

Transforming the Spirit: Wang Wei's Encomium on a Pure Land
Bianxiang

By
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Taraneh Aghdaie

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Chair: Crispin Williams

Keith McMahon

Amy McNair

Daniel Stevenson

Date Defended: 3 May 2017

The thesis committee for Taraneh Aghdaie certifies that this is the
approved version of the following thesis:

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Chair: Crispin Williams

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Abstract

In this thesis, I examine an encomium written by Wang Wei in the Tang Dynasty (618-907 CE). I explain how the term *bianxiang* 變相, which was used to refer to a certain type of Buddhist painting popular at the time, is treated by Wang Wei using references to pre-Buddhist Chinese concepts. I argue that despite previous theories which define *bianxiang* using theological arguments, the term means “sutra illustration.” I discuss references made by Wang Wei in the encomium to early texts, and how the encomium relates to pre-Buddhist inscriptions for the deceased. I also provide the first full translation of the encomium, and an art historical examination of the type of painting for which it was made.

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Introduction

In the Tang Dynasty (618-907), elites of society such as imperial officials participated in Buddhist rituals and created vast amounts of Buddhist art, including sculptures and paintings of various buddhas and other Buddhist figures. One especially popular type of painting created at that time was called *bianxiang* 變相. A large number of extant Tang Dynasty *bianxiang* paintings are located at the Mogao caves in Dunhuang, China. These are large murals which cover the walls of the remote caves. These paintings, many of which have inscriptions that identify them as *bianxiang*, can be categorized into types, and many of them are extremely similar to one another in composition and content. *Bianxiang* paintings illustrate compelling scenes from Buddhist sutras such as Pure Lands, Buddhist hells, and miraculous events.¹ Inscriptions for these paintings at Dunhuang also include the names of the sutras they illustrate.

One of the most common scenes illustrated by *bianxiang* paintings is an image of the Western Pure Land of a Buddha called Amitabha, also called Amitayus. A Pure Land is a paradise-like place created and ruled by a Buddha. People who purify their negative past deeds, or impure karma, and amass enough merit through good deeds and Buddhist rituals can be reborn there and eventually achieve freedom from the painful cycle of death and rebirth through enlightenment. In his essay on *bianxiang*, the famous Tang Buddhist teacher Shandao 善導 writes “If there is a person who paints a *bian* picture in accordance with the sutra and contemplates its adornments, he will absolve his multitudinous sins in his present life.”²

¹ William Reynolds Acker, tr. and annot., *Some T'ang and Pre-T'ang Texts on Chinese Painting*, vol. I (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1954), 264-274.

² Wu Hung, “What is *Bianxiang*? -On the Relationship Between Dunhuang Art and Dunhuang Literature,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 52, No.1 (Jun., 1992): 128.

In this thesis, I maintain that the term *bian* means “adaptation” and *xiang* 相 means “picture.” When a sutra illustration is referred to as a *bianxiang*, it means that the sutra has been adapted to a painted picture, or illustrated. Therefore, I believe it is both convenient and accurate to translate *bianxiang* as “illustration.” As these images have also frequently been referred to as *jingbian* 經變, I believe “sutra illustration” is also appropriate. Sutra illustrations, like the *Amitayus bianxiang* from Dunhuang Cave 217 are almost always titled with the name of the sutra followed by the word *bian* 變, the shortened form of *bianxiang*.³ This appellation is documented in inscriptions at the Dunhuang caves.⁴ For example, an illustration of the Amitabha Sutra is called *Amituo jing bian* 阿彌陀經變.

Besides inscriptions which identified the *bianxiang*, accompanying inscriptions also served as dedicatory texts. These texts were important in Buddhist funerary belief and rituals because of the belief in the importance of generating and dedicating merit to help the deceased attain a good rebirth. Creating Buddhist images was believed to generate merit, and dedicatory inscriptions assigned that merit to the spirit of the deceased, also called the dedicatee. Buddhist images such as *bianxiang* function as merit-making machines.⁵ After an initial dedicatory ritual, anyone who saw the painting or read the inscription would generate more merit for the dedicatee. The accompanying inscriptions are called *zan* 讚 in Chinese, and translated into English as “eulogies” or “encomia.”⁶

³ Victor Mair, “Records of Transformation Tableau (p’ien-hsiang),” *T’oung Pao*, Second Series, Vol. 72, Livr. 1/3 (1986): 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁵ For a discussion of Buddhist images and their dedicatory inscriptions as mechanisms to generate and dedicate merit, see Amy McNair, *Donors of Longmen: Faith, Politics, and Patronage in Medieval Chinese Buddhist Sculpture* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007), 5, 19, 35, 155.

⁶ See also Neil Schmid, “Encomia on Paintings: The Buddhist Body and Its Poetic Representations in Medieval China,” forthcoming, www.academia.edu/DNeilSchmid.

In the Tang Dynasty, famous poets wrote many encomia to dedicate *bianxiang*. These encomia provide important information about the paintings. One such encomium by Wang Wei, commissioned in the 8th century by an imperial official named Dou Shao 竇紹 for his deceased younger brother, describes the function of *bianxiang* and plays on the meaning of the term *bian*. The specific painting for which the encomium was written is lost, but the inscription is preserved in the *Complete Works of the Tang* (*Quan Tang wen* 全唐文).⁷ It is the aim of this thesis to examine the Dou Shao encomium, relate it to the function of *bianxiang*, and explore Wang Wei's literary take on the genre of Buddhist dedicatory text.

This thesis explores the Dou Shao encomium in three chapters. First, I analyze the form and function of *bianxiang* by examining their content, composition, and ritual use. Second, I provide the first full translation of the text of Wang Wei's Dou Shao encomium into English, with annotations explaining references to early texts and Buddhist terminology. Finally, I explore Wang Wei's pre-Buddhist references in the encomium.

Previous Scholarship on the Meaning of the Term *Bianxiang* and the Dou Shao Encomium

Despite years of research on sutra illustrations (*bianxiang*), and many theories about their function and the meaning of the term itself, scholars have not reached a general agreement about the meaning of *bianxiang*. Scholarship on the Dou Shao encomium is sparse, and the text has so far only been mentioned in passing without a full consideration of Wang Wei's treatment of the

⁷ Wang Wei, "Jishizhong Dou Shao wei wangdi gu fumaduwei yu Xiaoyi Si futu hua Xifang Amituo bian zan," in *Qin Ding Quan Tang wen: 1000 Juan, Zong Mu 3 Juan*, ed. Dong Gao, (Shanghai: Shanghai gu ji chu ban she, 2002), 卷 0325.

function and meaning of *bianxiang*. In this section, I will discuss previous scholarship on the meaning of the term *bianxiang* and on the Dou Shao encomium by Wang Wei.

In his article “Records of Transformation Tableau,” Victor Mair discusses *bianxiang*, and translates the term as “transformation tableau.” He also concludes that the function of *bianxiang* was to pictorially narrate stories of “supernatural transformation of Buddhist saints and deities,” referring to their ability to manifest in various forms.⁸ Mair refers to a brief mention of the Dou Shao encomium in his book, *Tang Transformation Texts*.⁹ In the book, Mair discusses a type of popular literature from the Tang called *bianwen* 變文, which he translates as “transformation texts.” *Bianwen* can generally be defined as stories found at Dunhuang that contain Buddhist elements, although Mair’s definition includes several other formal characteristics.¹⁰

I do not follow Mair’s translation of *bianxiang* as “transformation tableau” for two main reasons. The first is that the majority of *bianxiang* do not deal with themes of “supernatural transformation of Buddhist saints and deities” as Mair claims *bianwen* do. Instead, most *bianxiang* depict scenes of Pure Lands. *Bianxiang* scenes of Buddhist hells were also popular.¹¹ Some *bianxiang* do depict a miraculous scene. For example, illustrations of the *Vimalakirti Sutra* show Vimalakirti debating Manjusri. The sutra describes how Vimalakirti was magically able to summon and fit thrones for thousands of bodhisattvas of colossal size into his room.¹² But it is debatable whether this is really a “miraculous transformation (that is, appearance of

⁸ Mair, “Records of Transformation Tableau,” 3, 43.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁰ Victor Mair, *Tang Transformation Texts* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989) 27.

¹¹ Acker, *Some T'ang and Pre-T'ang Texts*, 264-274.

¹² *Vimalakirti Sutra* 維摩詰所說經, (Taisho 475), The SAT Daizokyo Text Database, <http://21dzk.l.u-tokyo.ac.jp/SAT>.

manifestation) performed by a Buddha or Bodhisattva for the edification of sentient beings.”¹³ Furthermore, Vimalakirti *bianxiang* do not seem to focus on this aspect of the scene. Instead, they highlight the debate between Vimalakirti and Manjusri, and depict a relatively modest entourage for each.¹⁴ Mair also argues that Pure Lands “are said to be “*transformationally manifested* by the Buddha 謂佛所變.”¹⁵ However, *bianxiang* which depict hells described in the sutras certainly do not fit this criteria.

The second reason I do not follow the translation of *bianxiang* as “transformation tableau” is that Mair determines this translation based on *bianwen*, calling them “transformation texts,” and then applies this translation to *bianxiang*.¹⁶ But the link between *bianwen* and *bianxiang* is not well established, therefore it should not be assumed that *bian* necessarily carries the same meaning in the two terms. Both Mair and Wu Hung have examined the connection between *bianxiang* and *bianwen*. Wu Hung claims that sutra illustrations came first and eventually inspired *bianwen*.¹⁷ Mair himself is ambivalent about the connection between *bianwen* and *bianxiang*, sometimes claiming they are related, and at other times stating that there is no evidence for a connection between them.¹⁸

I believe that since *bianwen* are Buddhist stories, the term *bianwen* might mean “adapted to literature.” This is similar to some theories which claim that the term is based on a change (*bian*) “from oral to written text,” or “a ‘change’ from one literary form...to another.”¹⁹ Mair explains that the reason not all *bianwen* are based on Buddhist themes is because they “began as

¹³ Ibid., 49.

¹⁴ See figs. 17, 18, 19, and 20 for an example of a Vimalakirti *bianxiang*.

¹⁵ Ibid., 48.

¹⁶ Mair, “Records of Transformation Tableau,” 3.

¹⁷ Hung, “What is *Bianxiang*?,” 170.

¹⁸ Mair, *Tang Transformation Texts*, 41-42, and “Records of Transformation Tableau,” 42.

¹⁹ Ibid., 36-37.

an Indo-Buddhist phenomenon, but gradually became secularized.”²⁰ This may also be related to the fact that *bianwen* were “situated in the folk and popular realms,” while *bianxiang* “were largely products of the elite (including the ecclesiastical establishment),” and therefore more closely based on the sutras themselves.²¹ If *bian* in both *bianwen* and *bianxiang* means “adapted to,” then this similarity in meaning does not rely on an elusive link between the contents of the two forms, but instead on the possibility that as Buddhist ideas were incorporated into popular and elite literature and art, *bian*, which was used to refer to both *bianwen* and *bianxiang*, was a descriptive term for this process and its results.²²

Mair also discusses the Dou Shao encomium and claims that Wang Wei does not understand the meaning of *bian*, and spends the entire preface of the encomium struggling to define it.²³ In my view, Wang Wei is not struggling to define *bian*, but restating religious beliefs which were commonly held at the time. These beliefs are centered around the goal of causing the person to whom the image is dedicated to be reborn in the Pure Land. Wang Wei also alludes to classical texts which would have been familiar to the highly educated imperial official, Dou Shao, who commissioned the painting and encomium.

Mair only translates a few snippets of the encomium, and does not discuss it at length. But I believe that since the encomium is intimately related to *bianxiang*, it provides an important textual source in examining and understanding the significance of the *bianxiang* images. This is especially the case when considered in light of the fact that Wang Wei was a practicing Buddhist and an accomplished literatus, with a thorough understanding of the religious concepts in

²⁰ Ibid., 58.

²¹ Mair, “Records of Transformation Tableau,” 43.

²² Ibid., 42.

²³ Mair, *Tang Transformation Texts*, 46-48.

question, and full command of the linguistic and literary faculties necessary to describe those concepts. Wang Wei's official status also allowed him to absorb the commonly held religious beliefs of his time, and participate in the Buddhist rituals which were popular at the highest levels of Tang society.

In his article, "What is *Bianxiang*?" Wu Hung refers to Mair's work on *bianxiang*, but does not translate the term *bianxiang* into English. He, like Mair, believes that *bianxiang* were narrative, but that they were used for devotional purposes, not for storytelling.²⁴ Hung also enumerates and classifies extant *bianxiang* at Dunhuang according to their content and composition. He argues that some *bianxiang* are "iconic" in composition, while others are narrative.²⁵ However, Hung goes on to analyze the narrative composition of one specific type of sutra illustration without mentioning the Dou Shao encomium.²⁶

Eugene Wang does mention the encomium in the introduction to his book, *Shaping the Lotus Sutra: Buddhist Visual Culture in Medieval China*.²⁷ Wang, like Mair, does not consider the encomium in depth, but only translates a few lines, and gives a general summary of the text.²⁸ He then mentions Wang Wei's use of the term *bian* as "transformation" in the encomium, but concludes that "even if we grant Wang Wei some poetic license," his definitions of *bian* are merely a "list of unrelated ideas."²⁹ Eugene Wang only mentions the encomium in passing and does not seek to define the term *bianxiang* in his work, borrowing Mair's translation of "transformation tableau." I agree that the Dou Shao encomium was written with characteristic

²⁴ Wu Hung, "What is *Bianxiang*?" 169.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 129.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 169-170.

²⁷ Eugene Wang, *Shaping the Lotus Sutra: Buddhist Visual Culture in Medieval China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005).

²⁸ *Ibid.*, xvii.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

poetic flair, but this does not suggest that Wang Wei's definitions of *bian* are meaningless word play. Rather, they are carefully chosen references to early texts familiar to Tang literati and relevant to the function of the sutra illustration. Nor does the aesthetic character of the writing detract from its usefulness as a contemporary source which alludes to the belief system behind *bianxiang*.

Wang Wei, the Buddhist

In the introduction to his book of translations of Wang Wei's poetry, Tony Barnstone describes how during the Chinese Cultural Revolution of the 1960's and 70's, Wang Wei, "was exiled from existence" because he was "a Buddhist nature poet" and his sentiments had no place in the dominant Marxist ideology of the time.³⁰ From the biographical information available about Wang Wei, including his own poems, it is obvious that he was indeed a devout Buddhist, but the misconception of him as a mostly secular "impersonal" poet with "an uneventful life," "impassive before nature," only concerned with success in his career, occasionally persists.³¹

This is important because Wang Wei's understanding of Buddhism would certainly have been included in the encomium which he wrote, and it provides a contemporary explanation of the function of *bianxiang*. Based on his intimate familiarity with Buddhist belief and practice, it is extremely unlikely, as Victor Mair and Eugene Wang have suggested, that Wang Wei would have been unclear about the concepts he himself expressed in his writing. In fact, his clarification

³⁰ Tony Barnstone, Willis Barnstone, and Xu Haixin, *Laughing Lost in the Mountains: Poems of Wang Wei* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1991), lxiv.

³¹ Barnstone, *Laughing Lost in the Mountains*, xxvi.

of terms such as *bian* provides an important way to from a more thorough realization of the meaning and function of *bianxiang* in the Tang.

An example of the problematic characterization of Wang Wei is found in Yang Jingqing's *The Chan Interpretations of Wang Wei's Poetry: A Critical Review*.³² Yang's thorough and meticulous study is full of historical information and sources about Wang Wei and his life, including discussion of other scholarship on Wang Wei's biography and poetry. The evidence presented in the book seems to *support* a Buddhist interpretation, not only of Wang Wei's poetry, but also of the core beliefs which shaped his life, but Yang concludes that Wang Wei's poetry is not Buddhist and does not suggest that Wang himself was either. This conclusion runs contrary to the overwhelming evidence of Wang Wei's piety contained in Yang's study. Yang's work may or may not have been politically influenced, but regardless, it is an example of scholarship which contributes to the unfounded dismissal of Wang Wei's religious inclinations.

Another obstacle to a well-rounded understanding of Wang Wei, not only as a nature poet and a scholar-official, but as a seriously religious man, lies in the tendency by some scholars to view important Buddhist ritual practices as irrelevant to educated elites. Robert Sharf describes this tendency as it relates to the worship of Buddhist icons:

“The tendency to overlook or misconstrue Buddhist icons is...aided and abetted by a number of popular misconceptions. Among them, I would highlight the following: (1) the notion that the veneration of images of buddhas, bodhisattvas, guardian deities, and saints is a degenerate or rueful display of folk piety...that was tolerated, but not encouraged, by the clerical elite; (2) the notion that the doctrinally normative function of Buddhist icons is didactic, that is, that the canon sanctions icons only as symbolic expressions of the virtues of buddhahood, or as “skillful means” intended to nurture a sense of reverence toward the Buddha and his teachings;... [and that] the primary function of certain buddha images and

³² Yang Jingqing, *The Chan Interpretations of Wang Wei's Poetry: A Critical Review* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2007).

mandalas was to serve as adjuncts in meditative practices, that is, as foci for concentration exercises or as aids to visualization.”³³

The misguided idea that Buddhist ritual practice or belief in icons would not have appealed to individuals like Wang Wei is rooted in these notions, but they are, as Sharf explains, “misconceptions.” Scholar-officials like Wang Wei were not immune to religious feeling or exempt from the desire to participate in rituals. This does not imply that Wang Wei’s Buddhism was never influenced by his social or official obligations, or that his understanding of spiritual ideas did not go beyond these practices, or that his intellectual understanding of reality was not especially profound or intricate. It only means that his belief and participation in typical Buddhist practices does not preclude him from being an unusually knowledgeable and insightful individual.

The information we have about Wang Wei’s life is punctuated by episodes which highlight his Buddhist faith and strongly contradict the notion that Wang Wei was somehow above participating in Buddhist ritual. For example, his wife died when he was thirty in about 731. Apparently heartbroken by this tragedy, he never married again. It was around this time that Wang began studying with a Buddhist teacher called Daoguang 道光. This association lasted ten years until Daoguang’s death.³⁴ Wang’s religious response to his wife’s passing led to the speculation that he had, in fact, made a vow a celibacy in deference to his faith.

Wang was also given to associating with both Buddhist and Daoist clergy. This may have been common practice for many officials at the time, since powerful members of the clergy often

³³ Robert H. Sharf and Elizabeth Horton Sharf, eds., *Living Images: Japanese Buddhist Icons in Context* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).

³⁴ Marsha L. Wagner, *Wang Wei* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1981), 33-34.

maintained close relationships with the government. But the style name that Wang Wei chose for himself – Vimalakirti, or *Weimojie* 維摩詰 in Chinese, the name of a famous Buddhist from a sutra of the same name – suggests his especially strong affinity for Buddhism.³⁵

Wang Wei's mother and brothers, with whom he was very close, were also known to be Buddhist. When his mother died in 750, Wang is said to have “become skin and bones” because of his grief, attesting to their close relationship.³⁶ In 758, he even petitioned the emperor to turn his own estate where she had lived into a Buddhist monastery in her memory.³⁷ Wang's moving memorial to the emperor clearly expresses his concerns about the afterlife and his desire to participate in the Buddhist process of creating merit to help all beings toward enlightenment.³⁸

Another important event in Wang's life that likely encouraged his continued piety was that he was captured by the An-Lushan rebels and almost convicted of treason when the rebellion had been put down.³⁹ Having come so close to his own death may have given him even more motivation to focus on his Buddhist practice.

Finally, Wang Wei's last act immediately before he died was to write to his family and friends and ask them to persist in practicing Buddhism.⁴⁰ The intention to help save all sentient beings from the cycle of reincarnation is fundamental to Mahayana Buddhist teachings, a category which also includes Pure Land Buddhism. Thus, anyone familiar with these Buddhist teachings immediately understands the significance of this act as the intention to help others

³⁵ Calvin, *Wang Wei*, 42.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 69.

³⁷ Yang, *Chan Interpretations*, 105.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 72-73.

³⁹ Calvin, *Wang Wei*, 69-70.

⁴⁰ Barnstone, *Laughing Loud*, xlii.

become enlightened. That Wang Wei chose to do this immediately before his passing speaks volumes about his deep commitment to and understanding of Buddhism.

Wang Wei's profound understanding of Buddhism would not have been omitted from the encomium which he wrote. Wang Wei could not possibly have been struggling with definitions of important Buddhist terms such as *bian* in the encomium; rather, his understanding, as expressed in the inscription, can only inform us as we move toward a more complete grasp of the significance of *bianxiang* in Tang Buddhist belief and practice, as well as the handling of the genre of dedicatory inscriptions by Tang literati.

Chapter One: Art Historical and Ritual Analysis

In this chapter, I analyze the form and function of the *bianxiang* paintings by examining their content, ritual use, and composition, and show that these three aspects of *bianxiang* are also referred to in the Dou Shao encomium. Based on this analysis, I argue that the function of *bianxiang* was to act as merit-making machines in order to generate and dedicate merit to the soul of deceased individuals, causing them to be reborn in the Pure Land.⁴¹

I begin by introducing the basic content of a typical 8th century Pure Land *bianxiang*, similar to the one commissioned by Dou Shao. Next, I explain the difference between “iconic” and non-iconic types of *bianxiang*, and argue that their soteriological function was the same. Third, I explain the religious significance of the location of the *bianxiang* and encomium commissioned by Dou Shao. In the fourth section, I discuss the rituals associated with *bianxiang*, and show how these rituals are also referenced in the Dou Shao encomium. Finally, I explain how the composition of Pure Land *bianxiang* expresses their ritual power.

Basic Content of a Typical Tang Dynasty Pure Land *Bianxiang*

The painting for which the encomium was written and the temple where the painting was housed are both lost, likely destroyed in the Buddhist persecutions of the ninth century, but the temple was probably located in the Tang capital of Chang’an. Since political, cultural, religious, and artistic connections between Chang’an and Dunhuang are well-documented because of their connection through the Silk Road, it is reasonable to assume that similarly titled paintings from

⁴¹ McNair, *Donors of Longmen*, 5, 19, 35, 155.

the Mogao Caves at Dunhuang provide a good surrogate for the lost *bianxiang* which was commissioned by Dou Shao⁴²

An example of this type of *bianxiang* dating from the High Tang (c. 713-766) is the *Amitayus Meditation Sutra* from Dunhuang Cave 217 on the north wall (fig. 1). This painting is a well-preserved example of this type of sutra illustration and features the standard characteristics seen in Pure Land *bianxiang*, including a symmetrical composition with the Buddha at the center surrounded by Bodhisattvas, architecture in the background, a lotus pond in front of the Buddha, and musicians flanking dancers in front of the lotus pond. This lotus pond, described in the sutras as filled with multicolored lotuses which emit colored light, is depicted as two symmetrical channels which flow down on either side of the Buddha platform into one horizontal channel in front of the platform (figs. 2 and 3). In this lower channel are the newly born souls which have just been reincarnated into the Pure Land. They sit on small lotus thrones where the colored lotus buds have opened (fig. 4). The ornate, opulent world of the Pure Land, complete with mythical birds which sing the dharma at regular intervals, can also be seen here (fig. 5).

“Iconic” and Non-Iconic Types of Bianxiang, and their Soteriological Function

In his article “What is Bianxiang,” Wu Hung argues that those *bianxiang* which depict the pure land in the typical symmetrical fashion with the frontally facing central Buddha are “iconic” – that is, they are “intended to be the focus of prayer and devotion” (See figs. 15 and 16).⁴³ Other types of sutra illustrations in which the figures do not face the viewer, such as the

⁴² Tan Chung, ed., *Dunhuang Art Through the Eyes of Duan Wenjie* (New Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Center for the Arts, 1994), 132-133.

⁴³ Wu Hung, “What is *Bianxiang*?,” 129.

Vimalakirti Sutra bianxiang, are characterized as non-iconic (figs. 17, 18, 19, and 20). However, both types were historically referred to as *bianxiang*. This suggests that it was not only the “iconic” quality of an image which was important to those who commissioned *bianxiang*, and that it was not only *bianxiang* that depicted the Pure Land which were considered important and effective in the generation and dedication of merit. I would argue that the functions of both “iconic” and non-iconic *bianxiang* are similar, and can be found in the sutras they illustrate.

According to Wu Hung, the most commonly illustrated *bianxiang* at Dunhuang done in the “iconic” style from between 705 to 780 are the *Amitayus Sutra* followed by the *Maitreya*, *Amitabha*, and *Lotus* sutras, respectively.^{44, 45, 46, 47, 48} Duan Wenjie includes the same sutra illustrations in his list, with the addition of the non-iconic *Vimalakirti* and *Mahaparinirvana Sutra bianxiang*.^{49, 50, 51} Both lists also include the *Medicine Buddha Sutra* illustration.⁵² These sutras all share in common foundational Mahayana beliefs which, taken together, espouse the idea that anyone, regardless of social rank, occupation, or lifestyle, can purify himself and accumulate enough merit to be reborn in a Pure Land, a place of perpetual wealth and happiness.⁵³

Furthermore, the *Lotus* and *Mahaparinirvana* sutras state that everyone has original Buddha nature, giving them the potential to become enlightened buddhas themselves, and that

⁴⁴ Wu Hung, “What is *Bianxiang*?,” 129.

⁴⁵ *Amitayus Sutra* 佛說無量壽經, (T. 360), Daizokyo.

⁴⁶ *Maitreya Sutra* 佛說彌勒下生成佛經, (T. 454), Daizokyo.

⁴⁷ *Amitabha Sutra* 佛說阿彌陀經, (T. 366), Daizokyo.

⁴⁸ *Lotus Sutra* 御製大乘妙法蓮華經, (T. 262), Daizokyo.

⁴⁹ Chung, *Dunhuang Art*, 139.

⁵⁰ *Vimalakirti Sutra* 維摩詰所說經, (T. 475), Daizokyo.

⁵¹ *Mahaparinirvana Sutra* 大般涅槃經, (T. 374), Daizokyo.

⁵² *Medicine Buddha Sutra* 藥師琉璃光如來本願功德經, (T. 450), Daizokyo.

⁵³ Luis Gomez, *The Land of Bliss: The Paradise of the Buddha of Measureless Light* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1996), 39.

buddhas are eternal, meaning their soul endures permanently, giving them eternal life.⁵⁴ Tang Dynasty court officials must have felt these messages were especially comforting, given the harrowing realities of court life, and this would have motivated them to participate in Buddhism in the hopes that they could also eventually become immortal buddhas.

The soteriological thrust of Tang Buddhism as practiced by the social elites would have been particularly appealing to officials, most of whom were regularly affected by the aftermath of court intrigues, in which officials were often killed. In light of the Buddhist injunctions against harming or killing living beings, those officials who were directly or indirectly involved in meting out harsh punishments of torture and execution certainly feared the unappealing possibility of a rebirth in one of the lower realms described in the sutras and popularized throughout the history of Chinese Buddhism. These factors motivated the officials' belief in and practice of Buddhist rituals, especially including funerary rituals, such as sponsoring the creation and dedication of *bianxiang*.

Furthermore, officials often feared for their own safety. Reputations were certainly at stake as officials' very livelihood was under constant threat of demotion and exile to distant corners of the empire. Officials were clearly concerned about both this life and the next. The Mahayana sutras popular at the time offered them some much-needed peace of mind. What could be more appealing to the wealthy literati and officials than the promise of an afterlife in a sumptuous Pure Land of absolute safety and contentment, where they could simultaneously maintain their high standard of living and commune with a Buddha, thereby attaining their own enlightenment and immortality?

⁵⁴ For a discussion of the sutras illustrated at Dunhuang during the Tang, see Chung, *Dunhuang Art*, 139-145. For English translations of the sutras, I consulted the Buddhist e-library at www.buddhism.org.

The sutras illustrated in the form of *bianxiang* commissioned by officials attest to their desires for salvation in the next life. The *Amitayus*, *Amitabha*, *Maitreya*, and *Medicine Buddha* sutras contain detailed descriptions of the Pure Lands of each of these buddhas as well as instructions on how to be reborn there.⁵⁵ In combination with associated ritual practice, these images were believed to have the power to affect rebirth in the Pure Land, followed by enlightenment and eternal life as a Buddha. The same is true for the *Vimalakirti Sutra*, which told the story of a wealthy cosmopolitan layman who achieved enlightenment while maintaining his worldly involvement.⁵⁶ These sutras were the subject of *bianxiang* because all *bianxiang*, whether “iconic” and non-iconic, served the same soteriological purpose.

The Religious Significance of the Location of the Dou Shao *Bianxiang* and Encomium

The location of the Dou Shao *bianxiang*, according to the encomium, was at the pagoda of the Temple of Filiality and Righteousness.⁵⁷ This temple may have been built on the estate of the wealthy official who donated the funds for the project, or it may have been another temple frequented by Tang elites, but although records of the temple itself are lost, it was most likely located in the capital of Chang’an, where Wang Wei and other officials lived and worked.

According to Duan Wenjie, who cites descriptions written by people of the time, the interiors of the “‘Pureland halls’ and ‘Bodhisattva Pavilions’ of the monasteries in the capital cities of Chang’an and Luoyang,” like the interiors of the Dunhuang caves, were covered in

⁵⁵ (T. 360, 366, 454, 450).

⁵⁶ *Vimalakirti Sutra* 維摩詰所說經, (T. 475).

⁵⁷ “於孝義寺浮圖,” from the encomium.

bianxiang murals.⁵⁸ This is confirmed in Acker's *Some T'ang and Pre-T'ang Texts on Chinese Painting*, which lists *bianxiang* murals located in Tang temples and pagodas.⁵⁹ These lists include sutra illustrations of Pure Lands, such as the Western Pure Land of Amitabha, depictions of hells, and other scenes and stories from sutras.⁶⁰ The relatively well-preserved interior of Dunhuang Cave 61 provides an example of this type of temple decor where numerous sutra illustrations line the walls of the cave shrine (figs. 6 and 7). Although this cave dates from about 200 years later than the encomium, Pure Land temples retained many of the same characteristics for centuries after the end of the Tang Dynasty, making Cave 61 a plausible example for the appearance of Tang era temples.⁶¹

Pagodas in Chinese Buddhist temples were originally built on top of reliquaries, but they also served other functions. Some pagodas did not house relics, and others functioned as actual tombs for monks. According to Eugene Wang in his dissertation on a Tang Dynasty Pagoda, the term *futu* (浮圖), which is used in the encomium, referred to “votive” pagodas. These pagodas were not built as tombs, but were “purely a symbolic expression of [a] donor’s pious...act.”⁶²

Likewise, the pagoda mentioned in the encomium was likely not a tomb, but would have retained its funerary associations because votive pagodas could also be used as memorials.⁶³ Wang explains that there are “many surviving stone pagodas...all dating from the 8th century” and that “the inscriptions on them reveal they were built for auspicious purposes, with good

⁵⁸ Chung, *Dunhuang Art*, 135.

⁵⁹ William Reynolds Acker, tr. and annot., *Some T'ang and Pre-T'ang Texts on Chinese Painting*, vol. I (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1954).

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 264-274.

⁶¹ Daniel B. Stevenson, “The ‘Hall for the Sixteen Contemplations’ as a Distinctive Institution for Pure Land Practice in Tiantai Monasteries of the Song (960-1279),” In *Buddhism in Global Perspective*, ed. Kalpakam Sankaranarayan and Ravindra Panth, and Ichigo Ogawa (Mumbai: Somaiya Publications, Ltd., 2003), pp. 152-153.

⁶² Wang, “*Pagoda and Transformation*,” 44.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 49.

wishes for the donors themselves and their relatives, both for this life and after-life. The inscriptions also identify the monuments as *futu* 浮圖.”⁶⁴

The pagodas Wang discusses are very small and do not contain any paintings, but his explanation of the inscriptions on extant *futu* does give the idea that the function of *futu* pagodas was as funerary votive memorials. The pagoda where the particular *bianxiang* associated with the encomium was located was likely this type of pagoda, and this can clarify the painting’s function in ritual terms as a way to generate and dedicate merit for the deceased.

***Bianxiang* and Buddhist Rituals Referenced in the Encomium**

Many of the rituals practiced in Buddhist temples and pagodas, such as chanting the name of Amitabha Buddha and visualizing the Pure Land, remained strikingly similar throughout history, and even continue in the present day. In his study of Buddhist ritual beginning in the Tang, “The Ties That Bind: Chinese Buddhist Rites for Securing Rebirth in the Pure Land,” Daniel Stevenson outlines the basic components of typical Buddhist ritual practice.⁶⁵ Interestingly, regardless of the sect of Buddhism associated with the rituals (ie. Pure Land, Tiantai 天台, etc.), the main parts of the rituals are very similar.⁶⁶

According to Stevenson, these components of ritual practice were frequently repeated by, and therefore very familiar to most followers, including the general lay public, and this is supported by references to the rituals in a variety of texts, including “inscriptions attached to

⁶⁴ Ibid., 43.

⁶⁵ Stevenson, “The Ties That Bind,” 196.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 173.

ritual halls.”⁶⁷ I argue that these rituals have also been referenced in the Dou Shao encomium attached to the Pure Land *bianxiang* which was painted in the pagoda of a temple. Therefore, these rituals would also be connected to the function of the *bianxiang* itself.

The role of the temples is also well-documented in Tang religious texts. For example, the monks who lived in the temples performed rituals several times per day and would routinely seclude themselves in certain halls or rooms for retreats. These retreats ranged in length anywhere from a few days to a few years. The longer the period of practice, the more complex the rituals. Lay followers, on the other hand, performed simplified daily rituals at home, and visited the temples for relatively short rituals. However, they could also participate in longer retreats of about two to seven days, or more, if desired.⁶⁸

Regardless of the rituals performed, the sect with which they were associated, or the type of person performing them, the majority of rituals included components such as reciting the name of the Buddha (*nianfo* 念佛), reciting the sutras (*songjing* 誦經), meditating on or visualizing the Pure Land (*guanxiang* 觀想), “followed by ritual confession (*chanhui* 懺悔), transfer or dedication of merit (*huixiang* 迴向), and profession of vows (*fayuan* 發願).”⁶⁹ Strikingly, these ritual activities are all referred to in the encomium and relate to the *bianxiang*. This shows the connection between the soteriological function of *bianxiang* and allusions to this in the encomium.

For example, the encomium mentions “chanting the name of Amitabha Buddha,” and a dedication:

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 159.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 173, 178, 183, 197.

“係有相者，憑十念以往生，”

“One who is bound to form [must] depend on chanting the name of Amitabha Buddha in order to be reborn,”

and

“西方變者，給事中竇紹敬為亡弟故駙馬都尉某官之所畫也”

“[This] sutra illustration of the Western [Pure Land] was respectfully commissioned by Imperial Attendant Dou Shao for his late younger brother, formerly a certain official in the Imperial Bodyguard.”⁷⁰

There is also an element of confession in admitting that there is “defiled karma,” and a vow, or expression of the desire for salvation:

“傾無長之工，不平分於我生，將厚貸於泉路。尚茲繪事，滌彼染業”

“Exhausting oneself in endless labor, unjustly leaving this world, [one] will owe a heavy debt to the netherworld. [We] hope that this painting cleanses that defiled karma.”⁷¹

Finally, there is a poetic visualization of the Pure Land:

“寶樹成列，金砂自映。迦陵欲語，曼陀未落，墜此中年，登乎上品。池蓮寶座，將逾棠棣之榮；水鳥法音，當悟鵲鷓之力。”

“Jeweled trees of the Pure Land are arrayed in a line, and the golden sand itself shines. The kalavinka bird desires to sing, the mandarava flowers have not yet fallen, The man who was cut off in the prime of his life will ascend to the highest level of rebirth [in the Pure Land]. The jeweled seat on the lotus in the pond surpasses the glory of the double rose. The sound of the waters and the birds expounding the dharma is equal to the strength of the wagtail’s morning call.”⁷²

Even the first section of the encomium seems to recall sutra recitation, including references to both the *Vimalakirti* and the Pure Land sutras, as well as a summary of ideas from the *Mahaparinirvana* and *Lotus* sutras, such as the existence of the soul and original Buddha nature:

“《易》曰「遊魂為變」，《傳》曰「魂氣則無不之」，固知神明更生矣。輔之以道，則變為妙身，之於樂土。大覺曰聖，離妄曰性，克修其業，以正其命。得無法者，即六塵為淨域；係有相者，憑十念以往生。”

“The Book of Changes states, ‘wandering spirit will be transformed.’

⁷⁰ My translation.

⁷¹ My translation.

⁷² My translation.

The biography [of King Yuan of Chu] says, ‘the soul, however [as opposed to the body], can go everywhere.’

Therefore, it is known that the spiritual intelligence is reborn.

Assist the soul according to the dharma

Then it will transform into a marvelous body and go to the land of joy.

Great awakening is called sagehood, freedom from delusion is called original nature.

One is able to improve his karma in order to rectify his fate.

In he who attains the no-dharma, the six impure senses *are* the Pure Land.

[But] one who is bound to form must depend on chanting the name of Amitabha Buddha in order to be reborn into the Pure Land.”⁷³

The correlation of the rituals with elements in the encomium strongly ties these rituals, whose stated goal is rebirth in the Pure Land, to the function of the *bianxiang*. This function was as a merit-making machine which created and transferred merit in order to cause the spirit of the dedicatee to reincarnate in the Pure Land.⁷⁴

This connection between ritual practice and *bianxiang* is also borne out in the paintings themselves. In the cave shrines of Dunhuang, much as in Tang Dynasty metropolitan temples, the main icons were set apart from wall paintings in that they were larger, three-dimensional sculpted figures positioned in the far end of the room at the altar (see figs. 8 and 9). When compared to these main icons, the *bianxiang* paintings seem to play an important, but subordinate role. For example, in Dunhuang Cave 172 (fig. 10), the sculpted icons are much larger than the Buddha pictured in the *bianxiang*, but the entire height of the *bianxiang* is equal

⁷³ My translation.

⁷⁴ McNair, *Donors of Longmen*, 5, 19, 35, 155.

to that of the icons. This places the *bianxiang* in a subordinate role to the main icons, while still retaining the painting's importance as a prominent feature of the room.

Ritual Power and the Composition of Pure Land *Bianxiang*

Buddhist rituals often include an invocation (*zhaoqing fo* 召請佛) in which the Buddha is called on and asked to inhabit the ritual space and the icons.⁷⁵ The icons are then considered to have been ritually activated and alive in a sense. This is what gives the icons their power and allows them to receive confessions and be venerated. Strictly speaking, supplementary images in the ritual space of the temple, such as *bianxiang*, would not share in this power, and therefore not be considered “iconic.” However, I would argue that they do embody a different kind of power, one which is also apparent, not only in their content, but also in their composition and appearance.

Three *Amitayus Meditation Sutra bianxiang* from Caves 66 and 172, and a partially-damaged *Western Pure Land bianxiang* from Cave 66 all illustrate this point (Figs. 11, 12, 13, and 14). The central Buddha is depicted as especially large and surrounded by circular mandorlas, or halos, which seem to push the figure forward and almost out of the center of the painting toward the viewer. Both the size of the Buddha and the mandorlas are iconographic features; the sutras explain that buddhas in the Pure Lands can be thousands of meters tall, and the mandorlas are evidence of their radiant bodies.

⁷⁵ Stevenson, “The Ties That Bind,” 196-199.

The large size of the Buddha in relation to the other figures in the painting is also hierarchical, because the Buddha is clearly the most important figure in the assembly. But the most striking feature of the composition is the use of orthogonals which converge on the Buddha in the center. This device makes use of the contents of the entire painting – the architecture, other figures such as bodhisattvas and musicians, terraces, platforms, and canals of the lotus pond – to form lines of perspective leading to the Buddha.

Normally, this type of one-point perspective would result in a vanishing point which seems to recede away from the viewer, thereby giving the illusion of deep space in a two-dimensional painting. However, because the Buddha is depicted as especially large with concentric halos placed around him, and his attendant bodhisattvas stand as though they are positioned slightly behind him, the vanishing point is sublimated as though it vanishes *behind* the Buddha, while the Buddha himself actually seems to move *forward* into the space of the viewer. This ingenious device gives the illusion that the viewer is simultaneously being pulled into the painting toward the Buddha, while the Buddha moves toward the viewer.

This three-dimensional feeling is further heightened because the Buddha is depicted as though he were on the same level as the viewer, but the figures surrounding him are painted as though the viewer is looking down on them from a higher vantage point. The lines of perspective also serve to tilt the plane of the *bianxiang* forward, as though the figures could slide down the lines and into the room with the viewer. Depicting the Buddha as independent from this tilt further emphasizes the feeling that he is floating toward the viewer, while the exaggerated upward slant of the lines below the Buddha invite the viewer toward him.

Interestingly, the concept of drawing near to the Buddha comes from the sutras and is also repeated in the encomium:

“傍熏獲悟，自性當成”

Drawing near to the fragrance [of purity], attaining awakening,
The essential [Buddha] nature will become realized.”⁷⁶

The idea was that proximity to Amitabha Buddha in the Pure Land was an important factor for enlightenment and one of the features which made rebirth in the Pure Land so attractive. This is why Pure Land *bianxiang* were painted to allow the viewer to feel as though they were being drawn closer to the Buddha in the painting. The depiction of the Buddha in this way is another example which shows how ritual belief was related to the function of the *bianxiang* as an object which was meant to act as a merit-generating machine for the spirit of the deceased.⁷⁷

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I have argued that *bianxiang* functioned to generate merit for the spirit of the deceased to whom they were dedicated, and that this caused them to be reborn in the Pure Land. Central to my argument is an analysis in five sections, in which I explore the content, ritual use, and composition, of *bianxiang* and compare them to passages in the Dou Shao encomium. This analysis shows that the meaning of *bianxiang* follows their function, which is to generate and dedicate merit and ensure rebirth in the Pure Land.

The first section outlines an *Amitayus Meditation Sutra bianxiang* from Dunhuang, made in the 8th century. This painting depicts the Pure Land of Amitabha Buddha (also known as Amitayus), just as the one mentioned in the Dou Shao encomium. This painting displays typical

⁷⁶ My translation.

⁷⁷ McNair, *Donors of Longmen*, 5, 19, 35, 155.

features of Pure Land *bianxiang*, such as a central Buddha, and a lotus pond where devotees are reborn. The rationale for looking to this *bianxiang* from Dunhuang as a surrogate for the Dou Shao *bianxiang* is based on the strong connection between Dunhuang and the Tang capital of Chang'an, where imperial officials such as Dou Shao lived and worked.

In the second section of the chapter, I discuss the problem of “iconic” and non-iconic *bianxiang*. These two types differ in their composition, mainly because “iconic” *bianxiang* include a frontally facing Buddha, while non-iconic *bianxiang* do not. I argue that despite their different content and composition, both “iconic” and non-iconic *bianxiang* are based on Mahayana Buddhist sutras. These sutras and the *bianxiang* which illustrate them emphasize the soteriological aims of Buddhist belief and practice. Therefore, I conclude that the motive for making both types of *bianxiang* was soteriological, and that their function was similar.

The third section explains the type of location which probably housed the Dou Shao *bianxiang* and encomium. This is important because it sets the stage for the type of rituals associated with these paintings and their dedicatory inscriptions. In the encomium itself, it says that the painting was located in the pagoda of a temple. Although this temple was likely destroyed in a Buddhist persecution, evidence of the function of Tang Buddhist pagodas remains. Through an analysis of this evidence, I conclude that the pagoda of the Dou Shao *bianxiang* was likely a votive funerary structure, and was part of the larger Buddhist system of ritual practice.

In the following section, I discuss these rituals, and show where they are also referenced by Wang Wei in the Dou Shao encomium. The components of these rituals have remained relatively stable over time, and they include activities such as chanting the name of Amitabha Buddha and visualizing the Pure Land. The goal of these rituals is similar to that of *bianxiang* paintings, and they were used together as part of the Buddhist path to Pure Land rebirth and

salvation through eventual enlightenment. The consistency of the ritual components throughout ritual texts, as well as in a *bianxiang* dedicatory inscription such as the Dou Shao encomium, supports the argument that *bianxiang* were meant to effect Pure Land rebirth.

Finally, I describe how Pure Land *bianxiang* are composed using special techniques which emphasize their power. The main example of this is how the central buddhas in Pure Land compositions are the focus of orthogonal lines which converge behind them. The lines in the foreground of the *bianxiang* also slant downward toward the viewer, and the combination of these devices gives the feeling of perpetually being drawn closer to the Buddha. I explain why this is important in Pure Land belief, as the goal of rebirth in the Pure Land is to gain proximity to the Buddha because, according to the sutras, this will enlighten anyone who is privileged enough to experience it.

Overall, the composition, ritual significance, and content of *bianxiang* shows that these three aspects were interrelated in Tang Buddhist belief. The function of *bianxiang* is inseparable from the soteriological goals of Tang Buddhism. Therefore, *bianxiang* were meant to ensure rebirth in the Pure Land by generating merit for those to whom they were dedicated.

Chapter Two: Annotated Translation

Sometime around the middle of the 8th century, an imperial official named Dou Yi 竇繹 passed away. His older brother, Dou Shao 竇紹, who was also an official, commissioned a Buddhist painting for him. The names of the two brothers are recorded in the Tang history, but other than their official titles, not much else is known. Dou Yi was part of the imperial bodyguard, and Dou Shao was a scholar-official who dealt with important imperial documents. The fact that the brothers both worked somewhat closely with the emperor shows their high status at court.

The painting that Dou Shao commissioned for his late brother was a *bianxiang* of the Western Pure Land of Amitabha Buddha. We know this because although the painting is lost, its inscription is preserved in the *Complete Works of the Tang* (*Quan Tang wen* 全唐文).⁷⁸ This inscription is an encomium written by Wang Wei, and it explains the meaning and function of the *bianxiang*, which was to help the spirit of the deceased be reborn in the Pure Land. The encomium refers to important Buddhist rituals, such as chanting the name of Amitabha Buddha. It also draws on Pure Land sutras, such as the *Amitabha Sutra*, which describe the Pure Land.⁷⁹ Most importantly, the encomium expresses Dou Yi's intention to be reborn in the Pure Land, and dedicates the merit generated by the *bianxiang* to him. These were essential components of Tang Pure Land belief and practice. So far, there has been no published full English translation of this encomium, so I provide one here.

⁷⁸ Wang Wei, "Jishizhong Dou Shao wei wangdi gu fumaduwei yu Xiaoyi Si futu hua Xifang Amituo bian zan," in *Qin Ding Quan Tang wen: 1000 Juan, Zong Mu 3 Juan*, ed. Dong Gao, (Shanghai: Shanghai gu ji chu ban she, 2002), 卷 0325.

⁷⁹ *Amitabha Sutra* 佛說阿彌陀經, (T. 366), Daizokyo.

This encomium is divided into two parts: a preface and the *zan*, or encomium itself. The preface seems to serve the function of explaining the content and context of the encomium, while the *zan* serves as a conclusion. This also may have had to do with the deceased's particular circumstances, or some request on the part of the donor. Most encomia contain similarly descriptive lines, but not all are divided into a preface and *zan*.

Translation of the Dou Shao Encomium

給事中竇紹為亡弟故駙馬都尉於孝義寺浮圖畫西方阿彌陀變讚（並序）

The encomium⁸⁰ with preface on the sutra illustration⁸¹ “Amitabha of the West”⁸² at the Temple of Filiality and Righteousness⁸³ pagoda commissioned⁸⁴ by Supervising Secretary⁸⁵ Dou Shao for his late younger brother, the former Imperial Bodyguard⁸⁶.

⁸⁰ Encomium (*zan* 讚 or 贊), means “to praise [something],” and is also translated as “eulogy.” However, not all encomia are used to eulogize the deceased. Many are written only to praise a painting by providing commentary for it, usually in the form of an inscription on the painting. In this case, the encomium’s primary function is similar to a eulogy in that its subject concerns the spirit of the deceased. However, this encomium would also have been inscribed on the painting, and describes the painting and its meaning as well.

⁸¹ The painting itself is referred to here as *bian* 變, meaning “adaptation.” This is understood to be short for *bianxiang* 變相, which means “adaptation to a picture,” or “illustration.” The content of the sutra is adapted to a painting.

⁸² Amitabha of the West (*Xifang Amituo* 西方阿彌陀) is a popular Buddha, and the focus of Pure Land Buddhism. “the West” refers to the pure land of happiness he inhabits, which is believed to be in the west. Amitabha, his name in Sanskrit, means “infinite light.” He is also referred to as Amitayus (*Wuliangshou* 無量壽), which means “infinite life.”

⁸³ Since this encomium and its associated painting were commissioned by an imperial official, the capital city of Chang’an would have been the most likely location for the temple. The pagoda could very well have been a small building or part of a complex on the private property of the donor official himself, as it was common practice for Tang officials to build temples on their private estates.

⁸⁴ Although the text contains the word *hua* 畫, “painted,” Dou Shao would not have painted the *bianxiang* himself. Rather he would have commissioned it to be painted by one of the many famous *bianxiang* painters of the time.

⁸⁵ Charles A. Hucker, *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985), 133. Hucker defines *jishizhong* 給事中 as “Supervising Secretary” during the Tang Dynasty. According to Hucker, these were “officials normally charged to monitor the flow of documents to and from the throne... a concurrent duty assignment for men primarily appointed to other offices; but always of relatively high prestige and influence despite relatively low rank status.” Hucker also explains that this office was responsible to “return for revision any documents considered improper in form or substance, to check on the implementation of imperial orders, to criticize and propose imperial policies, and sometimes to assist in keeping the Imperial Diary.” However, the Tang history (*Xin Tangshu* 新唐書), designates Dou Shao 竇紹 not only as Supervising Secretary, but also as *jingfu zhangshi* 荊府長史, which is a high-level military official. From this description it is apparent that Dou Shao was an important and influential official with elite social status. This explains why it was the famous poet, Wang Wei, who wrote the encomium.

⁸⁶ Hucker defines *fumaduwei* 駙馬都尉 as “Commandant Escort.” Although Eugene Wang translates this term as “the late husband of the imperial princess,” this is not the correct meaning here. (See Eugene Wang, *Shaping the Lotus Sutra*, xvi.) Hucker explains that from the time of North-South Division until the Ming, *fumaduwei* was “a title conferred on the consorts of imperial princesses,” but he specifies that during the Tang, this was the “title of either a functioning or an honorary military officer... in the imperial bodyguard forces called the Left and Right Guards.” See Hucker, 219. Another source which supports the translation of this term as “bodyguard” is the Tang history (*Xin Tangshu* 新唐書). Dou Shao’s younger brother, named Dou Yi 竇繹, is listed with his first title, *fumaduwei*, then his second title, *weiweiqing* 衛尉卿, which Hucker defines as “Chief Minister of the Court of the Imperial Regalia.” See Hucker, 565. This office “was in charge of manufacturing and storing weapons, tents, insignia, and other kinds of military regalia.” This may explain why Dou Shao may have been especially concerned for the fate of his younger brother’s soul after death. Buddhism lists amassing weapons as a violation of the 48 minor precepts listed in the *Sutra of Brahma’s Net* (T.1484). Zhiyi 智顛 (538-597), a famous Buddhist scholar whose writings heavily influenced Chinese Buddhism from the time they written, wrote commentaries on this sutra,

《易》曰「遊魂為變」，

The Book of Changes states, “wandering spirit will be transformed.”⁸⁷

as did Fazang 法藏 (643-712). See Muller, DDB entry for the forty-eight minor precepts, “四十八輕戒” and the *Sutra of Brahma’s Net* “梵網經.” That these prominent figures had written commentaries on this sutra shows that Tang Buddhists would have known about the negative karma created by amassing weapons. In Buddhism, excessive negative karma due to committing harmful deeds could cause one to be reborn in a hell, or as an animal or a ghost. Dou Shao may have been worried that his brother’s occupation had generated impure karma and compromised his fate in the next life. This could be one reason why he commissioned the painting. The encomium says the goal of the dedication is to purify any negative karma and help ensure rebirth in the Pure Land.

⁸⁷ This quote is from the *Book of Changes* (*Zhouyi* 周易), dated to the Western Zhou (1046-771 BCE). This text was one of the classics required for study by literati such as Wang Wei and other scholar officials. In this section, the “Great Treatise I” (*Xici shang* 繫辭上), the introductory passage discusses the origin and nature of change (*yi* 易), a principle thought to govern the cosmos and all natural phenomena and processes. Wang Wei quotes the second clause of a line referring to life and death, which are clearly mentioned in the previous line of the *Book of Changes* (“原始反終，故知死生之說，The original beginning reverses and ends; therefore, the explanation of life and death is known,” my translation). The following line from which Wang Wei quotes reads: “精氣為物，遊魂為變，是故知鬼神之情狀，” meaning “The union of energy and vital force forms things, and the wandering away of the soul produces the change [of their constitution], thus the circumstances of supernatural beings are known.” (Translation adapted from James Legge, *The Yi King*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1899), 353-354.) The implied meaning of the line is that life depends on a combination of factors, and that conversely, the separation of the soul from the body explains the existence of spirits. The category of spirits referred to here includes ghosts and gods, but Wang Wei uses this line to refer to the spirit of a person who has passed away. The spirit of the deceased has wandered away from his body, and, according to Buddhism, can be reincarnated in one of many pleasant or terrible realms.

《傳》曰「魂氣則無不之」，固知神明更生矣。

The biography [of King Yuan of Chu] says, “the spirit, however [as opposed to the body], can go everywhere.”⁸⁸

Therefore, it is known that the spiritual intelligence⁸⁹ is reborn⁹⁰.

⁸⁸ This is not a commentary for the *Book of Changes*, but the *Biography of King Yuan of Chu* (*Chu Yuan wang zhuan* 楚元王傳) from the *History of the Han* (*Han shu* 漢書), completed in 111 CE. The story from which this line was taken is originally found in the *Book of Rites* (*Liji* 禮記), written during the Warring States and Early Han periods (ca. 481 BCE to 220 CE). The story is about a man whose son dies during travel. Confucius praises the father’s proper behavior in a funerary context. In the passage, Confucius relates what the man does after burying his son. The *Book of Rites* version reads: “既封，左袒，右還其封且號者三，曰：「骨肉歸復于土，命也。若魂氣則無不之也，無不之也。」而遂行。孔子曰：「延陵季子之於禮也，其合矣乎！」，When the mound was completed, he bared his left arm; and, moving to the right, he went round it thrice, crying out, ‘That the bones and flesh should return again to the earth is what is appointed. But the soul in its energy can go everywhere; it can go everywhere.’ And with this he went on his way. Confucius (also) said, ‘Was not Ji-zi of Yan-ling’s observance of the rules of ceremony in accordance with (the idea of them)?’” translation from Li Chi, and James Legge, *The Li Ki*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1885). Wang Wei quotes only the section which says “魂氣則無不之,” “The spirit, however, can go everywhere,” my translation. Clearly, this is a reference to the contrast between the body and the soul after death as described in the passage. The body is confined to the earthen tomb, but the spirit of the deceased is believed to leave the body and be able to travel. Wang Wei uses this line, along with the reference from the *Book of Changes* as evidence that although Dou Shao’s younger brother had passed away, his soul would travel to another place.

⁸⁹ Spiritual intelligence (*shenming* 神明). There has always been controversy in Buddhism over what is actually reincarnated because the Buddha denied the existence of a permanent coherent soul. He maintained that various aspects of the personality would reincarnate, but Chinese Mahayana Buddhist apocryphal sutras, which were popular during the Tang, promoted the idea of an immortal soul which reincarnates. Here, Wang Wei seems to be referring to the consciousness of the soul by using the term *shenming*.

⁹⁰ In Muller, DDB, *gengsheng* 更生 is defined as “rebirth.”

輔之以道，則變為妙身，之於樂土。

Assist the soul according to the Way⁹¹, then it will transform into a marvelous body⁹² and go to the Land of Joy⁹³.

大覺曰聖，離妄曰性，克修其業，以正其命。

Great awakening⁹⁴ is called sagehood, freedom from delusion⁹⁵ is called original nature⁹⁶.

One is able to improve⁹⁷ his karma in order to rectify his fate⁹⁸.

⁹¹ Way (*dao* 道). Here, this refers to the teachings of Buddhism. Wang Wei says that this “Way” can assist the soul of the deceased, so that it may be reborn in the Pure Land.

⁹² Marvelous body (*miaoshen* 妙身). Buddhist sutras such as the *Amitabha Sutra* (*Amituo jing* 阿彌陀經), (T. 366), which describe the pure land of Amitabha Buddha, explain how a person’s soul transforms into a miraculous body when it goes to the Pure Land. This body is said to be pure, perfect, and beautiful. The sufferings associated with the imperfections of the earthly body no longer exist in the Pure Land.

⁹³ The Land of Joy (*letu* 樂土). This is Sukhavati, the land of happiness and joy, also known as the Western Pure Land, where Amitabha Buddha rules. Souls which are reincarnated there enjoy freedom from suffering in opulent magical surroundings, while proximity to Amitabha helps them achieve full enlightenment.

⁹⁴ Great awakening (*dajue* 大覺). This refers to the profound awareness which accompanies enlightenment.

⁹⁵ Freedom from delusion (*liwang* 離妄), literally “leaving delusion.” In Buddhism, delusion is believed to be at the root of suffering. This delusion perpetuates the desire which keeps beings trapped in the cycle of reincarnation and suffering.

⁹⁶ Original nature (*xing* 性). In Buddhism, this refers to “original nature” (*benxing* 本性). In many Mahayana sutras which were popular in Tang China, the Buddha teaches that everyone’s original nature is “Buddha nature.” The idea is that enlightenment is everyone’s original and natural state, but that this state gets covered over by delusion. The Buddhist teachings are meant to help dispel these delusions. Part of this process is accruing enough merit to counteract negative karma and allow the soul to be reborn in a pure land where it will be guaranteed to become enlightened.

⁹⁷ Improve. The character used is *xiu* 修, which means to repair or cultivate. The idea is to mend negative karma and transform it into positive karma that will propel the dedicatee toward enlightenment.

⁹⁸ The phrase “rectify his fate” refers to the result of purifying karma in order to allow the spirit to follow the correct path according to Buddhism. This path leads to the Pure Land and enlightenment, as opposed to a path of delusion leading to a lower rebirth, possibly in a hell realm.

得無法者，即六塵為淨域；係有相者，憑十念以往生。

In he who attains the no-dharma⁹⁹, The 6 impure senses¹⁰⁰ [of sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and thought] *are*¹⁰¹ the Pure Land¹⁰².

[But] One who is bound to form¹⁰³ must depend on chanting the name of Amitabha Buddha¹⁰⁴ in order to be reborn into the Pure Land¹⁰⁵.

⁹⁹ No-dharma (*wufa* 無法). Dharma in Buddhism includes the teaching of the Buddha and the practices of Buddhists. In Chinese, it is translated *fa* 法, or law. These are the law or principles of Buddhism. The term also includes the natural laws which Buddhism teaches, such as the law of karma and the law of reincarnation. No-dharma, literally “without dharma,” refers to a Buddhist practitioner whose understanding of the teachings of Buddhism have allowed him to integrate their truths into his consciousness to such an extent that they are no longer perceived as a separate set of ideas or rules, but are effortlessly embodied as an expression of his grasp of non-duality.

¹⁰⁰ The six impure senses (*liuchen* 六塵), literally “the six dusts.” According to Muller, DDB, these are the five senses plus thought, translated as “data fields.” *Chen* 塵 means dust or object, and refers to the physical perceptions that “defile” the natural state of the mind, which is pure consciousness.

¹⁰¹ *Are* (*ji...wei* 即...為). I take this construction to mean A IS B. This is similar to the modern Chinese *jiushi* 就是 meaning “is precicely” or “is exactly.” See note 24.

¹⁰² The six impure senses *are* the pure land, “即六塵為淨域.” This line is taken directly from the *Vimalakirti Sutra* (T. 475). In this sutra, Shariputra, one of the Buddha’s disciples, asks the Buddha why, if every Buddha creates and inhabits a pure land, is the earth where Shakyamuni Buddha lives so full of filth and negative phenomena. The Buddha responds that this is because of the defilement of Shariputra’s own mind, and that one who is enlightened would perceive the earthly world as a pure land, so that in reality, the objects of sensation *are* the pure land.

¹⁰³ One who is bound to form, “係有相者.” This is in contrast to the previous line, “he who attains the no-dharma,” “得無法者.” The person who has reached the state of no-dharma transcends the duality of perceivable phenomena, but the person who is “bound to form” is deluded by the perception of reality as separate objects such as “self” and “other.” “He who attains the no-dharma” describes an enlightened person, while “one who is bound to form” describes an unenlightened individual.

¹⁰⁴ Chanting the name of Amitabha Buddha (*shinian* 十念), literally “ten recitations.” This refers to the practice of reciting the name of Amitabha Buddha ten times, *nianfo* 念佛, literally “reciting Buddha.” This practice also includes visualizing the Buddha and comes directly from the Pure Land sutras which describe how Amitabha Buddha vowed that anyone who recited his name ten times would be reborn in his Pure Land. Although ten was the minimum number of recitations required, Pure Land practitioners chanted the name of Amitabha hundreds, if not thousands, of times.

¹⁰⁵ Muller, DDB explains that the term *wangsheng* 往生 usually means rebirth into a pure land.

西方變者，給事中竇紹敬為亡弟故駙馬都尉某官之所畫也。

[This] sutra illustration¹⁰⁶ of the Western [Pure Land]¹⁰⁷ was respectfully commissioned¹⁰⁸ by Supervising Secretary Dou Shao for his late younger brother, formerly a certain official in the Imperial Bodyguard.¹⁰⁹

天倫之愛，加人數等，悲讓佞而無所，痛殞身而莫贖。

Familial love¹¹⁰, of an extraordinary kind¹¹¹,
Sorrow causes eloquence to be displaced,
Grieving death for which there is no redemption.

¹⁰⁶ Sutra illustration (*bian* 變). This is the abbreviation commonly used for *bianxiang* 變相, literally “adapted to a picture.” This type of Buddhist painting was believed to generate merit for the spirit of the person to whom it was dedicated.

¹⁰⁷ Western Pure Land (*xifang* 西方). In Pure Land Buddhism, this term refers to the Western Paradise of Amitabha Buddha, which is believed to be in the west.

¹⁰⁸ Commissioned. The Chinese text uses the verb *hua* 畫, which literally means “painted,” but Dou Shao would not have painted the *bianxiang* himself. At this time, there were several very famous painters, such as Wu Daozi 吳道子 (680 – c.760), who specialized in these types of paintings, especially for elites such as imperial officials like Dou Shao, and it is most likely that Dou Shao commissioned one of them to do the painting.

¹⁰⁹ According to Stevenson, this line follows a common ritual dedicatory formula used to dedicate karma to a deceased person. The formula starts by stating the name of the donor, then goes on to say that the donor “respectfully commissions” an object or ritual for the deceased. The deceased is also named to ensure the successful transfer of merit to the correct person. See Daniel Stevenson, “‘It’s Alive!’,” in progress, 2017.

¹¹⁰ Familial love (*tian lun zhi ai* 天倫之愛). This is a variation on the phrase *tian lun zhi le* 天倫之樂, which means “family happiness.” *Tian lun* means “relationships created by heaven,” or “family.” *Le* (happiness) is replaced by *ai* (love) to complete the phrase.

¹¹¹ Of an extraordinary kind (*jia ren shu deng* 加人數等), literally “many levels above ordinary people.” This is a variation on the phrase *jia ren yi deng* 加人一等, meaning literally “one level above ordinary people” or “a cut above.”

(闕) 傾無長之工，不平分於我生，將厚貸於泉路。

(missing characters)¹¹² exhausting [oneself] in endless labor¹¹³, [then] unjustly leaving this world¹¹⁴, [one] will owe a heavy debt to the netherworld.¹¹⁵

尚茲繪事，滌彼染業，寶樹成列，金砂自映。

May this painting¹¹⁶ cleanse that¹¹⁷ defiled karma¹¹⁸,

Jeweled trees of the Pure Land are arrayed in a line, and the golden sand itself shines.

¹¹² It is unclear how many characters are missing here, but parallel structure was the most common rule of this style of classical composition. Considering the previous line (“天倫之愛，加人數等，悲讓佞而無所，痛殞身而莫贖”) consists of two four-character phrases followed by two 6-character phrases, the following line would most likely have followed the same structure. Therefore, “無長之工” would have been the second four-character phrase in the line, and 傾 would have been the last character in the first four-character phrase. This would mean that three characters are missing from the beginning of the line. Since *qing* 傾 means “to use up or exhaust,” the missing four-character phrase probably meant something like “vital energy completely exhausted.” Therefore I translate this phrase along with the following four characters as “exhausting oneself in endless labor.”

¹¹³ Endless labor, “無長之工.” This expresses the Buddhist idea that existence in the cycle of death and rebirth (samsara) is unsatisfactory and characterized by suffering. Here, Wang Wei echoes the feeling expressed by many imperial officials, that life was nothing but endless work, with the Buddhist connotation that earthly labor is ultimately futile.

¹¹⁴ Unjustly leaving this world (“不平分於我生”). I have translated *buping* 不平 as one word (unjustly) and *fen* 分 separately as “leaving,” rather than having *bu* 不 (not) stand alone and taking *pingfen* 平分 (equally divided) as one word. That translation would mean “not divided equally.” I feel that my translation expresses the idea that Dou Shao’s brother passed away too early, especially in light of the fact that he was younger than Dou Shao. This sentiment is also echoed later on in the encomium where Wang Wei refers to him as “the man who was cut off in the prime of his life.” *Wosheng* 我生 means “the world in which we live.”

¹¹⁵ I have taken the three clauses in this line to be a chronological description of life, death, and the afterlife from a Buddhist perspective. First there is the exhausting, futile, and endless labor which characterizes the suffering of life. Next, there is death, which has come unexpectedly and possibly in distressing circumstances. And finally, there is the idea that negative karma must be repaid by a long stay in the gloomy afterlife of the netherworld.

¹¹⁶ Painting (*huishi* 繪事). Wu Hung explains that in the Tang, the term *shi* used after a painting or a sculpture simply designates it as a “work.” See Wu Hung, “What is Bianxiang: On the Relationship Between Dunhuang Art and Dunhuang Literature,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* Vol. 52, No. 1 (Jun., 1992), 121.

¹¹⁷ “That” (*bi* 彼) and “this” (*zi* 茲) in the previous clause. The use of “this” to refer to the painting and the dedication ritual and “that” to refer to defiled karma expresses the belief that the *bianxiang* in the world of the living had the power to generate merit for the soul of the deceased and cause him to be reborn in the Pure Land.

¹¹⁸ We do not know what sort of “defiled karma” Dou Shao’s brother may have had, but the term *ranye* 染業 indicates that Dou Yi needed the *bianxiang* to ensure rebirth in the Pure Land, as opposed to rebirth in a lower realm such as a hell (a major concern of Tang Buddhists).

迦陵欲語，曼陀未落，墜此中年，登乎上品。

The kalavinka bird¹¹⁹ desires to sing, the mandarava flowers¹²⁰ have not yet fallen¹²¹,

The man who was cut off in the prime of his life¹²² will ascend to the highest level of rebirth [in the Pure Land]¹²³.

池蓮寶座，將逾棠棣之榮；水鳥法音，當悟鵲鳩之力。

The jeweled seat on the lotus in the pond¹²⁴ surpasses the glory of the double rose¹²⁵.

The sound of the waters and the birds expounding the dharma¹²⁶ is equal to the strength of the wagtail's morning call¹²⁷.

讚曰：

The encomium states¹²⁸:

¹¹⁹ Muller, DDB defines kalavinka (*jialing* 迦陵) as “a bird with a melodious voice native to the Himalayas.”

¹²⁰ Mandarava flowers (*mantuo* 曼陀). From Muller, DDB: “the name for a kind of heavenly plant.”

¹²¹ Jeweled trees...not yet fallen (“寶樹...未落”). These lines are taken directly from the Pure Land sutras such as the *Amitabha Sutra* (*Amituo jing* 阿彌陀經), (T. 366), which describe the Western Pure Land of Amitabha Buddha.

¹²² Here, Wang Wei characterizes the death of Dou Yi as somewhat unexpected and unjust. The implication is that he did not reach old age before he died, as his older brother, Dou Shao, outlived him.

¹²³ Highest level of rebirth (*shangpin* 上品). According to the *Amitayus Meditation Sutra* (*Guanwuliangshou jing* 觀無量壽經), (T. 365), within the Pure Land, there are nine levels into which a soul can be reborn. These are divided into three major tiers, each also containing three levels. The level into which a soul is reborn determines his proximity to Amitabha Buddha in the Pure Land and the time it will take for him to become enlightened. The highest tier is referred to as *shangpin* 上品. This line expresses the hope that Dou Yi will be reborn in the highest level of the Pure Land.

¹²⁴ According to the Pure Land sutras, souls who are born into the Pure Land are seated on jeweled thrones encased in lotus blossoms on a lotus pond. This is also depicted in *bianxiang* paintings of the Pure Land.

¹²⁵ Double rose (*tangdi* 棠棣). This term is usually either defined as *Kerria japonica*, a shrub with double yellow flowers, sometimes called the double rose, or as the Chinese bush cherry tree, which has cherry blossoms.

¹²⁶ In the Pure Land sutras, even the birds and waters of the Pure Land sing the teachings of the Buddha.

¹²⁷ The wagtail is a small, black and white bird with a loud, but pleasant, call.

¹²⁸ As explained in the title, the previous section was the preface (*xu* 序). The encomium (*zan* 讚 or 贊) begins here.

生因妄念，沒有遺識。憑化而遷，轉身不息。將免六趣，惟茲十力。

Rebirth is the effect of delusion¹²⁹, and there is no inherited knowledge [from the previous life].
[Therefore, one must] rely on reincarnation in order to transition, incessantly changing bodies.
In order to avoid the six destinies¹³⁰, there are only these ten powers¹³¹ [of the Buddha].

哀此仁兄，友於後生。

Mourning this dear friend¹³², friend unto a future life¹³³.

不知世界，畢意經營。

Not conscious of the world¹³⁴, ending the intention to come and go¹³⁵.

傍熏獲悟，自性當成。

Drawing near to the fragrance¹³⁶ [of purity], attaining awakening,
The essential [Buddha] nature will become realized¹³⁷.

¹²⁹ In Buddhism, deluded thinking perpetuates the desire for existence which causes endless rebirth in the cycle of samsara until one becomes enlightened and the cycle is broken.

¹³⁰ The six destinies (*liuqu* 六趣). These are the six kinds of rebirth. They are, from lowest to highest: hells, hungry ghosts, animals, asuras, humans, and gods. Although being reborn in the top three categories is preferable to the lower three, they are all part of the cycle of samsara and its inherent suffering.

¹³¹ Ten powers (*shili* 十力). These are the Buddha's ten powers of awareness. Here, the term is used to refer to the Buddha himself, probably Amitabha Buddha in this case, and to imply that only he can save souls from the cycle of death and rebirth. (For a full list of the ten powers, see Muller, DDB entry for “十力”).

¹³² Dear friend (*renxiong* 仁兄). Here, this term does not mean “benevolent older brother,” as Dou Yi was Dou Shao's younger brother, but is rather a term of endearment commonly used among literati for close friends.

¹³³ Wang Wei emphasizes that he and Dou Shao also plan to eventually join Dou Yi in the Pure Land in their future lives.

¹³⁴ This is the idea that the soul is no longer attached to the world, and therefore no longer conscious of it. The person can now go on toward enlightenment.

¹³⁵ Come and go (*jingying* 經營). The *Gu Hanyu Da Cidian* dictionary of classical Chinese (Fu Xu, *Gu hanyu da cidian*. Shanghai: Shanghai cishu chubanshe, 2002) provides one definition of *jingying* as “往來,” “to come and go.” I take this to refer to the cycle of continuous death and reincarnation. Wang Wei is describing Dou Yi as having ended the intention to come and go, implying that he will be reborn in the Pure Land, become enlightened, and be freed from the cycle of death and rebirth.

¹³⁶ The Pure Land sutras explain that through physical proximity to Amitabha Buddha, souls will be suffused with the fragrant essence of his purity, and this helps them to become enlightened.

¹³⁷ Awakening, or enlightenment, is the ultimate goal of rebirth in the Pure Land, so Wang Wei chooses to end the encomium with this sentiment.

Chapter Three: Early Chinese Precedents for the Dou Shao Encomium

In the Dou Shao encomium, Wang Wei refers to pre-Buddhist Chinese texts and concepts. In this section, I explain these references and concepts, and show how Wang Wei's literary treatment of the genre of dedicatory inscription, which includes a play on the term *bian*, was designed to appeal to the elite patron of the dedication, Dou Shao. I also explore how the concept of spirit transformation and the journey to the afterlife evolved through early Chinese religious history and provided a basis for Tang Buddhist beliefs about reincarnation into the Pure Land. I believe that the Dou Shao encomium provides a glimpse into this process.

I would first like to clarify that I am not advocating a “continuous” reading of the history of Chinese religious thought, where each successive idea is assumed to have been based on previous ideas in history. As Puett explains, this approach is often inaccurate and ignores or downplays realities of foreign influence and the possibility of changes as responses to developments within the culture, not to mention cultural heterogeneity within China itself.¹³⁸ Rather, I focus specifically on funerary dedicatory texts as a genre which evolves from pre-Buddhist Chinese religious history and eventually informs Tang Buddhist versions, such as the Dou Shao encomium. I argue that the conception of the afterlife in pre-Buddhist China forms a basis for Tang Buddhist belief, and that *bianxiang* paintings and their inscriptions were an important part of this tradition.

Throughout the history of Chinese religion, rituals performed by the living were required to ensure ancestors and relatives' successful and comfortable placement in the afterlife. The

¹³⁸ Puett, *To Become a God*, 120.

initial ritual to transform the spirits of the deceased into ancestor spirits who occupied the pantheon and wielded supernatural power in the lives of their living descendants is recorded on Shang oracle bones. According to Puett, who cites Keightley, there was an initial divination performed after death. The purpose of that divination was to name that ancestor's specific temple, and, because offerings were made to the ancestors on a calendrical schedule, to determine which day the ancestor should receive sacrifices.¹³⁹ This process ensured that every generation would be provided for in the afterlife. Furthermore, excavated ancient Chinese tombs from every period were filled with grave goods and reveal a continuation of the belief in spirit transformation after death.

An important aspect of spirit transformation in Chinese religion is that people do not travel to the afterlife in their earthly bodies. That is, they must undergo some type of spiritual transformation which allows them to inhabit a different type of body in the afterlife. In this section, I argue that in addition to any foreign concepts which came with the arrival of Buddhism in China, there was a precedent for this type of spiritual transformation beginning in early Chinese thought, and that its pre-Buddhist roots can be found in ideas such as the cult of *xian* (仙) immortality in the Han Dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE). Thus, the idea of spirit transformation would have been very familiar to Wang Wei and his contemporaries in the Tang Dynasty (618-907 CE).

Beginning with ancient religions through the popularization of Buddhism in the Tang, ideas about the soul after death evolved. Although oracle bones from the Shang Dynasty (1600-1046 BCE) and bronze inscriptions from the Zhou Dynasty (1046-221 BCE) provide some

¹³⁹ Ibid., 44-45.

textual sources related to funerary dedications and spirit transformation, texts which deal directly with the concept of spirit transformation do not appear until the Han Dynasty. Texts such as the *Huainanzi* 淮南子 describe a process of spiritual cultivation which is meant to result in spiritual transformation and ascension to heaven. Previous to the Han, the belief in a dual soul composed of the *hun* 魂 and the *po* 魄 was popular. Eventually, for Buddhists in the Tang, the soul needed to be purified through the process of accumulating merit, after which it could transform into a “marvelous body” and be reborn in the Pure Land. The *bianxiang* images accompanied by encomia were an important part of this process.

In this chapter, I will examine the relationship of the Dou Shao encomium to pre-Buddhist ideas and texts. Because the encomium quotes and refers to texts such as the *Book of Changes* and the *Mencius*, and uses terms from them to discuss Tang Pure Land Buddhist ideas, such as *bian*, it is important to examine the contexts in which the terms were used. I also explore pre-Buddhist Chinese tombs and what they show regarding the development of beliefs about the underworld and the concept of spirit transformation.

In the first section of the chapter, I discuss funerary dedicatory inscriptions and the concept of spirit transformation in the Shang and Zhou dynasties. In these early dynasties, rituals were used to place the spirits of the ancestors into a pantheon. This was done by giving the ancestors ritual names and assigning days for making sacrifices to them. I discuss how this relates to later ideas about spirit transformation. I also examine what tombs from this time reveal about beliefs in the afterlife.

The second section in this chapter looks at the Warring States Period. In this section I discuss how texts such as the *Neiye* reveal a belief in spirit transformation in the quest for

immortality. I also show how the evolution of the concept of the afterlife can be seen in tombs from the time, such as that of the Marquis Yi of Zeng.

Funerary dedicatory inscriptions and spirit transformation in the Han Dynasty is the subject of the third section. Many texts from this time period deal with these topics, and I explore their relationship to ideas contained in the Dou Shao encomium. I also discuss Constance Cook's in-depth analysis of the tomb of Shao Tuo, and her argument that it provides evidence for belief in spirit transformation.

Finally, in the last section, I explore how some of the terms and content of the Dou Shao encomium were derived from pre-Buddhist sources, such as the *Book of Changes* and the *Mencius*, and how Wang Wei used these ideas to express the function of *bianxiang*. Based on this analysis, I show how Wang Wei relates the term *bian* with the transforming of the spirit to inhabit a new body after rebirth in the Pure Land.

Beliefs about the Afterlife and Spirit Transformation in the Shang and Zhou

Textual evidence for Chinese religion begins in the Shang Dynasty, and is preserved mainly in the form of inscriptions on oracle bones. These include turtle plastrons and ox scapulae that were used by the Shang kings in a form of ritual divination called pyromancy. Rather than posing direct questions to the spirits, possible future outcomes were inscribed on the bones in formulaic positive and negative sentence pairs called charges and counter-charges.¹⁴⁰ Ritual specialists collected and prepared the thousands of bones used during the Shang, cleaning them and smoothing the surface in preparation for inscription. The bones were then carved by royal

¹⁴⁰ David N. Keightley, "Sacred Characters," 76.

scribes with statements such as “It will rain” and “It may not rain.”¹⁴¹ The bones were also bored in several points, and diviners applied heat to cause them to crack. These cracks were read and interpreted by the king as communications from the spirits.¹⁴²

What is interesting about these oracle bone inscriptions for the purpose of this discussion is what they reveal about how the Shang ancestral spirits were believed to have been placed into the Shang pantheon. According to Puett, “the construction of the pantheon begins with an individual’s death,” meaning that once a person died, their spirit would be ritually transformed into a powerful ancestor spirit who was placed in the pantheon.¹⁴³ Keightley has explained how the Shang “made” the ancestors, meaning that the Shang conception of what happened to the spirits of the ancestors after they died, and the ancestor’s roles in the realm of the spirits were imagined and decided by the living Shang.¹⁴⁴

Following Keightley, Puett argues that “sacrifice is a transformative act,” and that deities are created through sacrificial rituals.¹⁴⁵ This idea draws on Keightley’s argument that the creation of the ancestors means that the significance and power of the ancestors is created in the imagination of the living. According to Puett, the transformative power of sacrificial rituals is explained by theories by Huber and Mauss which describe sacrificial rituals as what causes the involved parties to be designated as sacred.¹⁴⁶ In other words, without the sacrificial ritual, there would only be mundane living descendants, ordinary animals (or enemy humans if human sacrifice is involved), and only spirits of deceased ancestors, with no special status assigned to

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 76,78.

¹⁴² David N. Keightley, “Shang Oracle-Bone Inscriptions,” 15-16.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 44.

¹⁴⁴ David N. Keightley, “The Making of the Ancestors: Late Shang Religion and Its Legacy,” 3.

¹⁴⁵ Puett, *To Become a God*, 51-52.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

them after death. Therefore, it is the sacrificial rituals which give all the participants special status and power.

According to this theory, without sacrifice, ancestor spirits would not be sacred. In life, elders likely had much control over the lives of their descendants, but without sacrifices made using important resources, how could their spirits continue to exert control after death? Even if they would still hold power over the living, the living would not conceive of or treat the spirits as deities without sacrifices to reify their authority.

This theory asserts that it is only in the relationship created through sacrificial rites that spirits can gain the status of gods, and people can relate to them based on that status. Thus, the concept and performance of sacrifice also allows for the concept of a deity who desires the sacrifice, thereby divinizing the ancestor spirit and “creating” the sacred. In the case of the Shang, there was the belief in important and powerful ancestor spirits who required sacrifices. There is also abundant evidence of both animal and human sacrifices in the form of carefully arranged remains in accompanying burials and sacrificial pits found at Shang tomb sites.¹⁴⁷ Furthermore, the Shang oracle bone inscriptions are predominantly concerned with sacrifices for ancestors and other spirits.¹⁴⁸

Puett argues that the rituals performed after death served to actually create the ancestors by transforming those spirits in order to place them in the pantheon.¹⁴⁹ The evidence for this, that “the deceased were given temple names, granted a day on which to receive sacrifices, and placed within the sacrificial cycle,” is recorded on Shang oracle bone inscriptions.¹⁵⁰ Once placed in the

¹⁴⁷ Corinne Debaine-Francfort, *The Search for Ancient China* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1999) 52-53.

¹⁴⁸ Keightley, “Shang Oracle Bone Inscriptions,” 30-31.

¹⁴⁹ Puett, *To Become a God*, 45-46.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

pantheon, the ancestor spirits were then entitled to regular sacrifices and could communicate with their living descendants.¹⁵¹

Goods found in Shang tombs and their accompanying burials also imply certain beliefs about the afterlife. One example is the tomb of Fu Hao, the consort of the Shang king, Wu Ding. Her tomb was filled with ritual bronze vessels, jades carved into knives, figurines, and pendants, and shows evidence of animal and human sacrifices.¹⁵² The lavish appointment of the tomb supports the idea that the Shang believed the dead needed to be well-equipped and provided for in the afterlife, and that the deceased could indeed take their riches and worldly belongings with them to the netherworld.

The meaning of the decor on the ritual bronzes remains unknown, and many scholars have offered their own interpretations of what they might mean. Some of these theories propose that the images are religious. For example, they might depict gods, spirits, or even the ancestors themselves. One theory argues that these images are not meant to be directly representational, but rather a generalized way to symbolize a mysterious netherworld.¹⁵³ Regardless of the purpose of their decor, the function of the bronzes as ritual objects used to interact with the ancestors in the spirit world suggests that the activities of the living would continue to be carried out in the next life.

According to Mu-Chou Poo, the Shang and Zhou kings were thought to go to heaven after death and live alongside the high god, Di.¹⁵⁴ Another clue to the Shang afterlife comes in

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 49.

¹⁵² Anthony Barbieri-Low, "Fu Hao," *Oxford Art Online* (Oxford University Press, 1996), <http://www.oxfordartonline.com>.

¹⁵³ Sarah Allan, "Epilogue," In *The Problem of Meaning in Early Chinese Ritual Bronzes*, ed. Roderick Whitfield (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1993), 162.

¹⁵⁴ Mu-Chou Poo, *In Search of Personal Welfare*, 64.

the form of the *bin* 賓 ritual. The *bin* ritual involved humans hosting the most recently deceased, and therefore least powerful ancestor spirits, who then hosted more powerful spirits, and so on, all the way up to the nature spirits, who were more powerful than the ancestors, and finally the high god, Di.^{155, 156} This implies that the spirits were imagined to be co-existing and interacting in a kind of hierarchy in the afterlife where they performed the same rituals as the living.

After they overthrew the Shang, the Zhou Dynasty also used transformative rituals to cause their own ancestors' spirits to occupy the place once held by the Shang ancestors in a hierarchy ruled by the high god, Tian 天.¹⁵⁷ Furthermore, the Zhou held ancestor feasting rituals, using similar bronze vessels to those used in the Shang. The main belief about the ancestor spirits was that they continued to enjoy the basic earthly pleasures of feasting and entertainment in the afterlife.

Examples from the Zhou show how successive generations of ancestors were meant to be continually created and placed in the pantheon of spirits. For example, lengthy bronze inscriptions, as well as texts such as the *Book of Poems* (*Shijing* 詩經), provide descriptions of political appointments of Zhou officials and ritual feasts given for ancestor spirits.¹⁵⁸ Zhou bronzes were frequently used in ceremonies to appoint new officials and commemorate the occasion of the appointment.

¹⁵⁵ Keightley, "The Making of the Ancestors," 11.

¹⁵⁶ Puett, *To Become a God*, 34, 48-49.

¹⁵⁷ Puett, *To Become a God*, 78.

¹⁵⁸ Martin Kern, "Bronze Inscriptions, The *Shijing* and the *Shangshu*: The Evolution of the Ancestral Sacrifice During the Western Zhou," in *Early Chinese Religion, Part One: Shang through Han (1250 BC – 220 AD)*, ed. John Lagerwey and Marc Kalinowski (Boston: Brill, 2009), 143-144.

The inscriptions on bronze vessels used for these ceremonies almost always end with the same phrase which refers to the newly appointed official and the bronze vessel given to him by the ruler: “May his son’s sons and grandson’s grandsons eternally treasure and use [it].”¹⁵⁹ This phrase is directly related to the use of bronzes as sacrificial vessels used in the feasting of ancestors. The vessel is meant to be used by each successive generation in the ancestor feasting rituals.

In the poem “Thorny Caltrop” (*Chu Ci* 楚茨) from the *Book of Poems*, believed to be a compilation of Zhou texts, a noble family celebrates their bountiful harvest with feasting and sacrifices for their ancestors.¹⁶⁰ The spirits are said to enjoy the food and drink, even becoming inebriated, and to bless their descendants in return for the sacrifices of meat, grain, and alcohol served at the feast.¹⁶¹ These representative examples seem to indicate that the Zhou retained at least some beliefs about ancestor spirits from the Shang, and this may have included the idea that the spirits of deceased ancestors needed to be ritually transformed in order to be able to occupy the pantheon of deities.

Beliefs about the Afterlife and Spirit Transformation in the Warring States

Tang Buddhist elites who commissioned *bianxiang* paintings and dedicated the merit they generated to deceased relatives and rulers were concerned for the welfare of the deceased, as were the Shang and Zhou. In Buddhism, spirits with impure karma can be reborn as animals,

¹⁵⁹ Edward L. Shaughnessy, “Western Zhou Bronze Inscriptions,” 76.

¹⁶⁰ Martin Kern, “‘Shi Jing’ Songs as Performance Texts: A Case Study of ‘Chu Ci’ (Thorny Caltrop),” *Early China* 25 (2000), 51.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 88-90.

be condemned to hells, or become hungry ghosts. Similarly, in the Warring States Period (475-221 BCE), spirits could be banished to a dark and unhappy underworld. But scholars are unclear about what the afterlife looked like for more fortunate spirits. The structure of the Warring States pantheon is also uncertain. Von Falkenhausen explains that pre-imperial Qin burials from around 800-206 BCE exhibit evidence of “adherence to Zhou ritual custom,” so it may be likely that other aspects of Zhou belief, such as the pantheon, were somewhat maintained throughout the Warring States.¹⁶²

One important source of evidence for Warring States beliefs about the afterlife can be found in tombs. The tomb of the Marquis Yi of Zeng from the late 5th century BCE is an extremely lavish example.¹⁶³ It is made up of four rooms: living quarters, an armory, a harem, and a main hall for meeting guests and conducting rituals.¹⁶⁴ In total, the tomb contains thousands of items interred with the deceased for him to use in the afterlife.¹⁶⁵ This includes 21 young female sacrificial victims who were believed to be servants of the Marquis, as well as ritual bronze vessels and about 20 musical instruments, one of which is a huge set of bronze bells.¹⁶⁶

The fact that the human sacrifices and an accompanying dog (thought to be the deceased’s pet) were placed inside the tomb along with the body of the Marquis contrasts with the previous custom of placing them in pits underneath or to the side.¹⁶⁷ This, combined with the layout of the tomb in the shape of a residence, and its contents, which included clothes, food, and

¹⁶² Lothar von Falkenhausen, “Mortuary Behavior in Pre-Imperial Qin: A Religious Interpretation,” in *Religion and Chinese Society*, ed. John Lagerwey (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2004), 117.

¹⁶³ Lothar Von Falkenhausen, *Suspended Music: Chime Bells in the Culture of Bronze Age China*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 7.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 7, 9.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 93.

the first known set of bells and chimes suspended on their racks instead of being separated from them as in earlier tombs, suggests that the Marquis was believed to continue his normal daily activities in the afterlife.¹⁶⁸

The tomb also contained sculptures of “supernatural guardians” as well as images of strange creatures, some of which may have been deities, painted on the coffin.¹⁶⁹ Although some scholars believe these otherworldly images were meant to protect the soul as it occupied the tomb, it may also be possible that they signal the continuation of the deceased’s spirit in another realm, such as the underworld of the Yellow Spring.¹⁷⁰ The Marquis Yi of Zeng’s tomb is an example of the gradual movement away from the bronze vessel filled pits of earlier tombs toward a more home-like construction appointed with personal possessions and items commonly used by the tomb occupant.¹⁷¹ It is likely that the Warring States conception of the soul and the afterlife paralleled this change as it continued into the later Han.

Although people in the Tang would not have known about the Marquis Yi of Zeng’s tomb, pre-Buddhist ideas about self-cultivation in an effort to become immortal and go to a heavenly realm, usually before death, were very familiar to Tang poets like Wang Wei, and were referenced in their poetry. Therefore, examining various pre-Tang texts provides one way to better understand Tang thought. These ideas may have helped form an ideological basis for the concept of spirit transformation after death in the thinking of elite Tang Buddhists as well. Although some of the historical evidence available to scholars today was not accessible during

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 93-94.

¹⁶⁹ Alain Thote, “Burial Practices as Seen in Rulers’ Tombs of the Eastern Zhou Period: Patterns and Regional Traditions,” in *Religion and Chinese Society*, ed. John Lagerwey (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2004), 91.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 91.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 95.

the Tang, they certainly had the benefit of many more historical texts as well as orally transmitted information beyond what remains now. Tang texts, such as the encomium, also frequently reference earlier texts.

Many pre-Tang texts contain more direct ideas about spirit transformation. For example, Cook mentions that in the *Wu Xing* 五行 text, excavated from the Guodian tombs dating from the Warring States period, the energies thought to make up the soul are involved in a process of self-cultivation which results in self-deification.¹⁷² One passage from this text which describes the process of self-cultivation reads:

“智之思也長，長則得，得則不忘，不忘則明，明則見賢人，見賢人則玉色，玉色則形，形則智。聖之思也輕，輕則形，形則不忘，不忘則聰，聰則聞君子道，聞君子道則玉音，玉音則形，形則聖。”¹⁷³

“The contemplation of wisdom is a long [process]. If a long time is spent contemplating wisdom, then there is attainment. Having attainment, then there is not forgetfulness. Not forgetting, then there is understanding. Understanding, one sees the wise man. Seeing the wise man, then there is integrity. If there is integrity, then there is form. If there is form, then there is wisdom. The contemplation of sagacity is a delicate [process]. Delicately contemplating sagacity, then there is form. Having form, then there is not forgetfulness. Not forgetting, then one is astute. Being astute, then one hears the way of the gentleman. Hearing the way of the gentleman, then there is honor. Having honor, then there is form. Having form, then there is sagacity.”¹⁷⁴

The *Wu Xing* ends with the line:

“文王之視也如此。「文王在上，於昭于天」，此之謂也。”

“The vision of King Wen was like this. ‘King Wen resides above, how bright he is in Heaven!’ This refers to it.”¹⁷⁵

¹⁷² Constance Cook, *Death in Ancient China*, 23.

¹⁷³ Matthew James Hamm, "The Distance of Heaven: An Analysis of the Guodian *Wu Xing*," *Asian Studies* 5, no. 1 (2017): 136.

¹⁷⁴ My translation.

¹⁷⁵ Translation by Matthew James Hamm, “*The Distance of Heaven*,” 139.

These passages show that in the *Wu Xing*, King Wen serves as the model of a sage who achieved the goal of immortality through self-cultivation.

In the *Neiye* 內業 section of the *Guanzi* 管子, a transmitted Warring States text, a person can make his vital energy rise up to heaven so he can become divine.¹⁷⁶ The result of this is explained in this *Neiye* passage:

“道滿天下，普在民所，民不能知也。一言之解，上察於天，下極於地，蟠滿九州。”

“The Way fills all under Heaven. It is everywhere that people reside, but people are unable to understand. With the liberation (*jie* 解) of the one word, one explores (*cha*) Heaven above, reaches to Earth below, and encircles and fills the nine regions.”¹⁷⁷

According to Puett, the *Neiye* expresses the belief that “humans can thus, through cultivation, achieve the powers of spirits and...divinize themselves.”¹⁷⁸ This process is meant to happen while the person is still alive, but it shows that the idea of self-cultivation with the goal of spiritual transformation and self-divinization preceded the similar idea in Tang Buddhism.

In texts such as the *Neiye*, special meditation techniques are prescribed to attain this goal. Tang Buddhists used a different kind of meditation during their lifetimes, but created and dedicated images such as *bianxiang*, along with the merit they generated, with the goal of eventual immortality as buddhas themselves. Furthermore, Cook describes the strong connection between beliefs about the soul throughout early Chinese history by saying “it is likely that the basic beliefs concerning the body, the spirit, and the journey to Heaven were quite ancient and shared by those elite who participated to a vast degree in a shared religious culture with roots

¹⁷⁶ Cook, *Death in Ancient China*, 25.

¹⁷⁷ Translation from Puett, *To Become a God*, 111-112.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 116.

deep in Shang culture.”¹⁷⁹ This shows a clear precedent in pre-Han Chinese history for ideas about the transformation of the spirit, with the end goal of reaching heaven and becoming deified. During the Han, these ideas continued to develop and became increasingly similar to later Buddhist beliefs about the spirit after death.

Funerary Texts and Spirit Transformation in the Han

In the Han Dynasty, tombs and interred objects were inscribed with “tomb-quelling texts” (*zhenmuwen* 鎮墓文) which functioned to save the deceased from the possible difficulties of the afterlife.¹⁸⁰ The tomb-quelling inscriptions are similar to the encomium in that they both seek to improve the deceased’s experience after death. Tomb-quelling texts do so by eliminating the possibility of doing hard labor or facing poverty in the afterlife. The text of one of these follows:

“Today is an auspicious day. It is for no other reason but the deceased Chang Shu-ching, who unfortunately died prematurely, is scheduled to descend into the grave. The Yellow God, who produced the Five Mountains, is in charge of the roster of the deceased, recalling the hun and p’o, and in charge of the list of the dead. The living may build a high tower; the dead returns and is buried deeply underneath. Eyebrows and beards having fallen, they drop and become dirt and dust. Now therefore I (the Messenger of Heavenly Emperor) present the medicine for removing poll-tax and corvée conscription, so that the descendants will not die. Nine pieces of *jen-shen* 人蔘 from Shang-tang substitute for the living. The lead-man is intended to substitute for the dead. The soybeans and melon-seeds are for the dead to pay for the taxation underneath. Hereby I establish a decree to remove the earthly evil, so that no disaster will occur. When this decree arrives, restrict the officer of the Underworld (*ti-li* 地吏), and do not disturb the Chang family again, Doubly urgent as prescribed by the laws and ordinances.”¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁹ Cook, *Death in Ancient China*, 30.

¹⁸⁰ Poo, *In Search of Personal Welfare*, 171.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 171-172.

This text parallels the encomium in its lament for the deceased and the desire of the living to help him in the afterlife. For example, soybeans and melon seeds are included in the burial so the spirit can pay taxes in the netherworld. Likewise, Buddhist dedicatory texts, such as the encomium, function to accrue merit and dedicate it to the deceased. The purpose of this dedication of merit is to ensure that the dedicatee will not be reborn in undesirable circumstances, such as in a hell, but instead will be reborn in the Pure Land and eventually become an enlightened and immortal Buddha.¹⁸²

Han funerary texts also show that many people aspired to become immortals.¹⁸³ In his article, “‘O Soul, Come back!’ A Study in the Changing Conceptions of the Soul and Afterlife in Pre-Buddhist China,” Yu Ying-Shih describes the cult of immortality that became popular during the Han Dynasty around the first century BCE.¹⁸⁴ Previously, the predominant belief about the soul after death involved the *hun* 魂 and *po* 魄 souls. This idea was widely accepted by the second century BCE.¹⁸⁵ According to this theory, the soul consisted of two parts: the *hun* soul and the *po* soul. When a person died, his *hun* soul went toward heaven, while his *po* soul moved down toward the earth.¹⁸⁶ Yu argues that this developed into the later Buddhist belief in one soul which went either to heaven or to hell based on its past deeds.¹⁸⁷ Some scholars believe that many people did not particularly differentiate the *hun* from the *po*, but thought of them together as *hunpo*.¹⁸⁸ Yu explains that the concept of *hun* probably originated in southern China, and was

¹⁸² Ibid., 172.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Yu, “‘O Soul, Come Back!’,” 386.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 374.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 375.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 386.

¹⁸⁸ Cook, *Death in Ancient China*, 20.

likely associated with the culture from the state of Chu 楚. By the third century BCE, the concept of *hun* had become “universally accepted.”¹⁸⁹

Later in the Han, during the reign of Emperor Wu (140-87 BCE), another export from the south, an immortality cult, became popular, and the concept of *xian* 仙 replaced *hun* and *po*.

According to Yu, the *xian* “obtains its total freedom by transforming the body into something purely ethereal.”¹⁹⁰ Yu cites the *Elegies of Ch’u* which “describes a scene of some ancient *hsien* [*xian*] immortals’ ascension to heaven in the following lines:

“With the ether’s (i.e. *chi*’s) transformations they rose upwards, with godlike swiftness miraculously moving. Leaving the dust behind, shedding their impurities – never to return again to their old homes.”¹⁹¹

This description of the transformation of a spiritual body traveling to a heavenly realm is strikingly similar to the transformation of the soul and its ascent to the paradise of the Pure Land, which is described in the Wang Wei encomium on a Pure Land *bianxiang* painting. Furthermore, according to Yu, the attitude of early elites in the Han parallels that of those in the Tang. He explains that imperial elites wanted to become *xian* immortals so that they could “prolong their worldly pleasures forever.”¹⁹²

Wall decor and inscriptions in Han tombs also corroborate this view of the netherworld as a place where the dead are depicted participating in activities such as social gatherings and meals.¹⁹³ And inscriptions contain well-wishes for the dead, including long life and good

¹⁸⁹ Yu, “‘O Soul, Come Back!’,” 364.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 387.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹² *Ibid.*

¹⁹³ Poo, *In Search of Personal Welfare*, 171.

fortune.¹⁹⁴ Although the end goal of Buddhism was enlightenment and freedom from the cycle of suffering in Samsara, the description of the Pure Land, both in the sutras and the encomium, with its jeweled trees, lotus thrones, and entertainment in the form of musicians and dancers, as well as its depiction in *bianxiang* paintings as an opulent royal garden, clearly appealed to Tang elites who wished to escape the problems of the world without giving up its pleasures.

In her book, *Death in Ancient China: The Tale of One Man's Journey*, Constance Cook describes and interprets the contents of the tomb of a Han official named Shao Tuo 邵佗. The tomb dates to 316 BCE, and is a square shape with a large central chamber surrounded by four smaller chambers (fig. 21).¹⁹⁵ Shao Tuo's coffin was placed in the central chamber, which also contained some weapons and clothing.¹⁹⁶ The eastern chamber contained everything needed for a ritual feast, including vessels, food, and musical instruments.¹⁹⁷ The southern chamber held weapons, armor, and horse and chariot equipment.¹⁹⁸ The western chamber contained all kinds of personal items that would be used while traveling, such as clothing, shoes, a folding bed, cooking utensils, and baskets and boxes.¹⁹⁹

Although Han religion and beliefs about the afterlife were very different from later Chinese Buddhist beliefs, there are some interesting similarities that can be seen from tombs such as Shao Tuo's. Based on what funerary texts and objects from the Han reveal, there was a precedent for the concept of spirit transformation which would enable the spirit of the deceased to inhabit a new body and travel to a heavenly realm.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 170.

¹⁹⁵ Cook, *Death in Ancient China*, 6, 49.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 50.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 55.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 59.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 60.

Cook argues that the contents of Shao Tuo's tomb were meant "to aid the metamorphosis of his higher spirit."²⁰⁰ For example, "weapons and clothing placed on top of Shao Tuo's inner coffins were no doubt meant for immediate use by the escaping spirit, helping him fill out his form or 'likeness' (*xiang*)."²⁰¹ "Images of flight," such as winged creatures, found in other Han tombs are also related to the idea that the soul was meant to "ascend into the astral plane as a divine spirit."²⁰² Cook also discusses "the idea of tomb as carriage," meaning that the tomb was supposed to function as a vehicle to transport the soul after death.²⁰³ One piece of evidence for this is that some tombs from the Early Western Zhou, chariot wheels were found placed by the sides of the coffins.²⁰⁴ According to Cook, this shows that after death, the spirit was meant to travel, and also that it would have a new form once it had left the old body.

Cook goes on to suggest that Shao Tuo's spirit would pick up the items necessary to protect him on his journey and to "establish his rightful place among his ancestors in the spirit world."²⁰⁵ Wherever the spirit was meant to go, it was the same place his ancestors inhabited in the afterlife, and there were probably other types of spirits and even deities there as well. One of the chambers of the tomb was set for a feast, complete with all sorts of drinking vessels, dining utensils, and many types of food. Cook interprets this as a feast set for Shao Tuo's ancestors, which his spirit would host before departing for the spirit world.²⁰⁶ This seems related to the ancient Shang *bin* ritual, where the living feasted the lower-ranking ancestor spirits, who in turn,

²⁰⁰ Cook, *Death in Ancient China*, 50.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 51.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 133, 17.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, 133, 144-145.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 55.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 55-56.

were believed to feast the higher spirits. In the Han, the spirit of the deceased is seen to be continuing this tradition as his spirit also feasts his ancestors after his own death.

Shao Tuo's tomb also contained musical instruments and statues of servants.²⁰⁷ These types of items and their high quality attest not only to Shao Tuo's wealth and relatively comfortable lifestyle as an official, but also reinforce the idea that his spirit was meant to participate in festive activities in the afterlife. This is also reflected in an inscription on a Han funerary bronze mirror which says "There is happiness daily and fortune monthly. There is joy without (bad) events, fit for having wine and food. Live leisurely, free from anxiety. Accompanied by flute and zither, with contentment of heart. Years of happiness are secure and lasting."²⁰⁸ Clearly, the afterlife imagined by the Han, at least for wealthy elites, was one of pleasure.

This conception of the afterlife with its feasting and musical accompaniment enjoyed with the ancestors by a spirit that had transformed into a new body is similar to the later Buddhist idea of the afterlife in the Pure Land. Even the concept of reuniting with one's ancestors seems to continue to some extent. This is seen in later Buddhist texts, such as the encomium, which express the hope to meet one's deceased family members in the Pure Land.

Another important object from Han tombs related to concepts about the afterlife and possibly spirit transformation is the Mawangdui 馬王堆 silk banner.²⁰⁹ The Mawangdui banner is a T-shaped piece of silk that was draped over the coffin of a Han tomb and painted with an image of the spirit's journey in the afterlife (Fig. 22). The painting on this banner is divided into

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

²⁰⁸ Poo, *In Search of Personal Welfare*, 170-171.

²⁰⁹ Cook, *Death in Ancient China*, 136.

three sections which show the spirit of the deceased as it travels from the tomb upward to heaven.²¹⁰ Interestingly, in Han times, heaven was thought to be in the west, as was the Buddhist Western Pure Land mentioned in the encomium. Cook's theory about the transformation of the deceased's spirit into a flying "demi-dragon" in the top register of the banner, which is thought to be heaven or the spirit world, is also notable as it suggests that the spirit will have a different kind of body in the afterlife.²¹¹ Although many scholars believe the half-snake woman is Nu Wa, the ancient goddess who created humans, Cook believes that it is the "transformed spirit" of Lady Dai.²¹² Based on the other obvious mythological references in the banner, such as Chang'e and Hou Yi, I also believe that the half-snake figure is Nu Wa. However, Cook's theory about the transformation of the spirit and its journey to the afterlife is still worth considering even if Lady Dai's otherworldly form is not depicted in the banner.

Tomb guardian sculptures called *zhenmushou* 鎮墓獸 have also been found in many Han tombs. While the meaning and purpose of the animal hybrid tomb guardian sculptures is not definitively known, Michael Loewe argues that they are symbols of transformation from a mortal to an immortal existence.²¹³ Meanwhile, Elizabeth Childs-Johnson believes the tomb guardians are images which "represented metamorphosis from the human to the god state."²¹⁴ Cook concludes that the transformation of the spirit of the deceased, necessary for its journey in the afterlife, "required the aid of hybrid beasts" such as the tomb guardians.²¹⁵ The tomb guardians

²¹⁰ Ibid., 132.

²¹¹ Ibid., 136.

²¹² Ibid., 147.

²¹³ Ibid., 139.

²¹⁴ Ibid.

²¹⁵ Ibid., 140.

are thought to help the spirit of the deceased assume its new hybrid form, as in the half-snake spirit depicted in the Mawangdui banner.²¹⁶

Cook also believes the tomb guardians may have functioned by “identifying the deceased and giving them an image.”²¹⁷ This desire to identify spirits of the deceased can be seen in funerary inscriptions throughout Chinese history.²¹⁸ The importance of this identification seems to go as far back as the initial rituals performed by the Shang after death in order to first install an ancestor spirit into the pantheon and give it an official name. Cook claims that in the case of Shao Tuo, his spirit was to be adorned with hybrid animal ornaments which, because they show metamorphosis from one state to another, represent transformation (fig. 23).²¹⁹

Finally, since the ancient Chinese believed that the earth was square and heaven was round, Cook believes that the position and layout of the tomb, with its square base and round top, proves that it was “a vehicle for transport to Heaven.”²²⁰ These concepts of spirit transformation, deification, and immortality tie into the *xian* immortality cult which became popular during the Han, and the desire expressed by Tang Buddhists to be reborn in the Pure Land in order to eventually become immortal buddhas themselves.²²¹

People in the Han were also concerned with avoiding negative consequences in the afterlife. Shao Tuo’s tomb contained some important documents that “identified him and his lineage as well as the merit he accumulated through service to the court and sacrifice to the spirits during his lifetime.”²²² The Dou Shao encomium also contains lines that identify the

²¹⁶ Ibid., 132, 142.

²¹⁷ Ibid.

²¹⁸ Stevenson, “‘It’s Alive,’” 9-13, 25.

²¹⁹ Cook, *Death in Ancient China*, 142-144.

²²⁰ Ibid., 145.

²²¹ Ibid., 146.

²²² Ibid., 60.

dedicatee and say that the merit generated by the *bianxiang* is meant to help him after death. Apparently, merit was important in the Han, just as it would be for future Chinese Buddhists who sought to accumulate good karma in order to be reborn in the Pure Land and avoid an unpleasant rebirth. Tomb-quelling texts from the Han include similar sentiments. One such text, written on a bottle of “tomb-quelling medicine,” a magical elixir interred with the deceased, reads:

“The Messenger of the Heavenly Emperor hereby reverently establishes safety and security for the tombs of the Yang family. It is reverently done, using lead men and gold and jade, to release culpability for the dead, and dismiss wrong doings for the living. After this bottle reaches (the tomb), it is decreed that the people should be relieved. The deceased should enjoy his own rent income underneath, which amounts to twenty million per year. It is decreed that generations of sons and grandsons shall serve in offices and be promoted to the ranks of duke and marquis, with fortune and prestige as marshals and ministers without end. (This decree) is to be dispatched to the Minister of Grave Mound and the Governor of the Grave, to be employed accordingly, as decreed by the law and ordinance.”²²³

In this text, special items such as “led men and gold and jade” are used to “release culpability for the dead,” thereby allowing the spirit of the deceased to enjoy a pleasant afterlife.²²⁴ There is also a concern that his rent in the afterlife be provided. Furthermore, through interring special items, such as the bottle of magical “medicine,” with the body, and by writing this funerary dedication text, living members of his family would also benefit. The significance of this text in this discussion lies in its similarity to the Dou Shao encomium. In both instances, special rituals and objects are dedicated to the deceased through the use of a text which is meant to effect a positive outcome in the afterlife.

²²³ Poo, *In Search of Personal Welfare*, 172-173.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*

In the Shang, the ancestor spirits determined who was guilty of some offence and would “blame” (*jiu* 咎) that person, causing them to acquire an illness. In the Warring States, this blame was attributed to being guilty of violating Confucian morality.²²⁵ During the Han, evidence of the continuation of this idea of blame can be seen in the Shao Tuo tomb. According to Cook, Shao Tuo “suffered three years of spiritual blame (*jiu* 咎) and died in the end without his team of ritualists discovering the...source of the curse.”²²⁶ Throughout Chinese history, ritual specialists such as diviners and mediums were employed to communicate with the spirits, determine the cause of guilt and blame, and carry out the rituals and sacrifices required to remedy the problem.

The ancient Chinese process of divination and sacrifice is very different than the later Buddhist beliefs and rituals used to accrue and dedicate merit, but the basic principle seems to be the same - particularly that written documents or inscriptions, which identified the individual by name, were required to ensure the proper functioning of the rituals. Encomia, such as the one examined in this thesis, are one example of this type of inscription.

In 139 BCE, Emperor Wu’s uncle, the king of Huainan, who likely had designs on the throne himself, presented the young ruler with the *Huainanzi* 淮南子, a book of philosophical advice on how to govern the kingdom.²²⁷ According to John Major, the *Huainanzi* is meant to be based on Zhou Dynasty ideals, including rule by an “enlightened sage-emperor.”²²⁸ The book also includes a long section on alchemical practices for becoming a *xian* immortal.²²⁹ Concepts

²²⁵ Cook, *Death in Ancient China*, 80.

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ John S. Major et al., *The Huainanzi: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Government in Early Han China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 1-2, 5.

²²⁸ Ibid., 5-6.

²²⁹ Ibid., 8.

regarding becoming an immortal illustrated by the *Huainanzi* seem to be precursors to later Chinese Buddhists beliefs.

The *Huainanzi* included “programs of self-cultivation that enable the adept to become a spirit.”²³⁰ Self-cultivation through ritual training and behavioral modification based on moral precepts was very important to Tang Buddhists who believed they needed to accrue good karma to ensure rebirth into the Pure Land. The *Huainanzi* also explains that it is necessary to climb extremely high mountains to reach “the Realm of the Great God (Di),” and this will allow the humans who reach that realm to become immortal.²³¹ Puett believes that the description of climbing mountains in the *Huainanzi* is a metaphor for a process of self-cultivation where “ultimately, one becomes a spirit and lives with the Great God.”²³²

Tang Buddhists sought to be reborn in the realm ruled by Amitabha Buddha through a different kind of self-cultivation. Through ritual practices such as meditating on the Pure Land and chanting the name of Amitabha Buddha, they generated the merit necessary for rebirth in the Pure Land. There, they would become enlightened by drawing closer to Amitabha. Rebirth in the Pure Land meant eventually becoming an immortal Buddha oneself.

According to Puett, the *Huainanzi* provides self-divinization as an alternative to using divination and sacrifices to influence the spirits.²³³ However, it seems that in practice, people continued to use forms of both methods, especially with regards to the afterlife. For example, some Han tombs contain inscriptions stating that the deceased sought immortality in the afterlife, but the tombs also contain evidence of belief in hosting feasts for the ancestor spirits, which

²³⁰ Puett, *To Become a God*, 3.

²³¹ *Ibid.*

²³² *Ibid.*

²³³ *Ibid.*, 4.

would involve the older rituals of food and wine sacrifices, as well as communication with the spirits.

In Tang Buddhism, the painting and dedicating of *bianxiang* images was the means by which people influenced the cosmos to create good karma for the deceased. But the end goal was for everyone involved to eventually be reborn in the Pure Land and become an immortal Buddha themselves. So although there continued to be a belief in the separation of humans and spirits and the necessity of communication with spiritual forces, the belief in self-divinization and immortality also became integrated into Chinese religious belief over time.

Terms and Content in the Dou Shao Encomium Related to Pre-Buddhist Sources

The encomium includes terms that refer to pre-Buddhist sources which discuss the concept of spirit transformation. These examples show that Wang Wei was using commonly understood references to the term *bian*. The function of *bianxiang* images was to transform the spirit of the deceased through the process of karma generation and dedication. Although texts for dedicating karma originated in India, many of the early Chinese texts and terms referred to in the encomium are related to pre-Buddhist Chinese religious traditions as discussed above.²³⁴ My goal here is not to undertake an extensive survey of the relevant terms in ancient Chinese literature, but to provide a few examples which illustrate the link between Tang Buddhist thought and pre-Buddhist Chinese religious thought, particularly in regards to the function of *bianxiang* and Wang Wei's literary treatment of *bian*.

²³⁴ Daniel Stevenson, "'It's Alive!'" 9.

Probably the most important term, which is both used in the encomium and found in many early texts, is *bian* 變. The common meaning of the character is “change” or “transformation.” Mair also explains that “before the introduction of Buddhism, the word *pien* [*bian*] in the classical Chinese language meant “change.”²³⁵ The encomium begins with a quote from the *Book of Changes* (*yijing* 易經 or *zhouyi* 周易) which says “wandering spirit will be **transformed** (遊魂為變).”²³⁶ The full line from the *Book of Changes* reads “[the union of] essence and breath forms things, and the wandering away of the soul produces the **transformation** [of their constitution] (精氣為物，遊魂為變).”²³⁷ This line is referring to birth and death, so it is appropriate for Wang Wei to quote it in an encomium for a deceased acquaintance. Tellingly, Wang Wei only uses the second clause of the line which refers to death. The last word in this clause is *bian* 變, or “transformation.”

Next, the encomium goes on to discuss the process of transformation, saying “the spirit, however [as opposed to the body], can go everywhere (魂氣則無不之).”²³⁸ This quote is part of a line from the *Biography of King Yuan of Chu* (*Chu Yuan wang zhuan* 楚元王傳 in the *History of the Han* (*Han shu* 漢書), completed in 111 CE. This line in its entirety says “flesh and bones return to the earth - this is fate, but the soul can go everywhere (骨肉歸復於土，命也，魂氣則無不之).”²³⁹ This means that although the corpse of a deceased person is confined to the earth, his spirit can go everywhere. Wang Wei then says “therefore, it is known that the spiritual

²³⁵ Mair, *Tang Transformation Texts*, 44.

²³⁶ My translation.

²³⁷ “The Book of Changes, The Great Treatise I (*Zhouyi, Xicishang* 周易, 繫辭上), translation adapted from Legge, *The Yi King*, 353-354.

²³⁸ My translation.

²³⁹ My translation. Original Chinese from the *Biography of King Yuan of Chu* (*Chu Yuan wang zhuan* 楚元王傳), *Scripta Sinica*, <http://hanchi.ihp.sinica.edu.tw/ihp/hanji.htm>.

intelligence is reborn (固知神明更生矣).”²⁴⁰ This sums up these two previous quotes by explaining that the fact that the spirit can travel after death is why people know the spirit can reincarnate.

Wang goes on to say “Assist the soul according to the Way, then it will **transform** into a marvelous body and go to the Land of Joy (輔之以道，則變為妙身，之於樂土).”²⁴¹ This and the previous lines of the encomium clearly continue to define *bian* and explain the purpose of the *bianxiang* image for which the inscription was written. The “transformation” mentioned in the Book of Changes is explained here as the idea that when a person dies, something about that person transforms. That something, according to Wang Wei, is the soul which leaves the body and can go anywhere. The movement of the spirit is then equated with reincarnation, and the particular mechanism of reincarnation is further defined as the soul *transforming* into a “marvelous body” and going to the Pure Land. *Bian* here is an active transformation which occurs to the form of the spirit. This change then allows the spirit to inhabit the “marvelous body” of those who are reborn in the Pure Land. These passages show how Wang Wei was punning on the term *bian*, commonly used to refer to *bianxiang*, and using the sense of *bian* as a transformation of the spirit for its reincarnation in the Pure Land.

Rebirth into the marvelous body (*miaoshen* 妙身) is depicted in Pure Land *bianxiang* paintings as small human figures seated on thrones in lotus blossoms. This process is described in the Pure Land sutras which the *bianxiang* illustrate. The body into which the spirit was transformed that lives in the Pure Land was referred to as the “marvelous body” (*miaoshen* 妙身) by Tang Buddhists like Wang Wei. This is another important piece of evidence that the *bian* in

²⁴⁰ My translation.

²⁴¹ My translation.

the phrase “*bian wei miaoshen* (變為妙身)” from the Dou Shao encomium is referring to the same transformation of the spirit into the “marvelous body” depicted in the Pure Land *bianxiang* paintings.

The most commonly painted *bianxiang*, which were images of the Pure Land, depict the end result of the transformation of the spirit in the figures born into lotus blossoms in the Pure Land lotus pond. However, other types of *bianxiang*, such as the *Vimalakirti Sutra bianxiang*, which do not depict this scene, still serve the same function as Pure Land *bianxiang*. This is because all *bianxiang* were made with the purpose of generating and dedicating the merit necessary to effect spirit transformation. This transformation would allow the spirit to inhabit the marvelous body in the Pure Land. Although the word *bian* can and does refer to the images themselves, Wang Wei plays with the meaning of the term to refer to the function of the images – that is, the transformation of the spirit through generation and dedication of merit.

Another early example of the term *bian* related to the process of death is found in the *Zhuangzi*. The passage describes an immortal, and says “death and life do not change him (死生无變於己).”²⁴² The passage explains that aside from being impervious to extremes of heat and cold, an immortal is unaffected by life and death. The word *bian* is used here again to mean “change.” The idea must be that because he is immortal, he is no longer subject to the change from not-yet alive to living, nor the change from living to dead. Although here, the term *bian* is not referring to reincarnation as it does in the encomium, it does show how the word was used to refer to the transformation of life and death in the Warring States Period when the *Zhuangzi* was written. It is also related to the fascination with immortality and self-cultivation practices

²⁴² *Zhuangzi*, Qi wulun, Scripta Sinica, <http://hanchi.ihp.sinica.edu.tw/ihp/hanji.htm>, my translation.

undertaken in order to become immortal and free of life and death forever. Interestingly, the goal of Buddhism is also freedom from the cycle of death and rebirth.

In addition to the *Zhuangzi*, Wang Wei is also drawing on key Confucian terms to define later Buddhist terms. One example is the line “Great awakening is called sagehood, freedom from delusion is called original nature. One is able to improve his karma in order to rectify his fate (大覺曰聖，離妄曰性，克修其業，以正其命).”²⁴³ Mencius often uses the words “nature” (*xing* 性), “sage” (*sheng* or *shengren* 聖人), and “fate” (*ming* 命) to refer to his belief in the fundamental goodness of human nature and the cultivation of that nature in order to become a sage.

Here again, Wang Wei equates later Buddhist ideas and terms with pre-Buddhist ones. For example, the line in the encomium discusses “great awakening” (*dajue* 大覺), “freedom from delusion” (*liwang* 離妄), and “improving his karma” (*xiu qi ye* 修其業) which are all Buddhist ideas. But he defines the first two concepts using the classical terms *xing* and *sheng*. Then he uses the word “fate” (*ming* 命) to explain the goal of improving karma. This does not suggest that Wang Wei did not understand the difference between Confucian and Buddhist ideas and terms, but that he was drawing on familiar pre-Buddhist concepts to support his discussion of Buddhist beliefs. Furthermore, these allusions were appropriate for the genre of funerary dedication written for elite patrons, such as Dou Shao, who could appreciate their complexity.

Finally, the encomium parallels a line from the *Mencius* which says “Whether he dies prematurely or lives long, it makes no difference; he will self-cultivate [while] awaiting it

²⁴³ My translation.

(death). Therefore, he will establish [his] fate (歿壽不貳，修身以俟之，所以立命也).²⁴⁴ The similarity of the idea of self-cultivation in preparation for death, as well as the parallel between establishing fate and rectifying fate, in addition to the verb *xiu* 修, meaning “to repair or “improve”, suggests some connection between the two texts. For comparison, here is the line from the encomium, followed by the *Mencius*:

“大覺曰聖，離妄曰性，克修其業，以正其命。”

“Great awakening is called sagehood, freedom from delusion is called original nature. One is able to improve his karma in order to rectify his fate.”

“歿壽不貳，修身以俟之，所以立命也。”

“Whether he dies prematurely or lives long, it makes no difference; he will self-cultivate [while] awaiting it (death). Therefore, he will establish [his] fate.”

This would not be considered unusual, because Tang literati like Wang Wei extensively studied and memorized texts such as the *Mencius* in preparation for the grueling civil service exams. But Wang Wei’s blending of classical ideas with later Buddhist concepts shows the tendency to look to historical precedents when thinking about religious issues, including spirit transformation. These examples from the *Mencius* show how Wang Wei used earlier terms and ideas to discuss Buddhist terms. It seems that he deals with the term *bian* in a similar way by using classical texts, which not only held great authority, but were also familiar to people in elite circles, to describe the meaning and function of *bianxiang*.

Dedicatory texts similar to the Dou Shao encomium by Wang Wei are explored in a forthcoming chapter by Stevenson on the transfer of merit.²⁴⁵ He explains that the Buddhist

²⁴⁴ Mengzi, “Jin Xin 1,” Scripta Sinica, <http://hanchi.ihp.sinica.edu.tw/ihp/hanji.htm>.

²⁴⁵ Stevenson, “‘It’s Alive!’,” 14.

dedication of merit seen in many sources, including the encomium, is formulaic, with certain compositional and grammatical similarities across many examples.²⁴⁶ Interestingly, similar dedicatory texts are found in both the Indian Buddhist tradition, from before the popularization of Buddhism in China, as well as in pre-Buddhist inscriptions in China.²⁴⁷

Shang 尚 is one term used in the encomium which is related to these formulaic dedications of merit. Stevenson cites Kalinowski as he explains that this term was used in Eastern Zhou divinations, and means “may it be that XYZ occurs.”²⁴⁸ Wang Wei uses the term *shang* in the same way in the encomium in the phrase “may this painting cleanse that defiled karma (尚茲繪事，滌彼染業).”

In Chinese Buddhist dedication texts from as early as the fifth century, the word *yuan* 願, rather than *shang*, is used to express the idea of wishing or praying for the desired outcome of the dedication.²⁴⁹ But Wang Wei uses the word *shang* instead of *yuan* in the Dou Shao encomium. His choice to use the more archaic *shang* is in keeping with the other references he makes to ancient texts such as the *Book of Changes* and the Han histories. The use of this term also supports his claims that these earlier texts had already attested to a belief in spirit transformation. Therefore, although the Chinese Buddhist concept of death and the afterlife was obviously different from pre-Buddhist beliefs, Wang Wei’s references to the history of the concept of spirit transformation echoes ideas found in earlier texts.

The structure of the encomium is another significant aspect of its relationship to earlier sources. According to Stevenson, the content and syntax of earlier inscriptions, such as those

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 25.

²⁴⁷ Ibid., 12.

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 29.

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 16, 17-25.

from Han funerary stele and tomb-quelling texts, are very similar to later Buddhist dedications such as the encomium.²⁵⁰ Each dedication contains a phrase which identifies the dedicatee and/or the reason for the dedication. Next comes a “specified action” saying that a dedicatory object was respectfully made, then a verb which expresses the wish for a specified outcome.²⁵¹

In the encomium, the phrase which identifies the dedicatee and the specified action are contained in the line “[This] sutra illustration of the Western [Pure Land] was respectfully commissioned by Supervising Secretary Dou Shao for his late younger brother, formerly a certain official in the Imperial Bodyguard (西方變者，給事中竇紹敬為亡弟故駙馬都尉某官之所畫也).” Then there is the line “May this painting cleanse that defiled karma, Jeweled trees of the Pure Land are arrayed in a line, and the golden sand itself shines (尚茲繪事，滌彼染業，寶樹成列，金砂自映).” This line expresses the wish for the specified outcome of rebirth in the Pure Land, implied by obvious allusions to the jeweled trees and golden sand described in the Pure Land sutras and depicted in the *bianxiang* paintings. These components, together with the lament often expressed in both earlier funerary texts, such as stele inscriptions and tomb-quelling texts, and in the encomium, place the encomium in a tradition of Chinese funerary dedicatory inscriptions with similar forms and functions.

²⁵⁰ Ibid., 25, 29.

²⁵¹ Ibid., 25-26.

Chapter Summary

Before the Warring States Period, concepts regarding the afterlife, such as what it looked like and what people actually did there are hazy, apparently even for people at the time.²⁵² For example, in the Eastern Zhou (771-256 BCE), there was a “dark and miserable” netherworld called the Yellow Spring (*huangquan* 黃泉) which was associated with underground springs, but information about its actual location and features is limited.²⁵³ There are more details available regarding beliefs about the afterlife from the Warring States Period. At that time, there was believed to be a city of the dead guarded by a governor named *tubo* (土伯).²⁵⁴ Graves from the Warring States contain more objects for daily use, such as earthenware vessels.²⁵⁵ According to Mu-Chou Poo, the ideas of the Yellow Spring from the Eastern Zhou and the city of the dead from the Warring states developed into the netherworld of the Han and “finally merged with the Buddhist concept of hell.”²⁵⁶

Based on the development of the belief in immortals and paradises throughout the Warring States and the Han, I believe the ancient Chinese concepts of heaven and the soul’s journey there also served as precedents for later Buddhist ideas about the transformation of the spirit into a “marvelous body” which would inhabit the Pure Land. The Dou Shao encomium by Wang Wei provides a snapshot of this process of the evolution and blending of religious beliefs. Through an examination of Wang Wei’s references to pre-Buddhist texts, I show how he explores the term *bian*, using it to refer to both the sutra illustration and the concept of spirit

²⁵² Poo *In Search of Personal Welfare*, 65.

²⁵³ Yu Ying-Shih, “‘O Soul, Come Back!’,” 382.

²⁵⁴ Poo, *In Search of Personal Welfare*, 66.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 167.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 66.

transformation. This brilliant allusion was designed not only to serve as a descriptive component of the dedicatory inscription of a funerary painting, but also as an exceptional example of elite literary communication.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I examine the term *bianxiang*, and argue that it can be translated as “adaptation to a picture” and, by extension, “sutra illustration.” I explain how the term was related to the function and meaning of sutra illustrations, such as those found in the Mogao caves at Dunhuang which depict Amitabha’s Pure Land. I analyze an encomium written by Wang Wei for a Pure Land *bianxiang* commissioned by the Tang imperial official, Dou Shao, and discuss how the use of terms in this encomium, particularly the term *bian*, can help form an understanding of the development of Tang Buddhist beliefs and practices regarding the afterlife and function of *bianxiang*. I explore this problem in three main ways divided into three chapters.

Beginning in Chapter One, I use an art historical analysis of *bianxiang* to explain their function and meaning. I also discuss their relationship to Buddhist rituals, some of which are still practiced today. The significance of this exploration is that it adds to an understanding of Buddhist belief and practice, especially Pure Land Buddhist belief and practice in general. Since its popularization by teachers such as Shandao in the Tang, Pure Land Buddhism has continued to enjoy a large following in China, as well as Japan. Pure Land *bianxiang* are an important part of the history of Pure Land, and any greater understanding of them contributes to a deeper understanding of the movement as a whole.

The attitude expressed toward *bianxiang* in the Dou Shao encomium expresses the ability of *bianxiang* to effect change, not only in the living who engage with the painting, but also in the dedicatee who has already passed away. This is done through the ritual transfer of merit which has always been a fundamental part of Chinese Buddhist practice. In the encomium, Wang Wei plays with the term *bian*, using it both to refer to the sutra illustration and to discuss the process

of spirit transformation and reincarnation into the Pure Land. He thereby emphasizes the role of the *bianxiang* in funerary belief, which was to change the form of the spirit of the dedicatee, from the human body to the “marvelous body” that resides in the Pure Land, through the process of merit generation and transfer.

Merit was believed to be generated from the moment of the intention to create the painting and dedicatory text, and accrued as the work was made and seen. However, the transfer of merit to the dedicatee continued to function indefinitely, perhaps permanently or until the destruction of the image and text. The placement of the *bianxiang* in the ritual space of the temple ensured the continuous creation of merit as the images and activities in that space are all designed with that same intention. According to some theories, even if the location of the *bianxiang* was remote and seldom visited, its very existence would ensure the indefinite action of the ritual machine, which once set into motion by the initial dedication, was believed to continue to generate merit by its very existence.²⁵⁷

In the second chapter of this thesis, I provide an annotated translation of the Dou Shao encomium in order to clarify the overall meaning which Wang Wei sought to express through the dedication. I focus on key classical and Buddhist terms, and show how the text of the encomium is related to Pure Land sutras and *bianxiang* paintings. Interestingly, the Dou Shao encomium is not an unusual text. The practice of writing funerary inscriptions has existed throughout Chinese history, and many Tang poets participated in the Buddhist ritual of dedicating merit to the deceased through encomia on Buddhist paintings.²⁵⁸ Many of these encomia have never been

²⁵⁷ This idea of the “karmic machine” or “karmic engine” is from Amy McNair’s book, *Donors of Longmen*. I have also developed this idea, particularly its association with ritual, in discussions with Daniel Stevenson.

²⁵⁸ Schmid, “Encomia on Paintings,” Abstract, www.academia.edu/DNeilSchmid.

translated, and a more extensive study of them would certainly reveal more about Tang Buddhism, as well as literati culture.

The third chapter of this thesis discusses the evolution of the concept of spirit transformation throughout Chinese history. I argue that the Tang Buddhist understanding of the concept was not just a novel export, but based on ancient and enduring ideas. I focus on the Shang and Zhou dynasties, the Warring States Period, and the Han Dynasty, and show how classical texts from each period express ideas about spirit transformation, the afterlife, and immortality. I also examine tombs from each period, and show how they also relate to beliefs about spirit transformation and the development of the concept of the afterlife. Finally, I show how the development of these ideas over time eventually blended into the Tang Buddhist beliefs expressed by Wang Wei in the Dou Shao encomium.

The ideas expressed in the encomium can be found throughout earlier religious beliefs in Chinese civilization. Some of the most important ideas in ancient Chinese culture, such as the *hun* soul and *xian* immortality seem to have been transmitted to the northern Chinese cultures from southern regions such as the state of Chu. By the time Wang Wei wrote the encomium, Buddhist teachings had also already been coming to China for several centuries. In the Tang, the blending of these ideas, combined with their well-established precedents from the past, allowed for the widespread embrace and development of Chinese Buddhist belief and practice.

Based on this history, it is clear that there was a precedent in China from the earliest times for the concept of the transformation of the spirit after death. The *bianxiang* images painted by Tang Buddhists, such as the ones in the Mogao caves at Dunhuang, were also part of the tradition of belief in spirit transformation, and functioned to effect this transformation in those to whom they were dedicated. According to the Wang Wei encomium, the goal of these

paintings and their dedication was to ensure that the spirit of the deceased could successfully gain the merit necessary to transform into the marvelous body that would inhabit the Pure Land. This is the why Wang Wei used the term *bian* to refer both to the sutra illustration and to the transformation of the spirit. In this way, he further connected the encomium with the function of the image it described, and positioned it as part of a long tradition of funerary dedicatory texts which expressed a belief in spirit transformation on the way to heaven after death.

Through this analysis, this thesis answers the question of how the concept of spirit transformation was imagined in ancient China and went through a process of evolution before the introduction and later popularization of Buddhism. By the time Buddhism had become widely accepted and practiced by a large part of the population in the Tang, Buddhist and native Chinese ideas had blended, and the various traditions had impacted one another. Fundamental concepts about how the spirit transformed after death from as early as the Shang and Zhou dynasties were retained, although they underwent changes. Practices like sacrificing to the ancestors seem to have been maintained through the Han, and other ideas about how to ensure a pleasant afterlife for the deceased, such as tomb-quelling texts used to prevent an undesirable afterlife, also merged with the later Buddhist concepts of merit-dedication which had arrived from India.²⁵⁹

After considering the historical context of *bianxiang* through an analysis of their art, location, the rituals that accompanied them, the content and significance of the sutras that provided their basis, and the pre-Buddhist ideas that informed them, *bianxiang* no longer appear as an enigmatic riddle, but as an integral piece of a cohesive religious system.

²⁵⁹ Daniel Stevenson, "It's Alive," in progress, 2017.

Figures



Figure 1, *Amitayus Meditation Sutra bianxiang*, Dunhuang Cave 217, north wall, www.e-dunhuang.com.



Figure 2, detail of *Amitayus bianxiang*, lotus pond channels.

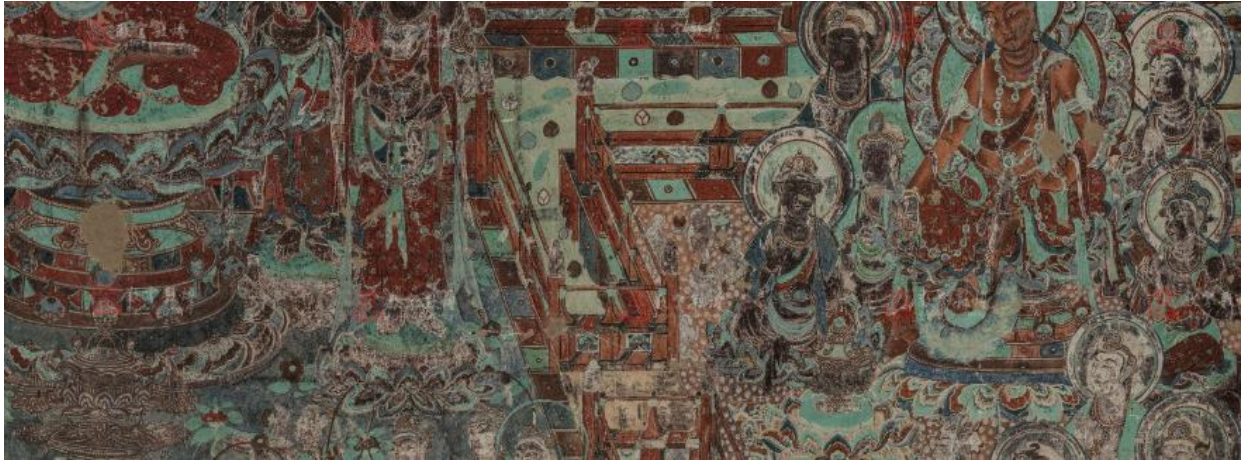


Figure 3, detail of *Amitayus bianxiang*, multicolored lotus buds in lotus pond.



Figure 4, detail of *Amitayus bianxiang*, people reborn in lotus pond.



Figure 5, detail of *Amitayus bianxiang*, mythical birds in lotus pond.



Figure 6, Dunhuang Cave 61, Five Dynasties Period (907-960), image from en.dha.ac.cn.



Figure 7, detail of Cave 61, multiple *bianxiang* covering the wall.



Figure 8, Dunhuang Cave 23, main icons, image from en.dha.ac.cn.

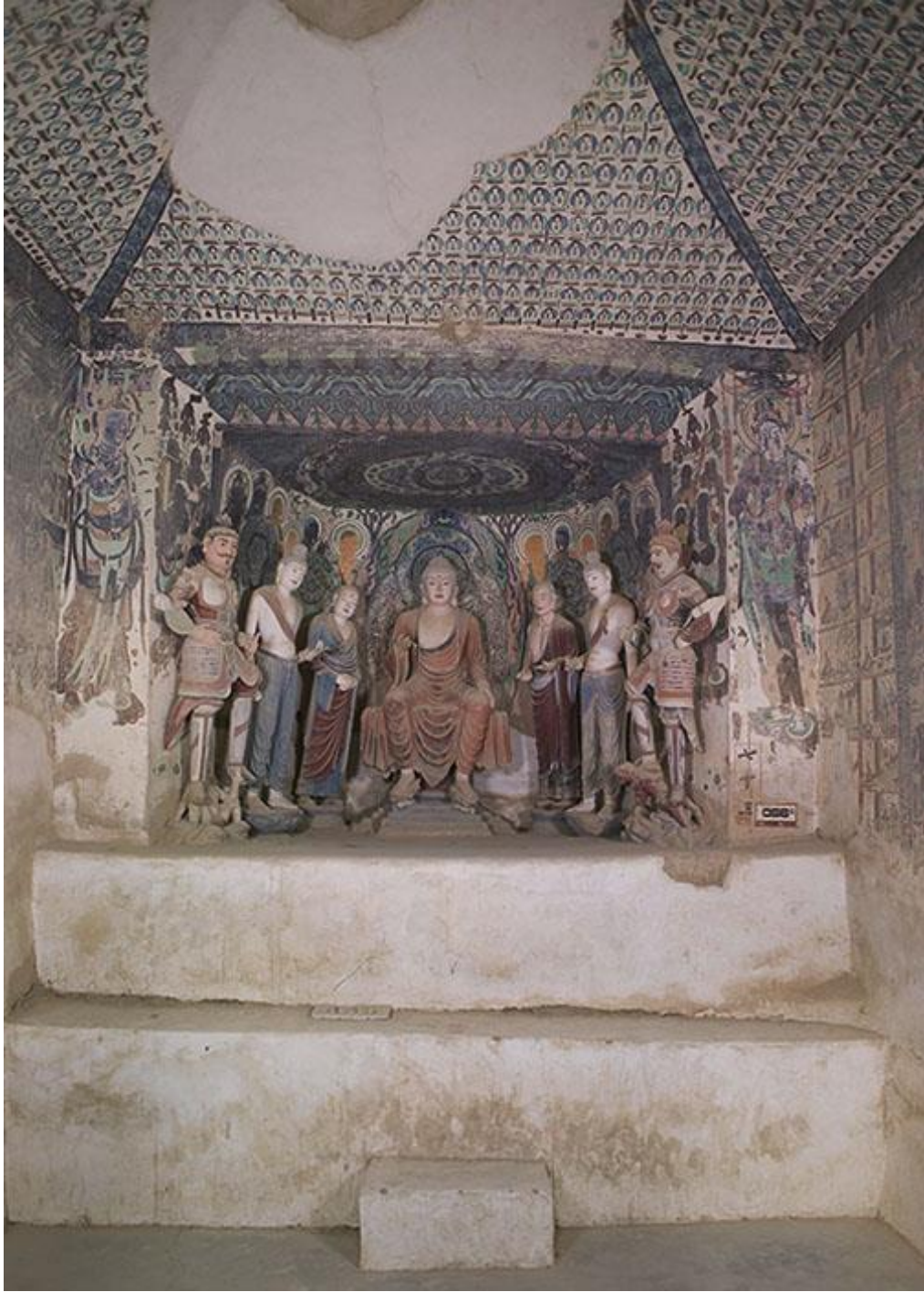


Figure 9, Dunhuang Cave 66, main icons, image from en.dha.ac.cn.



Figure 10, Dunhuang Cave 172, main icons and *bianxiang*, image from en.dha.ac.cn.



Figure 11, *Western Pure Land bianxiang*, Dunhuang Cave 66, south wall. www.e-dunhuang.com.



Figure 12, *Amitayus Meditation Sutra bianxiang*, Dunhuang Cave 66, north wall, www.e-dunhuang.com.



Figure 13, *Amitayus Meditation Sutra bianxiang*, Dunhuang Cave 172, south wall, www.e-dunhuang.com.



Figure 14, *Amitayus Meditation Sutra bianxiang*, Dunhuang Cave 172, north wall, www.e-dunhuang.com.



Figure 15, *Amitayus Meditation Sutra bianxiang*, Dunhuang Cave 103, north wall, www.e-dunhuang.com.



Figure 16, *Lotus Sutra bianxiang*, Dunhuang Cave 103, south wall, www.e-dunhuang.com.



Figure 17, *Vimalakirti Sutra bianxiang*, Dunhuang Cave 103, east wall, en.dha.ac.cn.



Figure 18, details of *Vimalakirti bianxiang*, Cave 103, Vimalakirti.



Figure 19, details of *Vimalakirti bianxiang*, Cave 103, Manjusri.



Figure 20, details of *Vimalakirti bianxiang*, Cave 103.

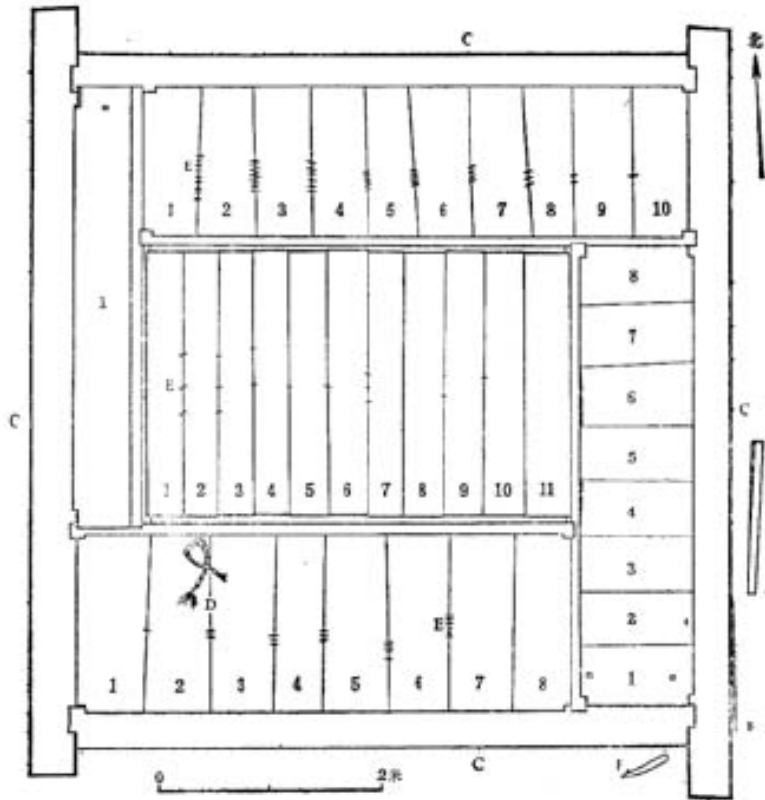


Figure 21, Shao Tuo Tomb Chambers, from Cook, *Death in Ancient China*, 49.



Figure 22, Mawangdui Banner, “T-Shaped Painting on Silk,” 206 BCE-25 CE, Hunan Provincial Museum, www.hnmuseum.com.

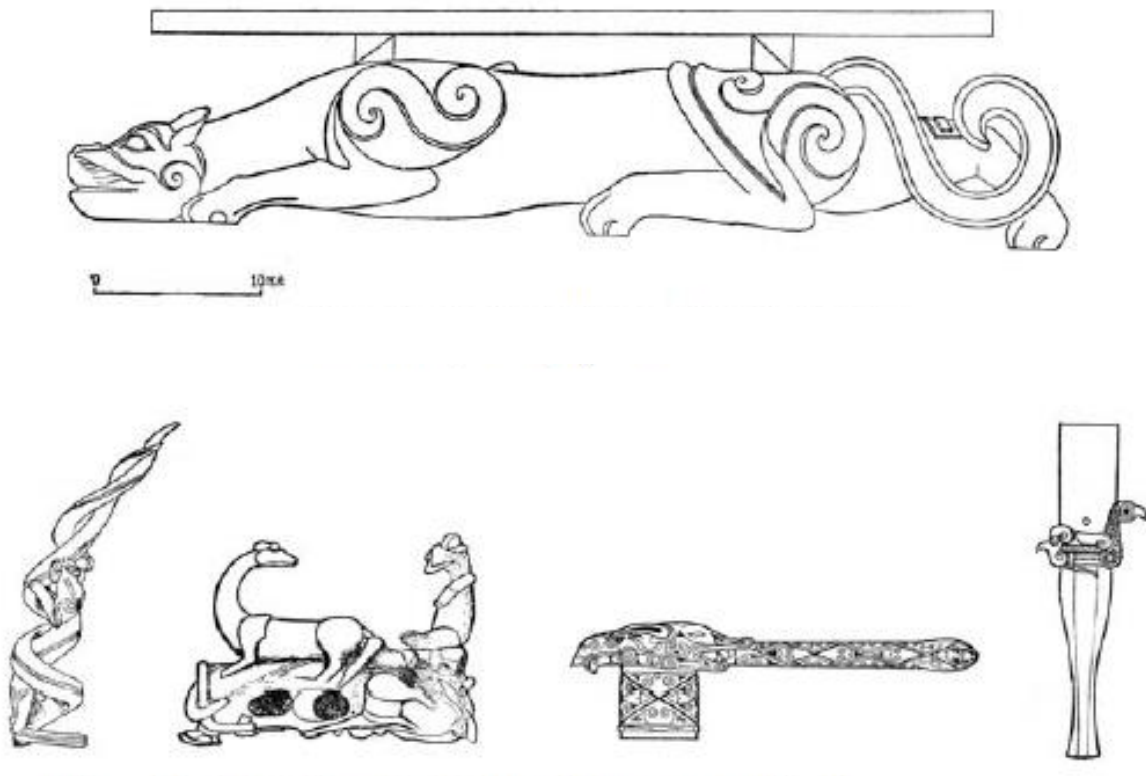


Figure 23, Shao Tuo's Animal Hybrid Ornaments, from Cook, *Death in Ancient China*, 61.

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