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Rituals in the Last Days of the Dharma: Connections Between the Thousand Buddhas of Zhag Cave in Western Tibet and Silk Road Relics at Dunhuang

Rufei Luo

School of Arts, Nanjing University, Nanjing 210093, China; rufeiluo@nju.edu.cn

Abstract

The Zhag Cave in western Tibet, dated to the 11th to 12th centuries, features four walls fully adorned with images of the Thousand Buddhas of the Bhadrakalpa (Fortunate Aeon). According to the Tibetan inscriptions, the arrangement of the Thousand Buddhas creates a circumambulatory space for worship and confession, enabling practitioners to purify their sins. Four aspects of the Zhag Cave are comparable to those of Dunhuang. First, among the inscriptions is the *Pratītyasamutpāda-gāthā*, elaborated in the *Śālistamba Sūtra*, the Tibetan manuscripts of which have been unearthed in both western Tibet and Dunhuang. Second, the way of depicting Thousand Buddhas on four walls inside the cave could be found in earlier caves from the 5th to 6th centuries at Dunhuang. Third, the specific practice of only depicting the Bhadrakalpa Thousand Buddhas on the walls parallels similar caves from the mid-10th to early 13th centuries at Dunhuang. Fourth, the motifs depicted along the wall edges correspond with the prevalent themes found in the Bhadrakalpa Thousand Buddhas transformation tableaux during the 9th to 13th centuries, reflecting the apogee of Bhadrakalpa Thousand Buddhas devotion. These connections prompt us to think about the ways in which Western Tibet was part of the Silk Road network. I argue that this shared iconographic and ritual framework embodies the intertwined religious practices of the Dharma-ending Age (Mofa 末法) thought and Buddhist revival movements along the Silk Road, explaining these complex interconnections between the Zhag Cave and the Dunhuang relics within the broader context of religious beliefs and socio-cultural patterns.

Keywords: Zhag Cave; Thousand Buddhas of the Bhadrakalpa; Dunhuang; Dharma-ending Age

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1. Introduction

Following the establishment of the Guge Kingdom in western Tibet (late 10th to early 17th century), there was a vigorous promotion of Buddhism that led to the construction of caves and temples, signaling the onset of the Second Propagation of Tibetan Buddhism (bsTan pa phyi dar). The early phase of the Guge Kingdom, spanning the 10th to 13th centuries, coincided with a period of cultural exchange and mutual learning among diverse civilizations along the Silk Road. The four major rivers originating from mNga' Ris in Tibet flow into the Indian Ocean, creating a transportation network that connects western Tibet with South Asia and Central Asia. This facilitated cultural exchanges between western Tibet and regions such as Xinjiang and the Hexi Corridor along the Silk Road.

Recent archaeological discoveries in western Tibet have provided significant new materials for understanding the relationship between Buddhist art in western Tibet during

the early phase of the Second Propagation and that of Dunhuang. For instance, both the murals and inscriptions of the stūpa in the mKhar rtse Valley vividly illustrate the influence of Dunhuang on early Buddhist art in western Tibet around the 10th century (Wang 2020). However, this topic has not received adequate attention in existing scholarship.

A series of Thousand Buddha caves and associated Thousand Buddha images in western Tibet vividly illustrate the close connections between this region and the Silk Road, particularly with places like Dunhuang, during this period.[1] These Thousand Buddha caves primarily date from the 11th to 13th centuries, representing the early stages of the Second Propagation. Among them, the Zhag Cave (11th to 12th centuries) serves as a particularly representative example, with the images of the Thousand Buddhas of the Bhadrakalpa (Fortunate Aeon) fully painted on the four walls of the main chamber (Figure 1).

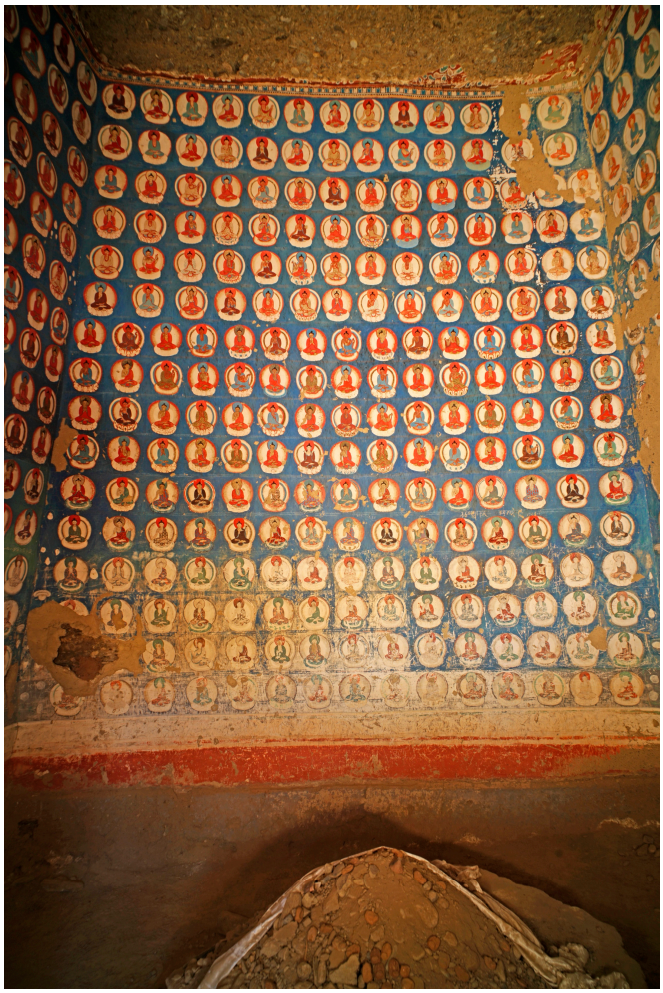


Figure 1. Mural of the Thousand Buddhas on the north wall of the Zhag Cave. (Photographed by Xie Jisheng 謝繼勝).

Among the previous scholarship studying the Zhag Cave,[2] the earlier research conducted by Gu ge Tshe ring rgyal po and Christiane Kalantari (Gu ge Tshe ring rgyal po and Kalantari 2021) merits great acknowledgement, especially their comprehensive art historical analysis of the cave's full pictorial program, including the entrance corridor and the main chamber with its depiction of the Thousand Buddhas of the Bhadrakalpa. Meanwhile, their study has attempted to illustrate the relationship between the murals of the Zhag Cave and those of Dunhuang in Central Asia, but it has not provided much in the way of detailed argumentation. To further elucidate this connection, this paper will use

the Thousand Buddha imagery of the Zhag Cave as a case study, integrating visual and textual materials for a comprehensive discussion.

2. The World of the Bhadrakalpa Thousand Buddhas at the Zhag Cave: Cave Structure, Murals, and Inscriptions

The Zhag Cave is located in Be gdongs po Village, mTho lding Town, rTsa mda' County, mNga' ris Prefecture, Tibet, on the northern bank of the gLang chen gtsang po (Xiangquan River). The cave features a square single-chamber design, comprising a main chamber and a corridor (Figure 2). The north wall of the main chamber measures approximately 390 cm in length, the west wall is about 342 cm, the east wall is around 340 cm, and the south wall is roughly 408 cm, with an overall height nearing 6 m. In the center of the cave, a circular pedestal remains (Figure 3). The pedestal has a diameter of approximately 169 cm and a remaining height of about 36 cm.

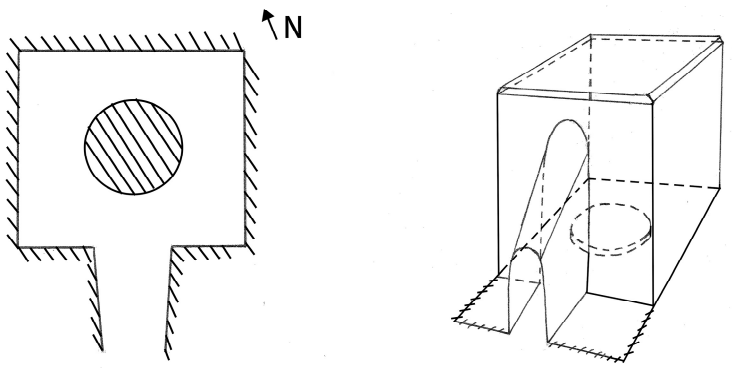


Figure 2. Plan view and three-dimensional schematic of the Zhag Cave. (Painted by Luo Rufei 駱如菲).



Figure 3. Remains of the central pedestal in the Zhag Cave. (Photographed by Liao Yang 廖暘).

Helmut F. Neumann has argued that the central pedestal in the Zhag Cave originally supported an image (Neumann 2002, p. 81). In contrast, Gu ge Tshe ring rgyal po and Christiane Kalantari, in their recent study, have suggested that it served as the base of a stūpa (Gu ge Tshe ring rgyal po and Kalantari 2021, pp. 422–23). Based on the available evidence, I am inclined to support Neumann's interpretation. Firstly, the upper edge of the surviving structure is clearly adorned with a band of lotus petal motifs, a feature characteristic of lotus pedestals. Secondly, while the construction of stūpas within caves or as

part of stūpa shrines was indeed a tradition in Western Tibet during the early Second Propagation, the round lotus pedestal in the Zhag Cave markedly differs from the square stūpa bases found at the Dung dkar Cave, Alchi Monastery, etc. Sections 4 and 5 of this paper will further elaborate on the iconography of the sculpture that may have once occupied this pedestal.

In terms of murals, the main chamber is predominantly decorated with depictions of the Thousand Buddhas of the Bhadrakalpa, while the corridor is embellished with additional murals, including the Tigress Jātaka, the Wheel of Rebirth,[3] and various images of guardian deities on the east and west sides.

The murals depicting the Thousand Buddhas on the four walls of the main chamber in the Zhag Cave are generally well-preserved, although the lower portions of the walls exhibit some signs of abrasion. Each wall, set against a backdrop of dark blue pigment, features 16 rows of Thousand Buddha images, amounting to a total of 789 figures. Additionally, along the edges of the walls, there are representations of standing Buddhas, lotus stems, flowers, and buds. Each Thousan Buddha image stands approximately 21 cm tall, characterized by a horseshoe-shaped halo surrounding the head and a circular halo enveloping the body, seated in a lotus position upon a lotus throne. The hand gestures vary and include the teaching gesture, meditation gesture, gesture of fearlessness, wish-granting gesture, and earth-touching gesture, as well as other less common positions where one hand holds the hem of a garment up to the shoulder or raises a hand to the chest with the palm facing inward, etc.

The Tibetan inscription in the corridor, which serves as the donor inscription, together with the inscriptions on the four walls of the main chamber—namely, the Thousand Buddha inscriptions—explicitly identify the paintings within the main chamber as representations of the Bhadrakalpa Thousand Buddhas. In particular, the donor inscription on the west wall of the corridor provides detailed information concerning the cave's construction (Figure 4). Since the transliteration and translation I present in this article differ in certain respects from the interpretation offered by Gu ge Tshe ring rgyal po and Christiane Kalantari (Gu ge Tshe ring rgyal po and Kalantari 2021, p. 412), I will set forth my own version here in detail. Additionally, I offer an emended Tibetan orthography that departs from the conventions of earlier Old Tibetan scriptural traditions.[4]

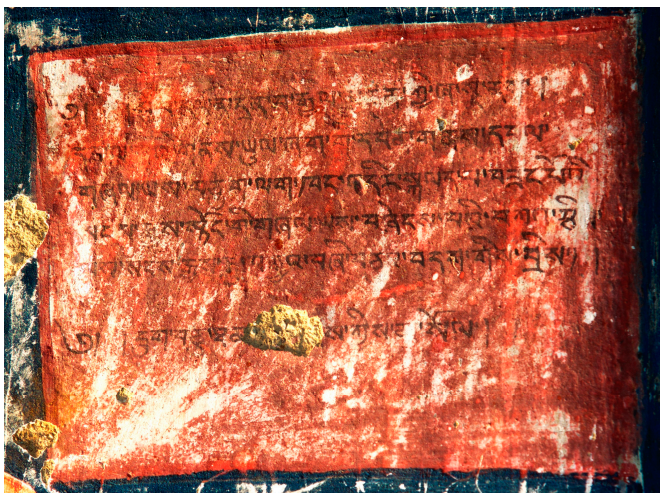


Figure 4. Tibetan inscriptions detailing the construction of the cave on the west wall of the corridor in the Zhag Cave. (Photographed by Xie Jisheng 謝繼勝).

Tibetan:

ཨ། །སློབ་དཔོན་དྲན་བ་རྒྱལ་མཚན་ཀྱི་ཞ་སྔ་ནས་།
དཔལ་ཞུའི་གནས་ཡུལ་ཞག་གི་དབེན་གནས་དཔལ་
གཞལ་ཡས་གཙུག་ལྷང་འདིར་སྐལ་པ་བཟང་པོའི་
སངས་རྒྱས་སྟོང་གི་གཞལ་ཡས་བཞེངས་པའི་བཀའ་རྩིས་
ཕྱས་སངས་རྒྱས་རྒུ་བརྒྱའོ་བཞི་བཅུའོ་བདག་གིས་བྲིས།།
ཨ། །དྲུག་བཅུ་ཐམ(…)ས་ཀྱིས་མ་སོལ།།

Transliteration:

[1] @//slob dpon dran ba rgyal mtshan kyi(1) zha(2) snga nas/
[2] dpal zhu'i gnas yul zhag gi dben gnas dpal
[3] gzhal yas gtsug lag khang 'dir skald(3) pa bzang po'i
[4] sangs rgyas stong gi gzhal yas bzhengs pa'i bka' rtsis
[5] pas sangs rgyas rgu(4) brgya'(5) bzhi bcu'(6) bdag gis bris//
[6] @//drug bcu tham (…)s kyis ma sol(7)//

Emendations:

(1) gyi (2) zhal (3) bskal (4) dgu (5) brgya (6) bcu (7) gsol or perhaps gsal?

Translation:

"Following the instructions of Master Dran ba rgyal mtshan that the immeasurable Thousand Buddhas of the Bhadrakalpa should be represented in this glorious immeasurable temple (Dpal gzhal yas gtsug lag khang) (of) the hermitage of Zhag (in) the place of Dpal zhu, I have painted 940 (of them). The (remaining) 60 were not venerated (?)."[5]

Each of the Thousand Buddha figures is accompanied by a Tibetan inscription located beneath it (Figure 5), resulting in a total of 803 inscriptions that embellish the four walls, and these inscriptions remain relatively clear. In comparison to the 789 Buddha images depicted on the walls, the 14 additional inscriptions relate to the standing Buddha figures and lotus bud motifs found along the edges (excluding one instance that remains unclear). Specifically, there are six standing Buddha figures along the edges: two on the southern edge of the east wall, three on the southern edge of the west wall, and one on the eastern side of the corridor entrance on the south wall.



Figure 5. One of the Thousand Buddha inscriptions in the main chamber of the Zhag Cave. (Photographed by Xie Jisheng 謝繼勝).

The precise number of Buddha figures represented in the cave presents an intriguing question. Neither the 789 Buddha images nor the 804 Buddha inscriptions correspond numerically to the figure cited in the donor inscription, which states, "I have painted 940 (of them)." It is important to recognize that the motif of the Thousand Buddhas is fundamentally conceptual; in practice, murals dedicated to this theme rarely feature a literal set of one thousand figures. The discrepancy between the 940 Buddhas referenced in the donor inscription and the actual number present in the cave remains unresolved—a mystery that may be clarified through further research. Nonetheless, from the perspective of the artisans, it is conceivable that they never anticipated their work would be subjected to such precise enumeration a millennium later.

The inscriptions corresponding to the Thousand Buddhas inscribed on the four walls of the main chamber consist of two components (with a few exceptions due to transcribing errors). The first part of the inscriptions for the Thousand Buddhas includes the names of the Buddhas, each prefixed by "De bzhin gshegs pa" (Tathāgata), followed by the specific name of each Buddha, thus forming complete titles such as "De bzhin gshegs pa 'khor ba 'jig" (Krakucchanda). The second part consists of a Tibetan transcription of the Sanskrit *Pratītyasamutpāda-gāthā* (*Ye dharmā* Verse):

> ye d+harmA he tu pra b+ha ba he tun te ShAn ta tha ga to h+ya ba dad/te ShAn tsa yo ni ro d+ha e bam ba ti ma hA shra ma na/[6]

Upon comparing the names of the Buddhas inscribed in the cave with those documented in the Tibetan *Bhadrakalpika Sūtra* (*'Phags pa bskal pa bzang po pa zhes bya ba theg pa chen po'i mdo*),[7] I found a correspondence rate exceeding 95%.[8] Furthermore, these inscriptions retain certain characteristics of old Tibetan writing. Based on the sequence of the Thousand Buddhas as delineated in the *Bhadrakalpika Sūtra*, I have systematically organized the arrangement of the Thousand Buddhas in the Zhag Cave, as illustrated in the diagram (Figure 6). This sequence begins from the westernmost end of the first row on the north wall and proceeds clockwise through the north, east, south, and west walls, moving from top to bottom; that is to say, the first Buddha is positioned at the westernmost end of the first row on the north wall, while the last Buddha is situated at the northernmost end of the sixteenth row on the west wall. The initial inscription in the cave corresponds to the name of the first Buddha in the *Bhadrakalpika Sūtra*, 'Khor ba 'jig (Krakucchaṃda), and the final inscription corresponds to the 808th Buddha name, Rin chen phung po (Ratnaskandha).

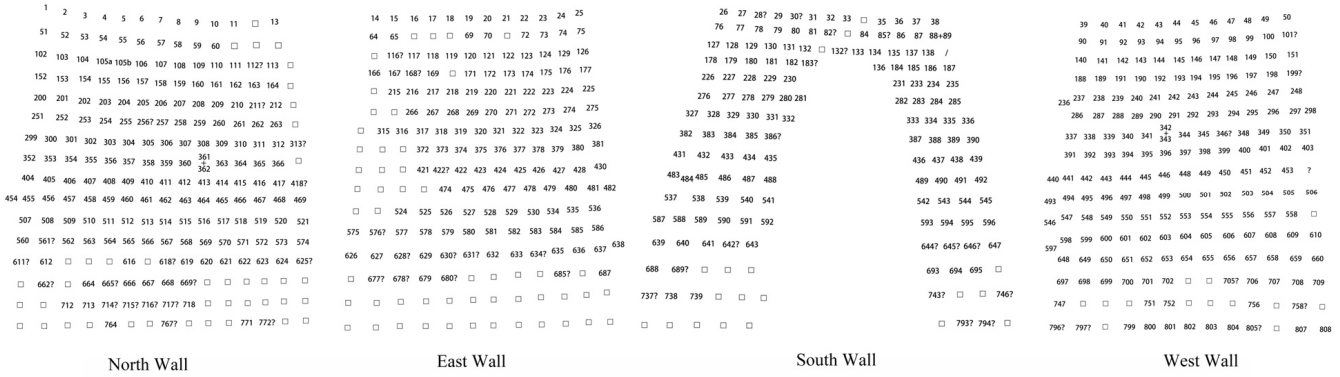


Figure 6. Sequential order of the Thousand Buddhas in the Zhag Cave inscriptions, corresponding to the *Bhadrakalpika Sūtra.* (Compiled by Luo Rufei 駱如菲).

From the inscriptions, it can be inferred that the arrangement of the Thousand Buddhas in the Zhag Cave adheres strictly to a top-to-bottom, left-to-right order, thus creating a clockwise or "rightward circumambulation" worship sequence within the space inside the main chamber of the cave. This design enables devotees to complete their worship of the Thousand Buddhas of the Bhadrakalpa through successive circumambulations.

What motivated the creators of the cave to construct such a space dedicated to the worship of the Thousand Buddhas of the Bhadrakalpa? We can easily find out the function of these Thousand Buddhas from the conclusion of the "Chapter on the Names of the Thousand Buddhas" in the *Bhadrakalpika Sūtra*:

"In this Bhadrakalpa, these thousand Buddhas will appear in the world to liberate all sentient beings across the ten directions. Each of these thousand Buddhas possesses a distinct name and image. If one listens to, accepts, recites, and diligently studies their names while practicing with a focused and discerning mind, offering worship without neg-

ligence, one will escape the sufferings of evil realms, attain tranquility, and abide in the observance of precepts. Such individuals will cultivate faith in the Dharma path, embrace pure conduct, and achieve the fruition of their practice. The profound and extraordinary patience and root of forbearance ensure the protection of all worlds for innumerable eons. Those who commit wrongful acts without understanding the karmic consequences will eradicate all sins and afflictions upon hearing the names of these Buddhas. Furthermore, individuals who uphold these Buddha names will acquire supernatural abilities and attain mental concentration. If ordinary beings hear or encounter this teaching, they will come into contact with these profound scriptures, amass immeasurable merit, comprehend the teachings, and eloquently articulate their wisdom. Consequently, they will achieve this samādhi, embodying purity of conduct and unwavering resolve, and their awakened wisdom will transcend attachment to the three realms, allowing them to retain total recollection and mindfulness."[9]

Reciting or hearing the names of the Thousand Buddhas of the Bhadrakalpa is believed to have the power to eliminate all sins and to accumulate immense merits. As a result, the murals and inscriptions depicting the Thousand Buddhas in Zhag Cave create a space dedicated to repentance, the eradication of sins, and the invocation of blessings.

Furthermore, before engaging in a discussion of the artifacts related to Zhag Cave and Dunhuang, it is essential to address the concept of the Dharma-ending Age (Mofa 末法). In Buddhist doctrine, it is asserted that following the Buddha's passing, there will be three distinct eras: the Right Dharma Age (Zhengfa 正法), the Dharma Resemblance Age (Xiangfa 像法), and the Dharma-ending Age. Different scriptures provide varying interpretations regarding the duration of these three periods. This article does not aim to explore this intricate issue in detail; rather, it seeks to examine how the concept of the Dharma-ending Age is manifested in the Thousand Buddhas imagery and associated Buddhist relics. The notion of the Dharma-ending Age advocates for the endurance and safeguarding of the Dharma, a sentiment that has influenced Chinese Buddhism since the Northern Liang period, significantly shaping Buddhist thought during the Northern Dynasties as well as the Sui and Tang periods. This concept is also reflected in the relics from Zhag Cave and Dunhuang that are discussed in this article.

3. The Extended Significance of the Dvādaśaṅga Pratītyasamutpāda and the Pratītyasamutpāda-Gāthā at the Zhag Cave

How should we interpret the *Pratītyasamutpāda-gāthā* found in the inscriptions of the Thousand Buddhas at Zhag Cave? These verses are intrinsically linked to the narrative of Śāriputra's conversion and encapsulate the core Buddhist teachings conveyed by the monk Aśvajit to Śāriputra:

"Those dharmas which arise from a cause.
The Tathāgata has declared their cause.
And that which is the cessation of them.
Thus the great renunciant has taught."

In Tibetan literature, the Dunhuang Tibetan manuscripts include a work titled *Pratītyasamutpāda-gāthā* and its commentary, which interpret the verses through the lens of the Four Noble Truths' sixteen aspects and the Dvādaśaṅga pratītyasamutpāda (twelve nidānas, 十二因緣, which means the Twelve Links of Dependent Origination).[10] The Tibetan *Commentary on the Ye dharmā* (*Ye d+harmA'i 'grel pa*) found in the *bsTan 'gyur* provides an analysis from the perspective of dependent origination.[11] According to previous scholarly analyses,[12] the meaning of the *Pratītyasamutpāda-gāthā* is intimately related to the Dvādaśaṅga pratītyasamutpāda and serves as a representation of the Dharmakāya, which is associated with the construction of stūpas and the enshrinement of relics. Furthermore,

the form of these verses, transcribed from Sanskrit into Tibetan, possesses the characteristics of a dhāraṇī, functioning to provide protection and consecration, and includes the capacity to invite deities to reside within statues or stūpas. Reciting these verses can also dispel malevolence and alleviate misfortunes.

The Dvādaśaṅga pratītyasamutpāda represents a fundamental pathway and methodology for attaining and perceiving Buddhahood, symbolically inscribed beneath the feet of Pratyekabuddhas. At Zhag Cave, the *Pratītyasamutpāda-gāthā* is similarly inscribed beneath each depiction of the Thousand Buddhas of the Bhadrakalpa, fully embodying and reinforcing this doctrinal concept. Departing from the more common practice of inscribing only the names of the Thousand Buddhas, the repeated inclusion of the *Pratītyasamutpāda-gāthā*—more than eight hundred times throughout the cave—demonstrates both the extraordinary effort exerted by the artisans and the patrons' profound cult and dedication to this verse.

Furthermore, as Daniel Boucher has highlighted, the intimate connection between the Buddha and the Pratītyasamutpāda was taken up again in the *Śālistamba Sūtra* (*'Phags pa sA lu'i ljang pa zhes bya ba theg pa chen po'i mdo*) (Boucher 1991).[13] It is exciting that Tibetan manuscripts of the *Śālistamba Sūtra* have been unearthed in Dunhuang, Khotan, and western Tibet. This sūtra expounds on the pratītyasamutpāda and elucidates the interrelationship between the Pratītyasamutpāda, the Buddha, and the Dharma, closely aligning with the themes of the *Pratītyasamutpāda-gāthā*. The *Śālistamba Sūtra* underscores that perceiving the Pratītyasamutpāda is tantamount to perceiving the Buddha and the Dharma. Two versions of the *Śālistamba Sūtra* are preserved in the Chinese *Tripiṭaka*. One version states, "Seeing the Dvādaśaṅga pratītyasamutpāda is equivalent to seeing the Dharma, and thus equivalent to seeing the Buddha," 「見十二因緣。即見法。即是見佛。」 (T709: 816)[14] while the other states, "If one sees pratītyasamutpāda, one thereby sees the Dharma; if one sees the Dharma, one is thereby able to see the Buddha." 「若見因緣，彼即見法；若見於法，即能見佛。」 (T712: 823)[15]

However, this sūtra is absent from the Tibetan *bKa' 'gyur* and is instead included within the *bsTan 'gyur* as a commentary—a curious omission, the reasons for which remain unclear. Nevertheless, several related manuscripts have been found among the ancient Tibetan documents from Dunhuang, indicating that the Tibetan version of the *Śālistamba Sūtra* was widely circulated during the the reign of the Tibetan Empire in this region. Notably, the Tibetan monk Guan Facheng (Chinese: 管·法成, Tibetan:'Gos chos grub), who was active in translating sūtras in Dunhuang, compiled a Chinese commentary on the *Śālistamba Sūtra* (*Dacheng daogan jing suiting shu* 大乘稻芊經隨聽疏) in the 9th century (T2782, pp. 543–56). Following him, Zhang Yichao (張議潮, p. 799–872), the governor of Zhang clan's Guiyi Army who had studied under Facheng, personally transcribed a copy of the *Commentary on the Śālistamba Sūtra* (manuscript S.5835, Dacheng daogan jingshi 大乘稻芊經釋). Furthermore, in the ancient region of Khotan, which bordered western Tibet, fragments of a Tibetan palm-leaf manuscript of the *Śālistamba Sūtra* were discovered at the site of Endere (Stein 1907, pp. 549–56).

Likewise, Tibetan manuscripts discovered in the Guge region of western Tibet include copies of the *Śālistamba Sūtra* (Zhang and Zhang 2023). These manuscripts display distinctive characteristics that are emblematic of old Tibetan script, such as the placement of superscript *la* and *sa* within a single grid space, with the radical shifted slightly to the right, the use of a syllable-separating dot (*tsheg*) preceding the *shad* mark at the end of sentences, the suffix *'a*, the combination of *ma* with subscript *ya*, and the inclusion of the second suffix *da* (*da drag*). Based on Basang Wangdui's research on ancient Tibetan manuscripts, such features—typically associated with the First Propagation of Tibetan Buddhism—are still observable in manuscripts from the 11th to 12th centuries (Basang Wangdui 2009).[16]

Therefore, it can be inferred that this manuscript from Guge dates to the early phase of the Second Propagation of Tibetan Buddhism, specifically the 11th to 12th centuries. This finding demonstrates the continued transcription of the Tibetan *Śālistamba Sūtra* in western Tibet during this period, with its textual lineage likely closely connected to the Dunhuang version. Alongside the dissemination of this manuscript, the doctrinal notion that "If one sees pratītyasamutpāda, one thereby sees the Dharma; if one sees the Dharma, one is thereby able to see the Buddha" should have spread to western Tibet during this time. It provides a critical religious framework for interpreting the *Pratītyasamutpāda-gāthā* found in the Zhag Cave.

In terms of material relics, the integration of the Seven Buddhas of the Past and Maitreya Bodhisattva with the content of the *Sūtra on the Dvādaśaṅga pratītyasamutpāda* (*Shi'er yinyuan jing* 十二因緣經) is prominently featured on Northern Liang stone pagodas unearthed in Turpan, Jiuquan, Dunhuang, and Wuwei (Figure 7). The upper section of these pagodas typically features carvings of the Seven Buddhas of the Past and Maitreya Bodhisattva, symbolizing the Buddhas of the past, present, and future. Meanwhile, the base of the pagodas is inscribed with passages from the *Sūtra on the Dvādaśaṅga pratītyasamutpāda*, particularly as found in the *Ekottara Āgama*.[17] Some of these inscriptions include vow texts that reference "being born in the Dharma-ending Age" ("Shengzhi mofa" 生值末法).[18] Additionally, the base of the pagodas is adorned with trigrams, representing the cyclical nature of time, alongside images of guardian kings. Collectively, the imagery and inscriptions on these stone pagodas construct a Buddhist cosmology rooted in the belief in the Buddhas of the Three Times, anticipating the future emergence of Maitreya. They emphasize the eternal presence of the Dharma, the imperative to protect it, and the Buddhist worldview and methodology within the framework of Dharma-ending Age thought.[19]

The theme of the Buddhas of the Three Times also plays a central role in the Northern Liang caves of Dunhuang. For example, in the "Three Northern Liang Caves" at the Mogao Caves, Cave 272 features the Buddhas of the Three Times as its main deities: Śākyamuni occupies the western niche, Maitreya is central to the south wall's Thousand Buddhas, and the Past Buddha is central to the north wall's Thousand Buddhas. Similarly, Maitreya serves as the main deity in Caves 268 and 275.

Turning to the Zhag Cave, it becomes evident that its iconography resonates with the Buddhist cosmology constructed by the Northern Liang stone pagodas within the context of Dharma-ending Age thought. The combination of the Seven Buddhas of the Past and Maitreya on the Northern Liang stone pagodas includes the first five Buddhas of the Thousand Buddhas of Bhadrakalpa in the present age, establishing a direct connection to the theme of the Thousand Buddhas of Bhadrakalpa depicted in the Zhag Cave. Furthermore, the *Pratītyasamutpāda-gāthā* inscribed in the Zhag Cave echoes the inscriptions of *Sūtra on the Dvādaśaṅga pratītyasamutpāda* from the Northern Liang stone pagodas. These inscriptions not only symbolize the Dharma but also convey the essential Buddhist principle that one must comprehend the Dvādaśaṅga pratītyasamutpāda to achieve enlightenment. These are also the notions which form the theoretical and methodological foundation for the Thousand Buddhas faith represented in the Zhag Cave.



Figure 7. The Pagoda of Gao Shanmu 高善穆, Northern Liang Period, excavated in Jiuquan (Source: Official website of the Palace Museum, Exhibition "Dunxing Guyuan" 敦行故遠 https://ggzl.dpm.org.cn/app/api/app/exhibitionListPc/146, accessed on 3 July 2025).

4. The Thousand Buddhas on the Four Walls of the Zhag Cave and the Evolution of Dunhuang's Thousand Buddha Caves

The depiction of the Thousand Buddhas is a prominent and pervasive theme in Silk Road cave temples, with the Dunhuang caves standing out as the most significant examples, both in terms of the scale of the imagery and its temporal continuity. Numerous caves in Dunhuang feature extensive Thousand Buddha murals.[20] This theme enjoyed enduring popularity at Dunhuang for several centuries, undergoing notable developments and transformations across different historical periods. In this sense, the Thousand Buddha imagery at Dunhuang serves as a representative model within the Silk Road grotto tradition, making it an essential point of reference when analyzing other Thousand Buddha caves. The evolution of the Thousand Buddha depictions at Dunhuang over the centuries

reflects changes in the theme's prevalence, as evidenced by shifts in the placement and composition of the murals. Furthermore, the interplay between the imagery and the architectural forms of the caves highlights their complementary relationship, with the design of the Thousand Buddha caves reflecting the intended function and symbolic significance of the depicted images.

The Zhag Cave in western Tibet exemplifies a central statue cave entirely adorned with depictions of the Thousand Buddhas of the Bhadrakalpa on all four walls. Similarly, other Thousand Buddha caves in western Tibet predominantly adopt this approach of full-wall decoration. Here, it raises an intriguing question: was this method also practiced in the Silk Road's Dunhuang caves during the same period? Gu ge Tshe ring rgyal po and Christiane Kalantari have stated, "Like in the Zhag cave, the Buddhas typically cover the whole side walls of the sanctuary and surround a central pillar on which one or a group of images of historical Buddhas are placed." (Gu ge Tshe ring rgyal po and Kalantari 2021, p. 419) To further explore this question, the following discussion will outline the characteristics of Dunhuang caves featuring Thousand Buddhas on all four walls and examine their potential connection to the Zhag Cave.

The first major phase of painting the Thousand Buddhas on all four walls in the Dunhuang caves occurred during the Northern Dynasties. Wu Hung has observed that the central pillar cave design, particularly evident in Dunhuang's Mogao Caves, was closely associated with the ritual of circumambulation, which flourished during the Northern Wei and declined by the early Sui Dynasty (Wu 2022, p. 128). When considering the Thousand Buddha murals of this period, it becomes clear that the circumambulation ritual and the central pillar cave design were intrinsically linked to the imagery of the Thousand Buddhas. During the Northern Wei, Thousand Buddha murals were typically painted on all four walls of the caves, particularly those with central pillar designs. These caves were designed to facilitate the physical act of circumambulation, allowing devotees to worship the Thousand Buddhas by walking around the central structure. Mogao Cave 254 from the Northern Wei period serves as a quintessential example (Figure 8).[21] Based on the inscriptions, the murals on the four walls of Cave 254 depict the past and future Thousand Buddhas in sequential order. In addition, the walls feature scenes of Dharma teaching, Jātaka tales, and transformation tableaux of subjugating demons, etc. Sculpted Maitreya figures are placed on the central pillar as well as on the north and south walls.

Beginning in the Sui Dynasty, the prominence of the Thousand Buddha motif gradually diminished, transitioning from its earlier placement on the four walls to the four slopes of cave ceilings. By the Tang Dynasty, with the emergence and widespread adoption of transformation tableaux, the Thousand Buddha theme became primarily confined to the ceiling's four slopes. During this period, the dominant architectural form of the caves was the hall cave. For instance, in Mogao Cave 100, constructed during the 1030s under the rule of Cao clan's Guiyi Army, the ceiling's four slopes are adorned with depictions of the Thousand Buddhas of the Bhadrakalpa. According to the inscriptions of the Buddha's names, the Buddhas are arranged sequentially on each individual slope. Once the depiction on one slope is complete, it continues onto the next slope.[22] This indicates that although the Thousand Buddhas of the Bhadrakalpa were organized in strict accordance with textual order, the earlier emphasis on circumambulation and veneration of the Thousand Buddhas, a practice prevalent during the Northern Dynasties, had largely diminished by this time.

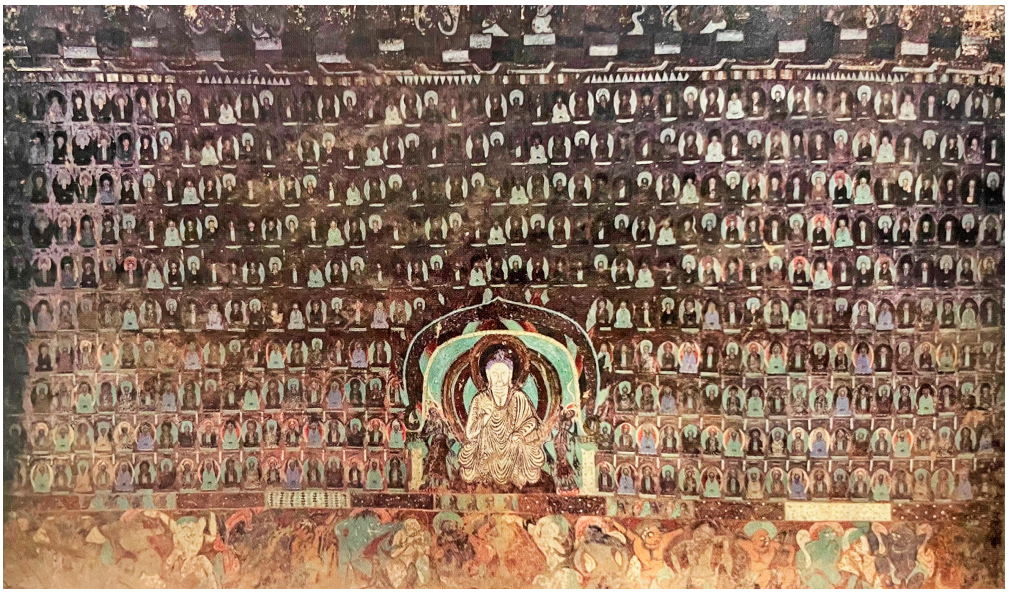


Figure 8. Thousand Buddha imagery at Mogao Cave 254 (Northern Wei Dynasty). (Suemori 2020, Plate 28.).

The second major period of prominence for the depiction of Thousand Buddhas on the four walls of Dunhuang caves occurred during the middle to late phases of the Cao clan's Guiyi Army (mid-10th to early 11th century) and continued into the Tangut period (1038–1227). This era represents the zenith of Thousand Buddha imagery at Dunhuang. During this period, compared to the Northern Dynasties, the depiction of the Thousand Buddhas theme became more focused and "pure" in nature, with the images densely and comprehensively covering all four walls of the main chamber, leaving virtually no space for other subject matter. Notably, during the Guiyi Army era, particularly in its later years under the rule of the Cao clan, the tradition of painting Thousand Buddhas across all four walls underwent a significant revival. Mogao Cave 16, originally constructed during the late Tang period under the Zhang clan's Guiyi Army, exemplifies this revival. The cave, characterized by a central horseshoe-shaped altar, features walls decorated with Thousand Buddha murals, which were repainted during the Cao clan's Guiyi Army period. Similarly, Cave 94, built during the Zhang clan's period, later had its walls repainted with Thousand Buddha imagery during the Cao clan's era. Additional caves from this period that feature Thousand Buddha murals include Caves 152, 256, and 233. These caves are typically classified as central altar caves, a style that emerged in significant numbers during the Guiyi Army period, aligning closely with the resurgence of the practice of fully decorating walls with Thousand Buddha imagery. Central altar caves became increasingly popular in Dunhuang from the late Tang period onward, reaching their peak during the Cao clan's Guiyi Army period and continuing to flourish throughout the Tangut and Yuan periods.[23]

During the Tangut period, the practice of painting Thousand Buddhas on the four walls, which had been revived during the later phase of the Cao clan's Guiyi Army, continued at Dunhuang.[24] This period saw a striking and vivid expression of the pure belief in the Thousand Buddhas of the Bhadrakalpa. Some of these murals were repainted in caves originally constructed in earlier periods, including central pillar caves from the Northern Dynasties, such as Caves 246, 263, and 432. In Cave 246, built during the Northern Wei period, statues and murals were remodeled and repainted during the Tangut period. The main statues in the east-facing niche of the central pillar depict Śākyamuni and Prabhūtaratna jointly preaching the Dharma. The four walls are densely adorned with images of the Thousand Buddhas of the Bhadrakalpa, and a Chinese inscription titled *Sūtra on the*

Names of the Thousand Buddhas of the Bhadrakalpa Volume One (*Xianjie qianfo mingjuan shang* 賢劫千佛名卷上) appears south of the door on the east wall. Similarly, the four walls of Cave 263, constructed during the Northern Wei period, and Cave 432, built during the Northern Zhou period, also feature Thousand Buddha paintings that were repainted during the Tangut period (Figure 9). In addition, the Tangut practice of repainting Thousand Buddha murals on the four walls is also seen in Cave 29, originally created during the Zhang clan's Guiyi Army period, as well as in Cave 351, constructed during the Cao clan's Guiyi Army period. Cave 356, which was newly built during the Tangut period, features Thousand Buddha images painted on its four slopes as well as the south, north, and east walls. Furthermore, the Tangut period saw the widespread practice of painting floral patterns on cave ceilings, adding to the aesthetic richness of these murals.

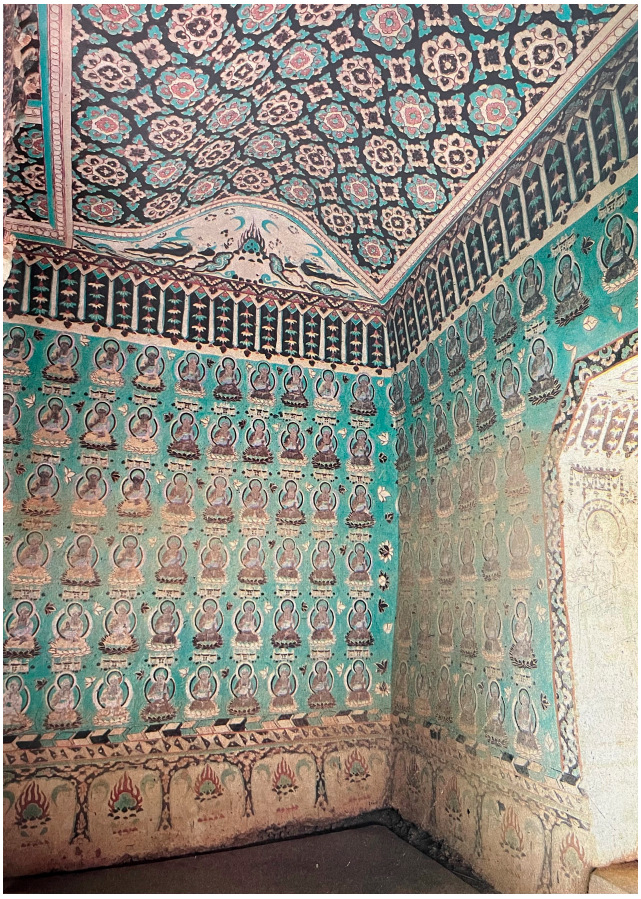


Figure 9. Mural depicting the northeast corner of Mogao Cave 432 (Tangut Dynasty). (Source: Shi Jinbo 史金波, Bai Bin 白濱, and Wu Fengyun 吳峰雲 (eds.), *Xixia wenwu* 西夏文物 (*Tangut Artifacts*), Beijing: Cultural Relics Press 文物出版社, 1988, Plate 48.).

Zhang Jingfeng has noted that the principal statues in the central altar caves from the Guiyi Army period at Dunhuang were predominantly depictions of Śākyamuni (Zhang 2009, pp. 31–39, 127–28). Among these, Cave 196 preserves its original statue (Figure 10). Although the original statues in most other caves have not survived, evidence from Dunhuang manuscripts provides strong support for the hypothesis that the principal statues in these caves were also representations of Śākyamuni, as exemplified by the dedication inscription of Cave 94.[25]



Figure 10. The central altar and its statues in Mogao Cave 196. (Source: Supervised by Venerable Master Hsing Yun, edited by Ruchang, *Encyclopedia of Buddhist Arts Vol. 7: Caves Vol. 3*, Kaohsiung: Fo Guang Shan Board of Directors, 2013, p. 1126.).

Notably, the Zhag Cave in western Tibet and the Thousand Buddha caves in Dunhuang, dating from the later Cao clan's Guiyi Army period to the Tangut period, exhibit remarkable parallels. First, in terms of mural composition, both feature walls densely painted with Thousand Buddha imagery, the majority of which can be identified as the Thousand Buddhas of the Bhadrakalpa. The presence of floral motifs on the ceilings further highlights their stylistic affinity, particularly with Dunhuang caves from the Tangut period. Second, regarding the architectural design of caves adorned with Thousand Buddha imagery from this period, both the central pillar and central altar structures facilitate circumambulatory worship, creating a spatial environment for devotees or practitioners to perform ritual circumambulation. Third, from a chronological perspective, the Zhag Cave is dated to the 11th–12th centuries, while the Thousand Buddha caves at Dunhuang span from the mid-10th to the early 13th century, resulting in a significant temporal overlap, particularly aligning with the Dunhuang caves of the early Tangut period. Fourth, with respect to the statues on the central altars, the Dunhuang caves from this period provide crucial insights into identifying the original statue at the Zhag Cave. Given the strong thematic, architectural, and chronological correspondences, it is reasonable to infer that the original statue at the Zhag Cave was also a representation of Śākyamuni, akin to those found in the Dunhuang caves from close periods. Section 5 will continue to shed light on this issue. Collectively, the Thousand Buddha imagery and cave construction principles evident in both sites demonstrate remarkable congruence, reflecting a shared religious and cultural framework.

5. The Zenith of Bhadrakalpa Thousand Buddhas Belief: Iconographic Construction and Narratives in the Zhag Cave and Dunhuang Caves from the Cao Clan to the Tangut Era

As previously discussed, the depiction of the Thousand Buddhas on the four walls of the Dunhuang caves underwent two prominent phases of popularity. A key question arises: does the belief associated with the Thousand Buddhas differ across these two phases? During the Northern Liang and Northern Dynasties, the emphasis was placed on representing the Buddhas of the Three Times (past, present, and future) (He 1994), often embodied as the Three Thousand Buddhas of the Three Times. The Northern Wei imagery

serves as a quintessential example of this thematic focus (Ning and Hu 1986). However, by the time of the Cao clan's Guiyi Army and into the Tangut period, representations of the Buddhas of the Three Times had disappeared from the Dunhuang caves. Instead, the Thousand Buddhas iconography during this later phase concentrated exclusively on the Thousand Buddhas of the Bhadrakalpa, representing the Buddhas of the present age.

The Zhag Cave's depiction of the Thousand Buddhas of the Bhadrakalpa in western Tibet aligns closely with this later thematic focus. Why did this theme experience a resurgence during this period, and what factors contributed to its culmination? To further investigate the interconnections between the relics of Zhag Cave and the Dunhuang caves during this period, the following discussion examines the iconographic representations and the underlying belief systems associated with the motif of Thousand Buddhas of the Bhadrakalpa.

Beginning with the Zhang clan's Guiyi Army in the late 9th century, Dunhuang caves began to incorporate a form of Bhadrakalpa Thousand Buddhas transformation tableaux. These were often depicted above the doors on the east walls in the main chambers or on the flat ceilings of the corridors, a tradition that persisted into the Tangut period. According to Liang Weiying (Liang 2000), elements such as the great lotus, ocean waves, and treasure vases in these depictions symbolized the births and predictions of the Thousand Buddhas of Bhadrakalpa. These motifs underscore the sequential manifestation and perpetual continuity of these Buddhas. The iconography draws upon textual foundations such as the *Mahāratnakūṭa Sūtra: Chapter on the Vajra Warrior with the Hidden Tracks* (*Da baoji jing: miji jingang lishi hui* 大寶積經·密跡金剛力士會) and the *Great Compassion Sūtra: Chapter on Veneration* (*Dabei jing: libai pin* 大悲經·禮拜品). By the later period of the Cao clan's Guiyi Army and into the Tangut era, the Bhadrakalpa Thousand Buddhas iconography, as seen in Caves 432, 263, and 264, had been simplified to emphasize the births of the Buddhas, often represented by a lotus flower.

For example, Mogao Cave 9, dating to the Guiyi Army period (constructed between 890 and 893 CE), features transformation tableaux of the Bhadrakalpa Thousand Buddhas depicted on the flat ceilings of the central pillar's northern and southern sides. At the northern side, above the prominent depiction of a large lotus flower, an inscription reads: "The thousand-petaled lotus flower blooms/Thousand Buddhas emerge from this lotus flower." (現千葉蓮花/千佛與此花中/出現時) The *Great Compassion Sūtra: Chapter on Veneration* provides an explanation for the origin of the term "Bhadrakalpa" (Auspicious Eon) through the depiction of this very scenario:

"Ānanda, why is it called the Bhadrakalpa (Auspicious Eon)? Ānanda, when this trichiliocosm (three-thousand great-thousand worlds) was about to form, it was entirely submerged in a single vast body of water. At that time, the gods of the Pure Dwelling (Jing ju tian 淨居天), using their divine vision, observed this world as one great expanse of water and saw therein a thousand exquisite lotus flowers—each lotus bearing a thousand petals, golden in color, radiating brilliant golden light that illuminated all directions, and exuding a fragrance so delightful and captivating. Upon seeing this, the gods of the Pure Dwelling were filled with immense joy and exclaimed with boundless delight, 'Marvelous! Marvelous! Rare indeed! In such an eon, a thousand Buddhas will arise in the world.' For this reason, this eon was named the Bhadrakalpa, the Auspicious Eon."[26]

The imagery along the walls of the main chamber in the Zhag Cave, situated in western Tibet, is closely aligned with the contemporary practice at Dunhuang, where the lotus flower motif symbolizes the transformation tableaux of the Bhadrakalpa Thousand Buddhas. The wall edges of Zhag Cave are embellished with patterns of lotus flowers and buds (Figures 11 and 12), each of the six lotus flowers giving rise to a standing Buddha figure (Figure 12).[27] The depiction of lotus flowers along the edges of the walls in the Zhag Cave

closely corresponds to the artistic conventions observed in the simultaneous Dunhuang Caves, such as Mogao Cave 432 during the Tangut period (Figure 9). This composition effectively encapsulates the concept of representing the births of the Thousand Buddhas of the Bhadrakalpa.



Figure 11. Lotus bud and stem motifs located at the eastern side of the corridor entrance on the south wall of the Zhag Cave. (Photographed by Xie Jisheng 謝繼勝).



Figure 12. Thousand Buddha depictions, standing Buddha figures, and lotus bud imagery on the southern edge of the west wall of the Zhag Cave. (Photographed by Xie Jisheng 謝繼勝).

Based on this iconographic arrangement, it can be reasonably inferred that the six standing Buddha figures emerging from the lotus flowers in the Zhag Cave symbolize the first six Buddhas of the Seven Buddhas of the Past, who preceded Śākyamuni. The Seven Buddhas of the Past encompass the final three Buddhas of the past eon and the initial four Buddhas of the present eon, with Śākyamuni occupying the position of the fourth Buddha in the present eon and the seventh Buddha in the sequence of the Seven Buddhas of the Past. This raises the question: where is Śākyamuni, the seventh Buddha in this sequence, represented? As previously discussed, if the original statue on the central pedestal was indeed a Śākyamuni, it would perfectly complete the configuration by uniting the six standing Buddhas on the wall edges with Śākyamuni in the middle of the cave. This integrated arrangement would further substantiate the hypothesis of the central statue stated above. Although no other direct evidence of central sculptural images from this period has been found in Western Tibet, such arrangements were, in fact, common in representations of the Seven Buddhas of the Past along the Silk Road around the 11th century. For instance, beyond the caves at Dunhuang, the first story of the Yingxian Wooden Pagoda—constructed during the Liao dynasty in the late 11th century—features a central sculpture of Śākyamuni as the principal deity, surrounded by wall paintings of six additional Buddhas. This layout thus constitutes a complete iconographic configuration of the Seven Buddhas of the Past.

Moreover, the inclusion of these six past Buddhas in Zhag Cave emerging from lotus flowers serves as a prelude to the narrative of the Thousand Buddhas of the Bhadrakalpa, directing the thematic focus of the cave toward the present Buddhas, represented by Śākyamuni and the Thousand Buddhas of the Bhadrakalpa. This iconographic construction establishes a cosmos of present Buddhas, with Śākyamuni at its center, encircled by the Thousand Buddhas of the Bhadrakalpa. The arrangement emphasizes the eternal endurance of the Dharma and the protective spirit it embodies, set against the backdrop of a religious apocalyptic ethos.

The narrative structure linking the Seven Buddhas of the Past with the Thousand Buddhas of the Bhadrakalpa is even more explicitly articulated in Dung dkar Cave 2, located a short distance from Zhag Cave and dating to a phase closely contemporaneous with it. In Dung dkar Cave 2, the north wall (main wall) originally showcased sculptures of the Seven Buddhas of the Past along with Maitreya Bodhisattva. Meanwhile, the murals adorning the cave's four walls depicted the Thousand Bodhisattvas of the Bhadrakalpa—these Bodhisattva forms precede the Thousand Buddhas in their attainment of Buddhahood. The sequence of the Thousand Bodhisattvas starts from the sixth figure in the Bhadrakalpa lineage, following directly after the Maitreya Bodhisattva (the fifth in this lineage) sculpture, which clearly conveys the anticipation of the future Buddhas' advent (Luo 2021).

The motif of the Seven Buddhas of the Past, either alone or in combination with Maitreya, was a widely prevalent theme in the Hexi Corridor and other regions during this period. It was often associated with rituals aimed at repentance and the invocation of blessings. The Tangut block-printed edition of *The Method of Repentance at the Compassionate Altar* (*Cibei daochang chanzui fa* 慈悲道場懺罪法) includes an "Illustration of the Principles of Repentance" ("Chanfa benshi tu" 懺法本事圖) and a Buddha Name Illustration at the frontispiece of each volume.[28] The Buddha Name Illustration portrays the Seven Buddhas of the Past alongside a seated Maitreya Buddha, with their names inscribed in Tangut script. The "Illustration of the Principles of Repentance" depicts Emperor Wu of Liang (梁武帝) performing this repentance ritual, which transformed his deceased Empress Xi (郗氏) from a serpent into a celestial being. Additionally, the theme of the Seven Buddhas of the Past appears in the Dunhuang caves during this period. For example, in Mogao Cave 365, the altar on the west wall features statues of the Seven Buddhas, with rewritten inscriptions from the late period of the Cao clan's Guiyi Army situated above each of the back screen.[29]

During the period spanning the Cao clan's Guiyi Army to the Tangut era, the veneration of the Bhadrakalpa Thousand Buddhas in Dunhuang reached an extraordinary level of fervor. As previously noted, the current surface layer of murals in Cave 263 consists of Thousand Buddha depictions repainted during the Tangut period. However, remnants of the original Northern Wei mural layer remain visible, including Thousand Buddha imagery, Dharma preaching scenes, and transformation tableaux depicting the subjugation of demons. On the visible original mural layer, the north, east, and south walls all feature Thousand Buddha paintings,[30] with the overall content and stylistic features closely aligning with those in Cave 254, another cave from the Northern Wei period mentioned above (Suemori 2020, pp. 88–89). This strongly suggests that, prior to the Tangut repainting, the original murals in Cave 263 likely included depictions of the Thousand Buddhas on all four walls, much like those in Cave 254. For other Thousand Buddha caves that underwent later repainting, it remains uncertain whether their original mural layers also featured Thousand Buddha imagery. Nevertheless, the case of the re-painters in Cave 263 applying a new Thousand Buddha depiction over a pre-existing one is already highly intriguing. At the same time, the aforementioned transformation tableaux of the Bhadrakalpa Thousand Buddhas in Dunhuang predominantly emerged during the Guiyi Army to the Tangut period as well. These all vividly illustrate the patrons' and founders' steadfast commitment to promoting the Bhadrakalpa Thousand Buddhas faith and their resolute efforts to revive it during this period.

The significance of the Bhadrakalpa Thousand Buddhas belief during this period is further evidenced by various Tangut relics. Among the extant Tangut manuscripts of the *Sūtra on the Names of the Thousand Buddhas from the Present Bhadrakalpa* (*Xianzai xianjie qianfo mingjing* 現在賢劫千佛名經),[31] one features a notable frontispiece depicting the celebrated "Tangut Sūtra Translation Illustration"(西夏譯經圖) (Figure 13).[32] This artwork portrays the Tangut Imperial Preceptor Anquan, named Bai Zhiguang (安全國師白智光), alongside a group of monastic and lay translators engaged in a translation session. Also included are donor portraits of Queen Dowager Liang, known as Caijing (才淨皇太后梁氏), and the Tangut emperor, referred to as "Emperor Mingsheng", Huizong Bingchang (「明盛皇帝」惠宗秉常), who reigned from 1067 to 1086.[33] The prominent placement of this imperial translation scene as the frontispiece of the *Sūtra on the Names of the Thousand Buddhas from the Present Bhadrakalpa* underscores the scripture's exceptional importance within the Tangut dynasty. Additionally, a Tangut painting of the Thousand Buddhas discovered in Dunhuang further illustrates that, while the Tangut people embraced the Vajrayana teachings of Tibetan Buddhism, they continued to uphold a deep veneration for the Thousand Buddhas tradition (Luo 2022a,2022b) (Figure 14).[34]

Sha Wutian in his analysis of the reasons behind the sealing of the Dunhuang Library Cave, observed that during the Guiyi Army period under the Cao clan's rule, Dunhuang was significantly influenced by the apocalyptic ideology of the Liao dynasty. He argued that the widespread production of Bhadrakalpa Thousand Buddhas transformation tableaux and the sealing of the Library Cave were interconnected, both serving as measures to safeguard Buddhism against Dharma-ending calamities in future times (Sha 2006). In the subsequent Tangut dynasty, this belief in the Bhadrakalpa Thousand Buddhas, shaped by the apocalyptic thought, not only persisted but also reached its zenith. The Library Cave (Cave 17), situated along the north wall of the corridor leading to Cave 16, further reflects this connection. The main chamber of Cave 16, repainted with Thousand Buddhas during the Cao clan's Guiyi Army period, features a prominent lotus motif above the entrance on the east wall, symbolizing the Bhadrakalpa Thousand Buddhas transformation tableaux. This context invites further reflection on the close thematic relationship between the Bhadrakalpa Thousand Buddhas imagery and the Library Cave.



Figure 13. Frontispiece of volume I of the Tangut manuscript titled *Sūtra on the Names of the Thousand Buddhas from the Present Bhadrakalpa*, featuring the renowned "Tangut Sūtra Translation Illustration", preserved in the National Library of China (Weng and Li 2014, p. 247).

Furthermore, Liang Weiying has argued that the depiction of the Bhadrakalpa Thousand Buddhas transformation tableaux in Dunhuang was closely tied to the anti-Buddhist campaigns of the late Tang and Five Dynasties periods (Liang 2000, p. 51). This motif emerged in the aftermath of the Buddhist suppression during the fifth year of the Huichang era under Emperor Wuzong of the Tang dynasty (845). It gained renewed prominence following another persecution issued by Emperor Shizong of the Later Zhou dynasty in the second year of his Xiande era (955). Subsequently, this theme continued to flourish as a popular motif throughout the Five Dynasties and Song periods. A comparable development can be observed in western Tibet during the early phase of the Second Propagation of Tibetan Buddhism. Following the Buddhist persecutions under gLang dar ma during the late Tibetan Empire and a subsequent "dark age" for Tibetan Buddhism lasting over a century, Tibet witnessed a revitalization of Buddhist practice and dissemination. Within this resurgence, western Tibet emerged as a key epicenter for the Second Propagation, as evidenced by the compelling depiction of the Bhadrakalpa Thousand Buddhas imagery during this period.

The emergence of the representations of the Thousand Buddhas of the Bhadrakalpa in the Zhag Cave of western Tibet during this period is thus entirely explicable. These murals were designed to affirm the enduring nature of the Dharma and demonstrate the futility of attempts to suppress Buddhism by depicting the sequential appearances of the Bhadrakalpa Thousand Buddhas. This focus on venerating the present Buddhas directly reflects the influence of religious apocalyptic notions tied to the Dharma-ending age and aligns with the broader Buddhist revival movement of the time. Moreover, the architectural configuration of the Zhag Cave, coupled with the meticulous arrangement of the Thousand Buddhas, establishes a sacred ritual space. This space facilitates practitioners and devotees in performing circumambulation, engaging in acts of repentance to absolve sins, and offering prayers for protection and blessings. When situated within the broader framework of the Silk Road, particularly through comparisons with the Thousand Buddhas imagery of Dunhuang, it becomes clear that, despite being separated by thousands of kilometers, the two sites exhibit profound connections. These connections are evident in their visual forms, thematic emphases, cave layouts, and conceptual approaches to construction. Together, they reveal remarkably similar patterns of religious expression within the multiethnic and intercultural environment of the Silk Road during this era.



Figure 14. The Tangut Thousand Buddha painting from Dunhuang, held by the National Library of China. (Source: Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, National Library of China 中國國家圖書館善本特藏部, Shanghai Longhua Temple 龍華寺, and the Editorial Office of Zangwai fojiao wenxian 《藏外佛教文獻》編輯部 (Buddhist Texts Outside the Tripiṭaka) (eds.), *Zhongguo guojia tushuguan cang dunhuang yishu jingpin xuan* 中國國家圖書館藏敦煌遺書精品選 (*Selected Treasures from Dunhuang Manuscripts in the Collection of the National Library of China*), Beijing: National Library of China, 2000, p. 61, plate 97.).

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Abbreviations

T Taishō shinshū daizōkyō 大正新脩大蔵經. 1924–1932. Edited by Takakusu Junjirō 高楠順次郎 and Watanabe Kaikyoku 渡辺海旭. Tokyo: Taoshō Issaikyō Kankōkai.

Notes

1 The Thousand Buddha caves in Western Tibet, dating back to the early period of the Second Propagation of Tibetan Buddhism, encompass several significant sites beyond the Zhag Cave discussed in this article. These include Drin Sa Cave 1, Dung dkar Cave 2, Phyi dbang Caves 79 and 90, as well as the Jo mo lha khang at Khyung lung Village, among others, all situated in rTsa mda' County, mNga' ris Prefecture, Tibet. Due to space constraints, a detailed discussion of these sites is beyond the scope of this study.

2 Research on the Thousand Buddha murals of the Zhag Cave currently includes articles of CPAM of Tibet (1997), Neumann (2002), Huo (2004), Xiong (2018), and Gu ge Tshe ring rgyal po and Kalantari (2021), as well as my Ph.D. thesis (Luo 2022c).

3 I have published a specialized article on the mural depicting the Wheel of Rebirth in this cave (Luo 2022d).

4 Editorial signs: [1], [2], [3], etc. = beginning of a line; @ = semi opening sign (*dang kyog*); / = vertical stroke (*shad*); (…) = illegible segment; _ = uncertain reading.

5 At present, I have not identified any references to Master Dran ba rgyal mtshan in Tibetan sources; further investigation into this matter will be necessary in future research.

6 Some of the verses in the Thousand Buddha inscriptions display slight variations in spelling.

7 This scripture was translated during the reign of King Khri srong lde btsan in the 8th century by the Indian master Vidyākarasiṁha and the Tibetan translator dPal gyi dbyangs. It was collated and revised by the Tibetan chief revising translator dPal brtsegs. It documents the names, identities, and enlightenment processes of the 1004 Buddhas of the Bhadrakalpa. See *bKa' 'gyur (dpe bsdur ma)*, vol. 45, pp. 19–803. The names of the Bhadrakalpa Thousand Buddhas listed in the second part of this sūtra, serve as a reference for this study.

8 Due to space constraints in this article, the specific names of the Zhag Cave are not individually enumerated.

9 Translated from the Chinese version: "是賢劫中有斯千佛興現出世，度脫十方一切眾生。是千佛等各有名號，皆如是像。若有人聞受持諷誦，執學心懷專精了識，行無放逸和同供養，棄眾惡趣勤苦之患，長得安隱住於禁戒，諸所將信順喜經道，應行清淨值具足果，此深妙忍根元法忍，護一切世若干億劫。犯諸惡行不知罪福果之報應，聞諸佛名除一切罪無復眾患。假使有持是諸佛名一切尊號，致得神足一心定意。若有凡庶，逮得見聞自在值此，斯眾導師御行經典，懷來億載無量功祚，所解說義暢達音慧，因得值見斯三昧定，性行清淨心無猶豫，所興發慧不著三界，以逮總持存在心懷，是等當行此三昧定。"(T425: 50)

10 IOL Tib J127, folio 2a4.

11 See *bsTan 'gyur (dpe bsdur ma)*, vol. 93, pp. 1472–75.

12 Daniel Boucher has discussed the function of the *Pratītyasamutpāda-gāthā* based on relevant archaeological materials (Boucher 1991). Bentor has analyzed the concept of *dharmaśarīra* and the function of the *Pratītyasamutpāda-gāthā* (Bentor 1992). Sa Erji 薩爾吉 has provided an in-depth analysis of the origins and evolution of this verse (Sa 2013).

13 See *bKa' 'gyur (dpe bsdur ma)*, vol. 62, pp. 334–53.

14 The incomplete translation 闕譯本.

15 The anonymous translation 失譯本.

16 (1) The character featuring superscript letters *la* and *sa*, where the superscript occupies a single grid space but is slightly offset to the right rather than aligned with the radical, continues to appear in certain Buddhist manuscripts dating from the 11th to 12th centuries. (2) The use of a syllable-separating dot (*tsheg*) preceding the *shad* mark at the end of sentences remains prevalent in many calligraphic Buddhist manuscripts from approximately the 11th to 12th centuries. (3) The phenomenon of appending a suffix *'a* to certain individual radical letters is still observable in Buddhist manuscripts from the 12th century. (4) The practice of attaching the subscript *ya* beneath the radical *ma* persists in some Buddhist manuscripts through the 12th century. (5) The addition of the second suffix *da* (*da drag*) occasionally appears in Buddhist manuscripts from the period of the Second Propagation of Tibetan Buddhism, typically following *na*, *ra*, or *la*.

17 Yin Guangming 殷光明 argues that the inscriptions on the Northern Liang stone pagodas referencing the *Sūtra on the Dvādaśaṅga pratītyasamutpāda* originates from the lost translation of the *Ekottara Āgama* (*Zengyi ahan jing*, 增一阿含經) by Nandi (Yin 1996). This sūtra was later revised by Saṃghadeva during the Eastern Jin dynasty, resulting in the extant version (T125: 776).

18 Found in the inscriptions inscribed on the Baishuangqie 白雙且 and Chengduaner 程段兒 stone pagodas excavated in Jiuquan.

19 For studies on Northern Liang stone pagodas and the Dharma-Ending Age thought in Northern Liang Buddhism, refer to Yin (1998a, 1998b). For related images and inscriptions, see Zhang (2006).

20 Liang Xiaopeng 梁曉鵬 conducted a comprehensive statistical and categorical analysis of the Thousand Buddha images in the Mogao Caves (Liang 2006).

[21] Ning Qiang 寧強 and Hu Tongqing 胡同慶 examined the Northern Wei belief in the Thousand Buddhas and the practice of circumambulation around stūpas, referencing Mogao Cave 254 (Ning and Hu 1986).

[22] Regarding the textual and inscriptional arrangement of the Thousand Buddha images in this cave, see Mi (2015).

[23] Based on Zhang Jingfeng's 張景峰 analysis of central altar caves at Dunhuang, those from the Guiyijun period include caves such as 16, 85, 94, 138, and 196 attributed to the Zhang clan's era, as well as caves such as 55, 61, 98, 109, 146, 256, 152, and 454, among others, attributed to the Cao clan's era (Zhang 2009). For further details, also see Ma (2006), Sha (2013, p. 9) and Wu (2022, p. 142).

[24] Zhang Shiqi 張世奇 systematically examined the Thousand Buddha murals in the Tangut period caves at Dunhuang as his master's thesis (Zhang 2015, pp. 21–25).

[25] Zhang Huaishen's 张淮深 dedication inscription of Cave 94, P.3720, *Stele of Meritorious Deeds for Zhang Huaishen's Cave* 张淮深造窟功德碑: "The golden figure of Śākyamuni is seated cross-legged on a jeweled throne, with robes cascading down. A subtle radiance emanates from the jade-like ūrṇā, reminiscent of the king approaching the early teachings. It is believed to descend from Trāyastriṃ śa heaven into the human realm." (「釋迦金象，趺寶坐以垂衣。少分玉豪（毫），想延王至初教。疑從刀利，下降人間。」)

[26] 阿難！何故名為賢劫？阿難！此三千大千世界劫欲成時盡為一水。時淨居天以天眼觀見此世界唯一大水，見有千枚諸妙蓮華——一一蓮華各有千葉，金色、金光大明普照，香氣芬薰甚可愛樂——彼淨居天因見此已，心生歡喜踴躍無量而贊嘆言：「奇哉奇哉！希有希有！如此劫中當有千佛出興於世。」以是因緣，遂名此劫號之為賢。 Translated by the Northern Qi translator Nalian tiye she 那連提耶捨 (T380: 958).

[27] The staff and alms bowl held by the standing Buddhas likely symbolize ascetic practices, representing the spiritual journey undertaken by past Buddhas to achieve enlightenment. Regarding the aforementioned standing Buddha images and the lotus bud motifs adorning the edges of the walls, each inscribed with sequentially arranged names of the Thousand Buddhas of the Bhadrakalpa, these inscriptions seem to demonstrate the craftsmen's systematic approach to ensuring the comprehensive documentation of as many names of the Thousand Buddhas as possible.

[28] The edition held in the National Library of China is a Tangut-script woodblock print dated to the 6th Year of the Dade reign of the Yuan Dynasty (1302), and it was unearthed in Lingwu, Ningxia (Weng and Li 2014, pp. 42–60).

[29] Zhao Yanlin 趙燕林 and Zhao Xiaoxing 趙曉星 transcribed and interpreted the remaining Chinese inscriptions on the back screens of the Seven Buddhas statues in Mogao Cave 365. They identified the inscriptions as representing the names of the Seven Buddhas of the Past and noted that the inscriptions were re-inscribed during the renovation of the cave (Zhao and Zhao 2020).

[30] Fragments of murals from Mogao Cave 263 are preserved at the State Hermitage Museum in Russia (Akiyama and Liu 1982). Images can be found in the collection edited by State Hermitage Museum (1997, plate 33).

[31] For the catalog of existing Tangut Buddhist scriptures, refer to the catalog compiled by Shi Jinbo 史金波 (Shi 1988, pp. 343–413).

[32] Held by the National Library of China (Weng and Li 2014, pp. 247–59).

[33] The title of the sūtra is followed by the inscription: "Fengtian xiandao yaowu xuanwen shenmou ruizhi zhiyi quxie dunmu yigong huangdi yujiao"奉天顯道耀武宣文神謀睿智制義去邪惇睦懿恭皇帝御校, indicating that the emperor personally revised the text. For details regarding the identities of the Tangut Empress Dowager and the Emperor depicted in this illustration, see Shi (1979).

[34] Held by the National Library of China (Luo 2022a). For illustrations, see Luo (2022b).

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