THE RESHAPED BUDDHIST COSMOS:
A STUDY OF THE ICONOGRAPHY OF THE MAIN CHAMBER
OF CAVE 45, MOGAO GROTTOES, DUNHUANG

by

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the iconographic characteristics and transformations of Buddhist art manifested in the main chamber of Cave 45, one of the adorned cave temples at the famed Buddhist site of Mogao, Dunhuang, China.

Probably commissioned sometime between the late seventh and early eighth centuries, the original, Tang-period decorations of Cave 45 display an illusion of spectacular Buddhist paradieses as conveyed in the *Lotus Sutra*. Pictorial and structural evidence found in the main shrine during my field research of the grotto, however, indicates that the initial ornament of this cave temple might have been left unfinished. Approximately a half-century later, work at Cave 45 resumed, as the oasis town of Dunhuang was taken over by the Tibetans in 781. Icons of beloved bodhisattvas, Guanyin and Dizang, were introduced into the cave at the request of new donors. These late additions modified the overall visual plan of the main shrine, in terms of its color scheme and Buddhist symbolism. The pairing of Guanyin and Dizang, in particular, suggests the two bodhisattvas’ increasingly popularity in the devotional life of post-Tang Dunhuang. The combined plan of the main shrine conveys a converted Buddhist worldview in which the heavenly Pure Lands coexist with the concerns of the earthly world and afterlife.

As an art-historical investigation of the main chamber of Cave 45, this research presents an explicit chronology of its devotional works of art. The speculation of the cave’s incomplete commission and renovations provides the reader with a glimpse of Buddhist art production and the devotional life in the context of a medieval oasis town along the overland travel roads.
DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my mother, Nong Weichun, who stood by me through the time of research and writing. Without her love and support, this work would not have been possible.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

This thesis analyzes the interior ornaments of a Buddhist cave temple (Cave 45) at the Mogao grottoes, located some fifteen miles southeast of the oasis town of Dunhuang in present-day northwest China (fig. 1).¹ As one of four-hundred-and-ninety-two adorned caves at Mogao, Cave 45 is well known for its spectacular murals and painted statues characteristic of the High-Tang style (705-781).² The mural paintings rendered in the main chamber of Cave 45, however, first caught my attention for their artistic disparities in terms of color, subject, and Buddhist iconography. After an investigation of the visual representations of the cave temple in situ in the summer of 2013, I speculate that the present-day layout of the main shrine of Cave 45 does not reflect the original, Tang-period plan, contrary to what is commonly believed. The cave looks like a patchwork of art dated to different historical phases—a feature shared by many long-thriving caves at Mogao. The original Tang plan of Cave 45, which possibly was focused on displaying the splendor of infinite Buddhist paradises, was modified later with the appearance of devotional images of the bodhisattvas Guanyin (Avalokiteshvara in Sanskrit) and Dizang (Ksitigarbha), sometime between the late eighth and early ninth centuries. The image of the latter deity, in particular, which is rarely seen in cave shrines prior to and including the Tang period, became extremely popular during the post-Tang period of Dunhuang, when this critical foothold

on the trade routes changed hands to the Tibetans and later the local warriors from the Tang army.³

The first goal of this thesis is to investigate the changing iconographic plans that took place in the main shrine of Cave 45. While the socio-political upheaval may in general account for the artistic discontinuity of these isolated Buddhist spaces, it is not the only factor that has contributed to the eclectic nature of the cave art at Mogao. Cave 45, on the one hand, had continued to be a sacred space of Buddhist worship throughout its history. On the other hand, it had undergone repetitive embellishment but seems never to have been completed. Therefore, the current layout of the cave temple manifests devotional landscapes created at different times by different hands and at the request of different donors. It looks more like a Buddhist collage that encompasses disparate scenes but lacks a focused subject.

After examining each section of the interior space of the cave, however, the beholder will still find an “underlying logic” to make the presence of each disparate scene reasonable in the context of the enclosed sacred space.⁴ In other words, when new craftsmen were summoned to continue the work that had been suspended in Cave 45, the artist or donor in charge would still have had to determine what appropriate motifs might be used to cover the blank space that would not only suit new tastes but would also not disrupt the previous plan of the cave. At least in the main shrine of Cave 45, no early images have been found beneath the current layer of murals of the late seventh and early ninth centuries. Artists of the later generations, while contributing to the old cave with new images, also admired and kept previous works and, more importantly, took

the mental plan of their predecessors into consideration. The reshaped cave plan, therefore, reflects a compromised outlook in which new and old iconographies are mixed. The second goal of this study, therefore, is to articulate this “underlying logic,” which resulted in the contextual merge of the early and late devotional plans into one.

To demonstrate the eclectic nature of the art of Cave 45, I present three arguments in the thesis: (1) at least two renovations took place in Cave 45 from its construction in the Tang period (618-781) to the cave’s disuse in the Ming period (1368-1644); (2) the first renovation, which occurred sometime between the late eighth and early ninth century, modified the original iconographic plan of the main chamber of Cave 45; (3) the two chronological plans that had coexisted in the main chamber thereafter contributed to a reshaped Buddhist space in the context of rock-cut shrines.5

In Chapter 2, I demonstrate that the current appearance of Cave 45 reflects work carried out in different historical periods. The main chamber of the cave temple, whose original plan dates to the High-Tang period, was modified sometime between the late eighth and early ninth centuries. By that time, the brilliant Tang style at the grottoes had begun to give way to another more eclectic style corresponding to Buddhist influences coming from both Tibet and central China. In Chapters 3 and 4, I provide a detailed examination of the iconographic plans created in these two subsequent periods, referred to as the Tang-period plan and the post-Tang-period plan, respectively. Since the innovative motifs worked together with the old ones in the main chamber

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5 The second renovation at Cave 45 probably occurred sometime in the middle of the tenth century, under the patronage of the Cao family (ca. 935-74). This tenth-century project seems not to have modified the existing decorative plan of the main chamber, though. See Rong Xinjiang, “Official Life at Dunhuang in the Tenth Century: The Case of Cao Yuanzhong,” in The Silk Road: Trade, Travel, and Faith, ed. S. Whitfield and U. Sims-Williams (Chicago: Serindia Publications, 2004): 61-2; Ma Shichang, “Buddhist Cave-temples and the Cao Family at Mogaoku, Dunhuang,” World Archaeology, vol. 27, no. 2 (1995): 311.
of the cave shrine, a transformed devotional landscape came into shape from the ninth century onward. A discussion of the Buddhist symbolic significance of this reshaped sacred space will be offered at the end of the thesis.

In the study, the term “Tang-period” only refers to the historical phase of Dunhuang when it was under the direct control/influence of the Tang Empire, approximately between the mid-seventh century and the late eighth century. From the second half of the eighth century onward, however, the Tang influence at Dunhuang began to diminish, as a political rebellion occurred in 755 and threatened the Tang court in Chang’an, China. Between the late eighth and early eleventh centuries, Dunhuang was successively controlled by the Tibetans (781-848) and local military commands (848-1036). The term “post-Tang period” designates this distinct time-period of Dunhuang when influences from the heartland of Tang China gradually decreased. The Tibetan occupation continued at Dunhuang for nearly seventy years, followed by the rule of the local warriors (historically known as *Guiyijun* 归义军, or Returning Allegiance Army) for another two centuries. Meanwhile, the Tang court struggled to maintain its dwindling authority in central China. Scholars also describe the historical phase as “the middle and late Tang period,” corresponding to the chronology of the Tang Dynasty in central China, which did not terminate until 907. Taking their oaths to the Tang and the later Song emperors, though, the local

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6 The chronology of the Tang Dynasty in the heartland of China began in 618 CE and did not end until 907 CE. Dunhuang, a foothold located on the northwestern periphery of China proper, on the other hand, was under complete control of the Tang from during the reign of Taizong (626-49) to the reign of Xuanzong (712-56). See “Dunhuang mogaoku dashi nianbiao 敦煌莫高窟大事年表,” in *Zhongguo shiku: Dunhuang mogaoku*, vol. 3 中国石窟: 敦煌莫高窟 (三), ed. Dunhuang wenwu yanjiusuo (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 2011): 240-6.
governors of Dunhuang acted as the monarchs of the territory, since the central government had neither energy nor capability to administrate this far-flung outpost in the desert.9

This study sheds light on the interrelationship between Buddhist iconographies and Buddhist ideals and behaviors in this famed oasis town along the overland travel routes. As one of the cave shrines in almost constant use between the fourth and fourteenth centuries, Cave 45, in particular, witnessed the most thriving years of the oasis town, the long-distant trades and the intercultural contacts between China and the west.10 People from different regions of Eurasia brought new ideas, techniques and knowledge, enriching the multicultural nature of the oasis town and pilgrimage center.11 In this respect, Cave 45 also serves as an artificial fossil providing us with invaluable information regarding the artistic, cultural and social significance of this famed “Buddhist Mecca.”12

Cave 45, together with its interior ornaments, has been discussed many times by different scholars.13 The current scholarship states that Cave 45 was one of the fifty fine cave temples commissioned in the golden age of the Mogao grottoes (ca. 618-781).14 Because of its well-preserved Tang-period structure, the plan of Cave 45 is often referred to as a model of traditional

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Buddhist cave architecture surviving in northwestern China (fig. 4). The sculpted Shakyamuni assembly, housed in the central niche of the cave, on the other hand, is usually considered the most refined statue group created in the High-Tang style (fig. 5). As to the interior wall paintings of Cave 45, interest has focused particularly on the monumental image of the bodhisattva Guanyin (fig. 10). While the Dunhuang Academy, China, dates this painting to the High-Tang period, some other scholars have noticed its unusual characteristics compared to other seventh-to-eighth-century renderings at Mogao. Terukaze Akiyama, for example, addresses its ordered composition, which looks forward to the formalization of cave paintings in Dunhuang during the Tibetan occupation (781-848). Miyeko Murase, on the other hand, notices that the image represents the earliest single portrait of Guanyin emerging at the grottoes, surrounded by narratives of the salvation of the bodhisattva. Its appearance seems to suggest the rising popularity of Guanyin in Dunhuang between the ninth and tenth centuries. Robert L. Thorp and Richard E. Vinograd, however, consider this painting conveying the Pure Land idealism, which was associated with another scene presented on the opposite wall, Amitabha’s Western Paradise, the most popular Buddhist sutra scene of the Tang-period caves (fig. 9).

In this thesis, I reconsider the chronology of the works of art produced in the main shrine of Cave 45. The present-day Buddhist landscape of the chamber, according to my investigation, is made up of works commissioned intermittently between the late seventh and the early ninth century.

15 Su Bai 宿白, Zhongguo fojiao shikusi yiji: 3-8 shiji zhongguo fojiao kaokuxue 中国佛教石窟寺遗迹--3 至 8 世纪中国佛教考古学 (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 2011):7-9; S. Whitfield and U. Sims-Williams, 264.
16 R. Whitfield, 82.
19 Murase, 65.
20 S. Whitfield and U. Sims-Williams, 245.
centuries. Coloration and iconography are the primary evidence that I use to distinguish the late works from the original renderings in the enclosed space. New scientific studies have disclosed the pigments and techniques of the local artists employed at Mogao throughout its historical phases. In light of this, the disparate color schemes of the artworks in Cave 45 indicate that they were probably commissioned in different eras, since usually the palette was kept in uniformity within one project. Using the pigments as a time indicator, I situate the works of art in chronological order. Besides the palette, I also consider the iconographic themes. The current plan of the main chamber of Cave 45 lacks an integral design, due to the intermittent projects carried out in the grotto. While Shakyamuni and his last sermon seems to have played a central role in the devotional scenes produced in the Tang period, portraits of independent bodhisattvas became the popular motifs in the post-Tang period and were added to the blank surface of the cave, suggesting changes of Buddhist worship at the grottoes after the retreat of the Tang influence. The repetitive icon images of Guanyin and Dizang, in particular, highlight their significant status in the devotional life of the oasis town.

In short, Cave 45 appears to be a Buddhist patchwork made up of devotional scenes commissioned at different times. With the latest, tenth-century renderings housed in the antechamber, the most remarkable works of art are chiefly preserved in its main chamber, dating back to the golden age of the Mogao grottoes between the seventh and ninth century. The current plan of the main chamber of Cave 45, in particular, displays a much combined and converted world of Buddhism where the admiration of enlightened Buddhahood is fused with the concerns of real life and the afterlife.

CHAPTER 2

CAVE 45 AS A PATCHWORK

The Buddhist cave shrine under discussion was carved on the cliff face of Mogao where the Mingsha Mountain (the Dunes of the Singing Sands) rises and the Gobi desert surrounds (fig. 2). Along with some seven hundred grottoes, Cave 45 currently rests on the ground floor of the cliff, facing the Yanquan, a seasonal river that flows in front of the grottoes. This cave temple features a simple, two-shrine plan with a small antechamber leading to a main chamber in the back. Cave 45 was commissioned on a moderate scale. The main chamber is no more than 18’ × 13’, including the central niche attached to the back wall on the west (fig. 4). Acknowledged as a representative Tang-period cave temple, the main shrine of Cave 45, in particular, houses spectacular sculptures and mural paintings regarded as masterpieces of the High-Tang style. But very few studies have discussed the iconographic program of Cave 45 as a whole, possibly because it is generally believed that there is no integral design in the cave temple. Cave 45, like most other old cave shrines surviving around the oasis town, has been abandoned and reused many times throughout its history.

Unfortunately, no documentation has been found to indicate the original patronage of Cave 45. The inscriptions now preserved in the cave were left by later donors and tourists. Considering its characteristic two-chamber plan and moderate size, Cave 45 was probably commissioned as a family shrine sometime between the late seventh and the early eighth

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23 R. Whitfield, 3.
centuries, as one of the one hundred and twenty-seven cave temples opened during the most
thriving time period in the history of the grottoes.\textsuperscript{25} Compared to the pre-Tang cave temples
commissioned at Mogao, Cave 45 features a rectangular space with one sumptuous altar centered
in the back wall of the main shrine. Without a central pillar penetrating the interior space or
small niches carved out of side walls, the central niche must have functioned as a sacred altar,
orienting Buddhist services hosted at the shrine, where sculptural icons were installed. Images of
the donors found in a contemporary cave shrine (Cave 217) visualize the whole family in their
devotional service. Standing in two rows, each figure faces the central altar (fig. 22). Similarly, a
tenth-century silk painting shows a family kneeling before the altar venerating the bodhisattva
Guanyin (fig. 39).

I speculate that the initial ornament of Cave 45 had not been completed during its
commissioning sometime between the late seventh and early eighth centuries; secondly, at least
two renovations subsequently took place in the cave temple, reshaping its original, Tang-period
plan into what we see today. Before it was eventually discarded with the whole oasis by the
Ming rulers during the fourteenth century, Cave 45 had undergone two subsequent renewals,
neither of which seemed to have completed the decorations of its interior spaces, though.\textsuperscript{26}

The initial adornment at Cave 45 probably was suspended soon after the construction of
the cave temple around the late seventh century. In accordance with the contemporary
architectural fashion, the Tang masters covered the sloping roof with images of the Thousand
Buddha interspaced with floral and geometric decorations (figs. 3 and 20). Below the
visualization of the infinite Buddha, painted stuccos of Shakyamuni (the historical Buddha) and

\textsuperscript{25} Duan, “Tangdai qianqi de mogaoku yishu,” Zhongguo shiku: Dunhuang mogaoku, Vol. 3, 162; Ning Qiang, “The
‘Family Cave’ at Dunhuang” in Art, Religion, and Politics in Medieval China: The Dunhuang Cave of the Zhai

\textsuperscript{26} Rong, “Dunhuang zai sichou zhilu shang de diwei,” Dunhuangxue shibajiang, 51-2.
attendants were sculpted in the open niche, the surface of which was also brilliantly painted with images of Buddhist figures, narratives and ornaments (figs. 6, 7 and 26). Along with the sculpted Shakyamuni assembly, Amitabha’s Pure Land was rendered in the middle of the north wall, flanked by two associated Buddhist narratives at the sides (fig. 9). For reasons we do not exactly know, however, the embellishment at Cave 45 appears to have been abruptly halted, when artists were finishing the decorative bands along the rim of the central niche and a votive image of the Bodhisattva Guanyin to the south (right) of the entrance, as will be discussed below (figs. 5 and 14).

Not until some fifty years later did the first renovation took place, during which new Buddhist figures, narratives and donor images were added. Some late inscriptions left on the walls of the main chamber suggest that craftsmen were summoned by new donors to cover surfaces that had been left incomplete in the previous project.27 During this renovation, the south wall was covered with an enormous image of the bodhisattva Guanyin, surrounded by vignettes in which this beloved deity manifests himself in various forms to save living beings from perils (fig. 10). New images were added to the west wall as well: the bodhisattva Guanyin on the south (left) and the bodhisattva Dizang (Ksitigarbha), north (right) (figs. 18 and 19). The cult of Guanyin and Dizang seems to have become increasingly popular in Dunhuang from the late eighth century onward, for their images were again painted to the north (left) of the doorway (fig. 15). Similar to the initial project, this late-eighth-century renovation seems not to have been completed, as I will demonstrate in the discussion that follows.

27 Dunhuang yanjiuyuan, Gongyangren tiji, 15-6.
The second renovation, evidenced by original documents recovered from the well-known “library cave” of Mogao, did not take place until the tenth century.\textsuperscript{28} It probably was sponsored by General Cao Yuanzhong (曹元忠, 944-974), the current military commander of Dunhuang, and his family.\textsuperscript{29} The Cao’s was pious Buddhist. Besides opening new caves, a number of the old cave temples, including Cave 45, were also restored, thanks to this leading family’s patronage of Buddhist monuments in Dunhuang. As for Cave 45, the restoration probably focused on remodeling the antechamber. Not only were the walls covered with new paintings, but also the doorways leading to the interior space were narrowed, in order to protect the main chamber in the back from scouring sand.\textsuperscript{30} This late renovation at Cave 45, however, seems not to have touched anything beyond the interior doorway. Therefore, everything in the main chamber probably was maintained as it was since the preceding renovation.

In this respect, while the overall plan of Cave 45 had been modified twice, the landscape of its main shrine, the most sacred section of a cave temple where monks meditated and devotees prayed, had only been reshaped once within a period of some six centuries. Since the antechamber of Cave 45 is a tenth-century reconstruction and is in extremely poor condition, the discussion that follows will focus on the iconographic programs of the main shrine. I will demonstrate that a late-eighth-century renovation probably took place in the main chamber, when the brilliant High-Tang style began to retreat from Dunhuang. In other words, the present-day layout of the main chamber of Cave 45 actually combines two incomplete iconographic plans produced in two historical phases. Along with iconographic variations between the

\textsuperscript{28} Cave 17, best known as the “library cave” at Mogao was discovered by the Daoist abbot Wang Yuanlu in the 1890s, in which nearly 50,000 ancient manuscripts had been sealed off since the early eleventh century. See R. Whitfield, 34; Rong, “Dunhuang canjingdong de yuanzhuang ji qi fengbi yuyan,” Dunhuangxue shiba jiang, 91-2.
\textsuperscript{29} Duan Wenjie 段文杰, “Dunhuang Art in the Last Phase,” in Dunhuang Art: Through the Eyes of Duan Wenjie, ed. Tan Chung (New Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Center for the Arts, 1994): 189-93.
\textsuperscript{30} Shi, 233-4.
artworks, new evidence referring to the decoration of the main chamber has been acquired through my investigation of the cave in situ. The discussion that follows will look at this new evidence that supports a historical reconstruction of the main shrine.

2.1 An Incomplete Main Shrine

Some interesting phenomena found in the main chamber of Cave 45 suggest that the interior adornment of the cave temple had never been completed. The most evident part is found on the east wall, which is pierced in the middle by the interior doorway (fig. 13). Against the whitewashed surface, some images had been rendered on both sides of the entrance. To the south (right), an image of bodhisattva Guanyin stands below an auspicious cloud (fig. 14). In fact, the deity can only be vaguely recognized as Guanyin, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, who carries in his headdress a small statue of Amitabha, the spiritual father of Guanyin.31 Other features are only dimly identifiable now, due to the extremely poor condition of the mural. While the lower portion of the image has disappeared, the rest has been seriously weathered. Nevertheless, it is still clear that the bodhisattva carries a flaming halo over his shoulder that had not been completed. The halo was supposed to be adorned with a ring of flames at its outer circle, as those painted behind the heads of the disciples and bodhisattvas in the central niche (fig. 7). Such “disc-shaped” halos encircled with flame decorations were frequently seen in seventh and eighth-century painted cave temples at Mogao.32

The other side of the doorway shows portraits of two bodhisattvas (fig. 15). Identified by his monkish appearance, the one on the left is the bodhisattva Dizang. He holds a flaming pearl

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in his left hand, a feature of the imagery of Dizang that emerged in Dunhuang no earlier than the ninth century. The deity next to him is the bodhisattva Guanyin, who is dressed with elaborate jewels and a garment. Although he does not have an image of Amitabha in his headdress, he carries a cup-like vessel and a willow branch, the latter that became another attribute of Guanyin. A cartouche appears at the upper left of each figure where the name of the deity would ordinarily have been inscribed. Texts possibly have either faded out or were never added. Considering the juxtaposition of the two bodhisattvas, this rendering perhaps belonged to a larger composition that was never completed. More than likely the artist had intended to paint an array of bodhisattva portraits framed by columns. This composition resembles a Buddhist pantheon which had become a typical decorative pattern in the grottoes around the late ninth and tenth centuries (fig. 16). Usually situated along the lower portion of the interior walls, the images of eminent bodhisattvas were horizontally arranged in painted panels as unfolded hand scrolls.

Comparing the paintings on either side of the entrance, it can be deduced that they were produced at different times and based on different iconographic schemes. Painted in different scales, the Guanyin wearing a flaming halo is larger than the two bodhisattvas on the opposite side. The portraits of bodhisattvas, in turn, are now in better condition than that to the south (right). Considering their close positions beside the entrance way, the only explanation for the great disparity between the images is that they were created at chronologically different times. The large image of Guanyin probably was an earlier rendering that belonged to the original, Tang-period plan, since the deity carries a flaming halo similar to those belonging to the painted statues in the niche (fig. 7). The image of the two bodhisattvas, on the other hand, was created

33 Zhiru Ng, “The Formation and Development of Dizang 地藏 Cult in Medieval China” (PhD diss., The University of Arizona, 2000): 179-81.
34 Chun-fang Yu, “Scriptural Source,” 43.
later, probably no earlier than the late eighth century.\textsuperscript{35} The only similarity that these two parts of the mural share is that neither of them is a fully-realized composition, as if the artists had given up in the middle of their production (fig. 13).

Another ornamental detail that caught my attention is on the edge of the open niche, facing the entrance. According to the characteristics of the Tang-period cave shrines at the grottoes, the original design of the niche in Cave 45 should have had two decorative bands outlining the alcove at the rim and two divinities flanking at the edges, presumably bodhisattva Guanyin and Shizhi (Mahasthamaprapta, figs. 21 and 27).\textsuperscript{36} At least in Dunhuang and before the second half of the eighth century, Guanyin was more frequently shown paired with Shizhi, rather than with Dizang. As a conventional treatment for central niches, decorative bands were supposed to frame the niche at its edge. In Cave 45, however, while the inner band was painted with rich floral patterns, recalling the splendid contemporary Chinese embroideries, the outer band, breaking the geometric patterns above, seems to have been left unfinished.\textsuperscript{37} Some sketches of it, however, have remained on the ground layer of the wall whose color has turned dark due to oxidation (fig. 17).\textsuperscript{38} Drawn in light color, motifs of auspicious clouds were patterned along the narrow edge, flanking the flaming jewel painted in the middle, which appears to be the top part of the Buddhist narrative rendered on the ceiling of the niche (fig. 6). Moreover, part of the outer band is covered by another layer of clay on which new images were executed. These marks corroborate the idea that subsequent work was undertaken on the side walls of the niche. The new images that partly cover the previous band are of the bodhisattvas Guanyin and Dizang (fig. 5). Flanking the central niche, each of the divinities stands on a lotus pedestal. Texts found

\textsuperscript{35} Duan, \textit{Dunhuang Art Through the Eyes of Duan Wenjie}, 301.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 138.
\textsuperscript{37} R. Whitfield, 80
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 115.
at the feet of each bodhisattva suggest that they were commissioned by Suo Tao (索滔), a male donor, on behalf of his deceased parents and other beings.\(^\text{39}\) Unfortunately, no specific date is mentioned in the inscriptions. As a result, we do not know when exactly this pair of bodhisattvas was commissioned. The only thing that can be confirmed is that they were added to the side walls sometime after the creation of the niche.

It appears that the Tang masters were not able to complete their work on the central niche and they left the cave before coloring the outer band of the niche. They perhaps did not have time to paint bodhisattvas, either. Over time, new artists were commissioned to cover the blank space. By the time of the renovation, however, Dizang seemed to have replaced Shizhi as the most beloved bodhisattva next to Guanyin.\(^\text{40}\) His image was not only painted to one side of the central altar paired with Guanyin, but was also shown on the opposite wall, again, in company with another icon image of Guanyin. Nevertheless, this renovation did not complete everything left unfinished from the original project. Large spaces of the east wall had been left unpainted. The portrait of Dizang, which had been added to the north (left) side of the central niche, was incomplete as well. The round halo over the shoulder of Dizang had only been sketched in. Its outer circle was left uncolored.

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2.2 Two Coexisting Palettes

If the aforementioned is not sufficient to prove that two different decorative plans were carried out in the main shrine of Cave 45, an analysis of the coloration of the artworks indicates two distinctive color schemes were used for adorning the enclosed Buddhist scenes. One features a brilliant palette of green, blue, yellow, red and gold; the other utilized a simplified green and brown palette. Although the two palettes may suggest the individual styles of artists working simultaneously, research on the painting materials used in the grottoes demonstrate that an artist’s personal style played a small part in the coloration of the cave paintings. Instead, the color scheme primarily depended on the number of pigments accessible to the painters as well as on the aesthetic experiences shaped by social conventions that usually remained relatively stable across time.\textsuperscript{41} More than likely two groups of craftsmen in two different periods worked in the cave chamber. Each group had a different choice of pigments available to it.

The study of the pigments utilized at Mogao grottoes was initiated by Sir Arthur Church and Mr. R.J. Gettens of the Fogg Museum in the early twentieth century.\textsuperscript{42} They identified some eleven pigments that ancient artists had employed for decoration of the cave shrines. These pigments comprised natural minerals and organic vegetable dyes bound with gum or animal glue.\textsuperscript{43} At present, new scientific experiments conducted by the Dunhuang Academy, China, have yielded more detailed information about the transformation of the range of pigments that

\textsuperscript{41} Wang and Fu, 115; Li,
artists used in the grottoes between the late fourth and early thirteenth centuries. The palette created by the Tang-period artists, according to the tests, appears to be the most complicated. The basic pigments consisted of red, blue, green, pink, yellow, black and white, usually acquired by mixing two or three mineral pigments. The use of gold foils on Buddhist figures, which greatly enhanced the sumptuousness of the sacred images, was also prominent, and was a conventional treatment since the Sui period (581-618, figs. 7 and 26). From the late eighth century onward, however, the number of pigments used on paintings and sculptures gradually diminished. Lapis lazuli mostly disappeared. Gold leaf and azurite blue were also less in use than before. Malachite and red ocher, on the other hand, became the predominant colors. The former even lost its vivid tone of the previous, Tang-period works. Possibly due to a mixture with too much white, the malachite green turned into a reduced green-blue hue.

At least ten pigments have been detected in Cave 45 contributing to a spectacular Buddhist universe displayed in the main shrine (Table 2.1). Take the painted stucco of bodhisattvas, for example. There is one standing on the lotus pedestal at both sides of the assembly. Commonly recognized as the bodhisattvas Guanyin and Shizhi, the two statues were sculpted and painted in the same manner. The one on the north is better preserved, though (fig. 7). This bodhisattva features “jade-like skin,” made of a mixture of steatite and mica powders, curved brows, long, narrow eye openings, possibly outlined by black iron and curved lips, glossed with cinnabar and red ocher, corresponding to the color of his lavish garment. Adorned with jewelry around the neck and arms, the bodhisattva bares his upper torso with a sash draping one shoulder. He wears a long dhoti (Indian-style garment) wrapped around his waist and legs.

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45 Wang and Fu, 121.
Table 2.1: Main pigments of Mogao Cave Art (ca. 600-1000 CE)  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period/Cave No.</th>
<th>Pigment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Early to High-Tang Period (ca. 618-781)</td>
<td>blue (azurite, lapis lazuli), green (malachite, atacamite) red (cinnabar, red ocher), yellow (ocher), pink (ocher + red lead), gold foil, black, white (steatite, gaoline)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-Tang Period (ca. 781-960)</td>
<td>malachite and red ocher predominant, black, white, pink, azurite (few)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cave 45</td>
<td>azurite, lapis lazuli, malachite, atacamite, cinnabar, ocher + red lead, gold foil, black, steatite</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The *dhoti* is brilliantly dyed with red, green, blue and yellow, patterned in abstract and floral motifs. The hem of the dress, on the other hand, is extravagantly highlighted by gold strips.

Overall, the bodhisattva is a masterpiece of the so-called High-Tang style: his head slightly turns to one side and the torso gracefully swings at the hip, forming an S shape, recalling the influence of Gandharan-Gupta Buddhist art that had spread eastward to Dunhuang via the silk roads (figs. 8 and 36). 

In fact, many pigments that the Tang masters used in the grottoes were importations to the oasis town from the travel routes. Lapis lazuli, cinnabar and atacamite, for example, were traded from present-day Afghanistan and other regions of Central Asia, while malachite and red

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47 The data is based on the research of Li Zuixiong, Wang Xudong and Fu Peng. See Li, *Sichouzhilu shiku bihua cansu yanjiu*, 36, 56; Wang and Fu, 115.

ocher were probably extracted from the nearby mountains of Gansu. Gettens’s unpublished comment, quoted by Langdon Warner in 1938, says “It is only by far-reaching trade intercourse that these substances can be assembled in any one place or even in any one country today.” Gettens’s comment reveals the importance of the travel roads to oasis towns like Dunhuang and their cave arts. It also implies that any interruption in the network of travel routes would have greatly affected the productions at these isolated Buddhist sites, since many painting materials were provided through long-distance trade. This may also help explain the changing palette of the wall paintings in the main chamber of Cave 45.

Represented by the mural rendered on the south wall, the coloration of this monumental scene of the Bodhisattva Guanyin looks not as rich as that of the niche and the north wall (figs. 10 and 11). A colossal portrait of Guanyin is shown standing in the middle of the wall, surrounded by a panoramic landscape in which ordered vignettes illustrate the twenty-fifth chapter of the *Lotus Sutra*. Unlike the statues and painted figures in the central niche with their glittering vivid tones, this scene looks much duller and more monotonous. The landscape is dominated by light green against the earthen brown, made by malachite and red ocher. The small figures in the vignette rendered in brown, green and white correspond to the colors used on the central deity. The blues applied to the canopy and Guanyin’s drapery are less vivid than the armor of the heavenly king in the central niche (fig. 7). Gold, vermilion red and ultramarine blue, the most glamorous hues of the Tang masters, have disappeared from this painting.

The decreasing use of blue and vermilion perhaps indicates the scant availability of lapis lazuli and cinnabar at the grottoes, which mainly depended on overland importation. After a

50 Warner, 9.
century’s peace and prosperity under the rule of the Tang Dynasty, Dunhuang fell into turmoil again between 776 and 781.\textsuperscript{52} Starting in 755, the Tang Dynasty began to decline as a result of the rebellions of An Lushan (ca. 703-757) and Shi Siming (ca. 703-761).\textsuperscript{53} Tang armies that defended the western borders were forced to move back to the capital to protect the emperor Xuanzong (711-755). Dunhuang, a distant garrison and station in the desert, now without any formal military forces, was occupied by the Tibetans, after a desperate resistance that lasted for over ten years.\textsuperscript{54} The trade routes may also have been disabled due to the continuous warfare.

The large icon image of Guanyin with the scenes of his salvation for the earthly beings perhaps was commissioned during this extremely unsettled era. After losing the protection of the Tang army, the residents of the oasis town may have turned to Guanyin, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, to save them from the Tibetans. The oasis town was seized anyway. But the savior had protected the living beings in his own way. The Tibetans spared this eminent Buddhist center from any damage, since they were pious Buddhists themselves.

The Tibetan occupation of Dunhuang is generally accepted as the main reason that the brilliant Tang-style gave way to another in the post-Tang era.\textsuperscript{55} During their seventy-year rule in Dunhuang, the Tibetans continued to open new caves and commission Buddhist artworks at Mogao and the other Buddhist sites, introducing new Buddhist ideology and iconography to the grottoes. They also controlled the caravan traffic between Dunhuang and Khotan (in present-day Xinjiang, China), impeding the contact and goods exchanges between Tang China and the

\textsuperscript{52} Rong, “Dunhuang zai sichou zhilu shang de diwei 敦煌在丝绸之路上的地位,” Dunhuangxue shibajiang, 47.
\textsuperscript{54} Ouyang Xiu and Song Qi 欧阳修、宋祁, Xin Tangshu: Tubo Zhuan, vol. 216 新唐书·土蕃传 (卷二百一十六) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju chubanshe, 1975): 6101.
\textsuperscript{55} Duan, “Dunhuang Art in the First Half of the Tang Dynasty,” Dunhuang Art through the Eyes of Duan Wenjie, 131.
western regions. The palette of Buddhist cave art in Dunhuang, in particular, turned much lighter; malachite green and red ocher became the primary hues. From the late eighth century onward, the color scheme of the cave paintings at Mogao became standardized. To paint an image of bodhisattva, for instance, the artist always used pink for the tone of flesh, malachite and red ocher to suggest details of the attire, attribute, headdress and halo, and white or black to outline the figure. As seen in the main chamber of cave 45, in the double portraits of Guanyin and Dizang, this “reduced palette” became common after the invasion of the Tibetans (figs. 15 and 16). The frequent use of malachite and red ocher indicates these colors esteemed by the Tibetans. Cave 14, for example, was a typical cave temple that had probably been commissioned from native Tibetan artists. The interior space of the shrine was painted in the distinctive palette of malachite green interlaced with earthy brown, exhibiting the Esoteric Buddhism figures and iconographies.

The main chamber of Cave 45 must have experienced at least one renovation when the High-Tang style began to decline at Dunhuang, approximately right before or soon after the oasis town changed hands from the Tang Chinese to the Tibetans. By this time, innovative images and iconographies had been introduced to the grottoes, greatly enhancing the multicultural nature of the Buddhist art production. In Cave 45, this renovation occurred in the transitional period; it should have changed the original, devotional landscape of the cave temple, which had been left incomplete by the earlier Tang artists. The changed plan of its main shrine, in particular, should have suggested continuity and transformation. The discussion that follows concentrates on the iconography of the main chamber of Cave 45 before and after this renovation.

57 R. Whitfield, 85.
CHAPTER 3
THE TANG-PERIOD LANDSCAPE

Although there is little extant textual evidence indicating when Cave 45 was commissioned, it can be inferred that this cave was opened sometime between the late seventh and early eighth centuries by comparing it with other contemporary cave constructions. Of one-hundred-and-twenty-seven cave temples constructed between 618 and 781, approximately fourteen caves contain inscriptions signed and dated by patrons.\(^5\) Cave 45, particularly its main chamber, shares similarities with most High-Tang period cave shrines. Take Cave 217, for example. According to the donor images and texts left on the central altar of its main shrine, this cave was commissioned by the Yin’s (阴氏), one of the most renowned families in Dunhuang, during the years of Shenlong (705-706, the era of Holy Dragon between Empress Wu and Emperor Zhongzong, figs. 21 and 22).\(^6\)

The main chamber of Cave 45 resembles that of Cave 217 in many respects. First of all, they share a similar architectural plan. The main chamber of Cave 217 also looks like a cube capped with a four-sided sloping roof, which is usually described as “an inverted dipper.”\(^6\) The central niche in the back wall of both main shrines contains clay statues and murals that display the illusionistic splendor of Buddhist universes, an underlying theme for cave shrine commissions at Mogao. The content and distribution of Buddhist works preserved in the two main shrines is summarized in Table 3.1, which shows that their pictorial/sculptural plans share

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\(^5\) Duan, “Dunhuang Art in the First Half of the Tang Dynasty,” 133.
\(^6\) Duan, “Dunhuang Art in the First Half of the Tang Dynasty,” 133.
certain similarities: (1) the ceilings are covered with thousand-Buddha motifs; (2) painted statues of the Buddha and attendants were installed in the open niche; (3) the Western Paradise scene appears on the north wall of each cave; and (4) Mahayana Buddhist doctrines, like the *Lotus Sutra* and the *Sutra of Visualization on Amitabha Buddha* served as principal textual sources.

### 3.1 The Thousand-Buddha Illusionisms: The Ceiling

The ceiling of the main chamber of Cave 45 appears to have been treated in the same manner as Cave 217. On the ceiling of Cave 45, countless small images of the Buddha seated on lotus pedestals are arranged in an orderly fashion, facing in four directions (fig. 20). As they occupy the four slopes of the roof, their identical appearance over the head of the devotee likely symbolized the infinite Buddhist cosmos where Buddha’s visualizations exist in all directions.\(^{61}\) The roof of the main chamber of Cave 217 is also covered with a thousand-Buddha scene (fig. 21). The only difference lies in some ornamental details. While in Cave 217, extra bands with floral scrolls frame the infinite Buddha scenes along the ridges of the roof, in Cave 45, only one geometric pattern rims the decorated ceiling at its bottom.

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Table 3.1: Layouts and Subjects of Buddhist Art, Caves 45 and 217

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cave No. Position</th>
<th>217 (Main Chamber)</th>
<th>Scriptural Source</th>
<th>45 (Main Chamber)</th>
<th>Scriptural Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ceiling</td>
<td>Thousand-Buddha</td>
<td>the <em>Lotus</em></td>
<td>Thousand-Buddha</td>
<td>the <em>Lotus</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Niche (west)</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Shakyamuni</td>
<td>the <em>Lotus</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West-wall Edge</td>
<td>Shizhi (left)</td>
<td>the <em>Sutra of Visualization on Amitabha</em></td>
<td>Guanyin (left)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Guanyin (right)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Dizang (right)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Wall</td>
<td>The Western Paradise (mid top); Shakyamuni preaching at Vulture peak (upper left); King Bimbisara and Queen Vaidehi’s imprisonment (lower left+bottom); Vaidehi’s sixteen visualizations (right)</td>
<td>the <em>Lotus</em>; the <em>Sutra of Visualization on Amitabha Buddha</em>; the <em>Amitabha Sutra</em></td>
<td>The Western Paradise (middle); Vaidehi’s sixteen visualizations (left); King Bimbisara and Queen Vaidehi’s imprisonment (right)</td>
<td>the <em>Sutra of Visualization on Amitabha Buddha</em>; the <em>Amitabha Sutra</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Wall</td>
<td>Illustrations of the <em>Lotus</em></td>
<td>the <em>Lotus</em></td>
<td>Guanyin+Guanyin as the universal savior</td>
<td>the <em>Lotus</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Wall (Doorway)</td>
<td>Guanyin as the universal savior</td>
<td>the <strong>Lotus</strong></td>
<td>Guanyin+Dizang (left)<em>; Guanyin with a donor? (right)</em></td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The emergence of the thousand-Buddha motif at the grottoes can be traced back to the late fifth century. In the rear chamber of Cave 275, one of the three earliest cave shrines carved at Mogao, images of the small seated Buddhas appear over the halo of the sculpted, cross-legged Maitreya (the Buddha of Future), along with paintings of bodhisattvas, flying apsaras and floral ornament (fig. 23). Presumably a Buddhist iconography introduced from the west via the travel routes, thousand-Buddha scenes had been continually executed by artists at the grottoes. The Mogao cave temples, therefore, were also well known as the Caves of the Thousand Buddhas.

By the late sixth century, the thousand-Buddha scenes became so predominant that sometimes small Buddha images covered up the interior walls between the principal sculptural programs (fig. 24). It became a convention of the Tang-period cave shrines that the infinite Buddha was always visualized overhead on the inverted-dipper ceilings, circling the exquisitely colored caisson in the center, as shown in Cave 45 and Cave 217. Unfortunately, at some time in the past the roof of Cave 217 collapsed, resulting in the loss of most of its original, refined mural paintings.

The ceiling of Cave 45, on the other hand, shows the craftsmanship achieved by the Tang masters. Stencils were extensively used for making multiple images of small Buddhas that were densely arranged in parallel lines oriented in the four primary directions (figs. 3 and 25). Therefore, it looks as if thousands of Buddhas have been conjured up over the vault of the Buddhist heaven. According to Mahayana theology, there are the infinite Buddha hovering over infinite universes and Shakyamuni, the historical Buddha himself, was an incarnation of the

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enlightenment, or the highest level of achieving the ultimate one (known as nirvana). Every living being has a potential to achieve this enlightenment as long as he/she persists in gaining merit through certain physical and mental practices. From this perspective, the countless Buddhas hovering on the ceiling of the shrine would have created a spectacular visual effect. Each small Buddha image represents a blessed universe that devotees desired to reach. It seems that the artist intended to visualize an illusion of the Buddhist heaven over the head of devotees who prayed before the central niche (fig. 22). It should have made him/her feel closer to the enlightened one by gazing up at the thousand Buddha illuminated above.

3.2 Shakyamuni Preaching at Vulture Peak: The Central Niche

Below the ceiling of the infinite Buddha, Shakyamuni is seen with six attendants in the open niche of Cave 45. The niche has a semi-cylindrical shape with a flat surface at the bottom, which also functions as an altar. The niche is large enough to occupy almost the entire wall on the west, leaving only one narrow edge on either side. One small pedestal-like platform protrudes from the lower portion of each edge, flanking the central altar at the corners (fig. 3).

Facing east towards the doorway, a group of seven painted stucco figures are placed in the open niche. They represent a visualization of the scene of Shakayamuni in his form of preaching on Vulture Peak, the first scene of the Lotus Sutra (Saddhara-pundarika Sutra). As one of the statues on the altar, Shakayamuni is seated on a high pedestal in the middle, and is attended by disciples, bodhisattvas and guardians standing at the sides. Each of the statues is brilliantly colored with corresponding decorative halos and with celestial beings painted behind them on the wall of the niche (fig. 5). Molded less than life size, all the figures are well

proportioned and gracefully balanced. The Buddha solemnly sits on a high pedestal with his legs crossed. He wears a Chinese robe over the kasaya (jiasha 袈裟 in Chinese, robes of Buddhist monks and nuns, originated in India). His right hand is raised in an Abhaya mudra, a symbol of fearlessness; the other hand is placed on his lap as if touching the earth (Bhumi-sparha mudra).65 The Buddha is calm and peaceful as he gazes down at the devotees with mercy. In contrast, the surrounding attendants show a variety of characteristics according to their own status. Disciple Jiaye (Kashyapa), who is known for his ascetic practices, stands to the north (right) of Shakyamuni (fig. 7). He is shown as a seasoned, skinny monk with wrinkles and lines in his forehead. Anan (Ananda), the youngest and smartest disciple of the Buddha, presents a smooth, plump face (fig. 26). He wears a short, jacket-like garment beneath his monastic robe, which absorbs elements of traditional central-Asian clothing, like the narrow sleeves and the round collar flared slightly from the waist.66 Contrasting to the gracefulness and feminization of the bodhisattvas, the two heavenly kings placed outermost represent the powerful and awe-inspiring side of the world of Buddha. Dressed in suits of armor, each features a ferocious face with wrinkled brow, protruding eyeballs and exaggerated moustache; each stands on a small demon trembling at his feet. Together, the peaceful Buddha, the pious disciples, the elegant bodhisattvas and the furious guardians epitomize a harmonious and ideal world of Buddhahood in which all human sensations are encompassed and ultimately transcended.

Described in the first chapter of the Lotus Sutra, Shakyamuni is preaching the words of truth at Rajagriha on Vulture Peak to a gathering of “monks, nuns, bodhisattvas, laymen,

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laywomen, heavenly beings, dragons…human and nonhuman beings” 67 Over the head of Shayamuni, Prabhutaratna (the Buddha of the Past) is presented sitting before a stupa with Shakyamuni, surrounded by an entourage of bodhisattvas and celestial beings arranged in rows (fig. 6). This narrative displays another episode of the Lotus Sutra: Prabhutaratna Buddha visualizes himself at the Many Treasures Stupa when Shakyamuni is teaching the canon to the multitude. 68 In order to enhance the sense of a miracle, the artist set up the scene above floating clouds with all the holy figures radiated by flowers, jewels and rays of holy light ejected overhead of the double Buddha.

Introduced to China as early as in the third century, the Lotus Sutra became an influential Mahayana doctrine in China, particularly after Kumarajiva’s translation (334-413) in the early fifth century. Kumarajiva was an eminent Mahayana monk from Kucha, in present-day Xinjiang. 69 In the Mogao grottoes, narratives from Buddhist sutras began to replace scenes of the Buddha’s life, jataka tales and devotional images of Maitreya from the late sixth century onward. Illustrations of the Lotus Sutra, in particular, became major themes of cave art between the Sui and the early Tang period. Meanwhile, the Mahayana Buddhist sect founded by Zhiyi (538-97), the Tiantai School flourished all over the nation. The Tiantai believers venerated the Lotus Sutra and regarded its doctrine as the highest teaching of the Buddha. 70 This native Chinese Buddhist sect received particular support from the emperors of the Sui dynasty (581-618) and continued to expand under the reign of the Tang. The increasing number of illustrations based on the Lotus

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70 Ibid., 178.
Sutra found in cave shrines between the seventh and eighth century testifies to the dominance of the Tiantai faith and the popularity of the sutra among the devotees at the oasis.

When Caves 45 and 217 were under construction, monumental representations of sutra narratives began to occupy entire walls, such as the preaching Shakyamuni assembly in the central niche. Unfortunately, all statues have been removed from the niche of Cave 217. All that remains is a seated Shakyamuni, which has perhaps been repainted by an awkward seventeenth-century hand (fig. 21). Remaining mural fragments on the surface of the niche, however, show three halos at either side of the Buddha, indicating he was once accompanied by an entourage of at least six attendants as well. The original sculptural program of Cave 217 probably displayed the first scene of the Lotus Sutra: Shakyamuni preaching at Vulture Peak, like that seen in Cave 45. While the large, carved niche itself might have symbolized a rocky mount, the surrounding stucco statues together with the celestial beings painted behind and above would have represented the multitudes who presented themselves at the mountain to listen to the true words. A sacred illusion, therefore, would have been conjured up over the altar and it would not be hard for a devotee to imagine himself as one of the listeners when he knelt and prayed before the altar. Two more statues might have been originally placed on the platforms at the corners, to make the sculptural grouping even grander (fig. 27). Such an assumption can be confirmed by the setting of the central niche surviving in another Tang-period cave temple at Mogao. In Cave 328, two minor bodhisattvas are seen kneeling on the side-pedestals. They face to each other and flank the sculptural group of Shakyamuni with disciples and bodhisattvas within the niche. Unfortunately, neither Cave 45 nor Cave 217 has surviving statue on the pedestals by the side of the niche now.

With everything considered, the sculptural and pictorial program housed in the niche of Cave 45 has a pronounced underlying theme of the Mahayana Buddhist faith: the blissful world

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of Buddhahood welcomes every living being who is devoted to the word of the truth, as represented by the doctrine of the *Lotus Sutra*. Simultaneously, the prominence of the Tiantai School reached its peak in China at the turn of the eighth century. Introduced to Japan during the late Nara period (710-794), where it was referred to as Tendai, the teaching had also spread to Dunhuang, a distant oasis stop on the periphery of northwest China, effecting the outlook of devotional art there in the isolated grottoes.  

Stylistically speaking, the painted sculptures, in particular, represent the aesthetic interest and craftsmanship of accomplished Tang artists.

3.3 Amitabha’s Western Paradise: The North Wall

Along with the preaching-Buddha scene, the murals on the north wall of the main chamber of Cave 45 are also considered masterpieces of the High-Tang style. Divided into three sections by two vertical lines of floral ornaments, the central panel shows Amitabha’s Western Paradise (fig. 9). In this painting, Amitabha Buddha is seen presiding over his blessed domain, known as the Western Paradise or the Pure Land. This land of bliss is portrayed within a palatial setting where grand mansions are covered with jade and gems, stupas are made of glass, and celestial orchestras play beautiful tunes in the foreground. The bodhisattvas Guanyin and Shizhi, recognized as Amitabha’s assistants in this paradise, each sit on a throne to either side of the Buddha.  

The Western Paradise served as an ideal ending particularly for the Pure Land believers. Since the beginning of the Tang period, the Pure Land faith had grown into a popular branch of Mahayana Buddhism. It claimed that devotees would be reborn in the paradise of Amitabha by abiding to certain moral principles, doing good deeds and practicing specific

meditative works, which in many ways conformed to the fundamental doctrines of the *Lotus Sutra*. Paintings that flank the central panel are narratives associated with the Pure Land faith, in particular, King Bimbisara and Queen Vaidehi’s Imprisonment on the right and Vaidehi’s Sixteen Visualizations on the left. These two narratives are derived from the *Sutra of Visualization on Amitabha Buddha*, which is considered one of the three principle scriptures of the Pure Land School. King Bimbisara and his wife, Vaidehi, were imprisoned after the king’s rule was overturned by his son. The desperate queen prays to Shakyamuni requesting ways to leave her suffering and be reborn in Amitabha’s land of bliss (fig. 28). Shakyamuni, who is preaching on the Vulture Peak, visualizes himself and disciple Ananda at the queen’s side, where they teach Vaidehi sixteen meditative ways to achieve the blessed domain of the Amitabha.

Similar to the imagery of the preaching Shakyamuni, the adoration of Amitabha’s Pure Land serves as another major theme frequently produced at the grottoes between the seventh and eighth century. Usually executed on one, or sometimes to two side walls of the rock-cut shrine, Amitabha’s paradise was highly preferred among a variety of paradise scenes, due to the popularity of the Pure Land faith. The iconography of the Pure Land ideology seems to have been established at the same time. While the Amitabha triad was enthroned in a sumptuous palatial setting framed by architectural elements, precious trees, lotus ponds and passageways with railings at both sides, the illustrations of the story of Queen Vaidehi accompanied the paradise scene at the sides as “visual aids” or interpretations to articulate the text. What interests me about the narratives here, however, is that the setting and the figures have been

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74 Thirteen, instead of sixteen meditations are illustrated to the left of the paradise scene. See Zhongguoshiku: Dunhuang mogaoku, Vol. 3, 234.
75 Watson trans., “Translator’s Introduction,” x.
portrayed in the Tang style, even though the story was originally from ancient India. The
structures are in typical seventh-century style and Queen Vaidehi is dressed like a noble lady of
the Tang court (fig. 29). Her hair is styled into a bun adorned with a peony on the top and her
garment is made of woven silk with broad sleeves and floral patterns embroidered along the hem.

The fixed format of sutra illustrations is often referred to as bianxiang (变相), or
“transformation scenes.”78 According to a study by Wu Hung, the term bianxiang has been
exclusively designated for a series of pictorial renderings that center on a certain Buddhist text.
Since the lower portion of the mural has been destroyed, we are not able to read the whole story
from the images remaining on the wall. The main shrine of Cave 217, however, houses another
bianxiang of the Pure Land that can provide us with a more detailed view of the subordinate
narratives (fig. 30). Also rendered on the north wall of the main chamber, the composition looks
a little different from that in Cave 45. The narratives frame the central paradise scene not only at
the sides but also at the bottom. Space has been saved by the artist for an image of the preaching
Shakyamuni at Vulture Peak, when the story of Queen Vaidehi is told at the beginning of the
Sutra of Visualization on Amitabha Buddha.79 Shown on the upper left of the panel, the Buddha
assembly is surrounded by green mountains and auspicious clouds. According to the sutra,
before the eyes of the desperate queen, Shakyamuni conjures up an illusion of the blissful land
over which Amitabha Buddha presides. Hence, she resumes her belief in the power of the
Buddha and dedicates herself to mediation, which ultimately facilitates her rebirth in the land of
no pain.

78 Ibid., 119.
3.4 Devotional Landscape Based on the *Lotus Sutra*

The artist who had integrated the image of the preaching Buddha into the *bianxiang* of the Amitabha’s Pure Land must have acknowledged the difficult of visualizing the visions depicted in the Buddhist scriptures. Each text contains parables, metaphors or dialogues with no explicit spacio-temporal existence, as time and space are meaningless in Buddhist worldview. Everything in the past, present and future is transcended as emptiness. To perceive the emptiness is one thing, to convey it is another. In order to make sense of all the seemingly irrelevant episodes shown in the enclosed space, the artist needed to find a “structural bedrock” to thread separate Mahayana iconographies into an integrated whole. The sermon of Shakyamuni at Vulture Peak is this “bedrock” in the visual form which repetitively appears in the illustrations of Cave 217. From the perspective of the Buddhist text, the “bedrock” is the *Lotus Sutra*, the most comprehensive and influential discourse of Mahayana thought venerated by most Mahayana branches, like the Tiantai and the Pure Land sects. In fact, the main chamber of Cave 217 can be described as dedicated to the *Lotus*, for the paintings executed on the wall of the other two sides are essential to the subject. The illustrations on the south wall are described by Eugene Y. Wang as “by far the most ingenious and exemplary composition based on the *Lotus Sutra*” (fig. 31). A number of vignettes portray parables derived from the text, like the burning house at the lower right and the phantom city at the upper right. The central panel doubtless exhibits the sermon of Shakyamuni at Vulture Peak.

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82 E. Y. Wang, “Textual Space and Pictorial Reconstruction,” 79.
On the east wall of Cave 217 is shown the bodhisattva Guanyin as the Universal Savior, based on the twenty-fifth chapter of the text (fig. 32). In this section, the Buddha glorifies Guanyin’s compassion and incredible capability for converting living beings and saving them from all sorts of perils. Specifically, the artist painted Guanyin’s various manifestations to the south (right) of the doorway, and executed the deity’s saving scenes to the north (left). Interestingly enough, over the entranceway, the assembly of the preaching Buddha again shows up, as if the Enlightened One with his attendants has witnessed what is happening here. Unfortunately, part of this mural was destroyed during the tenth century when a donor image was added by the side of the doorway.83

The original, visual plan of the main chamber of Cave 45 also reflects the ideal of Shakyamuni’s last sermons, although not as explicit as that of Cave 217. As discussed earlier, the original decoration of Cave 45 was not completed and some mural scenes were added to the main shrine in later periods, which might have caused the ambiguity; secondly, we do not see “structural bedrocks” used to interlace one scriptural bianxiang with another. Nevertheless, the theological connections between the eminent Lotus Sutra and other popular Mahayana texts, like the Amitabha Sutra and Sutra of Visualization on Amitabha Buddha, still look apparent. As has been pointed out by J. L. Davidson, iconographic elements derived from the Lotus Sutra began to be stressed in the grottoes in the early sixth century, like the scene of infinite Buddha and the gathering of multiple Buddhist figures, which were also used for illustrating other relevant Mahayana scriptures.84 The Tang-period renderings in the main chamber of Cave 45 suggest a highly schematic plan shared by Cave 217 and many other contemporary cave shrines: the

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83 Dunhuang yanjiuyuan 敦煌研究院, Dunhuang shiku neirong zonglu 敦煌石窟内容总录, 86.
central niche contains the preaching Buddha group, either sculpted or painted, while a range of Buddhist paradise-scenes occupy the side walls, from Amitabha’s western paradise, the Medical Buddha’s eastern paradise, to Maitreya’s earthly paradise. Together they visualize an infinite Buddhist cosmos encompassing vast spatial-temporal dimensions with one Buddha presiding over each of the transcended realms. That is the underlying theme of the *Lotus Sutra*.

On the whole, it can be concluded that Cave 45 originated in a commission that dates between the late seventh and early eighth centuries. At approximately the same time, Cave 217 was also under construction, patronized by the Yin family. Their images rendered in rows can still be seen along the lower portion of the central altar. Unfortunately, no original donor images survive in Cave 45. Its main chamber, however, preserves the most spectacular Buddhist sculptures and wall paintings of the High-Tang style. Its overall iconographic plan, though modified by later additions, displays an illusion inspired by the ultimate world depicted in the *Lotus Sutra*. The discussion that follows examines the later iconography that emerged in the cave when the brilliant Tang style gave way to new interests and tastes in cave art. Nevertheless, we will still see the texts and imagery of the Mahayana classics continued to influence the artists of the later periods.

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CHAPTER 4
THE POST-TANG-PERIOD LANDSCAPE

The artworks under discussion in this chapter are recognized as late additions to the main chamber of Cave 45, at a time when the Tang Dynasty began to decline after the Rebellion of An Lushan in the mid-eighth century. One aftermath of this political upheaval was that the Tang court lost direct control over Dunhuang. This far-flung outpost on the travel routes was soon occupied by the Tibetans, and it was not again under Chinese control until the mid-ninth century. Nevertheless, Buddhist commissions continued at Mogao and other grottoes in Dunhuang during and after the reign of Tibetans. Consequently, the cave art of Dunhuang entered a new era. Quite a number of unfinished Tang-period caves, whose work had been halted during the wartime, were resumed. Cave 45 was perhaps among these newly revived cave shrines. During this renovation, new images were added to the enclosed space and the iconographic plan of its main shrine was modified.

The new renderings are represented by the iconic image of Guanyin surrounded by narratives of his universal salvation on the south wall, and the double-portrait of the bodhisattvas Guanyin and Dizang on either side of the central niche (figs. 10, 18 and 19). As discussed previously, these images differed from the earlier Tang-period renderings in at least two respects. Since the issue of pigments has been discussed in Chapter 2, it is time to turn to the iconographic changes introduced by these new additions.

87 Shi, 231-2.
88 Sha, 25.
4.1 Guanyin as the Universal Savior: The South Wall

Based on the original, Tang-period plan, another paradise scene, possibly surrounded by associated sutra narratives, or bianxiang, should have occupied the south wall of the main chamber of Cave 45, corresponding to Amitabha’s Pure Land scene on the opposite side. Instead of a Buddhist paradise, a large portrait of the bodhisattva Guanyin amid an earthly landscape setting is seen on the south wall (fig. 10). Adorned with jewels and fine draperies, the Bodhisattva of Compassion stands solemnly under an embellished canopy. The deity crowns a small Amitabha Buddha over his headdress and carries a flask in his left hand.\textsuperscript{89} In the background, vignettes are displayed in a panoramic landscape. In each of the vignettes, the bodhisattva is shown in his varied manifestations preaching to the pious or relieving them from worldly perils and misfortunes, like fire, drowning, robbery, illness or childlessness, whenever his name is invoked or his sound is heard.\textsuperscript{90} Buddhist texts are provided in cartouches that accompany each of the episodes, directing the viewer’s eye from one vignette to the next (figs. 10 and 12). These texts, excerpted from the twenty-fifth chapter of the \textit{Lotus Sutra}, were specifically dedicated to Guanyin, together with the pictorial scenes to glorify his compassionate virtue and capacity for saving people from their miserable lives.\textsuperscript{91}

At first glance, this rendering looks like a copy of that shown on the east wall of Cave 217 (fig. 32). Both images address the same subject and share a similar format, occupying almost an entire wall. But there are distinctions as well. Besides the contrasting color schemes, the mural painting housed in Cave 45 shows the bodhisattva Guanyin as a primary divinity,

\textsuperscript{89} Chun-fang Yu, “Scriptural Sources,” 43.
\textsuperscript{91} Chun-fang Yu, “Scriptural Sources,” 37.
which represents an unusual pictorial example of the Tang-period cave art in Dunhuang. Most often, the deity’s salvations were a part of the sutra illustrations and shared one pictorial space with other scenes from the canon, like the treatment in Cave 217. Over the doorway of Cave 217, Shakyamuni Buddha with attendants is shown in the center, while smaller narratives associated with the bodhisattva are placed at either side. No formal image of Guanyin is shown. The scene of the Many Treasure Stupa (多重宝塔) appearing on the right of the Shakyamuni assembly, in particular, betrays the mind of the Tang master who had set up the composition. According to the *Lotus Sutra*, the bodhisattva Guanyin is offered a precious necklace from the bodhisattva Wujinyi (无尽意, Inexhaustible Intent), another deity attending the Buddha at Vulture Peak, who is deeply moved by the Buddha’s words of Guanyin. Unable to decline the offering, Guanyin divides the necklace into two and bestows them on the Many Treasure Stupa in which Shakyamuni and Prabhataratna Buddha are worshipped side by side. The layout of the east-wall image at Cave 217, therefore, was centered on visualizing the narrative of the doctrine itself.

The composition of the wall painting in Cave 45, on the contrary, focuses on the bodhisattva himself. A formal, iconic image of Guanyin replacing the Shakyamuni assembly is shown in the center of the wall, surrounded by narratives exclusively dedicated to the deity. This arrangement adopted the established format of the Buddhist *bianxiang* that was normally used for illustrating an entire sutra, like the *bianxiang* of Amitabha’s Pure Land shown on the opposite wall (fig. 9). The mural on the south wall of Cave 45 is actually among the earliest renderings of Guanyin’s portrait integrated into scriptural narratives in the grottoes.

Prior to Guanyin’s image as an independent deity, the most characteristic representation of this bodhisattva found at the cave temples was either as an attendant at the side of

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Shakyamuni or Amitabha Buddha, in company with the bodhisattva Shizhi, or as a minor deity of the Buddhist domain whose image is frequently shown with individual donors at marginal places of the caves. Take a mural scene located in the main shrine of Cave 205, for example (fig. 33). Executed on the back wall with some other sutra illustrations, this image shows a noblewoman offering a jewel to the bodhisattva Guanyin. Capped with a flaming halo over his shoulder, Guanyin is shown upon a lotus pedestal and surrounded by auspicious clouds. Framed by decorative bands, this independent, intimate scene had partly been blocked by the colossal statues placed on the central throne of the shrine, whose composition recalls the unfinished image of Guanyin painted on the east wall of Cave 45 (fig. 14). At one time in the past, the bodhisattva in Cave 45 perhaps was also accompanied by a donor shown at his feet. Unfortunately, the lower portion of this mural painting has been so badly defaced that we do not exactly know if it was commissioned at the request of a certain patron. What these two surviving Tang-period renderings of Guanyin suggest, however, is that the bodhisattva Guanyin had become a popular object of worship in the oasis town from the sixth century onward.

Hierarchically speaking, the iconography of the bodhisattva Guanyin found during and prior to the Tang period was subordinate to the imagery of the Buddha, precisely conforming to the basic doctrine of Mahayana Buddhist theology. Accordingly, prior to the eighth century, images of the bodhisattvas had never possessed so significant a position as the Buddha images in the context of the cave temples at Mogao.

The situation began to change in the post-Tang era in Dunhuang. Based on Wu Hung’s study of Buddhist bianxiang at the grottoes, the number of iconic images of the bodhisattva

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Guanyin continually increased from the late seventh century onward.\textsuperscript{94} At the same time, the text of the so-called “Guanyin Sutra” began to circulate at the oasis town. Buddhist sutra copies found in the Dunhuang manuscript collections indicate that the chapter addressing the bodhisattva Guanyin was often separated from the \textit{Lotus Sutra} and was venerated as an independent Buddhist canon (fig. 37).\textsuperscript{95} In this respect, the monumental representation of Guanyin amid narratives of his salvation in Cave 45 suggests an adapted type of \textit{bianxiang}. Probably for the first time this beloved bodhisattva received a dedication equal to that of a Buddha in the context of a rock-cut Buddhist shrine. As mentioned, Dunhuang fell into turmoil in the latter half of the eighth century when the Tibetans began to invade the west border of the Tang Empire. Guanyin, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, in particular, appealed to the inhabitants who lived in these difficult times. His image as a savior relieving sentient beings from all sorts of misery and misfortunes, would have offered comfort and hope to the inhabitants of the captured town. Indeed this deity bestowed safety to his followers, for the Buddhist Tibetans spared the oasis town from massacre and destruction. Dunhuang was eventually seized in peace.\textsuperscript{96} Under the rule of the Tibetans, Dunhuang continued to serve as a caravan station of the travel routes. Buddhist commissions at the grottoes and at other Buddhist sites of the oasis town were also revived. It was probably under this historical circumstance that a monumental image dedicated to Guanyin was commissioned in the main chamber of Cave 45.

\textsuperscript{94} Wu, “What is Bianxiang 变相? On the Relationship between Dunhuang Art and Dunhuang Literature,” 129.
\textsuperscript{95} R. Whitfield, 124.
\textsuperscript{96} Rong, “Dunhuang zai sichouzhilu shangde diwei,” \textit{Dunhaungxue shibaijiang}, 47.
4.2 The Pairing of Guanyin and Dizang: The Edge of the West Wall

Besides the bodhisattva Guanyin as the universal savior, a double-portrait of the bodhisattvas Guanyin and Dizang situated at the edge of the central niche is also considered a post-Tang rendering. Executed over the paintings in the High-Tang style, the pairing of Guanyin with Dizang did not become a common motif in the grottoes until the late eighth century.\(^97\)

Unlike Guanyin, who had received veneration as early as the second century in India, the bodhisattva Dizang had an “obscure origin” in the homeland of Buddhism.\(^98\) According to Zhiru Ng’s survey, Dizang was first glorified in sinicized Buddhist texts between the late fifth and the early sixth century, represented by the *Scripture on the Ten Wheels* (十轮经).\(^99\) The sutra describes Dizang as a *Sramana* (monk), who carries a flaming, wish-granting jewel in each hand. As heir to Shakyamuni, the bodhisattva had been entrusted by the Buddha to transform the sentient beings in the six realms of existences, or the six paths of rebirth.\(^100\) Due to the widespread of the doctrine, possibly by advocators of Sanjie jiao (三阶教), the cult of Dizang flourished in central China.\(^101\) Devotional works found at Buddhist sites in Henan, Shaanxi and

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\(^{100}\) The six paths of rebirth is also known as the six realms of existence. In Buddhist cosmology, it represents an endless cycle of reincarnation and death that a sentient being will experience from one to another. The realm that a sentient being will be reborn after death is determined by the karma the being gained in the past life. The six realms are the realm of god, human, demon, animal, hungry ghost and hell. See Zhiru, “Chapter 2 Cultic Beginnings Reconsidered,” *The Making of a Savior Bodhisattva: Dizang in Medieval China*, 71.
\(^{101}\) Sanjie jiao is known as a Buddhist movement occurred in the sixth century which had encouraged the formation and development of the Dizang cult in China. See Zhiru, “Chapter 2 Cultic Beginnings Reconsidered,” 55-61.
Sichuan attest that the iconography of Dizang had been completely established by the late seventh century (fig. 34).

The imagery of Dizang as the lord of the six paths of rebirth was also introduced to Dunhuang, probably along with the circulation of the *Scripture on the Ten Wheels*. From the ninth century onward, Dizang began to appear on the ceilings or walls of antechambers at the grottoes, usually in conjunction with other bodhisattvas.

A mural painting housed in Cave 196, for example, visualizes the bodhisattvas Dizang, Guanyin and Vajrapani in one composition (fig. 35). The cave temple was commissioned between 892 and 898 when the Tibetans had been defeated by the Guiyijun. Framed by elaborate floral patterns, the three divinities, from left to right, are Vajrapani, Guanyin and Dizang. Each figure poses on a lotus pedestal and is framed by a brilliant nimbus in the background. Compared to the other two bodhisattvas, however, Dizang was painted as a monk with a shaven head and wearing a sinicized *kasaya*. Four cloud-shaped streams are emitted from his body, three on the right and one on the left. In Buddhist iconography, each stream symbolizes a path of rebirth in the *Saha* world (the existence of sentient beings as an endless cycle of death and rebirth from hell to heaven). Therefore, six streams instead of four should have emanated from the body of Dizang, as shown in a stone relief of Dizang at Yaowangshan, Shaanxi (fig. 34).

No space between Dizang and Guanyin was spared for the two extra paths, otherwise, the streams might have overlapped with Guanyin painted in the center. Both Vajrapani and Guanyin received continuous worship long before the bodhisattva Dizang was introduced to the pantheon of Buddhism.

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103 Zhiru, “Chapter 4 Art and Epigraphy,” 124.
Devotional art found in north India proves that since the early years of Mahayana Buddhism, Avalokiteshvara and Vajrapani had served as the primary attendants of the Buddha. While Avalokiteshvara, known as the lotus bearer, represents the compassion of the Buddha, Vajrapani, equipped with a thunderbolt, symbolizes the strength or wisdom of the Buddha. Dizang, on the other hand, is more than likely a contribution of Chinese Buddhism from the fifth century at the earliest. Nevertheless, visual evidence found in the Dunhuang grottoes attests that no later than the late ninth century, the bodhisattva Dizang, like Guanyin and Vajrapani, had become a primary deity worshipped in the Buddhist center of Dunhuang. In charge of the paths of reincarnation, Dizang was particularly worshipped in folk culture as the savior of the underworld, whose salvific ability transformed the deceased.

Returning to the double-portrait of the bodhisattvas in Cave 45, Guanyin and Dizang flank the Shakyamuni assembly at either side of the central niche (figs. 18 and 19). Based on a standard, Tang-period plan, the two deities should have been the bodhisattvas Guanyin and Shizhi, or perhaps Wenshu (Manjusri) and Puxian (Samantabhadra). These four bodhisattvas are referred to in the *Lotus Sutra* as the principle attendants of the preaching Buddha at the Vulture Peak. As such, they were usually regarded as the representatives of Mahayana Buddhist ideals. The commission of the images of Guanyin and Dizang, however, was not based on any scriptural reference but the request of a layman called Suo Tao. Probably a native of Dunhuang living at the turn of the ninth century, Suo bestowed wishes and regards on his parents and other deceased beings, according to the brief inscriptions remaining on either side of the bodhisattva.

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108 Dunhuang yanjiuyuan, *Dunhuang shiku neirong zonglu* 敦煌石窟内容总录, 16.
By Suo’s time, the devotee’s enthusiasm in the pursuit of Buddhist ideal lands seemed to have decreased. Instead, we see an increasing interest in worshipping individual deities who had been endowed with different characteristics and powers. While Guanyin had long been venerated as a savior of living beings who suffer earthly misfortunes, Dizang was believed to be the lord of the domain of underworld who had mercy even on the “the damned.”

The artist who received this commission, however, adjusted the new icons into the established iconographic setting of the cave, suggesting a converted theological world of the Buddhahood. Even though there is no mention of the bodhisattva Dizang in the text of the *Lotus Sutra*, he can be incorporated into the already huge assembly of the Buddha at Vulture Peak, as the *Scripture of the Ten Wheels* has legitimized Dizang’s salvific ability comparing it to that of Guanyin. From the perspective of a donor like Suo, the bodhisattva Dizang, like Guanyin, Shizhi and Wenshu, was eminent enough to attend Shakyamuni’s sermon. In short, both Dizang and Guanyin were the objects of increasing popularity among the devotees of the oasis town. Their images were also painted on the north half of the east wall of the main chamber, probably commissioned by contemporaries of Suo (fig. 15).

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4.3 Life Savior vs. Soul Savior

Between the ninth and tenth centuries, Dunhuang witnessed a rising popularity in the sponsoring of images of individual Buddhist deities. The Bodhisattvas like Guanyin and Dizang, in particular, appealed to the demands and interests of devotees, when the oasis town was bustling with caravans, pilgrims, and other travelers moving between China and the west.¹¹⁰

The bodhisattva Guanyin was undoubtedly the most beloved deity in the pantheon of Buddhism at the time. The iconography of Guanyin as a universal savior, derived from the Mahayana doctrines, in particular, was a favorite subject dedicated to the bodhisattva’s unsurpassed compassion for all sentient beings. Surviving visual and textual materials found at Dunhuang prove that Guanyin played an important role in Buddhist belief and the practices of devotees at the oasis. One vignette in the background of the monumental image of Guanyin in Cave 45, for instance, shows a caravan of Turkic merchants with their cargo attacked by three armed robbers of Chinese appearance (fig. 12). This narrative vividly reflects one of the perilous situations that international traders were exposed to. Other threats included severe weather, wild beasts and shortages of food, water and medicine, especially when travelers crossed the deadly Taklamkan desert, the innermost area of Eurasia (fig. 38).¹¹¹ If the caravans had safely reached Dunhuang, one of the outposts resting on the east edge of Taklamkan, they would always pay homage to the nearby pilgrimage site, for example, the Mogao cave temples, situated some fifteen miles southeast of the oasis town.¹¹² The pious would have knelt before the icon of the

¹¹² Ibid., 23-4.
Bodhisattva of Compassion, in particular, and offered thanksgivings and prayed for safety and protection in their next journey.\textsuperscript{113}

Buddhist banners and devotional images painted on fabrics and paper and surviving in the Dunhuang manuscript collection also suggest that between the ninth and tenth century the bodhisattva Guanyin ranked as the most popular object of worship among a number of Buddhist deities, such as the bodhisattvas Dizang (Ksitigarbha), Wenshu (Manjusri) and Puxian (Samantabhadra).\textsuperscript{114} His fame had even overshadowed the eminence of the Buddha. Take a tenth-century silk painting for example (fig. 39).\textsuperscript{115} Now preserved in the British Museum, London, this drawing shows a six-armed Guanyin seated on a lotus throne behind an altar. Adorned with a small statue of Amitabha over his head, the bodhisattva poses in the preaching mudra with attributes held in his minor hands. Below the altar, four devotees of a family kneel in devotion. The husband offers a burning censer on the right while his son holds a banner behind; on the other side, the wife clasps her hands in prayer, attended by a maid. In the background, six pictorial narratives indicate the salvific power of the bodhisattva in relieving from perils. From left to right and top to bottom, respectively, a man is saved from a snake; two figures save a man from execution; two men covering their heads are escaping from a storm; and a man is shown surviving a fire. Together with the central, six-armed Guanyin, the composition of this silk painting is reminiscent of a simplified version of Guanyin bianxiang shown in Cave 45 at the Mogao. At one time, this devotional image was probably worshiped in one of the private cave shrines near Dunhuang, along with those permanent artworks of the rock-cut shrines, for the

\textsuperscript{113} Evidence of the cult of Avalokiteshvara/Guanyin is also found at several other pilgrimage sites along the travel routes, like the caves at Maijishan, Gansu, China and at Aurangabad in western Deccan, India. See Pia Brancaccio, “Buddhist Practice at Aurangabad in the Sixth Century,” in The Buddhist Caves at Aurangabad: Transformations in Art and Religion (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011): 125-56; A. L. Juliano and Judith A. Lerner ed., Monks and Merchants: Silk Road Treasures from Northwest China, 196-8.


\textsuperscript{115} Waley, “Catalogue,” 4.
welfare of an entire family.\textsuperscript{116} It provides us with a vivid scene of how local devotees performed Buddhist practices in their daily life. Multiplied on portable, less-costly mediums, this type of icon image must have been extremely popular in the oasis town during the post-Tang era.

The bodhisattva Dizang, on the other hand, became a primary object of worship in the context of Chinese Buddhism between the six and the seventh century.\textsuperscript{117} By this time, Chinese Buddhism, in turn, had exerted an impact on Central Asia, Tibet, and India.\textsuperscript{118} Ksitigarbha, the Sanskrit counterpart of the bodhisattva Dizang, was a relatively late creation of Tantric Buddhism that came into predominance during the Post-Gupta era (ca. 500-750).\textsuperscript{119} Dizang began to be glorified both in sinicized and esoteric Buddhist texts thereafter, like the Scripture of the Ten Wheels and Astamahabodhisattvamandala Sutra (Sutra of the Mandala of the Eight Great Bodhisattva, 八大菩萨曼茶罗经). Compared to other Buddhist sites near China proper, the imagery of Dizang preserved in Dunhunag shows more Esoteric influence as its communication with Tibet and India via the travel routes.

A ninth-century Buddhist cave at Yulin (over one hundred miles east of Dunhuang), for example, shows two distinctive images of Dizang/Ksitigarbha in one mural painting (fig. 40). Rendered on the east wall of the main shrine, a mandala of the Eight Great Bodhisattvas is shown in the middle. Enthroned Vairocana Buddha (大日如来佛) is surrounded by eight principle bodhisattvas who are connected by lotus stems.\textsuperscript{120} The reference for this painted mandala is the Astamahabodhisattvamandala Sutra, an esoteric doctrine translated into China by


\textsuperscript{117} Z. Ng, “Chapter 1 Antecedents of Dizang as Ksitigarbha,” \textit{The Formation and Development of Dizang Cult}, 32.


\textsuperscript{120} The Eight Great Bodhisattvas are recognized as Avalokiteshvara, Maitreya, Akasagarbha, Samantabhadra, Vajrapani, Manjusri, Sarvanivaranaaviskambhin and Ksitigarbha. See Z. Ng, 30.
Amoghavajra between 774-741. One portion is seriously damaged, but the south (left) part of the mural is in good condition. Chinese texts contained in the cartouches reveal that the divinity at the upper left is the bodhisattva Dizang, who is shown in characteristic Tantric form (fig. 41). Crowned with a high headdress, the bodhisattva’s long hair falls over his shoulders. Adorned with jewels, the bodhisattva carries a flaming pearl at his chest, an attribute exclusively his. To the left of the mandala stands another bodhisattva, who is also identified as Dizang. In his sinicized appearance, the bodhisattva is dressed in a checkered sakaya, carrying a medicine bowl in one hand and a staff in the other. This early ninth-century mural fragment found at Yulin suggests two sources for the iconography of Dizang, one coming from Tantric India and Tibet and the other is from central China.

The bodhisattva Dizang became increasingly popular in Dunhuang between the ninth and the tenth centuries, when his status as a lord of the underworld who can save those even in purgatory was strengthened. His image, therefore, was always accompanied by the ten kings of hell or with the bodhisattva Guanyin (figs. 42 and 43). It seems no texts address the pairing of these two bodhisattvas, although both Guanyin and Dizang are listed as the great eight bodhisattvas based on the esoteric doctrines. Their images had played important roles in the devotional life of Dunhuang during the post-Tang period as well. When Sir Aurel Stein (1862-1943) refers to the Buddhist paintings that he had found in the one of the caves in the early twentieth century, together with other manuscripts and sutra texts, he points out that the bodhisattva Dizang was one of the most popular devotional figures along with the bodhisattva

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121 Ibid., 29.
123 R. Whitfield, 45.
Guanyin and Wenshu (Manjusri). He comments that Dizang was “Avalokiteshvara’s only possible rival in popularity among the Bodhisattvas in the Buddhist Pantheon of the Far East.”

The pairing of Guanyin and Dizang, on the other hand, did not become a frequent devotional motif in Dunhuang until the post-Tang period. Actually, apart from the murals housed in Cave 45, the juxtaposition of the two bodhisattvas also appears in some other cave temples, for example, Cave 16 and 205 at Mogao, usually on the walls of antechamber. It is understandable that the pairing of Guanyin and Dizang became fashionable, since both address the two underlying spiritual demands of devotees: to live and to be saved. The two divinities had been worshiped separately as patron gods in their domains for quite a while, Guanyin as the savior of this earthly world and Dizang as the savior of the hell. A tenth-century Buddhist banner shows the two divinities seated side by side (fig. 43). The appearance of the bodhisattvas is quite different from their late-eighth-century prototypes shown in Cave 45, though. The one to the left is recognized as a six-armed Avalokiteshvara and, Dizang, wearing a hood, is a late image of the bodhisattva that did not appear in Dunhuang until the tenth century.

The introduction of the bodhisattva Dizang to the oasis town, as proved by the visual evidence of Dunhuang, derived from two different sources, the esoteric Indian via Tibet and China where both Tantric and Mahayana Buddhism flourished. The pairing of Dizang and Gunyin, in particular, suggests that a shift in devotional custom occurred during the post-Tang period in Dunhuang. By this time, individual bodhisattvas had begun to replace the Buddhahood becoming objects of worship in their own right, according to the patron’s personal interest rather than scriptural authority.

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125 Stein, 196.
126 Ibid., 197.
127 Zhiru, “Chapter 4 Art and Epigraphy,” 124.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION: CAVE 45 AS A RESHAPED BUDDHIST COSMOS

Cave 45 is one of the surviving Buddhist cave temples at the Mogao grottoes, Dunhuang. Its main shrine houses spectacular Buddhist works of art produced between the seventh and the ninth centuries. This study analyzes the overall visual plan of the main shrine and speculates the process of adornment occurred in this sacred space. It also discusses the iconographic characteristics and transformation of Buddhist art production manifested in Cave 45 and the devotional life of the medieval oasis town.

As one of many old Buddhist cave temples located along the travel routes between China and the west, Cave 45 had experienced prosperity and decline throughout its history. Pictorial and structural evidence found in the main shrine shows that the initial adornment began sometime between the late seventh and early eighth centuries. During this initial project, a series of works of art were accommodated into the cave temple by the Tang masters. When the artists were about to finish painting the decorative band along the edge of the central niche and an image of Guanyin on the wall to the south (right) of the entranceway, work was suspended. About that time, the Tibetans began to threaten the western border of the Tang dynasty and they finally conquered Dunhuang. The military turmoil did not destroy these beautifully adorned grottoes of the oasis town. On the contrary, the pious Tibetans continued to patronize Mogao and other nearby holy sites. The adornment in Cave 45 was very likely resumed at this time. New images were added by new artists and at the request of different donors. Similar to the previous commission, however, the artists were still not able to finish their job of covering the whole
space of the main shrine, maybe because they ran out pigments, the supply of which had largely
depended on the long-distance overland transport, or maybe the donor died or went bankrupt and
was no longer able to afford the commission. After all, life in this remote oasis town was never
easy. Approximately sixty years later, the Tibetans were finally defeated by the local army who
swore loyalty to the central government of China. Dunhuang, a garrison and outpost over one-
thousand miles away from China proper, was returned to the already problematic, shrinking
empire. Dunhuang enjoyed a brief peace under the reign of the Cao family (ca. 900-1000).  
Most old cave shrines were renovated as new grottoes were continued to be opened on the cliff
of Mogao. Cave 45, as one of the old caves, was restructured. The antechamber was probably
reconstructed and the doorway linking the main shrine and the antechamber was narrowed to
better protect the interior devotional icons and scenes. The plan of the main shrine, on the other
hand, seems to have remained as it was since the Tibetan time. No images were added to the
cave shrine thereafter, indicating it was regarded as an accomplished holy site where Buddhist
rites might be performed.

The main shrine of Cave 45 combines two subsequent decorative plans. The first project
took place between the late seventh and the early eighth centuries, when Dunhuang served as a
primary military outpost of the Tang Empire on the western periphery. In the golden age of
Buddhist art along the travel routes, the Tang masters adorned the sacred space with extremely
brilliant colors. Based on Mahayana doctrines like the Lotus Sutra, they visualized an image of
the ideal world in this isolated rock-cut cave. Below the ceiling of infinite Buddha, they showed
Shakyamuni preaching the words of truth at Vulture Peak in the presence of all the multitudes.
The content of the Buddha’s sermon was painted on the side walls, like Amitabha’s Pure Land of
West, and the compassion and competence of the bodhisattva Guanyin. The Tang masters

\[129\] Ma, 311.
intended to create a holy space resembling the enlightened, blessed land of Buddhahood, where all emotion, desire and reason have been encompassed.

The Tang artists did not complete this paradise on earth, however. They were forced to leave abruptly and they did not even have time to finish the decorative band around the central niche—the Vulture Peak in disguise. Dunhuang became unsafe by the mid-eighth century as the Tang armies retreated to central China. Art production at the grottoes, therefore, was suspended.

The second program at Cave 45 did not take place until approximately half a century later. By that time, Dunhuang was occupied by the Tibetans. New artists were commissioned to continue what had been left unfinished since the previous project. Inscriptions attached to some of the images suggest that several donors patronized this commission. One of the donors, Suo Tao, commissioned a pair of images, the bodhisattvas Guanyin and Dizang, on behalf of his deceased mother and other living beings. Presented on the left side of the central niche, Guanyin, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, was considered the savior of all suffering beings of this world. The bodhisattva Dizang was rendered on the right. He was a humble, monk-like bodhisattva whose status rose in the context of Chinese Buddhism. By Suo’s time, Dizang had been worshipped extensively in China. His image, in particular, was associated with the six paths of rebirth and the ten purgatories. Both Guanyin and Dizang had received devotion in the oasis town as they had mercy on the sentient beings, both living and dead.

In this respect, individual bodhisattvas replaced the paramount Buddha and became the new focus of worship. The promised land of bliss, no matter how ideal it could be, for most earthly beings, was a visional place and hardly approachable. The post-Tang artists actually expanded the dimensions of the visual world of Buddhism into three: the heavenly paradise, the earthly world and hell (underworld). When the infinite paradieses no longer served as a mere ideal end
and the anxiety of this life and the afterlife were more practically appreciated, the devotional landscape of the main shrine was reshaped. With the emergence of iconic images of Guanyin and Dizang, the enclosed space had been transformed into a peculiar spatial-temporal cosmos in which Buddhist heavens, the secular world and hells coexisted in harmony and functioned in their own right.
Fig. 1. Map of Dunhuang (the old city) with the Mogao Grottoes to the southeast, surveyed by Aurel Stein during his expeditions between 1900-1915 (S. Whitfield and U. Sims-Williams, *The Silk Road: Trade, Travel, War and Faith*, 228, fig. 30)
Fig. 2 Mogao Grottoes, Dunhuang, China
(Photograph taken from southeast to northwest, summer, 2012)
Fig. 3 Interior of the main chamber, Cave 45, Mogao Grottoes, Dunhuang, China, photography taken in 1943-44, The Mellon International Dunhuang Archive (James and Lucy Lo Photograph Archive, 045-2)
Fig. 4 Plan of Cave 45, Mogao Grottoes, Dunhuang, China
(Dunhuang wenwu yanjiusuo, Dunhuang Mogaoku, vol. 3, cat. 239)
Fig. 5 Shakyamuni preaching at Vulture Peak, central niche (facing west), main chamber, Cave 45, Mogao Grottoes, Dunhuang, China (Dunhuang wenwu yanjiusuo, *Dunhuang Mogaoku*, vol. 3, cat. 124)
Fig. 6 Shakayamuni and Prabhutaratna at the Stupa of Many Treasure, illustration of the *Lotus Sutra*, ceiling of the central niche (facing up), Cave 45, Mogao Grottoes, Dunhuang, China (Dunhuang wenwu yanjusuo, *Dunhuang Mogaoku, vol. 3*, cat. 125)
Fig. 7 Disciple, bodhisattva and heavenly king (detail), central niche, main chamber, Cave 45, Mogao Grottoes, Dunhuang (Dunhuang wenwu yanjiusuo, *Dunhuang Mogaoku, vol. 3, cat. 128*)
Fig. 8 Khasarpana Avalokiteshvara, from Sanarth, India, ca. 475 (Gupta period), National Museum, New Delhi (Susan L. Huntington, The Art of Ancient India: Buddhist, Hindu, Jain, 202, no. 10.22.)
Fig. 9 Amitabha preaching in the Western Paradise (middle); Queen Vaidehi’s sixteen meditations (left); King Bimbisara and Queen Vaidehi’s imprisonment (right) (facing north, lower right portion damaged), main chamber, Cave 45, Mogao Grottoes, Dunhuang, China (Dunhuang wenwu yanjiusuo, *Dunhuang Mogaoku, vol. 3*, cat. 136)
Fig. 10 Bodhisattva Guanyin as the Universal Savior (facing south, lower portion damaged), main chamber, Cave 45, Mogao Grottoes, Dunhuang, China (Dunhuang wenwu yanjiusuo, *Dunhuang Mogaoku, vol. 3*, cat. 131)
Fig. 11 Bodhisattva Guanyin as the Universal Savior (detail), south wall, main chamber, Cave 45, Mogao Grottoes, Dunhuang
(Dunhuang wenwu yanjiusuo, *Dunhuang Mogaoku*, vol. 3, cat. 135)
Fig. 12 Narrative of the *Guanyin Sutra* (detail), south wall, main chamber, Cave 45, Mogao Grottoes, Dunhuang, China
(Dunhuang wenwu yanjiusuo, *Dunhuang Mogaoku*, vol. 3, cat. 133)
Fig. 13 Gateway (facing east), Bodhisattva Guanyin and Dizang (north), Guanyin with a flaming halo (south), main chamber, Cave 45, Mogao Grottoes, Dunhuang, China. The Mellon International Dunhuang Archive (James and Lucy Lo Photograph Archive, DRA.C045.main.ew)
Fig. 14 Bodhisattva Guanyin with a flaming halo (detail), south to the entranceway (facing east), main chamber, Cave 45, Mogao Grottoes, Dunhuang, China. The Mellon International Dunhuang Archive (James and Lucy Lo Photograph Archive, DRA.C045.main ew)
Fig. 15 Bodhisattva Guanyin and Dizang (detail), north to the entrance way (facing east), main chamber, Cave 45, Mogao Grottoes, Dunhuang, China. The Mellon International Dunhuang Archive (James and Lucy Lo Photograph Archive, DRA.C045.main.ew)
Fig. 16 Six-armed Cintamanicakra Avalokiteshvara (upper left), Manjusri with one-thousand arms and bowls (upper right) and Offering bodhisattvas (bottom, facing east), Cave 14, 9th century, Mogao Grottoes, Dunhuang. China (The John C. and Susan L. Huntington Archive of Buddhist and Related Art, The Ohio State University)
Fig. 17 Sketches on the edge of central niche (detail), main chamber, Cave 45, Mogao Grottoes, Dunhuang, China. The Mellon International Dunhuang Archive (Northwestern University, DRA.C045.main ww)
Fig. 18 Bodhisattva Guanyin, south (left) edge of the central niche (detail), main chamber, Cave 45, Mogao Grottoes, Dunhuang, China. The Mellon International Dunhuang Archive (Northwestern University, DRA.C045.main.ww)
Fig. 19 Bodhisattva Dizang, north (right) edge of the central niche (detail), main chamber, Cave 45, Mogao Grottoes, Dunhuang, China. The Mellon International Dunhuang Archive (Northwestern University, DRA.C045.main ww)
Fig. 20 Ceiling of the main chamber, Cave 45, Mogao Grottoes, Dunhuang, China. (The John C. and Susan L. Huntington Archive of Buddhist and Related Art, The Ohio State University)
Fig. 21 Central niche (facing west), main chamber, Cave 217, ca. 705-6. Mogao Grottoes, Dunhuang. The Mellon International Dunhuang Archive (James and Lucy Lo Photograph Archive, 217-4)
Fig. 22 Central altar, main chamber, Cave 217 ca. 705-6, Mogao Grottoes, Dunhuang, China. The donor images of the Yin family are shown on the lower portion of the altar (Eugene. Y. Wang, *Shaping the Lotus Sutra*, 138, fig. 3.4)
Fig. 23 Cross-legged Maitreya, sculpture in west wall, Cave 275, Northern Liang period, Mogao Grottoes, Dunhuang, China (Dunhuang wenwu yanjiusuo, Dunhuang Mogaoku, vol. 1, cat. 11)
Fig. 24 South wall, main chamber, Cave 420, ca. 605, Mogao Grottoes, China
(The Mellon International Dunhuang Archive, DRA.C420.main.south,
Northwestern University)
Fig. 25 Stencil for the image of Buddha, ink on paper, 9th to 10th century, 12.8 x 11 inch. Aurel Stein, 2nd expedition: Cave 17, Mogao Grottoes, Dunhuang, China. The British Library (S. Whitfield and U. Sims-Williams, The Silk Road, 265, cat. 216)
Fig. 26 Disciple Ananda, bodhisattva and heavenly king (detail), central niche, main chamber, Cave 45, Mogao Grottoes, Dunhuang (Dunhuang wenwu yanjiusuo, Dunhuang Mogaoku, vol. 3, cat. 127)
Fig. 27 Central niche, main chamber, Cave 328, High-Tang period, Mogao Grottoes, Dunhuang, China (Dunhuang wenwu yanjiusuo, Dunhuang Mogaoku, vol. 3, cat. 111)
Fig. 28 Queen Vaidehi’s sixteen meditations (detail), north wall (west panel), main chamber, Cave 45, Mogao Grottoes, Dunhuang, China (Dunhuang wenwu yanjiusuo, *Dunhuang Mogaoku, vol. 3*, cat. 138)
Fig. 29 Attributed to Zhou Fang (周昉), *Noble Ladies Wearing Flowered Headdress (detail)*, ink and color on silk, Mid-Tang Dynasty. Liaoning Provincial Museum, Shenyang (Richard M. Barnhart et al., *Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting*, 80, no. 74)
Fig. 30 Illustrations of the *Sutra of Visualization on Amitabha Buddha*, north wall, main chamber, Cave 217, ca. 705-6, Mogao Grottoes, Dunhuang, China (Dunhuang wenwu yanjiusuo, *Dunhuang Mogaoiku, vol. 3*, cat. 103)
Fig. 31 Illustrations of the *Lotus Sutra*, south wall, main chamber, Cave 217, ca. 705-6, Mogao Grottoes, Dunhuang, China (Dunhuang wenwu yanjiusuo, *Dunhuang Mogaoku*, vol. 3, cat. 100)
Fig. 32 Illustrations of the 25th chapter of the *Lotus Sutra*, east wall, main chamber, Cave 217, ca. 705-6, Mogao Grottoes, Dunhuang, China (Dunhuang wenwu yanjiusuo, *Dunhuang Mogaoku*, vol. 3, cat. 108)
Fig. 33 Guanyin with a female donor, west wall, main chamber, Cave 205, Mogao Grottoes, Dunhuang, China (Dunhuang wenwu yanjiusuo, Dunhuang Mogaoku, vol. 3, cat. 121)
Fig. 34 Dizang and the Six Paths, Niche 8, Yaowang shan, Shaanxi, China (Zhiru, *The Making of a Savior Bodhisattva: Dizang in Medieval China*, 69, Figure 4)
Fig. 35 Guanyin, Dizang and Vajrapani, east wall, above door, Cave 196, ca. 9th century, Mogao Grottoes, Dunhuang, China (The John C. and Susan L. Huntington Archive Buddhist and Related Art, The Ohio State University)
Fig. 36 The Buddha Triad, Shakyamuni flanked by a bodhisattva (left), probably Vajrapani, and Avalokiteshvara (right) with Brahm and Indra in the background, ca. 182. Possibly from Sahri Bahlol, Pakistan. Gray Schist, Collection of Claude de Marteau, Brussels, Belgium (Sally H. Wriggins, The Silk Road Journey with Xuanzang, 70, fig. 4.6)
Fig. 37 Illuminated manuscript of the Guanyin Sutra (S. 6983), woman giving birth (left); praying to Guanyin for child (right, color and ink on paper, painted booklet, Aurel Stein, 2nd expedition, Cave 17, Dunhuang, China, The British Library, London (S. Whitfield and U. Sims-Williams, The Silk Road, 244, cat. 185)
Fig. 38 Dunhuang on the Overland Silk Roads (R. Whitfield et al., *Cave Temples of Mogao: Art and History on the Silk Roads*, 12)
Fig. 40 Mandala of Mahavairocana Tathagata; Bodhisattva Dizang (north/left), east wall, main chamber, Cave 25, Yunlin Grottoes, Dunhuang, China (The Mellon International Dunhuang Archive, DRA.C25YL.main.east, Northwestern University)
Fig. 41 Bodhisattva Dizang in sinicized form (north/left) and Ksitigarbha in Tantric form (central panel, upper left) (detail), east wall, main chamber, Cave 25, Yulin Grottoes, Dunhuang, China (The Mellon International Dunhuang Archive, DRA.C25YL.main.east, Northwestern University)
Fig. 42 Bodhisattva Dizang (Ksitigarbha) with the ten kings of hell, 10th century, ink and colors on silk, from Cave 17, Mogao Grottoes, Dunhuang (Musée national des Arts asiatiques - Guimet, Pelliot Collection, MG 17794)
Fig. 43 Bodhisattvas Guanyin and Dizang (upper portion of a banner), ink and colors on fabric, ca. 10th century, from Cave 17, Mogao Grottoes, Dunhuang, Palais du Louvre, Paris, no. 3644. (Dunhuang Art Exhibition, http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/features/dunhuang/pages/abroad(f)5.htm, accessed March 12, 2014)
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