Manjusri on the north side of the entrance and Vimalakirti to the south. The bodhisattva is painted on a lotus throne while Vimalakirti sits, deer-tail fan in hand, in a richly decorated *zhang*, the canopy bordered with fabrics, surrounded by screens placed on a scalloped platform. All these features are a continuation of iconographical elements discussed above. What is added to the sutra illustration are large entourages for both characters, which most significantly includes an anachronistic portrayal of emperor Taizong, his officials and ministers below Manjusri, while non-Chinese dignitaries stand below Vimalakirti. Ning Qiang discusses the particular figures and their representation of the Tang political landscape. Inclusion in the mural is a demonstrative gesture signifying the dominance of the Tang empire in the Dunhuang area and the Zhai’s allegiance to the emperor and court. Of interest to our discussion of the *zhang* and its later development at Mogao is the ideological implications generated by the overall configuration of the two debaters, the characteristics of their followers, and the relationships of power between them.

In their discussion of the Tang emperor, court officials, and the non-Chinese kings and dignitaries illustrating the Vimalakirti, scholars fail to examine the significance of the placement of these figures in relation to the two debaters, the characteristics of their followers, and the relationships of power between them.

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32 Ning, *Art, Politics, and Religion*, examines the religious and socio-political aspects of the cave in depth. Cave 335 (ca. 686) may be, according to Roderick Whitfield (personal communication), the earliest depiction of Gu Kaizhi’s painting at Dunhuang. It also depicts the same iconographical features found in Cave 220’s version. For images of cave 335, see *DHMGK* 3, pl. 61, and *Zhongguo meishu quanji* (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1988) 2, pl. 40; *DHSKQ* 9, p. 21 (line drawing); close-up, p. 30 (pl. 14).

33 See *DHMGK* 3, pl. 33, 34.

34 These elements appear not only in murals but also in late-Tang and Five Dynasties sketches of the scene; e.g., Stein painting 76; Sarah Fraser, *Performing the Visual: Making Wall Paintings in China and Central Asia, 618–960* (Stanford: Stanford U.P., 2004), pp. 120, 122, for illustrations.

35 Ning (*Art, Politics, and Religion*, pp. 57–61) also suggests that these depictions of specific individuals, including Taizong, are based on particular paintings by Yan Liben (ca. 600–673).
to the two debaters who provide the focal points for the tableaux. Cave 220’s mural provides the paradigm followed for all other large illustrations of the sūtra and maintains this standard configuration (figure 10, overleaf). Why is the Chinese emperor consistently placed immediately below Mañjuśrī and, opposite him, non-Chinese people positioned beneath Vimalakīrti, the hero, if you will, of the scripture? These are not random choices; all murals foreground these figures, highlighting their proximate relations to the two main characters and, moreover, this specific pictorial arrangement continues unchanged.

One possible way of understanding the scenario and its constituent parts is to realize the full cultural significance of the zāng as a marker of Chinese (as opposed to specifically Buddhist) authority and learning, and hence as a marker of ethnicity and power. Thus, power flowing metaphorically top-down necessitates that non-Chinese stand under the zāng, subject to its authority.36 Likewise, in their sacrality both the emperor and Mañjuśrī side together, in effect obliging the emperor to support the religion and to be, by extension, subject to it. It would make no sense to place the emperor below or subject to a symbol of Chinese authority, and he never appears in this position below Vimalakīrti. Buddhism worked as an ethnic unifier and clearly the inclusion of foreigners (demonstrably from the west, or specifically Tibet) in the Vimalakīrti tableaux was meant to imply this.37 Their gaze is respectfully focused upwards to Mañjuśrī. Conversely, as an audience, the emperor and his retinue look toward Vimalakīrti positioned in the zāng, a seat of learning which, as we will see, could also be occupied by the clergy.

Zhang at Dunhuang: The Magic Competition

Another well-known narrative depicted at Dunhuang, the match between Śāriputra and Rāudrakṣa, “The Magic Competition,” also demonstrates the same economy of symbolism found in the Vimalakīrti murals involving authority, learning, and ethnicity centered around the zāng, though to a very different end.38 The story concerns the

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36 This authority is simultaneously both scholarly and moral. In his discussion of monks and Chinese scholarly ideals, Kieschnick (Impact of Buddhism, pp. 112–13) notes that “the scholar-official defined himself in opposition not to the hermit, but to the barbarian, someone either ignorant of the proper rites or morally incapable of putting them into effect” [my emphasis].


38 Fourteen paintings of this story exist at Dunhuang dating from the early Tang to the Song: caves 335, 9, 85, 196, 6, 72, 98, 103, 53, 146, 342, 25, 55, 454. For an overview of depictions of the Magic Competition at Dunhuang, see DHSKQJ 9, pp. 12–78.
The configuration, symbolism, and power of the mural in cave 103 typify depictions of the Vimalakirti sutra from this period. In the lower left stands the Chinese emperor (outlined) and his entourage, below and subject to the authority of Manjuśrī and Buddhism. Oppositionally, in the lower right stands the Tibetan king (outlined) and his followers, positioned beneath and subject to Vimalakirti seated within the zhang, symbolizing traditions of Chinese authority and scholarship.
doctrinal contest of magical strength between Śāriputra, a disciple of the Buddha, and Raudrākṣa, a heterodox (waidao 外道) teacher. The struggle occurs after Śāriputra’s attempt to purchase land for a monastery is challenged by six heretical masters who fear a loss of followers and power. The chief of the six masters, Raudrākṣa, then engages in a match with Śāriputra, both for the land and for the King of Śravasti’s religious allegiance, who will convert to the victor’s faith. Six battles then follow, each won by Śāriputra: a jeweled mountain destroyed by vajra power; a bull devoured by a lion; a lake consumed by an elephant; a dragon vanquished by a mythical bird; evil demons destroyed by Vaiśravaṇa; and finally a massive tree blown over by a gale.

As in the Vimalakīrti sūtra tableaux, the zhang (“jeweled zhang”: baozhang 寶帳) is a prominent and consistent feature of the Magic Competition — appearing in each version. The contest between the two is framed oppositionally as in the previously discussed sūtra tableaux, yet, in contrast to the hero Vimalakīrti, it is Raudrākṣa who occupies the zhang. Clearly the seat bears the same symbolism as in the Vimalakīrti bianxiang, that of authority and learning. The significance of this is made all the more explicit as the zhang is forever depicted in the moment of its destruction (figure 11, over): on the side of immorality now, it should not and cannot bear the heretical master. Tellingly, the force which destroys it is Śāriputra’s “doctrinal power 道力.” The dynamism of the scene is impressive, with Raudrākṣa and his minions grimacing while they desperately — and quite comically — try to hold up the structure. In contrast to the chaos of the heretic masters and their followers, the Buddhists in figure 12 sit serenely unfazed by the struggle. Their calm

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40 Huang Zheng and Zhang Yongquan, eds., Dunhuang bianwen ji jiaozhu 敦煌變文集校語 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1997; hereafter, DHBWJJZ), p. 563.21. Śāriputra in contrast sits simply on a “jeweled seat” baozuo 寶座 (e.g., ibid., p. 563.21 and 565.19). S.4257v (edited in Dunhuang yishu zongmu suoyin xinbian, pp. 130–31) provides a short account of the Magic Competition in what appears to be a collection of cartouche phrases from a painting. Here Raudrākṣa is described as situated in a zhang 帳 and wozhang 帳帳 “tent.”

41 One exception is the early illustration in Cave 335, where both figures are seated on zhang. Note however that Raudrākṣa’s tented platform is still depicted at its moment of destruction; see DHMGK 7, pl. 10.

42 DHBWJJZ, p. 566.21.

43 This is described in DHBWJJZ, pp. 566.20–567.3, and translated in Mair, Tun-huang Popular Narratives, p. 83.
Figure 11. Magic Competition: Destruction of Raudrākṣa’s Zhang, Mogao Cave 196
Late-Tang; east wall. From ZGMSQJ 15, pl. 152.
is also a mark of their ethnicity: in the various tableaux, Śāriputra and the surrounding Buddhists typically possess relatively more Chinese features, while Raudrākṣa and his underlings exhibit the exaggerated features of foreigners, made all the more garish by their emotional-ity. The Chinese are in control; the barbarians are clearly not.

Neither the Vimalakīrti scripture nor the Magic Competition texts gives particular weight to or describes in detail the seats that frame and situate the major characters. However, in both these narratives artists chose moments where the zhang plays a signifying role. Additionally, the zhang functions as a configuring aesthetic element in the overall structure of each mural, elaborately painted and anchoring one side. The explicit use of this specific type of seating and its role in arranging figures of power, of ethnicity, and of learning convey layers of meaning not contained in either text, but which are of crucial significance given the socio-political circumstances of Dunhuang in the medieval period.

44 See also the parinirvāṇa scene in Cave 158, where the overtly non-Chinese demonstrate their grief through excessively emotional gestures such as cutting off ears and noses, self-stabbing; DHMGK 4, pls. 64, 65.
The Niche as Zhang at Dunhuang

The most striking incorporation of the *zhang* into the artistic program at Dunhuang is its full instantiation as a life-sized, three-dimensional object: it becomes the western niche in the mid-Tang (781–847) caves. Prior to that time, caves were typified by niches that continued the arrangements and styles dating from the Northern Zhou (557–580). These were rounded in their depth, often two-stepped, contained stucco sculptures, and were painted either with additional figures behind the sculptures or with the mandorla and/or nimbus of the main Buddha or bodhisattva statue. A border, or line, of Sassanian roundels defined the outer perimeter of the niche, while the front and exterior area below remained undefined in architectural or structural terms (figure 4). In mid-Tang, with the conquest of the general Sha-zhou region by the Tibetans, niches changed clearly so as to replicate *zhang*. The space becomes angular and well-defined, appearing stage-like (figures 5 and 6), while the arched exterior of Central Asian influence is rejected.

All the features of this new style of niche are the elements found in painted *zhang*, as discussed, above: the structure is a canopy, either gabled or inverted-dipper shaped (the distinction serving simply to define the types of *zhang* set forth in *Shiming*). The ceiling of the niche is sectioned into panels replicating the beams of the frame that typically supported the fabric of a canopy. Between the beams are “auspicious images” in this context being representations of Buddhist images, or statues. The platform is surrounded on three sides by winged screens, while above these is a *trompe l’oeil* fabric border (figure 7). The artisans also took pains to create the illusion that it sits on a scalloped platform (figure 6).


46 “Buddhist icons at Dunhuang are divided into two groups of images with different ontological status, one group directly referring to divinities – and so are able to receive the worshipper’s homage – and the other group referring to the ‘images’ of divinities. The former is a model; the latter, the representation” [Wu Hung, “Rethinking Liu Sahe: The Creation of a Buddhist Saint and the Invention of a ‘Miraculous Image,’” *Orientations* 27.10 [November 1996], p. 40]. These are images of famous icons from India, Central Asia, and China, identified as such by an adjacent cartouche. It would make sense that here, placed inside the ceiling of the niche, they would be unable to receive the adherent’s worship, though they would nonetheless retain powers, including those of association and place. For illustrations of ruixiang within niches, see *DHMGK* 4, pl. 99, 104, 106, 108, 109. Ruixiang disappear from Song-era niches (e.g., Cave 246, in Mission Paul Pelliot, *Documents archéologiques*, ed. Louis Hambis, vol. 11, *Grottes de Touen-Houang: Carnets de notes de Paul Pelliot: Inscriptions et peintures murales*, Documents conservés au Musée Guimet et à la Bibliothèque nationale [Paris: Centre de recherche sur l’Asie centrale et la Haute Asie, 1980–1992], pt. 3, pl. 177). This disappearance is no doubt tied to geo-political changes and their effects: the conquest of Khotan in 1006 by
In addition to the clear visual and material indications that niches from this period were reproductions of the scholarly canopied platform, we possess contemporaneous textual records that unequivocally refer to them as “zhang.” In a draft for the Yin Chushi stele 陰處士碑 as preserved in P.4640 (dated 839), the document records the refurbishing of Cave 231, speaking of it as having a “niche containing a plain statue of Śākyamuni with śrāvaka bodhisattvas, and the like, for a total of seven figures, while on the two sides of the entrance to the zhang 帷門 are paintings of Mañjuśrī, Samantabhadra, and attendants.”47 This passage describes a typical artistic program for the middle Tang—the configuration of a zhang-type niche with Mañjuśrī and Samantabhadra on either side, and the remainder of the cave filled with sūtra tableaux (jingbian). It was the standard format for the caves.48

As discussed in the previous section, the zhang element was employed highly selectively in Dunhuang art, appearing only in the sūtra tableaux of Vimalakīrti and the Magic Competition. As late as 1019, the date of Daocheng’s 道誠 Shishi yaolan, the seat continued to be strongly associated with Confucian learning.

In sum, the adoption of the zhang by the Chinese patrons of newly-created family caves and its evolution as the basic form of the niche, where Buddha statues were placed, is striking. It is possible that the shift was, in part, a gesture of cultural and ethnic solidarity with the heartland of China,49 given the symbolism of authority, learning, and ethnicity, on one hand, and the Tibetan occupation, on the other. Furthermore, by inscribing the Buddha firmly into the cultural matrix of the Chinese scholar-official, his status as a foreigner was diminished, and the differentiation from Chinese scholars lessened.50 Buddhism also flourished during this period: 66 caves were completed or newly built, 19 monasteries were active, while clerical exchanges continued.

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47 The text is: 龜內素釋迦牟尼像並聲聞菩薩神等共七幃幃門兩面畫文殊普賢並侍從 (P.4640; “Dafan gu Dunhuangjun Mogaoku Yin chushi gongxiu gongdeji” 大番故敦煌郡莫高窟陰處士公修功德記 (“The Account of Merit Gained by Yin for Building at the Mogao Grottoes in Dunhuang Prefecture under the Great Tibetan Rule”).

48 DHMGK 4, pl. 75, provides a clear illustration of this pictorial format with Cave 159.

49 Duan Wenjie 段文傑, Duan Wenjie, Dunhuang yishu lunwen ji 段文傑, 敦煌藝術論文集 (Lanzhou : Gansu renmin chubanshe, 1994), p. 192, notes that temples of this period took the names of those in the heartland and that the monastic structures closely resembled those of the Central Plain.

50 The attempt by the Tibetans to impose their rule on Dunhuang was not simply administrative; the residents of the Dunhuang area were forced to adopt the dress and social decorum of the Tibetans, and were sometimes marked as slaves. Text in P.4638 (ed. Zheng Binglin 鄭
The adoption of the zhang was further indication of the confidence and self-possession experienced by Buddhists during the eighth century, as China became the “central Buddhist realm” of East Asia. More significantly, however, the specific cooptation of this “seat” of power and ethnicity to represent the primary niche of mid- and late-Tang caves at Dunhuang was also motivated by the platform’s contemporaneous use in the ritual practice of Buddhist exegesis itself – the sūtra lecture (jiangjing). We turn now to this important subject.

EXEGESIS: SHUOFA, SUJIANG, AND JIANGJING

The performance of exegesis took place within the wider context of the propagation of the Buddhist law (shuofa 說法), which itself was embedded in an economy involving material and spiritual merit. The first pāramitā of charity (shi 施; Skt.: dāna) consists of two kinds, the gift of material goods (caishi 物施; amisadāna) and the gift of the Dharma (law) (fashi 法施, or fabushi 法佈施; dhammadāna). These were in turn differentiated by those who performed the acts: “laity should practice material offerings, monks should practice offering the Dharma” in family practice施出家人行法施. To expound the Dharma (shuofa; dharmadesana) is considered the best of all gifts, and here the laity was effective in its provision of money, sūtras, paintings, and so on, thus enabling the clergy to expound the teachings.
**Sūtra Lectures: Jiangjing wen and yuanqi**

Large-scale propagation of the Dharma in medieval China took the form of the popular lecture. As multi-day liturgical rituals, they typically explicated one section or chapter of the sūtra over the entire length of the event; and an event could last for days or even weeks. These liturgies held for the benefit of both clergy and laity, and would be sponsored by individuals or lay societies.\(^5^6\) Two Dunhuang manuscripts, P.3849 and S.4417,\(^5^7\) provide detailed sequences of the steps necessary to perform a popular lecture, which is structured around a set of texts: 1. an introduction of Brahmanic hymns 梵讚 and a seat-settling text 押座文; 2. the exegetical text (jiangjing wen 講經文);\(^5^8\) and 3. eulogies to the Buddha 佛讚, vows 發願文, texts for the transfer of merit for the well-being of others 向向文, and a text for dispersing the crowd 解講.\(^5^9\) The exegesis of a scripture, such as the *Lotus sūtra* or *Amitabha sūtra* (see below for discussion of the sūtras used in *jiangjing wen*) engaged two performers, an assistant lecturer (dujiang 都講) who chanted several lines from a sūtra, and the dharma master (fashi 法師) who then elaborated, first in prose and then in verse. This was followed by the introductory formula “please [let’s] sing 唱將來,” requesting that the next passage from the sūtra be chanted. The assistant lecturer had an additional function of asking questions 難, or allowing members of the audience 賓 to pose questions, to which the dharma master would request that the audience 賓 to pose questions, to which the dharma master would
answer 通. As described in *Biographies of Eminent Monks* (Gaoseng zhuan 高僧傳), and *Continued Biographies of Eminent Monks* (Xu gaoseng zhuan 續高僧傳), debates on doctrine could become heated, and thus engaging from the viewpoint of the audience.

A close analysis of Buddhist manuscripts from Dunhuang indicates that another genre, “[stories on] karmic conditions, or circumstances” (yuanqi 緣起, or yinyuan 因緣), was used in conjunction with, or as a replacement for, sūtra lecture texts. This genre is an elaboration both in content and in style of *avatāra* narratives found in canonical collections such as the *Śatāvadhāna sūtra* (Baiyuan jing 百緣經), *Sūtra of the Wise and the Foolish* (Xianyu jing 賢愚經), and *Samyuktarāṇātata sūtra* (Zaobaozang jing 雜寶藏經). The yuanqi genre, however, broadens the scope of *avatāras*, which are typically stories of former lives of people and beings other than the Buddha – stories of the Buddha’s former lives being known as jātakas – to include those of the Buddha and, notably, episodes from the life of the historical Buddha. Several textual characteristics distinguish a set of narratives as belonging this genre, and other features provide clear indications that texts in this genre were employed as core texts of popular lectures. *Yuanqi* differ from sūtra lecture texts however by being strictly narrative and told by one person. Thus, research, which has significantly expanded our understand-
standing of the liturgy, demonstrates that though they functioned on different levels of comprehension and to different ends – sūtra lecture texts providing exegetical exposition of doctrine and yuanqi providing concrete narrative elaboration of karma – they were presented in the same mode and in the same liturgical context, the popular lecture. This bifurcated mode of proselytizing finds a precedent in an earlier style known as “sing and lead 唱導” that was current from the Six Dynasties period to the Tang."

We have detailed contemporaneous descriptions of popular lectures from Ennin 圓仁, and a vivid account is found in the Dunhuang story of Huiyuan 慧遠. These sūtra expositions became spectacles drawing hundreds and at times thousands of people. Popular lectures were held by imperial command and by the ruling élite, as well as by lay Buddhist societies known as she 社. Lectures held by lay associations, usually in the spring and in the fall, would last at a minimum seven days and at a maximum twenty-eight depending on the association’s finances. Through material giving (caishi), such lengthy spectacles demonstrated to all listeners the patrons’ charitable largesse by having enabled the gift of the Dharma 施法 through the clergy. The patronage also publicly reinforced social relations and hierarchy, while fostering community solidarity.

“Circumstances of Prince Siddhārtha Cultivating the Way” (“Xida taizi xiu dao yinyuan” 悉達太子修道因緣 [Ryūtani University ms.]), and “Circumstances of the Transformation of the Maiden in the Woman’s Palace of King Bimbisāra, Śrīmātī [Śrīpūyāmatī], Who is Reborn in Heaven for Having Made Offerings to a Stūpa” (“Binbishaluo wang hougong cainü Gongdeyi gongyang ta sheng tian yinyuan bian” 頡婆娑羅王后宮綿女功德意供養塔生天因緣變, S.3491). Other narrative texts, such as the “apocryphal” “Scripture of the Crown Prince Attaining the Way” Taizi cheng dao jing 太子成道經, P.2999, also share these defining features.

Both sūtra-lecture texts and yuanqi are the continuation and development of an earlier type of liturgy led by changdaoshi 唱導 “masters of singing and leading.” These monks were accomplished narrators and worked in tandem with monks who specialized in specific sūtras. See Gaoseng zhuān 高僧傳 (Tno. 2059, vol. 50, pp. 417b–18a, and the discussion by Schmid, “Yuanqi,” pp. 153–56.


Although donations for sūtra recitation (nianjing 念經 or zhuanjing 轉經) could be dedicated to any member of society, living or dead (Gernet, Buddhism in Chinese History, pp.
Just as the sūtra lecture centers on the authority and exegetical actions of the officiating monk, so the configurations of high-Tang caves centers on the symbol of scholarly authority and power, the *zhang*, long associated with exegesis. Classical Chinese models and influences inform both the *zhang* and the sūtra lecture, the sūtra lecture being derived in part from classical exegetical techniques of the late-Han period.\(^{71}\) The terminology is indicative of this connection, the label *dujiang* being used in scholarly circles in the Han.\(^{72}\) (In Buddhism, the expressions *zong* 宗, “sect,” and *zu* 祖, “ancestor” or “patriarch,” also reveal a conceptualization of pedagogical authority with origins in classical Chinese learning.) Interestingly, the only portrayal of the *zhang* in Dunhuang caves other than those associated with Vimalakīrti and Raudrakṣa, discussed above, is found in cave 321 on the south wall, which shows the *Treasure Rain Sūtra* (*Baoyu jing* 寶雨經) tableau.\(^{73}\) (See figure 13.)

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203–6), dedication of Dunhuang sūtra lectures and *yuanqi* were often to the ruling élite (cf. P.2187, P.3808, “Sūtra Lecture Text for the Imperial Birthday of the Year 933 in the Hall of Restoration” 長興四年中興殿應聖節講經文, and the “Destruction of the Transforming Demons” “Po Mo bian”破魔變; ed. *DHBWJJZ*, pp. 531–51), where in the latter the merit of the preceding “sūtra lecture” (jiangjing) is dedicated to Zhang Yichao 張義潮, referred to as holding the position *puye* 僕射, in order that he may live one hundred thousand years 講經功德, 更祝僕射萬萬年 (*DHBWJJZ*, pp. 536–19).


\(^{72}\) *Hou Hanshu* 26, p. 901.

\(^{73}\) This is *T*, no. 660. The identification of this tableau is contested. Wang Huimin 王惠民, “Dunhuang 321, 74 ku Shilun jingbian kaoshi” 敦煌 321, 74 唐十輪經變考釋, *Yishushi yanjiu* 藝
The figure sitting on the zhang is clearly a monk, as is the character facing him; they appear to be engaged in debate. But the parallels between the officiant of the sūtra lecture and the Buddha positioned in the zhang extend beyond this object, as important as it is, to the pictorial program as a whole. The liturgical ritual and its primary constituent parts, exegesis and storytelling, configured the ritual’s textual remnants used outside the caves and its visual expression within, both of which were made possible by donors’ support. Thus, subsequent to the new style of zhang, three additional fundamental and consistent elements began to occupy pictorial space on the walls of late-Tang period caves: exegesis, narrative, and donors.

Bianxiang and Exegesis

During the eighth century the term bianxiang became circumscribed in its usage. As Wu Hung states: “From the High Tang on, the terms bian and bianxiang were used more strictly: they no longer designated sculptured forms but referred only to pictorial images, they were mainly associated with complex sūtra illustrations, and never with individual icons, even painted ones.”74 The time period corresponds exactly to the shift in pictorial program, as the zhang became the standard representation of the western niche, transformation tableaux become defined as distinct objects (framed by trompe l’oeil), narrative screens constituted the lower register, and, finally, when the popular lecture was most in vogue.75

Bianxiang represent sūtra texts, and the latter correspond to the sūtras that formed the subjects of exegetical texts. Of the twenty-four extant sūtra-lecture texts, only one is not represented, Sūtra-Lecture Text on the Yulanben Sūtra (Yulanben jing jiangjing wen 盃槃盆經講經文). Much has been made about the lack of correspondence and the “unreadable” or “untextual” non-sequential nature of the episodes in the transformation tableaux at Dunhuang, and of the problems created by trying to shoehorn the tableaux into a textually dominant mode of understanding illustrations. The situation is further complicated by the fact that texts found in cartouches rarely match the texts of the scriptures depicted. A paradigm predicated instead on the sūtra lecture provides an alternative model grounded in ritual experience. Understood from the standpoint

75 Schmid, “Yuanqi.”
of popular lecture, the lack of sequence not only makes sense but is in fact necessary. Sūtra lectures and sūtra lecture texts do not follow linearity of the sūtra as a whole – they are episodic. Typically, one chapter of a sūtra will be the subject of a sūtra lecture, and that chapter in itself could take days. It would be pointless to prioritize images on the basis of consecutive chapters, given the variable needs of the donors, patrons, and other circumstances that may have necessitated a particular lecture. This understanding of bianxiang is to supplement, not to obviate, other interpretations of the murals’ functions. Eugene Wang writes, “The intent behind the design appears to be the creation of an imaginary topography to situate and immerse the beholder, instead of providing an illustrated version for him to ‘read’ and understand.”

I would argue that the need to situate and immerse the beholder is especially relevant when the beholder’s exposure to the sūtra through the sūtra lecture is itself episodic and sporadic. The bianxiang serves the crucial function as providing both a unifying scene for the sūtra and a point of focus for the viewer – devotionally, meditatively, and liturgically. Thus, it is not that texts inform these images, or that the images are somehow dependent on texts, it is rather that the two stand in dialogue through ritual. As demonstrated here and below, a consequence of this model is that it pushes us beyond the inadequacies of the text-image binary.

Both sūtra lectures and bianxiang function in a consistent manner: as icons, the tableaux and the sūtra-lecture texts are both participatory. Icons serve to establish a one-to-one relationship with the viewer, with the elements of the composition drawing the gaze inward to the central figure, who in turn is looking out toward the viewer. Just as the viewer is implicated in the interaction with the tableau and its central figure, so too is the listener engaged with the exegetical act led by the officiant. This occurs not only on the level of comprehension but also on the level of mental concentration and physical effort. Throughout sūtra-lecture texts, annotations and prompts request the audience to invoke a Buddha by either chanting his name 念佛名 or that of Avalokiteśvara (or simply “bodhisattva” [Guanshiyin] pusa 觀世音菩薩). The opening lines of seat-settling texts will at times directly invite buddhas and bo-

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dhisattvas to descend directly to the ritual ground.\textsuperscript{78} A third prompt establishes an individual’s relationship with the Buddha through the repetition of the 佛子 “disciple of the Buddha.”\textsuperscript{79} These three prompts encourage connection and communication with the Buddha, manifest in the object or image. Lecture texts then are not simply doctrinal and exegetical works on sūtras, they are also devotional, a point which I elaborate, below. In this sense they represent the ritual interaction with particular scriptures found both in the form of a text as sūtra and in the form of an image as transformation or sūtra tableau. The power and agency of these pious objects are of course metonymical for that of a Buddha or bodhisattva, the scripture in a sense being anthropomorphized through the image. Consequently, both the tableaux and sūtra lecture function on multiple levels to foster understanding of, meditation on, and devotion to the Dharma, all of which is centered on the figure of authority — a representation of a monk or Buddha. However, two final elements remain unexplained in this confluence of image, ritual, and text, namely the winged screens and the donors.

\textit{Winged Screens and yuanqi}

Another significant change during mid-Tang was the addition and standardization of narratives in the form of winged screens occupying the lower register of cave walls. Like bianxiang and zhang, they became standard in the caves of this time. Wu Hung’s recent work, \textit{The Double Screen},\textsuperscript{80} discusses paintings that depict screens with an adjacent figure, arguing that they establish a metaphoric connection between the figure and the content of the screens. The screen by its very format and arrangement at ground, or human, level allows this sort of mapping function.\textsuperscript{81} In the lower register of Dunhuang caves from the eighth

\textsuperscript{78} “Good! Great wise, great compassionate worthy and the innumerable buddhas of the ten directions, we wish that each of you ride upon floral and bejeweled seats and wish that you now descend to the sacred ground.”善哉大聖大慈尊，三世十方無數佛，各願乘花兼寶座，惟願今朝降道場 (F.109, titled simply “Seat-settling text” yazuo wen 押座文; \textit{DHBWJJZ}, p. 1169).

\textsuperscript{79} “The Sūtra Lecture Text on the Amitabha Sūtra as Spoken by the Buddha” ("Fo shuo Amituo jing jiangjing wen" 佛說阿彌陀經講經文; S.6551; \textit{DHBWJJZ}, pp. 679–703), clearly meant for oral delivery, gives explicit instructions of what to say and how many times repeated. These reminders occur at the end of a prose passage before the beginning of the verse. At one point (\textit{DHBWJJZ}, p. 680.1) the narrator states, “say the Buddha’s name three or five [several] times, Buddha’s disciples”稱三五聲佛名佛子, and later simply “say the Buddha’s name, Buddha’s disciples”稱佛名佛子 (\textit{DHBWJJZ}, p. 681.5–6).

\textsuperscript{80} Wu, \textit{Double Screen}, pp. 20–21.

\textsuperscript{81} Intriguingly, an alternative name for avadāna and jātaka texts is biyu 比喻 or piyu 譬喻, translated as parable or metaphor. The primary function of them was to provide a means to understand one’s actions and their consequences in specifically Buddhist terms. This would by necessity entail a mapping of the stories onto the adherents’ lives and actions; see Schmid, “Yuanqi,” pp. 41–65.
century until the beginning of the Xixia 西夏 period in the 1000s, this potential is used to full effect. Initially a space dominated by donor figures in earlier caves, the screens experienced a transition — occupied first by images of (lay/potential) bodhisattvas and then increasingly by karmic narratives. In contrast to the realm of the buddhas above them, this shows the human realm. It is here that we stand literally face-to-face with the workings of karma. Like multiple lives, the screens succeed each other one by one, providing ample opportunity to observe the causes and effects of karma. And like yuanqi stories, such screens bring narrative into doctrine, rendering in the concrete and particular terms of time, place, and agent the abstract and universal principles of retributive causality. The narratives, both textual and painted, need no exegesis.

What is striking about the painted screens is not that they are simply karmic narratives like yuanqi, but that, taken together, they have the same genre constraints as the stories used in liturgies, and, in a number of cases, are the very same narratives. Specific parameters bearing on the content of yuanqi narratives also hold true for narrative screens: they all take place in India before or during the time of the historical Buddha; they embrace the two distinct genres of avadāna and jātaka tales, as well as stories from the life of the historical Buddha (benxing 本行); and, finally, they include no secular narratives. Stories found both in texts and in paintings are drawn from the Śūtra of the Wise and Foolish (Xianyu jing 賢愚經); Śūtra of the Storehouse of Miscellaneous Treasures (Zabao zang jing 雜寶藏經); Śūtra of the Collection of Buddha’s Original Deeds (Fo benxing jijing 佛本行集經); Śūtra of a Hundred Circumstances (Baiyuan jing 百緣經); and the Prince Sudhana avadāna (Xudana taizi haoshi yinyuan 須達拿太子好施因緣; Skt.: Sudhanakumarāvadāna). All yuanqi performed in liturgies are elaborations of those found in these canonical scriptures. Likewise, all painted narratives are elaborations of an oral narrative; the texts in cartouches do not correspond to extant manuscripts. This oral intermediary is a feature that these narrative screens share with bianxiang. Thus, both transformation tableaux and screens share a remarkable number of characteristics and functions with yuanqi and jiangjing.

82 Here I am referring to the available texts that mostly date from the late-9th and 10th cc. The screens used for comparison also date from that period, i.e., from caves 85, 94, 72, 98, 146, 108, 454, 54, 55, and 431.

83 The four sūtras here are, respectively, Tnos. 202, 203, 190, and 200. For the corpus of yuanqi narratives found at Dunhuang, see Schmid, "Yuanqi," pp. 7–14. The Dunhuang ms. (F101) of the Chinese elaboration of the Prince Sudhana avadāna ("Xudana taizi haoshi yinyuan" 須達拿太子好施因緣; Skt.: Sudhanakumarāvadāna) is highly fragmentary. Additional Dunhuang texts exist in Khotanese: P.2896, P.2957, P.2784, P.2025, Ch 00266, P.2957.
all four media are informed by the ritual liturgy. Together with the zhang as a teaching platform signifying exegesis and authority, these objects and their liturgical counterparts establish the caves as reproduction of the contemporaneous space of the lecture ritual and thus the propagation of the Dharma. However, none of this would be possible were it not for the charitable actions of donors and patrons.

Donors and Patrons

The presence of donors and patrons at Dunhuang should not be underestimated – of the 43,830 square meters of painted space in the caves, 7,000 portraits occupy a third – they are very much present.84 Another aspect of the overall, major shift was the great increase in size of figures and portraits, so much so that, by the Five Dynasties period they were larger than life. Additionally, their placement in the donor procession significantly was altered. In early caves up to the Sui (581–618) period, donors were led by monks, but from beginning around the early 600s it was the primary lay donor or patron, and his family, who head the pageant. They continue to occupy the lower register of the pictorial program in line with painted screens containing karmic narratives. This laicization is mirrored in the content of the shrines – the change from monk- or clergy-oriented to relatively lay-patronized caves. This is especially apparent in the development of “family caves” (jiaku), which increasingly dominated Mogao grottoes from the Sui period onwards, bringing social and political concerns to bear on their construction.85

As Eugene Wang points out,86 explicit votive inscriptions of Sui date that clarify exact motivations for the construction of the shrines are lacking. Inscriptions from later caves are parsimonious in their detail, often simply stating that “the offerings are made with a concentrated mind [for the benefit of so and so] 一心供養.” What in fact is stated is whether the person was living or deceased at the time of construction. This idealized blend in which living and dead are united at the moment of worship entails an expanded notion of temporal space. Cave 300 (mid-Tang) clarifies this as a locus in time occurring within the cave through the added word shi 時, here understood to mark a narrative sequence, that is, the donor “…in the moment of offering 供養時.”87 The donors are

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84 Edith Wiercimok, “The Donor Figure in the Buddhist Painting of Dunhuang,” *Silk Road Art and Archaeology* 1 (1990), p. 203.
86 Wang, *Shaping the Lotus Sutra*, pp. 75–76.
87 Shi Yai 史岩, *Dunhuang shishi huaxiang tishi 敦煌石室畫像題識* (Chengdu: The Insti-
thus depicted in the moment of action in a space that transcends time. As donors to the construction of the caves, they are offering material goods. A comparison with votive colophons on scriptures and painting indicates the same language was used for both types of material objects. These gifts of material goods (caishi 財施) allow for the gift of the Law (fashi 法施), and here the laity is filling its role enabling the best of all gifts, the teaching of the Dharma (shuofa 說法).

The performance of the liturgy functioned to unite participants, officiating monk, and devotional image through the creation of “shared merit” (jieyuan 結緣) for a better rebirth. The term jieyuan refers to the karmic bond that one formed first with the Buddha and second with those who shared the experience. In medieval China, creating karmic bonds frequently was referenced in relation to the two activities of giving material goods and a group experience of hearing the Dharma. Popular lectures were often calls for donations to fund the building and repair of monasteries. Ennin mentions, for example, that the minister of state called for popular lectures on scriptures and raising of funds 募緣 to be held for the repair of Kaiyuan 開元 Monastery and asked that the Japanese entourage donate money, thereby establishing “karmic affinities” (also jieyuan). The lectures lasted two months and were well attended, including foreign dignitaries. Very similar kinds of proselytizing ritual took place in Japan under the name of kōshiki 講式, that is, “Buddhist ceremonial,” which are strikingly like sūtra lectures in textual form and ritual steps.

The lecture and its literature have only recently come to the attention of scholars. Tsukudo Reikan 黃土鈴寬 (“Kōshiki no rekishiteki kōsatsu” 講式の歴史的考察, in Tsukudo Reikan,
recites a lecture text while the congregation chants praises of either a particular Buddha, eminent clerical figure, or sūtra present in the form of a statue or a text that functions as the devotional object honzon 本尊. Like the popular lecture, it was also used economically to gather donations, funds, and materials. Through the writings of Genshin 源信 and Jōkei 貞慶, kōshiki 成為 a standard form of religious practice and literature and a primary means of proselytizing in medieval Japan.94 In its combination of texts, rituals, and images, the liturgical form was crucial in extending Buddhism’s economic and social reach, as well as devotional practices.95 Both in Japan and in China these changes in devotional practice reflected an increasing orientation toward rebirth in the Pure Land 往生. The religious and social elements of these dynamics, configured specifically in terms of the sūtra lecture, are represented through the spaces and images within the caves at Dunhuang.

A useful analogue to the interaction of donors, merit, and objects can be found in medieval India. Gregory Schopen’s article “Filial Piety and the Monk” discusses the curious phenomenon whereby donations of religious gifts, such as relics, stupas, images, and paintings, lacked economic value, had no recipient, and bore inscriptions that were never meant to be read. Why then, he asks, were the names and titles of donors recorded so carefully? Schopen concludes that it is because these objects were religious in nature, and that they enabled worship by others:

They were, then, really giving to any of their fellow beings who ritually approached those objects both the means and opportunity to make merit: they were providing for all both the opportunity and the means to further their religious lives. But this would also seem to suggest that the initial gift of the actual object only marked the first moment in the donor’s act of giving. Each time the object was approached, he or the persons to whom he transferred his act of giving was to be credited for providing an additional opportunity for someone else to make merit. The donor’s act of giving and its

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95 The origins of the Japanese ceremonials kōshiki and dharma meetings (hōe 法會) in Chinese Buddhist practices together with comparisons to Dunhuang materials have yet to be investigated.
consequent merit, then, were continually repeated over time in every act of worship directed toward the object provided. It was the donor’s initial act that in a very concrete sense made each consecutive act of worship possible. It was because of the donor’s act was continually repeated over time, because it took place again and again long after the donor himself disappeared, that it was necessary to clearly record the donor’s name, the moment of the initial act, and – most importantly – the donor’s intentions.96

Using the same logic, the Dunhuang caves present a variation: the material objects are given to the Buddha for promulgation of the Law in order that the donors, patrons, and their relations may benefit eternally. Including themselves in the picture, so to speak, ensures that the donors do not disappear, that all those present, while maintaining their social relationships,97 benefit from their continual devotional position before the Buddha in an implied liturgical act.98 Significantly, in China this situation became a distinctly domestic affair: these are family shrines and their private nature reflects the intimacy not only of the act but also of its benefits.99 It is crucial to note that the Mogao caves include depictions of the living and the dead and thereby represent


97 An interesting comparison here would be the imperial practice of peiling 陪陵 “accompanying burials,” which became prevalent during the Tang. Imperial permission was granted for the burial of not only relatives but also of meritorious military and civil officials. This, in effect, fixed hierarchy and relationships in perpetuity. Although Tang imperial tombs were of two types, a mound based on Qin-Han models and those carved into a mountain-side, the majority were of the latter configuration. It was in these mountain-side tombs that accompanying burials were most prevalent (Howard Wechsler, Offerings of Jade and Silk: Ritual and Symbol in the Legitimation of the T’ang Dynasty [New Haven: Yale U.P., 1985], pp. 150–60). A further comparison would be with later Liao imperial tombs, where a similar practice to Tang imperial burial took place. In these cases, however, figures were painted on walls and not actually interred. Citing the History of the Liao (Liaoshi 遼史 [Shanghai: Zhonghua shuju, 1996] 18, p. 212) on emperor Shengzong’s death in 1031 and the request to include portraits of two prime minister in both ancestral hall and tomb, Tsao Hsingyuan writes, “Although underground and above ground portraits might have different audiences, their significance was similar, to extend their relationship into the other world” (Tsao, “A Deer for the Palace: A Reconsideration of the Deer in an Autumn Forest Paintings,” in M. K. Hearn and J. G. Smith, eds., Arts of the Sung and Yuan [New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1997], pp. 197–98.

98 Stein painting 14, for example, illustrates the adherents in a position of making offerings that in the accompanying cartouche are said to be in perpetuity (yongheng 永恒). See the discussion of this painting and its cartouche in Wendi Adamek, “The Impossibility of the Given: A Look at Chinese Buddhist Donor Inscriptions,” History of Religions 45 (2005), pp. 156–59.

99 The motivation for constructing caves however is no different from the construction of temples by the ruling elite of the heartland, that of zhuifu 追福 (“posthumous well-being”) for deceased relatives. For a discussion of great temples daji 大寺 built as gestures of filial piety by the imperial family in medieval China, see Antonino Forte, “Daji (Chine),” in Paul Demiéville,
both premortem and postmortem ritual spaces, thus providing merit for all depicted. Yet, it is the initial gift of the cave and its material objects – the *zhang*, paintings, screens, and even fabrics – that makes the continual production of merit possible.

Such donations were in no way different from donations to a monastery, which indeed were gifts to the Buddha that was present there. The act of giving to the Three Jewels, as opposed to receiving, was the act that hastened the donor’s transformation into a bodhisattva. The chart, below, provides a summary: starting a cycle of merit with the gift of material goods, the *sūtra* lecture (see “Gift of Law”) was a demonstrative ceremony that could create merit, which in turn permitted the salvation of others (“Donor and Family”) by propagating the Dharma through a Material Gift, leading eventually to the salvation of the self.

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Hubert Durt, and Anna Seidel, eds., *Höbōgin: Dictionnaire encyclopédique du Bouddhisme d’après les sources chinoises et japonaises* (Paris: Adrien-Maisonneuve, 1983), 6, pp. 682–704. There are strong parallels between Dunhuang caves and “merit cloisters” (*gongde yuan* 廟) as Buddhist structures built for the cult of the ancestors which remain unexamined. In 713, the Tang Xuanzong passed an edict forbidding the creation of merit cloisters by elite families (Dennis Twitchett, ed., *The Cambridge History of China*, vol. 3: *Sui and T’ang China, 589–906*, Part 1 [Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1979], p. 361). It would be interesting to ascertain any influence this edict may have had on the large number and types of caves constructed during this period at Dunhuang.

100 Religious services were most efficacious for the living, while the deceased only received one-seventh of the merit; see *Scripture on the Original Vows of the Bodhisattva Dizang* (*Dizang pusa ben yuan jing* 般若波羅蜜多心經; attrib. Śīkṣānanda, 652–710; *Tn*o. 412, vol. 13, p. 784b).

101 In his discussion of sandalwood (*candana*) and its importance to Buddhist culture, Edward Schafer (*The Golden Peaches of Samarkand: A Study in T’ang Exotics* [Berkeley: U. of California P., 1963], pp. 137–38) mentions two (20–ft. high!) sandalwood platforms presented to the monks of Anguosi in 871 by emperor Yizong.“to be used by lecturers on the sūtras.”

102 Kieschnick, *Impact of Buddhism*, p. 158, for a discussion of the seven acts which gain a donor merit (one being the furnishing of monasteries). Fraser (*Performing the Visual*, pp. 90–98) discusses wooden temples as prototypes for Dunhuang caves. Decorations of temples would have included hanging silk paintings known as *zhenghua* 嵐畫. Examples of these are the large-scale silk paintings, “bian 嵐,” of the *Huayan jing* 華嚴經 from Cave 17 are found in the collection of the Musée Guimet, Paris.

103 Of donations to the sangha and the exchange it engendered, Gernet (*Buddhism in Chi-
The pictorial program of the caves clearly represents these objects as material items, and moreover portrays them as portable and impermanent objects. Their ephemeral quality reinforces the temporality of the scene and hence its veracity. The zhang, which, in the context of the sūtra lecture discussed above, was set up according to the demands of time and space, frames the Buddha in terms familiar to the donors and patrons, rendering him as the functional equal to a lecturer.\textsuperscript{104} The extensive use of fabrics and valances heightens the effect of ephemerality. The lower register of the artistic program’s configuration, winged screens (conveying even gratuitous hinges), owe part of their utility to their portability, able to construct and define space at will.\textsuperscript{105} Moreover, their contents (images and themes) are changeable according to

\textit{neste History}, p. 217) writes, “Pious and charitable offerings together formed a coherent system that did not aim at an accumulation of goods but at their redistribution and circulation; not at growing profits but at expenditures. …To receive gifts of the Three Jewels engendered pious thoughts as well as feelings of gratitude and respect: one was bound by such gratuitous generosity. But the effect of giving to the triratna was more profound yet, for it led to the gradual transformation of the donor into a bodhisattva.”

\textsuperscript{104} This then is an interesting reversal of the later Chan practice of the abbot’s occupying the position and role of the Buddha in the dharma hall. This situation then was also operative for clergy as lecturers in a more general sense, where they assumed the seated position of Buddha on a teaching platform. In their discussion of the rite of “ascending the hall” (shang-tang 上堂), T. Griffith Foulk and Robert H. Sharf, “On the Ritual Use of Ch’an Portraiture in Medieval China,” \textit{CEA} 7 (1993–1994), p. 195, state, “The significance of this rite, in which the abbot ascended an altar functionally homologous to the altar occupied by a Buddha icon, was unambiguous: the abbot was rendered the spiritual equal of the Tathāgatha.” The porous nature of this positioning, both in the context of the monastery and in the cave, is clearly advantageous to the clergy.

In this light, the \textit{zhang} as the seat of a Buddha finds another use not discussed above: as a box for Buddhist relics. An ink inscription written on the reliquary from Famensi, Shaanxi, states: “On the fifteenth day of the second month in the second year of the Jinglong [reign] (708) of the Great Tang [dynasty], the monk Fazang and others made this marble, numinous tent, on account of the relic entering the pagoda at this time, and recorded this [event].大唐景龍二年歲次戊申二月庚丑十五日己卯派沙門法藏等造白石靈帳一鋪以其時舍利入塔故書記之.” For a discussion of the reliquary, see Famensi kaogudui 法門寺考古隊, “Fufeng Famensi Tangdai digong fajue jianbao” 扶風法門寺唐代地宮發掘簡報, \textit{Kaogu yu wenwu} 考古與文物 2 (1988), pp. 94–106, and Shaanxisheng Famensi kaogudui 陝西省法門寺考古隊, “Fufeng Famensi Tangdai digong fajue jianbao” 扶風法門寺唐代地宮發掘簡報, \textit{WW} 10 (1988), pp. 1–26. (I would like to thank Iman Lai for bringing this inscription to my attention.) Another remarkably well-preserved example is the relic box from Songyimsa in Korea [Kim Chewon, “Treasures from the Songyimsa Temple in Southern Korea,” \textit{Artibus Asiae} 22:1–2 (1959), figs. 8, 11, 14]. At Dunhuang, the parinirvana scene in Cave 148 features the same form as a bier carrying the Buddha’s body after his death. These objects all differ in structure from the niche as \textit{zhang} in that the base is different (not on a scalloped platform) and that there are no winged screens closing the three sides. The complex and fascinating relationship between the \textit{zhang} as a teaching platform and as reliquary and their connections to earlier funerary couches deserve attention.

\textsuperscript{105} Screens depicted \textit{within} the murals (i.e., in illustrations within transformation tableaux, not the lower register) at Dunhuang are often found in temporary structures such as tents for marriage feasts and of course within \textit{zhang} such as Vimalakirti’s.
the demands of the situation, rendering the choice of subject matter in each cave all the more significant for its permanence. As in life, all these objects serve as both visual and material culture, which then anchors particular religious ideas and specific practices.

The fact that the gifts are so realistically illustrated as such is to clarify and affirm them as material objects. The use of realism and of trompe l’oeil stylization in the depiction of Dunhuang caves has gone unexamined, but its analysis here is crucial to understanding the subject’s perceptual and experiential field. The realism of painted objects has three primary conceptual functions: 1. to affirm and legitimize the objects that constitute the pictorial space as material gifts; 2. portray the physicality of the liturgical setting given the “unreality” of its performance; 3. depict objects in their plenitude and particularity and thus to convey their numinous power. The latter is especially important in the case of transformation tableaux. As images conflating sūtra, deity, and Pure Land, they were employed as soteriological devices, having the power to transform karmically by cleansing previous defilements and to facilitate the dying’s rebirth in a Pure Land.

Their use in both pre- and postmortem rituals in medieval China is mirrored within these caves, which contain portraits of the living and the dead. As indicated above, the zhang in particular has rich associations in Chinese traditions of exegesis appropriated by Buddhism which in turn are foregrounded in murals in ways specifically relevant to the local socio-political context at Dunhuang. The lifelike status of these objects then substitutes or fills in for presence and allows for the hypostatization of a performative moment in its efficacy.

106 Here I distinguish the functional realism from the pictorial illusionism found in transformation tableaux, as discussed by Wang, *Shaping the Lotus Sūtra*, pp. 238–316. It may be, however, that the former was an elaboration of the latter.

107 Wang Wei’s “Eulogy on a Transformation of Western Paradise of Amitabha Painted on the Stupa of the Temple of Filiality and Duty by the Grand Secretary of the Imperial Chancellery, Dou Shao, for his Deceased Younger Brother, the Late Husband of the Imperial Princess, with Preface” states that the image itself is to cleanse the deceased’s karma allowing the transformation to occur, in expectation that the subtle or perfect body then can attain the Pure Land and the spirit body (Quan Tangwen, *全唐文* [Shanghai: Shanghai guji chuban she, 1990] 325, p. 1459). Mair (*T’ang Transformation Texts*, p. 47) and Wang (*Shaping the Lotus Sūtra*, pp. xvi–xvii) also discuss this poem but do not examine the soteriological uses of this or other bianxiang. In my forthcoming *Buddhist Proselytization*, I discuss at length the meaning of bian as “karmic transformation” through an examination of a wide range of materials, elite and popular, and provide a different interpretation of the term and its uses from those of Mair and others.

108 Curiously unstudied is the ritual function of donor portraits in the Mogao caves in terms of their realism. In the case of Chan funerals, for example, the portrait served as the locus for the spirit and thus required a high degree of realism (Robert Sharf, “The Idolization of Enlightenment: On Mummification of Ch’an Masters in Medieval China,” *History of Religions* 32.1 [August 1992], pp. 19–20).
At the same time however, these visual materials, texts, and the rituals that occasioned them are indicative of changes through time, harbingers of the transformations to come in Song-era religious culture. It would be a time when “the vernacularization of ritual and communication with the divine, in addition to the development of new liturgical practices for laity in both Buddhism and Daoism, gave ordinary people greater access to the gods.”

Mogao caves from this period can be understood as vernacular creations in a yet larger sense, however. Not only do they contain the trappings of vernacularized religious ritual, but the very caves in their pictorial program and style are uniquely local creations, a convergence of influences from widely divergent times and places.

CONCLUSION

Scholars repeatedly pose the question of what went on in these caves: what did people actually do in them? As my article has illustrated, the family shrines were configured around the very visible but immaterial liturgical ritual of expounding the Law, modeled in this case on the contemporaneous sūtra lecture. Through their material donations the patrons constructed an “as-if” space. I would argue that few activities were ever held in the caves, because something else was already going on, namely an interaction with the Buddha within the familiar setting of the sūtra lecture. The primary function of the caves was in creating an ideal imagined world, an as-if world that condenses time and space. Here there is no need for a dharma master and a dujiang. In this ideal world the Buddha is continually present. Rather than the mediation of Dharma through Ananda and a dharma master, it is the Buddha who, thanks to the donors’ material gifts, can present the Law directly. As sacred spaces configured around enacting the Law, the caves present a kind of double as-if scenario: the initial ritual frame of the liturgy further inscribed into a simulacrum of the first frame.


110 For the discussion of ritual as adult play, see Robert Sharf, “Ritual,” in Donald Lopez, ed., Critical Terms for the Study of Buddhism (Chicago: Chicago U.P., 2005), pp. 245–70. This understanding of ritual, as a mental act entailing the blending of apparently incongruous spaces and/or domains which results in a collapse of cause and effect [i.e., the ritual’s transformative nature], can also be analyzed through recent developments in cognitive science, particularly through the research program known as conceptual integration. See Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind’s Hidden Complexities (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

111 That is, the integration of the as-if ritual frame of the sūtra lecture (as-if by participat-
Therefore, to hold any kind of ritual in these caves would in fact be disruptive to such a doubly constructed space. To include “reality” would make it unreal.

This article began with a discussion of a fundamental shift in style and content during the mid-Tang period. Understanding caves from this period as being predicated on the sūtra lecture and its socio-religious implications provides a robust model for explaining both the dramatic change in the pictorial program that occurred and the visual and spatial elements that constitute that change. The inclusion of new, lifelike objects that were kinesthetically functional and appropriate to ritual underscores a shift in how the caves were conceptualized and used. Scholars, although positing theories about the actual use of these caves, have neglected to examine the objects depicted as functioning within a unified ground, meaningful to the donor. I argue that it is only through taking seriously the objects that occupy the donor’s perceptual and experiential fields that such a reconstruction is possible. Crucially, it necessary first to clarify what constitutes a meaningful object. Once delineated and properly contextualized, this specific material culture allows us to reestablish the social and religious topographies it sought to evoke. I have attempted to demonstrate that items unexplored in the study of Dunhuang art have the potential, when combined with texts and ritual, to elucidate not only the experienced world of those who had such caves constructed but also why the caves themselves may have changed. In tandem with the evolution of ritual and liturgical practices, the pictorial programs in caves from mid-Tang down to the beginning of the Xixia period underwent a type of vernacularization; by their immediacy, the caves speak the language of the living. Objects and their ritual uses, and thus the caves themselves, demonstrate a shift to the social and cultural topos of the lay donor. What is represented was the liturgical scene in its socio-religious importance, which permitted the extension of merit-making in perpetuity for donors, families, and their relations.

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fo ing in this act the audience gains merit) with the as-if ritual frame of the trompe l’oeil material liturgical frame of the previous.
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

DHBWJJZ  Huang and Zhang, eds., Dunhuang bianwen ji jiaozhu 敦煌變文集校註
DHMGK   Zhongguo shiku: Dunhuang Mogaoku 1–5 中國石窟敦煌莫高窟 (1–5)
DHSKQJ  Dunhuang shiku quanji 敦煌石窟全集
F       Institute of Oriental Studies Collection, St Petersburg
P.      Pelliot Collection
S.      Stein Collection
T       Taishō shinshū daizōkyō 大正新脩大藏經
ZGMSQJ  Zhongguo meishu quanji 中國美術全集