



Ursula Toyka. *The Splendours of Paradise: Murals and Epigraphic Documents at the Early Ming Buddhist Monastery Fahai Si (Volumes 1 and 2).* Sankt Augustin: Institut Monumenta Serica, 2014. 2 volumes, 990 pp. EUR 150.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-8050-0617-0.

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Ming-Era Monasteries

This book originates in a postdoctoral thesis (*habilitation*) that was submitted in 2003 to the Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms University of Bonn. The thesis is thus more than ten years old and apparently has not been updated except by the inclusion of a few later publications in the bibliography. The two volumes constituting this book still come in at just under 1,000 pages of close-packed text and include 276 plates and 11 drawings.

Despite the lapse of time between composition and publication, this book is welcome as it brings highly developed German scholarship on Sino-Buddhist discourse into English. Dr. Toyka demonstrates linguistic access to all the tools of Buddhist sinology. The marshaling of 276 plates, most in color, is an accomplishment in itself, and they are almost all accurately referenced and numbered in the text, no small feat of editing.

If the two volumes are not the last word (nothing ever is) on the Fahai Si, no future researcher on the site or on mid-fifteenth-century Ming Buddhist and Daoist murals can afford to ignore them. The author argues the murals were completed by 1444 under the driving force of a prominent and powerful eunuch, Li Tong, for whom the site became something of a memorial and who was buried there less than ten years later. Located in what is now the western suburbs of Beijing, it retains some of the most important, well-preserved murals of imperial and metropolitan China, particularly of the Ming period.

Some of the original buildings, all of the sculptures, and some of the murals have been destroyed but extensive sections of the Daxiong Baodianâs painted walls retain enough to suggest the overall plan of much of the hall. The distinguished quality of the painting, the exalted position of the eunuch-founder in imperial service, the inclusion of other well-placed officials named as donors, and the predominant role which the epigraphic documents ascribe to the Construction Office of the Ministry of Worksâ leads Toyka to the conclusion that the painters were the finest of the time (p. 143). Although none of the 169 artists and craftsmen named in one inscription appear in literary sources consulted by Toyka, deft use of other sources reveals information about the organization and titles of painters in the Ministry of Works and Crafts Office. She considers that the masters of the Fahai Si murals therefore may be said to have belonged to the elite at the imperial courtâ (p. 147). Through the logic of quality, Toyka then identifies paintings on silk in various collections as works by the same artists.

The first three chapters are devoted to a survey and reconstruction of the original architectural layout of the site, its notice (or absence) in various historical records of the Ming, Qing, and Republican periods, and a close study of the epigraphic documents surviving in situ. From the classically formulated literature review of the state of research to date (which unfortunately omits key

works on the site published in 2003 and 2007 by Karl Debrezény), and here and there in other sections, one can glean information about the site's situation during the turbulence of the Cultural Revolution. There is, however, no section devoted to this period of time when, it is stated, the sculptures were destroyed. Wherever possible the earlier people mentioned in the inscriptions are identified, and a collective portrait of the donors and patrons accumulates. This section is very informative as a case study of patronage by a Ming official and his wide circle in government, imperial, and Buddhist milieus. The collection, documentation, and translation of various dedication and restoration stelae, inscriptions on pillars, and a bronze bell is extensive and impressive. The inscription with the artists and craftsmen of various named types justifies Toyka's conclusion that the long list of their names constitutes a so far unique record in Chinese art history of a team engaged in the construction and adornment not only of a Buddhist monastery, but possibly of [other] projects (p. 141). The Chinese texts are provided in an appendix complete with plates, index, a forty-five-page glossary of Chinese terms, and bibliography.

Primary documentation aside, the bulk of the volumes is devoted to illustrating and analyzing the iconography and the style of the murals in this small monastic foundation of Chan Buddhist tradition (p. 15). Although Dr. Toyka states she is undertaking an analysis of iconography, ritual function and style, ritual function is minimally explored (p. 24). A more accurate summary of her approach is found in a much later section; although applied there to a particular member of a class of *comparanda*, it applies to the overall approach: "Our aim is primarily to concentrate on the visual concept of celestial assemblies, their major compositional elements, character of the brushwork and the likely function of the picture, and not to discuss here wider aspects of the *Chaoyuan Xianzhang* (p. 537).

As Toyka freely admits, hers is an old-school type of art historical examination. She cites Langdon Warner's 1938 work on Buddhist murals as the methodological basis for her formal analysis of the more than 235 square meters of murals in the Fahai Si's Daxiong Baodian. Chapter 4 opens the discussion of the assemblies of Buddhas, bodhisattvas, arhats (Luohan), and a few additional sculptures mainly in the central area of the hall, including the main sculptures once the focus of the shrine, the Buddhas of the Three Ages (*sanshi fo*). They were destroyed in the Cultural Revolution, but are pictured in early black-and-white photographs. The murals survived, however, including a garden scene, groups of

Buddhas and bodhisattvas, and a triad of bodhisattvas behind the three-Buddha altar platform. The following five chapters—consisting of some three hundred pages—focus on the two panels in the rear of the hall, the so-called Twenty Deities Paying Homage to the Buddha (*ershi tian li fo tu*). They are compared to several other sculptures of various dates found at other sites.

Chapter 5, titled "The Images in the Rear Section of the Daxiong Baodian: Genesis and Iconography" and chapter 6, "The Pantheon of Twenty Deities and Related Configurations in Ritual Context," are largely concerned with individual and group iconographic identity, about extracting Indian Buddhist identities out of Chinese forms in which gods and goddesses manifest themselves as secular rulers, emperors, kings, empresses and queens, noble men and women, generals and warriors (p. 258). She ingeniously utilizes other groupings of the lesser deities in Buddhist shrines in China and Japan, as well as a Southern Song dynasty text, the *Zhutian Zhuan* by Xingting and Wu Xu, which describes a group of twenty deities somewhat similar to the one found at the Fahai Si (though with a different order). She also considers an illuminated Buddhist manuscript of 1443 in the National Palace Museum Taipei with images of Three Buddhas and groupings of heterogeneous deities like the Fahai Si.

Chapter 5 is taken up with an introduction to these twenty deities in terms of their origins in India and role in early Chinese Buddhism. They are Brahmā, Indra, the four Lokapāla, Maheśvara, Bodhivāśīkṛtī, Mahāśrī/Lakṣmī, Sarasvatī (which unfortunately appears frequently as Śrīvastī), Śārya, Candra, Mārīcī, Hārītī, Pāṭhivī, Vajrapāṇi, Skanda/Kārtikāya, Pañcika, Śagara Nāgarāja, and Yama. Toyka treats each of them in turn, relying to a surprising extent on a few sources: T. S. Maxwell's 1997 *The Gods of Asia*, Ernest John Eitel's 1870 and 1904 *Handbook of Chinese Buddhism*, William E. Soothill and Lewis Hodous's 1937 *Dictionary of Chinese Buddhist Terms*, and the 1922 *Foxue da cidian* (The Great Dictionary of Buddhism). Although the Indic origin of the names is indisputable, their relationship to Indic ideas is remote at best, which makes the desire to interpret them in the light of Indic ideas or imagery, rather than Chinese practices and understanding, curious. For example, Indra is turned into Brahmā's consort, an empress. (Candra is also feminized, the better to match his paired opposite in the composition, Śārya, the solar deity as an imperial couple; pp. 375, 408–411.) So too at the Fahai Si, both Mārīcī and Sarasvatī both appear as male bodhisattvas (*pace*

Toyka, who reads both as female and even discovers in the latter a "half-fierce expression", with bare torsos (except for scarves and jewelry) and the smooth hairlines of other males, such as Mahevara at the Fahai Si. Toyka refers to them as female, despite the visual evidence, presumably based on their Indian origins. This intriguing gender-switching is unfortunately not explored, something of a lost opportunity.

Most of chapter 6 consists of detailed comparisons of the Fahai Si paintings of the Twenty Deities with sets of sculptures and murals, mainly those already mentioned. There is a great deal of description of the individual deities, with the aim of demonstrating how firmly the Twenty Deities are rooted in the pantheon of post-mediaeval Mahāyana Buddhism in China (p. 316). Chapter 7 is a ninety-page chapter describing in detail each of the Twenty Deities in the murals, focusing on each attribute held; the cut and decoration of the painted robes and fabrics, hats, jewelry; and facial features, many of which occasion asides and diversions. Often description becomes accolade: "magnificently decorated," "graceful sideways sweeps," "colourfully embroidered," "delicately embroidered," "elaborate trousers," etc.

Chapter 8, "Principles of Figure Painting," begins promisingly enough, with discussion of various historical sources on portraiture and figure painting. The initial survey of such sources, mostly from pre-1980 translations, is kept separate from the analysis of the Fahai Si murals. Most of the chapter consists of finding in the paintings ambiguous textual features such as "handsome eyes" (p. 441) from the late seventeenth-century *Primer of Portraiture* (part of the *Jieziyuan huazhuan* [Painting Manual of the Mustard Seed Garden]), or "nine-tenth" vs. "seven-tenth" views of the head, grades of views derived from Contag's 1937 German translation of an eighteenth-century painting manual by Ding Gao. Each of the Twenty Deities is treated in turn, scouting for such "principles." The book would have been considerably shorter and more valuable if the author had summarized the common tendencies and comparisons of the different groups of deities she identifies.

The last chapter, chapter 9, "Artistic Visions of Celestial Assemblies," considers the ensemble of the Twenty Deities at Fahai Si with comparable Buddhist and Daoist groupings, including those of the Yongle Gong and the handscroll in the C. C. Wang collection titled *Chaoyuan Xianzhang*, "safely" attributed to the eleventh-century artist Wu Zongyuan. Dr. Toyka understands the two

painted panels of the back wall, each consisting of ten deities, less as a descent of the deities towards the altar platform and the three Buddhas, as in *shuilu* arrangements than as a "circumambulation of the Buddha's altar" (p. 510). A problem arises from the fact that both groups face inward, on either side of the central door in the back wall. This implies that half the deities are actually moving in an anti-clockwise direction. The start of the chapter is devoted once again to an analysis of the formal arrangements. This time, "lineature," color, and gilt gesso relief (i.e., *pastiglia*) are analyzed for their contribution to the illusion of movement and to demonstrate "the munificence of the donation [and] the votive character of the painting" (p. 517).

The heart of the chapter is devoted to the "related concepts" (p. 521) between the Buddhist and Daoist pantheons, surely one of the most promising aspects identified, and something that arises repeatedly in the reader's mind based on the shared figure-types. The sites are assessed and comparatively rated on the basis of their "artistic maturity" (p. 522) and aesthetic weaknesses. The "concepts" turn out not to be liturgical, then, but compositional. The reader is then made privy to more close description of that site and its painted subjects, particularly those of the Sanqing Dian.

Two sections of the chapter are devoted to the C. C. Wang tall handscroll. The painting is treated along now familiar lines; that is, in great detail as far as brushwork and characterizations of formal effects go. The "valuable information about the pantheon of mediaeval religious Daoism and its iconography" is acknowledged but shelved because of its "complexity" and the fact that "the picture has never been fully researched" (p. 537). Along the way, there is more partisanship on behalf of the Fahai Si at the expense of the scroll painting. It does not really deepen the understanding of the fifteenth-century Fahai Si, in my opinion, to use its qualities as the standard against which to compare a painting attributed to the eleventh century. Ultimately a gesture at a justification for all this attention is offered up: there was "an underlying tradition on which [Buddhism in the fifteenth century and Daoism in the eleventh century] both fed" (p. 550).

Two final sections on the assemblies *qua* assemblies follow. The first begins by a consideration of the legendary Tang painter Wu Daozi, temple murals, and Wu Zongyuan, quickly reverting to the issue of brushwork. The second raises very interesting formal precedents for the assemblies in early Buddhist sculpture and painting

in the form of donor assemblies, including the Northern Wei reliefs of the emperor and empress processions now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Nelson Atkins Museum. The productive suggestion is made that the image of secular rulers in the form of empress and emperor donor processions was then adapted for images of processions of male and female rulers in Buddhist and Daoist heavens between the late Tang and early Song (p. 561). Some of the acts performed by earthly imperial donors, such as the offering of lotus flowers or incense burners, are then transferred to the heavenly deities in the later murals. The author then resorts to biographical speculation in order to explain a putative resemblance between Brahmā and (the female) Indra to an emperor and empress donor couple: it is not impossible that the painting was created to commemorate one of the former imperial couples who also were of some significance in Li Tong's personal life (p. 564). (Toyka also tentatively but unconvincingly identifies three other images [two paintings and a lost sculpture] as portraits of the eunuch founder Li Tong. Two of them have full beards, unlikely for a eunuch.)

The final section of the ninth chapter affords another opportunity to describe textiles and ornaments: Towards a Definition of Style: References to Tibetan Art and a Re-discovered Scroll Painting by the Masters of the Fahai Si. This section is largely devoted to the Tibetan connection, which plays a major theme throughout the two volumes. The central question is raised as to whether or not Tibetan artists participated in the painting of the Fahai Si. We are reminded of the Tibetan names of the donors, discussed at length in the epigraphic section, and the presence of Mahākāla in one of the photographs (treated in chapter 4), the inscribed Tibetan blessing (in the form of Lantsa script *dhāraā'ā*) inside the bronze bell (chapter 3), and the *maā'āqā* on the ceiling above the main altar of the Daxiong Daodian (chapter 4). Mural paintings from the Amdo frontier and Central Tibet are compared to those of the Fahai Si. The last page of the chapter is dedicated to attributing a magnificent paint-

ing on silk (Pl. 200) held in the Beijing Capital Museum to the Masters of the Fahai Si (p. 575). The formal properties betray the same masters' brush, except that the painting displays less of the Central Asian influence than do the Fahai Si murals.

The three-page conclusion recapitulates the main points: the Tibetan connection, the integration of the pictorial program with the architecture, the cult of the Twenty Deities as related (to a degree) to a Song dynasty text (the *Zhutian zhuan*), the connection of processions to a common base of donor assemblies in the Northern Wei and Tang dynasty, and the outstanding standard of aesthetic effects and technical execution of the Fahai Si murals (p. 576). Finally, the hypothesis of an identity between the artists of the Fahai Si and the *shuihu* scrolls of Musée Guimet and the Cleveland Museum of Art is reiterated: they were all created by the very workshops, if not the same painters (p. 577).

In sum, the work is valuable for its attention to later Buddhist art and gathering of empirical evidence of complex systems of signification. Its belatedness is unfortunate since the past fifteen years have seen significant rethinking of Chinese religion and art. Nevertheless, despite an overemphasis on the possible role of Tibetans in the creation of the Fahai Si, some Buddhological lapses when it comes to iconography and terminology, the tendency to substitute description for analysis, and a questionable confidence in the ability to determine hands at work in fifteenth-century murals and paintings on cloth, the volume is still impressive for the author's erudition and diligence in the service of evaluating the Fahai Si.

[Ed. Note: The reviewer has published a longer version of this review on his Academia.edu page: https://www.academia.edu/23969015/Review_of_Toyka_The_Splendours_of_Paradise_Murals_and_Epigraphic_Documents_at_the_Early_Ming_Buddhist_Monastery_Fahai_Si_2_vols._2014.]

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