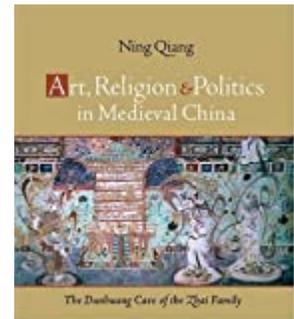


**Ning Qiang.** *Art, Religion and Politics in Medieval China: The Dunhuang Cave of the Zhai Family.* Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004. xv + 178 pp. \$39.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8248-2703-8.



**Reviewed by** Angela Howard (Rutgers,)

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## **The Making of a Seventh-Century Buddhist Cave in Dunhuang, China: Politics or Piety**

This book is a case study of Dunhuang Cave 220, completed in 642 through the sponsorship of the prominent Zhai family, which continued to supervise the cave's upkeep until the tenth century. Ning Qiang has chosen the cave for several reasons; it is dated, we know the identity of its patrons, and its décor manifests stylistic and doctrinal innovations. Breaking away from sixth-century stylistic and doctrinal conventions, Cave 220 was decorated with large murals of Pure Lands or Paradises on the lateral walls, a composition of the Vimalakirti and Manjushri (the Bodhisattva of Wisdom) debate above the entrance, and a large niche in the rear wall where a group of sculpture was complemented by painted images on the niche's surrounding walls. The layout and décor established a model for subsequent Tang caves. Although the author emphatically states that his study gives equal weight to the textual sources of the décor, related pictorial examples, and their socio-political foundations, he emphasizes the political and social influence of patronage and tends to overlook the religious sources of the art.

In chapter 1, Ning Qiang takes issue with the general opinion that the Pure Lands are those of the Bud-

dha of Healing (Bhaisajyaguru) on the northern wall, and that of the Buddha of Measureless Light or Measureless Life (Amitabha or Amitayus) on the southern wall. Instead, he identifies the former as the healing ritual centering on Bhaisajyaguru, while the latter refers not only to Amitabha's Pure Land but also includes contemplation elements belonging to the *Sutra on Visualizing Buddha Amitayus*. Rather than explain these iconographies as a reflection of the rising popularity of Pure Land doctrine during the Tang, Ning proposes that they resulted primarily from the 640 expansionist military policy of the Tang into Central Asia in which the Zhai participated. To express their wish that the wounded be cured and the dead be reborn in a Pure Land, the family oversaw the painting of the Bhaisajyaguru and Amitabha murals in the cave. Likewise, the inclusion in the Vimalakirti group of the Tang Emperor, his ministers and foreign ambassadors expressed the allegiance of the family to the imperial court and its policy. This interpretation is offered as an alternative to the generally accepted view that the august gathering was a reproduction of a superb painting by the court painter and Minister of the Right, Yan Liben (ca. 600-73). In other words, Xi'an style and taste were

transplanted in a frontier locale of Dunhuang.

There are, however, limitations to interpreting Buddhist art simply as a response to contemporary politics or religious ideology. The author is mistaken in explaining the miracles Vimalakirti performs as “conjuring up the Fragrant Land, creating an illusory bodhisattva to feed the assembled, transporting the audience to a supernatural abode?” as the intention of the Buddhist clergy to imitate Daoist magic practices. Ning Qiang ignores the sutra text which states the miracles to be the effect of Vimalakirti having entered *samadhi* or mental concentration.

Chapter 2 explores how the Zhai modified Cave 220 in the centuries following its making. Minor structural changes occurred during the Tibetan occupation of Dunhuang (781-847) when a modest niche was opened in the cave passage way. Below the Buddhist groups painted in the niche, the Zhai patrons are dressed in Tibetan attire. The inscription, which Ning Qiang reconstructs, states that the niche was dedicated to the Tibetan king. A major redecoration and repainting of Cave 220 took place in the tenth century, during the Five Dynasties period (907-59), sponsored by the scholar-official, Zhai Fengda, a ninth generation Zhai. Additional changes occurred during the Western Xia alien dynasty (1036-1226). Zhai Fengda saw to the painting of a Manjushri panel in the passage way. Below the bodhisattva, he is dressed conspicuously in Han apparel in the midst of other relatives. Zhai Fengda sponsored, perhaps, also the large mural painted in the cave over the original Amitabha Pure Land of the south wall. (This second layer was removed in the 1940s revealing the original décor.) The repainting consisted of a group of thirty-three auspicious images whose fame rested on being issued from India. Miraculous stories and local deities (the Buddha Panhe) were added to the Indian deities. Ning reconstructs in a drawing the lost mural by relying on pre-1940s records and descriptions; in addition he uses the extant images of Cave 231. Why did Zhai Fengda choose this particular iconography to redecorate the southern wall? The author is again partial to local politics in his explanation. During the tenth century, the alliance between Khotan, a well-known Buddhist center along the Southern Silk Route, and Dunhuang was a close one sealed even by marriage between the two ruling families. According to Ning, these images became popular in the Dunhuang caves because Zhai Fengda “eventually turned this religious painting into a work of political propaganda for local diplomacy” (p. 103).

The concluding chapter explores the meaning and implications of Cave 220, as a ‘family cave.’ To strengthen

his assumption that the decorative program of caves reflected the contemporary political scene, the author discusses two other Dunhuang caves. Cave 96 ascribed to ca. 695, during Empress Wu Zetian’s rule, was sponsored by two members of the Yin family, the monk Lingyin and the layman Yin Zu. This cave is noted for its colossal, thirty-three meter high Maitreya sculpture. The author emphasizes that by choosing Maitreya, the Yin clan no doubt affirmed its allegiance to the empress. Less convincing, however, is Ning’s description of the statue as “shaped according to a woman’s bodily form and clothing. The imposing breasts are exposed to clarify the sex of the Buddha” (p.113). In his eagerness to call attention to the empress connection, the author neglects the fact that we are looking at a republican era (1911-49) restoration, not the original Maitreya. It is a subjective call, but the shaping of the unformed, thickset chest is far removed from the anatomy Ning describes. One mural of the contemporary Cave 321, also a Yin family cave, reflects, in his opinion, political rather than religious overtones. The south wall mural interprets the Grand Cloud Sutra, an apocrypha created to legitimize the empress’ rule. According to the author, “The strong political messages delivered by the artworks in the two Yin family caves apparently reveal the sociopolitical intentions of the lay patrons and may help in understanding the non-religious aspects of the Tang family caves at Dunhuang” (p. 115). To express it differently, social and political issues lie beneath a Buddhist mural; consequently patronage takes on the primary role of deciding on iconography for its own personal motifs, an extreme case of appropriation.

This chapter’s sketchy section regarding patrons, Buddhist practitioners, artists, and audience is explored in greater detail by Sarah E. Fraser’s recent book, which shares the same documentation with the author.[1] In contrast, the chapter’s closing part details the traditional celebrations of the New Year. Here the author’s investigation moves to the realm of Tang culture in general. Ning uses literary and historical sources to describe the dances and lantern festivities, many of which continue to be practiced to this day. As one might expect, the author concludes that the mural of the Bhaisajyaguru Ritual in Cave 220 “illuminates the partial transformation of the ritual from a religious ceremony to a secular celebration” (p. 133). Does he mean that this painting is but a visual record of contemporary New Year celebration? It is, in my opinion a stretch since the sutra painstakingly elaborates on how to enact the ceremony asking the celebrants to observe the numbers of fasting days and sutra readings, of lamps, candles and banners used, as well as

the release of living creatures. All these prescribed, pious acts place emphasis on number seven or its multiples.

*Art, Religion and Politics in Medieval China*, relies heavily on the scholarship of numerous Dunhuang scholars who, in turn, make use of documentation retrieved from the Library Cave of Dunhuang (Cave 17). The author acknowledges their impact on his research. We, in turn, are indebted to Ning for bringing their contribution to our knowledge. Although the author states his intention of pursuing an inquiry respectful of text, style, and

history, in reality he emphasizes the socio-political aspect above all others especially at the expense of doctrinal concerns. According to Ning, the Zhai family became patrons of Cave 220 not so much as an expression of their piety, but rather to showcase their political standing.

Note

[1]. Sarah E. Fraser, *Performing the Visual: The Practice of Buddhist Wall Painting in China and Central Asia, 618-960* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2004).

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