Art in the dark: the ritual context of Buddhist caves in western China

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Preamble

One can imagine a simpler time, when art was ‘art’ because it engendered an ‘aesthetic experience’, a time when art was understood with reference to beauty, and beauty was something that could not be reduced to utility or function alone. Just as the New Critics approached a work of literature through ‘close reading’, the meaning of a work of art could be deduced, it was presumed, from a close critical analysis of the autonomous object. This approach is not without appeal: in giving prominence to beauty and aesthetic experience, one assumes some degree of congruence between the aesthetic intent of the artist and the affective response of the intended viewer, both of which are vested in the work itself. In other words, situating the import of an aesthetic work within the object itself, rather than, let’s say, in its cultural context, enables one to circumvent the complex issues of production and reception, not to mention the apparent gap that separates the two.

The art-historical counterpart of New Criticism, perhaps best exemplified in the formalism of Heinrich Wölfflin, Roger Fry and Clement Greenberg, found itself on the defensive during the last quarter of the twentieth century. Following the historicist and postmodernist currents of the day, art historians were increasingly critical of approaches predicated on the presumed autonomy of the object. Moving away from the self-contained object, scholars placed increased emphasis on the object’s *Sitz im Leben* – the social, political, and institutional context from which the work emerged.

Historians of Buddhist art were not immune to these developments. Where their predecessors engaged in formal and stylistic analysis, iconography, connoisseurship and other methodologies that foreground aesthetics, a new breed of scholars underscored the social and material conditions of production. But when it came to medieval Buddhist art – the focus of this paper – this proved no easy task. What we call Buddhist ‘art’, particularly the genres made for liturgical or devotional purposes, was regarded more as ‘craft’ in its day, and it is difficult to reconstruct the cultural world, much less the lives and aspirations, of the countless anonymous artisans who fashioned the surviving corpus. Nor are scholars of Buddhist art well served with regard to the conditions of reception: with few exceptions the pious patrons, pilgrims and sundry worshippers who comprised the audience for such objects left little in the way of critical response or commentary. When it comes to medieval Buddhist art, authorial intent and audience reception often lie beyond our grasp.

Some responded to the conundrum through a focus on patronage; historical sources often render it easier to recover the lives of powerful sponsors than the lives of the peons they sponsored. Unsurprisingly, then, we learn that Buddhist art played a seminal role in political legitimation, in currying favour with political elites, in the acquisition and display of social status, and so on. Unfortunately, such findings may simply reflect the limitations of the available sources and the questions we bring to them. Besides, the emphasis on patronage can also divert attention away from the distinctively aesthetic registers that draw many to this body of material in the first place.

There is, however, one approach that has gained currency of late for its promise to bring the methodological interest in lived context to bear directly and non-reductively on questions of aesthetic import. I refer to the recent enthusiasm for looking at Buddhist art in the context of its ritual function. The logic is compelling: earlier attempts to reconstruct the distinctively religious context of Buddhist art were preoccupied with identifying the normative textual sources on which the iconography was supposedly based, but this ignored the likelihood that many of those who commissioned, produced and viewed the art would have been unfamiliar with such sources. The turn to ritual promised to bring us closer to the experience of the artwork in situ; the ‘meaning’ of Buddhist devotional art was to be found not in some reconstructed textual tradition but rather in its ritual deployments.
But the notion of ritual function, at least as it has been applied to date, may not be the panacea some would like it to be. All too often it rests on romantic views concerning the nature of Buddhist monastic culture and religious practice. To engage in a bit of caricature, in talking about ritual function scholars tend to conjure images of meditating monastics earnestly engaged in the quest for liberation. Placing Buddhist art in its ‘ritual context’ is then tantamount to taking it as a vehicle for, or an expression of, enlightenment.

Needless to say, not everyone is so naïve as to believe that being a Buddhist monk necessarily entailed a commitment to meditative attainment. Yet this assumption continues to inform studies of Buddhist cave art found throughout Central Asia. Indeed, Buddhist caves in general, and the massive Mogao cave complex near Dunhuang (Gansu) in particular, have become a proving ground for those who tout ritual as key to understanding Buddhist art. In this short paper I cannot do justice to the vast literature on Buddhist cave sites and the artwork found therein. Besides, such an endeavour lies beyond my competence. Rather, I will focus on some key assumptions that inform studies of Buddhist cave art in western China, and suggest an alternative way forward.

Form and function

By ‘shrine caves’ or ‘cave temples’ I refer to caves, typically excavated into the sides of cliffs, that were adorned with altars, sculpted images and wall murals along the lines of the decor found in worship halls in freestanding Buddhist temples. Indeed, the interiors of these caves were often fashioned precisely so as to resemble the interior of temples, with ersatz timbers, pillars, caves, balconies and the like, carved, plastered and painted around the walls and ceilings (Figure 1). Some of the most famous sites are found on the Deccan Plateau in the central Indian state of Maharashtra (Bhājā, Kārli, Kānheri, Ajantā, Ellora etc.), and on the northern plains of central China (notably Yungang near Datong, and Longmen near Luoyang). Running between these ancient Indian and Chinese centres of...
government and commerce – stretching across the overland trade routes that connected South, Central and East Asia – are dozens of sites, from small and often isolated clusters of caves to sprawling complexes such as those at Bamiyan in central Afghanistan, and Kizil and Mogao in western China (Figure 2). Much of the scholarship on these sites has been preoccupied with untangling the stylistic genealogies of the caves – the complex lines of architectural and artistic influence that link together these far-flung ruins. The task is daunting; our analysis of stylistic influence will depend, in part, on how the caves are dated, yet in many cases the only clues to dating come from stylistic analysis, a limitation that sometimes results in rather tenuous, if not circular, argument.

What is curious about these complexes, particularly the more remote sites along the edges of the Taklamakan and Gobi deserts, is how little is known about the purposes for which they were built. Given the paucity of textual and epigraphic clues, scholars have had to speculate about their function on the basis of their architectural design and iconographic programmes. While various theories have been put forward, many presume that the sites were intended to serve monastic communities, and that the shrine caves were used by resident monastics for worship and meditation. The classification and analysis of the caves then proceeds from the assumption that form follows function, ergo, function can be deduced from form.

Various classification schemes have been proposed, all of which agree on a handful of basic cave types. Most obvious among these basic types are the ‘colossal-image caves’ (daxiang ku 大像窟) that dominate the larger sites. The two giant buddhas in niches at Bamiyan, destroyed by the Taliban in March 2001, may be best known, but most of the larger Central Asian and Chinese complexes feature one or more such monumental buddhas (Figure 3). Many of the surviving colossal images are now exposed to the open air, but most were originally enclosed, either within a cave face that has eroded away, or within an imposing wooden structure that once covered the front of the excavated cliff.

Another cave type is known variously as a ‘buddha-image cave’ (fxiang ku 佛像窟), ‘holy image cave’ (zuxiang ku 尊像窟), and so on. These caves are sometimes subdivided into groups according to ceiling shape: barrel-vault cave, truncated-pyramid cave, etc. All consist of an open squarish or rectangular chamber that features a painted or sculpted altar at the rear, or a sculptural group on a raised platform in the centre, or occasionally both at once. Some scholars treat the caves with a pronounced central altar as a separate type, known as a ‘buddha-altar cave’ (fotan ku 佛壇窟). Both image caves and altar caves are understood to serve the same function as the prominent buddha hall (fotang 佛堂, fodian 佛殿) or lecture hall (jiangtang 讲堂) that is integral to freestanding Buddhist temples and monasteries.

The classification schemes also include a type known as a ‘central-pillar cave’ (zhongxin zhu ku 中心柱窟) that is distinguished by a large unexcavated central core or pillar, often square in shape, that is understood to constitute or represent a stupa or pagoda (Figure 1). The association of central pillar and stupa accounts for the alternative names by which scholars

Figure 3 Longmen: central colossal Buddha. Photograph courtesy of Wenshing Chou.
Figure 4 Mogao Cave 17: sculptural image of Hongbian. Photograph: Dunhuang Academy.
Figure 5: Mogao Cave 285: section and plan. Photograph: Dunhuang Academy.
refer to these caves, including cāitya cave (zhīti ku支提窟), pagoda-shrine cave (tāmiào ku塔廟窟), and so on.

The sites also contain any number of small squarish caves that are believed to have been used as residences or meditation cells for the monks. These are often classified as ‘meditation caves’ (chán ku禪窟), ‘arhat caves’ (luóhàn ku羅漢窟), and some scholars use the Sanskrit term leṇa. The vast majority of these smaller caves are unadorned, but in a few key instances they are decorated and feature the sculpted or painted image of a meditating monk, which is taken as further evidence of their use for meditation. Those with images of monks in meditation are sometimes treated as a separate category, namely, ‘image caves’ or ‘memorial caves’ (yǐng ku影窟; Zheng et al. 2008: 33), a category to which I will return below (Figure 4). Another important variant are caves in which a number of small cells open onto a common central space; these are known by various names, including ‘multi-chamber meditation caves’ (duōshí chánkù多室禪窟) and vihāra caves (Figures 5 and 6). (The latter term is borrowed from the residence halls that survive at Buddhist cave sites and monastery remains in India; see below.)

As is immediately evident, these classifications of architectural form are predicated on assumptions about function. The ‘meditation cave’ is a prime example: this has become the default designation for just about any small unpainted squarish cave found at these sites, irrespective of whether there is evidence that meditation – or indeed any religious practice at all – occurred therein. Equally telling are the ‘central-pillar caves’, which have been the subject of considerable discussion and debate. The pillars in some caves do indeed resemble a Chinese-style pagoda, and as such this cave type is considered a Chinese adaptation of the cāitya-gṛha found in early Indian sites, wherein the central structure is unambiguously shaped as a stūpa. Some scholars have suggested that the central pillar found in some of the Mogao caves does not symbolise a pagoda per se, but rather the central mast that runs down the middle of a pagoda, such that entering the cave is tantamount to entering a pagoda (Ho Waikam 1968–69: 22; Abe 1990: 5). But whether the pillar is understood as a pagoda proper or as its central shaft, scholars agree that it is situated so as to facilitate ritual circumambulation. By extension, any cave structure that permits one to circulate around an unexcavated core is deemed a ‘central-pillar cave’, as it is presumed to have served the same religious function. This has resulted in caves being grouped in the central-pillar category even when there is no trace of a pagoda, stūpa or even a central pillar to be found. I have in mind the so-called central-pillar caves at Kizil, most of which, despite the classification, do not contain anything that resembles a pillar proper. Rather, they consist of a rectangular hall, often with a barrel-vault ceiling, that has a painted or sculpted image and altar setting at the back (Figure 7). As such, they would be classified as ‘buddha-image caves’, except that running back from either side of the rear wall are two tunnel-like corridors that connect to a smaller rear chamber. This rear chamber, which is sometimes little more than another cramped corridor running transversally, contains a painted or sculpted parinirvāṇa scene (Figure 8). That it is possible to circumambulate through these rear corridors has
It is clear, then, that the analysis of the caves is predicated on presuppositions about the form/function relationship. Perhaps the most curious of these presuppositions is the notion that the countless painted or sculpted icons and scripture tableaux found in the caves were intended to support visualisation practices (guan 觀); indeed, Chinese scholars are sometimes wont to refer to such caves as ‘meditative-visualisation caves’ (changguan ku 禪觀窟), as distinct from the smaller and typically unpainted meditation cells found alone or in clusters (as in the ‘vihāra caves’) at Mogao. In other words, the smaller unpainted cells are understood as intended for chan practice, while the remaining grottoes with painted murals are for guan.

This is a curious state of affairs for at least three reasons. First, this distinction between chan practice and guan practice is not supported by the textual tradition bearing on Buddhist ritual and meditation. Second, there is little clear and compelling evidence that the shrine caves we see at Mogao were intended to serve practising monastics in the first place. Finally, while modern scholars assume that cave sites in western China such as Kizil and Mogao were intended for meditation, they do not make the same assumption about major cave sites in the central plains, notably Yungang and Longmen (Figure 3). The difference, I believe, is the relative abundance of historical data pertaining to the construction and use of the grottoes at Yungang and Longmen, data that point in a different direction (see below). So how did the sites in western China come to be associated with meditating monks?

I can only touch upon the intellectual genealogy of the ‘meditation-cave’ hypothesis here. While the theory is not unknown in earlier literature, I suspect that it came to the fore through the work of the Chinese scholar Liu Huida 劉慧達. Liu was strongly influenced by the textual studies of the historian Tang Yongtong 湯用彤 who, in his monumental study of early Chinese Buddhism (Tang 1938), brought together the many textual references to ascetic chan practice during the Northern Dynasties, specifically practices prevalent in the Northern Wei. Inspired by Tang’s findings, Liu argued that the spread and popularity of meditation practices during the Northern Dynasties might explain the concurrent rise in Buddhist cave construction. Liu noted that the meditation manuals circulating during this period specify the need to practise in an isolated area, the need for a suitable icon for worship, and so on, and he argues that such requirements are met by the Silk Road cave sites. Liu concedes the lack of textual or epigraphic evidence directly linking the grottoes to chan, and he is accordingly circumspect in his analysis, but in short order Liu’s hypothesis would come to be accepted as established fact.

Owing to the political and cultural turmoil in China during the 1960s, Liu’s seminal paper on the subject, ‘The rock-cut caves of the Northern Wei and meditation’ (Beiwei shiku yu chan 北魏石窟與禪), was not published until 1978. However, the Chinese scholar Su Bai 宿白 reports having had a copy of Liu’s manuscript in hand in 1962, shortly after it was written. Su emerged as one of the most important scholars of Chinese cave temples in the post-Cultural Revolution period, and Liu’s article was included in Su’s influential collection of essays on the caves (Su 1996). Building on Liu’s work, Su develops the thesis that the Dunhuang caves were intended for meditation practice. In his work on Mogao Cave 285, for example, he

Figure 7 Kizil Cave 100: central altar showing corridors to rear chamber. ZSKS vol. 2, plate 88.

Figure 8 Kizil Cave 38: small corridor at rear of cave; painted mural of parinirvāṇa Buddha visible on the right. ZSKS vol. 1, plate 142.
discusses the Channish themes of the caves – the striking and unique images of monks meditating in huts, the fact that the central image in the cave is flanked by seated monks rather than by buddhas and other divine figures (Figure 9), and so on, all of which testify, he believes, to a connection between the cave and *chan* practice. That this imagery is found in a cave with eight small cells, four on the south wall and four on the north, would seem to clinch the case (Figures 5 and 6).12 To my knowledge, virtually all later Chinese scholars have embraced the notion that the cave sites found along the Central Asian trade routes were intended for meditation.

In the United States, the connection between architectural form, iconographic programme and ritual function was given additional specificity by Stanley Abe in his 1990 article ‘Art and practice in a fifth-century Chinese Buddhist cave temple’. Abe draws from Su Bai (with whom he studied in Beijing), as well as Tang, Liu and others to delineate a supposedly distinct cluster of Buddhist practices that he calls ‘Liangzhou Buddhism’. Liangzhou Buddhism, which Abe believes was prevalent in the region of Dunhuang, is characterised by ‘the popularity of meditation and visualisation rituals, the utilisation of images to assist these practices, the central role of Maitreya, the use of
spells and magic, and most importantly, the emphasis on the results of karmic action. Much of Abe’s article is an attempt to link one cave in particular, namely Mogao 254 (Figure 1), with one particular scripture, the Scripture on the Sea of the Discernment of the Buddha Samādhi (Guangfo sanmei haijing 觀佛三昧海經, T643). Cave 254, constructed between 475 and 490, is a particularly well-preserved cave of the central-pillar type. However, noting that the Discernment of the Buddha Samādhi instructs the meditator to actually enter a pagoda, Abe argues that the central pillar in Cave 254 represents the central mast of the pagoda, rather than the pagoda proper, such that entering the cave is tantamount to entering a pagoda. While the Discernment of the Buddha Samādhi does not mention circumambulation, following scholarly consensus Abe assumes the central-pillar configuration of Cave 254 was intended to facilitate this practice as well. In the end, Abe concludes that the cave accommodated a wide variety of rituals, from popular forms of image worship (circumambulation, prostration, offerings of flowers and incense) to more formal styles of monastic practice including repentance rites, meditation and visualisation. That all such practices are intended to mitigate the karmic effects of past deeds is further evidence, according to Abe, of the connection between Cave 254 and the practices associated with Liangzhou Buddhism (Abe 1990: 12).

Despite the wealth of material Abe brings to bear on the cave, his findings remain problematic. The practices he discusses – image worship, confession, penance, meditation, visualisation, devotion to Maitreya, the use of spells and magic, and the emphasis on the results of karmic action – were ubiquitous throughout medieval China. The same is true of many of the teachings that Abe culs from the Discernment of the Buddha Samādhi, including flower offerings before an icon and other forms of puja, visualising a buddha, and so on. These practices are mentioned in any number of Mahāyāna scripts translated into Chinese, the Pratyutpanna-samādhi-sūtra. As such, the connections that Abe draws between the ritual prescriptions of the Discernment of the Buddha Samādhi on the one hand, and the architectural design and artistic motifs of Cave 254 on the other, lack the specificity required to link the cave to a particular text or meditative regime. Abe ends where he began, with the assumption, still unproven, that the cave was a site for Buddhist practice.

Many other scholars have joined Liu, Su and Abe in arguing for a link between architectural form, iconographic content and ritual function, including Angela Howard (2007), Ho Puay-peng (1995), Ning Qiang (1996, 2004, 2007), Eugene Wang (2005), Wu Hung (1992b), and Zheng et al. (2008). Rather than rehearse their specific arguments here, I would draw attention to one difficulty that virtually all of them pass over in silence: many of the caves would have been so dark that the elaborate paintings and sculptures would have been barely visible, if visible at all.

Indeed, in some cases the main chambers of the caves would have been pitch black. The typical Central Asian shrine cave, including both the central-pillar type and the image-hall type, consisted of two chambers running back into the cliff. To reach the rearmost main chamber, one first entered an exterior doorway that led to an antechamber or vestibule. In some cases the antechamber was a wooden edifice cantilevered out in front of the cliff face and supported by wooden struts or scaffolding, and the antechambers of many of the ground-level caves resembled large wooden temples. Some of the caves had an additional middle chamber set between the exterior vestibule and the main hall, such that the visitor to the cave, as well as the sunlight, had to traverse two rooms and two corridors before arriving in the main shrine. As the connecting corridors were often narrow, even in the best of conditions, little sunlight would have penetrated into the rearmost hall that enshrined the main altar and icons. The darkness would have been even more dramatic in the central-pillar caves: under natural light it would have been virtually impossible to make out anything at the sides and back of these caves. (Even today, when the outer vestibules have often disappeared due to the erosion of the cliff face, visitors need powerful flashlights to see in the caves.) How would anyone – artists, patrons, meditating monks or pious devotees – have viewed, much less appreciated, the artwork inside?

Few scholars have speculated as to how the cave paintings were executed given the lack of natural light. Did the artists use lamps, perhaps with a shield on top to catch the soot? Were mirrors used to bring sunlight into the caves while construction was ongoing? There is, to my knowledge, little if any evidence bearing on the issue. But if the finished caves were indeed entered and used on a regular basis, one would expect to find traces of soot and oil from lamps and incense; such deposits are commonly found on the beams and ceilings of freestanding Buddhist worship halls. Yet apart from the obvious damage caused by later transient visitors, explorers, thieves and would-be restorers, the interiors of the caves show surprisingly little sign of use. It is not obvious, in other words, that the elaborately adorned interiors of these caves were designed with the expectation of being seen. This, I submit, is a long-ignored clue to the religious function of the caves.

**Mortuary shrine**

As mentioned above, the cave sites of Yungang and Longmen, located in the heartland of medieval China, are treated differently than the sites in the more remote regions of Gansu and Xinjiang. This is due, in part, to the robust archive of textual and epigraphical sources bearing on the construction and use of Yungang and Longmen – sources that pre-empt speculation about meditating monastics. The record suggests, rather, that the caves at Yungang and Longmen served two interrelated functions. First, they were monumental public displays of Buddhist devotion and filial piety, and second, they were intended to generate merit for deceased family members, most notably parents, through the creation and worship of sacred icons.

As these famous sites have been studied by generations of scholars, I will merely touch upon a few key findings here. Inscriptional and textual sources indicate that the major caves at Yungang and Longmen were commissioned by emperors and members of the imperial family, with lesser caves
sponsored by eunuchs, members of powerful local clans, and well-connected monks and nuns. The caves were typically dedicated to the memory of parents and ancestors, with the principal caves often built in pairs, one for each parent. There is no evidence that these sites were also intended to accommodate meditation. Rather, the Yungang and Longmen caves functioned largely as family shrines where rites, led by clerics, were performed for the memory and welfare of the deceased.

This may explain the location of these sites. Yungang is approximately 16 km from Datong, and Longmen 12 km from Luoyang. Like tombs proper, the mortuary associations of the Yungang and Longmen grottoes may have necessitated their placement at some remove from the local metropolitan centres so as to maintain ritual purity, yet close enough to allow clerics and lay sponsors to travel to and fro in a single day. There is evidence that some of the caves at Longmen were under the jurisdiction of monasteries in the capitals, rendering them, in the words of Amy McNair, akin to ‘auxiliary image halls’ of these monasteries, and in some cases the caves seem to have functioned as extensions of the imperial court altar (McNair 2000: 186–7). The clerical community resident in the capital was responsible for overseeing ritual offerings at these chapels, offerings made on behalf of, and underwritten by, the elite patrons of the cave.

McNair, who has done extensive work on patronage at Longmen, notes the tremendous expense involved in the construction of these grottoes and remarks that the donors of the shrines were denounced for their extravagant displays of piety and wanton waste of resources (McNair 2007: 5–6, 51–74). This is reminiscent of the critics of ostentatious tombs, and indeed there is an abundance of evidence, from early times, suggesting various links between shrine caves and tombs. One of the earliest extant buddha images in China is found carved into the lintel in Tomb 9 at Mahao 麻浩, a row of rock-cut sepulchres in Leshan (Sichuan) dating to the Eastern Han Dynasty (Wu 1986) (Figure 10). Many such tombs from the medieval period, excavated into rock at ground level or into the sides of cliffs, have been discovered throughout Sichuan and Gansu, and some evoke the Buddhist cave shrines with their multiple chambers and wall paintings (Fu 2002: 73–8). It is quite possible that the engineering skills and technology involved in Buddhist cave excavation were borrowed directly from those used for these rock-cut burial chambers. At times actual tombs are set in and among Buddhist shrine caves; the most famous example is the tomb of Empress Yi Fu 乙弗 (510–40), wife of Emperor Wen 文帝 (507–51) of the Western Wei Dynasty, found at Maijishan 麦积山, a major Buddhist cave complex near Tianshui (Gansu). Empress Yi Fu’s body (or perhaps a surrogate body) was buried in 540 in a tomb excavated beneath Cave 43, along with two attendants in a three-bay structure. Fu Xinian believes that burials or ‘false burials’ in Buddhist cave sites may have been common during the Eastern and Western Wei and Northern Qi Dynasties.

Perhaps the most striking ‘false burial’ within a Buddhist cave is that of the Buddha Śākyamuni himself. Recall the distinctive style of the misnamed ‘central-pillar’ caves found at Kizil. These caves consist of a main hall with a central altar at the rear, along with a smaller and often cramped chamber set behind the altar that is accessed via two tunnel-like corridors. The rearmost room enshrines a sculpted or painted parinirvāṇa scene (Figure 11). We might then approach this small chamber as a cave within a cave – a sort of über cave exemplifying the tomb-like resonances of Buddhist rock-cut architecture – that functions as a mausoleum for the Buddha. This would also explain the distinctive architectural form of these Kuchaean caves: the architects needed to find a means to connect the rear ‘tomb’ to the main hall in a manner that would avoid cutting through the centre altar of the back wall, and that at the same time would not break the symmetry of the cave. The solution was to have two entrances leading aft from the rear corners of the main chamber. This may better explain the peculiar design of these caves than does the theory that it was intended to create an ambulatory around a (non-existent) pillar.

Returning to Gansu, the construction of caves at Mogao, Maijishan and other sites in the region appears to have been influenced by the tomb design of the period. The similarities have been noted by many scholars, both Asian and Western, who have studied these sites. One frequently discussed
Figure 12 Mogao Cave 249: ceiling, south side. Photograph: Dunhuang Academy.

Figure 13 Mogao Cave 285: ceiling, east side. Photograph: Dunhuang Academy.
example are the ceiling designs found in Mogao Caves 249 and 285, which are dated to the second quarter of the sixth century (Figures 12 and 13). The celestial motifs on these ceilings recall the themes found in Tomb 5 at Dingjiazha丁家闸 (Jiuquan), which dates to the Northern Liang Dynasty (ca. 386–441) (Figure 14). This is a double-chambered tomb, and rather than being adorned with painted bricks, the interior walls were plastered and painted, precisely as was done at Mogao. The ceiling of this Dingjiazha tomb contains images of Xi Wangmu, Fu Xi and Nü Wa, and the Lord of the East. At Dingjiazha, as at Mogao, such imagery contributes to the transformation of the space into an otherworldly residence for those memorialised within.

In short, I would suggest that we approach Mogao, Kizil and other larger sites in Xinjiang and Gansu as we do Yungang and Longmen: rather than regard the grottoes as intended for monastic practice such as meditation, we would do better to treat them as mortuary shrines donated by well-heeled patrons to produce merit for their deceased parents and ancestors. The caves were not there to serve the clerics; rather, the clerics were there to serve the caves.

There is then no reason to expect that the main chambers would have been entered on a regular basis. Insofar as the caves were built to generate merit, the task was largely complete at the time the shrine was finished and the icons consecrated. This is not to say that the donors would not have continued to sponsor regular offerings (gongyang供養, Sk. pūjā) at their family caves but, as in the case of many Chinese and Buddhist monuments, including tombs, the offering ceremonies need not have been held within the dark inner chambers. More likely, they would have been performed in the outer vestibules or exterior verandas that once covered the cliff face. The relationship between outer vestibule and inner chamber might then be likened to that between the ground-level shrine and subterranean crypt found in tomb architecture (Wu 2010).

That many of the caves functioned more as mortuary monuments than as monastic residences solves a number of puzzles. It would explain, for example, the lack of soot and oil deposits in the caves, deposits that would presumably be present had the caves been used with any regularity. Some have pointed to the ‘lamp-lighting festivals’ at Mogao mentioned in various Dunhuang manuscripts, particularly the Laba臘八 festival that took place on the 8th day of the 12th month to celebrate the Buddha’s enlightenment, as evidence that the caves had become a popular site for pilgrimage and lay worship by the mid-Tang. We know that, in preparation for such festivities, the task of kindling the lamps was divided up among various monasteries. But there is no evidence from these documents that the innermost sanctums of the caves were opened and entered on such occasions, and it seems more likely that the lamps would have been strung up along the outer network of scaffolding, staircases and balconies that covered the cliff.
This would have produced the illuminated spectacle mentioned in the historical sources. But given the enormous expense involved in excavating the caves and producing the sculptures and wall paintings – paintings were often finished with exotic and expensive mineral pigments – it is difficult to imagine the donors of the private chapels opening them to a stream of gawking pilgrims. Thus while colossal-image caves such as Mogao 96 (Figure 15) were probably open to all – as today, they may have served as places of public worship – most of the shrine caves could have fulfilled their ‘ritual function’ without even needing to be opened.

The mortuary shrine theory solves another puzzle as well: if Mogao were a monastic site, where did the monks reside? There is little scholarly consensus on this issue. Some assume that monastics lived in the northern-sector caves, a dense cluster of some 245 caves that are largely unpainted and more crudely fashioned than the caves to the south (Figure 16). Many of the northern caves appear to be residential in function: they contain platforms/beds, stoves, shelves and niches, a platform that served as a bed, a stove, a small storage room, and a window that allowed sunlight to enter the interior (Vignato 2005: 134–5). The residence caves often include rock-cut environments. The residence caves often include rock-cut shrines that protected the main living area from the harsh desert face.

The residence-cave type is unmistakable: one enters via a side door opening to a narrow corridor that provides access to the main chamber from the rear, an arrangement that protected the main living area from the harsh desert environment. The residence caves often include rock-cut shelves and niches, a platform that served as a bed, a stove, a small storage room, and a window that allowed sunlight to enter the interior (Vignato 2005: 134–5). The residence caves are unpainted, although some include a niche that may have served as a small shrine or altar. These residential caves are scattered throughout the site; most commonly, one residential cave is found clustered together with (1) a painted ‘central-pillar’ shrine cave, and/or (2) a squarish cave which may be painted or simply plastered and whitewashed (Figure 17). In sum, the layout at Kizil included almost as many central-pillar caves as residence caves, and it seems rather extravagant that each resident monk should have had his own large and lavishly adorned shrine cave simply for private meditation practice. It is more likely that a monk, charged with the ritual upkeep of the adjacent central-pillar cave/family shrine, performed his personal observances within his private chambers, or perhaps in the adjoining square caves. The ritual offerings undertaken on behalf of the donors of the grand central-pillar cave could well have been performed in the outer vestibule or veranda.

Other scholars assume that monks at Mogao lived in free-standing monastic buildings located in front of the cliff face, and some have suggested that Sanjie si 三 世 寺, a monastery from which many if not all of the manuscripts found in Cave 17 originated (see below), stood adjacent to the caves (see Figure 28). A leading proponent of this theory, Rong Xinjiang, acknowledges the absence of direct evidence, but in addition to the presence of the library he notes that the Sanjie monastery was responsible for lighting lamps at the Mogao Laba festival (Rong 1999–2000: 264), and this leads him to conclude that it must have been located somewhere in the immediate vicinity.

(More specifically, Rong suggests that the Sanjie monastery may have been located in front of Cave 16, an area that contains traces of an earlier wooden structure.) But, as we have seen from our comparison with Longmen and Luoyang, that a monastery had jurisdiction over a particular cave does not, in and of itself, indicate that it was located on-site. The presiding monastic establishments may well have been situated in or around the town of Dunhuang – an important garrison and trading outpost throughout medieval times – which lies some 20 km from the caves. In other words, it is possible that the monks who oversaw the Mogao caves and performed ceremonies there were affiliated with monasteries that were some distance from Mogao proper.

Support for the mortuary-shrine hypothesis can also be found at Kizil. At first glance, this is counterintuitive, as Kizil contains what are clearly residence caves scattered in and among the shrine caves. But then Kizil is located at a much greater distance from the local population centre: it is some 70 km from the town of Kucha, making travel to and fro considerably more arduous than travel between Mogao and Dunhuang, or Longmen and Luoyang, for example. At Kizil it would have been more convenient for the clerical overseers of the shrines to reside closer to the caves, and this may explain the particular arrangement of the Kizil site.

The Kizil residence-cave type is unmistakable: one enters via a side door opening to a narrow corridor that provides access to the main chamber from the rear, an arrangement that protected the main living area from the harsh desert environment. The residence caves often include rock-cut shelves and niches, a platform that served as a bed, a stove, a small storage room, and a window that allowed sunlight to enter the interior (Vignato 2005: 134–5). The residence caves are unpainted, although some include a niche that may have served as a small shrine or altar. These residential caves are scattered throughout the site; most commonly, one residential cave is found clustered together with (1) a painted ‘central-pillar’ shrine cave, and/or (2) a squarish cave which may be painted or simply plastered and whitewashed (Figure 17). In sum, the layout at Kizil included almost as many central-pillar caves as residence caves, and it seems rather extravagant that each resident monk should have had his own large and lavishly adorned shrine cave simply for private meditation practice. It is more likely that a monk, charged with the ritual upkeep of the adjacent central-pillar cave/family shrine, performed his personal observances within his private chambers, or perhaps in the adjoining square caves. The ritual offerings undertaken on behalf of the donors of the grand central-pillar cave could well have been performed in the outer vestibule or veranda.
(Vignato 2006b), making regular entry into the dark interior unnecessary. This suggests, once again, that the shrine caves were not there to serve the monks so much as the monks were there to serve the shrines.

Which is not to imply that there were never monks meditating at sites such as Mogao and Kizil: one can imagine that the original occupants of these remote spots were eremitic monks drawn to the isolation and solitude of these desert cliffs. The ‘Record of the Mogao Caves’ (Mogaoku ji 莫高窟記), a short text that recounts the founding of Mogao, traces the origins to two monks, Lezun 樂僔 and Faliang 法良. Lezun is said to have been inspired to build a cave in the year 366, after witnessing rays of light on the cliff that looked like a thousand buddhas. Faliang came shortly thereafter; he too witnessed various miracles (shenyi 神異) and built a niche next to that of Lezun. The ‘Record’ goes on to say: ‘The construction of this monastery (qielan 伽藍) was begun by these two monks.’

While this account may well be apocryphal (the text cannot be dated earlier than the mid-ninth century), the use of the term qielan – a transcription of the Sanskrit saṃghārāma – may nonetheless be significant, as it suggests that the author regarded the Mogao complex as some sort of monastic residence.33 And there are many smaller Buddhist cave sites along the Silk Road that may have retained a monastic character over the centuries. Toyok is a good example: situated some 60 km from Turfan, Toyok is a small cluster of approximately 46 caves in an isolated river valley that contains a vihāra-style layout of cells in Cave 42. The four smaller cells in this cave, each of which measures approximately 1.8 × 2 m square, would readily accommodate meditating monks.34 Moreover, some of these cells contain rudimentary drawings of monks performing corpse meditations (bujing guan 不淨觀, Sk. aśubha-bhāvanā), or more specifically, meditations on a skeleton (baigu guan 白骨觀); these may be depictions of practices that took place therein (Figure 18).
larger vihāra-style caves can be found at Subashi, another cave site in the vicinity of Kucha. Cave 5 at Subashi, for example, contains over a dozen cells leading off a main hallway, and here too one could imagine the cells being used for seated meditation practice.35

So it is possible, perhaps even likely, that Buddhist cave sites in Xinjiang and Gansu began as sanctuaries for small bands of monastics seeking solitude and isolation. Be that as it may, the residents of these remote havens would still have to eat, and this required the support of donors who

would have been drawn to these ascetics as wonder-workers and fecund ‘fields of merit’. In time the donors grew more ambitious and began to construct private family chapels at these holy sites – a kind of burial (or ‘false burial’) ad sanctos. (Burials within urban areas were prohibited in medieval China.) We know that Mogao quickly became a magnet for patronage, and there is evidence that construction at Mogao went through a period of rapid expansion as early as the Northern Liang under the benefactor Prince Jugu Mengxun沮渠蒙遜 (368–433).36 As the scale and grandeur of these private monuments grew, they began to attract the hoi polloi, becoming the religious Disneylands of their day. They assumed a regular calendar of festivities, along with all the merchandising and tourist trappings of pilgrimage sites since time immemorial.37 They must have been sites of ceaseless construction as well, housing hundreds of workers including engineers, labourers, porters, purveyors, sculptors, painters, cooks, accountants, and so on. I can think of few places less conducive to solitary meditation than a site of continual stone excavation, with the steady racket of picks, sledgehammers, wedges and the shouts of workers hauling away rubble. As the money moved in, the monks moved out.38

Before moving on I would like to briefly return to Mogao Cave 285, a so-called vihāra cave with a complex iconographic programme that has been the focus of considerable scholarly attention.39 As mentioned above, this cave has eight small cubicles, four on each side of a central chamber (Figures 5 and 6). There is little doubt that the cubicles were intended to denote meditation cells: the shape of the openings and the painted motifs that adorn the tops of the cells resonate with the row of ‘dhyāna caves’, each housing a single monk in meditation, that ring the bottom of the ceiling (Figure 19). The theme of meditation (chan, Sk. dhyāna) is reinforced on the west wall as well, in which we find the central image of the cave – a seated buddha – flanked by two monks seated in dhyāna set within their own niches (Figure 9). But curiously, the meditation cubicles in Cave 285 seem too small to accommodate real persons. At roughly 1.1 m square by 1.4 m high, they are considerably smaller than those found in the northern-sector vihāra caves mentioned above, smaller than those found at Toyok and Subashi, and indeed smaller than any found in vihāra caves in South Asia.40 I would suggest that the cells in 285 are better understood as icons of meditation cells, and that Cave 285 is organised around the theme of dhyāna in the same way other shrine caves are designed around such themes as the Lotus Scripture, the uṣṇīṣavijayā-dhāraṇī, various Jātaka tales, and so on. To put it another way, Cave 285 is a dhyāna cave in the same way that an icon of a buddha is a buddha.41

The visual evidence

The wall paintings at Dunhuang contain innumerable illustrations of Buddhist worship, both lay and monastic, making the murals an invaluable aid in the study of medieval Buddhist practice. The paintings include depictions of altar settings, of pagodas, shrines and temples, and of sacred mountains

Figure 18 Toyok Cave 42, cell D2: painting of a monk meditating on a half corpse, half skeleton. Photograph courtesy of Akira Miyaji.

Figure 19 Mogao Cave 285: detail of painting of arhat in meditation cave, lower register on ceiling. Photograph: Dunhuang Academy.
and other pilgrimage sites, populated by devotees engaged in various forms of individual and collective worship. The renderings are stylised, idealised and sometimes fanciful to be sure, but they still draw on the contemporary understanding of and familiarity with Buddhist practice.

The murals include depictions of monks meditating in small caves, often set in mountainous landscapes such as those that ring the bottom of the ceiling in Mogao 285 (Figure 19). But the craggy landscapes surrounding these ‘dhyāna caves’ do not resemble the settings surrounding the shrine-cave complexes at Bamiyan, Kizil, Mogao and Longmen. Su Bai (1996: 206–9) suggests that the artistic prototype for the meditation caves depicted in Mogao 285 may be freestanding thatched huts or kuṭi used for meditation in South Asia. As the image of an ascetic monk sitting in samādhi in a small kuṭi travelled from South Asia through the mountainous terrain of the Himalayas, the kuṭi was reinterpreted as a cave in an alpine landscape. (The clue to the origin of the image in a freestanding kuṭi is...
the thatching motif around the opening of the cave, which was retained even as the straw hut morphed into a mountain cave.) Whatever their origin, the idealised meditation caves set among towering peaks depicted in Cave 285 bear little resemblance to the actual cliff-cut grottoes found in bustling complexes such as Mogao. There are over 45,000 square metres of wall paintings at Mogao, yet to my knowledge there are no depictions of monks meditating in the sort of shrine caves under consideration here.

There is, however, one unambiguous theme found repeatedly in Buddhist cave sites that arguably portrays a ceremony taking place in the very cave in which the painting is found. I am referring to the so-called ‘donor images’ that depict a solemn procession of laypersons in formal attire led by one or two monastics (Figure 20). The lead monastic typically carries an incense censer, while the trailing laypersons may each hold a single flower by the stem, or carry a tray of blossoms, or simply have hands folded in a gesture of veneration (Figures 21 and 22). The procession is immediately recognisable as an offering ceremony (gongyang 供養, Sk. pūjā), in which oblations of incense, flowers, incantations, lamps, food and the like are presented to the icon(s) (benzun 本尊) enshrined on the central altar in exchange for merit and blessings. (The underlying structure of these ubiquitous Buddhist pūjā rites is that of a sacrifice.) These donor images are frequently found on the lower register of the wall paintings in the main chamber, but they are sometimes situated around the bottom of a central pillar, or lining the corridors that connect the antechamber to the main chamber, and so on. The donor portraits and the surviving inscriptions that accompany them have been studied in depth by scholars interested in the social history of Dunhuang and the genealogies of the local clans. But they have been largely ignored by those interested in the ritual function of the caves, perhaps because they are so utterly ubiquitous and seemingly innocuous.

The donor images are often arranged in pairs, with males in procession on one side and females on the other. (These pairings of men and women are reminiscent of the paired caves, one for each parent, found at Yungang and Longmen.) The two columns are usually configured so as to appear to converge on the central icon, giving the impression that the participants are being memorialised in the very act of performing pūjā (Figure 23). Some of the inscriptions are explicit in this regard, reading, ‘[Devotee so and so] at the moment of presenting offerings’ (gongyang shi 供養時) or ‘[Devotee so and so] earnestly presenting offerings’ (yixin gongyang 一心供養). We might then be justified in approaching such images as if they are visual records of actual events. Indeed, they are arguably the only surviving depictions of rituals taking place within the shrine caves themselves. There is, in fact, every reason to suspect that such ceremonies, in which clerics would lead the donor family in making offerings to the main image in their private chapel, were held in conjunction with the dedication of the cave and consecration of the icons. Such rituals continue to be performed at temples and shrines throughout East Asia down to the present day.

But all is not as it seems. For we know from inscriptions and other historical documents that some of the individuals...
depicted in the donor processions were deceased at the time the cave was constructed, making their participation in the ceremonies impossible. In Mogao Cave 62, for example, a Sui Dynasty cave associated with the Cheng family, the primary patron of the cave, Cheng Tuoluo, placed his grandfather, his father and mother, three of his older brothers, and two of his daughters, all of whom are identified as ‘deceased’ in the inscriptions, in the procession along with his wife and other living relatives (Figure 21). Another example can be found in Mogao Cave 220, a Tang cave identified as a ‘Zhai family cave’ (Zhai jia), in which the chief patron Zhai Fengda had his ninth-generation ancestor, Zhai Siyuan, portrayed in the act of making offerings (Figure 24). There are literally dozens of such examples among the surviving inscriptions in which deceased relatives, especially parents, are shown in procession along with the living. So while the images of donors presenting offerings may well have been modelled on actual ceremonies that took place in the caves, the presence of the deceased among the living cautions...
us against taking them at face value. Rather, these images seem to be memorialising members of the donor’s family, both the living and the dead, as if in the midst of making offerings to the Buddha. Suspended in time in these remote desert sanctuaries, the donor is brought together with several generations of his ancestral line, and together they continue, for all eternity, to worship the buddhas and thereby generate merit for the welfare of their kin.

At times the donors had themselves depicted along with conspicuous signs of status and wealth. There are examples of donors memorialised along with attendants, slaves, horses and carts and other household goods (Figures 21 and 25), and in the case of one famous general, with an entire army. All of this is again reminiscent of Chinese tombs, in which the deceased are provided with painted or sculpted human ‘surrogates’ (yongzhe俑者, ouren偶人) to accompany them to the afterlife (Figure 26), along with miniature residences, supplies of household goods, stocks of food and the like to keep them content. (These grave goods are known generically as mingqi明器 or ‘numinous objects’.) There is no single understanding of what
becomes of the dead in medieval China and thus no single understanding of the funerary portraits, figurines and grave goods, or of the elaborate mural depictions of everyday life that are commonly found in Chinese tombs. And I am not suggesting that the donor figures should be taken as substitute doubles in any literal sense. On the contrary, it is misleading to assume that the patrons of Chinese tombs believed that the tomb figurines literally ‘came to life’ to serve the deceased in the afterlife, as is sometimes claimed in textbook accounts. The early Chinese understanding of funerary practices was, it is safe to assume, complex, and it is more fruitful to regard the world of the tomb as akin to the ‘as if’ world of ritual space – a space defined precisely by marking it off, literally, figuratively and conceptually, from the workaday world.49 I do not have the space to explore this complex topic here; it will suffice to note that the resonances between the donor processions in Buddhist shrine caves and the depictions of surrogates in Chinese tombs is further evidence of the mortuary associations of these Buddhist sites.50

A most striking case of the conflation of cave and tomb may be the category of ‘image caves’ or ‘memorial caves’ (ying ku) – small squarish cells that contain a sculpted or painted image of an eminent monk, often in the posture of dhyāna. The best-known example may be Mogao Cave 17, which was originally used (if not built) to commemorate the monk Hongbian 洪辯 (?–862?), a prominent cleric in the Hexi region who oversaw the Mogao site in the mid-ninth century and who is credited with helping the general Zhang Yichao restore control over the area (Figure 4).51 This small cave,52 entered via the corridor connecting the antechamber to the main chamber in Cave 16, contained a lifesized painted sculpture of Hongbian, seated cross-legged with his arms folded under his robes, set on a platform placed against the north wall. (The image of Hongbian had been removed to make room for manuscripts, but was restored to its original position in 1964.) A purple silk bag containing Hongbian’s relics was found in an opening at the rear of the image. A painting on the wall behind the sculpture of Hongbian depicts two trees, with a water flask and a monk’s satchel hanging on their branches. A painted maid and a nun, each holding round fans, stand in attendance on either side of Hongbian’s sculptural image (Figure 27). This small cave dedicated to Hongbian and containing his relics exemplifies the conflation of shrine cave and tomb: were the cave viewed under the rubric of a ‘tomb’, the painted images of two attendants might well be considered ouren, and the water flask and monk’s bag would constitute...
Figure 27 Mogao Cave 17: north wall, detail of mural behind the image of Hongbian. Photograph: Dunhuang Academy.
mingqi – surrogates and grave goods meant to serve Hongbian in the afterlife. Many other memorial caves dedicated to a single eminent monk have been found throughout western China, while others are known from historical sources, notably the collections of biographies of eminent monks. While the surviving caves contain sculpted or painted images of a memorialised saint, the historical sources tell of grottoes containing complete mummies, a phenomenon known as ‘whole body relics’ (Sharf 1992). Thus while these memorial caves are typically seen as a subset of the category ‘meditation caves’ – indeed, they are cited as evidence for the meditation-cave hypothesis – these caves might be better viewed as shrines of charismatic masters who, even in death, continued to be venerated as enlightened saints and ‘fields of merit’.

Funerary Buddhism

It should be clear that the distinction some are wont to draw between monastery/temple on the one hand, and shrine/mausoleum/tomb on the other, may be, in the Buddhist case, misleading. The first category is focused, presumably, on the living, and the second on the dead. But these seemingly straightforward categories may be more ours than theirs – in Asian Buddhist practice they are often difficult to tease apart.

The performance of mortuary services by the Buddhist priesthood has been a lucrative business in Asia, and some nineteenth- and twentieth-century Asian intellectuals and modernisers have castigated the clergy as little more than a guild of undertakers with monopolistic powers who take advantage of the benighted masses. The inordinate focus on funerary services and memorial rites came to be known derisively as ‘funeral Buddhism’ (from the Japanese sōshiki Bukkyō葬式仏教). Rather than defend the practice, Buddhist reformers insisted that ‘funeral Buddhism’ is not true or authentic Buddhism but rather a later corruption that is inimical to the founder’s original teachings. (This oft-repeated critique contributed to the modern construal of authentic Buddhism as properly concerned with meditation, spiritual growth and social transformation.)

In truth, the corrupting force of monastic wealth has been a subject of concern and criticism from early on. And few would openly defend the practice of charging outrageous fees for funerary services, as is still common in Japan. But the notion that there is something fundamentally ‘un-Buddhist’ about the priesthood’s focus on death and funerary ritual is odd on the face of it, and I suspect it reflects the well-documented modernist and ‘protestant’ tendencies of late nineteenth- and twentieth-century Buddhist apologists.

The goal of Buddhist practice, namely nirvāṇa, has always been intimately linked with death, however the two terms are understood. The stūpa – an edifice whose origins lie in a funeral mound – is, among other things, both a reliquary and symbol of the Buddha’s final passing, and stūpas served as the architectural and ritual foci of Buddhist monasteries and temples from the beginnings of the tradition. In East Asia the stūpa morphed into the pagoda, a Chinese adaptation that drew from the architecture of the qie 閣 or ‘gate-tower’ associated with Chinese tomb construction since the Zhou Dynasty. The mortuary associations of Buddhist temples are also evident in the Chinese word miao 墓; this term, widely used in Chinese sources for smaller Buddhist temples, pagodas and shrines, is a pre-Buddhist term for an ancestral shrine or mausoleum. (Note that the semantic range of the Sanskrit caitya is similar: it too originally referred to a funeral mound but came to refer more generically to Buddhist worship halls.) Yet another example is provided by tatchū 塔頭, the ubiquitous temples that sprouted up around major Japanese monastic complexes. These temples began as residences for retired abbots that were intended to serve as their memorial shrines after their death. In sum, when talking about Buddhism, the distinction we make between ‘temple’ on the one hand and ‘mortuary shrine’ on the other is not always salient.

Even at the level of monastic practice, the distinction between ‘mortuary practice’ and ‘meditation’ can blur. Some of the earliest and most common forms of Buddhist meditation were focused precisely on death, including the meditation on a decomposing corpse and the related white-skeleton meditation, and monks were exhorted to meditate in graveyards. Moreover, the performance of deathbed and funerary services was seen as a potent opportunity for spiritual advancement for both the deceased and the officiating priest. In a nutshell, much of the Buddhist tradition – from its architecture and its liturgies to its soteriological goals – was imbued with a concern with death from the outset.

In fashioning a Buddhist grotto as a memorial shrine for the deceased it is then only natural to borrow from temple architecture. East Asian Buddhist liturgies often include a segment called ‘adornment of the sanctuary’ (zhuangyuan 道場) that ritually transforms a place of worship into a ‘pure land’ or ‘buddha land’ with a venerated icon enthroned at the centre. The shrine cave engages this
same cluster of images and motifs: it is a consecrated space or ‘pure land’ intended for the memorialisation *ad sanctos* of the ancestors who are themselves depicted in the act of presenting offerings.

This conflation of temple and mortuary shrine may not be unique to China. As mentioned above, the cave complexes of Maharashtra, with their clearly defined *caitya* and *vihāra* halls, are presumed to be the historical prototypes for the Central Asian and Chinese sites, although the lines of influence are complex and indirect. I have neither the space nor the experience to deal with the Indian sites; for the present purposes it will suffice to note that some of what has been said of the Chinese caves is apropos to some of the caves of the Deccan Plateau. In the later caves at Ajantā, for example, we are confronted with imposing monuments dedicated, at least in part, to the generation of merit for family members, both living and dead. Here too armies of labourers and craftsmen slaved to excavate and adorn the caves, and here too ongoing construction as well as the stream of pilgrims would have made the site less than ideal for monks seeking a quiet place to cultivate *dhyāna*. It is true that the individual cells in the Indian *vihāra* caves are appropriately sized to serve as living quarters for monastics. But even then, the clergy residing at the more ostentatious monasteries may have been there to ritually serve the sites and their patrician donors as much as the sites and their donors were there to service the monastics.

**Art in the dark**

One reason the Mogao caves have been treated differently from the caves at Longmen and Yungang is the presence of a ‘monastic library’ at the site. The manuscripts were discovered hidden away in Cave 17, the small cave originally used as a memorial chamber for Hongbian (Figure 28). Seals on the manuscripts indicate that many if not all originally belonged to a handful of monasteries, notably the Sanjie monastery mentioned above. It then seemed natural to assume that the monasteries mentioned in the seals were situated at Mogao, and that the Mogao caves were used by the resident monastic population for their meditation and visualisation practices. But, as noted above, the location of the monasteries that owned the manuscripts remains uncertain, and if the circumstances at Yungang and Longmen provide any guidance, it is more likely that they were situated in the town of Dunhuang proper rather than alongside the caves. In the end, there is little compelling evidence that the shrine caves we see today were designed with meditating monks in mind.

Of course, when it comes to the function of a site as complex as Mogao, it is difficult if not foolhardy to generalise. One must bear in mind the stretch of time over which the caves were constructed, the variety of architectural forms and iconographic programmes, the shifting ethnic identities of the patrons of the caves, and the likelihood that, over time, even a single cave may well have been put to different uses. Be that as it may, with the exception of a few larger grottoes such as the colossal-image caves which were, in all likelihood, open as public places of worship, I have suggested that the majority of the shrine caves at Mogao functioned as private memorial chapels, and that the inner precincts of these chapels were entered only rarely.

What might this tell us about the artwork found therein? For one thing, insofar as the purpose of the caves was the creation of merit for the family line, this was largely realised as soon as the shrines were completed and the images consecrated – once complete, the caves need not have been opened nor the murals and icons seen for the caves to fulfil their intended function. That the caves were often dark and the images difficult – if not impossible – to see is then inconsequential to their function. This is not to deny that there were other social and religious functions of the caves; there is evidence that the caves, like so many Buddhist monuments, also served to flaunt the piety and social status of the donors. But even then, success may not have been contingent on ongoing access to the caves' inner sanctums. If it is true that the images were there to glorify the shrines rather than to serve as aids in a monastic regimen, then the wall paintings and sculptures that adorn the caves may be closer to ‘art’ in the modern sense of the term than some have assumed. The artists at Mogao were not saddled with the task...
of accommodating specific liturgies or meeting the iconographic requirements of particular visualisation practices. They were free to experiment and innovate, and evidence of their creative energies is found everywhere (Figure 29). This does not mean that the artists, like artists today, were not under pressure to please: competition for commissions may well have been intense. But success in garnering commissions would depend on eminently artistic concerns rather than on stringent compliance with canonical norms.

In conclusion, insofar as the purpose of the works of art in these mortuary shrines – the production of merit that comes from the production of images – was realised largely at the moment the production was complete, and insofar as the images were not intended to be seen after the shrines were consecrated, the art in these caves enjoyed an autonomy that distinguishes them from artwork made for strictly liturgical purposes. And it is precisely this autonomy – a non-instrumental modality that gives pride of place to aesthetic concerns – that argues for appreciating these works as ‘art’ in the unfashionably Renaissance sense of the term. Indeed, there may be no better example of ‘art for art’s sake’ than art that was not intended to be seen at all.56

Notes

1. The art-historical focus on aesthetics is often traced back to the Renaissance; see, for example, Gombrich 1971.
2. For evidence that Buddhist artisans, particularly those that fashioned the Mogao caves that are the focus of this article, were sometimes regarded as little more than manual labourers, see Fraser 2004: 15–47.
3. I myself have been complicit in this enthusiasm for ritual function; see Foulk and Sharf 1993/94, and Sharf and Sharf 2001.
4. For evidence that Buddhist artisans, particularly those that fashioned the Mogao caves that are the focus of this article, were sometimes regarded as little more than manual labourers, see Fraser 2004: 15–47.
5. They are also sometimes called ‘monastic-residence caves’ (sengūfū ku僧居窟), although more recent studies, including the comprehensive archaeological report on the northern-sector caves at Mogao (Peng et al. 2000–2004) reserve this term for what were clearly residences – i.e. caves, usually unainted, that include separate living and cooking areas, etc. Scholars also talk of ‘burial caves’ (yiku 痞窟), which, being unainted, I do not include among the ‘shrine caves’. Twenty three burial caves were identified in the northern sector of the Mogao site, dating from the Sui to the Yuan Dynasties (Zheng et al. 2008: 34).
6. For a detailed study of the central-pillar type, including a discussion of the Kizil examples, see Leung 2007. On circumambulation at Kizil see Vignato 2006a: 399; 2006b: 18.
7. Despite my reservations, I will continue to follow standard practice and refer to these Kizil caves, which are unique to the Kucha region, as ‘central-pillar caves’.
8. There are three such vihāras caves among the shrine caves in the ‘southern sector’ at Mogao: Caves 268, 285 and 487. As the cells in these caves are quite small (see below), scholars assume they were intended for seated meditation rather than as living quarters proper.
9. The notion that the central pillar was intended to facilitate circumambulation is an old one, going back to Mizuno Seichī 1938 and Yan Wenru 1952. See the discussions in Leung 2007; Li 2010; Zheng et al. 2008: 29–30.
10. For a discussion of the central-pillar type, including a discussion of the Kizil examples, see Leung 2007. On circumambulation at Kizil see Vignato 2006a: 399; 2006b: 18.
11. The idea that ‘visualisation’ or guan can be distinguished from ‘meditation’ or chan – a notion sometimes found in Chinese scholarship on the caves – is odd on the face of it. The term chan is a Chinese rendering of the Sanskrit dhyāna, a somewhat generic term for meditation that includes many forms of mental training, including ‘visualisation’. (See Greene 2012 for a discussion of how visions and visualisation practices fit within the framework of dhyāna.) Indeed, the various ‘discernments of impurity’ (bujingguan 不淨觀), which involve visualising both the impurity of the body and the impurity of a decomposing corpse, were among the most prevalent teachings of the early meditation masters (chanshi 僧侶) in China. The term guan, often better rendered as ‘discernment’ or ‘insight’, has a similarly broad range of meanings in Buddhist materials; guan is used, for example, as a translation of Sanskrit vipaśyāna, which is the insight that comes from, among other things, the practice of dhyāna. Chan and guan thus have overlapping semantic domains, and the notion that they refer to two distinct styles of practice and that guan is specifically associated with visualisation misconstrues medieval Buddhist doctrine and practice. (It is possible that scholars who distinguish chan from guan are confusing or conflating the two terms with a more standard pairing of samatha [心安] or dhamma [心止] and vipaśyāna. In this scheme, samatha would encompass all forms of dhyāna including those involving visualisation.)
14. Abe does cite the Trapuṣa and Bhallika Śūtra as evidence that ‘circumambulation was a practice taught to common lay people in the latter part of the fifth century, which suggests that it was this class of lay Buddhist practitioners who may have been involved in circumambulation in Cave 254’ (Abe 1990: 11).
15. The first translation of this scripture, under the title Banzhou sanmei jing般舟三昧經 (T.418), is attributed to Zhi Loujiajen 文理遮顚 (Lokakṣema) of the Eastern Han Dynasty.
16. To cite Ho Puay-pen, ‘The primary purposes for these Pure Land paintings must have been to depict the wonderful pure crystal world of the Amitābha Buddha for meditative cultivation as expounded by the Chinese patriots, and to serve as votive
offerings for the accumulation of merits for rebirth in the Pure Land’ (Ho 1995: 22).

17. In some cases these large multi-bay structures – some of which had tiled floors, rammed earth or wooden walls, and elaborate gabled roofs – straddled the fronts of several caves at once. A detailed excavation report can be found in Pan and Ma 1985; see also Ma Shichang 1995. On the wooden architectural features that fronted the Kizil caves, see Vignato 2006a.

18. When Mitsuhiro Seichi’s Japanese team conducted the first archaeological survey and took rubbings and photographs at the Yungang site during the years 1938–44, there was no electricity available, and thus they used mirrors and paper screens to direct sunlight into the caves (Mizuno 1950: 40). Note that the wooden antechambers that once stood in front of many of the Yungang caves had largely disappeared by the time Mizuno arrived, making the use of mirrors much easier.

19. Ning reports that, after a ‘very careful investigation’, he found ‘traces of burned oil remaining at the centre of the western niche’ of Mogao Cave 220 (Ning 1996: 42; 2004: 36), but this would appear to be a rare finding. Vignato notes that some of the central-piller caves at Kizil show wear on the floor around the unexcavated core, which he believes resulted from the practice of circumambulation (Vignato 2006a: 399 n. 59). Among the later transient visitors at Mogao were escaped White Russian soldiers whose cooking fires caused considerable smoke damage in some of the caves.


21. Major Buddhist cave sites across Asia also contain hundreds or even thousands of smaller ‘intrusive’ niches and shrines squeezed into whatever space remained after the larger caves were excavated. Surviving inscriptions in China indicate that many of these smaller niches were donated by lay Buddhist devotional societies (yi jī, yi ji 吉 義, yishui 義會) on behalf of their members, or by individual monastics and lay devotees on behalf of family members. On medieval Buddhist devotional societies and their involvement with Yungang and Longmen see especially Wong 2004: 43–60.


23. The empress’s body appears to have been relocated to her husband’s tomb at a later date. Or the tomb may have been a ‘false tomb’ from the beginning; the evidence is unclear. Fu (2002: 78) notes, ‘The powerful Eastern Wei general and eventual ruler Gao Huan, who died in 547, has a false tomb among the Xiangyangshan caves northwest of the Northern Qi capital at Ye, located due south of the former Wei Kingdom capital Ye . . .’ The use of Buddhist caves as tombs during this period would be a natural progression. The spread of Buddhism during the Northern and Southern dynasties encouraged a considerable crossover of architectural features between cave temples and the common tomb plan of the period.1

24. Mogao Cave 332, a late seventh-century central-piller cave, would appear to reproduce this Kizil cave type, with a large parinirvana image in a niche in the rear (west) wall behind a central pillar. On the evolution of so-called parinirvana caves, see especially Lee 2010: 139–201.

25. On the relationship between Mogao cave art and tomb decor, notably the Dingjiazha tomb, see, for example, Abe 2002: 113–18; Duan et al. 1994: 114–17; Prasser 2004: 100–102; Fu 2002: 89.

26. The most valuable such document is the ‘Checklist of Caves and Shrines for Lamp-Lighting Duty during the Laba Festival’ (Laba randeng fenpei kukan mingshu 霧 燈燈分配宿名片名數), believed to have been composed in 951 (Dunhuang yanjiu yaancang 敦煌研究叢編 no. 3232). See also P.2049W, which contains annual reports for the Jingtou monastery.”
35. Yamabe 2010: 800–801. Yamabe also notes that, with the exception of Toyok and Subashi, many of the so-called ‘meditation cells’ at Mogao, Bezeklik, and other sites in western China seem too small to have been used for meditation. But as Yamabe regards the cave complexes as monastic in orientation, he assumes that monks must have been practising meditation somewhere. On the relationship between these western cave sites and specific Buddhist meditation practices see also Yamabe 1999a, 1999b and 2002.

36. The evidence for Mengxun’s patronage is found in Daoxuan’s fishenhua sanbao guanglong lu 魏神龍三寶感通録, preserved in the Guang hongming ji 廣弘明集 (T.2106: 417c–418a; Soper 1958: 141–2).

37. See, for example, ‘Praise of Hong Baode’s Merit’, which reports on the boom in cave construction at Mogao following the time of Lezun and Faliang, and the ensuing flood of pilgrims attracted by the splendours of this site. ‘From the tops of the mountains to the bottom of the valleys, the quintessential elegance of this buddha-land is impossible to put into words’ (由是山頭谷地, 鬱則之精麗難名).

38. Carrithers (1979, 1983) identifies much the same dynamic in his study of Sri Lankan Buddhist asceticism.

39. The cave, built in the 530s during the Western Wei Dynasty, is commonly associated with the Yin family, but several other families were also involved in the patronage of the cave (Ning 2004: 107).

40. The cells in Mogao 268, which also measure about 1 m square, are no better; see the discussion in Yamabe 2010.

41. Some of the cells in 285 now contain small stupas which scholars believe may have contained the relics of eminent monks. The stupas are later additions – they appear to date from the Yuan Dynasty at the earliest, and thus they do not reveal much about the original conception of the cave. However, they do indicate that the caves were considered an appropriate place for the interment of the deceased.

42. The literature on the social history of Dunhuang and Mogao is large and still growing; see especially Ma 1996b; in English, see Ning 2004.

43. The first formula is particularly popular in the many surviving inscriptions in Mogao 285 (Dunhuang yanjiuyuan 1986: 115–19).

44. Such services may have been held on a regular basis following the consecration of the cave, but as mentioned above, the lack of soot and other evidence of use suggests that the caves were only rarely opened for such offering ceremonies. This is not to suggest that the caves were never re-entered by the donors. There is at least one recorded case in which a cave was entered and ‘updated’ by the donor: after receiving a promotion, Zhai Fengda, the chief patron of Mogao Cave 220 mentioned above, added an inscription to his donor image that included his new official title (Dunhuang yanjiuyuan 1986: 101; Ning 2004: 78). It is quite possible that family members made periodic visits to honour their ancestors, make offerings, and remind themselves of their lineage.


46. Dunhuang yanjiuyuan 1986: 101–4. In his analysis of Cave 220, Ning Qiang, who generally regards Mogao as a monastic site intended for meditating monks, does note that ‘the recognition of the creator of the family cave as the first ancestor, to whom later generations of the clan could have offered sacrifices annually, suggests the nature of the family cave-temple as an ancestral shrine’ (Ning 2004: 78). Eugene Wang makes much the same connection (2005: 75–6).

47. Inscriptions in Caves 9, 12, 107, 120, 121, 144, 166, 188, 197, 231, 282, 290, 305, 322, 338, 360, 468, all of which date to the Tang, record some of the depicted persons as ‘deceased’ (wáng); see Dunhuang yanjiuyuan 1986, passim.

48. The most famous such scene is found in Mogao Cave 156, a Tang cave dating to 865, which contains a grand mural of General Zhang Yichao 章義超 memorialised in parade with his soldiers, complete with mounted cavalry, standard bearers, dancers and musicians. The inscription identifies the scene as General Zhang Yichao, Governor of Hexi and Imperial Censor, travelling together with his army on the Hexi Road after liberating the territory from Tibetan occupation (Dunhuang yanjiuyuan 1986: 74). Parts of the mural include hunters chasing deer, pack animals hauling supplies, and the opposite wall has a similarly grand depiction of the general’s wife with her retinue. Cf. the discussion in Duan et al. 1994: 181–3; Chen (2007) makes explicit comparisons between such ‘procession murals’ (chuxingtu 出行圖) at Dunhuang and Yulin (specifically Mogao Caves 94 and 100, and Yulin Cave 12), and the murals found in Chinese tombs of the same period.


50. Fu Xinian (2002: 89) has written eloquently on the connections between the Chinese tomb and the Buddhist cave. In his discussion of the interior of Majishan Cave 3, he notes, ‘Here we have a fully developed Buddhist worship hall, probably resembling one from the first centuries of Buddhism in China. On the back wall, a main image sits under a canopy and caiyu arch, and images and paintings re-create the rest of a Buddhist world of deities in relation to the main Buddha. Also important is the ceiling, a canopy or pyramidal-vaulted one of the kind observed in contemporary tombs. Cave temples like this suggest that temple and tomb shared both architecture and iconography in fourth- to sixth-century, China. That, although it was typical for a Buddhist to be cremated, the pervasive funerary world of Han China may have resulted in the creation of tombs for Buddhists of the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries that were modeled after Buddhist cave temples or halls.’

51. Huntington 1986; on Zhang Yichao see note 48 above. Kumtura Cave 75 is another ‘memorial cave’ that has been the subject of considerable discussion. The cave includes a painting of a meditating monk together with a circular diagram that some take to be a wheel of life, donor portraits, and a partially legible inscription; see especially Teiser 2006: 153–62, and Yamabe 2012, who argues, on the basis of his rereading of the inscription, that the portrayed monk is engaged in the meditations on the four immeasurable states (si wuliang shou nian, Sk. catvāri-apramāṇāni).

52. The chamber measures 2.94 m wide by 2.91 m deep by 2.66 m high.

53. On these protestant tendencies see, for example, Lopez 1995 and McMahan 2008.

54. Again, the literature is large; see, for example, Fu 2002: 85 and Guo 2004.

55. Note that the basalt rock from which the Indian sites were hewn is denser and thus in some respects more challenging to excavate than the relatively soft gravel conglomerate found at some of the Chinese sites such as Mogao and Kizil.

56. For a similar argument with respect to the aesthetic dimension of a Buddhist finger relic, see Sharf 2011.

References

Abbreviations


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