

## CULTURAL DISCRIMINATION AND PREJUDICE AS REFLECTED IN ARTS: AN INVESTIGATION ON THE WAYS OF REPRESENTING FEMALE HERETICS IN DUNHUANG PAINTINGS

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**Abstract:** The representation of heretics is quite common in Buddhist art. Heretics who were represented as Indians (*Poluomen* 婆羅門, literally Brahmans) can be abundantly traced in the art of India, Central Asia, western regions of China. However, it is worth noticing that those heretics are mainly male, whereas images of female heretics have been neglected, possibly due to the fact that images of female heretics appear relatively less frequently in Buddhist art and in a limited number. On the base of Dunhuang paintings, one can see that there are specific female heretics such as in the scenes of “subduing demons and attaining enlightenment”, “*Raudraka*’s battle with *Sariputra*”, “*Bao’en Sūtra*”, and so on. It is worth observing that female heretics had changed during time in Dunhuang paintings: in early caves, they are beautiful young girls and ugly old Indian women depicted according to the style of Central Asia and the Western Regions; yet these kinds of figures started to be represented as Chinese noble ladies or barbarians (*hu* 胡) in the Tang period, and as Western Xia noble ladies or demons in the scene of “subduing demons and attaining enlightenment” during the Western Xia period. In general, when dealing with images of female heretics, Chinese artists followed the main sinicizing trend of their own time. Such a phenomenon has been determined by the standards and norms which regulated female behavior rooted in Han culture and traditional society. At the same time, the cultural prejudice about foreign

women in Han society generated a discriminatory phenomenon in the artistic sphere including Buddhist paintings. The ways of representing heretics in Dunhuang paintings not only could illustrate the development of external influence in Han culture but also the discrimination in art due to cultural prejudices.

**Key words:** female heretic images; Brahman (*Poluomen* 婆羅門); Han culture; female moral norms; the idea of the female body; cultural prejudice; discrimination in art

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### Preface

As a consequence of the popularity and growth of Buddhist communities in India, several philosophical schools started to appear more and more frequently. During its formative period, Buddhism was confronting various so-called “heretical” sects that followed teachings in different *sūtras*. Heretics such as *Vasistha* (Po Sou Xian, 婆藪仙)、*Mrgasira* (Lutou Fanzhi, 鹿頭梵志)、*Nirgrantha-putra* (Ni Gan Zi, 尼乾子)、*Raudraksa* (Lao Du Cha, 勞度叉)、Six major teachers who taught different doctrines from Buddhism (Liushi Waidao, 六師外道), etc., have been recorded in written sources. In addition, Brahmins too are usually included among those heretics. However, such Brahmins considered to be heretics in Buddhism, are mainly referring to followers of Brahmanism. Yan Yaozhong has already discussed the images of Brahman deities in Buddhist art to be found in

Dunhuang paintings<sup>1</sup>. Moreover, in Buddhist *sūtras* there is a trace of another kind of Brahmins who were included within the Indian cast system although they were Buddhist and were represented as common characters in Buddhist art.

There is plenty of information about heretics in Buddhist written sources. Images of heretics are omnipresent among Buddhist statues and paintings. In early Buddhist sculptures from India, Pakistan and Afghanistan, the heretical figures were often represented according to the iconography of Brahmins. This way of representing heretics was still popular in the Western Regions and central China. Such an iconographic tradition continued for a long time and it was maintained without big changes until the Five dynasties and Song periods. Stylistic changes emerged only during Western Xia, Liao, Jin, Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties. Heretics were depicted as people looking like Chinese that did not present Indian traits anymore.

The main characteristic of these heretics and Brahmins in Buddhist sculpture and murals is nudity: they are male persons wearing just shorts or skirts and a kind of silk belt wrapped around their waist. These figures are usually slim and thin, with visible ribs and long hair bounded on the top of their head. Their faces have many wrinkles, long beards and eyebrows, the latter being quite colorful. Similar figures can be found very often in Kizil and Dunhuang paintings. Lü Deting investigated representations of heretics in Dunhuang caves; he studied systematically the images of Buddhist heretics including the heretic holding a sparrow (Zhique Waidao, 執雀外道), *Mrgasira*, heretics worshipping *Agni* (Shihuo Waidao, 事火外道), *Agni* (Huo Tian, 火天), *Nirgrantha-putra*, Six major teachers who taught different doctrines from Buddhism and so on<sup>2</sup>. His study has contributed significantly to our understanding of heretics in Buddhist iconography and conception. On the whole, among those Buddhist scenes, there are quite a few female heretics and their image has been changing over time.

Some more figures of female heretics have been found in Dunhuang paintings in recent times. Although there have been some discussions about heretics and related problems in academic circles, less attention was paid to heretics themselves. Lü Deting has studied the images of heretics in *Nirvanasūtras*<sup>3</sup>, but so far no attention has been given to the issue concerning the images of female heretics.

<sup>1</sup> Yan Yao-zhong. *On the interpretation of brahmin deities in Dunhuang frescoes*[J], Journal of Dunhuang Studies, 2012(2): 76-68.

<sup>2</sup> Lü De-ting. *A study of the Images of Tirthika in the Buddhist Art: Centering on Dunhuang Crottoes*[D], Doctoral dissertation, Institute of Dunhuang Studies, Lanzhou University, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Lü De-ting. *On the image of the Outside in nirvana Diagram*[J], *Ethnic Arts Quarterly*, 2013(6): 135-130.

This article wants to be a short introduction and discussion on female heretical figures in mural paintings of Dunhuang to shed some new light and call the attention of students of Buddhist art on this topic.

### **Representations of women in early Dunhuang narrative paintings**

In order to investigate in-depth the way of representing female heretics in Dunhuang paintings and their profound historical meaning, it is necessary to make a comparison with generic female figures which can be found quite often in the early cave paintings. The early caves at Mogao have been dated to the Northern Liang, Northern Wei, Western Wei and Northern Zhou periods. Representations of women in those early narrative paintings could shed light on heretical female images as well.

We chose female images in early cave paintings because the dominant style in this period was still following iconographic models recently imported along with Buddhist art. That is to say, the characters were mainly featuring people of India, Central Asia, and Western Regions. Ever since the Sui dynasty, Buddhist art in Dunhuang had undergone great changes. The artistic style was completely sinicized because of the impact of Chinese iconographic models from Central China. In this period, women in Buddhist narrative paintings were also represented as contemporary Chinese people, and Indian, Central Asian or Western Regions-styled features already mentioned above were no longer depicted.



Fig.1. Narrative painting of Sibi Jātaka, northern wall of the main chamber, cave 254, Mogao (Northern Wei period).



Fig.2. A young girl seducing a shaman in the Avadāna tale of Shaman's Suicide, cave 257, Mogao (Northern Wei period).