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Xiao Yang*

Maṇḍala within the Rock: The Visualization of the Mahāmāyūrī-vidyārājñī and its Altar in Southwestern China, 9th–13th Centuries

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Abstract: This paper considers visualizations in Chinese medieval esoteric Buddhism in seven sculptural tableaux of the Mahāmāyūrī-vidyārājñī (Peacock Wisdom King 孔雀明王) from rock carving sites in the Sichuan Basin, Southwestern China. Early scholars highlighted the authority of Amoghavajra’s ritual manual for the Mahāmāyūrī images in this area, yet divergences between text and image hold them back from further interpretation. This paper reinvestigates these Mahāmāyūrī shrines “dialectically” by considering the text-image relationship. While keeping Amoghavajra’s ritual manual as a reference, it attempts to decode the meaning of the images and sites based on their own content, and to extrapolate from the text-image divergences how artistic productions and esoteric practices could lead to the presence of such divergences. This involves discussing artistic forms and decorative elements appropriated from exoteric Buddhism, as well as adjustments to the central icon and adjacent narrative scenes weaved within the temporal and spatial transitions. It also includes observations on the grouping between the Mahāmāyūrī and other deities in the larger iconographic program in their affiliated rock-cut sites, which reflects the interaction between this esoteric teaching and other popular beliefs. At least four out of seven examples share the same hierarchical iconographic programs or signature spatial structures similar to the Mahāmāyūrī altar prescribed in Amoghavajra’s ritual manual. It takes these visual or spatial similarities as concrete evidences that the construction of these shrines intended to make altars/maṇḍalas, although in two different ways to represent the esoteric altar and to create a space to conduct such a ritual.

Keywords: the Mahāmāyūrī-vidyārājñī, making altars/maṇḍalas, Chinese esoteric Buddhism, Sichuan rock carving sites

This paper considers visualizations in Chinese esoteric Buddhism with the Mahāmāyūrī cult. This cult originated from the Mahāmāyūrī Dhāraṇī, associated

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with the power of healing snake bites in ancient India. No later than the seventh century, the Mahāmāyūrī-vidyārājñī (hereinafter referred to as the Mahāmāyūrī), the personification of this magic spell, appears in the development of Indian Tantric Buddhism.¹ There are six Chinese versions of the Mahāmāyūrī-vidyārājñī sūtra (hereinafter referred to as the Mahāmāyūrī sūtra) in the *Taishō Revised Tripiṭaka* 大正新脩大藏經, and the most influential version translated by Amoghavajra (705–774) in the middle of the eighth century. The master also edited an additional ritual manual to guide the preparation of the Mahāmāyūrī altar, which attained considerable popularity throughout the East Asian cultural sphere.² Believers consider this sorcery to possess great magical power, which could bring protection and benefit by controlling the weather, removing misfortune, ending war, defending the county, protecting childbirth, expelling poisons, curing diseases, and exorcising demons.

At the center of my discussion are seven sculptural tableaux from rock carving sites in the southeastern Sichuan Basin in southwestern China that depict the Mahāmāyūrī (Figure 1). It includes a formerly unpublished example, the Mahāmāyūrī niche of Monastery Longjusi 龍居寺 in Suining 遂寧, Sichuan Province 四川省.³ Excavated around the second year of the Guanghua 光化 era (899), it is the earliest extant Mahāmāyūrī image in both Sichuan and China. The other six examples, one in Anyue 安岳, Sichuan Province, and five in Dazu 大足, Chongqing Municipality 重慶市, were attributed to the period from the end of the Northern Song (960–1126) to the late Southern Song (1127–1279).⁴ Although there is a gap in time between the examples from the late Tang and Song Dynasties, they are associated with each other not because of similar themes but also because they were all carved *in situ* and are located extremely close to one another (the distance between Suining, Anyue, and Dazu is no more than 100 kilometers). I thus consider these seven stone carvings as a coherent corpus, which provides a rare opportunity to investigate the visualization of a particular esoteric teaching within a particular medium in a particular area during the Tang and Song dynasties, the heyday of Chinese esoteric Buddhism.

Since the late twentieth century, several scholars have studied the Mahāmāyūrī images in the Sichuan area.⁵ They are apt to highlight the authority

1 Mevissen 1990: 230–231.

2 For further discussion on the Mahāmāyūrī cult in Japan, see: Masuki 2008.

3 Peng 1993: 45. Peng briefly introduced the rock carving sites in Longjusi but did not recognize the Mahāmāyūrī niche. Li Jingjie 李靜傑, the professor in Tsinghua University, Beijing, kindly called my attention to this sample.

4 Liu et al. 1985: 401, 440, 473, 545–546, 571; Liu 1997: 173.

5 Wang 1996: 40–41; Guo 2013: 168–181; Suchan 2003: 337–352.

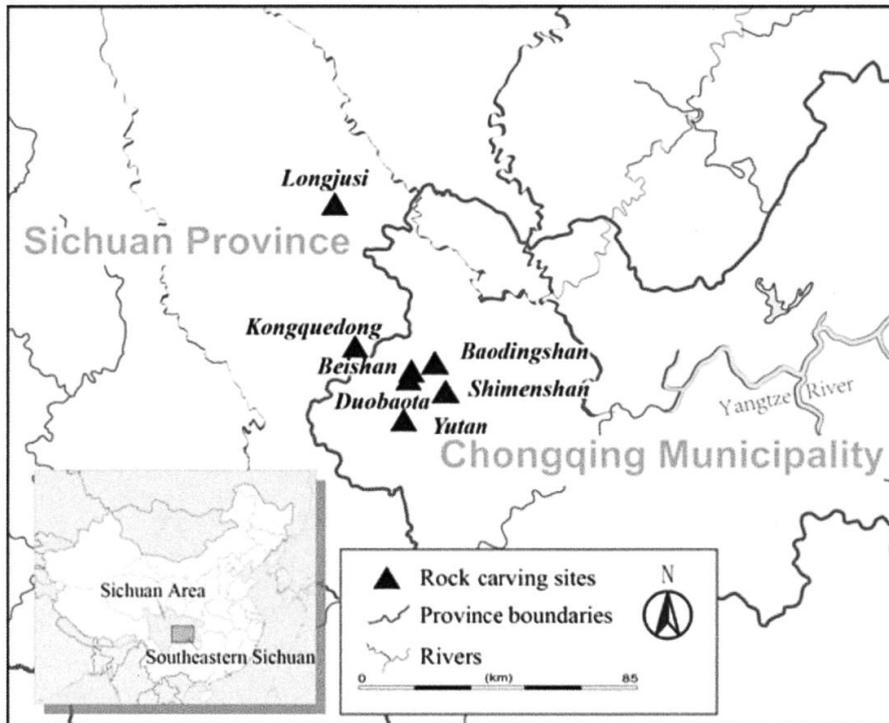


Figure 1: Map showing rock-cut sites with the Mahāmāyūrī images in the Sichuan area.

of Amoghavajra’s ritual manual for the Mahāmāyūrī images in this area, yet divergences between text and image hold them back from further interpretation. I attempt to reinvestigate the Mahāmāyūrī shrines by more “dialectically” considering the text-image relationship.⁶ I assume that Amoghavajra’s ritual manual played a significant role in the Mahāmāyūrī cult in the Sichuan area, but the text was not necessarily visualized dogmatically, and the text itself could have been re-edited in circulation before it guided image-making.⁷ Thus, I attempt to decode the meaning of the images and sites based on their own content while keeping the extant text as a reference, extrapolating from the text-image divergences to argue that artistic productions and esoteric practices could lead to the presence of such distinctions. This will involve discussing the artistic forms and decorative elements appropriated from exoteric Buddhism, as well as the adjustment of the central icon and adjacent narrative scenes weaved within the temporal and spatial transitions. It also includes observation on the grouping

⁶ Geri H. Malandra cites W. J. T. Mitchell on the “dialectic” between text and images (Mitchell 1986: 43) in her discussion of the methodological issues of treating images as the source to discuss esoteric practices. Malandra 1996: 181–182.

⁷ For further discussion on the flexibility of image making in esoteric Buddhism, see: Malandra 1997; Wang 2013 and 2018.

between the Mahāmāyūrī and other deities in the larger iconographic program in their affiliated rock-cut sites, which reflects the interaction between esoteric teachings, popular beliefs and exoteric Buddhism. Remarkably, at least four out of seven examples share the same hierarchical iconographic programs or signature spatial structures similar to the Mahāmāyūrī altar prescribed in Amoghavajra's ritual manual. I take these visual or spatial similarities as concrete evidence that the construction of these shrines intended to make altars/maṇḍalas, although in two different ways to represent the esoteric altar and to create a space to conduct such a ritual.

1 The Mahāmāyūrī Sūtra and its ritual manual

Although there are six Chinese versions of the *Mahāmāyūrī sūtra* in Chinese Tripiṭaka, Amoghavajra's translation and ritual manual represent the dominant influences on the image making in Chinese esoteric Buddhism.⁸ The Sichuan area is no exception. Amoghavajra translated the *Mahāmāyūrī sūtra* as the *Sūtra of the Great Peacock Wisdom King as the Mother of Buddhas* 佛母大孔雀明王經 (T982). Similar to other version of this sūtra, it framed its heart, the Mahāmāyūrī Dhāraṇi, with narratives that describe how the Buddha recited it. It was said that a monk called Svāti was bitten by a black snake while splitting firewood. Ānanda witnessed this accident and sought help from the Shakyamuni Buddha, and the Buddha told Ānanda the Mahāmāyūrī Dhāraṇi and the "Jātaka Tale of the Peacock King" to illustrate the spell's power. The Buddha said that when he had been the king of peacocks in a previous life, one day he was captured in a hunter's net. The peacock king suddenly remembered that he had forgotten to chant the Mahāmāyūrī Dhāraṇi, which he normally would recite every morning. After the bird intoned the incantation, the net fell off at once, by itself, and he survived. Following the Buddha's tale, Ānanda successfully heals Svāti with the Dhāraṇi, and the rescued monk visits the Shakyamuni, bows at the Buddha's feet and stands beside him. Noteworthy within the framework of the story, the past seven Buddhas, the Maitreya Bodhisattva, Brahmā, Śākya, seers, gods, demons, and various numina appear with their own spells to swear to the efficacy of the Dhāraṇi.

For the ritual manual, Amoghavajra titled it the *Ritual Manual of the Altar of the Great Peacock King Image Spoken by the Buddha* 佛說大孔雀明王畫像壇場儀軌

⁸ For more research on the six Chinese versions of the *Mahāmāyūrī sūtra*, see: Sørensen 2006; Masuski 2008; Overbey 2016.

(T983A). The Mahāmāyūrī is described as a one-headed, four-armed figure sitting with crossed legs on a lotus flower over a peacock, with a lotus in the first right hand, with a citron 俱緣果 [whose shape similar to *Shuigua* 水菰] in the second right hand, an Auspicious Fruit 吉祥果 (similar to a peach) in the first left hand, and three or five peacock feathers in the second left hand.⁹ The ritual space is set up as a square altar/maṇḍala with an elaborate painted image on the ground (Figure 2) that consists of three nesting levels. In the inner, or first hall, there is a wheel-shaped lotus, in the center of which is the Mahāmāyūrī, and on the eight petals are painted the seven past Buddhas and the Maitreya Bodhisattva. Around the lotus, four Pratyekabuddhas are painted at the four cardinal directions, and the four great Śrāvakas on the intermediary corners. In the middle, or second hall, are painted the Eight Guardians of the Eight Directions along with their retinues. And in the outer, or third hall are the Twenty-eight Yakṣas and Twelve Constellations. Practitioners

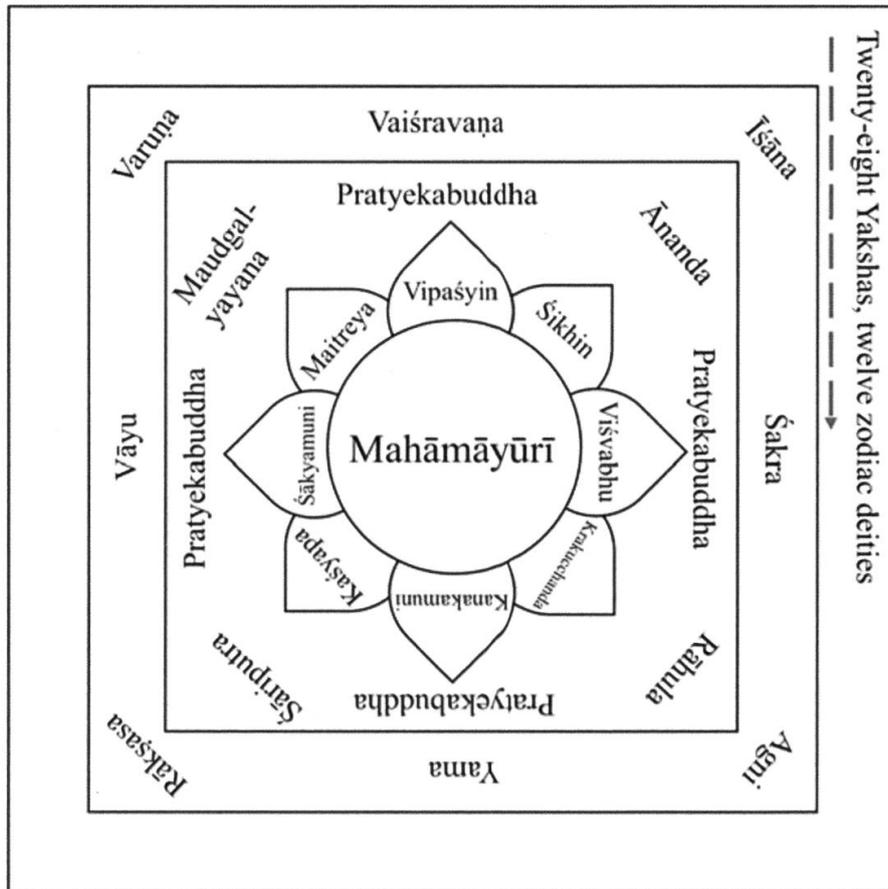


Figure 2: Diagram of the Mahāmāyūrī altar in Amoghavajra's ritual manual. Drawing by author.

⁹ The hands of the primary arms which directly link to the shoulders are the first hands, and the hands of the subordinate arms are the second hands.

should recite the mantras and form various mudrās as well as make offerings of incense, food, drink and followers. Remarkably, Amoghavajra also mentions an expediency if practitioners experience a sudden disaster. They can hold a simplified ritual by installing a Buddha statue at the center of a square space and placing three or five peacock feathers on this altar.

Two historical contexts should be mentioned here. First, as Gerd J.R. Mevissen has pointed out, the four-armed Mahāmāyūrī described by Amoghavajra is based on a version of this figure that was well-known in Bihar in the eighth century. A tiny stone sculpture of a one-headed and four-armed Mahāmāyūrī sitting with crossed legs on a lotus in the Archaeological Museum at Nalanda, whose inscription on the reverse attributed it to eighth and ninth centuries, resembles the Mahāmāyūrī described in Amoghavajra's text.¹⁰ This seems to corroborate Amoghavajra's biography written by his lay disciple Zhao Qian 趙遷 in 774, that Amoghavajra traveled to Sri Lanka and India to learn the esoteric teachings and to collect "their bearings, shapes, colors, and images, their altar rituals and signature symbols".¹¹ Second, the same biography records that in the fifth year of the Tianbao 天寶 era (746) the Emperor Xuanzong 玄宗 (685–762) invited the master to pray for rain at the imperial court.¹² By setting up the Mahāmāyūrī altar, Amoghavajra successfully ended the scorching weather and rain came within three days. Although the anecdote belongs to the hagiography, whose authenticity can be questioned, the tale unquestionably endorses the effects and miracles of the Mahāmāyūrī altar. The seven Mahāmāyūrī images in the Sichuan area testify to the charisma of the Mahāmāyūrī altar in the medieval Buddhist world.

2 A rare example of the Mahāmāyūrī altar from Tang dynasty

Monastery Longjusi is located in Baihezui hamlet 白鶴嘴村, Dongchan town 東禪鎮, in the Anju district 安居區 of Suining, Sichuan Province. The Mahāmāyūrī niche is

¹⁰ Mevissen 1990: 228, 236.

¹¹ T50n2056, 293a2–16: “次達海口城，師子國王，遣使迎之 ... 覺無常師，遍更討尋諸真言教，并諸經論五百餘部，本三昧諸尊密印，儀形色像，壇法標幟，文義性相，無不盡源 ... 又遊五天，巡歷諸國，事跡數繁，闕而不記。” English translation see: Yang 2018: 252–256.

¹² T50n2056, 293a21–24: “是歲也終夏愆陽，帝請大師入內祈雨。制日時不得賒，雨不得暴。大師奏大孔雀明王經壇法。未盡三日，膏澤彌洽。皇帝大悅，自持寶箱，賜大師紫袈裟，帝為披擯，并賜絹二百疋。” English translation see: Zeng Yang 2018: 260.

carved on the northwestern face of a giant rock in this monastery (Figure 3). Its opening is rectangular with double-reveals (which measures 173 cm long and 131 cm high) and its layout is closed to a semicircle (with a radius of 90 cm).¹³ On the back wall, the central icon, a four-armed Mahāmāyūrī riding a peacock is carved as a high relief, which is surrounded by seven small Buddhas seated in the clouds. The two flanking walls each contain a representation of a Buddha and a disciple sitting next to each other. Next to the outside opening, two general figures stand separately on two sides. No inscriptions have been found in this niche, but its left and right niches preserved votive messages dated to the second year of the Guanghua era (899) in the



Figure 3: The Mahāmāyūrī Niche. Polychromed sandstone, height 131 cm, width 173 cm, depth 90 cm, ca. 899. Longjusi Monastery, Suining, Sichuan province. Photograph by author.

¹³ The Longjusi niche has been partly repaired with cement, but the different textures of the stone and cement make it possible to differentiate the original from the restoration. The description here is based on the part preserved the original appearance.

Tang dynasty. As the Mahāmāyūrī niche is in the same sculptural styles as its two neighboring niches, it is reasonable to assume they all date from the same period.

How should the viewer understand the iconographic program of this Mahāmāyūrī niche? The designer of this niche arranged a Buddha and disciple sitting one by one on each flanked wall, which as far as I know has not appeared in any other examples in medieval Buddhist art. Yet the Pratyekabuddhas and the four Śrāvakas (the disciplines of Buddha) are in the same hall in Amoghavajra's Mahāmāyūrī altar. As such, I suggest we understand the iconography of this niche as a simplification of the Mahāmāyūrī altar (Figure 4). The Mahāmāyūrī and seven small Buddhas around its peacock's tail symbolize the deity and the seven Buddhas (the Maitreya was omitted) in the central lotus of the maṇḍalas (which may be indicated by the lotus under the foot of the peacock). Meanwhile the two Buddhas and two disciples on the flanking walls represent the four Pratyekabuddhas and the four Śrāvakas around the lotus in the first hall. The two general figures that stand next to the opening represent the Eight Guardians of the Eight Directions who dwell in the middle hall. Based on Amoghavajra's assignment of the attributes for the eight guardians, we can partly ascertain the

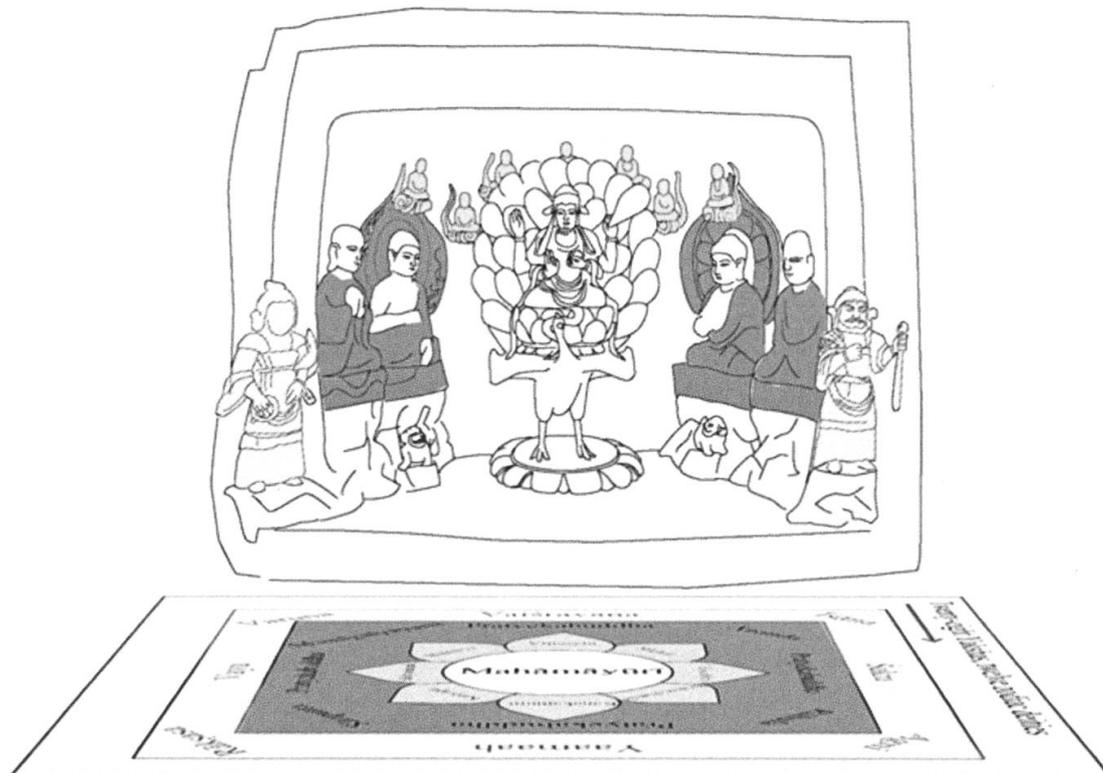


Figure 4: Diagram of the Mahāmāyūrī Niche, Longjusi Monastery. Drawing by the author.

identity of the general figures: the right figure holding a bundle of rope may be the Varuṇa (the water god), the god of the west who holds a noose; the left figure holding a pronged stick may be the Śakra, who guards the east with a long gadā, or may be the Vaiśravaṇa, who guards the north with a staff.

It is noteworthy that there is a correspondence between the Longjusi niche and the Mahāmāyūrī altar not only for the figures' identities, but also for their spatial arrangements. A pivotal detail to understand the positional relationship among these figures in the niche is the overlap among the Mahāmāyūrī, the seven smaller Buddhas, and the two larger buddhas. Five of the seven small Buddhas are on the back wall, whose bodies are more or less obscured by the spreading tail of the peacock ridden by the Mahāmāyūrī. Yet the two small Buddhas who are separated onto the two flanking walls partly obscure the haloes of the two larger Buddhas. Taking into consideration the niche's semi-circular layout, the overlapping details provide a visual indication of the following: the seven small Buddhas enclose the central deity, while the seven small Buddhas are further enclosed by the two larger Buddhas. This perfectly parallels the arrangement, from center to periphery, of the Mahāmāyūrī, the seven past Buddhas (and Maitreya), and the four Pratyekabuddhas in the esoteric altar. The correspondence between the spatial arrangements and between the design details makes it difficult to consider the similarity between the iconographic program and the ritual manual a mere coincidence.

This provokes a further question: why did the designer represent the Mahāmāyūrī altar in the way that he did in the Longjusi niche? Considered with the context of Tang China, it seems the Longjusi niche appropriated formats and motifs from exoteric Buddhist art. The arrangement of the seven main figures in the niche – the Mahāmāyūrī at the center, flanked by a Buddha, a disciple and a guardian on each side – is similar to the seven-figured assembly in Tang dynasty exoteric Buddhist art. For example, in the western niche of Cave 45 in Mogao Grottoes 莫高窟 in Dunhuang 敦煌, the seven-figured group of painted statues features a Buddha is flanked on either side by a disciple, a bodhisattva and a heavenly king or guardian figure. Additionally, the Mahāmāyūrī niche of Longjusi contains representations of a pair of lions.¹⁴ The lions reflect artistic conventions from the local area. Sculptors in Sichuan often placed two lions at the front of multi-figured assemblies. For instance, the cliff sculptural site of Nankan 南龕 in Bazhong 巴中 (217 kilometers northwest of Suining) is full of seventh to eighth century Buddhist images that display a nine-figured group accompanied by two lions.¹⁵

¹⁴ The photo of the Western Niche in Cave 45 can see: Yang (1993): 28.

¹⁵ Typical examples include Niche 37, Niche 49 and Niche 83. Bazhong Municipal Cultural Relics Bureau 2008: 43, 85, 116.

The appropriation of formats or elements from exoteric art was not uncommon in Chinese esoteric art in the late Tang. Lai I-man has discussed this phenomenon in her analysis of the ninth century Buddhōṣṇīṣa Cakravartin image.¹⁶ The main data for her discussion is preserved on the front side of the fourth gold casket in an eight-container reliquary set from the Famensi Monastery 法門寺 in Shaanxi Province 陝西省. In this case, the Buddhōṣṇīṣa sits at the center point, which is crowned by bodhisattvas, disciplines and heavenly kings, a format that is considerably similar to the scene of the Buddha preaching under the tree popular in the Dunhuang Caves from the Tang dynasty. Lai argued that these resonances demonstrate the process of “localization” or “sinicization” of esoteric Buddhist art in China. In the Longjusi niche, its design followed a similar method, in which conventional formats and motifs were absorbed into the artistic language that shaped the esoteric image. Nonetheless, the designers of the Longjusi niche seemed to be even more deliberate as they condensed the Mahāmāyūrī altar into the seven-figure assembly niche without losing its multi-layered structure or its corresponding figures.

3 The rejuvenation of the Mahāmāyūrī altar in Song dynasties

Buddhists in southeastern Sichuan revived their enthusiasm for carving Mahāmāyūrī images into living rock between the early twelfth and the first half of thirteenth centuries. With the exception of the Peacock Cave in Anyue, the other five are found in Dazu: Cave 155 at the Fowan 佛灣 site; Niche 36 in the Duoba pagoda (Duobaota 多寶塔) at Mount Beishan 北山; Cave 8 at Mount Shimenshan 石門山; Niche 2 at the Yutan 玉灘 site; and Niche 13 at the Dafowan 大佛灣 site at Mount Baodingshan 寶頂山. The dated inscriptions attribute Cave 155 (Figure 5) to the first year of the Jingkang 靖康 era (1126) and Niche 36 (Figure 6) to the twentieth year of the Shaoxing 紹興 era (1150).¹⁷ The other four sites contain no direct information for dating purposes, yet their sculptural style and relationship to neighboring caves helps to date construction of Shimenshan Cave 8 (Figure 7) and Yutan Niche 2 (Figure 8) to the middle of the twelfth century, and Peacock Cave (Figure 9) and Baodingshan Niche 13 (Figure 10) to the late twelfth to early thirteenth century.¹⁸

¹⁶ Lai 2014: 246–247.

¹⁷ Guo 1999: 26, 455.

¹⁸ For detailed discussions on the chronology, see: Yang 2018: 200–204



Figure 5: Beishan Cave 155. Polychromed sandstone, height 322 cm, width 318 cm, depth 592 cm, ca. 1129. Fowan, Beishan rock carving site, Dazu, Chongqing municipality. Photograph by author.

Compared to the Longjusi niche, the six examples from the Song dynasties present looser connections to Amoghavajra’s extant text. Especially, their images share a set of stable rules in their representation of the icons and surrounding images, which is based on Amoghavajra’s canon but adds variations in the details. I thus can reconstruct the order and meaning of these rock carvings based on their own narrative content, while using the somewhat “outdated” Tang dynasty canons as references. In addition, I analyze the groupings between the Mahāmāyūrī and the other deities in the larger iconographic program in their rock carving sites. Fragmented narratives in novels or other historical text from the Song dynasties relate to the Mahāmāyūrī cult provides some traces to understand these groupings.

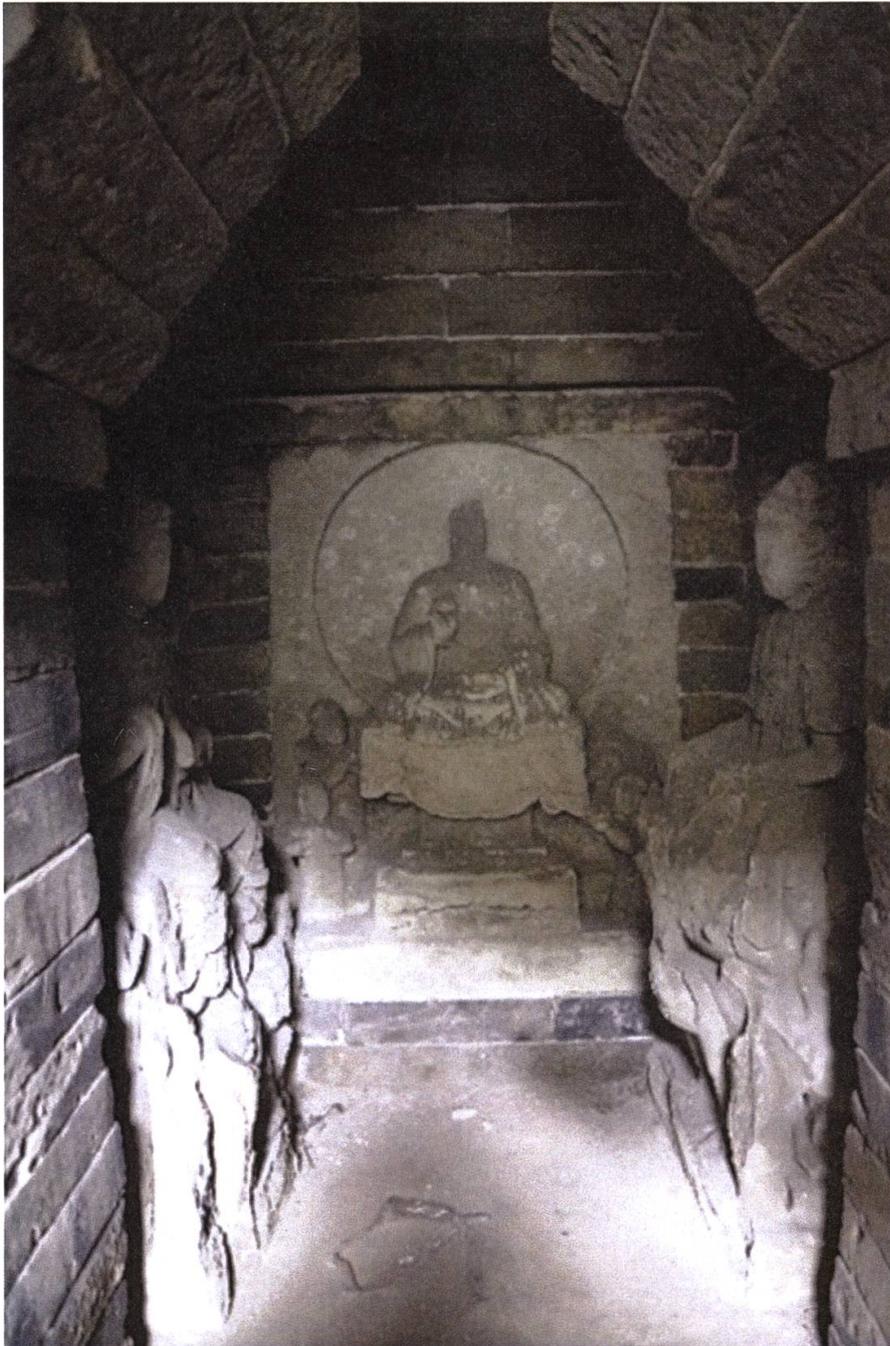


Figure 6: Duobaota Niche 36. Polychromed sandstone, height 117 cm, width 80 cm, depth 113 cm, ca.1150. Beishan rock carving site, Dazu, Chongqing municipality. Photograph by author.

4 The making of the Mahāmāyūrī statues

The Mahāmāyūrī figures in the Sichuan examples from the Song dynasties still show a strong connection to Amoghavajra's ritual manual: all the Mahāmāyūrī figures take the peacock as their vehicle, while five out of the six examples were

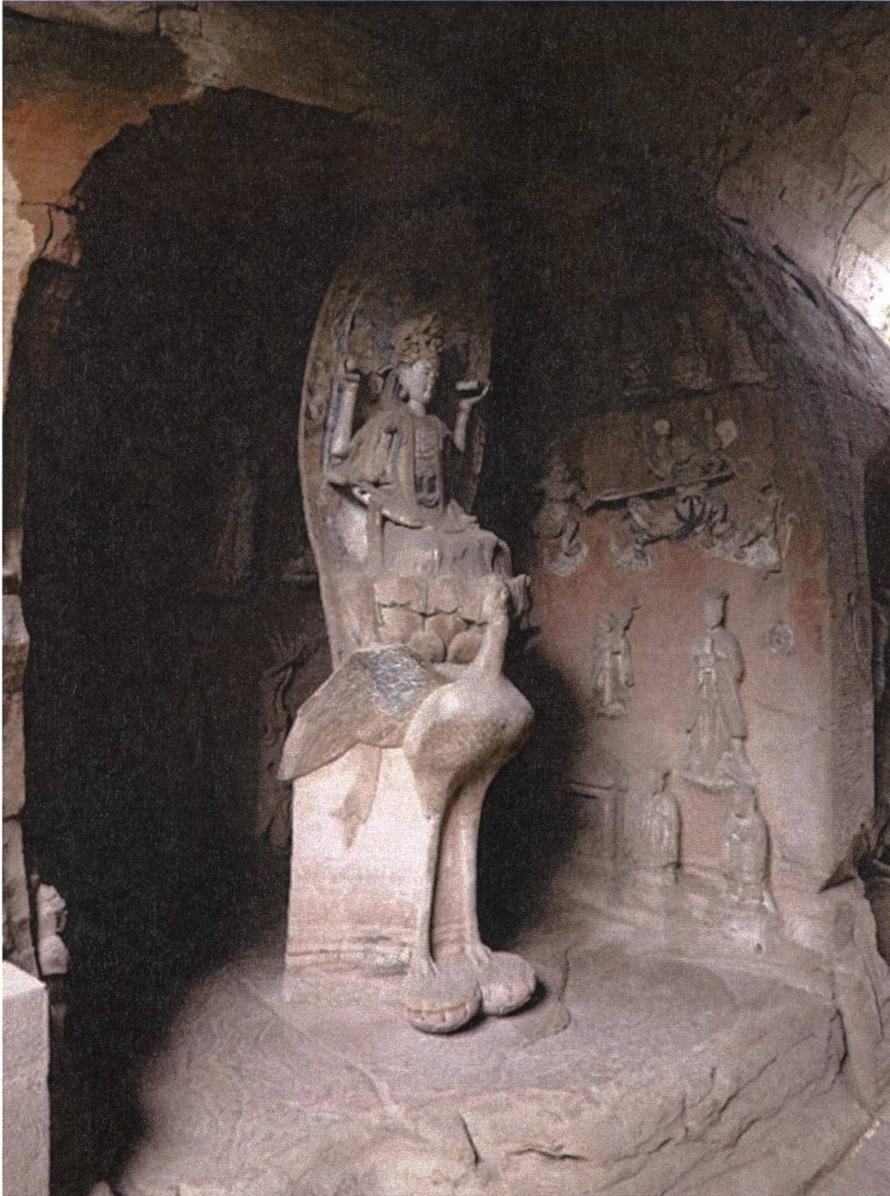


Figure 7: Shimenshan Cave 8. Polychromed sandstone, height 318 cm, width 312 cm, depth 231 cm, ca. the mid-12th century. Shimenshan rock carving site, Dazu, Chongqing municipality. Photograph by author.

carved with the four-armed format that includes the lotus, the peacock feathers, and the auspicious fruits. However, significant differences are present. The following discussion aims to describe these transformations and consider them within their relevant context.

Let's start with the four-armed Mahāmāyūrī figures (Figure 11). At the end of the Northern Song and the early Southern Song, the central statues in Beishan Cave 155, Shimenshan Cave 8 and Duobaota Niche 36 feature similar representational styles. They are decorated with fabulous diadems and flamboyant



Figure 8: Yutan Niche 2. Polychromed sandstone, height 200 cm, width 165 cm, depth 85 cm, ca. the mid-12th century. Yutan rock carving site, Dazu, Chongqing municipality. Photograph by author.

necklaces; their peacocks are full-length portraits, with their legs embedded in the rock in order to support the whole statue; and they all rest their first two hands on their knees, with an oval fan in the left and a lotus in the right, while their secondary hands rest near their ears, with the Pothi book in the left and a ball-like fruit in the right. Dating from the middle and late periods of the Southern Song, the Peacock Cave and Baodingshan Niche 13 show a new style for the four-armed Mahāmāyūrī figure. These two Mahāmāyūrī statues wear a simple garment with fewer ornaments, while all four arms rest near their abdomen. Their attributes are almost the same but exchange the left and right, so that the first hands hold the lotus and the peacock feathers, and the second



Figure 9: The Peacock Cave. Polychromed sandstone, height 407 cm, width 330 cm, depth 177 cm, ca. 1150s–1240s. Baoguosì Monastery, Anyue, Sichuan province. Photograph by author.

hands hold a plate of peaches and a book. Their peacocks are only represented as busts with two outspread wings.

Noteworthy in the three early works (Beishan Cave 155, Shimenshan Cave 8 and Duobaota Niche 36) is that the Mahāmāyūrī holds an oval fan with long braids in its first left hands. This type of fan is called the *Shanfu* 扇拂 (Fan-like whisk), a common ritual instrument made from peacock feathers.¹⁹ It should be used as a substitute for the peacock feathers featured as attributes of the Mahāmāyūrī, which are held in the same hands in two examples (the Peacock Cave and Baodingshan Niche 13). Also, the ball-like objects held by the three earlier figures are equivalent to the peaches in the later two examples. In Shihmenshan Cave 8, its ball-like object has a calyx at its top, which helps to identify the fruit as a pomegranate – a “Sinicized” form of the *Fruit of auspiciousness* popular in Chinese and Japanese esoteric images.²⁰ Thus, it is easy to

¹⁹ Huang Xiufu 黄休復 (fl. early eleventh century), a scholar and art connoisseur of the Northern Song living in *Yizhou* 益州 (present-day Chengdu in the Sichuan Province), mentioned in his prose that the feathers of peacock quills can be used to produce the woman’s ornaments and that the *Shanfu*, indicating this implement, was common in this area. Huang 2012: 134–135.

²⁰ Tanabe 1999: 4–14.



Figure 10: Baodingshan Niche 13. Polychromed sandstone, height 590 cm, width 560 cm, depth 260 cm, ca. 1179–1240s. Dafowan, Baodingshan rock carving site, Dazu, Chongqing municipality. Photograph by author.

see that all five statues were carved with the same attributes in their four hands – peacock feathers in the first left hand, a lotus stem in the first right, a book in the second left, and a *vilva* in the second right – even if the Peacock Cave exchanges the positions of the two sides (Table 1).

These attributes differ from the instructions in Amoghavajra’s text, as well as from Tang artwork in this area, as it not only adds a new object – the book – to the attributes, but also changes positions for the auspicious fruits and peacock feathers. Yet these alterations are remarkably similar to the Mahāmāyūrī’s attributes found in Dunhuang, Shaanxi Province. In Cave 205 and Cave 208 two four-armed Mahāmāyūrī figures riding peacocks are painted on the ceilings of the entries to the main chambers. They both belong to renovation projects supported by donors from the Cao family, whose figures and titles are painted in the inscriptions on the left and right walls of the entries. Using the donors’ biographies, Hashimura Aiko dated the renovation projects in Cave 205 and Cave 208 to the second quarter of the tenth century.²¹ Both Mahāmāyūrī figures

²¹ Hashimura 2011: 29–31.

Type I



Beishan Cave 155



Shimenshan Cave 8



Duobaota Niche 36

Type II



The Peacock Cave



Baodingshan Niche 13

Figure 11: Two types of the four-armed Mahāmāyūrī figures in the Sichuan area, twelfth–thirteenth centuries. Drawing by author.

hold peacock feathers in their first left hands, a lotus stem in their first right hands, a lotus bud in their second left hands, and a peach-like fruit in their second right hands. Comparing the Sichuan examples to the Dunhuang examples, three out of the four attributes are the same, both in terms of objects and the positions, with the only difference the attribute in their second left hands. Thus, it seems reasonable to infer that in the circulation of the classic figures from Amoghavajra's ritual manual, that the Sichuan examples share a lineage with the Dunhuang figures. As the Dunhuang examples were produced earlier, the Sichuan examples appear to be successors from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in which the second left hand's attribute is replaced by the book.

Table 1: Attributes of the Mahāmāyūrī figures in Anyue and Dazu, Song dynasties.

		The second right hand	The first right hand	The first left hand	The second left hand
Four-armed type	Beishan 155	 Fruit	 Lotus	 <i>Shanfu</i>	 Book
	Shimenshan 8	 Pomegranate	 Lotus	 <i>Shanfu</i>	 Book
	Duobaota 36	 Fruit	 Lotus (partly destroyed)	 Destroyed	 Book (partly destroyed)
	Peacock Cave	 Book	 Destroyed	 Lotus	 Platter of peaches
	Baodingshan 13	 Platter of peaches	 Lotus	 Peacock feathers	 Book
Two-armed Type	Yutan 2				
	 resting on its knee (reconstructed)		 Book rolled up		

Let's now shift to the only exception: the two-armed Mahāmāyūrī found in Yutan Niche 2. Interestingly, the earliest similar examples for the Yutan statue also come from Dunhuang. In the Mogao Grottoes (Caves 169, 133, and 165) and the Yulin Grottoes (Cave 33), which Hashimura Aiko attributed to the late tenth century and the sponsorship of the Cao family, there are four examples of two-armed Mahāmāyūrī figures.²² The two-armed Mahāmāyūrī figures are also arranged in the lotus position on a lotus over a peacock. They hold a feather of the peacock quill in their left hands and their right hands display the varadamudra. Hashimura Aiko attributed the two-armed format and the new mudra to the introduction into China of an older type of the Mahāmāyūrī, which can be found preserved in Cave 10 and 12 in the eighth century Ellora Grottoes from western India.²³ Similar to the four-armed figure described above, the two-armed figure in Yutan Niche 2 in Sichuan can be understood as a further adaption of the two-armed Mahāmāyūrī statues from Dunhuang. On the one hand, the right-hand rests on the deity's knee, possibly a depiction of the varadamudra (though its palm was restored and now faces downwards); on the other hand, the book in its left hand is an unusual and rare attribute that was likely borrowed from the new attributes group of the four-armed Mahāmāyūrī figures.

The new attribute, the book, presents a further issue for the Mahāmāyūrī. I suggest two possible reasons for the introduction of the book in this deity's attributes. First, as the common material carrier of the scriptures or mantras, the book can be considered the mark or embodiment of the Mahāmāyūrī's nature, to remind believers that the Mahāmāyūrī's supernatural power comes from its Dhāraṇī. Second, the book is usually understood as a symbol of the "Perfect Wisdom 般若", which Buddhists consider to have given rise to all Buddhas, and which they metaphorically refer to as the "Buddhas' Mother 佛母".²⁴ As Amoghavajra also used the "Buddhas' mother" to indicate the Mahāmāyūrī, it does not seem too strange that the book appears in the Mahāmāyūrī's attributes in order to highlight the place of the "Buddhas' mother" in its cult.²⁵

²² Hashimura 2011: 32–34.

²³ Hashimura 2011: 42–45. Additionally, in the *Sādhanamālā* no. 201, a Sanskrit collection of esoteric rituals edited by Abhayākara Gupta (who died in 1125), the Mahāmāyūrī is also merely two armed, and holds a feather of the peacock quill in its left hand, while its right hand displays a varadamudra. Bhattacharya 1968: no. 201.

²⁴ For example, the book is used as the attribute of the Prajñāpāramitā which embodies the "Perfect Wisdom" and is called as the 般若佛母 (Buddhas' mother of Perfect Wisdom) in Chinese.

²⁵ For more research on the Mahāmāyūrī as the Buddha's mother, see: Orzech 2002: 82. Thomas Suchan assumed that the book in the hand of the Mahāmāyūrī was the *prajnapara-ramitaa sūtra* and argued that it was a substitute for the auspicious fruit as both relate to the Mahāmāyūrī's aspect as the Buddhamātṛkā/mother of Buddhas. Although this interpretation sounds a bit farfetched (especially the lack of evidence to identify the book of the Mahāmāyūrī

5 Arranging the images into the shrines

To understand the entire iconographic programs in the rock carvings of the Mahāmāyūrī during the Song dynasties is a thorny question. The challenge does not come only from the difficulties in identifying the content present in the background images, but also the need to appreciate their arrangement within these three-dimensional rock-cut shrines. I attempt to trace the original intention in these rock carvings with reference to both the extant images and their spatial design. The following discussion is based on the chronology of the examples. However, more attention is paid to Beishan Cave 155, Shimenshan Cave 8 and Baodingshan Niche 13, in which either their relief images or spatial arrangement provide concrete evidence that their designs were directly or indirectly associated with the Mahāmāyūrī altar described in Amoghavajra’s ritual manual.

The earliest example, Beishan Cave 155, is full of small relief Buddhas (Figure 12). Most of these small Buddhas, which sit on lotus flowers, are in the meditation posture, while a few are carved in other positions, such as holding a vase or leaning on a small table (*pingji* 憑几). In addition, a larger Buddha can be found in the center of each of the three walls. The left-hand Buddha with the earth-touching mudra is likely the Śākyamuni, but the identities of the right-hand Buddha, who is posed in the preaching mudra, and the back Buddha, whose two arms are gathered in front of its chest (its two hands are destroyed), remain uncertain. Thomas Suchan argues quite convincingly that the thousand Buddhas image was produced in the Mahāmāyūrī cave to highlight its nature as the “Buddhas’ Mother”.²⁶ As I discussed in reference to the book as an attribute, “Buddhamāṭṛkā/Buddhas’ Mother” was used to indicate the magic power of the Mahāmāyūrī Dhāraṇi, from which all enlightenments or buddhas derive.

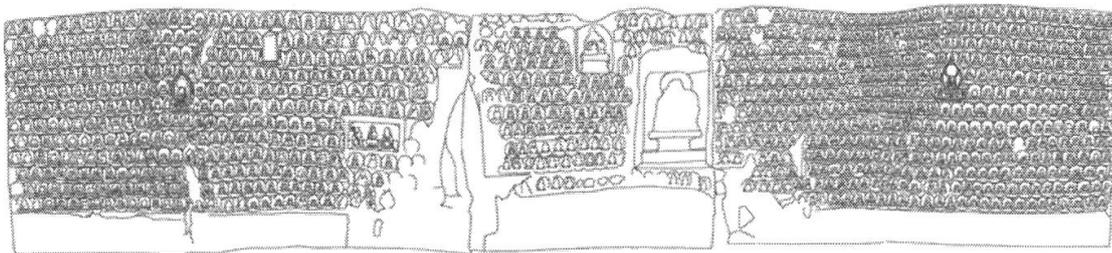


Figure 12: Interior elevations of Beishan Cave 155 (right, back and left walls). Drawing by the author.

with the *Prajñāpāramitā sūtra* and to argue for the book as the auspicious fruit’s substitute), it provides some inspiration to understanding the association of the new attribute with the concept of the Buddhamāṭṛkā or the Prajñāpāramitā. Suchan 2003: 348–349.

²⁶ Suchan 2003: 350–352.

The Shimenshan Cave 8's background images mostly correspond to the scripture, which can also be understood as a “transformation (*bianxiang* 變相)” of the *Mahāmāyūrī sūtra* (Figure 13). The entire pictorial program can be divided into four groups. In the first (1) group, a Buddhist with two attendants and the eighteen arhats rest on an extruding shelf that spans the three walls. This recalls the beginning of the whole sūtra, whose first sentence pays tribute to all Buddhas, bodhisattvas and śrāvakas (whose highest enlightened status is the arhats).²⁷ In the second (2) group, a Deva fights with an Ashura on the left side, while a goddess riding a peacock and another deva with a halberd hurry to the left on the back wall, while a dragon with its attendant appear on the right. They seem to be associated with the followers of this Mahāmāyūrī Dhāraṇi in the first and second volumes, who pledge to protect its reciters from secular sufferings.²⁸ In the third (3) group, seven male celestial beings stand on clouds that appear on the three walls, which recall the male immortals and deities of rivers, mountains and stars in the third volume.²⁹ Taking into consideration their number and costumes, we cannot eliminate the possibility that they are one of

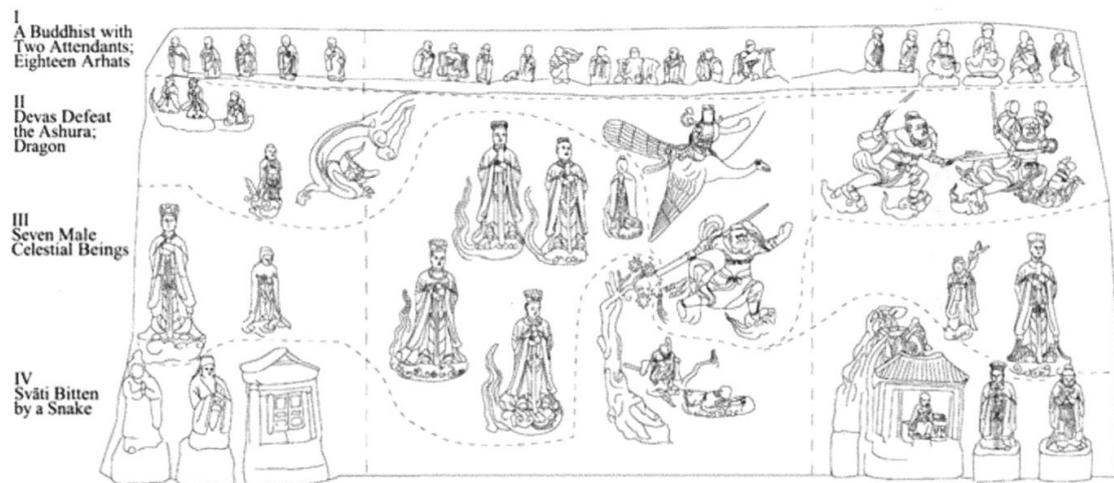


Figure 13: Interior elevations of Shimenshan Cave 8 (right, back and left walls). Drawing by the author.

27 T19n982, 415b22–25: “南謨母馱野 南謨達磨野 南謨僧伽野 南謨七佛正遍知者南謨慈氏菩薩等一切菩薩摩訶薩，南無獨覺聲聞，四向四果，我皆敬禮如是等聖眾。”

28 T19n982, 426a05–07: “如是等藥叉，有大軍大力。降伏他怨敵，無有能勝者。名稱滿諸方，具足大威德，天與阿修羅，戰時相助。” 428a21–22: “此等鬼女，有大神力，具大光明，形色圓滿，名稱周遍，天阿蘇羅共戰之時，現大威力” Similar sentences also refer to the *rākṣaṣī* 羅刹女 (429a06–11, 26–29, 430b07–10), the heavenly mother 天母 (429c04–07) and dragon kings (433b29–c07).

29 T19n982, 436a03–437c10.

the four seven-star (*qixiu* 七宿) sets described in the scripture.³⁰ And in the fourth (4) group, a monk falls to the ground under a tree while another monk stands beside him with a panicked expression on the back wall. This of course refers to the key story of “Svāti Bitten by a Snake” in the *Mahāmāyūrī sūtra*: the prone monk should be Svāti, bitten by the snake, while the standing monk is Ānanda, who witnessed the accident.³¹

Although the background images on Beishan Cave 155 and Shimenshan Cave 8 are different, their spatial arrangement (Figures 14 and 15) are similar to each other. Both are large enough to allow people to enter and conduct rituals (Beishan Cave 155 measures 322 cm high, 318 cm wide and 592 cm deep; Shimenshan Cave 8 measures 318 cm high, 312 cm wide and 231 cm deep). Both also feature Mahāmāyūrī statues carved at the center of the hollowed-out cave. In these two caves, the Mahāmāyūrīs’ spirited mounts rest on the ground with elaborate mandorlas that reach to the caves’ ceilings. Notably, their layouts resemble the central-pillar caves in northern and northwestern China that date to the northern dynasties (386–581) and the central-altared caves in the Thousand Buddha Cliff in Guangyuan 廣元 in northern Sichuan from the first half of the Tang dynasty.³² However, this feature disappeared from caves for almost four hundred years before it reappeared in the construction of these two Mahāmāyūrī caves. It seems insufficient to understand the central-figured structures in Beishan Cave 155 and Shimenshan Cave 8 within the conventions of Buddhist rock carving sites. I prefer to understand it as the expression of a spatial arrangement delineated in Amoghavajra’s ritual manual, that the Mahāmāyūrī is arranged in the center of the altar. The designer of these two caves may have been inspired by the spatial arrangement delineated by the ritual manual and decided to incorporate this idea into the rock-cuts in order to set up a perfect sacred space for making the Mahāmāyūrī altars. The close relationship between the spatial arrangement and the ritual practice can be testified by another example with a similar layout in Dazu of Song dynasties, the Beishan Cave 136. In the center of this cave is a bookcase called *Zhuanlunzang* 轉輪藏, the Revolving Wheel Storage. As the name indicates, this bookcase is supposed to be rolled

³⁰ T19n982, 437a21–22: “宿有二十八，四方各居七。”

³¹ Remarkably, a pair of pavilions and four guardians appear on the two sides, which may represent the auspicious and ominous dreams in Yijing’s 義淨 ritual manual (T19n985, 477a12–19). The left pavilion with a monk inside and a tree full of clothes outside recalls the Triumph hall (*Dehengtang* 得勝堂), Kalyāṇa-mittatā (*Shanzhishi* 善知識) and the fantastic trees recall various treasures in his description of fortunate signals. Meanwhile the right pavilion with a closed window seems to refer to the empty shelter in the list of portentous warnings.

³² For a typical case study of the central-pillared caves and related religious practices, see: Stanley K. Abe’s discussion of Cave 254 in Mogao Grottoes, Dunhuang, Shanxi Provinces. Abe 1990: 10–11. For an overall survey of the Cliff Thousand Buddhas in Guangyuan, see: Howard 1988: 13–25.

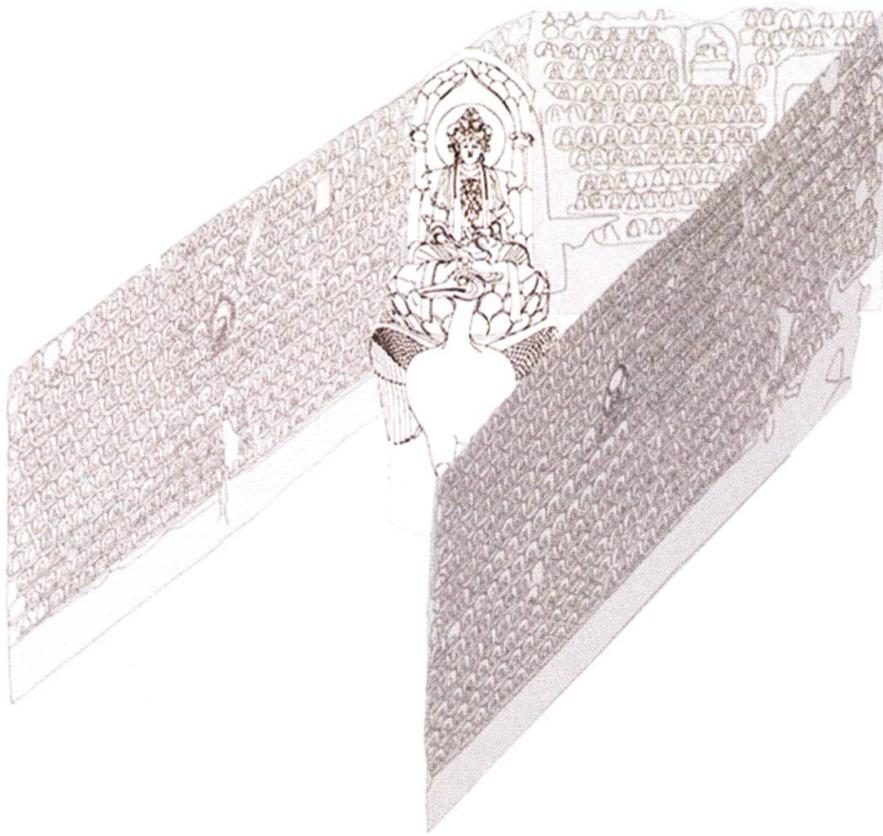


Figure 14: Three-dimensional rendering of Beishan Cave 155. Drawing by the author.

(impossible for the stone one in this cave) or circumambulated by the believers to make merits.³³

As for the Yutan Niche 2 and the Peacock Cave, their spatial arrangements and pictorial projects become simpler. In Yutan Niche 2 (Figure 16), the sculptors carved a Mahāmāyūrī figure in the center, flanked by two protectors and the four heavenly kings. The narrative scene appears on the left side and is quite simple. In it a figure is depicted with an axe standing beside a tree stump, which clearly refers to the narrative of Svāti. The snake-bite is implied by a short piece of a snake’s tail protruding from a hole in the tree. As for the Peacock Cave (Figure 17), its back wall is also carved with the Mahāmāyūrī and its retinues. The left wall of the cave, unfortunately, has collapsed, but on the right wall the scene, “The Devas Defeat the Ashura”, is preserved. Similar to Yutan Niche 2, all the figures in the narrative scenes are gathered onto a single panel in which four angry soldiers with a spear, a stone, or bow and arrow attack a three-headed, four-armed Ashura.

³³ Detailed discussion and photos of this cave can see Suchan 2003: 158.

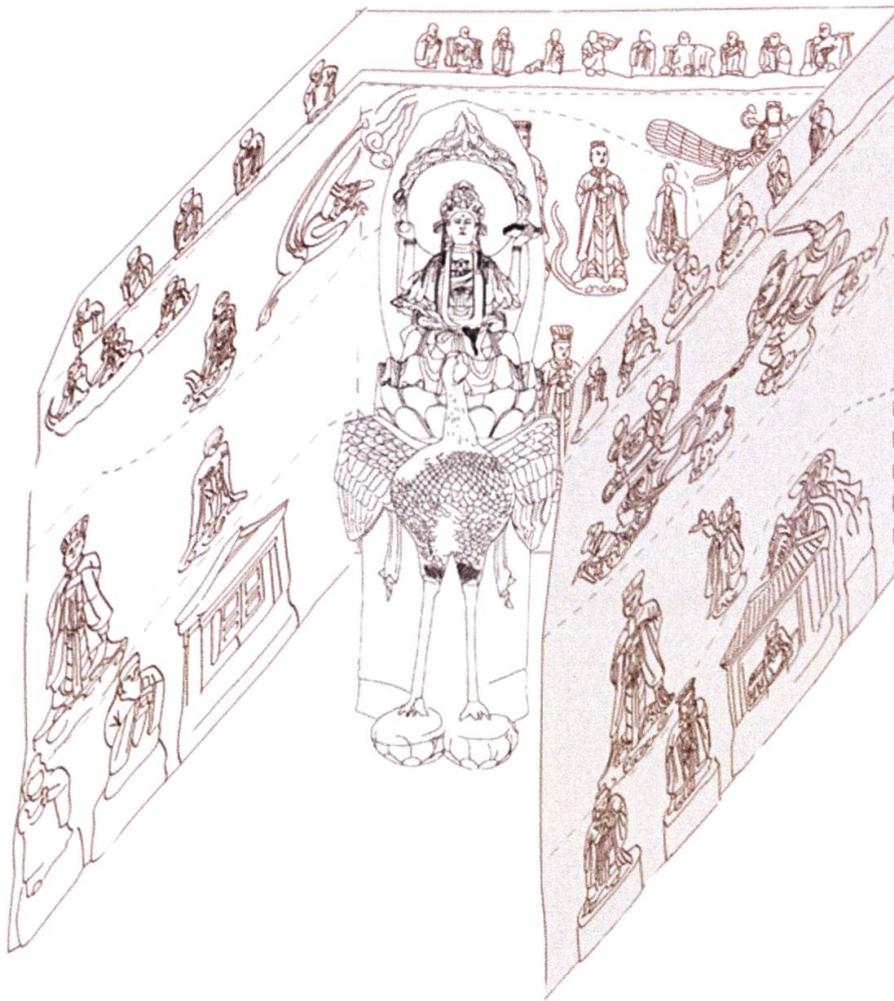


Figure 15: Three-dimensional rendering of Shimenshan Cave 8. Drawing by the author.

How should we understand the nature of these two shrines? Some elements suggest possible links to ritual making, yet the evidence does not seem strong enough to distinguish them from ordinary shrines centered on exoteric Buddhism icons. For example, there are the four heavenly kings in Yutan Niche 2. The four heavenly kings were mentioned in a kind of altar in the ritual manual of the *Mahāmāyūrī* sutra, translated by Yijing (義淨, 635–713).³⁴ But the rest of Yutan Niche 2 is different from the described altar, such that it would be speculative to argue that the niche was meant to be the altar's representation

³⁴ T19n985, 476b1–8: “次於壇東面 ... 供養持國天王健達婆等神。次於壇南面 ... 供養增長天王俱樂茶等神。次於壇西面 ... 供養廣目天王諸龍等神。次於壇北面 ... 供養毘沙門天王藥叉等神。”

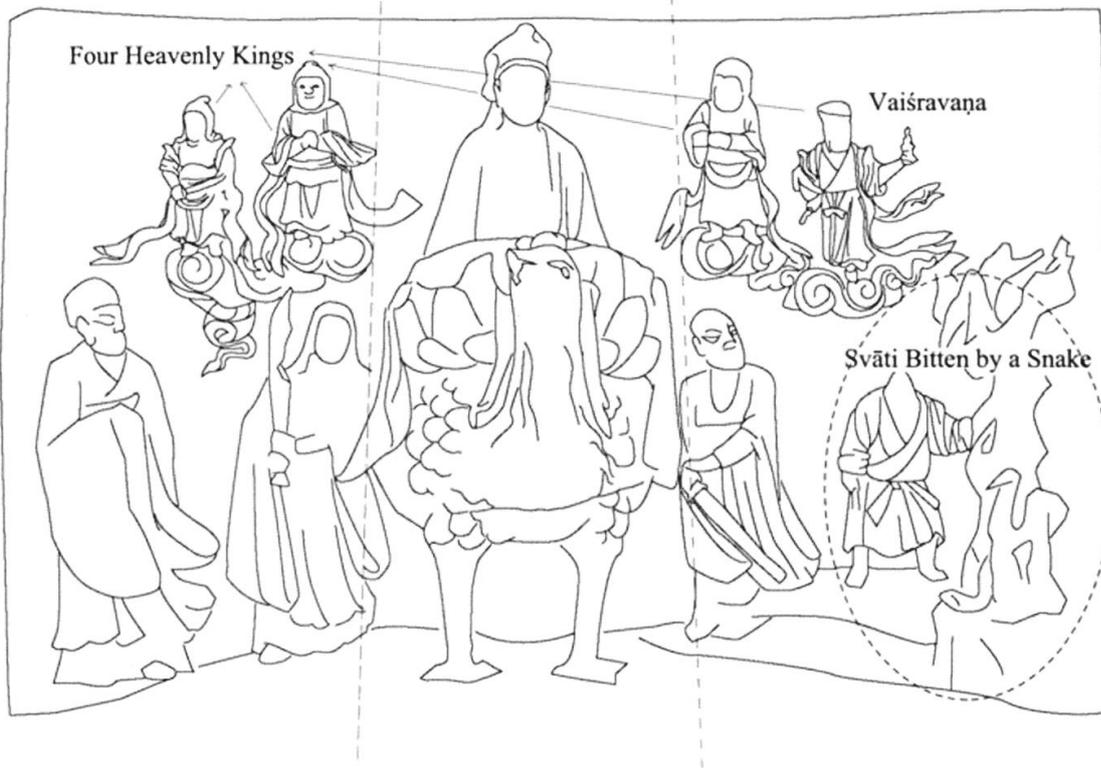


Figure 16: Interior elevations of Yutan Niche 2 (right, back and left walls). Drawing by the author.

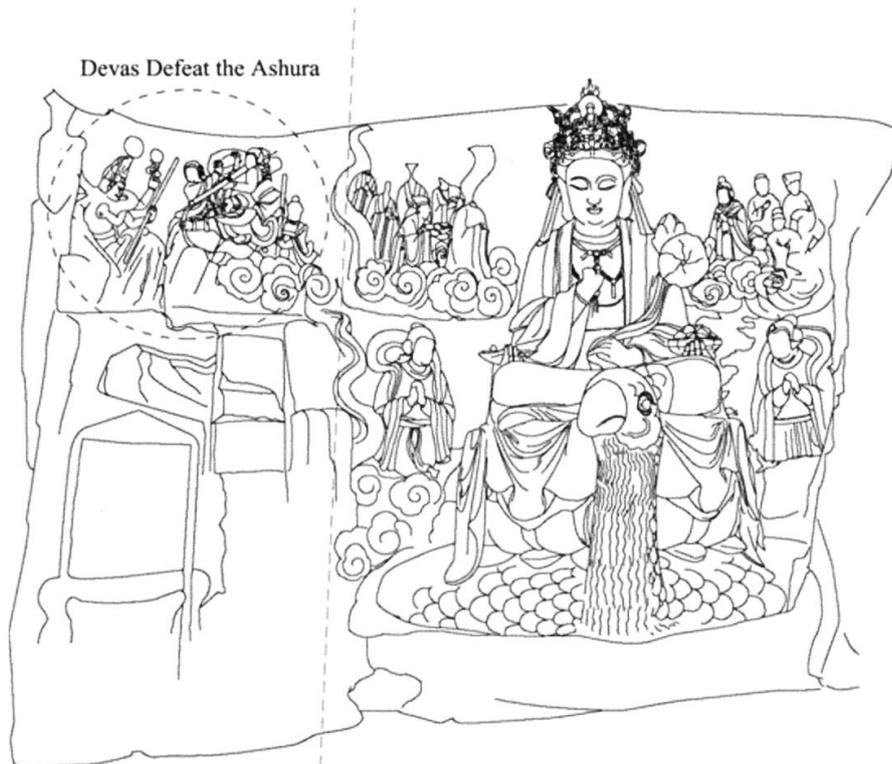


Figure 17: Interior elevations of the Peacock Cave (right and back walls). Drawing by the author.

(like interpretations of the Longjusi niche). As for the Peacock cave, it measures 407 cm high by 330 cm wide by 177 cm deep. The inside space of the cave is large enough for people to enter or perform rituals. However, its spatial arrangement, which places the center icon on the back wall and the narrative scene on the flanked walls, is not as unique as the center-figured layout in Beishan Cave 155 and Shimenshan Cave 8, which separate its design from the common rock-cut caves in Sichuan during the Song dynasties.

Now we turn to the last and also most complicated example, Baodingshan Niche 13 (Figure 18). Several scholars have discussed this image but have failed to give a systematic interpretation because the left section of the niche is partly destroyed. I propose to understand the main body of niche 13 as a flexible visualization of the Mahāmāyūrī altar, which is composed with its two other parts, the two narrative scenes located at the two upper corners and the evil animals suppressed at the bottom. As a ritual space, this shrine differs from Beishan Cave 155 and Shimenshan Cave 8, but resembles the Tang dynasty Longjusi niche.

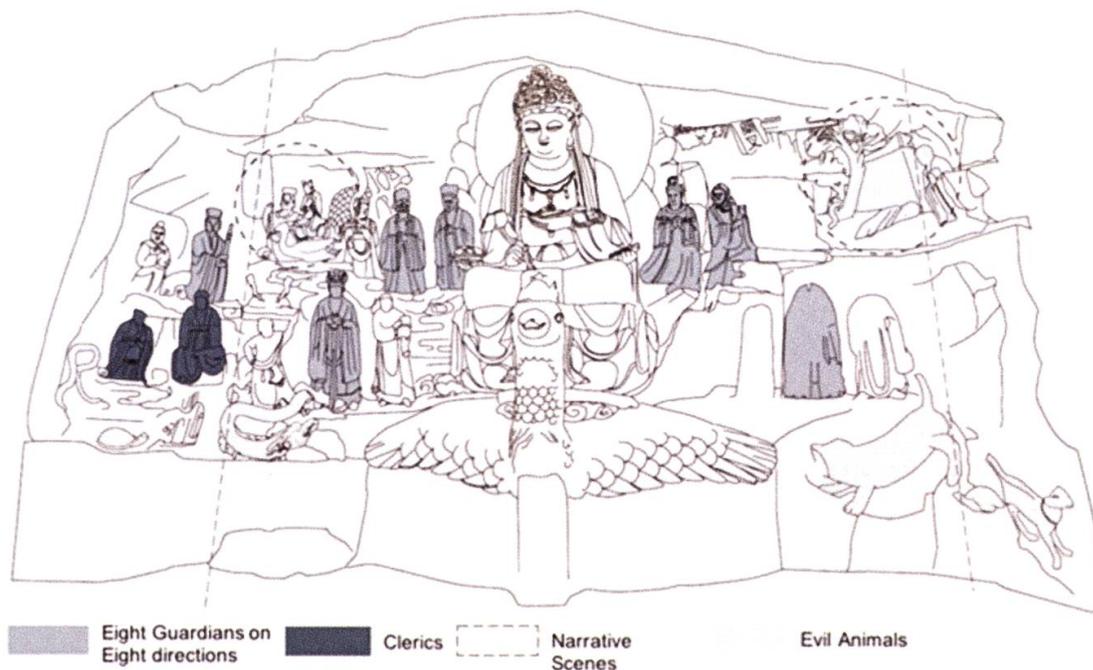


Figure 18: Interior elevations of Baodingshan Niche 13 (right, back and left walls). Drawing by the author.

The principal part of this relief shrine is the Mahāmāyūrī altar. Although it does not utilize a grid structure, it represents the characters from the first, second and third halls, as well as chanting clergies, from the instructions provided in Amoghavajra's

ritual manual. The central statue (1) wears seven Buddhas in the interlacing leaf-pattern on its crown, which likely represents the Mahāmāyūrī and the seven past Buddhas in the inner hall.³⁵ The eight male deities (2) flanking the main statue represent the eight guardians of the eight directions, which are in the middle hall of the altar.³⁶ However, the identification of the eight guardians is not easy due to the terrible damage done to the niche; only two identities are relatively certain. The one figure, standing on an evil dragon, must be the Varuṇa who is in charge of the dragons. The other, on the upper layer of the left side of the back wall, is likely to be Vāyu, or god of wind, on account of the flutter of his helmet's chin strap.³⁷ Floating in the clouds on the top left section of the niche is a banner (3) with the two characters, “*Yaocha* 藥叉 (Yakshas)”, which is an aniconic image of the twenty-eight yakshas in the third hall. This special representation may result from the limited space in the shrine and the lack of detailed description about the third hall in Amoghavajra's manual.³⁸ The two clerics (4) in the lower section of the left side

35 A fact supporting this theory is that the Seven-Buddha crown is uncommon in Buddhist images in the Sichuan area during the Song dynasties. Apart from the Mahāmāyūrī figure in Baodingshan Niche 13, there are only two other examples of such a crown, and they appear in the statues of the Mañjuśrī bodhisattva to symbolize it as the teacher of the seven past Buddhas. Hence, it is more reasonable to relate the seven Buddhas in the crown to the seven past Buddhas in the Mahāmāyūrī altar than to consider them an unintended decoration. Qi 2014: 45.

36 The left side of the niche is destroyed, but we can logically reconstruct it with reference to the well-preserved right side, as the entire pictorial program of this niche can be assumed to be symmetrical with the central Mahāmāyūrī statue. The primary figures on the right are four male figures, so it can be assumed that a similar assembly would have been placed on the left, meaning that all eight male figures were represented in this niche.

37 A possible approach to identifying the eight figures is to consider their possible placement. The two identifiable guardians indicate that these eight figures may be not arranged by their directions but by their ranks, also possible in Chinese esoteric Buddhism. The four figures on the upper layer of the back wall appear in two pairs and could be the four guardians of the secondary directions; the two on the bottom layer of the back and the two on the side walls appear singularly with their own servants, which may indicate that they are the four guardians of the four cardinal directions. If this conjecture is correct, then it is possible to identify the four secondary direction figures. The demon-like figure may be Rakṣasa, guard of the southwest, who is the king of evil ghosts. The old figure with long eyebrows and beard is likely Agni, god of fire, guard of the southeast, as he is usually represented as an ascetic old man (like the Agni in Cave 148 in the Mogao Grottoes in Dunhuang). Thus, the remaining unidentified guard of the secondary directions is most likely Īśāna, of the northeast. The one on the right wall and the destroyed two on the left side of the Mahāmāyūrī should be the three remaining cardinal guardians: Kubera, guard of the north, Yama, guard of the south, and Indra, guard of the east. See Yang 2018: 220–222.

38 Early scholars considered this banner as the cartouche of the two male figures standing on the top layer of the right side of the niche (Wang 1996: 40). But this interpretation is not very convincing because the banner is too large and too far away to be a caption for these two

seem to be practitioners. One of them sits on the rock, whose two hands are gathered, but the mudra is eroded. The other stands and hooks his index fingers together in front of his chest, which corresponds to the mudra of the Vajrāṅkuśa in Amoghavajra's ritual manual.³⁹

The two narrative scenes are represented as a pair at the top of the two sides. On the top-right corner, Svāti lays down a stone and Ānanda seems to recite or sing with a book in his hands. Behind these two figures is a pavilion beneath a tree and the surface of the architecture is engraved with the start of the Mahāmāyūrī sūtra. On the top-left corner, a goddess rides a peacock and holds a book in her hands; because of her slightly parted lips she seems to be chanting. A deva stands behind the female deity, holding a flag that says, “*Tian shen xiuluo* 天勝修羅 (Devas defeat Ashuras).” Further, an evil dragon, a beast, a snake, a dog, and a pair of tortoises are represented at the bottom of the niche, which likely refer to the evil and misfortune suppressed by the Mahāmāyūrī altar.⁴⁰ Notably, the dragon here is without feet or claws. This detail shows that it is an evil dragon rather than the heavenly dragon seen in Shimenshan cave 8.

What I want to highlight is that Baodingshan Niche 13 differs from the Longjusi niche due to its designer's intention to make it a “living” mandala. This purpose can be traced by the representations of the clergies on the right corner of the panel, who are playing the mudra and chanting the incantation (as indicated by their opened mouths). The engagement of the practitioners transforms the representation of the still and silent altar into a scene of the ritual in process. This idea also affects the representation of the two narrative scenes. The dramatic elements in the two scenes seem to be intentionally reduced and the main figures, including Ānanda and the goddess riding a peacock, are portrayed as reciters in that both hold a book in their hands and open their mouths. Ānanda and the goddess also seem engaged in making the Mahāmāyūrī altar. Other details that also shape the living atmosphere include the smoke rising from the incense burners held by the servants of the eight guardians, which remind us of the instruction in the ritual manual to burn incense to the deities of the four

figures. It is also hard to explain why the designer only engraved the identity of these two figures but did not mark the other deities in the same niche. Hence, I prefer to separate the banner and the figures below it and interpret the “*Yaocha*” as an aniconic image of the twenty-eight yakshas in the third hall.

39 T19n983A, 440c08: “准前三昧耶印，以二頭指屈如鉤向身招。”

40 T19n982, 431c13–15: “願除滅諸怖，王怖賊怖、水火等怖、惡友劫殺、怨敵等怖、他兵饑饉、夭壽死怖、地動惡獸及諸死怖。” 432a4–6: “願除滅龍毒、蛇毒、藥毒、呪毒、蠱毒、魅毒，一切諸毒悉皆殄滅。”

directions.⁴¹ In some scenes, Baodingshan Niche 13 can be understood as a perpetually moving Mahāmāyūrī altar. As for the clergy, Ānanda and the goddess keep their chanting posture, which suggests the imagination and creativity of the esoteric clergy and sculptural artists in Sichuan during the Song period.

Last but not least, there is an inexplicable gap between the image and the text. Similar to the “Svāti Bitten by a Snake”, the “Devas Defeat the Ashuras” was represented three times (Shimenshan Cave 8, the Peacock Cave and Baodingshan Niche 13) in these rock carvings from the Song dynasties. However, the story was never part of the core narrative in the Mahāmāyūrī sūtra. It is only briefly mentioned in relation to the past experiences of some of the female retinues who had once exhibited great power in the war between the Devas and Ashuras and would rescue followers of the Mahāmāyūrī incantation from suffering. In contrast, the “Jātaka of the Peacock King”, one of the two stories which provides the framework of the sūtra, disappears in all the rock carvings. How to understand the differences between image and text? I propose that there may have been an unknown adapted version of the Mahāmāyūrī sūtra which has since been lost and was not collected in the present-day Chinese Tripiṭaka. In this version, the role of the original “Jātaka of the Peacock King” was replaced with the more dramatic war tale, which was perhaps formed through oral preaching that alluded to the continuous wars between the Song and surrounding regions. This assumption is supported by the pragmatic and modular nature of the Dhāraṇī scripture.⁴² In Ryan Richard Overbey’s study of the Chinese Mahāmāyūrī sūtra, he pointed out that the stories vary in the four fifth–sixth century translations, but that the magic spell remains the same. This indicates the stories seem to be secondary, which aims to provide the framework of the magic spell rather than the crucial content in this text.⁴³ In addition, Buddhist stone scriptures from the Tang dynasty preserved in the Wofoyuan 臥佛院 in Anyue testify to the fact that there are unique versions of some Dhāraṇī scriptures which were merely popular in the Sichuan area. For example, the Uṣṇiṣavijayā-dhāraṇī-sūtra 佛頂尊勝陀羅經 carved in Wofoyuan Cave 46 differ from all the sūtras collected in the *Taishō Revised Tripiṭaka* or any other extant versions.⁴⁴

⁴¹ T19n983A, 440b11–15: “中院聖眾燒沉香和香等供養，東方天眾應燒白膠香而為供養，南方天眾以紫鑛芥子及鹽相和燒之供養，西方天眾以酥和安悉香燒之供養，北方天眾應燒薰陸香而供養之。”

⁴² For more discussion on the modular structure of esoteric Buddhism, see: Orzech 1996: 241–242.

⁴³ Overbey 2016: 5–7.

⁴⁴ Sassmann and Tsai 2016: 114–121.

6 Fixing the Mahāmāyūrī to the sites

Buddhist caves or niches in Sichuan rock carving sites can be understood not as a single shrine but as a pair or a group of caves/niches within a larger iconographic system. Early scholars already noted the grouping between the Mahāmāyūrī caves/niches and nearby shrines in these rock-cut sites.⁴⁵ I will continue this discussion by tracing the religious thought behind such kinds of assemblies through reading contemporaneous references to the Mahāmāyūrī cult in novels and other secular historical texts.

The most frequent image group is the Mahāmāyūrī paired with various manifestations of Avalokiteśvara.⁴⁶ In Duobaota Niche 36 (Figure 19), in which a Buddha sits on the back wall as the central icon, it is flanked by a Mahāmāyūrī on the left and an Amoghapāśa Avalokiteśvara on the right. The dedicatory inscription engraved above the niche is partly indecipherable due to corrosion, but fortunately retains the words: “...Zong and wife ... Niang roused a motivation ... attached to the two saints...”⁴⁷ The term “two saints” reveals that the donors of this niche were aware of the pairing of the Mahāmāyūrī with the Amoghapāśa Avalokiteśvara. A similar set-up appears in the eastern-most section of the Dafowan site in Baodingshan, in which there is a giant reclining Buddha on the west side, the Mahāmāyūrī in Niche 13 is on the north side, and the Thousand-hand, Thousand-eyed Avalokiteśvara is in Niche 8 on the south.⁴⁸ In addition, the Mahāmāyūrī in Beishan Cave 155 is located next to the Cintāmaṇicakra Avalokiteśvara in Beishan Cave 149. They were carved in a similar size at almost the same time and are obviously distinguished from the neighboring shrines on the same section of cliff, so these two caves may have been constructed as a pair.

The pairing of the Mahāmāyūrī and the Avalokiteśvara may be a result of their similar forms and functions, in that both are represented as multi-armed bodhisattva figures who promise to rescue those who recite their names and mantras from suffering. But I would argue that the direct event that contributed to the combination of these two belief-systems may trace back to the co-recitation of the *Mahāmāyūrī sūtra* and the *Lotus sūtra*, which was prevalent in the Northern Song. Two pieces of evidences from existing literature confirm that the co-recitation of the *Mahāmāyūrī sūtra* and the *Lotus sūtra* was accepted in the

⁴⁵ Suchan 2007: 82; Kucera 2016: 37.

⁴⁶ The pairing of Avalokiteśvara and other deities are popular in the Buddhist art in the medieval China. A new study of its pairing with the Thousand-armed Mañjuśrī can see Wang 2016: 81–105.

⁴⁷ Guo 1999: 455.

⁴⁸ Kucera 2016: 37.

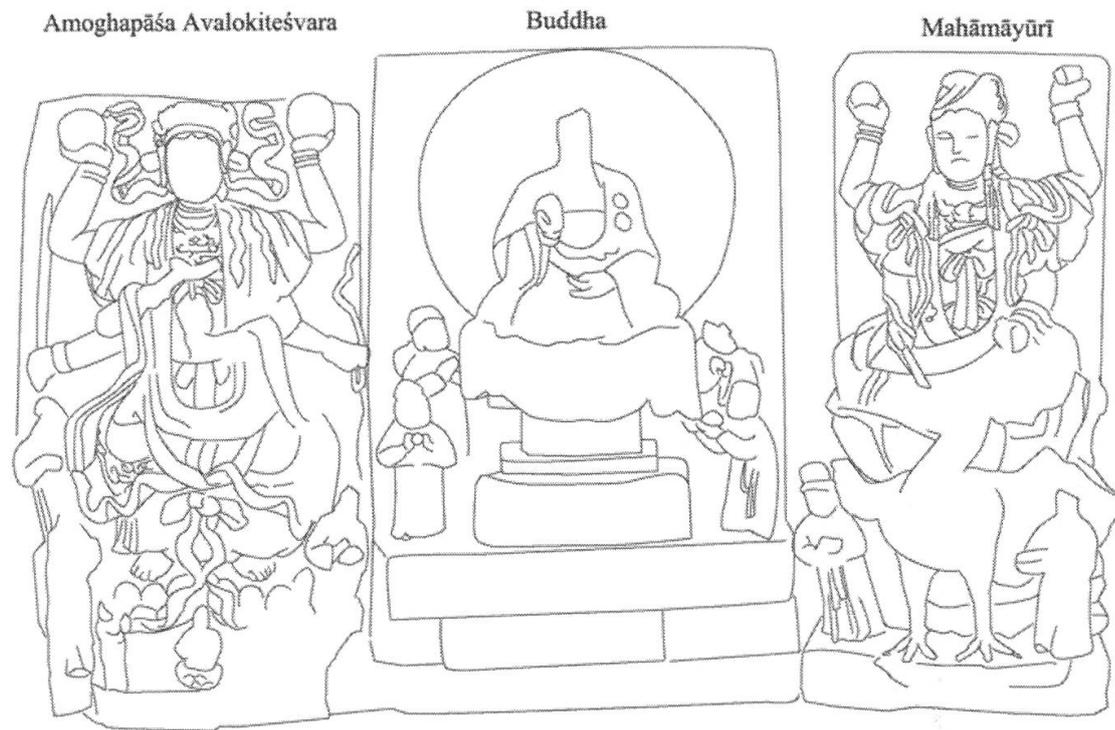


Figure 19: Interior elevations of Duobaota Niche 36 (right, back and left walls). Drawing by the author.

imperial monastery and national ritual systems by the eleventh century. The first one is an epigraph written by Xia Song 夏竦 to record the construction of the Da'an Pagoda 大雁塔 in the Huguo Chan Monastery 護國禪寺 in Bianjing 汴京, the capital of Northern Song (present-day Kaifeng 開封 in Henan Province).⁴⁹ It recorded that in the second year of the Mingdao 明道 era (1033), the donation of the Emperor Renzong 仁宗 (1010–1063) was used to build two halls flanking the Da'an Pagoda that were used to chant the *Peacock sūtra* (i.e. the *Mahāmāyūrī sūtra*) and the *Lotus sūtra*. A pair of liturgical verses were also found in the Collection of Wang Anshi that were written for the co-recitation of these two sūtras during an inaugural ceremony for a temporal hall in a southern suburb of the capital that was used to conduct the national sacrificial rites.⁵⁰

Another piece of evidence comes from a pair of stone pillars from the Taiping xingguo 太平興國 Monastery in Changzhou 常州, Jiangsu Province 江蘇省. The pillars were separately engraved with scripture from the *Mahāmāyūrī sūtra* and the *Lotus sūtra*. Unlike the general information provided by

⁴⁹ Xia 1983: 269.

⁵⁰ Wang 1959: 487.

literature, this engraving provides the crucial information that the scripture from a section of the *Lotus sūtra* known as the *Universal Gateway* (*Pumen Ping* 普門品).⁵¹ As we know, the *Universal Gateway* talks primarily about how Avalokiteśvara is a universally accessible savior who assumes a multiplicity of forms to aid people in spiritual or physical distress, and this text serves as the foundational source for the cult of Avalokiteśvara in both the Mahāyāna and Tantric traditions. Hence, we can be relatively certain that the practice of co-recitating these two sūtras is related to the combination of the cults of Avalokiteśvara and Mahāmāyūrī, which inspired the grouping of Mahāmāyūrī and the Avalokiteśvara in the Dazu area in the twelfth century.

The image assembly also exists in the Mahāmāyūrī, the Hārītī and the Wutong 五通. In contrast to the equity between Mahāmāyūrī and Avalokiteśvara, there is an obvious hierarchy in this group, in which the Hārītī and the Wutong appear subservient to the Mahāmāyūrī. Thomas Suchan has pointed out the pairing of Hārītī and Mahāmāyūrī in Niche 9 and Cave 8 in Shimenshan, and in Niche 3 and Niche 2 in Yutan (Figures 20 and 21).⁵² He argues that this pairing is a result of the concept that both are incarnations of the Buddhamātṛkā/Buddhas' mother, but I want to figure out another possible interpretation from the *Mahāmāyūrī sūtra*, which expresses that Hārītī, her consort Pañcika, and their five hundred sons are all adherents of this esoteric teaching.⁵³ This could also explain the subsidiary position of the Hārītī niches when compared to the Mahāmāyūrī shrines. Another aspect that contributes to their pairing is that both these figures are guardians of pregnancy and childbirth. There is little doubt about the connection between the Hārītī and fecundity, as she has 500 children and is often regarded as a symbol due to having numerous descendants in the Buddhist cosmology. As for the Mahāmāyūrī cult, we find some fantastic stories from the Song dynasties that attribute this sūtra to aid conception and delivery. For example, Hong Mai 洪邁 (1123–1202) recorded a karma-tale about an impious donation in his *Records of Yi Jian* 夷堅志.⁵⁴ A peasant named Chen Er 陳二 in the town of Yaoshun 孝順鎮 in Jinhua County 金華縣 was said to have promised to donate 1000 coins for a *Mahāmāyūrī sūtra* to the temple Buddha in order to gain protection over his wife's pregnancy. But after his wife successfully gave birth to a son, they did not fulfill the promise, which led to an awful punishment: the wife became blind and their child unable to walk. This tale, of course, invokes karmic retribution to warn believers from dishonest generosity.

51 Miao 2002: 264.

52 Suchan 2007: 82.

53 T19n982, 438a28–b1: “散支迦大將，訶利底母及五百子，并諸眷屬，亦隨喜宣說。”

54 Hong 2006: 860.



Figure 20: Hārītī in Shimenshan Niche 9. Shimenshan rock carving site, Dazu, Chongqing municipality. Photograph by author.

Yet the beginning of the tale also provides evidence that the *Mahāmāyūrī sūtra* was invoked in connection with wishes for safe pregnancy and male descendants.

In addition, I propose that Shimenshan Niche 7, with its depiction of Wutong, should also be understood as affiliated with the Mahāmāyūrī cave (Figure 22). “Under the title “Muke in the Jiangnan Area 江南木客,” *Records of Yi Jian* also present a group of tales related to Wutong, Muke being another name of this demon.”⁵⁵ This one-legged creature was recorded as a prurient demon who often committed adultery with women, sometimes even impregnating them. One of its victims was the consort of Wei Gengbian 尉耿弁, whose paternal name was Wu

⁵⁵ Hong 2006: 695–697.

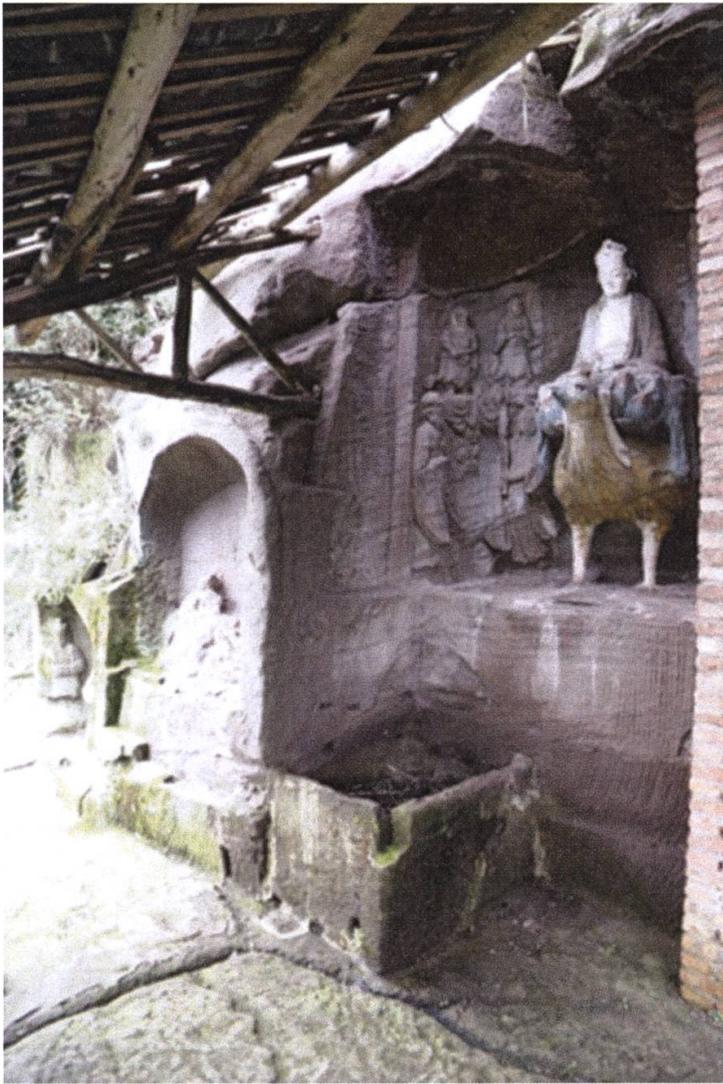


Figure 21: Partial overview of Yutan rock carving site showing Niche 2 and Niche 3. Dazu, Chongqing municipality. Photograph by author.

吳. The fetus was vicious, and she experienced intolerable pain during the delivery. After a monk recited the *Mahāmāyūrī Dhāraṇī* and the lady swallowed a talisman, she gave birth to the ghost of an infant whose body was covered in fur. This fantastical story helps us to trace the relationship between the *Mahāmāyūrī* and Wutong, even though Wutong does not appear directly in the *Mahāmāyūrī* scriptures. It shows that this demon was regarded as a threat to pregnant women but that it could be subjugated by the Peacock mantra. Because of this, Cave 8, Niche 7 and Niche 9 in Shimenshan ought to be understood as a group of images that vividly express the wish for fertility and continuation of the family line.



Figure 22: Wutong in Shimenshan Niche 7 before the head was stolen. Shimenshan rock carving site, Dazu, Chongqing municipality. Photograph provided by Dazu Rock Carving Research Academy.

7 Conclusion

This paper analyzes visualizations of Mahāmāyūrī images in rock carving sites through consideration of extant scriptures and ritual manuals. The reason for taking the text as a reference is based on the observation that the contents of the rock carvings partly correspond to descriptions in the ritual manual. Yet it does not assume that certain images were produced under the direct guidance of the text. In fact, material remains reflect the theological text and the final artworks retain obvious inconsistencies. It seems that clergies and artists allowed the play of “innovation” in practice. Although their “innovation” was far from free creation, and was structured by historical and geographical context, they did change and enrich the original system in their imageries by adding or removing some aspects, reediting contents, and integrating rituals and symbols from other faiths.

There were four types of “creativity” that likely caused the text-image discrepancies. First: to absorb new aspects transmitted from India. This primarily was reflected in the Mahāmāyūrī figures, such as the new two-armed format in Yutan Niche 2. Second: to appropriate representations from exoteric Buddhist art. The Longjusi niche in which the altar is made with the seven-statues assembly is a good example, demonstrating a fantastically intelligent borrowing of art languages between the exoteric and esoteric Buddhist traditions. Third: to re-edit content from the scriptures and ritual manuals. This refers to the slight adaptations to the attributes group of the Mahāmāyūrī, but also to dramatic changes like the inclusion of the thousand buddhas images in Beishan Cave 155, or replacing the narrative of “Jataka of Peacock King” with the tales of the “Devas defeat Ashuras”. Fourth: to group the Mahāmāyūrī and other deities. The association of the Mahāmāyūrī to the Avalokiteśvara, the Hārītī and the Wutong belong to this type, which reflects interactions between the Mahāmāyūrī and other Buddhist traditions, and the Mahāmāyūrī and indigenous folk religions.

The re-design of the canonical system becomes even more interesting when arranged within its original space. There are two different practices that help to identify the construction of the caves or niches with the making of the altar.⁵⁶ The first type was to represent the Mahāmāyūrī altar, as in the Longjusi niche and Baodingshan Niche 13. Although they do not contain gridded structures typical of maṇḍala images, the placement of the statues still demonstrates the multi-layered structure of the Mahāmāyūrī altar. The maintenance of spatial

⁵⁶ Paul Copp has also separated the altars into two kinds, one is as an actual space and the other is an iconic representation. Copp 2008: 248–249.

structures is the key criterion through which I distinguish the images as belonging to the altar rather than to a group of esoteric Buddhist figures. The other type, found in Beishan Cave 155 and Shimenshan Cave 8, were produced as real, functional ritual spaces in which to make the Mahāmāyūrī altar. These two examples provide enough space for ritual activities. What's more crucial is that their spatial arrangement, which sets the Mahāmāyūrī in the center of the space just like the Mahāmāyūrī altar, should be understood as making a special shrine for holding the ritual. Interestingly, while the iconography in the first type was closely associated to Amoghavajra's ritual manual, the second type shows few connections to the described Mahāmāyūrī altar. This may have resulted from the designers' interest in making a mandala with new elements in the early twelfth century (when two examples of this second type were built). However, it is also possible that their designers treated the relief images on the walls as decoration and may paint the Mahāmāyūrī altars that followed Amoghavajra's instructions in an impermanent material on the ground. One thing which must never forget is that the original altar in Amoghavajra's manual was to be completed with colors or colored sands, rather than carved into living rock.

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