Introduction

Buddhism and Buddhist art occupied an extremely important position in the culture and society of the Tang dynasty (618–907 C.E.), a period often referred to as the golden age of Chinese civilization. The vast number of Buddhist monuments surviving today provides us with the opportunity to understand the glorious and complex visual culture of this great period in Chinese history. The largest remaining site containing the most diverse examples of Chinese Buddhist art is the cave-temple complex Mogaoku (Mogao caves), more popularly known as the Dunhuang caves. Mogaoku is in the desert near the modern town of Dunhuang, Gansu Province, in northwestern China.

The Dunhuang caves consist of 492 grottoes carved in a gravel conglomerate cliff that are full of wall paintings and painted sculptures and an additional 230 caves at the northern end of the same cliff. The 45,000 square meters of paintings and 2,400 sculptures remaining in the caves span a period of a thousand years, from the early fifth to the fourteenth century C.E., and visually represent with vivid detail the culture and society of medieval China (Fig. 1). In addition to the wall paintings and painted sculptures, some 1,000 paintings on silk and paper and 50,000 texts written in Chinese, Tibetan, Sanskrit, and other central Asian languages were discovered in 1900 in a sealed cave, known as the “library cave,” at the Mogao site. These texts and paintings, now preserved in museums
throughout the world, were produced within the same sociohistorical context as the art found in the Buddhist caves. Examined together, they form an ideal case for interdisciplinary studies of art, religion, sociology, and politics.

The importance of the Dunhuang materials has been recognized by many scholars around the world. Currently, more than a thousand scholars worldwide are studying the artifacts and manuscripts from Dunhuang.\(^1\) Why do materials from this remote site in China’s northwestern desert deserve such large-scale scholarly attention? As Victor Mair points out:

Dunhuang and Turfan\(^2\) Studies, though focusing on texts and artifacts associated with these two particular sites, actually have broad ramifications for the history of East-West cultural and commercial relations in general. Another major reason is the unique quality of many materials discovered at Dunhuang and Turfan. Archaeological finds from these locations have enabled us, for the first time, to obtain an essentially first-hand look at China and some of its neighbors during the medieval period. That is to say, we can now learn, for example, about popular culture during Tang times without being forced to view it through a Confucian historiographical filter.\(^3\)

In addition to Victor Mair, Stephen Teiser also sees the Dunhuang texts as a means to “avoid the limitation of traditional historiography” in his studies.

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of the ghost festival in medieval China. Indeed, for students of medieval Chinese society and culture, the firsthand visual and textual evidence preserved at Dunhuang is an ideal starting point.

The combination of visual works and written evidence makes the Dunhuang materials a perfect case study for those who want to examine works of art from the Mogao caves within their sociohistorical context. As an art historian, my first objective is to provide a “historical explanation of pictures,” that is, to explain the reasons for fashioning the works of art in the Dunhuang caves. My final goal, however, is to go one step further and use the artworks as reliable historical information to fill the gaps left by text-oriented historians. Methodologically speaking, this juxtaposition of the “historical explanation of pictures” and a “pictorial explanation of history” requires one to examine literally every piece of information, visual or textual, within a particular historical context. An interdisciplinary approach, therefore, is essential for this study.

To present a workable amount of research data that will additionally serve as a case study, I will focus on a well-preserved cave built in the early Tang dynasty. Numbered 220 by the Dunhuang Research Academy, this cave was originally built in 642 C.E. by the Zhai family, a prominent local clan at Dunhuang. It is a square cave, approximately 17 feet wide, 16 feet deep, and 10.5 feet high, with a truncated pyramidal ceiling and a rectangular niche in the west wall (Fig. 2). When it was completed in the early Tang, every inch of its walls and ceiling was covered with colorful paintings. These paintings, however, were entirely hidden by a new layer of paintings around the tenth century and remained concealed until the early 1940s. Once exposed, the original early Tang paintings, accordingly, appeared very fresh and colorful in comparison with other Tang paintings at Dunhuang.

Crucial to our understanding of the original pictorial program is the well-preserved condition of the Zhai family cave, which provides a unique opportunity to investigate the visual details of the original paintings and sculptures in the cave. Furthermore, the remaining traces of reconstruction and redecoration indicate how this cave was maintained and used by the same Zhai clan during a period of more than three hundred years.

When this cave was built in the early Tang, the four walls of the cave were painted with varied themes that could be closely connected in terms of composition and function (Fig. 3). The paintings on the north and south walls are composed in the same scale and face each other. The north wall represents the Healing Ritual, an important Buddhist ritual for healing the wounded and the sick. The south wall depicts the Western Paradise, the main destination for Buddhist believers when they reach the end of their lives. The paintings on these two walls, therefore, seem to have been prepared for the wounded and sick (north wall) and dead (south wall) members of the patron family.

Figure 2 | Cross section and layout of Cave 220, Dunhuang, originally built in 642 C.E.
The paintings on either side of the entrance on the east wall are almost symmetrically designed to illustrate the famous debate between Sage Vimalakirti and Bodhisattva Manjuśri. Standing beside Manjuśri is Taizong, the imposing contemporary emperor of the Tang dynasty, shown with his ministers surrounding him. On the other side, non-Chinese kings and princes are depicted beside Vimalakirti. The picture of the Tang emperor and his court officials might signify the patrons’ unswerving loyalty toward the Tang central government in the capital Chang’an (present-day Xi’an). Apparently, the motifs on the east wall could help the living patrons gain political benefits from the Tang government. Together, the paintings on the north, south, and east walls are intended to serve the sociopolitical and religious needs of the wounded, dead, and living members of the patron family.

The west wall, in the lower section, features portraits of patrons from the Zhai family. The standing figures of patrons flank a rectangular panel at the lower center, in which three large characters, “Zhai Jia Ku” (Zhai family cave), are written. This clearly written information and the serial family portraits establish an unmistakable identity of the cave as a family shrine of the Zhai clan. The sculptures of the Buddha, two of his disciples, two bodhisattvas, and two heavenly guardians are located in the niche above the patron figures and were partially damaged or repainted over time. Eight additional disciples of the Buddha are painted on the wall behind the sculptures in the niche. Together with the two sculptures of disciples, they form a theme of the Ten Great Disciples of the Buddha. The painting on the niche’s ceiling shows bodhisattvas coming to listen to the sermon of the Buddha. Bodhisattva Manjuśri is riding a lion and Bodhisattva Samantabhadra is riding on an elephant; they are depicted on the left and right sides of the niche. Generally speaking, the composition of the west wall appears to be more conventional than that of the north, south, and east walls except for the written emblem of the patron family shown at its lower center and the two great bodhisattvas painted on the left and right of the niche. Writing the family name appears to be a new phenomenon in the Dunhuang caves, which indicates the beginning of a local tradition of “family caves.”

The significance of the Zhai family cave may be understood from the following perspectives. First, it is the first firmly dated and the best-preserved cave among the some 230 grottoes constructed at Dunhuang during the Tang dynasty. The vivid details of the wall paintings and the high quality of the sculptures exemplify the achievements and characteristics of Tang art. Most of the remaining Dunhuang caves were built by the Tang people, whose historical and
cultural legacy can still be seen not only in contemporary China but also, even more clearly, in China’s neighboring countries such as Japan and Korea. Analyzing this reliably dated early Tang cave as a case study creates a solid foundation for the understanding of other Tang caves and thereby yields a potentially vast resource of visual materials available for the study of the art, religion, culture, and society of the Tang dynasty.

Second, this cave is the earliest identifiable cave built by a single family at Dunhuang. Local families played an extremely important role in constructing Buddhist cave-temples. Donors from a single family have been identified in some pre-Tang caves, for example, but they usually patronize an individual icon or a single picture within a larger pictorial program in a cave that is shared by several families or social groups.6 Cave 220, by contrast, was patronized by the Zhai family alone and maintained by the same clan for hundreds of years. The three large ink characters of “Zhai Jia Ku” written at the center of the west wall, just below the sculpture of the Buddha, face everyone who enters the cave from the gate on the east wall. These characters function as a clan emblem of the Zhai family and identify the cave as a privately owned family shrine. The portraits of patrons from the same Zhai family, placed to flank the clan emblem, further enhance the sense of family shrine. The combination of a Buddhist cave-temple and a traditional Chinese family shrine, on the one hand, suggests a further sinicization and secularization of Buddhism on Chinese soil during the Tang dynasty. On the other hand, it reflects the dominance of prominent clans in Buddhist activities as a local Buddhist practice at Dunhuang.7 Subsequent to completion of the Zhai family cave in the early Tang period, single-family sponsorship of cave construction became a popular pattern of patronage.8 Cave 220 was the start of a long tradition of family caves and provides the opportunity to examine the role of clans in the art and religion of medieval China.

Third, contextual evidence suggests that the design and pictorial programs of the Zhai family cave are closely associated with contemporary politics of the early Tang period. Dunhuang was not a stable territory of the newly established Tang empire. Local warlords repeatedly rebelled against Tang rule until the 630s and 640s when the Tang army initiated military actions in the Western Regions9 and used Dunhuang as its headquarters. The Zhai family cave was built two years after the military operation of the Tang troops to conquer Karakhoja (Gaochang), a small central Asian kingdom near Dunhuang.10 The wall paintings in the cave were created when the Tang army was still fighting in the Western Regions. Significantly, some members of the Zhai family served as officers of the imperial troops and probably joined the battles against the central Asians.11 Scenes of the Healing Ritual and the Western Paradise, which are shown, respectively, on the north and south walls of the cave, were probably designed for the Zhai officers who were wounded or died in the war.

The artistic styles of these paintings suggest they were imported from the Tang capital Chang’an and not only reflect the Zhais’ preference for the flair of the “capital style” but also demonstrate their political gesture toward the Tang court. By adapting this artistic style for their family cave, the Zhais declared their support of Tang rule in their hometown. The Zhais’ political attitude and ambition continue to be revealed in the paintings on the east wall of the cave, the direction from which the Tang army came. The contemporary ruler of the Tang dynasty, Emperor Taizong, is portrayed on an impressive
scale. He is accompanied by his ministers and court officials. Foreign kings and princes, central Asian in appearance, stand at the other side, paying tribute to the Tian Kehan, or the Highest Ruler under Heaven, also known as the King of Kings. As military officers in an unstable new territory, the Zhais needed to demonstrate their absolute loyalty to the Tang court. By portraying the Tang emperor as a leading figure in their family cave, the Zhais not only proved their loyalty to the Tang government but also appealed to the commanders of the Tang army based in Dunhuang. These political motifs in a Buddhist cave are crucial for our understanding of the relationships among art, religion, and politics in medieval China.

Finally, Cave 220 was maintained and renovated by the Zhai clan generation after generation for more than three hundred years. The historical changes undertaken in the cave after its completion further illuminate the function of the cave as a private shrine and a political showcase of the patron family. Unfolding the historical layers of the cave can help in understanding how a Buddhist cave-temple was used by its owners to express their social and political concerns in different historical contexts.

The studies of the Zhai family cave began when the French scholar Paul Pelliot and his photographer took a few pictures of the cave and recorded some crucial inscriptions in the cave in 1908. Pelliot published three black-and-white plates of the cave (south wall, west wall, and a detail of the pedestal of Buddha in the west niche) in 1914–1924, but his extensive notes and copies of inscriptions remained unpublished until the 1980s and 1990s. In the 1940s, after the removal of the tenth-century murals that had covered the four walls of the cave for a thousand years, the discovery of the original early Tang paintings began to attract the attention of scholars.

A Chinese archaeological project undertaken in 1975 excited increased interest in the cave when it revealed important paintings created in various historical periods on the sidewalls of the entrance tunnel of the cave (Fig. 4). The staff members of the Dunhuang Research Academy removed the outermost layer of the passageway of Cave 220 and exposed paintings of the Tibetan period (781–847 C.E.) on the south wall and Five Dynasties paintings on the north wall of the entrance tunnel. Wenwu, one of the most influential journals on Chinese archaeological discoveries, published the newly discovered paintings and inscriptions a few years later in 1978.

Akiyama Terukazu published the first comprehensive introduction to the cave in 1969. Although Akiyama’s study of Cave 220 is only a small section of his book on Chinese Buddhist art, he takes the cave “as an example of an early Tang cave” to illustrate the stylistic impact of metropolitan China upon frontier areas “as a result of the powerful expansion of Tang centralized rule.” Even more important is his identification of the iconography of the paintings on the north, south, and east walls. Akiyama points out that the south wall represents the Pure Land of Amitâbha, the north wall depicts the Paradise of Bhaïṣajya-guru, and the east wall illustrates the story of Vimalakîrti. Although many details in the three paintings were not clearly discussed by the author, this identification has served as the standard explanation of the iconography of Cave 220 since its publication decades ago.

Akiyama’s introduction was followed by a more systematic iconographic study by Deng Jianwu (Higashiyama Kengo) in 1980. Although Deng merely claims to provide readers with basic information on the cave, he takes two vigorous approaches in identifying the contents of the paintings in the cave.
Figure 4 | Entrance to Cave 220 after the removal of the outer layer of the passage-way in 1978.
First, his article examines the motifs against the relevant records in Buddhist sutras and explains the content of the motifs in detail. Second, he compares the paintings in this cave with the relevant paintings in other caves at Dunhuang and tries to explain how the paintings in Cave 220 evolved from previous paintings. This research explains and describes the form and content of the paintings and sculptures in detail and thus seems to offer a good foundation for further studies of the cave. Two major problems with this analysis, however, may lead to questionable conclusions: (1) quotations of records from various Buddhist scriptures lack a careful investigation of the relationships among them; and (2) the relationships among the individual paintings and sculptures in the cave remain unclear.

The studies of Chinese scholars of Cave 220 were collectively published as the explanations of plates printed in the third volume of the five-volume series on the Mogao caves, entitled Zhongguo shiku—Dunhuang Mogaoku (Chinese cave temples—the Mogao caves at Dunhuang). Accompanied by fourteen high-quality color plates, the explanatory notes introduce the inscriptions remaining in the cave, discuss the iconographic details of the paintings, and relate the individual motifs to the Tang poems and popular literature in the Dunhuang region. These notes are short but quite informative. They explain in detail what is actually represented in the paintings. The main problem with these short notes on Cave 220, however, is the use of incorrect Buddhist scriptures as the textual basis for their interpretation of the motifs. The painting on the north wall, for example, is explained as an illustration of the Yaoshi liuliguang qīfó benyuan gongde jīng (Sutra on the merit of the fundamental vows of the seven masters of healing, the Lapis Lazuli Radiance Buddhas), a sutra that was translated in 707 C.E., more than half a century later than the date of the painting. The use of the Amituo jīng (Amitābha sūtra) as the textual basis of the painting on the south wall is also problematic. A more appropriate text would be the Guan Wuliangshou jīng, or Sutra on Visualizing the Buddha of Measureless Life (popularly known as the Visualization Sutra).

A major study in English of Cave 220 was published by Roderick Whitfield as one of the forty Mogao caves discussed in his luxuriously illustrated book, Dunhuang: Caves of the Singing Sands, in 1995. Whitfield continues the identifications provided by the Japanese and Chinese scholars and gracefully describes the stylistic features of the paintings in Cave 220. In this publication, Whitfield makes a few significant contributions. First, he translates the important inscription with dating information remaining on the north wall and thus makes it available to Western readers. Second, he also identifies the north wall painting as the illustration of the Eastern Paradise of Bhaiṣajya-guru but recognizes that some details in the painting are related to “the worship of the Buddha” instead of his paradise. Whitfield also points out the correspondence between the colorful banners in the north wall painting and the actual banners from Dunhuang now in the Stein collection at the British Museum. It is regrettable that he does not move on to explain why these non-paradise elements are shown in the painting and how they may relate to the function of the painting in the context of a family shrine. Third, he describes the imperial image on the east wall in detail and suggests that the “portrayal of the emperor in full ceremonial attire, listening to the debate between Vimalakīrti and Mañjuśrī, was an important means of showing imperial support for Buddhism.” In addition to this obvious meaning, however, I would argue that the portrait of the contemporary Tang emperor reveals
the patrons’ intention to show their loyalty to the Tang court.\textsuperscript{23}

Another important contribution was made by Fujieda Akira, who notes that Cave 220 was renovated several times after its completion and that Zhai Fengda supervised a major reconstruction in 925 C.E.\textsuperscript{24} It also indicates the relationship between the tenth-century *ruixiangtu*, or “picture of auspicious images,” in Cave 220 and the Khotan kingdom.\textsuperscript{25} These interesting ideas inspired me to systematically investigate the social and political changes as reflected in the history of the Zhai family cave and to examine how this family shrine was used by the offspring of the clan in these different socio-political contexts.

In addition to the above five important publications on the Zhai family cave, many scholars have written about a specific painting or sculpture in the cave or discussed the general value of the cave. Generally speaking, these studies can be divided into two types: (1) the inclusion of this cave in a broader discussion of the overall condition of Tang dynasty art at Dunhuang,\textsuperscript{26} and (2) the use of one or other mural of the cave in the comprehensive study of the paintings of the same subject matter in the Dunhuang caves.\textsuperscript{27} The first type of scholarship places the cave in a larger context of Tang dynastic arts in the Dunhuang region and emphasizes the significance of the cave in the studies of Tang caves at Mogao. This limited type of study, however, provides only an oversimplified sketch of the cave and lacks deeper intellectual inquiry. The second type of scholarship focuses on an individual painting in the cave and allows for a more detailed introduction to the iconography of the mural. The latter study, however, separates the wall from its original context and creates artificial barriers for our understanding of the entire pictorial program.

Why were the paintings and sculptures put together in this family cave? Why did the Zhai family create such a cave in this historical moment? How did this prominent local clan maintain and use its family cave? How could these paintings and sculptures, moreover, help in understanding the characteristics of Tang culture and society? These and other questions have not been answered by existing scholarship and invite a deeper inquiry into this unexpectedly well-preserved monument of early Tang Chinese Buddhist art.

My research into various aspects of the Zhai family cave rests on four presuppositions. First, this study gives priority to textual evidence in explaining the artworks in the Dunhuang caves instead of relying on formal analysis. It uses the original inscriptions remaining on the walls of the caves, the documents discovered from the “library cave” at Dunhuang, and other local historical records to interpret the Buddhist motifs appearing in the Zhai family cave and to unfold the historical layers of the family shrine. In my opinion, any changes in the visual form must be understood within their historical context, and in the case of Dunhuang art studies, reliance on textual evidence to explain artistic phenomena is essential because ancient local texts and artworks were produced in the same historical circumstances and therefore should be examined concurrently as evidence.

Second, this study draws attention to the political dimensions of Chinese Buddhist art. It examines the political intentions of the original pictorial program and the redecorations of the Zhai family cave and reveals how the Zhai clan used their family cave as a political showcase to respond to various political circumstances in different historical periods. This approach is mainly inspired by the publications of Martin Powers and Wu Hung, whose books on the
political expression and ideology shown in the funeral art of the Han dynasty paved the way for future scholars to reconsider approaches to the study of Chinese art history. Although their works focus on Han funeral art, their methodology is also valid for the study of Chinese Buddhist art.

Third, this study analyzes Dunhuang caves in their religious ritual context. It connects the Healing Ritual to the north wall and the visualization practice to the south wall of the Zhai family cave and explains the importance of ritual practice in understanding Dunhuang Buddhist art. In 1990, Stanley Abe published his study on the function of Dunhuang Cave 254 within a ritual context of Northern Wei Buddhist practices. Wu Hung's article on the paintings of the Western Paradise in the Tang-dynasty Dunhuang caves also discusses the paradise images in their religious and ritual context. In the field of Buddhist studies, Stephen Teiser demonstrates the significance of Buddhist rituals in medieval Chinese social life. My great interest in the studies of the religious and ritual contexts of the Dunhuang caves coincides with the interests of these scholars, although my own study concentrates on the Zhai family cave.

Fourth, this study establishes close connections between the Dunhuang caves and the local history of the region. Most publications on the relationship between the Dunhuang caves and the local history were done in China by scholars at the Dunhuang Research Academy—in particular, the late Shi Weixiang and the late Sun Xiushen, former director of the academy Duan Wenjie, and Ma De. My study of the Zhai family cave is indebted to their studies, as readers can see throughout the book. Slightly differing from their approach, however, my study attempts to make the links between the local historical circumstances and the visual forms of the paintings and sculptures more specific and concrete rather than offering brief introductions to the local history and cave art, respectively.

My study of the Zhai family cave focuses on the meaning and function of the original pictorial program and the political implications of the reconstruction history of the cave-temple. The overall design of the book comprises three main sections. The first section identifies the contents of the paintings and sculptures and explains why these motifs were chosen by the patrons for their family cave shrine. The second section traces the renovation history of the Zhai family cave and interprets the political implications of the later additions to the cave. The third section analyzes the historical and cultural values of the Zhai family cave in understanding medieval Chinese society.

In addition to using historical texts to interpret the meanings of the paintings and sculptures in Cave 220, this study will also use the pictorial information in the cave to explain interesting phenomena in the social, political, and religious histories of medieval China. It is my intent that this juxtaposition of the “historical explanation of pictures” and the “pictorial explanation of history” will make our studies of art more historically grounded and our studies of history more deeply oriented in material culture.