

Tentative Title

The Visual Representation of Amitābha and his Western Pure Land: Recontextualization of the Bas-Relief from Xiangtangshan, Northern Qi Dynasty

INOUE Takami, Otani University

Abstract

The introduction of Buddhism to Central Asia and China was, first of all, the transmission of Buddhist icons (art), stūpas (architecture), and sūtras (literature), through which the Mahāyāna idea of the universe, or a multiverse with innumerable Buddhas and their world systems, was disseminated. Among these Buddha Worlds or Pure Lands, “as many as the grains of sand in the Ganges River,” Amitābha Buddha’s Land of Bliss (Sukhāvātī) became the most popular in East Asia.

This paper examines the bas-relief from Cave Two of the South Xiangtangshan of the Northern Qi dynasty (550-577 CE), which is one of the earliest visual representations of Amitābha and his Pure Land, based on the *Sukhāvātīvyūha* (Splendrous Visions of the Land of Bliss) sūtra.

The cave temples at Xiangtangshan were located to the west of the Northern Qi capital of Ye, dating a little before the great suppression of Buddhism by Emperor Wu (r. 561-578) of the Northern Zhou dynasty (557-588). Several factors contributed to the growth of Pure Land Buddhism during this period. First, Buddhism had taken root on Chinese soil five centuries after its introduction. Second, Tanluan’s (c. 476-542) innovative interpretations of Pure Land texts contributed to the doctrinal development and the popularization of Pure Land practices in this area. Third, Emperors Wenxuan (r. 550-560) and Houzhou Wei (r. 565-575), devout Buddhist rulers of Northern Qi, generously supported Buddhist institutions. Finally, the Indian monk Narendrayaśas (490-589) came to Ye in 556, and translated sūtras that introduced the eschatological doctrine of the Last Dharma (*mofa*).

The bas-relief was detached from its original site and is now in the collection of the Freer Gallery of Art. Taking advantage of the University of Chicago’s Xiangtangshan Cave Project*, this paper attempts to recover the sculpted image’s deeper significance as an epoch-making representation of the Buddhist universe. (300words)

*<<http://xiangtangshan.uchicago.edu/introduction/>>

*<http://xiangtangshan.uchicago.edu/collection/viewByLocation.php?model_id=69&p=all>