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# Orientations

The monthly magazine for collectors and connoisseurs of Asian art



## The Art of Dunhuang

Rethinking Liu Sahe: The Creation of a Buddhist Saint and Invention of a 'Miraculous Image'

The *Lotus Sutra* Tableau in Cave 217 Revisited

Deciphering Illustrations of the *Vimalakirti-nirdesha*

The Use of Pounces

# Orientations

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*Cover:* Image of a seated Buddha  
From Cave 17, Dunhuang, Gansu province  
Late Tang dynasty, c. 9th century  
Ink and colours on paper  
Height 29 cm  
British Museum, Ch.00396c  
(Stein Painting 44 [3])

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# Rethinking Liu Sahe: The Creation of a Buddhist Saint and the Invention of a ‘Miraculous Image’

Wu Hung

The Chinese monk Liu Sahe (b. c. 345) has been the subject of many articles written in various languages over the past two decades (Fig. 1). One reason for this scholarly attention lies in the research material itself, which has been constantly expanding to allow new historical reconstruction and interpretation. Literary accounts of this monk have been found in transmitted texts (Jao, 1990) as well as among archaeological finds; the latter include three manuscripts of *A Memoir of the Monk Liu Sahe* discovered in the early part of this century in the ‘secret library’ at Dunhuang (Chen, 1979; Vetch, 1981) and a damaged stele which, originally part of the Temple of Spiritual Response (Gantong Si) in Gansu province, records the founding of this temple as a monument to Liu’s legacy (Sun and Dang, 1988). Moreover, art historians have been able to link Liu Sahe with an increasing number of works of art, including sculptures, murals and portable paintings (Sun, 1982; Shi, 1983; Whitfield, 1989; Huo, 1993); it seems that this monk, in addition to being a famous ‘holy man’ or saint, also played an important role in the development of Buddhist art.

Important questions remain, however. Liu Sahe, as I will show in the first section of this paper, was more a legendary figure than a credible historical personage. Why was he so frequently mentioned in texts and associated with art? What was his significance to the various ancient writers and artists who continually elaborated upon his legend from the fifth to the tenth centuries? These questions have not been seriously asked because most modern historians working on this subject have been preoccupied by the seemingly more immediate task of reconstructing Liu Sahe’s life; some authors have heroically tried to piece together the fragmentary biographical information into a chronicle (see, for example, Sun, 1985). While these works provide detailed inventories of primary sources, their general conclusions can be artificial and misleading due to two questionable research methods commonly practised by their authors. First, in order to forge a coherent chronicle, they have to determine and utilize ‘accurate’ records while omitting ‘inaccurate’ and ‘false’ ones; the distinction and evaluation of these two groups of data is often subjective and never explains why those so-called ‘false’ records were ever written. Second, in order to synthesize information scattered in a wide range of sources into a single biography, these authors have to disregard the specific historical intentions and contexts of the original records, which were written in different times and places. Their studies thus naturally negate the question posed earlier: what was Liu’s significance as perceived by ancient writers and artists? This paper intends to answer this question by re-examining both textual and visual evidence. Instead of assuming that there was a unified vision of this monk, this author will explore Liu’s metamorphic images and their implications. My focus thus shifts from Liu Sahe as a true historical figure to the creation of a myth, the central issue of which is the concept of a religious icon in mediaeval Chinese Buddhist art.

The first biography of Liu Sahe appeared a century after his death, in *Lives of Eminent Monks* (*Gaoseng Zhuan*; T. 2059, vol. 50, pp. 409-10) by the monk Huijiao (497-554). The late date of this posthumous document may explain its sketchiness in recording Liu’s early life: we are only told that he was from Lishi (in present-day Shanxi province) and that as a young man, he loved to hunt. After this brief opening, Huijiao immediately focuses on an extraordinary event which took place when Liu reached the age of thirty: during a deep coma (called a ‘false death’ in the text), he travelled to the Underworld and witnessed the horrors of Hell. There, a holy man initiated him into Buddhism and asked him to make a pilgrimage to the South after he returned to life, to look for sacred monuments of Ashoka (r. c. 272-c. 232 BC), the famous Indian king said to have built 48,000 stupas around the world to spread the Buddhist faith. Following this instruction, the reborn Liu Sahe, now the monk Huida, went to the lower Yangzi river region on his religious mission. From this point on, Huijiao’s record of his life is intertwined with the history of some of the most important Buddhist monuments and icons in fourth century China.

According to Huijiao, Liu Sahe first arrived at Jiankang (present-day Nanjing in Jiangsu province), the Eastern Jin (317-420) capital. Standing on the city walls and gazing around, he saw a strange light radiating from an ancient monastery called the Changgan Si. After locating the origin of the light and worshipping the place reverently, Liu conducted an excavation. He found hidden under stone tablets three nesting reliquaries which contained relics of the Buddha, including a fingernail and a thread of shining curly hair. The relics were believed to have been originally stored under a stupa built by Ashoka. Since this old structure had long ago disappeared, Liu Sahe transferred the relics into a new pagoda.

The Changgan Si also housed a golden statue of the Buddha from India, which becomes the next focus of Huijiao’s narrative. Gao Kui, the magistrate of Danyang (in today’s Jiangning county near Nanjing), is said to have found the statue in a river. Although the statue’s base and halo were missing, a Sanskrit inscription revealed that it was an image of the Buddha commissioned by Ashoka’s fourth daughter (or by Ashoka for his fourth daughter). As the statue was being moved back to town, the bull pulling the cart ignored the driver’s orders and walked directly to the Changgan Si. Other miracles followed: two years later, a fisherman found the statue’s lotus base, made of gold, floating on the sea. Five foreign monks then arrived, claiming that a dream had led them there to find the statue, which they had brought from India to China but had lost track of after the fall of Ye (now Luoyang in Henan province) towards the end of the Western Jin period (265-317). They cried with joy at seeing the statue, which radiated in response, its light brightening the dark temple hall. Finally, in 371, during the Eastern Jin period, the Buddha’s missing halo was found on the bottom of the ocean. Emperor Jianwen (r. 371-72) donated it to the temple,



(Fig. 1 ) Liu Sahe and the legend of the miraculous image at Fanhe  
Five Dynasties period (907-60)  
Ink and colour on silk  
Height 95.9 cm, width 51.8 cm  
British Museum, OA1919.1-1.020; Ch.0059  
(Stein painting 20)

and it fit the statue perfectly. Interestingly, although all these events took place before Liu Sahe's arrival, Huijiao included them in his biography because Liu had subsequently seen the statue and 'highly praised its spiritual power'. The same narrative pattern underlies Huijiao's account of two Buddhist stone statues, which had allegedly sailed on their own to China and found their new home in the Tongxuan Si in Wujun (in modern Suzhou, Jiangsu province). 'People of Wu were amazed by their spiritual power and many of them became Buddhist believers,' reports Huijiao. 'During the three years of his stay in the Tongxuan Temple, Huida (i.e. Liu Sahe) worshipped [the statues] day and night without the slightest interruption.' The last event recorded in the biography is Liu Sahe's finding of a second Ashoka stupa in Maoxian near Kuaiji (modern Hangzhou in Zhejiang province), an event which echoes his discovery of the remains of the stupa at Changgan Si. Again, Liu spotted the abandoned monument through seeing or visualizing its light – 'Concentrating his mind in deep meditation, he saw rays of spiritual light issuing from the earth like leaping flames.' After this discovery, a large temple was founded at the place, and many Buddhist monks and lay worshippers travelled to this sacred site.

Three essential features characterize Huijiao's biography. First of all, it clearly represents a southern view. Although Liu Sahe spent his first thirty years in the North and, according to all later biographers, returned to the North after his southern journey, the events Huijiao relates all took place in the South; more specifically, in a small area centred on the Eastern Jin capital of Jiankang in the lower Yangzi region. Indeed, the biography frames Liu as (and only as) a pilgrim from the North, and concludes with the sentence: 'We lost Liu Sahe's traces afterwards.' The 'North', however, was not only a geographical notion but a political concept: it was occupied by 'barbarian' regimes after the Jin moved its seat from Ye to Jiankang. Liu Sahe's pilgrimage, conducted after this major change in China's political geography, thus unmistakably relocates the centre of Buddhism to the South – it was there that the most ancient and privileged Buddhist relics and monuments could be found. To reinforce this message, the gold statue in the Changgan Si is said to have mysteriously travelled to the South after the fall of the Western Jin in 317. Its initial incomplete state was analogous to the break up of the country; reassembling the missing parts in the South symbolized the Jin's mandate to rule China. This southern bias, which may have originated in the Eastern Jin period, served Huijiao well. As the North-South conflict was continuing, he wrote Liu Sahe's biography in the Jiaxiang Si in Hangzhou to convey his conviction in the legitimacy of the southern Buddhist tradition (see Wright, 1954).

Second, although called a biography (*zhuan*), Huijiao's account of Liu Sahe single-mindedly concentrated on his relationship with relics and holy images. The four events described in the biography follow two distinct narrative patterns. In the first, Liu Sahe is a pilgrim in a conventional sense, travelling to visit famous icons. In the second pattern, he is not only a visitor but, more importantly, a *discoverer* of hidden relics and ruined monuments, which then become famous pilgrimage sites. In the first pattern, it is a holy statue which possesses magical power and acts on its own accord, appearing and disappearing in accordance with the changing political situation. Such a religious icon is called a *ruixiang* or 'miraculous image', and represents a political omen in traditional Chinese culture (Wu, 1989, pp. 73-96). In the second pattern, it is Liu Sahe whose extraordinary spiritual power evokes miracles, thereby identifying holy relics and monuments. In this way, he is recognized as a saint who embodies the Buddhist concept of

*gantong* ('spiritual response'), a 'manifestation that occurs spontaneously in response to the purity of the monk' (Faure, p. 104, n. 17). The Buddhist sites and images that Liu Sahe visited or discovered provide the most crucial evidence for the religious and political legitimacy of the South, and the stupas and relics he unearthed all linked southern China to India, the origin of Buddhism. The existence of these images and relics in the lower Yangzi region thus confirmed the historical orthodoxy of the Buddhist tradition in the South and consequently proved the righteousness and legitimacy of the major political patron of this tradition – the Eastern Jin royal house.

This brings us to the third implication of Huijiao's account of Liu Sahe's southern journey: his pilgrimage also served to identify selected southern temples as the most important Buddhist monuments in China. These temples derived their special status both from their direct ties with Indian Buddhism and the direct sponsorship of the Chinese emperor. Throughout the biography, the temple remains the most fundamental unit of religious structures and symbols, consisting of individual buildings, statues and relics. In fact, Huijiao's biography of Liu Sahe is not so different from a temple chronicle, which lists subsequent constructions and records important ritual occasions. This similarity explains why the biography could so easily be adopted by Yao Cha, the sixth century author of the *Liang Shu* (*History of the Liang Dynasty*), to enrich his gazetteer of southern temples (*Liang Shu*, pp. 791-92). As a professional historian, Yao provided additional 'factual' information regarding Liu Sahe's journey, including a detailed report of the monk's excavation at the Changgan Si. He also supplied the dates and descriptions of a series of important occasions that took place after this discovery, in which the Jin emperor paid personal homage to the Changgan Si, donating new buildings and statues to the temple or sending ministers and royal members to participate in ceremonies. It is clear from this account that even though the Changgan Si had existed before Liu Sahe's visit, it achieved renewed significance after his discovery of the Buddha's relics and the abandoned Ashoka stupa, by re-establishing on one hand the temple's forgotten link with India, and thus the origins of Buddhism, and on the other attracting the patronage of the Chinese political authority.

Not long after Huijiao died in 554, another record of Liu Sahe's life appeared, this time in the North. Its author was the Northern Zhou (557-81) monk Daoan (d. 574) from Hucheng in Fengli (Chen, p. 247). The original text of this biography, available during the Tang dynasty (618-906) in the form of a stele inscription, is now missing. However, several Tang biographies of Liu Sahe, including the influential one in *Continued 'Lives of Eminent Monks'* (*Xu Gaoseng Zhuan*) by Daoxuan (596-667) and the three Dunhuang manuscripts of *A Memoir of the Monk Liu Sahe*, refer to it as their primary source and thus allow us to speculate on its content. One thing is clear: this record had little to do with Liu Sahe's southern pilgrimage. In Daoxuan's new biography of Liu Sahe in the *Continued 'Lives of Eminent Monks'*, this early Tang writer conveniently omits Liu's entire southern journey by simply referring the reader to the 'previous biography' (*qianzhuan*) by Huijiao. Instead, he relies on Daoan's inscription, which described what happened to Liu Sahe after his southern pilgrimage. It is said that Liu returned to the North in 420 and travelled to northwest China. On the way to Liangzhou, he stopped at a place called Fanhe (also written 'Panhe' or 'Banhe', in modern Yongchang county in Gansu province). There, facing Mt Yugu (alternately called Mt Yangrong or Yurong) in the distance, he bowed and predicted that a miraculous Buddha statue would emerge from

the cliffs of the mountain in the future. 'Should its wondrous appearance be complete,' he told his followers, 'then people will be happy and the world will be peaceful. But if some parts of the statue are missing, then the world will be in turmoil and people will suffer.' This prophecy turned out to be Liu Sahe's last words: he fell into Seven Mile gorge (Qili jian) west of Jiuquan; his bones were smashed to pieces as tiny as sunflower seeds. Someone strung the fragmented bones together and left them in the hand of a Buddha statue in an old temple near the gorge.

As mentioned, a different geographical framework separates this new record from the old one. Whereas Huijiao only recorded Liu Sahe's activities in the South, Daoan followed him in the North, in an area not far from Liu's birthplace. More importantly, however, these two accounts orient Liu Sahe very differently in terms of time. To Huijiao, Liu's significance lay completely in his relationship with the past: his pilgrimage, itself the result of a past event in his life (i.e. his 'false death'), led him to discover ruins and relics. To Daoan, however, Liu's significance lay completely in his relationship with the future. His Liu Sahe was no longer a Buddhist 'archaeologist' searching for relics and ruins, but had become a prophet who left his words to be fulfilled and his own 'relics' to be worshipped by later people.

Following this new direction, Daoxuan recorded Liu Sahe's prophecy of the Fanhe statue as the only event in the monk's life, devoting the remaining, and far larger, portion of the biography to the statue's manifestations after Liu's death. In other words, the principal protagonist of this biography is no longer Liu Sahe, but the statue. There are obvious connections between this statue and the holy icons that Liu Sahe visited in

the South, as they were all conceived as 'miraculous images' able to act of their own accord. Instead of gaining its meaning from an Indian past, however, the Fanhe image was an indigenous icon of the future: it was not even born yet, but would one day 'thrust itself out' (*tingchu*) of a native mountain. Obviously inspired by the numerous grotto carvings created during the Northern Dynasties period (386-581), this statue was not a fixture of a wooden-framed temple inside a city; instead, a temple would be created in the wilderness to honour it. Daoxuan reports:

Some eighty-seven years later [after Liu Sahe's prophecy], in the first year of Zhengguang (519), a stone image was thrust out of the mountainside following a great thunderstorm. It was eighteen feet high and of marvellous appearance, but with no head. Craftsmen were ordered to choose stone to carve a head, but it fell off as soon as it was put on the body. At that time, the Northern Wei dynasty (386-534) was about to end; so what the monk had long foretold had come true. In the first year of the Northern Zhou (557), in the Seven Mile gorge to the east of Liangzhou [where Liu Sahe died], a ray of light appeared, shining brightly in the darkness. To everyone's amazement, it was from the head of the statue. People took the head reverently to the mountainside and installed it on the statue. It fit the body perfectly. Although the image had been incomplete for over forty years, and although the body and the head had been divided by 200 miles, the two came together when peace arrived in the world [Fig. 2]. When the Miraculous Image Temple (Ruixiang Si) was founded there in the first year of Baoding (561), light shone everywhere and the sound of bells echoed without cease; no one knew how.

During the beginning of the Jiande era (572-78), the head frequently fell off. The Grand Minister and Prince of Qi came to investigate and



(Fig. 2) Detail of Figure 10 showing the miraculous emergence of the Fanhe statue and the installation of the head South wall, Cave 72, Dunhuang, Gansu province Late Tang or Five Dynasties period, mid 9th-10th century Mural painting

they ordered the head to be reinstalled. At night it fell off again, just as before. People tried many times and used various materials to make new heads, but all efforts were in vain. Soon afterwards, the Northern Zhou rulers persecuted Buddhism, and this led to the régime's demise four years later. Examining this event, intelligent people realized that there had been signs that this would happen.

However, in spite of being outlawed and abandoned, the image still stood fast. From the beginning of the Kaihuang reign (581-89) of the Sui dynasty, the Buddhist faith was greatly promoted; the Buddha image was elaborately embellished, and the temple was highly respected. In the fifth year of Daye (609), Emperor Yang visited this temple to pay his respects. With his generous donations, the temple regained its glory and beauty. The emperor changed the name of the temple to the Temple of Spiritual Response (Gantong Si), and ordered the stone image to be copied and circulated, but its precise measurements could never be achieved. The image is still there today, and although people agree that it is roughly eighteen feet high, each attempt to measure it has produced a different result. (Partially based on Roderick Whitfield's translation of a different version of the legend found in the *Fayuan Zhulin*. See Whitfield, 1989, pp. 68-69.)

Since Daoan could not possibly have recorded the statue's manifestations after his death, the last part of this chronicle, especially the events after China's unification under the Sui, must have been added by Daoxuan. The result was a symbolic historical narrative from a retrospective point of view: the statue witnessing the fall of the Northern Wei, rejecting the mandate of the Northern Zhou for its persecution of Buddhism, and finally celebrating the victory of the Sui and Tang empires. It is not difficult to see the political agenda implied in this record. Indeed, as a spokesman for early Tang Buddhism, Daoxuan was actively involved in political and public affairs, and developed close ties with the courts of Emperors Taizong (r. 627-50) and Gaozong (r. 650-84) (Wagner, pp. 61-69). His works, often characterized by a strong synthetic tendency, transcended the old political boundaries of the North and South. Several enormous encyclopaedias compiled by him and his colleagues, including the *Collected Records of Spiritual Response of the Three Jewels in China* (*Ji Shenzhou Sanbao Gantong Lu*), *An Extended Collection of Buddhist Writings* (*Guang Hongming*

*Ji*) and the *Pearl Grove of the Dharma Garden* (*Fayuan Zhulin*), gathered Buddhist miracle tales, gazetteers and hagiography from various sources into a unified whole. Not coincidentally, these three books all include the story of the Fanhe statue, as well as Huijiao's account of the holy images that Liu Sahe saw in the South. These religious compilations seem to have mirrored the country's political unification. This, in turn, suggests that Daoxuan's account of Liu Sahe only represented a particular point of view; other legends of the saint and the Fanhe statue could have developed in different social circles for different purposes.

First, Liu Sahe's life story continued to evolve around a number of themes. To emphasize his conversion to Buddhism, writers constantly exaggerated the roughness of his pre-Buddhist youth, often describing him as a wealthy and martial figure who found pleasure in deer hunting. Influenced by the popular interest in 'purgatory tales', documents such as the Dunhuang *Memoirs* focus on Liu's Underworld experiences. Other writers or storytellers stressed his reputation as a famous pilgrim and deliberately confused him with an altogether different monk named Huida, who travelled to India with Faxian (c. 342-423) at the beginning of the fifth century. Finally, Liu Sahe's prophecy at Fanhe inspired the author of the Dunhuang *Memoirs* to assert that only because this holy monk had also travelled to Dunhuang and made a prophecy there could this place become a centre of Buddhist art, with one thousand image niches carved into the mountainside.

A second group of legends relates to the Gantong Si. This temple had grown into a powerful religious centre, making it a new locus for historical writing and storytelling. A damaged stele dating from the eighth century unearthed in 1979 in Gansu province bears an inscription recording the history of the temple, with many details that are absent from other documents. For example, an 'eye witness' is created to testify to the miraculous emergence of the Fanhe image. The stele relates that 86 years after Liu Sahe's prophecy, the hunter Li Shiren chased a deer to Mt Yugu and suddenly saw the illusion of a grand temple with a holy monk standing in front of it (Fig. 3). Li bowed in homage, but when he lifted his head the monk had vanished. He marked the place with a pile of rocks and was about to leave.

(Fig. 3) The hunter Li Shiren chases a deer and encounters a holy monk  
Reverse of the screen behind the central altar,  
Cave 98, Dunhuang, Gansu province  
Five Dynasties period (907-60)  
Mural painting  
Photography by Wu Jian



A thunderous sound stopped him, and there on the cliff appeared a miraculous image. It seems that the 'deer hunting' episode, originally part of Liu Sahe's life story, has now been transferred to the creation myth of the statue and the temple. As discussed later in this paper, this new narrative, along with other events described in the inscription, became a source for late Tang and Five Dynasties period (907-60) murals at Dunhuang.

Third, under the strong influence of the concept of 'spiritual response', both Liu Sahe and the Fanhe statue were further mystified in Buddhist theological writing. In his last work, called *Vinaya Master Daoxuan's Record of Spiritual Responses* (*Daoxuan Lüshi Gantong Lu*, T. 2107), Daoxuan recorded his encounter with a heavenly being, who praised his writings but also pointed out some flaws. He then asked this heavenly being questions about the Fanhe statue and other miraculous images, and was told that this statue had actually been created by the Heavenly Kings (Skt. Lokapala; the guardians of the four directions) at the time of the Buddha Jiaye (Skt. Kasyapa; one of the historical Buddhas preceding Shakyamuni). The great *bodhisattva* Libin bestowed it with magical power, so it could move around and teach people, just like the Buddha himself. Many millennia later, evil forces controlled the region and destroyed the temple housing the image. But the mountain god lifted the statue into the air and stored it afterwards in a stone chamber. Gradually, the chamber sunk into the cliffs of the mountain. Liu Sahe was able to point out the statue's whereabouts because he was an incarnation of the Libin *bodhisattva*.

Fourth, by the early Tang period, there had appeared a powerful regional cult centred around Liu Sahe in northwest China. Daoxuan visited this area at the beginning of the sixth century and saw that this saint, sometimes considered to be the *bodhisattva* Guanyin (Skt. Avalokiteshvara), was worshipped by people of both Chinese and non-Chinese origin in the eight prefectures along the upper reaches of the Yellow river. A quite different legend was circulating in this area: Liu Sahe was thought to be a mysterious master who lectured on Buddhist Dharma from a high tower during the day, but retreated into a silkworm cocoon at night. More important to this study, Daoxuan recorded that this local cult was closely related to an image known as *Hushi Fo* or 'The Foreign Master Buddha', which was erected in the Liu Sahe temple at his birthplace, and which was copied throughout the region. It was clearly a miraculous image: 'It travels on its own from one village to another in the first month of the year....When the wrinkles on its forehead disappear and the statue looks happy, the host village will see less death and other calamities; but if the wrinkles deepen and the statue looks sad, the host village will suffer disasters in the coming year.' A common misunderstanding among scholars is that this *Hushi Fo* represented Liu Sahe himself, since many records identify him as a *hu ren*, or non-Han Chinese (Vetch, 1984, p. 71). However, as Shi Weixiang has convincingly argued, *Hushi Fo* actually means 'The Foreign Master's Buddha', just as an Ashoka Buddha is a Buddha statue commissioned by the Indian king. He thus identifies the Fanhe statue as the prototype of the *Hushi Fo* widely copied in northwest China (Shi, pp. 8-9).

The distinct northern and southern views inherent in the different versions of the Liu Sahe myth provide a new basis for re-examining certain important murals and sculptures at Dunhuang. One group of such images, best exemplified by the murals in early Tang Cave 323, documents the transmigration of Buddhist icons from India to China. Another group is centred on the Fanhe statue, which acquired a conventional iconography as early as the seventh century, but whose pictorial context

changed continuously over the next three hundred years. In the third group, famous Indian and Chinese icons are combined into an array of 'miraculous images' to map the Buddhist world.

Cave 323 has been discussed in a number of excellent articles; two papers, by Jin Weinuo and Ma Shichang, provide the most detailed iconographic identifications for the images painted on the cave's two side (north and south) walls (Jin, 1958; Ma, 1982). Their studies allow this author to explore the coherent geographical and chronological framework underlying individual pictorial stories. Most illustrations on these two walls are related to famous Buddhist personages and icons from the Indian world. Of the three famous icons portrayed here, the two which went to China during the Northern and Southern Dynasties period (317-589) both found their new home in the South. As Ma Shichang has suggested, the pictures proceed from the north wall to the south wall and from west to east on each wall. Viewed in this sequence, the first story is about a seven-metre high golden statue obtained by Emperor Wu (r. 140-87 BC) of the Western Han period (206 BC-AD 9) from the Western regions. The last picture on the north wall represents the Sogdian monk Kang Senghui demonstrating the miraculous power of the Buddha's relics to Sun Quan, the founder of the Wu kingdom (220-80). This is again followed by two stories illustrated on the south wall, whose subjects are now familiar to us: the first composition depicts the arrival of the two stone statues which sailed to south China during the Western Jin period. The second composition concerns the golden Ashoka statue in the Changgan Si; the subsequent discoveries during the Eastern Jin period of the Buddha figure, the lotus base and the halo are shown in three interrelated scenes. The designer of the murals must have consciously arranged these events in a chronological sequence, because he clearly labelled these events with their respective dynasties in the accompanying cartouches.

This geographical and chronological framework accords with the 'southern view' inherent in Huijiao's account of Liu Sahe's pilgrimage and other *gantong* stories. The direct iconographical sources of these pictures, however, are most likely the early Tang Buddhist encyclopaedias, including Daoxuan's *Collected Records* and *An Extended Collection*. The overall design of Cave 323 also seems to reflect the strong synthetic tendency of these writings. Indeed, the murals representing foreign monks and icons form an integral part of the cave, as they are painted on the two side walls to flank a stucco Buddha in the central niche. Moreover, the stories illustrated on the west end of both walls (and therefore directly connected with the central niche) are all about Buddhist icons, and naturally lead the viewer to speculate on their relationship with the Buddha statue in the niche. Unfortunately, this niche has been heavily remodelled and very few scholars have even mentioned it. Only Shi Weixiang urges us to notice an important feature of the niche: the tensely sculpted mountain peaks in its interior. Though reconstructed during the Qing period (1644-1911), these forms were most likely based on the original Tang design (Shi, p. 8). Against such a mountain background, the central Buddha figure reminds us of the Fanhe statue, whose emergence from the mountainside is recorded many times by Daoxuan. Is it possible that the central Buddha image in this cave actually represents the Fanhe statue, and, by occupying the focal position, symbolizes the dominance of a northern and indigenous 'miraculous image' in Tang China? Since this sculpture has been rebuilt and its present form does not agree with the standard iconography of the Fanhe statue, we can only leave the answer to future scholarship.

We can recognize the 'standard iconography' of the Fanhe

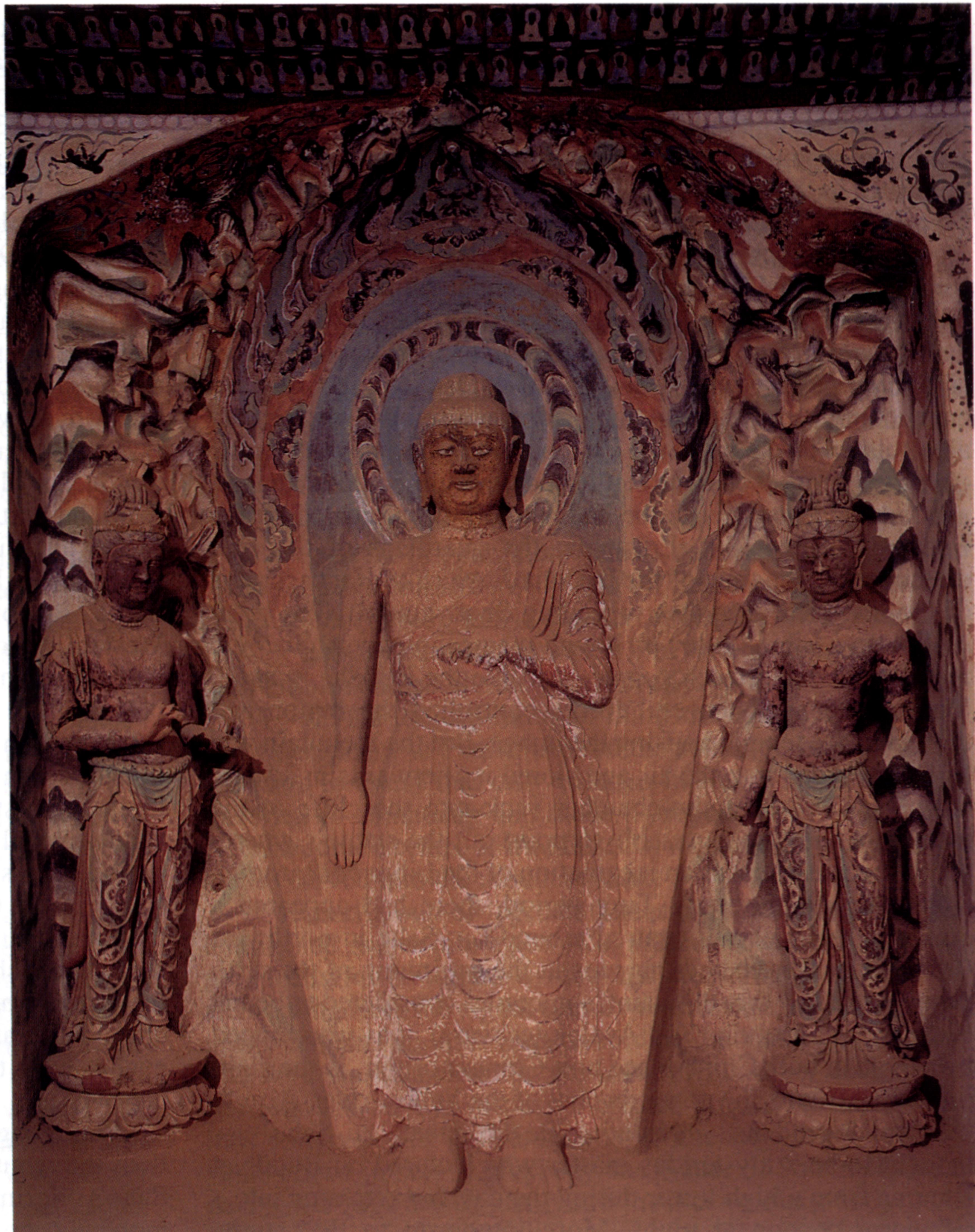
(Fig. 4) Detail of Figure 7 showing the miraculous image at Fanhe  
Central niche ceiling, Cave 237, Dunhuang, Gansu province  
Tang period, late 8th/1st half of the 9th century  
Mural painting  
Photography by Wu Jian



statue in late Tang and Five Dynasties period paintings of 'miraculous images'. Among these is a standing Buddha, extending his right arm straight down and grasping the hem of his robe with the left hand (Fig. 4). This figure is labelled 'The Image of His Holy Appearance on Mt Yangrong (i.e. Mt Yugu) to the north of Fanhe county'. Representations of this image, however, had appeared at Dunhuang at least by the early Tang period: the same iconography characterizes the main Buddha statue in Cave 203, which was constructed in the late seventh or early eighth century (Fig. 5). With a relief torso and head sculptured in the round, this Buddha is situated in a mountain environment (and thus supports my speculation that the original icon in the contemporary Cave 323 may have been a Fanhe image).

The Buddha in Cave 203 has a square head with a large, round *ushnisha* (cranial protuberance), and the drapery on his robe is arranged in rigid parallel curves. The image's strict frontality and verticality form a sharp contrast with the flanking *bodhisattvas*, whose twisting bodies are represented in the relaxed manner typical of the period. Shi Weixiang has suggested very convincingly that the Buddha statue deliberately imitates an archaic style of Northern Dynasties period sculpture (Shi, p. 8). Interestingly, it has been reported that a Buddha statue dating from the Northern Wei or the Northern Zhou dynasty has been found in an old temple in what would have been Fanhe county during the Tang period. According to Sun Xiushen, the statue, now headless, has a relief torso about six metres high. Carved out of living rock of reddish granite, it originally had a head made of a separate block of green stone, which is now kept in the Yongchang County Cultural House. The location and date of this sculpture, as well as its separate head and torso (whose different colours are faithfully depicted in later Dunhuang paintings), have convinced Sun that this is the original Fanhe statue (Sun, 1985, p. 304). If his opinion is reliable, this pre-Tang statue may have served as the model for the central Buddha image in Cave 203 at Dunhuang.

The design of the central niche in Cave 203 is closely related to the composition of a magnificent piece of embroidery, taken from the 'secret library' cave at Dunhuang and now in the



(Fig. 5) Central niche  
Cave 203, Dunhuang, Gansu province  
Tang period, late 7th/early 8th century  
Photography by Wu Jian

British Museum (Fig. 6). Again, the central icon in this unusually large banner has the standard posture of the Fanhe Buddha. As in the case of Cave 203, two *bodhisattvas* flank the Buddha and layers of rocks delineated in angular outlines encapsulate the Buddha image to suggest its immediate physical context. With these distinctive features, this work, whose donor images along the lower edge suggest an eighth century date, can be titled 'The Miraculous Image of the Fanhe Buddha', though it has been identified as 'Shakyamuni Preaching on Vulture Peak'. Another work belonging to this group is the central Buddha statue in Cave 300 at Dunhuang. Slightly later than the Cave 203 Buddha and roughly contemporary with the British Museum embroidery, it does not have flanking *bodhisattvas* and disciples. But other features (such as the Buddha's standard gesture and the mountain background) identify it as a representation of the Fanhe image.

We do not know how the embroidered icon was used in ritual, but the location of the Buddha statue in Cave 203 is definitive and raises important questions about the nature of such images in the seventh and eighth centuries. Standing majestically in frontal view in the central niche, it was the main subject of religious worship conducted in a cave chapel. In fact,



(Fig. 6) The miraculous image of the Fanhe Buddha  
From Cave 17, Dunhuang, Gansu province  
Tang period, 8th century  
Silk embroidery on hemp cloth faced with silk  
Height 241 cm, width 159.5 cm  
British Museum, Ch.00260

its central location and ritual function identify it as the Buddha, to whom worshippers paid their utmost respect and in whom they found hope for happiness in this world as well as in the future. On the other hand, it is also unmistakable that this statue deliberately imitated an existing image, located not far from Dunhuang: the central Buddha figure in Cave 203 leans awkwardly backwards to imitate a 'statue' on a mountainside. Such an effort to mimic the Fanhe statue was doubtless inspired by a strong fascination with it. But the result was a conceptual ambiguity: on the one hand, the Dunhuang statue was meant to be worshipped as the Buddha in person; on the other, it deliberately 'copied' an existing icon.

This conceptual ambiguity disappeared after the eighth century. Towards the middle and late Tang period, a clear awareness developed of the difference between *representations of divinities* and *representations of images*, and hence a great effort was made to distinguish these two kinds of icons and to assign them distinct roles in a coherent ritual context. One result of this awareness was a new painting subject called *ruixiang tu* (or *ruixiang* in a simpler form) – 'pictures of miraculous images' – which often consisted of a row of rectangular frames, each containing the image of a famous Buddhist icon from India, Khotan (in Chinese Central Asia, present-day Xinjiang province) or China (Fig. 7). Such images appeared in murals and on painted banners, and their cartouches were transcribed in manuscripts (such as those found in the library cave, for example S5659 and S2123). An introduction to these images and their social and religious implications, even a sketchy one, is beyond the scope of the present paper, in which only their significance in redefining a religious icon is stressed. A *ruixiang tu* is a 'meta-image', a 'representation of a classical representation'. This status of a *ruixiang tu* is defined through its inscription and its position in a cave. Instead of identifying the images as certain Buddhas or *bodhisattvas*, a *ruixiang tu* is always labelled as a collection of *images* (*xiang*) of Buddhas and *bodhisattvas*. In the simplest case, it secures such an identification by indicating an image's location. In other cases, the date of an image's creation and instances of its miracles are also supplied. *Ruixiang tu* at Dunhuang are frequently painted in one of two locations: either above the main Buddha statue in the cen-



(Fig. 7) Miraculous images, with the Fanhe image at the centre  
Central niche ceiling, Cave 237, Dunhuang, Gansu province  
Tang period, late 8th/1st half of the 9th century  
Mural painting  
Photography by Wu Jian

tral niche, or on the ceiling of the passageway leading to the main chamber. In the first position, they re-represent famous icons throughout the Buddhist world to glorify the Buddha, while the main statue in the niche stands for the Buddha and functions to receive the worshippers' homage. In the second position, these 'images of images' are separated from, yet lead



(Fig. 8) Central niche  
Cave 55, Dunhuang, Gansu province  
Five Dynasties period (907-60)  
Photography by Wu Jian

to, the main chamber, which symbolizes the divine world of the Buddha. Thus, though they are all manufactured artifacts, Buddhist icons at Dunhuang are divided into two groups of images with different ontological status, one group directly referring to divinities – and so able to receive the worshipper's homage – and the other group referring to the 'images' of divinities. The former is the model; the latter, the representation.

This conceptual distinction provided the basis for new types of Fanhe depictions during the late Tang and Five Dynasties period. Although this statue often appears in a group of 'miraculous images', it is sometimes singled out to become the sole subject of a pictorial composition. One conventional location for this composition is the reverse side of a large earthen 'screen', constructed in some Five Dynasties period caves as a backdrop for the main Buddha statue. In this location, the Fanhe image can hardly be seen since the space between the screen and the cave's back wall, where a viewer can stand, is only a few feet wide. The image's main role is therefore conceptual, not visual: it is painted on the back of the screen because it provides a counterpart to the Buddha statue in front of the screen (Fig. 8). This statue, which represents the personage of the Buddha, is exposed to the public and determines the centre of a ritual space. The painting then appears as the image or 'shadow' of the Buddha, and its two-dimensionality emphasizes its identity as such. Additional narrative scenes further surround this image to frame it in a historical context. In several cases, such scenes illustrate the story of a hunter chasing a deer and encountering a monk (Fig. 9; see also Fig. 3), a clear reference to the legend recorded in the 'Ste勒 of the Temple of Spiritual Response', that the hunter Li Shiren chased a deer to Mt Yugu and witnessed the emergence of the Fanhe statue. These narrative scenes emphasize the image's historical particularity as opposed to the timeless Buddha represented by the statue in front of the screen.

In pictorial composition, these images of the Fanhe statue are most closely related to the damaged silk painting from Dunhuang, the fragments of which are now distributed between the British Museum in London and the Musée Guimet in Paris (see Fig. 1). As a number of scholars have pointed out, this painting, possibly created during the Five Dynasties period, also represents the Fanhe statue with narrative scenes. However, these narrative scenes are much richer than those found on the back of a screen, and the painting also portrays Liu Sahe next to the statue whose emergence he predicted (Sun, 1985, pp. 300-303; Whitfield, 1989). Because this painting has al-

(Fig. 9) The hunter Li Shiren chasing a deer  
Reverse of the screen behind the central altar, Cave 61, Dunhuang,  
Gansu province  
Five Dynasties period (907-60)  
Mural painting  
Photography by Wu Jian





(Fig. 10) The miraculous image at Fanhe  
South wall, Cave 72, Dunhuang, Gansu province  
Late Tang or Five Dynasties period, mid 9th-10th century  
Mural painting  
Photography by Wu Jian

ready been carefully studied by several scholars and because severe damage makes it impossible to reconstruct its original composition, I will focus instead on a mural on the south wall of Cave 72 at Dunhuang (Fig. 10), which is the most ambitious representation of the Fanhe statue we know, and which may have served as a model for the silk painting, since it includes all the images in the painting and many more. The general subject of this painting has been correctly recognized since at least 1982. Until recently, however, researchers were handicapped by an unfortunate reality: after Cave 72 was constructed during the late Tang or Five Dynasties period, it was flooded and half buried by sand. As a result, the images on the lower part of the painting were almost completely lost. In 1989, Huo Xiliang, a senior researcher in the Dunhuang Research Academy, made a heroic effort to 'discover' the painting. Because the wall surface was undamaged and still bore faint marks left from the original colouring and ink lines, he was able to trace these marks under candlelight. After months of hard work, Huo provided a line drawing which shows most of the images and inscriptions in the mural (Fig. 11).

Huo's paper, published together with the line drawing in 1993, offers a verbal description of his reconstruction. The question here is how to 'read' this extremely complex painting, perhaps the most self-conscious reflection on a religious icon ever attempted by a traditional Chinese artist. The usual scholarly method would be to match the painted scenes with events described in texts in order to reconstruct the 'story' in the painting. The problem with this approach, as argued by this author at length in an article on the relationship between Dunhuang art and Dunhuang literature (Wu, 1989), is that events, which unfold in a literary narrative in a linear fashion, often appear in a painting in a seemingly random manner. An art historian, therefore, must not only identify the textual sources of individual scenes, but also uncover the spatial framework upon which a story is reorganized in a pictorial narrative. This idea, which has guided my studies of some Dunhuang paint-

ings, also leads me to make the following observations on the Cave 72 mural.

Following a common practice in icon painting, the painter of this mural portrays the main deity in the middle, although here we find not one, but *two* identical images of the Buddha appearing one above the other along the central axis. Both images deploy the standard gesture of the Fanhe statue, extending the right arm down and holding the hem of the robe with the left hand. The upper image, however, is surrounded by a large crowd of *bodhisattvas*, *arhats* and heavenly kings. Other Buddhist deities are arriving on flying clouds to join this celestial gathering. This is, therefore, a heavenly assemblage frequently seen in Dunhuang art. What makes this depiction unusual, though, is the Buddha's gesture, which identifies him as the *model* of the Fanhe statue below him, shown against a single, triangular mountain. The dual appearance of the Buddha expresses the painting's central theme about the nature and meaning of a religious icon, while the remaining images focus on two main aspects: the responses of the icon to human events through miraculous manifestations and the reverence or destruction it experiences in the human world.

The two central Buddha images divide the painting into two halves. The most prominent scenes in the right, or west, half all illustrate the miracles of the Fanhe statue. Close to the Buddha image in the lower centre (i. e. the Fanhe statue), the hunter Li Shiren is paying homage to a holy monk (identified by an inscription as Liu Sahe). The headless statue that Li sees, however, appears far above him near the upper edge of the painting, described in a cartouche as 'the moment when the Image of His Holy Appearance has just descended but has no head' (see Fig. 2). The three heads lying in front of the statue may thus allude to the subsequent episode, in which repeated efforts to install a head onto the body all failed because of the predestined fall of the Northern Wei dynasty. The verb 'to descend' (*xia*) used in this inscription explains the painter's decision to place this scene in the upper section of the painting:

rather than a human product, the Fanhe statue is thought to be a manifestation of an autonomous heavenly being, 'The Image of His Holy Appearance'. Earlier, I cited a statement in the *Vinaya Master Daoxuan's Record of Spiritual Responses* that the Fanhe statue was the incarnation of a heavenly image of the Buddha, which was created by the gods and able to travel around to enlighten people, just like the Buddha himself. Like miniature forms of the Buddha in the upper centre, 'The Image of His Holy Appearance' appears several times in clouds, either on its way to a dragon pavilion or travelling to the Buddha's assembly on Vulture Peak. In one case, there is an explanatory cartouche that reads: 'The moment when the true body of the Image of His Holy Appearance on clouds arrives'. This heavenly image links the Buddha with the Fanhe statue and pre-determines the statue's iconography. Liu Sahe was able to predict the statue's appearance because he could communicate with this heavenly image to realize its will.

The dual images of the Buddha not only divide the painting into right and left, they also qualify the painting's upper and lower parts as heaven- and earth-bound realms. In fact, in composing the lower part, the artist was guided by local geography: at the centre is Mt Yugu at Fanhe where the statue is located; the city at the lower left corner is 'the county town of Zhangye near the Lingzhi Mountains'; and the place depicted at the opposite corner on the lower right is the Seven Mile gorge, where the head of the statue appeared at the beginning of the Northern Zhou period. Several scenes about this head form an independent narrative sequence, winding upwards to the upper part of the painting. The first scene in this sequence represents, predictably, the head 'descending' to earth. People then find it, worship it, carry it in an elaborate sedan to the headless image, and finally place it on the body (see Fig. 2). Each of these scenes is identified by an inscription in a rectangular frame.

As we move to the left half of the painting, several large scenes contrast two kinds of human responses to the Fanhe statue: either reverence and the attempt to spread its glory by duplicating it far and wide, or malice and the attempt to damage or destroy it. The painting's subject thus changes from the statue's manifestation to human action. Next to the Buddha in the upper centre, two scenes depict 'The moment when skilled painters are invited to copy the Image of His Holy Appearance' and 'The moment when workers and skilled craftsmen are invited to measure the statue's body in order to duplicate it'. Interestingly, the first scene shows a framed painting, in which the Fanhe statue has been copied as a two-dimensional representation. In the second scene, a sculptor is measuring the statue under a monk's supervision. These two scenes thus illustrate the two main art forms through which a famous icon was copied and transmitted. In sharp contrast to such devotional acts, two nearby scenes represent 'The moment when shameless Tibetans try to steal the statue's precious pearls but fall down and die' and 'The moment when Tibetans try to burn down the Temple [of Spiritual Response] but are killed by thunder from Heaven'. Significantly, these episodes are not related in any known literary record, and are most likely the painter's own reaction to the Tibetan occupation of the Dunhuang area during the mid-Tang period.

These images and events occupy most of the painting and determine its primary content. However, the smaller figures scattered throughout the composition also play important roles and cannot be overlooked. One group of figures includes various donors and worshippers: the emperor's messengers, local elders and officials, and foreign pilgrims and merchants. Another group includes various portraits of Liu Sahe: he is worshipping the central Buddha as well as the Fanhe statue; he is

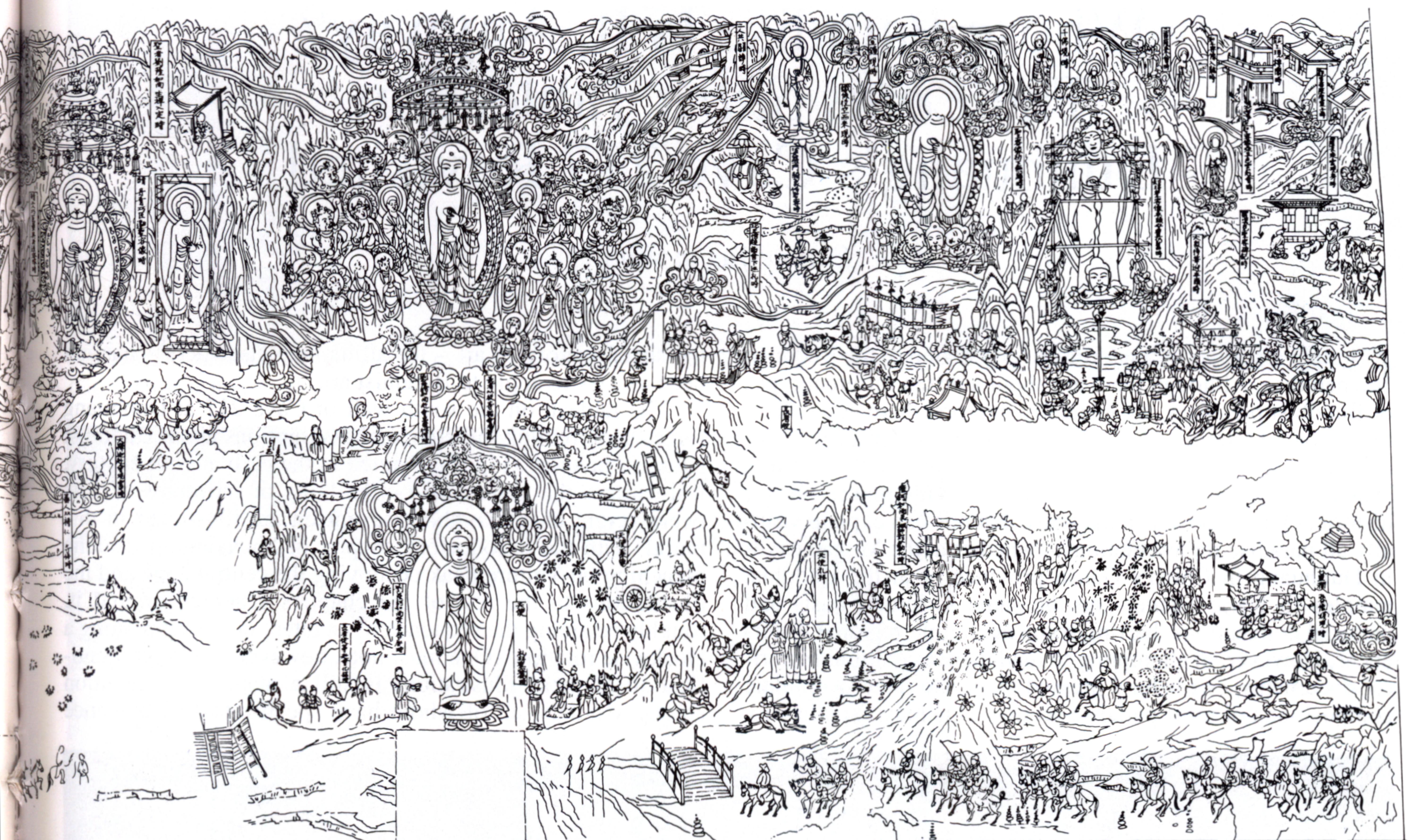
(Fig. 11) Line drawing of Figure 10  
By Huo Xiliang



meditating in the heavenly realm; and he appears in front of the hunter Li Shiren eighty-six years after his death. With such metamorphic appearances, this saint clearly transcends the boundaries of time and space. It is important to remember, however, that in this painting, which is completely dominated by the legend of the Fanhe statue, Liu Sahe is only given a very limited place. We have noted a similar phenomenon in Tang versions of Liu Sahe's biography, which shift their focus from this holy monk to the holy icon whose appearance he predicted.

The third and last group of images in the painting includes various celestial beings, among which are the heavenly images of the Fanhe statue. Underlying these depictions is the belief that each famous icon in the human world derived its existence from a 'proto-image' in Heaven, which had the status of a Buddhist deity and was a regular member of the Buddhist pantheon. Fourteen Buddha images in this work have the standard posture of the Fanhe statue. Although identical in iconography, these images differ in religious significance: there is the 'real' Buddha as the master of his celestial kingdom; there is 'The Image of His Holy Appearance' as a member of this celestial kingdom; there is the Fanhe statue as the earthly manifestation of this heavenly image; and there are the paintings and sculptures duplicated from the miraculous Fanhe statue. What these fourteen Buddha images signify, therefore, is the *system* and *ontology* of a Buddhist holy icon, from its conceptualization to its materialization, and from its divine origin to its endless copies on earth. The fundamental concept of this system is *presentation*, not *representation*: when a miraculous icon is believed to be a self-manifestation of a heavenly image, the human artist is reduced to a copier facing the impossible task of duplicating what is unduplicable.

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