
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Study on the Historical Dynamics of the Medicine Buddha Sutra Illustrations based on Medicine Buddha Beliefs

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ABSTRACT

A substantial portion of the murals and manuscripts housed in the Sutra Caves of Dunhuang is intimately tied to the cult of the Medicine Buddha. An examination of the *Catalogue of Dunhuang Mogao Caves* compiled by the Dunhuang Academy, alongside the *New Catalogue of the Dunhuang Manuscripts* edited by Huang Yongwu, reveals the presence of 295 texts pertaining to the Medicine Buddha, underscoring the prevalence of this belief system in Dunhuang. The popularity of the Medicine Buddha belief in the region emerged as a pivotal factor influencing the evolution of sutra illustrations' content and form. The Medicine Buddha's attributes of averting calamities, curing illnesses, and prolonging life—all catering to worldly aspirations—resonated deeply with people's pursuit of immediate benefits in this life. This paper employs a multifaceted approach, encompassing documentary research, iconographic analysis, and comparative studies, to trace the historical trajectory and graphical transformations of the "Medicine Buddha Sutra Illustrations" (Yaoshijing Biantu), culminating in a comprehensive synthesis. Furthermore, by delving into the societal backdrop, the underlying economic underpinnings, and the evolving "compositional strategies" of these illustrations across various eras, we aim to present a holistic view of the dynamic development of the Medicine Buddha Sutra illustrations throughout time.

KEYWORDS

Dunhuang Mogao Caves, Medicine Buddha Sutra Illustrations, Religious Beliefs, Evolution of Paintings

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1. Introduction

In the present work, the historical dynamics of the Medicine Buddha Sutra illustration in the Dunhuang Mogao Cave 12 were studied. The distinctive architecture, sculptures, and paintings of the Mogao Caves, particularly the murals, reveal historical changes and cultural integration over thousands of years. Existing references indicate that *Medicine Buddha Sutra Illustrations* first appeared during the Sui Dynasty and continued through the Western Xia Dynasty. Currently, there are 96 distinct illustrations of the Medicine Buddha Sutra in the Dunhuang Caves. (Dunhuang Academy, n.d. Unlike scriptures, murals serve not only as physical paintings on cave walls but also guide viewers' gaze through visual effects. They help viewers grasp and experience the profound meanings of the scriptures, sometimes making them forget the physical existence of the cave chamber in a trance. From historical and cultural perspectives, the illustrations of Medicine Buddha Sutra in different periods reflect changes in aesthetic concepts, social backgrounds, and religious beliefs. (Zhu, 2020, p. 132)

2. The Image Hierarchy of the Medicine Buddha Sutra Illustrations in Cave 12 during the Late Tang Dynasty

Cave 12 is situated at the northern end of the southern section of the Mogao Caves. This medium-sized cave features a Tang Dynasty design, including a gabled ceiling and niches on the west wall. There is an ink inscription on the east wall above the entrance, which reads, "Sponsored by Monk Suoyi, a Buddhist official from the Jinguangming Temple" (Digital Dunhuang, n.d.-a). Consequently, the cave is also known as the "Cave of Officer Suo." The upper parts of the south and north walls of the cave depict

six sutra illustrations, while the north and south sides of the east wall respectively depict the illustration of *Vimalakirti sutra* and *Panikarasutta sutra*. Each wall below the illustrations is adorned with three to four strips of screen paintings. The illustration of the Medicine Buddha Sutra uses a scattered-point perspective technique, and its layout is influenced by the *large-sized Amitayus sutra illustration* (Digital Dunhuang, n.d.-b). Composition level: Central level: Medicine Buddha and attendants. The Medicine Buddha is situated in the center of the painting, seated on a lotus pedestal, with a compassionate and serene expression, holding a dharma instrument or a medicine bowl, symbolizing the boundless merits of saving sentient beings. Suryaprabha (Bodhisattva of the sun) and Chandraprabha (Bodhisattva of the moon) stand on the left and right sides of Medicine Buddha, holding the sun disk and moon disk, respectively. Sub-central level: twelve divine generals and dharma protectors. The twelve divine generals surround the Medicine Buddha, clad in armor and wielding weapons, exuding a formidable presence as essential guardians of the pure land of the Medicine Buddha. Dharma protectors and disciples recite scriptures or offer worship with devoutly held offerings, demonstrating the reverence and faith of Buddhist believers towards Medicine Buddha. Peripheral level: the scenery of pure land and decorative elements. Pure land scenery includes a lotus pond with rippling waves, towering palaces reaching into the clouds, colorful prayer flags, and more. These elements collectively create a peaceful and beautiful pure land world. Decorative elements include flying Apsaras, auspicious clouds, lotus flowers, and more. There is an inscription at the front, which reads "Sutra of the Medicine Buddha in the Eastern World." The screen painting at the bottom of the image depicts the human suffering associated with the "nine kinds of untimely death" and illustrates the various ways in which the Medicine Buddha rescues sentient beings from these fates. The combination of these elements not only enhances the image's beauty but also imparts a sense of mystery and sacredness. Through the skillful use of artistic techniques, these elements are seamlessly integrated to form an independent yet unified whole, effectively and accurately conveying their intended roles to viewers. The central theme focuses not on narrative but on highlighting the mission of the Medicine Buddha to save people from danger and suffering. These images not only interpret the belief in the Medicine Buddha in an artistic way but also effectively reflect the social culture, religious beliefs, and aesthetic concepts of the time.

3. The Historical Evolution of the "Operation Positioning" of the Medicine Buddha Sutra Illustration from the Initial Period to the Late Tang Dynasty

The belief in the Medicine Buddha originated in India and began spreading to China during the Eastern Jin Dynasty. The translation of the *Sutra of the Medicine Buddha* during the Liu Song Dynasty further facilitated its dissemination, and the belief gained widespread popularity during the Southern and Northern Dynasties (Thanh & Leigh, 2001).

The main deity of the belief is Medicine Buddha, or Bhaisajyaguru vaiduryaprabhasa in Sanskrit, the founder of the Pure Vaidurya realm (Goodweb, n.d.). He is also referred to as Medicine Master Tathagata, Medicine Master Vaidurya Light Tathagata, Great Medicine Buddha, and Twelve Vows Buddha. The Medicine Buddha belief centers around the worship of Medicine Buddha, with the *Sutra of the Medicine Buddha* as its main theoretical basis. Drawing on concepts such as the twelve great vows, nine kinds of untimely death, the method of hanging banners and lamps to prolong life, and the Pure Land, this belief system gradually evolved into a comprehensive religion. It encompasses rituals, sacred sites, followers, places of worship, and religious activities and has led to various cultural expressions. (Zhang & Han, 2023) The Medicine Buddha has been widely revered by various social classes in Chinese society due to its power to dispel disasters and prolong life. The origin of the *Medicine Buddha Sutra Illustrations* can be traced back to the Six Dynasties period. Classics of the Medicine Buddha Sutra illustrations from this era have been discovered in sites such as the Bezeklik Thousand Buddha Caves, the ancient city of Gaochang, and Tuyugou Valley, spanning from the Six Dynasties to the Qocho Uighur period. Although the Medicine Buddha belief was introduced early in the Gaochang region, it was not until the Gaochang Uyghur period that the illustrations of the Medicine Buddha Sutra began to be created. In the early stage, the subject matter was limited, and the form was simple, resulting in only rudimentary prototypes of the Sutra illustrations. By the Sui Dynasty (581-618 AD), there was a significant advancement, with a broader range of subjects and an increasing number of depicted scenes from the Sutra. The Medicine Buddha Sutra illustrations in Mogao Caves appeared at this time. Currently, four Sui Dynasty Medicine Buddha Sutra illustrations can be found in the Mogao Caves. They are located above the entrance on the east wall of Cave 395, on the lower part of the flat top at the back of Cave 417, on the east side of the flat top in Cave 433, and on the east side of the flat top in Cave 436. The illustrations typically feature one Buddha, two Bodhisattvas, and symbolic elements such as longevity lamps and the Twelve Divine Generals. Their layout generally mirrors the style of Northern Dynasties Buddhist art. These illustrations typically have the Medicine Buddha at the center, surrounded by Bodhisattvas, Dharma protectors, and other elements. The Medicine Buddha is usually placed in the center or slightly above, surrounded by backlight and decorative elements like auspicious clouds, adding a sense of depth and three-dimensionality to the illustration. Additionally, early Medicine Buddha Sutra illustrations often depict scenes of offerings and rituals, such as lighting lamps, reciting scriptures, and making offerings. These scenes highlight the devout worship of the Medicine Buddha and illustrate the "rituals for prolonging life and curing illness," as shown in Figures 1 and 2. (Zhu, 2020, p. 132)



Figure 1. Three statues featuring the Han Medicine Buddha holding a monk's staff and a glass bowl alongside the Bodhisattvas of the Sun and the Moon, a mural from the early Tang Dynasty, Dunhuang Mogao Cave 322



Figure 2. Mural of the Medicine Buddha Sutra, Mogao Cave 394, east wall of the entrance, Sui Dynasty

During the mid-term development phase, as the Medicine Buddha belief became more widespread, the number of illustrations saw explosive growth. Statistics show that up to 23 Medicine Buddha Sutra illustrations have been discovered in the Mogao Caves alone. During this period, the composition evolved significantly from the early, simple style to a more complex and diversified approach, shifting from the Sui Dynasty's speaking Dharma pattern to a grand and monumental style. Moreover, the contraposition in sutra illustrations became more prominent during this period. The Medicine Master Buddha, as the central figure, appeared more majestic and solemn, while decorative elements like backlight and auspicious clouds had become richer and more elaborate. The spatial layout of the paintings has expanded, creating a grand and profound visual effect through the use of perspective and multi-layered architecture. Furthermore, the painters introduced more figures and scenes, such as the Twelve Divine Generals, the Eight Great Bodhisattvas, and flying Apsaras, enriching and enhancing the illustrations. During this time, the focus was on classic Buddhist doctrines such as the twelve great vows of the Medicine Buddha and the nine types of untimely death. The ideology in this period gradually emphasized benefiting the world, as advocated by the Medicine Buddha Sutra. The artistic expression of the Medicine Buddha Sutra illustrations matured during this period, forming more complex compositions and themes.



Figure 3. The Medicine Buddha Sutra illustration, Mogao Cave 220, the north wall of the main chamber, early Tang Dynasty

During the late Tang and the Five Dynasties period, the illustrations of the Medicine Buddha Sutra maintained the mid-Tang style but featured larger sizes, richer content, more figures, and a more rigorous and harmonious layout. For example, the illustrations of the Medicine Master Sutra and the Amitabha Sutra in Cave 85 are symmetrically arranged, applying an open courtyard layout in two sections instead of the depiction of water pools, reflecting the customs of praying for blessings and warding off disasters at that time.

These changes not only reflect the development and evolution of Buddhist art in different periods but also provide important references for us to deepen our understanding of social life, religious beliefs, and cultural arts from the Six Dynasties to the late Tang Dynasty, as shown in Figures 4 and 5.



Figure 4. Mogao Cave 12, North Wall - the illustration of the Medicine Buddha Sutra (complete and lower screen paintings), Late Tang Dynasty

Summary of the features and changes of the classic							
	Medicine Buddha holding a bowl	Bodhisattvas of the Sun and the Moon	Twelve great yaksha generals	Colorful prayer flags	Medicine Buddha lamps	Eastern Pure Land	Twelve great vows & nine kinds of untimely death
Sui Dynasty		Eight Great Bodhisattvas-417	✓	✓	✓		
Early Tang Dynasty 220	✓ Only one of the seven Buddhas holds the bowl	✓ Bodhisattvas of the Sun and the Moon and Eight Great Bodhisattvas	✓	✓	✓	Early form: the transformation of the prince within the lotus pond in the Pure	
Flourishing Tang Dynasty 148		✓	✓	✓ banners only	✓	✓	✓
Middle Tang Dynasty 361	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Middle Tang Dynasty 112							
Late Tang Dynasty 12		✓	✓		✓	✓	
159							
18	✓	✓					✓
Five Dynasties		✓					
Yulin 16		✓	✓			✓	
61	✓			✓			
Western Xia Dynasty 400	✓ holding a monk's staff	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Song Dynasty 55		✓	?Doubtful				✓

Figure 5. Summary of the features and changes of the classic illustrations of the Medicine Buddha Sutra in Dunhuang over time

4. The Social Background and Economic Foundation of the Flourishing Buddhist Activities during the Sui and Tang Dynasties

As an important part of Buddhist art, the Medicine Buddha Sutra illustrations encompass various elements, including politics, economics, and culture. In terms of politics, the feudal rulers of the Sui and Tang dynasties held a positive attitude towards Buddhism, creating favorable political conditions for the spread and development of Buddhism. During the Sui and Tang dynasties, rulers implemented various policies to promote the development of Buddhism, such as establishing specialized monk officials responsible for the dissemination of Buddhist ideas and providing state funding for the operation of official temples. During the reign of Emperor Wen of Sui Dynasty, Buddhism experienced rapid growth. According to the *Tripitaka*, the number of monks reached 230,000 during this period, 3,792 temples were established, 46 collections with 132,086 scrolls of scriptures were transcribed, 3,853 old scriptures were restored, and 106,580 Buddha statues were made. (Fu, 2008). The management of Buddhism in the Tang dynasty became more systematic and institutionalized. According to the *Tang Huiyao*, Buddhism deeply integrated with local culture. During the Tang Dynasty, specialized administrative agencies were established. For instance, the Chongxuan Bureau under the Honglu Temple was responsible for conducting examinations for monks and nuns, issuing certificates, and supervising religious activities. (Zhou, 2021). Additionally, positions such as the Street Merit Officers were created to directly oversee Buddhist affairs within and outside the capital, establishing a relatively comprehensive system for managing Buddhism. During the Tang Dynasty, the Shangshu Cibu (Ministry of Rites) managed the issuance of monastic certificates, using special materials to record detailed personal information of monks and nuns to verify their legal status and rights. The distribution of monastic certificates was strictly controlled by the central government, aiming to limit the number of monks and nuns and prevent the excessive expansion of monasteries. Additionally, a monastic register system was established during this period to facilitate management and statistics, thereby enhancing the government's control over the Buddhist population. The monastic certificate

system lasted through several dynasties until it was abolished in the thirty-ninth year of the Qianlong reign (1774). (Tu, 1989). This change occurred with the introduction of a new land tax policy, which replaced the poll tax with a more equitable land tax system. During the Tang Dynasty, there were strict official certification processes for those seeking to become monks or nuns, including the evaluation system, the special almsgiving system, and the monastic certificate sale system. These measures aimed to maintain the quality of the monastic community and prevent unsuitable individuals from entering monasteries, thereby preserving the purity of Buddhism.

5. Conclusion

The *Sutra of the Medicine Buddha*, a relatively recent classic in Mahayana Buddhism, enriches Buddhist art with diversity and embodies compassion and the spirit of salvation, positively influencing modern attitudes toward life. From a diagrammatic perspective, the illustrations of the Medicine Buddha Sutra evolved from simple, early works to large-scale creations in the early Tang Dynasty, then to elaborate and complex compositions during the flourishing Tang period. By the middle and late Tang Dynasty, these illustrations reached a peak of artistry and stability, reflecting both the economic foundation and shifts in artistic expression across different economic conditions. The continuity and evolution of this artistic style effectively demonstrate the inclusiveness and innovative spirit of Chinese Buddhist culture.

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