

Buddhism in Central Asia II

Practices and Rituals, Visual and Material Transfer

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PART 2

Practices and Rituals



Seeking the Pure Land in Tangut Art

Michelle C. Wang

1 Introduction

One's fate in the afterlife was an abiding concern of devotees across Buddhist cultures. The search for the pure land inspired a vast range of visual and material expressions, from paintings of bodhisattvas to relief sculptures of the wheel of rebirth. Ritual and religious practices ranged from daily practice and pre-mortem preparations to deathbed veneration and post-mortem offerings, all of which could be carried out collectively by devotees and their loved ones. Even given the vast array of soteriological options across medieval Asia, however, one object of devotion remained constant: Amitābha Buddha of the Western Pure Land.

This paper focuses on a small group of paintings in the collection of the Hermitage, originally recovered from Karakhoto, that feature Amitābha Buddha receiving the soul of a devotee into his Western Pure Land. These works are known as welcoming descent paintings (Chin. *laiyingtu* 來迎圖, Jap. *raigōzu*) (fig. 6.1). The first part of my paper delves into questions of visual and religious transmission that have attended the study of Tangut paintings. Based upon stylistic and iconographic features, these and other paintings have figured prominently in discourses concerning the Chinese or Tibetan stylistic origins of Tangut art. The second half, in turn, makes the case that artistic materials and techniques are equally vital to our understanding of transcultural transmission. Not only was the intermedial circulation of visual motifs important for the transmission of the welcoming descent motif, but the paintings from Karakhoto are distinguished materially from welcoming descent paintings produced elsewhere in Asia.

This set of objects presents a unique opportunity for thinking through the stakes of transcultural research, especially concerning assumptions regarding the origins and afterlives of images, which intersect with the concerns of the global and the local. Previous scholarship on these paintings has positioned them in between Song China (960–1279, 宋) and Koryŏ Korea (936–1392, 高麗國). The paintings, then, purportedly stand not only between distinct visual cultures (China and Tibet) but also between temporal and regional Buddhisms



FIGURE 6.1 Greeting the righteous man on the way to the Pure Land of Amitābha, roll on linen, 84.8 × 63.8 cm (with original border 99 × 63.8 cm). Karakhoto, 13th c. X2411, THE STATE HERMITAGE MUSEUM, ST. PETERSBURG

(Song China and Koryŏ Korea). Here, it is useful to bear in mind Naomi Standen's interrogation of "[...] standard definitions of categories like states, ethnicity, religion [...]" in the pursuit of more interconnected histories.¹

Even prior to the recent scholarly turn toward global art history, Buddhism and its visual cultures offered a readymade model for thinking through transculturalism that has not yet perhaps been fully exploited or complicated. Consider, for example, the following statement by the Islamic art historian David Roxburgh:

The perpetually global nature of Islam—from the seventh century through the modern period—might in fact offer models to some other fields of art history that are now, somewhat belatedly, adopting similar approaches to their materials in recognition of the impact of their individual historiographies, the obfuscation and occlusion of artistic interactions because of nationalism, medium-specific approaches, distinctions between the fine, industrial, and decorative arts, and so on.²

It is precisely the focus on the 'individual' character of artistic interactions that is lost by an easy emphasis on the homogeneity of Buddhist cultures across Asia.³

A second, related concern is that transcultural transmission needs both a starting point and an end point. For too long, the *locus classicus* of Buddhism was the heartland of India; such views were only fairly recently challenged by the discovery of Buddhist manuscripts in the desert oasis cities of central Asia which pointed to their mediating role in the translation and transmission of

1 Naomi Standen, "Colouring Outside the Lines: Methods for a Global History of Eastern Eurasia," *Transactions of the RHS* 29 (2019): 27. Pay particular attention to the following statement made by Standen (*ibid.*, 28): "I am currently writing a global history of eastern Eurasia between 600 and 1350, without using the word 'China.'" See also Alicia Walker, "Globalism," *Studies in Iconography* 33 (2012): 183–196.

2 David Roxburgh, "Review: Art, Trade, and Culture in the Islamic World and Beyond: From the Fatimids to the Mughals: Studies Presented to Doris Behrens-Abouseif by Alison Ohta, J.M. Rogers, and Rosalind W. Haddon, ed.," *Middle East Studies* 53.1 (2019): 140.

3 See, for example: "A culture that is 'cosmopolitan' or 'international' is marked by a shared political order, set of beliefs, language, and/or aesthetics [...]. I argue that this homogeneous, cosmopolitan Buddhist art style that held sway in East Asia for about a century was underscored by the common ideal or utopia of a 'Buddhist state' or 'Buddhist empire.'" In Dorothy C. Wong, *Buddhist Pilgrim-Monks as Agents of Cultural and Artistic Transmission: The International Buddhist Art Style in East Asia, ca. 645–770* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2018), 2.

Buddhist texts eastward into China.⁴ The discourse of localisation, which gestured toward the sinicisation of foreign forms, has also privileged the cultures of settled states and major dynasties versus those of nomadic or border regimes.⁵ This dynamic is revisited time and again in discourses of Tangut art, which emerged with the appearance of the Tangut people in the late 10th to early 11th centuries (in the western part of present-day Gansu (甘肅) province) and the establishment of the Tangut Kingdom in 1038 with its capital in Xingqing (興慶) (present-day Yinchuan (銀川), Ningxia Autonomous Region).⁶ Not only was the Tangut state (ca. 1038–1227, in Chinese sources known as Xixia 西夏) surrounded by the Chinese and Tibetans, but those states had much longer sedentary histories than did the Tanguts, and their own visual traditions. While the presence of Chinese and Tibetan Buddhist monks or artists in the Tangut heartland must be acknowledged, so must the agency and innovations of Tangut devotees and donors.⁷

In this paper, I examine paintings of Amitābha's welcoming descent from Song China and from medieval Japan and Korea, not only to hypothesise about possible paths of transmission, but also to examine them in a comparative context. That is to say, by looking at Tangut Pure Land paintings against those of the Tangut state's immediate neighbours, we can gain a clearer sense of their unique particularities which emerged from 'local,' not just 'localised' contexts and distinct phenomenological demands and possibilities.

2 Amitābha's Welcoming Descent

The corpus of Amitābha paintings from Karakhoto focuses on two distinct motifs, the first of which is Amitābha in the Western Pure Land and the second of which is Amitābha's welcoming descent from the Western Pure Land. One might say that Amitābha was more or less a moving target, as devotees could aspire to an encounter with the buddha through contemplation of the

4 See, for example, Valerie Hansen, "The Path of Buddhism into China: The View from Turfan," *Asia Major Third Series* 11.2 (1998): 37–66.

5 The term 'localisation' often appeared in tandem with discourses of 'sinicisation' in earlier scholarship on Buddhist art; see, for example, Ning Qiang, *Art, Religion and Politics in Medieval China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), 5, 77.

6 Yu-Min Lee, "Amitābha Paintings from Khara Khoto," *National Palace Museum Bulletin* 31.6 (1997): 1. According to Lee, "Tangut Buddhism developed in the shadow of China and Tibet." See Lee, "Amitābha Paintings from Khara Khoto," 2.

7 Craftsmen from the Northern Song court were requested by the Tangut in 1063. *Xi Xiaji* 西夏紀 [The Tangut Records] as cited in Lee, "Amitābha Paintings from Khara Khoto," 10, n. 39.

Western Pure Land during life, at the moment of their death, or upon their rebirth in the Western Pure Land.⁸ Regardless of the motif, visual representations of both were characterised by a remarkable sense of immediacy, as will be further discussed.

Paintings of Amitābha in the Western Pure Land typically showed him seated frontally facing on a lotus throne in between the Bodhisattvas Avalokiteśvara and Mahāsthāmaprāpta (fig. 6.2). The hieratic scale between the buddha and bodhisattvas is reinforced as the latter turn their bodies toward the buddha in a three-quarter pose of adoration. The lotus pedestals of the three deities emerge from a single stalk that rises from a lotus pond. In the lotus pond are miniscule images of the souls being reborn in the Western Pure Land from lotus buds (fig. 6.3). As these two paintings indicate, there were variations in material support, style, and ancillary motifs.

Paintings of Amitābha's welcoming descent in the Hermitage were also executed on a diverse range of material supports: portable paintings made on silk, hemp, as well as mural paintings. These images, too, display several consistent features. The first of these is the descent of Amitābha on a swirl of clouds from the upper right corner of the pictorial frame (fig. 6.1). In front of him, and standing also on the same mass of clouds, are the Bodhisattvas Avalokiteśvara and Mahāsthāmaprāpta, who together hold a lotus pedestal in their hands. As noted by other scholars, a distinctive motif is the appearance of the deceased in the lower left corner, and again alighting on the lotus pedestal held by the two bodhisattvas.⁹ Yet another is the leftward-facing orientation of the buddha and bodhisattvas. In extant works, the deceased is a layman (fig. 6.1, 6.4), a female-male couple (fig. 6.5), or a monk (fig. 6.6).

As earlier noted, the discourse on Tangut paintings of Amitābha's welcoming descent has been dominated by the question of their models. In terms of the chronology of these images in East Asia, one of the earliest might have been a mural painting on the west wall of the Northern Song Dynasty (960–1126, 北宋) Kaihua Temple (開化寺), located in Gaoping (高平), Shanxi province (fig. 6.7).¹⁰ In the upper section of the mural painting, a buddha in three-quarter profile descends on a trail of clouds and hovers just above the

8 Jimmy Yu, "Pure Land Devotion in East Asia," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to East and Inner Asian Buddhism*, ed. Mario Poceski (Chichester; Malden: John Wiley & Sons Inc., 2014), 201–220 provides a helpful overview of the multiplicity of pure land discourses in Asia, problematizing the sectarian history of Pure Land Buddhism and urging attention instead to devotion to Amitābha Buddha and the goal of rebirth in his Western Pure Land. My thanks to an anonymous reviewer of this article for the reference.

9 Lee, "Amitābha Paintings from Khara Khoto," 12.

10 Lee, "Amitābha Paintings from Khara Khoto," 10.



FIGURE 6.2 Pure Land of Amitābha, roll on silk, 58 × 34 cm. Karakhoto, 13th–14th c. X2422, THE STATE HERMITAGE MUSEUM, ST. PETERSBURG



FIGURE 6.3 Pure Land of Amitābha, *thangka* on canvas, 76 × 43 cm. Karkhoto, late 12th–13th c.

X2349, THE STATE HERMITAGE MUSEUM, ST. PETERSBURG



FIGURE 6.4 Greeting the righteous man on the way to the Pure Land of Amitābha, roll on silk, 32 × 19.5 cm. Karakhoto. 13th c. (?)

X2477, THE STATE HERMITAGE MUSEUM, ST. PETERSBURG

heads of a group of richly dressed women standing below, none of whom seem to be aware of his presence. A ray of light emits from the buddha's *ūrṇā*, the spiral at the forehead, and shoots directly toward a male figure who is lifted above a lotus pedestal by gathering clouds. The rapport between this figure and the buddha seems to echo that of Amitābha Buddha and the deceased in



FIGURE 6.5 Amitābha appearing before worshippers, roll on silk, 125 × 64 cm. Karakhoto, 12th–13th c.
X2416, THE STATE HERMITAGE MUSEUM, ST. PETERSBURG



FIGURE 6.6 Greeting the righteous man on the way to the Pure Land of Amitābha, roll on canvas, 142.5 × 94 cm. Karakhoto, 13th c.

X2410, THE STATE HERMITAGE MUSEUM, ST. PETERSBURG



FIGURE 6.7 Detail from buddha preaching scene, west wall of Kaihua Temple, Chinese, mural painting, Gaoping, Shanxi province

the Tangut welcoming descent paintings. However, the buddha is not attended by bodhisattvas, as is the case with Amitābha. Furthermore, the status of the male figure as having originally been supported by a lotus pedestal seems to rule out his identification as a lay follower, as none of the other figures milling around him stand upon lotus pedestals. Therefore, it is difficult to identify this visual motif with certainty as Amitābha of the welcoming descent.

In fact, the visual motif of Amitābha of the welcoming descent did not flourish until the Southern Song Dynasty (1127–1179, 南宋) (fig. 6.8–6.9), and is



FIGURE 6.8 Buddha Amitābha descending from his Pure Land, hanging scroll, ink and color on silk, 135.9 × 58.4 cm, with mounting and knobs 243.2 × 85.1 cm, 13th c. 1980.275, METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, THE DILLON FUND GIFT



FIGURE 6.9 Amitābha trinity descending on clouds, hanging scroll, ink, color, and gold on silk, 97.1 × 53.8 cm, 12th c.
09.86, MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS BOSTON, DENMAN WALDO ROSS COLLECTION

closely related to materials from medieval Japan (fig. 6.10) and Korea (fig. 6.11).¹¹ The modern scholarship on these paintings has hypothesised about the origins and circulation of welcoming descent imagery. For example, Lee Yu-min considered whether the origins of the imagery lay in Northern or Southern Song paintings. As she notes, the Tangut welcoming descent paintings were little known outside of Russia until they were displayed in the traveling exhibition *Lost Empire of the Silk Road—Buddhist Art from Khara Khoto* in Europe and Taiwan in 1993–1994. Before then, because the genre was better known from extant Japanese paintings, Japanese scholars argued from the 1940s onward that the motif had first appeared in Japan.¹²

In articles published only a few years after that landmark exhibition, Lee assessed catalogue essays written by the Russian scholars Maria Rudova and Kira F. Samosyuk, both of whom posited that the welcoming descent motif was based upon Song or Southern Song models.¹³ Lee endeavored to uncover whether the prototypes of Tangut welcoming descent imagery lay in Northern or Southern Song paintings, and whether “Hsi-Hsia works [should] be considered extensions of Song painting into a peripheral region, and thus only a footnote to Chinese Buddhist painting?”¹⁴ Ultimately, Lee concluded that Tangut and Southern Song welcoming descent paintings both originated from a Northern Song model but that the compositional differences between them could be explained by their subsequent development into independent traditions.¹⁵ Her argument rests largely on chronology, since the earliest Tangut welcoming decent paintings date to the early twelfth century, or the end of the Northern Song. This is despite her acknowledgment that “[...] unfortunately, no Northern Song *lai-ying* paintings have survived to date.”¹⁶

On the other hand, scholars of Japanese and Korean art and Buddhism believe that Tangut paintings might have been the source of welcoming descent compositions in Goryeo painting. Following Ide Seinosuke, Richard

11 A detail from the Tang Dynasty Mogao Cave 431 shows the deceased ascending but not the welcoming descent of Amitābha. See Li Yumin 李玉珉, “Heishuicheng chutu Xixia Mituohua chutan 黑水城出土西夏彌陀畫初探 [Preliminary Study of Tangut Amitābha Paintings Excavated from Khara Khoto],” *Gugong xueshu jikan* 故宮學術季刊 [The National Palace Museum Research Quarterly] 13.4 (1996): 1–50; fig. 1.

12 Lee, “Amitābha Paintings from Khara Khoto,” 2. See footnote 3 on the same page for a survey of the relevant Japanese-language scholarship.

13 Lee, “Amitābha Paintings from Khara Khoto,” 3 and nos. 4–5. See also Li, “Heishuicheng chutu Xixia Mituohua chutan,” 14.

14 Lee, “Amitābha Paintings from Khara Khoto,” 3.

15 Yu-Min Lee, “Amitābha Paintings from Khara Khoto (continued),” *National Palace Museum Bulletin* 32.1 (1997): 16–33, especially 17–18, 26.

16 Lee, “Amitābha Paintings from Khara Khoto (continued),” 18.



FIGURE 6.10
 Welcoming descent of Amitābha Buddha,
 hanging scroll, gold ink, cut-gold leaf
 (kirikane), and color on indigo dyed
 silk, 98.7 × 38.7 cm, mounting including
 suspension core and roller ends 194.9 ×
 61.5 cm, Japanese Nambokuchō period
 (1333–1392), 14th c.
 2013.47, HARVARD ART MUSEUMS/
 ARTHUR M. SACKLER MUSEUM, THE
 LOUIS V. LEDOUX COLLECTION; GIFT
 OF MRS. L. PIERRE LEDOUX IN MEMORY
 OF HER HUSBAND



FIGURE 6.11 Amit'a Triad, Korean, hanging scroll, ink, color and gold on silk, 130.2 × 81.9cm, 14th c.
61.204.30, BROOKLYN MUSEUM, GIFT OF PROFESSOR HAROLD G. HENDERSON

McBride states that the iconography was generally believed to have developed from Tangut and Dunhuang (敦煌) paintings, although both note compositional differences between Tangut and Goryeo works.¹⁷ Yet other scholarship has highlighted the artistic impact of welcoming descent paintings produced in the Chinese port city of Ningbo (寧波) in present-day Zhejiang province in transcultural transmission. Based upon style and iconography, An-yi Pan and Junhyoung Michael Shin argue that Goryeo and Joseon (1392–1897, 朝鮮) welcoming descent paintings display evidence of Sino-Korean artistic transmission.¹⁸

Here, I want to point out that the emphasis on paintings to the exclusion of works in other media might have turned scholars' eyes away from another fruitful source of material: the frontispieces of woodblock printed *sūtras*. In recent years, scholarly attention has been paid to the role of intermediality in the transcultural transmission of artistic motifs, particularly during the Song, Yuan (1279–1368, 元), and conquest dynasties. In the work of Shih-shan Susan Huang and Anne Saliceti-Collins, the vibrant circulation of woodblock printed *sūtras* between the Tangut and their neighbours has challenged earlier perceptions of them as occupying the periphery of East Asia and instead demonstrated their centrality in the patronage and production of art.¹⁹

During the Northern Song Dynasty, the composition of woodblock prints often borrowed from paintings. In certain cases, prints were even made to mimic the dimensions and format of hanging scrolls.²⁰ Yet the direction of intermedial intervention could also flow from print onto painting. In the case of *Lotus sūtra* frontispieces, Shih-shan Susan Huang has argued that the particular placement of the frontispiece at the head of a scroll resulted in a more

17 See Richard McBride, "Koryŏ Buddhist Paintings and the Cult of Amitābha: Visions of a Hwaŏm-Inspired Pure Land," *Journal of Korean Religions* 6.1 (April 2015): 106 and Ide Seinosuke, "The World of Goryeo Buddhist Painting," in *Goryeo Dynasty: Korea's Age of Enlightenment, 918–1392*, ed. Kumja Paik Kim (San Francisco: Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, 2003), 36.

18 See An-yi Pan, "A Southern Song Dynasty Amitābha Triad Painting Reconsidered," *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art* 81.9 (1994): 351, 359–360 and Junhyoung Michael Shin, "The Face-to-Face Advent of the Amitābha Triad: A Fifteenth-Century Welcoming Descent," *Cleveland Studies in the History of Art* 6 (2001): 37–40.

19 Anne Saliceti-Collins, "Xi Xia Buddhist Woodblock Prints Excavated in Khara Khoto: A Case Study of Transculturation in East Asia, Eleventh-Thirteenth Centuries" (MA thesis, University of Washington, 2007); Shih-shan Susan Huang, "Reassessing Printed Buddhist Frontispieces from Xi Xia," *Zhejiang University Journal of Art and Archaeology* 1 (2014): 129–182, especially 130–131, especially 130, no. 2.

20 Shih-shan Susan Huang terms this "media transfer." See her "Media Transfer and Modular Construction: The Printing of Lotus Sutra Frontispieces in Song China," *Ars Orientalis* 41 (2011): 135–163, especially 137–140.



FIGURE 6.12 Frontispiece to the *Diamond sūtra*, woodblock-printed scroll, ink on paper, 27.6 × 499.5 cm. Dated 868
OR.8210/P.2, BRITISH LIBRARY

dynamic composition that was diagonally oriented from right to left, distinct from the static and frontally-facing compositions that characterised the Tang Dynasty (618–907, 唐) renditions at Dunhuang. The stacking of the buddha and his retinue in the right-hand side of the frontispiece and their leftward gaze anticipated the unrolling and reading of a Buddhist scroll, an early template of which we can see in the frontispiece to the *Diamond sūtra* from Dunhuang in the British Library (fig. 6.12).²¹

For the *Lotus sūtra* frontispieces, the diagonal orientation of the buddha and his retinue resulted in a purely visual effect that did not necessarily have any substantive bearing on the soteriological concerns of the *sūtra*. In the case of Amitābha's welcoming descent, however, the direction of the buddha's gaze and movement could be considered as significant elements, because they not only distinguished regional variations on the motif, but had the potential to either visually reinforce or obfuscate the movement of the buddha's descent from the Western Pure Land.

21 Huang, "Media Transfer and Modular Construction," 140–141.

3 Leftward Looking

The previous scholarship on paintings of Amitābha's welcoming descent has noted that Japanese paintings almost always consistently showed the buddha turning from left to right in a three-quarter profile (fig. 6.10).²² It is believed that this directional orientation was intended to convey the buddha's eastward (rightward) descent from the west, which was associated with the left-hand side of the painting. Southern Song and Goryeo welcoming descent paintings, on the other hand, were often oriented from right to left (figs. 6.8 and 6.11). This has created confusion, as it seems to imply that the buddha is descending to the west, rather than moving in an eastward direction.

One answer to this visual anomaly, I argue, can be found in printed frontispieces associated with the *Amitābha sūtras*. So far, I am aware of two extant frontispieces that display Amitābha's welcoming descent, both of which were recovered from Karakhoto and now kept in Russian collections. The first is numbered ТК 244 (fig. 6.13), which was the frontispiece for the *Smaller Sukhāvativyūhasūtra*, the *Foshuo Amituo jing* 佛說阿彌陀經 [The *Amitābha sūtra* as Spoken by the Buddha]. In this composition, Amitābha occupies the right half of the image, his body enveloped in rays of light and extending his right hand downward in a giving gesture. Descending on a sea of clouds, his bodhisattva attendants Avalokiteśvara and Mahāsthāmaprāpta take the lead and hold a lotus pedestal in order to receive the soul of the devotee. A monk stands before them with his hands brought together in a gesture of reverence. Despite the fact that it is the bodhisattvas who stand immediately before him, the monk-devotee is connected directly to Amitābha by a ray that shoots out from his *ūrṇā* and broadens to envelop the body of the monk-devotee. Musical instruments and flowers float in the negative space of the left side of the image. A cartouche in the upper right corner reads in Chinese "Amitābha Buddha" (Chin. Amitufo 阿彌陀佛). A cartouche directly above the head of the monk reads in Chinese "disciple Gao Xuanwu" (Chin. *dizi* Gao Xuanwu 弟子高玄悟).²³

A second frontispiece is numbered x2478 (fig. 6.14). Amitābha similarly stands in the right-hand side and points his right hand downward in the giving gesture. Swirling clouds around his head replace the rays of light seen in the previous frontispiece. Standing in front of him, Avalokiteśvara and

22 Ide, "The World of Goryeo Buddhist Painting," 40; see also Lee, "Amitābha Paintings from Khara Khoto (continued)," 18–19.

23 For a detailed analysis of this image, see Saliceti-Collins, "Xi Xia Buddhist Woodblock Prints Excavated in Khara Khoto," 80–81. See also Han Xiaomang 韓小忙, *Xi Xia meishushi* 西夏美術史 [History of Tangut Art] (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 2001), 58–59.



FIGURE 6.13 Frontispiece to the *Smaller Amitābha sūtra*, woodblock print, Karakhoto TK 244, INSTITUTE OF ORIENTAL MANUSCRIPTS (IOM) OF THE RUSSIAN ACADEMY OF SCIENCES

Mahāsthāmaprāpta hold a lotus pedestal as they peer solicitously at a semi-clad baby rising from a mass of clouds originating from the kneeling lay male devotee below. The baby holds his hands together in a gesture of veneration and steps forward toward the lotus pedestal. Due to extensive damage along the top of the extant portion of the frontispiece, we cannot see whether there is a ray of light connecting the buddha and devotee. Nevertheless, the main elements of both frontispieces remain the same, with the primary difference being the inclusion or lack of the baby. The second frontispiece also lacks carouches and inscriptions.

The frontispieces correspond with the right to left orientation of the Tangut paintings, on the other hand, show a left to right orientation consistently. Furthermore, the similarities between the compositions are striking, in particular, the doubling of the figure of the pious deceased and the welcoming role played by the two bodhisattvas. The circulation of Buddhist *sūtras* between



FIGURE 6.14 Greeting the righteous man on the way to the Pure Land of Amitābha (fragment), xylograph, 16.8 × 21.7 cm. Karakhoto, 12th–13th c. X2478, THE STATE HERMITAGE MUSEUM, ST. PETERSBURG

the Tangut and Song China not only resulted in the transmission of Buddhist teachings and practices, but also in the transmission of Buddhist imagery.

4 Pure Land Devotion in Karakhoto

In Karakhoto, thirteen texts pertaining to Amitābha were discovered.²⁴ From these texts, inscriptions, and prayer texts (Chin. *yuānwén* 願文), it appears that pure land belief among the Tanguts was strongest during the second half of the 12th century to the beginning of the 13th century. Already in the late

24 Li, “Heishuicheng chutu Xixia Mituohua chutan,” 9–10. Saliceti-Collins, “Xi Xia Buddhist Woodblock Prints,” 79; Cui Hongfen 崔紅芬, *Xi Xia Hexi fojiao yanjiu* 西夏河西佛教研究 [Studies on Buddhism of the Hexi Corridor under the Tangut Rule] (Beijing: Minzu chubanshe, 2010), 109–110.

11th century, references to either the Western Pure Land (Chin. *xifang* 西方) or Pure Land (Chin. *jingfang* 淨方) appear.²⁵

Of the pure land texts discovered at Karakhoto, three were in Chinese, seven were in Tangut, and three were in Sanskrit. Of the Chinese texts, there were:

- (1) *Miyan yuanyin wangsheng ji* 密咒圓因往生集 [Collected Secret Mantras of the Perfect Causes of Rebirth into the Pure Land], T. 1956
- (2) *Foshuo dacheng sheng wuliangshou jue ding guangming wang rulai tuoluoni jing* 佛說大乘聖無量壽決定光明王如來陀羅尼經 [Dhāraṇīsūtra Preached by the Buddha on the Greater Vehicle Sage, the Buddha of Immeasurable Life, the Decidedly Radiant King Tathāgata]
- (3) *Wuliangshou jing* 無量壽經 [Larger *Sukhāvātīvyūhasūtra*], T. 360

In Tangut, there were:

- (1) *Wuliangshou jing* 無量壽經 [Larger *Sukhāvātīvyūhasūtra*], T. 360
- (2) *Foshuo Amituo jing* 佛說阿彌陀經 [Smaller *Sukhāvātīvyūhasūtra*], T. 366
- (3) *Wuliangshou zongyao jing* 無量壽宗要經 [Sūtra of the Dhāraṇī of the Buddha of Immeasurable Life]
- (4) *Jingtu qiusheng shunyao lun* 淨土求生順要論 [Discourse on Complying with the Essentials of Seeking Rebirth in the Pure Land]
- (5) *Jingtu qiusheng shunyao yu* 淨土求生順要語 [Discourse on Complying with the Essentials of Seeking Rebirth in the Pure Land]
- (6) *Xifang jingtu shiyi lun* 西方淨土十疑論 [Ten Doubts about the Pure Land], T. 1961
- (7) *Fo suoguan wuliangshou fo jing gaoyao shu* 佛所觀無量壽佛經膏藥疏 [Plaster Commentary on the Sūtra of the Buddha of Immeasurable Life Contemplated by the Buddha]

Finally, in Sanskrit there were:

- (1) *Miyan yuanyin wangsheng ji* 密咒圓因往生集 [Collected Secret Mantras of the Perfect Causes of Rebirth into the Pure Land] T. 1956
- (2) *Sheng wuliangshou yibaiba ming tuoluoni* 聖無量壽一百八名陀羅尼 [Dhāraṇī of the One Hundred and Eight Names of the Sage Buddha of Immeasurable Life]
- (3) *Amituo fo zhou* 阿彌陀佛咒 [Mantra of Amitābha Buddha]

Thus, we can see that foundational texts of pure land Buddhism were available in both Chinese and Tangut; the *Larger Sukhāvātīvyūhasūtra* was preserved in Chinese and Tangut and the *Smaller Sukhāvātīvyūhasūtra* was preserved in Tangut. *Dhāraṇī sūtras* were also preserved in all three languages, indicating the intermingling of Pure Land and Esoteric elements.²⁶ The *Foshuo guan*

25 Li, "Heishuicheng chutu Xixia Mituohua chutan," 7–10.

26 Li, "Heishuicheng chutu Xixia Amituo hua chutan," 9–10.

wuliangshoufo jing 佛說觀無量壽佛經 [Contemplation Sūtra] (T. 365) appears not to have been preserved at Karakhoto in any language. Importantly, given the material features of relevant paintings, none of the extant Pure Land texts were discovered in Tibetan translation. This is intriguing, given that the *Smaller* and *Larger Sukhāvātīvyūhasūtra* had both been translated from Sanskrit into Tibetan by the compilation of the Denkarma Catalogue (9th c., Tib. dKar chag lDan dkar ma) and have been listed in all known editions of the Tibetan canon.²⁷ This is also despite the presence of Tibetan imperial preceptors at the Tangut court by the 12th century.²⁸

The presence of the *Larger Sukhāvātīvyūhasūtra* is particularly significant, because the welcoming descent motif refers to the vow made by Amitābha to descend from the Western Pure Land and appear before pious devotees, enabling them to be reborn in the Western Pure Land after death.²⁹ According to the *Larger Sukhāvātīvyūhasūtra* (T. 360), Śākyamuni Buddha addresses Ananda regarding the three grades of aspirants who seek rebirth in the Western Pure Land. Each grade of aspirant is distinguished by their monastic or lay status, and commitment to performing meritorious deeds. For those in the highest grade, just as they are about to die, Amitāyus will appear before them with his retinue, whereupon they will follow him to be reborn in his Western Pure Land. They will be born “[...] spontaneously from within seven-jeweled lotus flowers.” To those in the middle grade of aspirants, “[...] Amitāyus will manifest his transformed body, which is fully possessed of the same radiance and physical characteristics and marks as those of the real buddha, and make it appear before them, together with a host of sages. Then they will follow this transformed buddha and be born in the Pure Land.” For those in the lowest

27 Georgios T. Halkias, *Luminous Bliss: A Religious History of Pure Land Literature in Tibet—with an Annotated English Translation and Critical Analysis of the Orgyan-gling Gold Manuscript of the Short Sukhāvātīvyūhasūtra* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2017), 63–64.

28 Ruth W. Dunnell studies the eight Tangut imperial preceptors, at least some of whom were Tibetan, in her “Translating History from Tangut Buddhist Texts,” *Asia Major* 22.1 (2009): 41–78. For the preference by Tanguts for the Chinese translations of Buddhist sūtras, see Imre Galambos, *Translating Chinese Tradition and Teaching Tangut Culture: Manuscripts and Printed Books from Khara-Khoto* (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2015), 124–125. Kirill Solonin helpfully outlines the development of “Sinitic Buddhism” among the Tanguts, especially Chan and Huayan Buddhism, in his “Sinitic Buddhism in the Tangut State,” *Central Asiatic Journal* 57 (2014): 157–183. Solonin further points to the role played by Tangut monks in mediating between Chinese and Tibetan Buddhism; see his “Buddhist Connections Between the Liao and Xixia: Preliminary Considerations,” *Journal of Song-Yuan Studies* 43 (2013): 177.

29 Shin, “The Face-to-Face Advent of the Amitābha Triad,” 28.

grade of aspirants, they will see Amitāyus in a dream and be reborn in the Pure Land.³⁰

This notion is elaborated in the *Contemplation sūtra*. Here, a system of nine grades of rebirth, three levels within each grade, is articulated. For those who attain rebirth in the upper, middle, and lowest levels of the highest grade, Amitāyus will appear to the devotee as they are about to die, along with Avalokiteśvara, Mahāsthāmaprāpta, and a large assembly holding either a *vajra* seat, purple-gold seat, or golden lotus flower. They are reborn in the Western Pure Land in the time it takes to snap one's fingers, in an instant (lotus opens after one night), and immediately (lotus opens after a day and a night). For the upper level, it is described that Amitāyus “[...] releases a great flood of light that illuminates the aspirant's body.” The buddha and bodhisattvas extend their hands in welcome in the upper level and in the middle level, he says that “I have come to welcome you.” In the upper level, the aspirant “[...] rejoices so greatly as to dance [...],” in the middle level, he sits on the seat and joins his palms to praise the buddhas, and in the lower level, he sits on the lotus, which closes around him.³¹

The printed Buddhist texts that were discovered at Karakhoto were mostly sponsored by the Tangut royal clan. In 1031–1073, the Tangut made six requests toward the Northern Song for copies of the Kaibao Canon (Chin. *kaibao zang* 開寶藏); these were subsequently housed in monasteries built in the Tangut capital. The second half of the eleventh century further saw translations of Buddhist texts into Tangut, with printing bureaus established in order to produce texts printed in the Tangut script.³² Of the two frontispieces discussed earlier, the first (fig. 6.13) contained Chinese inscriptions and lacked the figure of the reborn devotee. The second frontispiece (fig. 6.14) lacked inscriptions completely, making it impossible to determine the language in which the *sūtra* had been printed, but it included the image of the devotee reborn as an infant in the Western Pure Land. From a comparison between these two

30 Hisao Inagaki and Harold Stewart, trans., *The Three Pure Land Sutras* (Berkeley: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 2003), 35–36. Also T. 12.360, 272b15–272c10.

31 Inagaki and Stewart, *The Three Pure Land Sutras*, 92–94. Also T. 12.365, 344c9–346a26.

32 Huang, “Reassessing Printed Buddhist Frontispieces from Xi Xia,” 137–138. There are five woodblock printed versions of the *Smaller Sukhāvātīvyūhasūtra* extant; Meng Liefu 孟列夫, *Heishuicheng chutu Hanwen yishu xulu* 黑城出土漢文遺書敘錄 [Record of Chinese Manuscripts Excavated from Khara Khoto], [Lev N. Menshi'khov, *Opisanie kitaiskoi chasti kollektii iz Khara-Khoto (fond Kozlova)*, trans. Wang Kexiao 王克孝] (Yinchuan: Ningxia renmin chubanshe, 1994) cited in Sun Changsheng 孫昌盛, “Lielun Xixia de jingtu xinyang 略論西夏的淨土信仰 [Brief Discussion of Tangut Pure Land Belief],” *Ningxia daxue xuebao* 寧夏大學學報 (人文社會科學版) *Journal of Ningxia University (Humanities & Social Science Edition)* 21.2 (1999): 30, no. 2.

frontispieces, it is tempting to interpret this transformation as visual evidence of the processes behind a distinctively Tangut rendering of the welcoming descent motif.

5 Materiality and Vision

We have discovered how print culture likely resulted in the distinctive orientation of Tangut welcoming descent paintings. Despite their closeness to the visual appearance of the welcoming descent as revealed in frontispieces, at least some of which must have been produced in Song China, there remain important differences between the Tangut welcoming descent paintings and Southern Song (and other East Asian) examples, the most important of which are materiality and format. Unlike welcoming descent paintings from Song China, Korea, and Japan in the hanging scroll format, those from Karakhoto were often mounted as *thangkas*. This entailed the use of a different set of materials and techniques. Furthermore, the Tangut welcoming descent paintings were generally smaller in size, unlike related examples from Song China, Korea, and Japan, resulting in different modes of viewer-devotee engagement.

The welcoming descent paintings from Song China, Korea, and Japan discussed previously were all painted on silk and mounted on hanging scrolls, a technique that entailed pasting the painting directly onto a sturdy backing and framing it with decorative strips of silk brocade. The Tangut paintings, on the other hand, were produced on cotton, linen, and silk; several were mounted as *thangkas* or possibly intended for this type of mounting. Cotton and linen are unknown in East Asian paintings and are treated differently than silk before and during painting.³³ Unlike East Asian silk paintings, which were sized before painting, the cotton canvas used in Tibetan *thangka* painting was both sized then treated with gesso before paint was applied. The gesso consisted of a white earth pigment, chalk, or kaolin, that was mixed with the sizing solution (e.g., glue). The application of gesso to the canvas and polishing of the ground resulted in a painting surface that was bright white and opaque.³⁴ This was distinct from the treatment of silk in East Asian painting, in which white paint could be applied to the underside of the silk in order to brighten the appearance of pigments applied on the other side, but never directly on the front side

33 It should be noted, however, that banner paintings made from materials other than silk have been discovered along the silk roads, such as Dunhuang.

34 David and Janice Jackson, *Tibetan Thangka Painting: Methods and Materials* (London: Serindia Publications, 1984), 18–23.

or painting surface. We might say that the material effect of East Asian silk paintings was predicated upon an aesthetic of translucency whereas Tibetan *thangka* paintings were infused with an aesthetic of opacity.

Welcoming descent paintings from Song China, Korea, and Japan were generally over one hundred centimeters in height and ranged between fifty to one hundred centimeters in width before mounting. With the silk mounting, they were made even larger (sometimes doubling in height) and more splendid. The Tangut welcoming descent paintings, on the other hand, varied in size but were generally smaller. The largest is x2410 (fig. 6.15), which was 142.5×94 cm before mounting and 196.5×105.5 cm after mounting. This is still smaller than most welcoming descent paintings from Song China, Korea, and Japan, which frequently exceeded 200 cm in height after mounting. However, that particular painting is an outlier, as most of the Tangut welcoming descent paintings were well under one hundred centimeters in height. For example, x2477 (fig. 6.4) measures only 32×19.5 cm. On average, the Tangut welcoming descent paintings were roughly half the height of those from Song China, Korea, and Japan. The generally smaller size of the Tangut paintings enabled a more intimate viewing experience.³⁵ Devoid of the elaborate retinues of certain welcoming descent paintings from Song China, Korea, and Japan, the intimacy of the encounter between the deceased devotee, Amitābha Buddha, and his bodhisattva attendants was foregrounded.

The sense of immediacy and intimacy is thwarted or heightened by the method of mounting: the handscroll versus the *thangka*. As in one Japanese Nambokuchō period (1331–1392, 南北朝時代) example from the Harvard Art Museums (fig. 6.16), the addition of the handscroll mounting, and its verticality served to visually elongate the painting and artificially conflate its overall size. The mounting of *thangkas* before the 15th century entailed only the stitching of smaller strips of fabric onto the top and bottom edge of the painting (figs. 6.15, 6.18, 6.19).³⁶ Unlike East Asian silk paintings that could only be inscribed on the recto, the *thangka* mounting enabled paintings to be inscribed on the verso, sometimes more than once. The opaque painting surface that resulted from the gesso applied to the canvas prevented inscriptions written on the verso from being seen on the front side. Since dedicatory inscriptions are commonly found on the verso of painted *thangkas*, this brings us to our

35 This also raises intriguing questions regarding how the paintings may have been used in deathbed rituals in different regions of Asia.

36 Marion Boyer and Jean M. Terrier, "Thangka Restoration and Conservation," June 19, 2003, accessed February 29, 2020. <https://www.asianart.com/articles/thangkas-/index.html>.



FIGURE 6.15 Greeting the righteous man on the way to the Pure Land of Amitābha, roll on canvas, 142.5 × 94 cm. Karakhoto, 13th c. X2410 (WITH *THANGKA* MOUNTING), THE STATE HERMITAGE MUSEUM, ST. PETERSBURG



FIGURE 6.16
 Welcoming descent of Amitābha
 Buddha, hanging scroll, gold ink,
 cut-gold leaf (kirikane), and color
 on indigo dyed silk, 98.7 × 38.7 cm,
 mounting including suspension
 core and roller ends 194.9 × 61.5 cm.
 Japanese Nambokuchō period, 14th c.
 2013.47, HARVARD ART MUSEUMS/
 ARTHUR M. SACKLER MUSEUM, THE
 LOUIS V. LEDOUX COLLECTION;
 GIFT OF MRS. L. PIERRE LEDOUX IN
 MEMORY OF HER HUSBAND

next topic, which is the presence of the pious deceased in Tangut welcoming descent paintings.

6 Devotion and Proximity

As stated earlier, the doubling of the figure of the deceased is an element unique to Tangut welcoming descent paintings. Furthermore, they are striking in their engagement with the deities. It has been said that “Khara Khoto paintings contain many likenesses of Tangut donors, as well as monks.”³⁷ But are these figures to be understood unequivocally as donors? Were dedicatory inscriptions written on the verso, as per the conventions of the Tibetan *thangka* format? According to Kira Samosyuk, welcoming descent paintings recovered from Karakhoto hardly ever had inscriptions, so it seems unlikely.³⁸ Therefore, in the absence of donor inscriptions, whether the figure of the deceased in Tangut welcoming descent paintings represents a specific donor or beneficiary of a donation is a question worth pondering.

Other Tangut paintings display donor images similarly positioned in a natural manner, both with and without donor inscriptions. A silk painting of the Water-Moon Avalokiteśvara (Chin. Shuiyue Guanyin 水月觀音) (fig. 6.17) displays a kneeling layman in the lower left corner rising on gathered clouds with a male servant standing at attention behind him. He holds a censer in his hands; the rising smoke of burning incense draws Avalokiteśvara’s attention and gaze to him. In the upper right corner, the elderly man, now reborn as a young boy, descends from the sky toward Avalokiteśvara on trailing clouds. In the lower right foreground of the painting, a group of dancers sporting the Tangut *tufa* hairstyle dances in front of an exposed grave, presumably that of the deceased.³⁹ Thus, this painting shows the entire cycle from death to rebirth

37 Mikhail Piotrovsky, ed., *Lost Empire of the Silk Road: Buddhist Art from Khara Khoto (X–XIIIth Century)* (Milan: Electa, 1993), 83.

38 Kira Samosyuk, “Donors’ in the Tangut Painting from Khara-Khoto: Their Meaning and Function,” *The Tibet Journal* 26.3–4 (2001): 165. According to a personal communication from Kira Samosyuk on 16th October 2019 that was shared with me by Lilla Russell-Smith: “It is difficult to answer for your question, because each painting is framed and has covered back side. I think that the ‘Welcoming’ have not any inscription. The inscriptions are at Tibetan style *maṅḍala*, sometimes at the other icons with the names of the donators, or sometimes with the *mantras*, or at *Jin guang mingjing* there are the titles of the *sūtra* parts. There is Tibetan style *thangka* Tangut letters *mantra* at the very bad condition Tibetan style Eleven headed Avalokiteśvara, not reproduced in my book. (x 3554). Nobody in 50th–60th years did not think [*sic*] to keep the back of the paintings.”

39 This painting is discussed in Piotrovsky, *Lost Empire of the Silk Road*, 198.



FIGURE 6.17 Water-Moon Avalokiteśvara, roll on silk, 101.5 × 59.5 cm. Karakhoto, early 12th c.
X2439, THE STATE HERMITAGE MUSEUM, ST. PETERSBURG

within a single image, in a manner conceptually similar yet visually distinct from the welcoming descent paintings.

But in the absence of inscriptions, were the images of the deceased intended to represent specific donors/beneficiaries or a more general idea of Tangut devotion? As noted earlier, donor inscriptions are exceedingly rare among Tangut paintings. One notable exception is a *thangka* of a deity identified by the Tangut inscription as “The Planet Li Mei,” Yue Bo (fig. 6.18). In the lower left corner of the painting is a standing male devotee, above which is a Chinese-style red cartouche with a Tangut inscription identifying him as “the donor [surname] Ie.”⁴⁰ The writing of inscriptions on the recto of a painting seems to confirm to Chinese practice. More often than not, images of donors or devotees appear in the lower corners of paintings without any dedicatory inscriptions.⁴¹ Nevertheless, what we can infer from a comparison between the donors or devotees in the welcoming descent, Water-Moon Avalokiteśvara, and Yue Bo paintings is the sense of animation in the representation of those figures and their active engagement with the deities (looking upward, stepping or reaching toward, etc.).

A departure from this is the representation of donors and devotees in tantric paintings, in which there is a greater degree of separation between donors and deities. Two *thangkas* of Acala (figs. 6.19 and 6.20) display kneeling monk and lay devotees in the lower left and right corners of the paintings, with altars or ritual implements placed either directly in front of the figures or in the horizontal frieze between them. They are neatly encased within painted frames, unlike the easy interaction between donor-devotees and deities in the welcoming descent, Water-Moon Avalokiteśvara, and Yue Bo paintings.⁴² Kneeling before altars, these figures are engaged in active acts of worship but remain ever distant from the deities above. This is suggestive of the general aims and means of tantric ritual, in which engagement with deities unfolds in a hieratic and highly controlled sequence, beginning with the cordoning off of the ritual space. Also, the ritual activity is mediated by monks; this is distinct from the treatment of the monk as a deceased figure in welcoming descent paintings.

40 Piotrovsky, *Lost Empire of the Silk Road*, 232. On astral deities, see Jeffrey Kotyk, “Astrological Iconography of Planetary Deities in Tang China: Near Eastern and Indian Icons in Chinese Buddhism,” *Journal of Chinese Buddhist Studies* 30 (2017): 33–88.

41 In the *Lost Empire of the Silk Road* catalogue, see 150, 155, 160, 170, 238, and 245 for donors with no inscriptions.

42 It should be noted that the welcoming descent and Water-Moon Avalokiteśvara paintings both pertain to pure land motifs: The Western Pure Land and Mt. Potalaka.



FIGURE 6.18 Yuebo Planet, roll on canvas (with original border), 38.5 × 29.7 cm, with border 53 × 37.7 cm. Karakhoto, 13th c. X2454, THE STATE HERMITAGE MUSEUM, ST. PETERSBURG



FIGURE 6.19 Acala, *thangka* on canvas (with border), 47 × 35 cm, with border 61 × 47 cm. Karakhoto, 13th–14th c.(?)

X2375, THE STATE HERMITAGE MUSEUM, ST. PETERSBURG



FIGURE 6.20 Acala, *thangka* on silk, 73 × 56.3 cm. Karakhoto, 13th–14th c. (?)
X2374, THE STATE HERMITAGE MUSEUM, ST. PETERSBURG

The hieratic and static arrangement of figures in the Acala *thangkas* makes the images of the deceased in the welcoming descent paintings appear even more remarkable. It has been argued that they were actually portraits of the residents of Karakhoto.⁴³ Note the funerary scene in the lower left corner and Sudhana in the upper left corner of the Water-Moon Guanyin painting. Another way to interpret these figures may be to examine them from the point of view of their expectations of deities—were they viewed as distant or remote, or as divine figures with the power to interact and intercede personally on behalf of devotees?

Comparative evidence from medieval Japanese Buddhism demonstrates that devotee-deity engagement in Pure Land Buddhism was powerful and could be realised in a number of ways, such as welcoming descent song and dance performances that were enacted by monks. The *mukaekō* (迎講), or ‘welcoming rite,’ was a public performance enacted before devotees of all social classes by monks and novices who playacted the welcoming descent of Amitābha and his retinue by dressing in costume, playing music, and reciting the *nembutsu* (Jap. 念仏, the Repetition of the Name of Amitābha), all practices that were especially associated with the monk Genshin (942–1017, 源信).⁴⁴ Japanese welcoming descent paintings could be introduced near the time of death and some still have strings attached to them that were held on the other end by dying devotees in order to firmly cement their connection with Amitābha at the precipice between life and death.⁴⁵ Visually, Japanese paintings of the ‘rapid descent’ brought about a startlingly direct form of viewer engagement by their unflinching frontality and looming presence (fig. 6.21). No such composition exists in the body of welcoming descent paintings from Karakhoto. Yet, I argue that Tangut devotees found another way to accomplish this by literally inserting themselves into paintings of Amitābha, Avalokiteśvara, and other deities that served as visual proof of the efficacy of devotion and of the closeness between deities and their devotees. This interpretation is augmented by the emphasis that was placed by the Tanguts upon Buddhism, which was

43 Samosyuk, “Donors’ in the Tangut Painting from Khara-Khoto,” 165. In this article, Samosyuk argues for the ethnic and class identifications of individual donor figures.

44 Jacqueline I. Stone, “By the Power of One’s Last Nenbutsu: Deathbed Practices in Early Medieval Japan,” in *Approaching the Land of Bliss: Religious Praxis in the Cult of Amitābha*, ed. Richard K. Payne and Kenneth Ken’ichi Tanaka (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2004), 82–83.

45 Stone, “By the Power of One’s Last Nenbutsu,” 82. See, for example, one famous example of such a painting at Konkaikōmyō Temple (金戒光明寺) in Kyoto, Japan.



FIGURE 6.21 Welcoming descent of Amitābha, hanging scroll, ink, color, gold pigment and cut gold leaf (kirikane) on silk, 97.5 × 47.9 cm, mounting with cord and roller ends 198.1 × 73 cm. Japanese Nambokuchō period, 14th c. 1949.95, HARVARD ART MUSEUMS/ARTHUR M. SACKLER MUSEUM, GIFT OF MRS. WALDO E. FORBES

“more closely associated with the idea of the unique position of the Tanguts in the world” than were Confucianism and Daoism.⁴⁶

7 Conclusion

A quote from the *Lost Empire of the Silk Road* catalogue cites a 12th century poem that articulates the Tangut sense of identity as positioned in between China and Tibet:

Far to the west stand the mountains of Tibet
Far to the east lie the lowlands of China [...]⁴⁷

I would argue that in the welcoming descent paintings, the subjectivity of Tangut donors and devotees was maintained not by their sense of in-betweenness, but rather by their insertion into the realm of the divine. Welcoming descent paintings showed the close contact between deities and devotees, as well as their certainty of rebirth in the Western Pure Land. In these images, it can be seen that the Tanguts did not view themselves as having been relegated to the periphery,⁴⁸ but rather were themselves placed squarely front and center.

Moreover, one goal of this paper has been to shift the discourse on transcultural artistic transmission, particularly in the Buddhist context, from one that rests primarily upon the visual to one that takes materiality into account as well. Doing so opens up our understanding of the processes of transcultural transmission beyond the surface level and allows us to consider the objects of our inquiry—and their movement between start and end points—from a fuller, one might even say three-dimensional perspective.

46 See Kirill Solonin, “The Formation of Tangut Ideology: Buddhism and Confucianism,” in *Buddhism in Central Asia I—Patronage, Legitimation, Sacred Space, and Pilgrimage*, ed. Carmen Meinert and Henrik Sørensen (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2020), 147. Solonin also explicates the important role that Buddhism played in Tangut state protection; Solonin, “The Formation of Tangut Ideology: Buddhism and Confucianism,” 140. My thanks to an anonymous reviewer of this article for the reference.

47 Kira F. Samosyuk, “The Art of the Tangut Empire: A Historical and Stylistic Interpretation,” in *Lost Empire of the Silk Road: Buddhist Art from Khara Khoto (X–XIIIth Century)*, ed. Mikhail Piotrovsky (Milan: Electa, 1993), 59.

48 In this regard, Susan Huang calls attention to the ‘peripheral vision’ articulated by Rob Linrothe in his article “Peripheral Visions: On Recent Finds of Tangut Buddhist Art,” *Monumenta Serica* 43 (1995): 235–262, especially 250–251, 255–257; as cited in Huang, “Reassessing Printed Buddhist Frontispieces from Xi Xia,” 130, no. 2.