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Four Sichuan Buddhist Steles and the Beginnings of Pure Land Imagery in China

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The Northern and Southern Dynasties (386–589) is well recognized as a period of significant developments in Chinese art history. Idioms and artistic conventions established in Han-dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE) art continued, while the acceptance of Buddhism and Buddhist art forms inspired new artistic expressions. Mutual influence between indigenous and foreign artistic traditions engendered vitality, and sometimes these fertile interactions led to fundamental changes in ways of seeing things and in representation.¹ Such interactions and innovations, however, did not occur uniformly. A case in point is the coexistence of disparate but parallel traditions at Nanjing and Luoyang – two important artistic and cultural capitals of the Southern and Northern dynasties, respectively. Even though Nanjing and Luoyang were well-known centers of Buddhism and of Buddhist art, the content of their mortuary rituals was still informed by the indigenous traditions of Confucianism and Daoism. Ritual art on steles, mortuary shrines, and sarcophagi continued to express the concepts of Confucian virtue or Daoist immortality. Much of the thematic repertory of the Han dynasty continued popular: paragons of filial piety or womanly virtue, or Immortals and fantastic beasts that populated the Land of the Immortals. One may say that this persistence of traditional ritual art expressed a conservative spirit. Buddhist art, on the other hand, remained a foreign, and thus “separate” or “other” tradition. It followed prototypes and artistic principles established by foreign models. The fact that these two cultural capitals were strongholds of indigenous traditions may have inhibited freer interactions between native and foreign traditions.

This paper argues that some of the more innovative developments occurred elsewhere. It examines a group of Northern and Southern Dynasties Buddhist stone steles from Sichuan that combined new ideological content with an experimental mode of representing space.² The parallel orthogonal perspective inherited from Han was replaced by a convergent, multiple-viewpoint perspective which formed the principal compositional scheme in later large-scale Pure Land paintings. The lyricism and sensitive treatment of landscape in these carvings also marked the beginnings of a landscape art in China. That those innovations and that extraordinary achievement should have occurred in Sichuan is not surprising. Sichuan had been a

thriving economic and cultural center since Han times, but compared with Nanjing and Luoyang, capital cities where ritual art in the service of a state ideology remained an imperative, Sichuan always allowed artists a much greater degree of freedom. An analysis of the inventiveness of the Sichuan steles elucidates how local artists adroitly adapted and transformed pre-existing conventions to articulate a new religious doctrine.

The content of the four steles to be discussed informs us about Buddhist beliefs in Sichuan during the Northern and Southern Dynasties. Two of them depict prototypical images of the Western Pure Land associated with Buddhas Amitābha/Amitāyus; the third stele portrays Maitreya’s paradises; and the fourth contains iconic images of Amitāyus and Maitreya. The depictions of the Western Pure Land and of Maitreya’s paradises count among the very few examples that predate the Tang dynasty (618–907), and provide important evidence for understanding the beginnings of Pure Land painting in China.³ The strong devotional focus on Amitābha/Amitāyus and Maitreya also distinguishes the character of Sichuan Buddhism within the larger context of early Mahāyāna Buddhism in China.

It is well known that Daoan (312–385) and his disciple Huiyuan (334–416)—two key intellectual figures in Chinese Buddhism—emphasized the worship of Maitreya and Amitābha, respectively. Huiyuan is considered the founder of the Pure Land school of Buddhism in China, but his practice (and that of Daoan) differed somewhat from the devotion to Amitābha/Amitāyus as a savior that characterized later popular Pure Land Buddhism. Both Daoan and Huiyuan were eclectic: they advocated Prajñāpāramitā (“Perfection of Wisdom,” the earliest school of Mahāyāna Buddhism), the bodhisattva doctrine, devotional Buddhism, and *dhyāna* (“meditation”) practice. Through the missionary work of their disciples, the teachings of Daoan and Huiyuan influenced Buddhist belief and practice in Sichuan. Understanding the nature of the Buddhism practiced in Sichuan provides a context within which to interpret the complex iconographic programs of the pictorial reliefs on the hitherto unexplored Sichuan steles. This interpretation suggests that the origins of Pure Land imagery may be rooted in the early Chinese understanding of Mahāyāna doctrine as expounded in the teachings of Daoan and Huiyuan.

As Pure Land Buddhism gained strength, Amitābha's Western Pure Land was also being represented elsewhere in sixth-century China, as in the Xiangtangshan cave-temples of Hebei-Henan. But the Sichuan steles are unique in their treatment of landscape and in their graphic, low-relief figural style, and these unique characteristics incorporate pre-existing art styles prevalent in Sichuan, exemplified by pictorial tomb tiles and other tomb reliefs of the Han dynasty. Buddhism's interactions with local artistic traditions therefore account for the distinctive artistic expression of these Sichuan Buddhist steles. In the highly sophisticated societies of Nanjing and Luoyang, individual artists, some from literate and elitist backgrounds, were beginning to gain recognition and improved social standing by virtue of their art. But in Sichuan artists/artisans remained largely anonymous. Since the Sichuan steles cannot be associated with known artists, they bring to attention the role of anonymous craftsmen in representational innovation, and cast doubt on the relevancy of ascribing creative breakthroughs to artists whose names have survived in literary records.

FOUR SICHUAN STELES: FORMS, CONTENT, AND DATING

Our steles number 1–3, portraying Pure Land and paradise imagery, all come from the famous Wanfosi (“Temple of Myriad Buddhas”) site in Chengdu, Sichuan. Our number 4, bearing iconic images of Amitāyus and Maitreya, comes from Mao xian, north of Chengdu. The Wanfosi steles were in fragments by the time they were first excavated, whereas the Mao xian stele was damaged more recently. But careful comparison of the reconstructed fragments confirm that all four steles were oblong slabs, relatively shallow in depth but carved on all four sides. All probably stood between one and two meters high. In both style and content these Sichuan steles vary markedly from the typical northern Buddhist steles of the fifth and sixth centuries.⁴

Wanfosi was a large monastery located about five hundred meters outside the western gate of the old city wall of Chengdu. Within the last century the site has yielded several sculpture hoards totaling hundreds of objects: the first discovery came in 1882, followed by others in 1937, 1945–46, 1953, and 1954. Many sculptures from the first hoard have since been lost. Those from the later finds are mostly in the Sichuan Provincial Museum; a small number are kept in the Chengdu Municipal Museum and in the Sichuan University Museum. All carved from the soft reddish sandstone typically found in the Sichuan plateau, these sculptures consist of individual Buddhist figures, relief carvings, steles, and a few *sūtra*-pillars (multifaced pillars inscribed with texts of *sūtras*). They mainly date from the Northern and Southern Dynasties and Tang

periods. In 1958 fifty selected pieces were published by Liu Zhiyuan and Liu Tingbi.⁵ A full study of the Wanfosi sculptures, however, has yet to appear.

The three Wanfosi steles all date from the Northern and Southern Dynasties, when the temple first became a major Buddhist art center. Stele 1 is the most problematic of the three, because it is known only from a rubbing (*Fig. 1*).⁶ Based on accounts in Chinese sources, the stone was part of the first find, that of 1882. Wang Liansheng recorded the discovery in *Tianxiangge biji*, mentioning that three of the sculptures bore inscriptions. He further wrote that the earliest of these three was dated to the Yuanjia reign-period (424–453) and that it was superbly carved. At the request of his father, who was then chief of Chengdu county, Wang built a small temple, called Xiao Wanfosi, to house the sculptures. The temple later collapsed and the sculptures were lost, but not, apparently, the three inscribed pieces, which Wang had removed earlier. The Yuanjia-dated stele is said to have been sold by his descendants.⁷ Only a few rubbings of the stele survived. In the early part of this century one of them was published and circulated as a “Han pictorial relief.” On the basis of the modern inscription written on the right side of the rubbing, the 1958 catalogue asserts that this rubbing was taken from the Yuanjia-dated stele.⁸ This claim, however, cannot be ascertained because the dated inscription has never been published together with the rubbing.⁹ In 1969 Nagahiro Toshio published the first major study of the stele, judging it to be a fine work of Southern Dynasties Buddhist art.¹⁰ Given the uncertainties about the authenticity and date of the stele, it deserves a thorough investigation, especially in conjunction with the other Sichuan steles.

The rubbing in Figure 1A is a reconstruction, made in Japan, based on the original rubbing published by Liu Zhiyuan and Liu Tingbi and by Nagahiro. It shows a large fragment of a stone slab that has been damaged at the top and at the bottom. The main relief depicts a number of scenes in landscape settings, which will be examined in the next section. Of the damaged upper section, enough details remain to show that it represents a bridge over a lotus pond—one of the earliest representations of this key iconographic element of Pure Land imagery. The relief panels on the right edge of the rubbing—taken from one of the narrow sides of the stele—have been identified as scenes from the story of the Buddha's life, a common theme in early Buddhist art.¹¹

Stele 2 bears no date but can be assigned approximately to the mid-sixth century. It is broken horizontally into two halves, and the upper half is somewhat damaged at the top (*Figs. 2, 2A*).¹² It measures 119 cm high, 64.5 cm wide, and 24.8 cm thick. The obverse is composed of three tiers of unequal height: in the topmost, in high relief, are two standing bodhisattvas accompanied by



Fig. 1. *Pure Land depiction with secular landscape*. Rubbing of reverse of Stele 1, partially damaged. 5th–early 6th century (?). Recovered from Wanfosi site, Chengdu, Sichuan. Dimensions unknown. Rubbing in Sichuan Provincial Museum. From: Liu Zhiyuan and Liu Tingbi, eds., *Chengdu Wanfosi shike yishu* (Shanghai: Zhongguo gudian yishu chubanshe, 1958), pl. 31.

three pairs of subsidiary figures holding various offerings (the two subsidiary figures in front wear high crowns and may represent princely donors or Hindu deities such as Indra); in the middle tier a pair of guardian figures and a pair of lions flank the brimming urn from which grow the two lotus blossoms that serve as pedestals for the two bodhisattvas; in the bottom tier is a row of *gandharvas* (heavenly musicians) flanking a censer in the shape of a lotus. On the reverse is a large pictorial relief, closely comparable with that of Stele 1 (to be discussed below). The upper half of this relief—the section corresponding to the missing area of Stele 1—clearly shows a prototypical Pure Land scene—across a lotus pond we see a hieratic Buddhist assembly, lush vegetation, and palace architecture. Comparison of these two reliefs makes clear that they represented the same subject matter, albeit with small variations, as the very top of the rubbing of Stele 1 shows a centrally located bridge across a lotus pond, closely similar to the bridge and pond in the top half of Stele 2. Comparison also suggests that, like Stele 2, Stele 1 was probably carved with iconic images in high relief

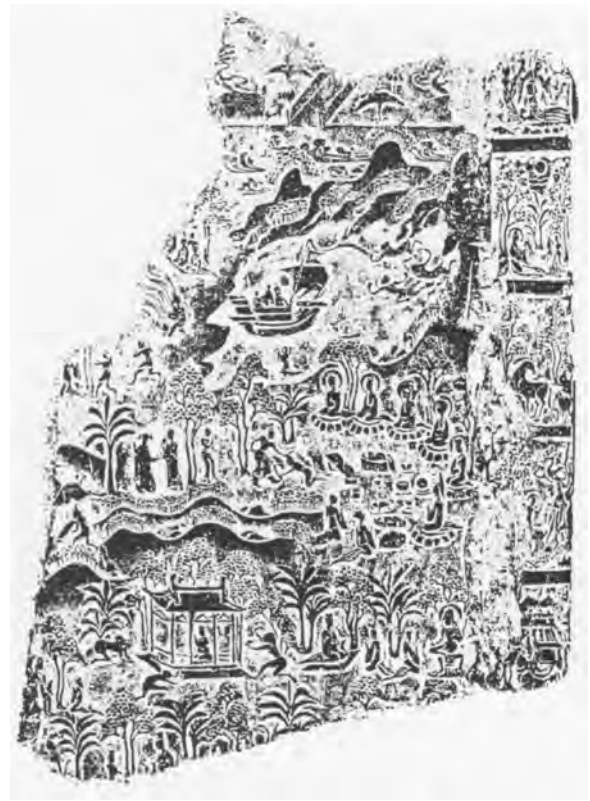


Fig. 1A. Reconstruction of Stele 1. From: Nagahiro Toshio, *Rikuchō jidai bijutsu no kenkyū* (Tokyo: Bijutsu shuppansha, 1969), pp. 56–66, pl. 9.

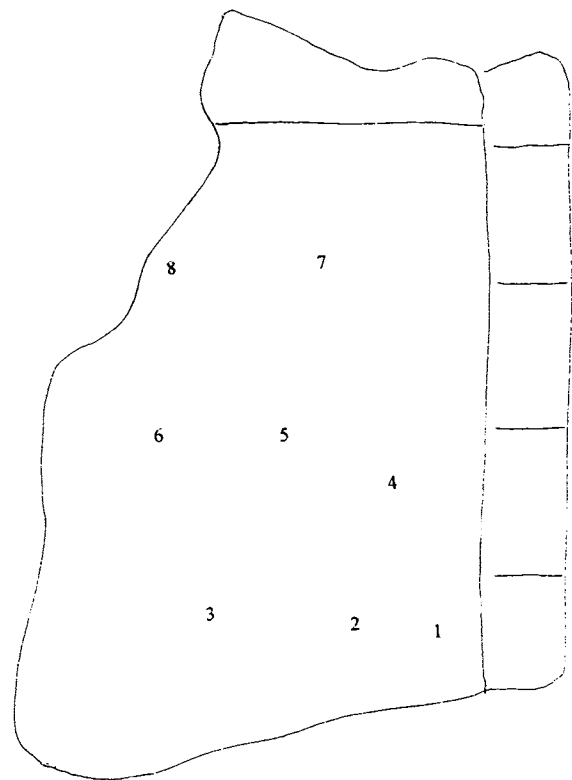


Fig. 1B. Diagram of Stele 1. By the author.



Fig. 2. *Pure Land depiction with secular landscape*. Reverse of Wanfosi Stele 2, reconstructed from two fragments. Mid-6th century. Recovered from Wanfosi site, Chengdu, Sichuan. Red sandstone; h. 119 cm, w. 64.5 cm, d. 24.8 cm. Sichuan Provincial Museum. From: *Zhongguo meishu quanji* series, *Wei Jin Nanbeichao diaosu* vol. (Beijing: Renmin meishu chubanshe, 1988), pl. 63.

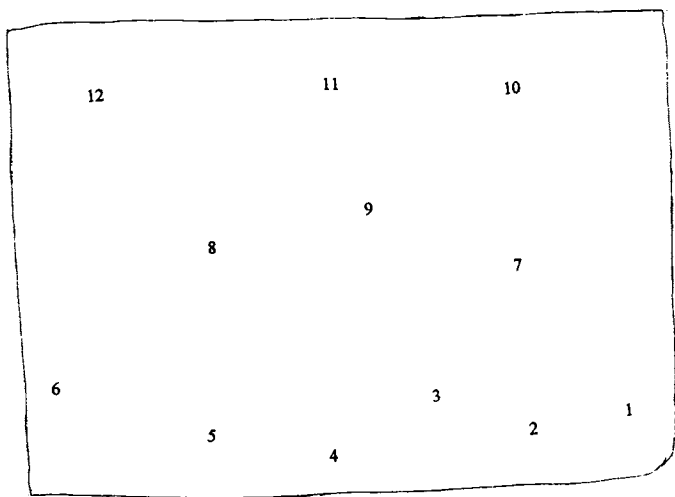


Fig. 2B. Diagram of reverse of Stele 2, lower half. By the author.



Fig. 2A. *Two standing bodhisattvas on lotuses with attendants*. Obverse of Stele 2. From: *China: 5,000 Years, Innovation and Transformation in the Arts*, ed. Howard Rodgers (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1998), pl. 151.

on the obverse. As on the rubbing of Stele 1, the two shallow sides of Stele 2 are carved with pictorial reliefs divided in registers, the subjects of which have not been identified.

The surviving fragment of Stele 3 (Fig. 3) appears to be the upper half, since its top edge is even, and on the reverse the scenes immediately below the edge are complete. In high relief on the obverse is a spiral-like depiction of Mt. Meru.¹³ On the reverse we see Maitreya in his paradises, arranged in three horizontal registers. The topmost register shows Maitreya as a bodhisattva in a palace in Tuṣita heaven, waiting to be reborn. The middle register depicts Ketumatī, the ideal kingdom ruled by a *cakravartin* ("king who turns the Wheel of the Law," or universal ruler), into which Maitreya is reborn. Once reborn, Maitreya will gain enlightenment as a Buddha and hold three assemblies. The groups of figures in the middle register signify these three assemblies. Below, we see events and circumstances in Ketumatī: the sowing of

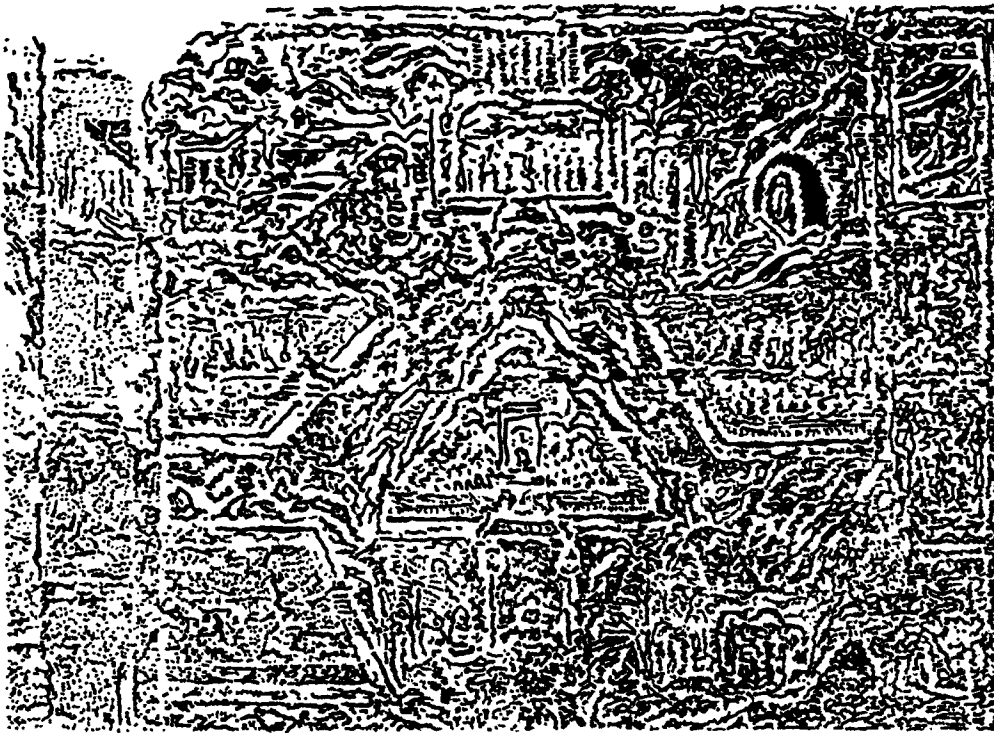


Fig. 3. *Maitreya in Tuṣita Heaven and Ketumatī*. Diagram of reverse of Stele 3, upper half. Late 6th–7th century. Recovered from Wanfosi site, Chengdu, Sichuan. Red sandstone; dimensions unknown. Sichuan Provincial Museum.

seeds that yield sevenfold harvests (lower left); the *cakravartin*, his wife, and attendants taking the tonsure (lower right); several brahmins attempting to destroy the Tower of the Seven Treasures, the Seven Treasures being emblems of the *cakravartin* (middle right). The subjects of all three registers have been identified by comparison with Maitreya paradise scenes of the Tang dynasty, such as a mural in Dunhuang Cave 148, dated to 776, in which the Tuṣita heaven is labeled as such (Fig. 7). But in contrast to most Dunhuang murals of Tang date, which are conspicuously symmetrical and conventionalized in composition, our Stele 3 displays a freer composition and a stronger narrative character—traits which suggest that the Wanfosi relief antedates the Dunhuang murals. Maitreya imagery is not the focus of the present discussion; it is considered here for the light it sheds on the iconography and representational style of Steles 1 and 2.¹⁴

Steles 1, 2, and 3 were recovered as fragments, but a comparative examination enables us to reconstruct their original appearance. The remains of Steles 2 and 3 suggest that these were oblong slabs, shallow in depth, embellished with carvings on all four sides—the obverse with iconic or other images in high relief, the reverse with a composite pictorial relief that includes a paradise scene at the top, and the two narrow sides with narrative panels in low relief.¹⁵ Stele 1 was probably similar, with the rubbing showing the proper left of the lower half of the reverse.

If the authenticity and date of Stele 1 remain uncertain, Steles 2 and 3 offer iconographic and stylistic evidence that permits the establishment of a chronological sequence. The motif of paired bodhisattvas on the obverse of Stele 2, for example, was popular in Northern Qi (550–557) sculptures.¹⁶ In their sinuous curves and sensuous modeling they also compare with other sculptures from the Wanfosi site, such as a group dated to 548 (Fig. 8).¹⁷ These comparisons suggest that Stele 2 was made about the middle part or third quarter of the sixth century. In addition to the sensuous carving, such motifs as the brimming urn, the *gandharva* figures, and the high-crowned princely donors suggest very strong and direct influence from Gupta India.¹⁸ Stele 3 we judge to be slightly later, late sixth or early seventh century, first, because its paradise composition is more complex, and second, because the Mt. Meru theme on the obverse has been associated with a number of late sixth-century works.¹⁹ Stele 1 resembles Stele 2 far more closely than it does Stele 3. In a number of key elements the reliefs of Steles 1 and 2 are almost identical. But the tentative quality of the carving on Stele 1, especially in the representation of space, and the use of the older parallel orthogonal perspective, would place it earlier than Stele 2 (see further discussion below), perhaps in the early sixth or even the fifth century.

Stele 4, dated to 483, comes from Mao xian, not far north of Chengdu (Figs. 4, 4A). Discovered in the 1920s, it was displayed first in a temple and later in front of a library

Fig. 4. *Amitāyus Buddha* (right) and *Maitreya Buddha*. Obverse and reverse of Stele 4. Dated to 483. Mao xian, Sichuan. Red sandstone; h. 118 cm, w. 50 cm. Sichuan Provincial Museum. From: *Zhongguo meishu quanji* series, *Wei Jin Nanbeichao diaosu* vol. (Beijing: Renmin meishu chubanshe, 1988), pl. 44.

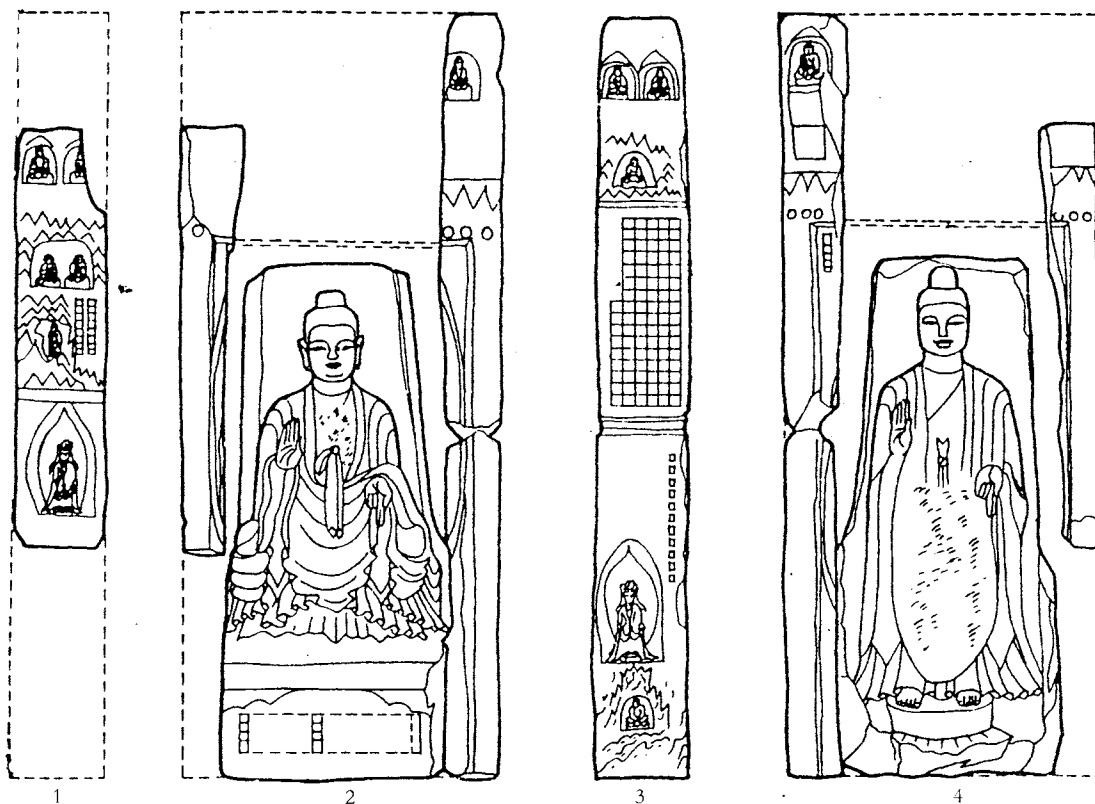


Fig. 4A. Reconstruction of Stele 4. From: Yuan Shuguang, "Sichuan Maowen Nan Qi Yongming zaoxiangbei ji youguan wenti," *Wenwu* 1990.2, fig. 1.

in a park. In 1935 a Sichuan warlord stole it and broke it into several pieces, in order to smuggle out of China and sell the pieces bearing the images. But this attempt was thwarted; the stele, still missing several pieces, is now in the Sichuan Provincial Museum. Although the main portion of the slab, with the two Buddhas on obverse and reverse, has long been published and illustrated, it was only in 1990 that Yuan Shuguang published a reconstruction of the stele (Fig. 4A).²⁰

According to this reconstruction, the original monument was rectangular in shape, about 170 centimeters high, 73 centimeters wide, and 21 centimeters thick. Obverse and reverse are each carved in low relief with a single large Buddha, identified by inscription: standing Amitāyus (Fig. 4A, no. 4) on the obverse and seated Maitreya (Fig. 4A, no. 2) on the reverse.²¹ Much of the top is missing; the surviving section shows small Buddha images in niches. The two narrow sides present more small Buddha images, along with standing bodhisattvas and small figures in mountain huts (one is a monk practicing *dhyāna* and another is a standing Buddha; the rest are insufficiently distinct to permit identification). Inscriptions appear on both of the narrow sides. The main inscription (Fig. 4A, no. 3) reads:

On the fifteenth day of the seventh month, in the *guihai* year, the first year of the Yongming reign [483] of [Southern] Qi. Monk Xuansong, an administrator of Western Liang,²² reverently dedicates the images of Amitāyus and the Future Buddha Maitreya for the emperor, his ministers, teachers of many generations, my parents, brothers, relatives, and all sentient beings. May all beings open up their hearts, believe in the Three Jewels, and practice the Ten Good Virtues. May all have the good fortune to encounter Maitreya, attend the Future Buddha's three assemblies, and be released from the chain of existence. [Maitreya's] full Dharma Body will ferry every being [across to the other shore] to achieve full enlightenment. Monk Sengcheng...together accomplished this [project].

The line below the main inscription is half-illegible, but gives the title of a donor as *zhenshu* (chief of a garrison town). The inscription on the other side (Fig. 4A, no. 1), next to the Buddha standing in a mountain hut, records Buddhist doctrine:

All [forms of] existence are impermanent, therefore the purpose of life is to extinguish the causes of existence. When life is annihilated and all material forms cease to exist, bliss arrives.

The date of Stele 4 places it early in our sequence of Sichuan steles. Moreover, its devotional icons anticipate the focus of the Wanfosi steles. If Steles 1 and 2 represent the Western Pure Land of Amitābha/Amitāyus and Stele 3 the paradises of Maitreya, then the icons of Stele 4 attest to the strength of the cults of these two Buddhas in the region during the fifth century, even before their supernal realms began to be represented.

The reverse of Steles 1 and 2 share a similar horizontally divided composition: in the lower half are scenes in landscape settings, in the upper half, the imagery of a prototypical Western Pure Land (S: *Sukhāvati*).

Pure Land paintings of later times, such as those at Dunhuang, have been associated with the three Pure Land texts: the longer *Sukhāvati-vyūha Sūtra* (C: *Wuliangshou jing*), the shorter *Sukhāvati-vyūha Sūtra* (C: *Amituo jing*), and the *Amitāyur-dhyāna Sūtra* (C: *Guan Wuliangshoufo jing*).²³ These texts describe Sukhāvati, the Western Pure Land presided over by Amitābha (Buddha of Infinite Light), as a place of delight and splendor, free of all sin and suffering, filled with delectable scents, flowers, fruits, gemmy trees, and sweet-voiced birds. Jeweled flowers float in its fragrant rivers. The sky is bright with ornaments, heavenly musicians (*gandharvas*) make music, and *apsarases* dance. Beings reborn there are endowed with a multitude of virtues, and enjoy fine dress, ornaments, gardens, palaces, and pavilions. Buddhas of the Ten Directions come to glorify Amitābha Buddha, showering flowers upon him.

The possibility of rebirth in so blissful a realm, described with such luxuriant, sensuous imagery, won Pure Land beliefs a large following in China and later in Japan. This popular devotional faith has inspired the creation of some of the most magnificent Buddhist paintings. Two eighth-century wall murals at Dunhuang epitomize the grandeur and splendor (S: *alambkāra*) of the Pure Land imagery (Figs. 5, 6).²⁴

The Wanfosi steles show earlier imaginings of this Land of Bliss. The rubbing of Stele 1 shows most of a bridge over a lotus pond, the lotus being a symbol of spiritual purity and thus the key element in Pure Land imagery. Beyond the bridge, in the undamaged stele, would have appeared the Land of Bliss itself. Stele 2 features the lotus pond with reborn beings swimming in it, luxuriant vegetation, pavilions and palace architecture, *gandharvas* playing instruments and *apsarases* dancing, and Amitābha preaching to an assembly. All of these elements correspond with later depictions of the Western Pure Land. Most extant Pure Land paintings date from the seventh century. Only two other mid-sixth-century examples are known—one from the Majishan cave-temples in Gansu, and one from the Xiangtangshan cave-temples (Figs. 9, 10; see discussion below). Together with the two Sichuan reliefs they represent some of the earliest depictions of the Pure Land.

In our Steles 1 and 2, however, a central bridge clearly links the Pure Land with the temporal landscape below. Assuming that the two parts constitute a single iconographic program, an interpretation of the lower half is crucial to understanding the relief's overall import. For clarity in discussion, I divide the reliefs into horizontal tiers

Fig. 5. *Amitāyus' Pure Land*. 1st half of 8th century. Dunhuang, Gansu, Cave 320, north wall. Mural. From: *Chūgoku sekkutsu* series, *Tonkō Bakkōkutsu* vol. (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1982), vol. 4, pl. 4.

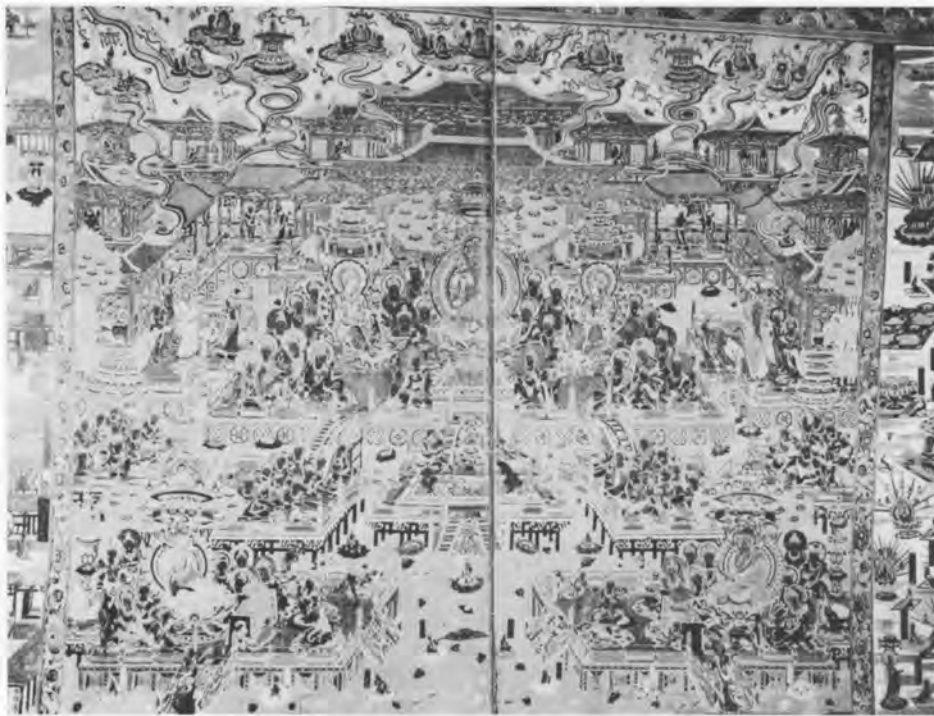
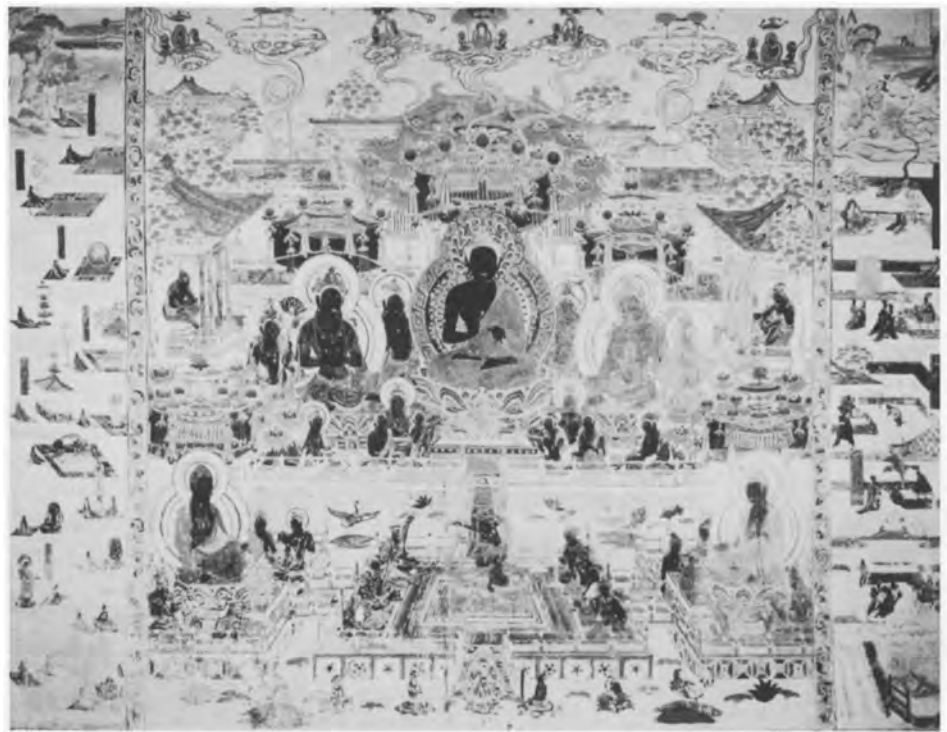


Fig. 6. *Amitāyus' Pure Land*. Dated to 776. Dunhuang, Gansu, Cave 148, south side of east wall. Mural. From: *Chūgoku sekkutsu* series, *Tonkō Bakkōkutsu* vol. (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1982), vol. 4, pl. 39.

and number them from the bottom to the top tier and from right to left (see drawings, *Figs. 1B and 2A*).

The two reliefs show several distinctively similar scenes in similar positions; they also comprise scenes of similar content in different positions, as well as scenes of dissimilar content. Despite the differences, there are enough sim-

ilarities to suggest that they represent essentially the same subject matter and that one (presumably Stele 2) is derived from the other, with some variations. The reliefs appear to depict some kind of stories. In the first major study of Stele 1, Nagahiro Toshio proposed that it represents tales from the *jātakas* (stories of the Buddha's previous lives) and



Fig. 7. *Maitreya in Tuṣita and Ketumatī*. Dated to 776. Dunhuang, Gansu, Cave 148, south wall. Mural. From: *Dunhuang bihua*, (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1959), pl. 163.



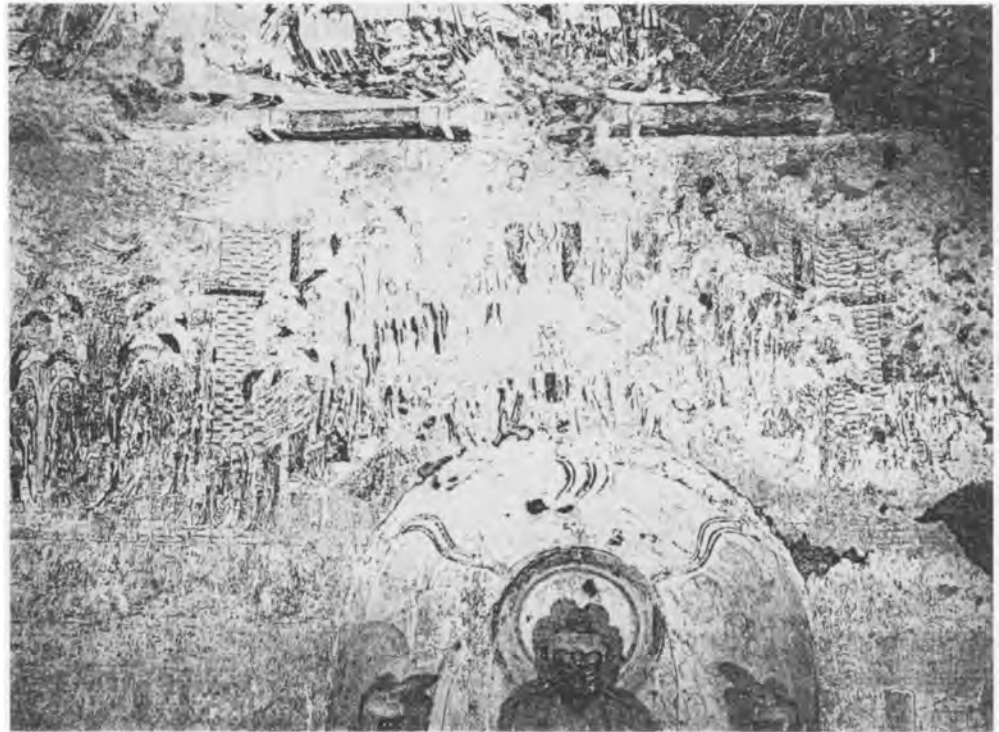
Fig. 8. *Bodhisattva with attendants*. Dated to 548. Recovered from Wanfosi site, Chengdu, Sichuan. Red sandstone; h. 44 cm, w. 37 cm, d. 15.5 cm. Sichuan Provincial Museum. From: *Zhongguo meishu quanji* series, *Wei Jin Nanbeichao diaosu* vol. (Beijing: Renmin meishu chubanshe, 1988), pl. 58.

avadānas (parables) explicating the Buddhist concept of the six *pāramitās* (“perfections”).²⁵ Two collections of such Buddhist moralistic tales were translated into Chinese in the south in the third century and thus were available as textual sources: the *Liudu ji jing* (*Collection of Stories of the Six Pāramitās*), translated by Kang Senghui (d. 280), and the *Pusa benyuan jing* (*Stories of Bodhisattvas’ Vows*), translated by Zhiqian (act. 223–253).²⁶

Lacking any supporting epigraphic evidence or any similar representations elsewhere, it proves almost impossible to determine the exact narrative content. For instance, there are five stories in the *Liudu ji jing* relating to events at sea. For the sailboat scene Nagahiro suggested “A bodhisattva sacrificing his life to save merchants at sea,”²⁷ but other scholars conjectured that it might represent Avalokiteśvara saving people from shipwreck.²⁸ These widely disparate hypotheses indicate the problems of piecemeal identification. Interpreting the whole iconographic program as a single unit may yield less tenuous results. Rather than following previous attempts to link individual scenes to text-based stories such as *jātakas* and *avadānas*, I will divide the scenes into two major groups: mundane and religious.

Beginning with the first group, at top right of Stele 1, a sailing ship carries three persons (Fig. 1B). Nearby, three figures are swimming, suggesting shipwreck or danger at sea. At the shore below is a kneeling figure, with a flying *apsaras* or bodhisattva to the left. A similar scene is depicted at top right of Stele 2, with the character *shui* (“water”)

Fig. 9. *Amitābha's Pure Land*. Western Wei dynasty (535–557). Maijishan, Gansu, Cave 127, above a Buddha's niche. Mural. From: *Chūgoku sekkutsu* series, *Bakusekizan sekkutsu* vol. (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1987), pl. 161.



inscribed in the center (Fig. 2B.10). In the bottom left of both reliefs, a seated figure is seen praying inside a house; three half-naked, demon-like figures surround the house, making threatening gestures as if they were about to attack it (Fig. 1B.3, Fig. 2B.6). The agile figures look menacing,

suggesting that they may be troublemakers or demons, often encountered in Buddhist tales. The protagonists in both the sailboat and house scenes appear to be praying to deities for protection. A third scene belonging to this group is depicted in the center of Stele 1, where a figure



Fig. 10. *Amitābha's Pure Land*. Northern Qi dynasty (550–577). Xiangtangshan cave-temple, Henan. Stone; h. 158 cm, w. 305 cm. Courtesy of the Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., acc. no. 21.2.



Fig. 11. *The bodhisattva's prophecy*. Sui dynasty (581–618). Dunhuang, Gansu, Cave 423. Ceiling mural. From: *Chūgoku sekkutsu series, Tōkō Bakkōkutsu* vol. (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1980), vol. 2, pl. 34.

seizes a kneeling person by the hair, as if about to administer punishment (Fig. 1B.5).²⁹ These dramatic scenes clearly suggest the adversities encountered in this world: shipwreck, robbery, or punishment. Several scenes on both steles simply show a couple of figures conversing or running (Figs. 1B.2, 1B.6, 2B.1, 2B.3–2B.5).

The second group shows activities or symbols associated with Buddhist worship. The key scene on Stele 1, at middle right, shows six figures seated in a semicircle (Fig. 1B.4). They wear haloes and sit on lotuses. Before them, a couple kneels. Between the adorants and the haloed figures stand a low table, trays, a box, and bowls. Since the six figures are not wearing *dhoti* and scarves but Chinese robes, they cannot be bodhisattvas. But their haloes and lotus pedestals indicate they are spiritual entities. Based on the symbolism of the number six, Nagahiro suggested that they represent the six *pāramitās*—the six virtues or perfections that must be practiced by anyone aspiring to become a Buddha, namely, charity (*dāna*), morality (*śīla*), patience (*kṣāntī*), vigor (*vīrya*), meditation (*dhyāna*), and wisdom (*prajñā*).

The six *pāramitās* are a key concept in the bodhisattva doctrine of early Mahāyāna Buddhism, particularly prominent in Prajñāpāramitā (“Perfection of Wisdom”) thought. According to this school of thought, following the bodhisattva path by practicing the six *pāramitās* (later developed

into ten *bhūmi*, or stages), is the only way to Enlightenment. Known in China as Banruoxue, Prajñāpāramitā was the first major school of Chinese Buddhist philosophy, flourishing between the third and fifth centuries. It was studied by most of the well-known masters, including Daoan (312–385) and his disciple Huiyuan (334–416). With the arrival of the Kuchean monk Kumārajīva (ca. 343–413) at Chang’an in 401, Prajñāpāramitā teaching, now systematized as the Mādhyamika school, reached a peak in the early fifth century.³⁰

Nagahiro’s suggestion that Stele 1 relates to the *pāramitā* concept is insightful, because it interprets the relief in the proto-Mahāyāna context. I cannot, however, accept his argument linking the reliefs to *jātaka* and *avadāna* tales, which belong to the visual vocabulary of early Buddhism. Instead, I shall attempt to interpret them as visual conceptions of the new Mahāyāna world view.

One specific motif, hitherto unidentified, can support Nagahiro’s general interpretation. At the lower right Stele 1 portrays a bodhisattva sitting on a wicker stool, with his proper right leg crossing over the left leg; a lay figure kneels in front of him (Fig. 1B.1). The cross-legged, contemplating bodhisattva is frequently represented in both India and China, but the adorant makes this scene distinctive. A similar motif appears on Stele 2, but here the iconography is less distinct (Fig. 2B.2).³¹ The same motif occurs in a number of Dunhuang murals of the Sui dynasty (581–619; Fig. 11).³² Dunhuang scholars have long identified this motif as *pusa shouji*, or “the bodhisattva’s prophecy” (S: *vyākaraṇa*), referring to an aspirant taking the bodhisattva vow (S: *praṇidhāna*) in front of a bodhisattva. The bodhisattva in turn promises the aspirant’s future Enlightenment. The motif therefore portrays the Mahāyāna ritual of taking the bodhisattva vow, a significant moment when the aspirant is fully concentrated on Enlightenment, a state of mind called *bodhicitta*.³³ The resolve to gain Enlightenment initiates the aspirant’s bodhisattva career of practicing the *pāramitās*.

Visually, the layman figure kneeling in front of a bodhisattva parallels the famous Dīpaṅkara motif, which shows Sumedha prostrating himself before Dīpaṅkara Buddha (Fig. 12). It is a popular theme in Gandhāran art and appears also in early Chinese Buddhist art. The historical Buddha, in a previous incarnation as the young brahmin Sumedha, encountered for the first time the Buddha of his aeon, Dīpaṅkara. He begged flowers from a young woman and waited for Dīpaṅkara to pass by, then threw the flowers over the Buddha’s head and prostrated himself before the Buddha, spreading his hair on the ground for the Buddha to walk upon. It was to Dīpaṅkara that the future Gautama Buddha first made his vow to win full Enlightenment, and Dīpaṅkara prophesied the fulfillment of this vow.³⁴

The Dīpaṅkara *jātaka* emphasizes Sumedha’s adoration of the Buddha, his resolve to gain Enlightenment, and the

Fig. 12. *Dīpaṃkara Buddha's prophecy*. Ca. late 1st–2nd century. One of 13 relief panels on circular base of Sikri Stūpa, Gandhāra. Gray schist; h. 33 cm, w. 35 cm. Lahore Museum. From: Sir John Marshall, *The Buddhist Art of Gandhara* (Cambridge: Published for the Department of Archaeology in Pakistan at the University Press, 1960), fig. 73.



prophecy of Buddhahood. That story, however, also incorporates the early concept that only one Buddha exists in each *kalpa* (“aeon”) and that therefore only a few beings are destined to become Buddhas. In the Mahāyāna teaching, however, the vow and the promise are made available to all beings and at all times. The similarity between the old Dīpaṃkara motif and the new bodhisattva’s prophecy motif—each depicting a prostrate figure taking a vow in front of a Buddha or a bodhisattva who in turn prophecies the attainment of this vow—suggests that the newer motif is an adaptation of the older one.³⁵ The parallel stories denote a conceptual affinity, but the new Mahāyāna doctrine necessitated a change in the identity of the protagonists.

In the Mahāyāna tradition *pāramitā* also means “gone to the beyond,” which invests the term with the meaning of spiritual progress.³⁶ The bridge, most clearly shown on Stele 2, both demarcates and connects the mundane and supernal worlds. It thus becomes the principal symbol of *yāna* in Mahāyāna thought, the “vehicle” that ferries religious aspirants to the celestial shore. Edward Conze wrote:

One speaks of a “vehicle” because the Buddhist doctrine, or Dharma..., is conceived as a raft, or a ship, which carries us across the ocean of this world of suffering to a “Beyond,” to salvation, to Nirvana.³⁷

Since the upper halves of Steles 1 and 2 represent a place of spiritual purity and bliss, then the lower halves should be read as the mundane world, full of dangers and temptations but at the same time the locus of a program of religious practice and worship leading to rebirth in the Pure Land depicted above.

The division between a spiritual realm above and the temporal world below also corresponds to the distinction between pure and impure lands in Buddhist cosmology.³⁸ The cloud motif seen on Stele 1 (above scene 1.7), adapted from traditional Chinese artistic symbolism, is another device to separate sacred from earthly space. (In Eastern Zhou [771–256 BCE] and Han art the cloud scroll frequently accompanies Immortals and fantastic beasts, or connotes the Daoist concept of *qi*, the breath force.) The impure land is called *sahā* (*sahāloka*, *sahālokadhātu*; C: *suopo shijie*). In early Buddhism *sahā* refers to the universe of persons subject to transmigration. In the Mahāyāna scheme *sahā* becomes the “land of transformation” (C: *huatu*), the land where the Buddha dwells and in which all beings are transformed. Each Buddha (or an advanced bodhisattva) in the Mahāyāna pantheon has his own Buddha field (*buddhakṣetra*; C: *fotu*), a cosmos in which he exerts spiritual influence.

On Stele 2, at top center of the lower half, a Buddha is preaching to an audience arranged in two symmetrical



Fig. 13. *White Path Between Two Rivers* (*Niga byakudō*). 2nd half of 14th century. Japan. Color and cut gold on silk; h. 164.5 cm, w. 54.6 cm. Courtesy of the Seattle Art Museum, Margaret E. Fuller Purchase Fund, acc. no. 56.187.

rows (Fig. 2B.11). The same subject may appear at the damaged top left corner of Stele 1 (Fig. 1B.8), which also shows figures seated in a row on a floor mat. Stele 2 further shows a person making an offering to a Buddha (Fig. 2B.8) and at upper left an Aśoka-type *stūpa* (“relic mound”),

with several tall spires surmounting a waisted diamond throne, symbolic of the sacred body of the Buddha (Fig. 2B.12). The Buddha preaching and the *stūpa* allude to the transformative power of the Buddha to purify this land and to prepare people for rebirth.

The concept of *sahāloka* thus explains why the secular landscape comprises both scenes of Buddhist virtue and scenes of evil and adversity. Later Japanese Pure Land paintings (Fig. 13), although not directly related, depict similar themes, such as *The White Path Between Two Rivers*. In this narrative a man hurries along a perilously narrow white path between a river of water and a river of flame, pursued by human and animal predators. His only hope is to go forward along the difficult, solitary path until he reaches the western shore—the Pure Land.³⁹ Religious aspirants seek to purify themselves in the “land of transformation” in order to achieve Enlightenment. But Mahāyāna Buddhists also believed in rebirth in the Pure Land as an ultimate religious goal.

In the year 402 Huiyuan led his community of 123 Buddhist intellectuals of the White Lotus Society on Mt. Lu to pray before an icon of Amitābha Buddha for rebirth in the Western Pure Land. Traditionally, Huiyuan is considered the founder of Pure Land Buddhism in China. In this early phase of Pure Land faith Huiyuan’s devotion was probably based on the *Pratyupannasamādhi Sūtra* (C: *Banzhou sanwei jing*) rather than the three Pure Land texts later established as standard.⁴⁰ Translated by Lokakṣema in the second century, the text teaches that in meditation (at the level of *dhyāna* or *samādhi*) one can see the Buddhas of the Ten Directions, and that if one’s heart is focused on Amitābha one will be reborn in Sukhāvātī, the Western Pure Land presided over by Amitābha. Most early Chinese Buddhist monks were known to practice *dhyāna*, or meditation, including Huiyuan’s teacher Daoan. Whereas Daoan meditated on Maitreya, Huiyuan chose Amitābha as his object of meditation.

The Indian master Nāgārjuna (ca. 150–250) distinguished two paths to the dharma, one difficult, the other easy.⁴¹ The difficult way entailed religious practice and discipline to achieve progressive spiritual advancement, the easy way was to chant the Buddha-name (*buddhānusmṛti*), in particular that of Amitābha, in a spirit of complete reverence. Huiyuan and his followers sought to attain Sukhāvātī through their own religious practice and discipline. That strenuous path differs profoundly from reliance on the grace of Amitābha, the means advocated in the teachings of Tanluan (476–542), who established the Pure Land sect as a popular devotional faith and was honored as the sect’s first patriarch. In later practice Pure Land Buddhism emphasized the three well-known Pure Land texts (see p. 62) rather than the *Pratyupannasamādhi Sūtra*.

The makers of the two Wanfosi steles, by prominently depicting the “land of transformation” and not merely the

Pure Land alone, show their awareness of the two disparate paths. Predating most Pure Land imagery, these two early Pure Land steles demonstrate that the beginnings of Pure Land imagery, which originally included the “land of transformation,” was a theme rooted in an early Chinese understanding of Mahāyāna Buddhist doctrine. Furthermore, the Mahāyāna world-view may be associated with the Daoan-Huiyuan lineage, which embraced Prajñāpāramitā teaching, the bodhisattva doctrine, devotional Buddhism, and *dhyāna* practice. I shall attempt to advance this hypothesis through contextual investigation of the religious milieu of the period and of Sichuan in particular.

INFLUENCE OF THE DAOAN-HUIYUAN LINEAGE IN SICHUAN

Chengdu was an ancient cultural, political, and commercial city, as well as a major crossroad of traffic between east and west. Buddhism reached Sichuan as early as the Eastern Han dynasty, and some of China’s earliest Buddha images—from the second and third centuries CE—are found in this region.⁴² Literary evidence also indicates that, by the fourth century, Sichuan was already a flourishing Buddhist center and a staging area for missionary work, both from abroad and from within China itself.⁴³

Huijiao’s (497–554) *Gaoseng zhuan* (*Biographies of Eminent Monks*) records some twenty eminent monks, both foreign and Chinese, who had associations with Sichuan or specifically Chengdu between the fourth and the mid-sixth century.⁴⁴ Their biographies tell that foreign missionaries came from Kashmir and Khotan via Gansu. They also report frequent monastic travel between Sichuan and Chang’an, and between Sichuan and Jingzhou (present-day Hubei-Hunan) in central China. Several eminent monks were natives of Sichuan, testifying to the strength of monasteries in recruiting and training locals.

In the spread of Buddhism from India to China and within China itself, missionary work was the major agent. Monks from India and from the kingdoms along the Central Asian trade routes created major centers of Buddhism in towns such as Dunhuang, Chang’an, Luoyang, and Ye (capital of Northern Qi in present-day southern Hebei). Converted Chinese, in turn, carried on the work of scholarship and proselytizing. Political and military instability abetted religious zeal in spreading the faith. In north China between the fourth and late sixth century kingdoms rose and fell in rapid succession, and often the fall of a kingdom impelled its court-sponsored Buddhist community to flee. Many chose to go south, where the political situation was more stable. The advanced teachings of Buddhism, naturalized and developed in northern and central China, were thus introduced to the south and southwest.

Several instances of exodus and dispersal of Buddhist communities occurred in the fourth and fifth centuries: (1) the Buddhist center at Ye in Hebei, established by Fotudeng and his follower Daoan, disintegrated on the collapse of the Later Zhao kingdom in 351; (2) the Buddhist community at Xiangyang (Hubei), led by Daoan, was dispersed when the Eastern Jin and Former Qin armies fought there about 379; and (3) the Buddhist translation bureau at the Later Qin court at Chang’an, distinguished by the leadership of Daoan and Kumārajīva, dissipated when Daxia (407–431) sacked Chang’an in 418.

Daoan, who was a leading figure in all three of the above-named Buddhist centers, was also far-sighted in ensuring the survival of Buddhism by sending his followers to spread the religion in outlying regions.⁴⁵ Three followers of the Daoan-Huiyuan lineage carried out sustained missionary activities in Sichuan, and were doubtless instrumental in defining the character of Buddhism in that region.

The first missionary was Fahe. Amid the chaos of the fall of Ye, Daoan led some four hundred followers south of the Yellow River. From Xiangyang, where he stayed from 365 to 379, he dispersed many disciples to different parts of the country to preach the Buddhist faith. He sent Fahe to Chengdu, mentioning that the scenic landscape there would enhance the cultivation of the mind. Arriving at Chengdu, Fahe soon won a large audience among the educated in the region. He joined Daoan again at Chang’an, where the latter presided over the Buddhist translation bureau from 379 onward.⁴⁶

The second missionary was Huichi, the younger brother of Huiyuan. Both brothers were members of the Buddhist community at Xiangyang and students of Daoan during the third quarter of the fourth century. Huiyuan became Daoan’s most brilliant disciple in Prajñāpāramitā teaching. When Xiangyang dispersed in about 379, the two brothers and their followers went south, eventually settling on Mt. Lu in Jiangxi. There, according to tradition, Huiyuan founded a famous White Lotus Society, devoted to the worship of Amitābha. Their learning earned the two brothers the respect of the southern court and aristocracy. In 399 Huichi left for missionary work in Sichuan, having heard that Sichuan was a land of prosperity and because he wanted to visit Mt. Emei. Mt. Emei was by then an important Daoist sacred site, home of Immortals; it was later appropriated as a Buddhist sacred mountain as well. Huichi resided and taught at Longyuansi, attracting a large group of followers. He also befriended the governor of Yizhou (present-day Sichuan) and high-ranking priests from the region. Huichi stayed in Sichuan until his death in 412.⁴⁷

The third missionary to Sichuan was Daowang, a disciple of Huiyuan, who stayed there until his death in 465. Northwest of Chengdu he established a monastery called Qihuansi (the Wanfosi site is also west of the city). Like

others before him, he gained the respect and support of local dignitaries and was a significant figure in local religious affairs. Daowang was also a well-known *dhyāna* master.⁴⁸

The biographies of these three monks confirm that Buddhist monasteries in the region received support from the educated local elites and officials. Furthermore, it is clear that some of the most influential Buddhist figures in the region of Chengdu from the mid-fourth to the mid-fifth century were disciples of the Daoan-Huiyuan lineage. This lineage emphasized Prajñāpāramitā thought, *dhyāna* practice, devotional Buddhism and, in the case of Huiyuan, mountain-worship. All of these elements are reflected in the Wanfosi reliefs. Prajñāpāramitā thought provides the religious program toward enlightenment: the naturalistic landscape denotes the “land of transformation,” while the Pure Land scene portrays the attainment of rebirth. These depictions might have served as visual aids for the devotee’s devotional and meditation practice.

Daoan and Huiyuan both advocated devotional Buddhism. It is well known that Daoan prayed before an image of Maitreya for rebirth in Tuṣita heaven, and Huiyuan before an icon of Amitābha for rebirth in Sukhāvātī. The four Sichuan steles are therefore iconographically significant, since Steles 1 and 2 portray the Western Pure Land of Amitābha/Amitāyus, Stele 3 depicts Maitreya in Tuṣita and Ketumatī, and Stele 4 offers Amitāyus and Maitreya jointly for reverence. Among them, the four steles indicate the devotional foci in Sichuan during this early period, and attest the influence of Daoan’s and Huiyuan’s teaching and practice. From the time of Daoan and Huiyuan and continuing into the Tang period, the relative merits of Maitreya’s Tuṣita heaven and Amitābha/Amitāyus’ Sukhāvātī as places of rebirth were a subject of lively clerical debate. In order to compete with the Amitābha cult, Maitreya’s Tuṣita heaven and Ketumatī were increasingly interpreted as Pure Lands, even though early Buddhist teachings located both in the lowest, impure realm (Kāmadhātu) of the cosmos (see n. 3). In Tang-period representations at Dunhuang Tuṣita and Sukhāvātī are both popular and evidently equal in status.

LANDSCAPE AND FIGURAL STYLES AND THE SICHUAN HERITAGE

The conception of the *sahā* world as a mountainscape may be associated with the burgeoning mountain cult in Chinese Buddhism. Man’s close connection with nature and, more particularly, deep reverence for mountains, are deeply rooted in Chinese culture. Munakata Kiyohiko wrote:

People who practiced religious Daoism, which developed from the second century AD onward, associated the great mountains with the

theological concept of the realms of the immortals. This association became a profound source of inspiration for poets and artists. More secular, Confucian scholars, in contrast, regarded the mountains as paradigms of world order. Eremitism in China, in both the Daoistic (i.e., seeking spiritual enlightenment or freedom of mind) and the Confucian (taking refuge from unacceptable social circumstance) senses, has been inextricably associated with both the awesome and the benign forces of the mountains.⁴⁹

Buddhism’s interactions with this indigenous tradition gave rise to a new religious form that has been called “Landscape Buddhism.” Whereas the Daoists associated mountain-worship with the Immortality cult, and the Confucianists with statecraft, the Buddhists made mountains into the abodes of their various deities, and thereby sacred.⁵⁰ Buddhists also practiced *dhyāna* (“meditation”) in seclusion in the mountains to cultivate psychic and magical powers.

In China the affiliation of spirituality with the natural world accompanied an awakening interest in natural phenomena and their beauty, giving rise to one of the most important themes in Chinese arts: landscape. The period from the Han through the Northern and Southern Dynasties has generally been recognized as a formative phase of this tradition, a period when aesthetic, poetic, and emotional responses to nature were articulated in art and literary criticism, in metaphysics, and in representational arts.⁵¹ During the Northern and Southern Dynasties as turmoil in the north impelled the Chinese elites southward, the lush, scenic landscape and temperate climate of the south further enhanced an “aesthetically conscious appreciation of nature,” contributing to the flowering of landscape arts especially in the south.

The religious, literary, aesthetic, and representational aspects of the landscape tradition all came to a head in the early part of the fifth century. Poets such as Xie Lingyun (385–433) and Tao Qian (365–427) expressed an aesthetic and philosophic view of human life deeply intertwined with nature. Gu Kaizhi (ca. 345–ca. 406), the first well-known master of Chinese painting, is said to have written *Hua Yuntaishan ji* (*On Painting the Cloud Terrace Mountain*), an essay on how he would or did depict the Daoist sacred mountain as an ideal landscape.⁵² Dai Kui (d. 395), the famous sculptor and painter of Buddhist subjects, and his son Dai Bo are both said to have excelled in painting landscapes.⁵³ About the same time, Huiyuan is said to have established the White Lotus Society on Mt. Lu, and his fellow Buddhist Zong Bing (375–443) wrote the first major treatise on landscape painting, *Hua shanshui xu* (*Preface to Painting Landscape*).⁵⁴

The most remarkable characteristic of the Wanfosi reliefs is their sensitive rendering of landscape elements. As visual representations of Buddhist doctrine, their paramount function was religious, but that did not pre-



Fig. 14. *Deer Jātaka* (detail). Northern Wei dynasty, 1st half of 5th century. Dunhuang, Gansu, Cave 257. Mural. From: *Chūgoku sekkutsu* series, *Tonkō Bakkōkutsu* vol. (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1980), vol. 1, pl. 44.

clude expression of an artistic consciousness. Probably executed by skilled craftsmen under the direction of Buddhist doctrinal specialists, the reliefs cannot be ascribed to any known artist. Scholars studying representational arts of this period have often noted that the advanced aesthetic theories of the time are of known or ascribable authorship, whereas the extant art works cannot be linked to these theoreticians or to works mentioned by them.⁵⁵ And yet, did those literary and aesthetic theories not draw their inspiration from the religious experiences and metaphysics of both Daoism and Buddhism? Would the landscape paintings of famed artists be utterly divorced from those of their fellows, who, commissioned to express religious ideas in visual form, would have brought all their artistic skills to bear on the task? Should all representational innovations be automatically attributed to recognized masters and none to anonymous artisans? In this era only a small number of individual artists, mostly from literate backgrounds, and only in sophisticated cultural centers such as Nanjing, were beginning to gain social recognition; the majority who catered to the demands of ritual and religious art were considered artisans, relatively low in social status, and since their identities added nothing to the value of their works, the works remained anonymous. The aesthetic merit and inventiveness of these Sichuan carvings warrant reconsideration of the role of unknown artisans. Moreover, lacking surviving authentic works of known artists, the Wanfosi reliefs offer rare examples of this nascent landscape art.

On Stele 1, each large individual scene is set in a landscape, a pocket of space surrounded by trees and hills. Within each unit, recession in space is suggested. For example, trees and wooded hills fill the continuous shore line that encloses the sailboat scene, making for a naturalistic surrounding. The body of water is a rough diamond shape, the viewpoint is an oblique-angled bird's-eye perspective. Lower on the picture plane signi-

fies closer to the viewer. The scene of six haloed beings in a semicircle is similarly portrayed from a high viewpoint, with the two figures at lower right shown in three-quarter and side views. In the scene at lower left the house is again depicted from an angle; placing the three threatening figures at three of the house's four corners and surrounding the scene with trees creates a believable spatial setting. The artist was adept in capturing figures in motion, and their dramatic gestures further enliven the narratives. Other smaller scenes with only one or two figures are simply depicted on an arbitrary ground line.

The linear, rhythmic patterns used to render rolling hills and trees (palm trees and leafy trees typical of southern climate) flow together, creating an overall illusion of a single coherent landscape. But their primary role is as scene dividers, encasing "space-cells" where action takes place. In fifth-century *jātaka* murals from Dunhuang, hill forms (and sometimes trees) also separate the scenes of narratives, as in the *Deer Jātaka* of Cave 257 (Fig. 14). As already noted by Soper and Sullivan, the formal, schematic treatment of landscape elements in early Dunhuang narratives probably reflects West Asian and Indian influences.⁵⁶ Their decorative qualities, inverted scale (humans, animals, and trees being larger than hills), and total flatness contrast sharply with the more realistic spatial treatment and fluid pictorial style of the Wanfosi reliefs.

The artistic patrimony of the Wanfosi reliefs comes from the Han art of Sichuan, especially pictorial tomb tiles rendered in a style known for naturalism and lyricism, for bold explorations of space, movement, and landscape motifs.⁵⁷ Michael Sullivan wrote:

The Szechwan [Sichuan] reliefs...bring us face to face with a down-to-earth realism that has no parallel elsewhere. Their makers were primarily concerned with the literal, accurate description of an industrial process, or of the activities of farmers and peasants, or of the environment in which they lived and worked. In attempting to set these down they encountered certain specific problems in the delineation of three-dimensional space, of trees, birds, and plants,

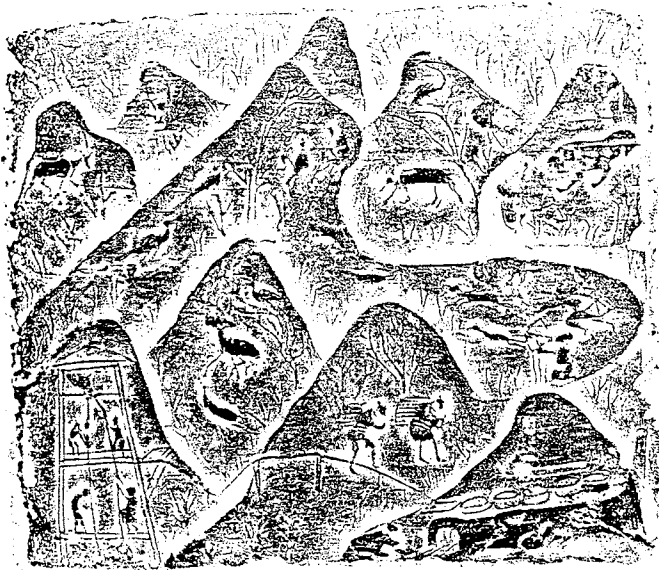


Fig. 15. Salt mine, workshops, hunters. Eastern Han dynasty (25–220). Chengdu, Sichuan. Ceramic tile; h. 40.8 cm, w. 46.7 cm. Chongqing Municipal Museum. From: *Zhongguo meishu quanji* series, *Han hua xiangshi huaxiangzhuan* vol. (Beijing: Renmin meishu chubanshe, 1988), pl. 239.

which had to be solved. Their tentative efforts to solve these problems constitute the first significant advance toward true landscape painting in China.⁵⁸

In a pottery tile depicting a salt mine and laborers in the foreground as well as hunters and animals in the forest in the background, the various elements are united in a coherent spatial composition by the simple silhouettes of hills overlapping one another (Fig. 15). Another tile shows a boatman paddling amidst lotuses and waterbirds, with a row of low wooded hills in the distance (Fig. 16). Sullivan notes that “the artist has here successfully managed a *continuous* recession from the immediate foreground to the horizon,” and thus has presented a “convincing representation of three-dimensional space.”⁵⁹

The entire relief on Stele 1 is much larger than any pictorial tile, and encompasses multiple scenes. Close inspection reveals that hill ranges sometimes end abruptly at the edge of the next scene, as, for example, to the left of the scene with the six haloed figures. This awkward feature indicates that the artist of Stele 1 adapted, synthesized, and elaborated earlier pictorial conventions in order to create an ambitiously complex composition,

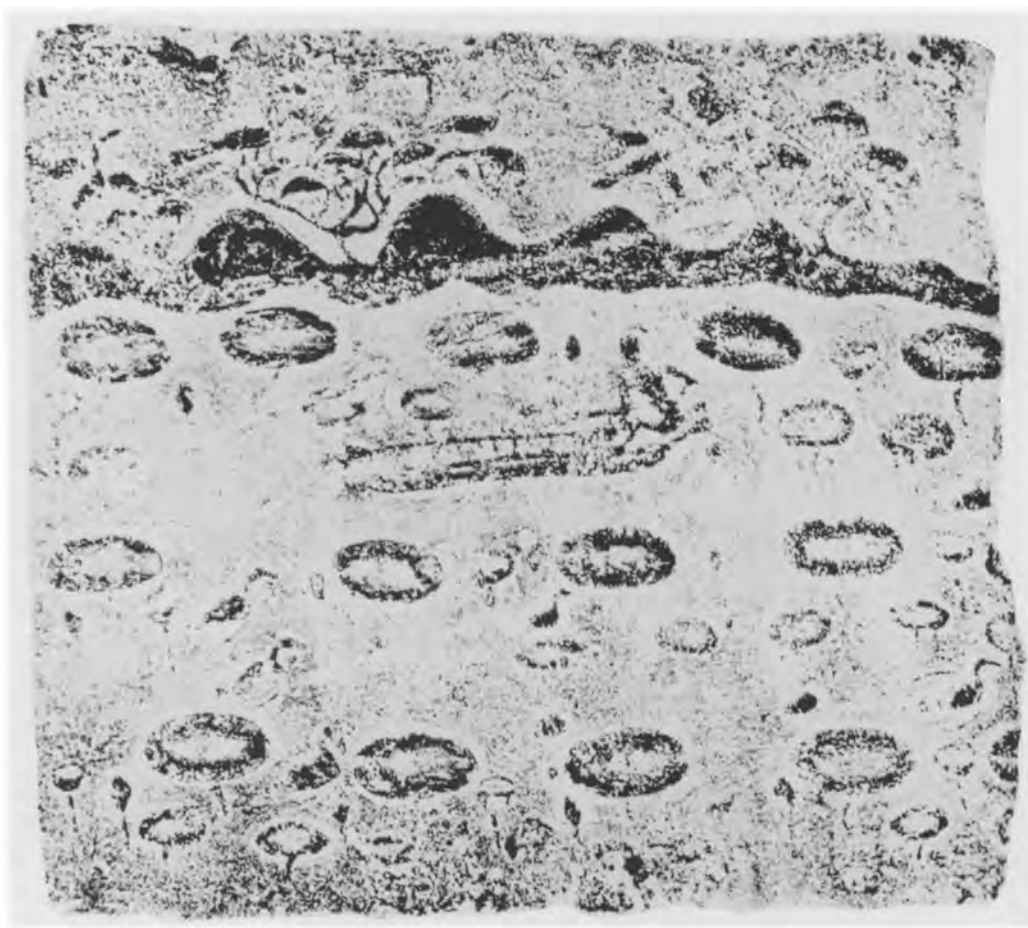


Fig. 16. Boatman in a lotus pond. Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE). Deyang, Sichuan. Ceramic tile. From: Michael Sullivan, *The Birth of Landscape Painting in China* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Pr., 1962), pl. 93.

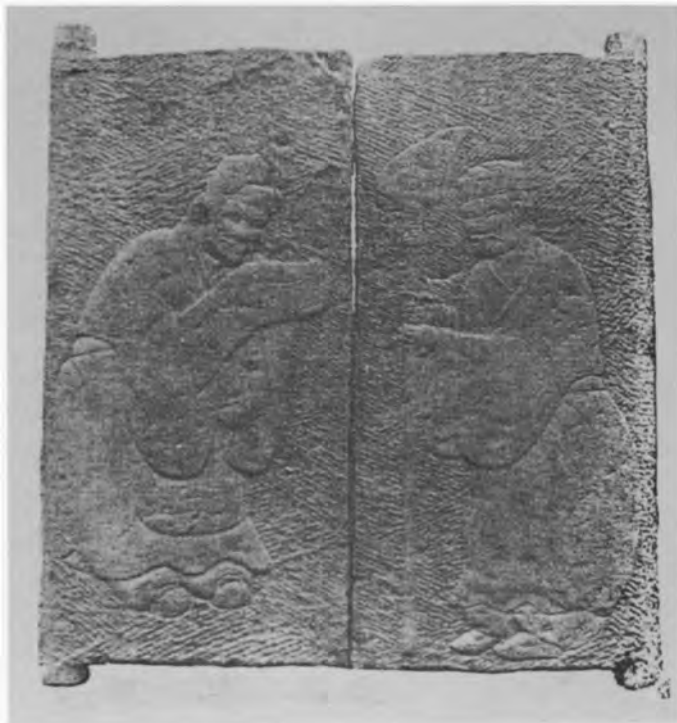


Fig. 17. Two relief figures carved on doors of a Jin-dynasty tomb. Dated to 274. Excavated at Yangzishan, Chengdu, Sichuan. Stone; tomb doors h. 165 cm, w. 83 cm, d. 12 cm each. From: *Wenwu cankao zhiliao*, 1955:7, pl. 1.

but could not quite master the linking of the individual space cells into a single coherent landscape (see further discussion below).

The carving of Stele 4 further demonstrates the Sichuan steles' indebtedness to existing local artistic traditions. Its two principal icons are rendered in raised low relief (Figs. 4, 4A). Their heads, with broad faces and gentle features, are subtly modelled. Except for the hands, the figures are almost entirely two-dimensional, with linearly defined drapery folds flaring out into "fish-tail" pleats at the hemlines. Both the conception of form and the technique of carving contrast drastically with the Indian mode and may be attributed to the direct influence of a native, local style. A close link between the indigenous carving tradition and the Mao xian images may be found in a pair of figures carved on the doors of a Jin-dynasty (265–420) tomb excavated at Chengdu (Fig. 17).⁶⁰ The two standing figures wear hats and large robes with loose sleeves; one holds a staff and the other a tablet, and they incline slightly toward the center in respectful attitudes. Probably they represent officials or guards of the tomb. They are carved in low relief, on a ground of zigzagging parallel grooves (a typical Han stone-carving manner). Even, fine lines define the contours of their features and costumes; their internal modelling consists of broad, flat planes and smooth curves. Although the relief projects only two centimeters above

the ground, the modelling is subtle enough to impart a sense of volume, especially in slightly protruding areas, such as cheeks and noses. In carving technique, soft modelling, and two-dimensional, linear conception of form, these figures are comparable to the two Mao xian Buddha images.⁶¹

BREAKTHROUGH IN THE DEPICTION OF ILLUSORY SPACE

The spatial disjuncture seen in Stele 1 is resolved in Stele 2. Here a more rational pictorial space is accomplished by virtue of consistency and continuity in the portrayal of landscape elements and by the invention of a convergent perspective, with symmetrical sets of orthogonal lines converging on a series of points along an imaginary central axis. These innovations would greatly abet the later development of panoramic Pure Land scenes and landscape paintings.

Unlike the division into space-cells in Stele 1, the landscape space in the lower half of Stele 2 is unified by overlapping its constituent elements, a method first explored in Han tomb tiles such as the landscape and salt-mine scene (see Fig. 15). In the latter, however, the mountains are simple triangular silhouettes, whereas in Stele 2 the mountains and valleys are internally modelled so that each consists of a succession of planes that create the appearance of volumetric depth. Depicted from a bird's-eye viewpoint, the structured mountains with winding paths draw one's gaze upward along the relief and into the pictorial distance, to focus on the Buddha's assembly just below the bridge leading to the Pure Land. A row of low hills at the top edge represents the horizon, replacing the magical cloud scrolls of Stele 1. Whereas the maker(s) of Stele 1 conceived of the landscape elements as subordinate to the narratives, in Stele 2 the coherent depiction of illusory space manifests an advancing appreciation and mastery of naturalism. And yet this rational approach to representation does not diminish the relief's religious symbolism, since the viewer's gaze is directed to concentrate on the Buddha's assembly. The centrality of this iconic group is reinforced by its alignment on axis with Amitābha in the Pure Land scene above. Furthermore, the mountain form is also iconic. As in Stele 1, the mountains are repeatedly rendered as a central peak flanked by two smaller hills, resembling a Buddhist triad and recalling the Chinese character *shan*.⁶²

The traditional Chinese method of depicting pictorial space employs the parallel orthogonal perspective. Exemplified by another Han tomb tile from Sichuan, which represents a feast, this perspective is articulated through the orthogonal lines of rectangular objects such as floor mats and tables (Fig. 18). The base lines of these objects are presumably aligned with the picture base, and



Fig. 18. *Feasting and entertainment scene*. Eastern Han dynasty (25–220). Chengdu, Sichuan. Ceramic tile; h. 43.5 cm, w. 48 cm. Sichuan Provincial Museum. From: *Zhongguo meishu quanji series, Han huaxiangshi huaxiang-zhuan* vol. (Beijing: Renmin meishu chubanshe, 1988), pl. 241.

the parallel inclination of their sides suggests an upward-tilted ground plane, which in turn signifies spatial recession—the extension of the scene into space beyond the picture plane. As the orthogonals slant upward, figures in the distance are depicted above those in the foreground. This manner of disposing formal elements in a believable space is widespread in Han pictorial art, from Sichuan to artistic centers in Henan and Shandong, such as the Nanyang and Yi’nan tombs.

The Han parallel orthogonal perspective also appears in the large scenes of Stele 1 discussed above, with and without the aid of orthogonal lines. In the upper scene the orthogonals of the bridge lead away from the center to the upper right, confirming that the artist followed the pictorial conventions established in Han art. In Stele 2, however, this Han perspectival convention has undergone a revolutionary change. In the upper half, the scene of Sukhāvati, instead of one set of orthogonals receding into the distance in only one direction, two sets of orthogonal lines proceed from the sides symmetrically, converging on the central axis at several points. The

intention is to focus the viewer’s eye and attention on the central icon, Amitābha Buddha presiding over the Western Pure Land. The bridges, the rows of trees, the listeners, and the palace architecture all reinforce this directed concentration, at the same time creating an illusion of a rational, three-dimensional space. The orthogonal lines so prominent as visual cues in the paradise scene are mostly absent from the landscape scene below, which is nevertheless organized according to the same multi-point convergent perspective.

This new perspective superficially resembles but is not fundamentally comparable to the linear perspective with a single vanishing point discovered in Renaissance Italy, which is based on a scientific understanding of the optics of a visual pyramid. The illusory space described in Stele 2 is only partly rational, as it comprises at least five vanishing points. Sichuan artists understood the new system not in the scientific sense but as a means of symbolizing order and serenity, that is, a superior world. Nonetheless, this is a brilliant first step toward naturalism and the mastery of pictorial space.

COMPARISON OF STELE 2 WITH OTHER PURE LAND DEPICTIONS

Among depictions of the Pure Land contemporary with Wanfo Stele 2, we know of two others that employ convergent perspective. One is a Western Wei (535–557) mural in Maijishan Cave 127 (Fig. 9).⁶³ It shows Amitābha's assembly in the center, with attendant figures in an inverted V formation. Behind each file of attendants and in parallel with them are palaces. Directly below the mural is the main icon of the cave-temple, presumably Amitābha; if so, then the mural depicts Sukhāvātī, Amitābha's abode and the promised land of rebirth for devotees. This Pure Land and the one in our steles offer similarly deep and similarly organized recessional space, exemplifying the close stylistic linkage brought about by frequent traffic between the Sichuan and Gansu regions.

The second example is a relief panel dating to the third quarter of the sixth century from the Xiangtangshan cave-temples and now in the Freer Gallery of Art (Fig. 10).⁶⁴ Earlier discussions of the origins of Pure Land imagery have focused primarily on this panel. It shows the Amitābha triad (Amitābha Buddha flanked in the foreground by his principal bodhisattvas Avalokiteśvara and Mahāsthāmaprāpta) and subsidiary figures afloat upon a lotus pond. Beings in the process of rebirth are shown emerging from lotus blossoms; some are still enclosed in the buds, the time of their emergence depending on the amount of good karma they accumulated in previous incarnations. Palace pavilions frame the scene, and in the upper part transformation Buddhas from other Buddha lands are coming to glorify Amitābha. In its organizational principle, the Xiangtangshan relief resembles Wanfo Stele 2. As Bachhofer observes:

The side lines of the pool in the center converge, and so do the side lines of the pavilions at either end. Such converging orthogonal lines not infrequently occur on steles from the beginning of the sixth century. They were at that time not the result of acute observation, but rather an attempt to obtain perfect balance and a hieratic symmetry by treating one half antithetically to the other. This was no longer the case with the relief from Nan Hsiang-t'ang [Southern Xiangtang]. There the device was used to produce a spatial effect. It was not consistently applied. The artist simply repeated the formula of the central pond when he drew the other two pools.⁶⁵

Bachhofer correctly noted that convergent perspective might be employed to either or both of two disparate ends: to create a hieratic symmetry and focus, and to suggest spatial recession. Other sixth-century Buddhist art works show the same double intention, sometimes only half successful, as in a Buddhist triad of the Southern Liang state, dated to 546 (Fig. 19). Incised in the mandorla above the principal deity is another Buddha triad, flanked (as in Fig. 9) by attendants in inverted V formation. The orthogonals of the floor mats converge on the central axis.



Fig. 19. *Buddha triad*. Dedicated by Monk Huiying, dated to 546. Southern Liang dynasty (502–557). Stone with gilt; h. 34.2 cm. Shanghai Museum. From: *Zhongguo meishu quanji series, Wei Jin Nanbeichao diaosu* vol. (Beijing: Renmin meishu chubanshe, 1988), pl. 57.

Mountain forms and ocean waves form an attempt at a natural setting, but the scene is utterly flat, with no trace of a suggestion of three-dimensional space.

Just as indigenous Chinese conventions influenced Buddhist art in China, so also Buddhist iconography influenced indigenous Chinese pictorial conventions. In his study of Han art, Wu Hung noted that the introduction of Buddhist icons into China may have inspired the Chinese to represent cult figures such as Xiwangmu (Queen Mother of the West) in frontal forms; previously Chinese artists had represented human figures primarily in profile.⁶⁶ The experiment with convergent orthogonal perspective in the sixth century may also have been influenced by the iconic mode of representation, characterized by frontality, centrality, and symmetry. The Han parallel orthogonal perspective was transformed when the principles of symmetry and balance were applied: two sets of orthogonals, symmetrically placed and angled, meet on the

central axis, where the main icons are presented frontally. This produces a pictorial space congruous with the ways in which icons are meant to be viewed. Since Pure Land images were associated with the practice of meditation and visualization, the converging orthogonals enhance this ritual practice by directing the viewer's gaze to the central icon.

Notwithstanding both the Xiangtangshan and the Wanfosi carvings' use of convergent perspective to accomplish spatial effects, there are fundamental differences between the two. The former augments centrality and convergent perspective with hieratic scale in order to lay maximum emphasis on the Amitābha triad, and thus on the deities' omnipotence. It also lacks the elaborate landscape scene below, which describes the dangers of the Realm of Desire and the path of spiritual progress toward rebirth in the Pure Land. These differences denote divergence in doctrinal emphasis and religious practice, even though both reliefs pertain to Pure Land beliefs. The absence, in the Xiangtangshan relief and in most later Pure Land depictions of the Amitābha figure, of any description of the spiritual program to be undertaken in this world, together with the relatively greater size of the Amitābha figure, gives credence to the hypothesis that these images portray a Pure Land attainable solely through faith in the grace of Amitābha. The carver of Wanfosi Stele 2, by showing the Buddha figures no larger than the human figures, was able to present a more rational three-dimensional space as well as to give due weight to the rigorous human effort necessary to merit rebirth in the Pure Land. Stele 2 also displays the lyrical, graphic idiom that distinguishes the sixth-century Sichuan style from that of Xiangtangshan in the north, which is derived from the rounded carving styles transmitted from India.

The Majjishan mural is closer to the Wanfosi relief in the scale of the figures and in its rather deep spatial recession. The elongated figures in flowing robes are also closer to the southern figural style. Withal, the mural is meant to complement the main icon of Amitābha below and, like the Xiangtangshan carving, does not depict the travail that one must endure in the *sahā* world before attaining rebirth.

Steles 1 and 2 share similar contents but represent pictorial space in drastically different manners. Stele 1 retains the older Han perspectival system, and its organization into space-cells seriously undercuts what may have been an attempt at a unified landscape setting. Stele 2 employs the newly discovered convergent perspective to achieve a more rational portrayal of space, an innovation that was also attempted elsewhere in China in the sixth century. Although not conclusive, such evidence argues that Stele 1 dates earlier than Stele 2, perhaps from the early sixth century or even the fifth century. The difference in content between the Wanfosi reliefs and Pure Land scenes in

other regions (Majjishan and Xiangtangshan) is also significant. The secular world depicted in Stele 1 and repeated in Stele 2, which includes a prescriptive program of spiritual effort for the aspirant, would suggest that earlier Pure Land imagery reflected an earlier, more philosophical understanding of Mahāyāna doctrine. As the more popular devotional faith gained currency during the sixth century, eschewing prescriptive spiritual effort in favor of total reliance on Amitābha's salvific power, the pictorial imagery likewise discarded scenes of this-worldly effort for description of the Pure Land and its omnipotent deity.

By the mid-sixth century the subject of the Western Pure Land had been represented in at least three major regions of China—Sichuan in the southwest, Gansu in the northwest, and Henan/Hebei in central China (the artistic center of Northern Qi, 550–577). The Sichuan-Gansu and Henan-Hebei regional traditions both contributed to subsequent developments of Pure Land imagery in the Tang. The Amitābha assembly, as represented at Xiangtangshan, developed an ever larger entourage of attendant figures. But it was the pictorial realism and rational space emphasized in the Wanfosi reliefs and the Majjishan mural that laid the foundation for the grand panorama of later Pure Land depictions.

The merging of different Buddhist styles from the two geographical centers may be discerned in the Tang Pure Land scene in Dunhuang Cave 320 (Fig. 5). In this mural are clearly combined the two types of configurations that had prevailed in the sixth century: from the Sichuan-Gansu region, a grand panorama employing symmetrical orthogonal perspective and creating a sense of pictorial realism, and from the Henan-Hebei region the larger-than-life Buddha's assembly as at Xiangtangshan. The mature Pure Land artistic tradition was therefore a fusion of western and central antecedents.

Wanfosi Stele 3 gives further evidence that Sichuan was a major center of Pure Land imagery. Maitreya's paradises are located in the Realm of Desire, which reinforces the interpretation that the continuous mountainscape on which they are superimposed in Stele 3 represents the *sahā* world. The whole scene is portrayed from a very high viewpoint, forcing the ground plane to tilt sharply upward. Most of the relief displays convergent perspective, but the border of the field at lower left directs away from rather than toward the center. The resulting zigzag, called the "herring-bone" perspective, is frequently employed in later Pure Land depictions. Here the complex subject matter and divergent perspectives preclude the visual unity achieved in Stele 2. Nonetheless, these features enhance a grand panoramic view of the Buddhist cosmic vision, and would also argue a later date for Stele 3, perhaps in the late sixth or early seventh century.

The experiments with multiple viewpoints in these Pure Land compositions also laid the foundation for the

sophisticated portrayal of illusory space in Chinese landscape painting. In monumental landscapes of the Northern Song dynasty (960–1127), for example, the artists adroitly captured a vast expanse of space through shifting viewpoints. The painter-theoretician Guo Xi (ca. 1020–ca. 1090), among others, discussed in great detail the use of three types of perspective: “high distance” (*gaoyuan*), “level distance” (*pingyuan*), and “deep distance” (*shenyuan*).⁶⁷ By employing multiple viewpoints, along with other conventional depth cues such as atmospheric perspective, foreshortening, and texture gradients, Chinese landscapists were able to attain a compelling degree of naturalism in their paintings. Between their early assays in pre-Tang Buddhist art and their masterful use in monumental landscapes, perspectival and other pictorial methods of describing space show great continuity of development. In the shift of subject from the religious space of the Pure Land to the secular space of Nature, the rigid principles and hieratic scales that govern iconic imagery were discarded, finally liberating Chinese artists to interpret and represent a space that was borne of human experience.

CONCLUSION

The character of Buddhism in Sichuan and its interactions with local artistic traditions, both in landscape and figural, must account for the distinctive artistic expression of these Sichuan steles. Religious doctrine and practices developed in Buddhist centers in northern and central China by figures such as Daoan and Huiyuan were transmitted to an outlying region like Chengdu by the dispersal of Buddhist monastic communities. Once Buddhist missionaries were established there, the region’s relative stability, freedom from imperial constraint, and support from the local lay community fostered continued evolution of the Buddhist tradition. Drawing inspiration from Sichuan’s rich artistic heritage of landscape depiction and pictorial realism, local artists devised innovative methods to render a new religious conception. In turn, the organizational principles of frontality, centrality, and symmetry in Indian Buddhist iconic imagery transformed the Han parallel orthogonal perspective. The resulting new way of portraying deep recessionary space, a synthesis of native and foreign ideologies and artistic conventions, was a vital antecedent of later Pure Land images and of classic landscape painting.

Characters

Amituo jing 阿彌陀經
 Banruoxue 般若學
 Banzhou sanwei jing 般舟三昧經
 Dai Bo 戴勃
 Dai Kui 戴逵
 Daoan 道安
 Daowang 道汪
 Dunhuang 敦煌
 Fahe 法和
 fotu 佛土
 Gaoseng zhuan 高僧傳
 gaoyuan 高遠
 Gu Kaizhi 顧愷之
 Guan Wuliangshou jing 觀無量壽經
 Hua shanshui xu 畫山水序
 Hua Yuntaishan ji 畫雲台山記
 Huiyuan 慧遠
 Huichi 慧持
 Jingtū 淨土
 Liudu ji jing 六度集經
 Longyuansi 龍淵寺
 Maijishan 麥積山

Mao xian 茂縣
 Mt. E’mei 峨眉山
 pingyuan 平遠
 Pusa benyuan jing 菩薩本願經
 pusa shouji 菩薩授記
 qi 氣
 Qihuansi 祇桓寺
 Sengcheng 僧成
 shenyuan 深遠
 suopo shijie 娑婆世界
 Tao Qian 陶潛
 Tianxiangge biji 天壤閣筆記
 Wanfosi 萬佛寺
 Wang Liansheng 王廉生
 Wuliangshou jing 無量壽經
 Xiangyang 襄陽
 Xie Lingyun 謝靈運
 Xuansong 玄嵩
 Xiangtangshan 響堂山
 Ye 鄆
 Yizhou 益州
 Yuanjia 元嘉
 zhenzhu 鎮主
 Zong Bing 宗炳

Notes

1. Wu Hung has discussed the “profound change in visual perception and representation” that occurred during this period, in “The Transparent Stone: Inverted Vision and Binary Imagery in Medieval Chinese Art,” *Representations* (Spring 1994), p.72; also discussed in *Monumentality in Early Chinese Art and Architecture* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Pr., 1995), p.261.

2. This article is based on a longer discussion of the Sichuan steles in the author’s *The Beginnings of the Buddhist Stele Tradition in China* (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1995), pp.59-156, 344-56. Part of the material has also been presented in a paper entitled “The Beginnings of Pure Land Imagery in China, a Reconsideration” at the Association for Asian Studies’ annual conference, 1996. I am grateful to those who have read or commented on different versions of the paper: John M. Rosenfield, Wu Hung, Jan Fontein, Susan Bush, Anne Clapp, and Audrey Spiro.

3. In Buddhist cosmology the universe is divided into three realms (*trilokya*): the Realm of Desire (*kāmadhātu*), the Realm of Form (*rūpadhātu*), and the Realm of Pure Formlessness (*arūpadhātu*). The *kāmadhātu* includes six heavens; Maitreya’s Tuṣita heaven, as the fourth of these, is still part of the impure realm. Amitābha’s Sukhāvati transcends the *kāmadhātu* and is therefore a Pure Land.

4. The northern-type Buddhist stele is also a vertical oblong slab, but is usually rounded at the top and surmounted by one or more pairs of dragons, as in Han steles. The obverse bears iconic groups, often in registers. A dedicatory inscription occupies the lower obverse or the top or bottom of the reverse. Donor images fill all remaining surfaces. See Wong, *Buddhist Stele*.

5. Liu Zhiyuan and Liu Tingbi, eds., *Chengdu Wanfosi shike yishu* (Shanghai: Zhongguo gudian yishu chubanshe, 1958). See also *Zhongguo meishu quanji* (hereafter *ZMQ*), *Wei Jin Nanbeichao diaosu* (Beijing: Renmin meishu chubanshe, 1988), pls. 54, 55, 58, 59, 63; these are color reproductions and pieces published in the 1958 catalogue. The recent exhibition “China: 5,000 Years, Innovation and Transformation in the Arts” at the Guggenheim Museum in New York (1998) also featured several Wanfosi sculptures (exh. cat., ed. Howard Rodgers [New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1998], nos. 150, 151, 163, 168, 176).

6. The dimensions of the rubbing are not available in any publication.

7. The account is given in Liu Tingbi, “Chengdu Wanfosi shike zaoxiang,” *Chengdu wenwu*, 1987:1.

8. Liu Zhiyuan and Liu Tingbi, p. 4, pl. 31. A.C. Soper briefly mentioned the stele and reported this account in “South Chinese Influence on the Buddhist Art of the Six Dynasties Period,” *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities*, vol.32 (1960), p. 107, n. 243.

9. Audrey Spiro raised this issue in “Shaping the Wind: Taste and Tradition in Fifth-Century South China,” *Ars Orientalis*, vol. 21 (1991), p. 104, n. 28. The writings on the original rubbing are modern-day colophons, accompanied by seals.

10. Nagahiro Toshio, *Rikuchō jidai bijutsu no kenkyū* (Tokyo: Bijutsu shuppansha, 1969), pp. 56-66, pl. 9.

11. From the top, the framed relief panels show: the infant Buddha being born under the right arm of Queen Māyā while she stands beneath the *sāla* tree; an astrologer foretelling that the infant Buddha, shown standing with a halo, is to be the Enlightened One; a mother horse with her colt Kaṇṭhaka, who is destined to carry Prince Siddhārtha away from the palace in search of Enlightenment; and Prince Siddhārtha in contemplation under a tree. The fifth panel has not been identified. See Yang Hong, “Nanchao de fobenxing gushi diaoke,” *Xiandai foxue*, 1964:6, pp. 31-33. The Chinese textual source for the legends is the *Foshuo taizi ruiying benqi jing*, trans. Zhiqian (act. 3rd c.), *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* (hereafter *TD*), ed. Takakusu Junjirō and

Watanabe Kaigyoku (Tokyo: Taishō shinshū daizōkyō kankōkai, 1924-29), no. 185.

12. Liu Zhiyuan and Liu Tingbi, pls. 27, 28; *ZMQ*, *Wei Jin Nanbeichao diaosu* vol., pl. 63; *China: 5,000 Years*, cat. 151.

13. I have examined photographs of both the obverse and reverse of Stele 3 at the Sichuan Provincial Museum, courtesy of Ms. Yuan Shuguang, researcher at the museum. I wish to thank Professor Li Shisheng of the Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts at Chongqing, who provided me with a xerox of a photograph of the reverse for study. Unfortunately, the measurements of the fragment are not available.

14. For a discussion of Stele 3 in the context of Maitreya imagery, see Wong, *Buddhist Stele Tradition*, pp. 303-55.

15. The tablet-type stele differs from the leaf-shaped stele, of which the Wanfosi site has also yielded several. The leaf-shaped steles are dominated by the iconic group on the front; the reverse sides are sometimes carved with relief scenes, but none of these approach the complexity of the prototypical Pure Land scenes under discussion.

16. Denise P. Leidy, “The Ssu-wei Figure in Sixth Century A.D. Chinese Buddhist Sculpture,” *Archives of Asian Art*, vol. 63 (1990), pp. 21-34.

17. *ZMQ*, *Wei Jin Nanbeichao diaosu* vol., pl. 58.

18. See Soper, “Southern Chinese Influence.”

19. A number of Sui and Tang Buddha images show Mt. Meru prominently depicted on the robe (see Angela F. Howard, *The Imagery of the Cosmological Buddha* [Leiden: Brill, 1986]).

20. Yuan Shuguang, “Sichuan Maowen Nan Qi Yongming zaoxiang-bei ji youguan wenti,” *Wenwu*, 1990.2, pp. 67-71.

21. Yuan Shuguang called the side with Maitreya the obverse, but I’m inclined to disagree because the main inscription names Amitāyus first.

22. Western Liang (400-421) was a short-lived kingdom centered in the Dunhuang/Jiuquan region. Both Western Liang and the nearby Northern Liang had much traffic and contacts with the southwest. “*Xiliang cao*” here probably means that Monk Xuansong had served as an administrator in the former Western Liang territory, which included the major Buddhist center of Dunhuang.

23. *TD* nos. 360, 366, and 365 respectively; the Longer and Shorter *Sukhāvati-vyūha* have been translated into English by F. Max Müller, and the *Amitāyur-dhyāna Sūtra* by J. Takakusu (in *The Sacred Books of the East*, ed. F. Max Müller, vol. 49 [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1894], pp. 1-108, 159-202). See also Luis O. Gomez, *The Land of Bliss* (Honolulu: Univ. of Hawaii Pr., 1996).

24. From Caves 320 and 148, respectively; *Tonkō Bakkōkutsu* [hereafter *TBJ*] (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1980-82), vol. 4, pls. 4, 39.

25. Nagahiro, *Rikuchō jidai bijutsu no kenkyū*, pp. 56-66.

26. *TD*, no. 152, vol. 3, pp. 1-52, and *TD*, no. 153, vol. 3, pp. 52-70, respectively.

27. Nagahiro, *Rikuchō jidai bijutsu no kenkyū*, pp. 64-65; the five stories relating to events at sea include tales 9, 33, 37, 39, and 67 of the *Liudu ji jing*.

28. Soper remarks in his footnote to the Stele 1 rubbing that it might represent Avalokiteśvara’s salvation miracles (“South Chinese Influence,” p. 107, n. 243). Yoshimura Rei devoted an entire article to this topic (“Nanchō no Hokkekyō Fumonbon henshō,” *Bukkyō geijutsu*, vol.162 [1985], pp. 11-28). This author has examined Yoshimura’s argument and concluded that the association of the Wanfosi reliefs with a developed Avalokiteśvara cult and iconography at this early date is unlikely (see Wong, *Buddhist Stele*, chap. 2).

29. Nagahiro identified the motif as “Prince Yueguang (Candraprabha) offering himself for beheading at the request of a brahmin” (*Pusa benyuan jing*, pp. 62-64). But a Hellenistic roundel from the Gandhāra region shows Aphrodite punishing Cupid by seizing him by the hair (*Masterpieces of Buddhist and Hindu Sculpture from the British Museum*, exh. cat. [The British Museum and Asahi Shimbun, 1994], cat. 54), and a figure grasped by the hair appears also in the *avadāna* narrative of the Five Hundred Thieves in Dunhuang Cave 285 (*TBJ*, vol. 1,

pls. 131–32). The Candraprabha *jātaka* in Dunhuang Cave 275 shows Prince Candraprabha presenting three heads (multiple sacrifices) on a plate (TB, vol. 1, pl. 14).

30. Richard Robinson, *Early Mādhyamika in India and China* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Pr, 1967), pp. 71–95.

31. The indistinctness in this motif may support the view that Stele 2 copies Stele 1.

32. TB, vol. 2, pl. 34.

33. The order of bodhisattvas, associated with the origins of the Mahāyāna in India, was also practiced in China from the early fifth century onward. The ceremony of taking a bodhisattva vow was performed on an ordination platform, in the presence of a master. Thereafter the aspirant would abide by a rigid code of bodhisattva precepts (S: *śīla*) that emphasize self-discipline and stringent ascetic practice. Other rituals included the confession of sins, meditation, maigre feasts, and visualization in front of images (Michihata Ryōshū, *Chūgoku bukkyō shisōshi no kenkyū* [Kyoto: Heirakuji shoten, 1979], pp. 381–94); Funayama Toru, “Rikuchō jidai ni okeru bosatsu-kai no juyō kaitei Ryūsō-Nansei ki o chūshin ni-” *Tohō gakuho*, vol. 67 [1995], pp. 6–51; Susan Bush, “Continuity and Change: Ku K’ai-chih and the Monsters of Liang” [1996, unpublished paper].

34. In the Chinese Tripiṭaka, Dīpaṅkara’s prophecy is recorded in the *Diamond Sūtra* (TD, vol. 8, p. 749), and in the *Lotus Sūtra* (TD, vol. 9, p. 42).

35. The presence of the Buddha’s life stories on the side panels of Stele 1 exemplifies the transitional character of the overall iconographic program, continuing older motifs on the one hand, and inventing new ones on the other.

36. In Sanskrit and Pali the noun *pāramitā* is derived from the adjective *parama*, meaning “high, complete, perfect,” and therefore *pāramitā* means the highest, most complete understanding of truth. In the Mahāyāna tradition, the term has been analyzed as a binome, *pāram itā*, meaning “gone to the beyond.”

37. *Thirty Years of Buddhist Studies* (Columbia: Univ. of South Carolina Pr., 1968) p. 48.

38. See n. 3.

39. Elizabeth ten Grotenhuis, “The White Path Crossing Two Rivers: A Contemporary Japanese Garden Represents the Past,” *Journal of Garden History*, vol. 15, no. 1 (1995), pp. 1–18; fig. 5.

40. TD, nos. 417, 418. Paul Williams, *Mahāyāna Buddhism*, pp. 256–57.

41. In his commentary on the *Daśabhūmika Sūtra* (the fullest statement on the bodhisattva doctrine). The *Daśabhūmika Sūtra* (C: *Pusa benye jing*, or *Shidi jing*) was first translated into Chinese in the third century (TD, nos. 281–84); it later was incorporated as part of the *Avatamsaka Sūtra* (C: *Huayan jing*; TD, nos. 278, 279), one of the most influential works in Chinese Buddhism.

42. Nanjing Bowuyuan, *Fojiao chuchuan nanfang zhilu* (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1993); see also Wu Hung, “Buddhist Elements in Early Chinese Art,” *Artibus Asiae*, vol. 42, no. 3/4 (1986), pp. 263–316.

43. Alexander Soper, *Literary Evidence for Early Chinese Buddhist Art in China* (Ascona: *Artibus Asiae* Supp. 19, 1959), pp. 34–35, 44, 51.

44. *Gaosenzhuān* (hereafter GSZ), TD, no. 2059. A listing of these monks and their references may be found in *Ryō kōsōden sakuin*, comp. Makita Tairyō (Kyoto: Heirakuji shoten, 1972), pp. 296–97.

45. For Daoan’s biography, see GSZ, *juan* 5, pp. 351–54; also in *Meisōden shō*, in *Dai Nihon zoku zōkyō* (Kyoto: Zōkyō shoin, 1905–12), 1st coll., pt. 2b, case 7, *ce* 1. Studies of Daoan include Tang Yongtong,

Han Wei Liang Jin Nanbeichao fojiaoshi (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983), vol. 1, pp. 133–63; Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China* (Leiden: Brill, 1959), pp. 180–204.

46. GSZ, p. 354.

47. GSZ, pp. 361–62.

48. GSZ, pp. 371–72.

49. Munakata Kiyohiko, *Sacred Mountains in Chinese Art* (Urbana and Chicago: Univ. of Illinois Pr., 1991), p. 2; see also Michael Sullivan, “The Magic Mountain,” in *Studies in the Art of China and Southeast Asia*, vol. 1 (London: Pindar, 1991), pp. 98–108.

50. A collection of essays on mountains and Chinese Buddhism is published in *Nikka bukkyō kenkyūkai nenpō*, vol. 5 (1942). The mountains selected as sacred by the Buddhists were often those already sacred to the Daoists. Mt. Wutai, which Buddhists believed to be the abode of Mañjuśrī (the Bodhisattva of Wisdom) in Shanxi is an example; see Ono Katsutoshi and Hibino Takeo, *Godaisan* (Tokyo: Zayuhō kankōkai, 1942), pp. 9–17, and this author’s “A Reassessment of the Representation of Mt. Wutai from Dunhuang Cave 61,” *Archives of Asian Art*, vol. 66 (1993), pp. 27–52.

51. Alexander C. Soper, “Early Chinese Landscape Painting,” *Art Bulletin*, vol. 23 (1941), pp. 169–98; Michael Sullivan, *The Birth of Landscape Painting in China* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Pr., 1962).

52. The essay is recorded in Zhang Yanyuan’s *Lidai minghua ji* of 847, *juan* 5; a translation and discussion of Gu’s essay may be found in Sullivan, *The Birth of Landscape Painting in China*, pp. 90–101.

53. *Lidai minghua ji*, *juan* 5.

54. *Lidai minghua ji*, *juan* 6; Susan Bush, “Tsung Ping [Zong Bing]’s Essay on Painting Landscapes and the ‘Landscape Buddhism’ of Mount Lu,” in *Theories of the Arts in China*, ed. Susan Bush and Christian Murck (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Pr., 1983), pp. 133–64.

55. Sullivan, *The Birth of Landscape Painting in China*, p. 87.

56. Soper, “Early Chinese Landscape Painting,” p. 156; Sullivan, *The Birth of Landscape Painting in China*, p. 128.

57. Richard C. Rudolf, *Han Tomb Art of West China* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Pr., 1951). Lucy Lim, ed., *Stories from China’s Past: Han Dynasty Pictorial Tomb Reliefs and Archaeological Objects from Sichuan Province, People’s Republic of China*, exh. cat. (San Francisco: Chinese Cultural Center, 1987).

58. Sullivan, *The Birth of Landscape Painting in China*, p. 72.

59. Sullivan, *The Birth of Landscape Painting in China*, p. 70.

60. Shen Zhongchang, “Chengdu Yangzishan de Jindai zhuanmu,” *Wenwu cankao zhiliao*, 1955:7, pp. 95–101, pl. 1.

61. The two Buddhas’ robes are draped in the celebrated “sinicized” fashion that later became the model for northern Buddha images; see Wong, *Buddhist Stele Tradition*, pp. 348–50.

62. Sullivan, *The Birth of Landscape Painting in China*, pp. 99–100; Bush, “Tsung Bing’s Essay,” pp. 143–44.

63. *Bakusekizan sekkutsu* (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1987), pl. 161.

64. Soper, “South Chinese Influence,” p. 95.

65. Ludwig Bachhofer, *A Short History of Chinese Art* (New York: Pantheon, 1946), p. 99.

66. This thesis was advanced in his article “Buddhist Elements in Early Chinese Art.”

67. Guo Xi’s ideas about landscape painting are recorded in his lengthy treatise *Linquan gaozhi* (The Great Message of Forest and Streams).