

## **The life of the Buddha at Chinese Buddhist cave complexes in Northwestern and Central China**

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My dissertation topic and the main aspect of my PhD research is on Buddha's extended biography which includes the narratives of his past lives (known as *jataka* tales) and also the story of his last life as Gotama Sakyamuni and I'm particularly interested in examining the role of the narrative and visual representations of the Buddha's life story for the early spread of Buddhism.

The tentative title of my doctoral dissertation is: *"The Great Life of the Body of Buddha: Re-examination and re-assessment of the images and narratives of the life of Buddha Shakyamuni"*.

My dissertation will be a textual and iconographic re-examination of the connections between Buddhist narratives (and in particular the extended biography of the Buddha) and Buddhist images and will be focusing on the exploration of the connections between textual and iconographic representations of Buddha's lives stories, and also the body of Buddha as depicted in Buddhist narratives and their visual iconic representations and will be a reassessment of the role and significance of narratives about the life of the Buddha and the produced images for the spread of Buddhism from India through Central Asia to China.

Buddhist images, Buddhist cave temples and the role of visual representation of narratives at early Buddhist sites seems have undoubtedly had a very significant role for the spread of Buddhism and is a phenomenon that started in India, developed in Central Asia and then found new development in China. That images play an enormous role in the dissemination of Buddhism is for instance attested by the legend of how Buddhism was first introduced to China – a legend that involves Emperor Ming of the Han who in 1 CE is said to have dreamed of a golden man and the religion is said to have begun its existence in China with the bringing of a golden image of the Buddha. A very similar legend involves the introduction of Buddhism to Japan and the very name that Buddhism was called by the Chinese in the

early days of its transmission is also very telling – it was called *xiangjiao* (Ch.), i.e. the teaching of images, a name that clearly reveals the paramount importance of images in Buddhism.

The topic of my proposed summer research project was: *Narrative images depicting Buddha Shakyamuni's life episodes at Chinese Buddhist cave complexes in Northwestern and Central China.*

Most of my SRA award tenure was spent conducting research at several Buddhist cave temples in Northwestern and Central China and more specifically I managed to visit the important Buddhist grottoes of Bezeklik Caves (Turfan, Xinjiang province), Kizil Caves (Kuqa, Xinjiang), Mogao Caves (Dunhuang, Gansu), Western Thousand Buddha Caves (Dunhuang, Gansu), Yulin Caves (Gansu), Binling Temple Grottoes (Lanzhou, Gansu), Maijishan Caves (Tianshui, Gansu), Longmen Caves (Luoyang, Henan), Yungang Caves (Datong, Shanxi), etc.

In addition to on-site research, I also visited several local museums that also provided important data which is extremely helpful for my dissertation research. I visited the National History Museum (Beijing), Xinjiang Provincial Museum (Urumqi), Gansu Provincial Museum (Lanzhou), Shaanxi Provincial Museum (Xi'an), Beilin Stele Museum and Buddhist stone carving museum (Xi'an), Xi'an City Museum (Xi'an), Luoyang History Museum (Luoyang), etc.

My main objective was to look into and investigate the similarities and differences in the depiction of specific narrative scenes from the life of the Buddha (such as the birth, the First Meditation, the ascetic practice and the Enlightenment) comparing them to those of India and Central Asia, but also exploring the actual physical position of specific scenes in the context of the Chinese cave complexes and the specific caves themselves. I found that the Indian and Central Asian influences on the Buddhist caves in China are even more substantial and important, not just architecturally and structurally but also in terms of their iconographic program and its meaning, something I plan on further investigating in my dissertation.

My methodology is interdisciplinary and comparative. My starting point are the textual depictions relating the narrative scenes from several different canonical sources in Sanskrit, Pali and Chinese, but also draw upon my knowledge and study of the art-historical and archaeological evidence from India and Central Asia and draw comparisons with the depictions of those scenes in China. I'm

especially interested in examining what is the physical position of narrative scenes at specific sites, thus being able to visit the sites was of great importance to my project. As part of my research I took copious notes, sketches and took photographs whenever possible (some sites unfortunately had a ban on photography inside the caves) to document my findings and will definitely be able to use the relevant information as evidence in my dissertation. The findings exceeded my expectations and the evidence gathered will be very helpful to establish a new angle to look at an important connection between Indian, Central Asian and Chinese cave complexes that could further our understanding about early Buddhist religious practice and transmission.

Apart from the immediate goal of gathering evidence to support specific arguments I will put forth in my dissertation, this research trip also allowed me to observe a worrying trend in deterioration at several of the cave temples I visited as part of my on-site research. I had visited five of the cave complexes at least once before more than ten years ago and the deterioration at almost all of them was visible and especially at the Datong Yungang cave complex, staggering. It is apparent that in just a little more than a decade, monuments that had withstood the passing of a millennia and a half seem to be deteriorating fast and urgent preservation efforts to protect the fragile Buddhist art at the sites is extremely important and urgently needed. Apart from environmental deterioration, the large numbers of tourists that visit some of those Buddhist cave sites daily are further complicating and adding to the already fast deteriorating processes. At the Kizil caves near Kuqa in the Xinjiang province which are rather remote and thus not as popular with tourists, and where only a small number of caves are in my observation barely maintained, many of the important and valuable caves are not accessible and there seems to be no maintenance at all and urgent protection and preservation action is required to maintain and preserve the caves which are an historical monument of extreme importance and great artistic and historical value. The situation I observed is indeed rather bleak and the fast deterioration and lack of maintenance will unfortunately lead to the irreparable loss of monuments of high artistic and historical value unless urgent preservation and maintenance efforts are put forth.

The SRA research experience in China was extremely helpful for my PhD dissertation. It not only provided me the resources to undertake a very important on-site research to more than a dozen (at times remote and not easily accessible) Buddhist sites, and be able to gather very important evidence that I plan to use in my dissertation, but also enabled me to establish valuable connections with a network of local Chinese scholars who I hope to stay in touch with and re-connect with on future research projects.