

NEW SCHOLARSHIP

The Analysis of Narrative of the Murals of Qutan Si (Gautama Temple)

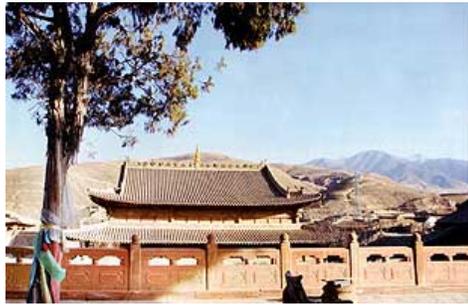


Fig.1 Exterior view of the Qutan Si complex. Source: *Zhongguo Xizang*, 2007:3, p.74.



Fig.2 Plaque reading 'Qutan Si'. Source: *Zhongguo Xizang*, 2007:3, p.80.

Review of: Xie Jisheng and Liao Yang, 'Qutan-si huilang fozhuan bihua neirong bianshi yu fengge fenxi' (Identifying the contents and analyzing the style of the Jataka murals in the ambulatory of Qutan Temple), *Gugong Bowuyuan yuankan* (Palace Museum Journal), 2006.3, pp.16-43.

I regularly visited Qutan Si (Gautama Temple) in the 1990s with colleagues at the Qinghai Cultural Relics and Archaeology Institute, and grew familiar with the precipitous rocky road that had probably ensured the survival of the temple over the five hundred and fifty years since it was built.

The temple stands adjacent to a small town inhabited by Tibetans and Chinese, one that hosts annually a festival of *hua'er* singing that is among the liveliest in China's north-west. (Fig. 3) Only about ten monks, mostly novices, were living in the temple when I visited, and some of the younger ones were listlessly trying to master several elementary Chinese characters on their Tibetan slates. They sprang into action, however, whenever the small team of local archaeologists and conservators took officials or visitors around, and it was not uncommon for a monk to hit or strike out at an outsider, or archaeologist, who drew too close to a holy statue or a mural.



Fig.3 General view of the Qutan Si complex against the Laji mountains. Source: *Zhongguo Xizang*, 2007:3, p.75.

The cultural relics officials were pleased that the monks took their role as custodians so seriously, as they also received stipends for their vigilance. But the monks would regularly refuse to show some of the Tantric votive objects to visitors whom they felt did not appreciate Tibetan Buddhism. However, it is the murals of the temple that are particularly beautiful and noteworthy. One could spend hours gazing at the finely wrought details in the voluptuous green mountain settings of the murals, which were such a contrast to the harsh bone-dry crags of the landscape outside. The murals stood completely open to the elements, yet the dry plateau had ensured that they were remarkably well preserved.

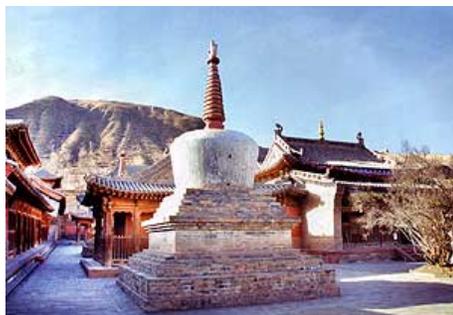


Fig.4 Qutan Hall (right) and Tibetan style chörten (left) Source: *Zhongguo Xizang*, 2007:3, p.78.

Qutan Si is located in Ledu county, Qinghai province (Amdo in Tibetan). This area of 'Greater Tibet', at the time that the temple was built, marked the contiguity of territories of Tibetan, Mongol and Han military, and cultural, influence. Ledu county is also the birthplace of the present Dalai Lama and the previous Panchen Lama. These reincarnations were discovered there by teams initially sent out at different times in the 1930s by the Tibetan government in Lhasa acting on information provided by the Nechung state oracle and other sources that may have been as politically, as they were divinely, inspired.

Apart from the Ming and Qing religious murals in the ambulatory, Qutan Si is one of the finest remaining examples of Ming palace architecture. The narratives that unfold in the murals are examined in detail by the Tibetan studies scholars Xie Jisheng (formerly of CASS, Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, and now at the Han-Tibetan Buddhist Arts Institute of Capital Normal University, Beijing) and Liao Yang (CASS, Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology) in *Gugong Bowuyuan yuankan* (2006:3). Their discussion of the mural paintings at the temple are part of a broader survey of the history of temples and their murals undertaken between 2002 and 2005, although the full report is yet to be published.

Construction of the Tibetan Buddhist temple called Qutan (Gautama) Temple (the Tibetan transliteration provided in the article is gRo-tShang-rDo-eje-vChang, the Tibetan name of the area being gRo-tShang, read Zhuocang in Chinese), located in mountainous terrain near a ravine 20km south of the Ledu county seat in

Qinghai province, extended over a long period of time, although the harmoniousness of its architecture and conception would seem to belie this. Its architecture is similar to that of the Forbidden City in Beijing, and it is sometimes called 'the little Gugong', in acknowledgement of the fact that it only covers an area of 1.4 ha. In common with many other Buddhist temples, it includes the following structures: Diamond Hall (Jingang Dian), Gautama Hall (Qutan Dian) (Fig.4), Precious Light Hall (Baoguang Dian), Hall of the Flourishing Nation (Longguo Dian) (Figs 5 & 6), Bell Tower (Zhong Lou), Drum Tower (Gu Lou) and Stele Pavilion (Bei Ting) (Fig.7). However, it is best known for its exquisite murals, which not only enrich the main halls, but which also decorate the inner ambulatory that surrounds the temple's inner courtyard. (Figs 8 & 9)



Fig.5 Exterior view of Longguo Dian (Hall of the Flourishing Nation) at Qutan Si. Source: *Zhongguo Xizang*, 2007:3, p.77.



Fig.7 Southern beiting at Qutan Si. Source: *Zhongguo Xizang*, 2007:3, p.76.

The oldest structure in the complex is Qutan Dian, on which construction began in Hongwu 24 (1391) and was completed in the following year. While construction of the central court began in the Hongwu reign, it was



Fig.6 Interior view of Longguo Dian (Hall of the Flourishing Nation) showing a Ming-dynasty plaque reading *Huangdi wanwansui* (Long life for the emperor) at Qutan Si. Source: *Zhongguo Xizang*, 2007:3, p.77.

not completed until the Yongle period, with Baoguang Dian only completed in Yongle 16 (1418). Also completed at roughly the same time were: Diamond Hall (Jingang Dian), The Hall of the Past, Present and Future Worlds (Sanshi Dian), Lokapala Hall (Hufa Dian), the central ambulatory and the Small Bell and Drum Towers (Xiao Zhonggu Lou). The central ambulatory extends from either side of Diamond Hall, connecting the small bell tower to the drum tower. The rear hall, also called Hall of the Flourishing Nation (Longguo Dian), was built in Xuande 2 (1427), in compliance with an imperial order issued by Emperor Xuanzong. The entire temple-monastery complex, with the monks residing adjacent to and in the village, was built in the architectural style described in Chinese as 'capital-style' (*jingshi-yangshi*), with a double set of roof-eaves and halls with an anterior span of seven bays (*jian*) and a depth of five bays, resting on a carved stone Mount Sumeru foundation platform.



Fig.8 View of left side of ambulatory at Qutan Si. Source: *Zhongguo Xizang*, 2007:3, p.78.



Fig.9 View of ambulatory at Qutan Si. Source: *Zhongguo Xizang*, 2007:3, p.81.

According to one school of thought, the murals in the surrounding ambulatory, which tell the stories of Buddha's previous incarnations (Jataka tales), were painted between Yongle 16 (1418) and Xuande 2 (1427), and constitute an original narrative sequence, but there were many later additions (some during the Qianlong period). In the course of the repair of the paintings in the Daoguang reign (1821-1850) of the Qing dynasty, painters often failed to understand the original narrative sequence in the murals and as a result they often conflated episodes or added details in the wrong position.

Although the mural painters who worked at Qutan Si during the Qing dynasty left their signatures on their work, these are not dated. However, we do now know that the same team of painters who worked there also painted murals at a nearby temple called Fushen Miao prior to its destruction at the end of the Qing dynasty. The work at Fushen Miao was carried out between Daoguang 18 (1838) and Daoguang 24 (1844) by three local painters—the master Sun Kegong, and his two apprentices, Xu Runwen and He Jihan. Regarding the Qing dynasty murals at Qutan Si, we do know that they were completed by 'three painters from Pingfan' (today's Yongdeng county). This is surprising because the late-Qing sections of the murals sometimes evoke a *Haipai* ('Shanghai school') chiaroscuro style, which would seem to be impossible as it had yet to emerge in Shanghai!

Ferretting through local gazetteers, the authors provide biographical details regarding the three painters who repaired the murals at Fushen Miao and established that these were the same artists who painted the 19th century murals in the ambulatory at Qutan Si. They quote from *Lanzhou Honggu-qu zhi*:

Sun Kegong (?-early Xianfeng period) was a native of Shangyaopu (now Yaojie). He loved calligraphy and painting from childhood. In his youth he became a Buddhist monk, and in

Daoguang 14 (1834), through the recommendation of the abbot of the (Tianzhu) Shangfang Temple, acquired as novices Xu Runwen and He Jihan in order to proceed to Qutan Si in Qinghai to take charge of the painting there. Painting of the murals at Qutan Si was begun in the Xuande reign of the Ming dynasty, but two corridors of paintings—the section of corridor south from Baoguang Hall and the northern section beyond the rear hall—remained incomplete. Sun Kegong set about painting the missing sections of the murals, and in all completed more than 230 sq m of paintings. The main themes he painted were the scene of Nagarjuna presenting treasures to Sakyamuni, the Nirvana and cremation of the Buddha, and the visit of Bodhidharma to the Liang court, as well as various Buddha and Bodhisattva images. In Daoguang 17 (1837), his top student Xu Runwen, working under his direction, finished his work on the sculptures and murals at Qutan Si and at Guandi Temple. In the following year, his second student He Jihan also finished his work on the murals at Qutan Si and at Fushen Temple. His two students returned home, but Sun Kegong remained at Qutan Si reciting scriptures and meditating, and he died there in Xianfeng 1 (1851). He was cremated at Toudaogoukou (Upper Road Gulch) opposite Langying-shibei-tan (Shoals of the Wolf Battalion Stele). [pp.758-9.]

Another painter identified from the signatures on the murals in the eastern ambulatory running from the rear hall, Hall of the Flourishing Nation, is Wang Zhu of Yunwu. Xie Jisheng points out that Yunwu provided a distinctly different cultural background from Shangyaopu, even though Shangyaopu in Yongdeng county is only 15 km from Yunwu (today's Chuankou) in Minhe county. At Shangyaopu one enters the heartland of Gansu Han culture, but Chuankou is steeped in Tibetan culture and is part of the multi-ethnic Huangshui River Valley. This leads Xie to conclude that Wang Zhu was responsible for the images of White Tara and other Tibetan material in that part of the ambulatory. (Fig.10) The entire ambulatory comprises 47 painted panels or spaces (*huamian*); in some of these several adjacent paintings form a single narrative or story, while others combine several plot details within a single work. Some of the panels bear labels explaining their content and subject matter, making it clear that these are Jataka tales, while others record incidents in Siddhartha Guatama's life or record events related to the construction of the temple. (Fig.11)



Fig.10 Detail of panel no.7 of murals in the Qutan Si ambulatory in which the presiding deity is White Tara. Source: *Zhongguo Xizang*, 2007:3, p.81.



Fig.11 Detail of panel no.5, showing an official arriving at the stairs of the Celestial Palace of Indra (Dishitian ???). From: Xie and Yang, op. cit., p.23.

In the Yuan dynasty, literati painting developed to a highpoint, although the literati painting of the early Ming dynasty was relatively lacklustre. In the early Ming, the fashion was for commissioned works of professionally engaged painters (*gongjiang huashi*) from southern China (Jiangnan), notably Buddhist murals. These works received imperial patronage. Yet few Buddhist murals of the early Ming have survived, particularly from the Hongwu to Xuande reigns. Only those at Qutan Si and several other Tibetan Buddhist temples in neighbouring Gansu (Miaoyin Temple in Liancheng and Gan'en Temple in Hongcheng, both in Yongdeng county; and, Shimen Temple in Taoyan township, Zhuoni county) are intact. The murals at Chongshan Temple in Taiyuan, Shanxi province, were contemporaneous with the murals at Qutan Si, but what survives today are only copies made in the Chenghua reign (1465-1487).

Other surviving mural paintings of the early Ming are later works which feature heavy *gongbi* brush work and gaudy colour, and there is a strong use of layering and gold appliqué: Main Hall of Baofan Temple in Lianxi (Zhengtong 2, 1437); Fahai Temple in Beijing (Zhengtong 4, 1439); Jiange Jueyuan Temple (Tianshun 1, 1457); Pilu Hall of Guanyin Temple, Xinjin, Sichuan (Tianshun 6, 1462); Daxiongbao Dian of Longzang Temple in Xinfan (Chenghua 1, 1465); and, the Central Hall at Longju Temple in Guanghan (Chenghua 2, 1466). The mural paintings inside Qutan Hall, not those in the ambulatory around the courtyard, are painted in a similar style.



Fig.12 Detail of panel 24 of murals in ambulatory at Qutan Si. From: Xie and Yang, op. cit., p.32.

What distinguishes the exquisite murals of the earlier Ming period from Qutan Si, and their very successful augmentation in the Daoguang period of the Qing, is that the painters who created them perpetuate the traditions of 'green-blue landscape painting' (*qinglü shanshui*) that was one of the major techniques of literati painting of the Yuan dynasty. (Figs12 & 13) The inclusion by literati painters of figures in landscapes was designed to enliven landscapes, but the figures were never central to such 'green-blue landscape paintings' as Wen Zhengming's 'Wanhua zhengliu tu' (Contending streams in ten thousand valleys), although the figures could be used to reinforce the concept or intended scene (*yijing*), as in Qiu Ying's 'Taoyuan xianjing tu' (The realm of immortals in the peach orchard).

The authors of this fascinating study provide terse



Fig.13 Nirvana scene from panel 41 of murals in ambulatory at Qutan Si. From: Xie and Yang, op. cit., p.37.

summaries of the 47 different painted panels, and, in a valuable tabular supplement to their article, cross-reference the themes of each panel with their treatment in murals at several other temples in China. [BGD, © Bruce Gordon Doar]

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