WAYS OF READING AND WRITING IN MEDIEVAL CHINESE RELIEF SHRINES: EXAMPLES FROM GUYANG GROTTO, LONGMEN

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In a thought-provoking essay on early sculpted Indian jātaka narratives, Robert Brown proposes two ideas (among others) that raise questions for students of early Chinese Buddhist sculpture.¹ The first, which provoked a riposte from Joanna Williams,² is that some of the relief carvings at Sāñci and Bhārhat were placed too high or too low to be seen with any ease, suggesting they were actually never intended to be seen. The second is that the jātaka illustrations at these sites do not tell a story, but are composed as reductive dramatic scenes intended to convey the presence of the Buddha iconically. Both writers also make reference to Gregory Schopen’s work,³ citing his arguments that an Ajantā inscription reveals that a Buddha image there was considered the actual person of the Buddha and that early Indian donative inscriptions were intended principally “to associate the donor with the sacred site, not to record pious generosity for a human audience.”

Such theories raise questions about the intentions of donors of early Chinese Buddhist relief shrines in grottoes. Were their shrines intended to be seen? Or were they simply produced to generate karmic merit? Is there evidence in the shrines that suggests a visual language employed for the eyes of the living? To whom are the dedicatory inscriptions addressed, and why are they there? Looking at some late-fifth-century and early-sixth-century shrines in Guyang Grotto, the oldest of the Longmen Grottoes, reveals conventions of representation and design that allowed contemporaneous viewers to recognize these shrines immediately as single-image icons. At the same time, the shrines possess a level of detail intended to allow a more thorough reading as depictions of three-dimensional shrines in worship by donors. It may be argued that despite being immured in a cliff-carved grotto at a site several kilometers south of the Northern Wei (386–534) capital of Luoyang (in modern Henan Province), the shrines were indeed meant to be seen by a human audience in addition to being registered by the karmic mechanism.

¹ Fig. 1: Guyang Grotto, interior, Longmen Grottoes.
The interior of Guyang Grotto is a crazy-quilt of hundreds of smaller shrines carved on the walls and ceiling between the original program of eight large Buddha shrines on the upper side walls and the colossal Buddha triad on the back wall Fig. 1. This jumble of images and inscriptions, obscured in the crepuscular gloom of the ceiling 11 meters overhead, challenges the modern viewer’s powers of seeing and invites questions concerning issues of legibility for the sixth-century visitor. It is important to know, however, that the floor of the grotto was lowered twice, once around the year 508 (as evinced by the lack of dated inscriptions in the ceiling after 507) and again around 518. Hence, the early shrines we examine here would have been about three to six meters from the ground for a contemporary viewer.

The dominant scholarly point of view holds that the original program was initiated by one Huicheng, a monk, for the karmic benefit of the Northern Wei state and his late father, the Duke of Shiping. Although they likely were members of the Tabgatch royal family, father and son are otherwise unknown to history. Huicheng’s dedication, engraved on a relief stele next to the outermost shrine of the four on the north wall, is dated to 498 Fig. 2. Huicheng apparently headed a consortium of donors for the other seven large seated Buddha shrines – some of whom identify themselves in dedicatory inscriptions – for the similarities in the size and design of the niches and icons strongly suggest all eight shrines were laid out at once Fig. 3. The colossal triad on the west wall was probably also part of the original program and was certainly completed before 505, as evinced by an intrusive shrine added at that date, but more likely around the year 500.

Very soon after the large Buddha shrines were sketched out on the side walls, however, other donors began to add their own shrines, large and small, to the areas around them. Most of these contain a seated image of Maitreya Bodhisattva, flanked by standing bodhisattvas. Lady Yuchi (454–519), the wife of Mu Liang (451–502), Prince of Changle, dedicated her Maitreya shrine in 495; above her shrine is another dedicated in 498 by Gao Jiaofang, consort of the late Emperor Xianwen (r. 465–71), and her son Yuan Xiang (476–504), Prince of Beihai. The placement of these shrines and the composition of their elements invite an examination of problems of visibility and visual conventions. Such an examination allows us in turn to address the questions of legibility and audience raised by scholars of Indian Buddhist art.

Visibility, or Were These Shrines Meant to be Seen?

Lady Yuchi’s Maitreya shrine is located directly above the large Buddha shrine dedicated by Wei Lingzang and, at 140 centimeters high and 106 centimeters wide, is not quite half its size Fig. 4. The lintel of the arch is carved with eleven bust-length apsarasas who face the viewer and hold up a swagged garland of flowers in offering to the deity below. Centered in the niche is the figure of Maitreya, wearing a flowing dhoti bound at the waist, a scarf across his chest, and a necklace, armbands, bracelets, and earrings. The head is now shattered, but the hair was in a high coiffure, from which flowed ribbons and scarves. The figure is seated with ankles crossed, his feet held up from below by the hands of a half-length, bare-chested guardian figure. Maitreya’s proper left hand grasps a piece of his robe, symbolizing his succession in the lineage of Śākyamuni, while the right hand is raised to his chest with the thumb and forefinger pressed together in vitarka mudrā, a gesture of
teaching. Flanking his knees are two seated lions looking back toward their master, and standing to either side is an attendant bodhisattva.

The purpose of this full description of Lady Yuchi’s shrine is not to characterize it as unique, but rather the opposite. It has the same design, proportions, and motifs as the Maitreya shrine immediately above it, dedicated in 498 by Yuan Xiang and his mother (shrine no. 51), as well as several other late-Northern Wei Maitreya shrines in the upper north wall and ceiling, such as those by Gao Jiaofang for her grandson (no. 45), by monk Daojiang (no. 78), by monk Huigan for his late parents (no. 135), by monk Huile for Yuan Xiang (no. 105), by Great Consort Hou for her grandson (no. 99), by a women’s lay society headed by Yin Aijiang (no. 89), and by others with no dedication (e.g., nos. 18, 20, and 67).

Surely the virtue of such a stereotyped composition is instant legibility. There are only two types of principal icon in this grotto: seated cross-legged Buddha figures and seated cross-ankled Maitreya Bodhisattva figures. These icons, moreover, are always situated in the center of their shrine. With the niche acting as a frame, the familiar silhouettes of the two would be instantly recognizable from a considerable distance, even in half-light.

This compositional device strongly suggests the icons were intended to be seen by a human audience since shape recognition is not the key to causing the dharma-kāya, or Buddha-principle, to respond to a simulacrum and occupy it. Other inscriptions at Longmen make clear that the dharma-kāya recognizes the laksana, or sacred marks, on the body of the Buddha. Some of these are still visible, for example the svastika carved on the chest of the Buddha in the large shrine dedicated by Wei Lingzang around 502. Many others were probably added in paint or gilt that has long-since vanished. Their presence and efficacy are also asserted in their dedications. An inscription of 641 says of its Śākyamuni figure, “When one looks closely at the precious special marks (laksana), the entire person of the Buddha [were present]" and an inscription of 648 dedicating a Maitreya Buddha says, “When its marvelous laksana were initially complete, it was as though he was under the bodhi tree." Visual Conventions: Illusions of Three-Dimensionality

While the central icon was intended to be recognized or read first, the other elements of the shrine require more looking, since they are the fine details of carving intended to create the impression of three-dimensional space. These are found in the relief carvings on the back wall of the shrine and in the figures of donors or donor processions to the side or below. On the façade of Lady Yuchi’s niche are bas-relief figures of worshipers in northern dress, holding lotuses. That these figures are meant to be read as “in front of” the shrine and moving or facing toward the central image is made clearer by other contemporaneous examples.

In the year 504, monk Fasheng dedicated the second large Buddha shrine from the entrance on the south wall to the late Emperor Xiaowen (r. 471–99), the Prince of Beihai, and his mother. Converging on the central inscription panel are two processions of worshipers in bas-relief, one male and one female. On the right are three monks leading an adult male figure flanked by two young male figures, with two attendants behind holding a large fan and an umbrella over the head of the man. Behind the attendants are two boys, and behind them are two smaller figures, who may be their attendants. The adult male
Fig. 2: Huicheng’s shrine, Guyang Grotto, 498.

Fig. 3: Large seated Buddha shrines dedicated by Huicheng (shrine no. 304), Wei Lingzang (no. 234), and Yang Dayan (no. 228). Maitreya shrine of monk Huigan (no. 135).

Fig. 4: Lady Yuchi’s shrine, Guyang Grotto, 496.

Fig. 5: Upper north wall shrines, Guyang Grotto: Yuan Xiang and Gao Jiaofang (shrine no. 51), Lady Yuchi (no. 94), Monk Daojiang (no. 78), Monk Huile (no. 105), anonymous (nos. 18, 20).
The figure is labeled “Disciple Yuan Furong, Prince of Beihai.” The Prince of Beihai in 504 was Yuan Xiang, although the style name Furong is otherwise unknown. The names “Pure Believer Yuan Baoyi” and “Pure Believer Yuan Shanyi” appear next to the heads of the two boys. Baoyi was the style name of Yuan Xu, the second son of Yuan Xiang. At the time this dedication was made for his father, he would have been about two years old. Shanyi was the style name of Yuan He (before 487–523), a fourth-generation descendant of Emperor Daowu (r. 386–409), in the line of the emperor’s son Yao (394–415), whose title was Prince of Henan. During the Taihe period, Yuan He became a monk, but after the death of Emperor Xiaowen in 499, he returned to lay life and eventually inherited the family title of Prince of Henan. Yuan He would have been at least seventeen years old when Fasheng made this dedication and had already returned to lay life.

The monk figures in the procession are labeled as “bhiksu Seng liu,” “bhiksu Seng Long,” and “bhiksu Seng Dao.” Seng liu was Fasheng himself. Leading the procession of women are the nuns Minghui and Fazhen, along with a third nun, whose name has been erased by time. Behind them are two unidentified adult women accompanied by servants bearing umbrellas and large fans, with other attendant figures behind them. The first likely represents the mother of the Prince of Beihai, while the second may portray the prince’s wife (d. 514), the daughter of Liu Chang (436–495). In sum, the procession was composed of Fasheng (the donor) and the living beneficiaries and other members of the household of the Prince of Beihai.

It is noteworthy that the most important beneficiary, the late Emperor Xiaowen, is not represented with the procession of living people. Perhaps it would have been inconceivable to mix the living and the dead, or perhaps it was taboo for someone other than a member of the royal family to have the emperor depicted at all. On the other hand, perhaps he was considered to be already present, represented symbolically by the figure of the Buddha within the shrine or the colossal Buddha on the back wall of the grotto.

These shrines not only express a belief system, they also reveal how medieval people were trained to read the texts and imagery. The two-dimensional worshiper processions were surely meant to be read in three-dimensional space, as rows of figures approaching the front of the shrine. When the viewer reads the processions as extending outward into the third dimension, each shrine becomes its own ritual space. The processions are to be read in the direction in which the figures move, the viewer experiencing the figures in an ascending scale of social and religious importance, culminating in the figure of the Buddha in the center, which the processions approach. The viewer begins to read at the outer edge of the procession, with the least prestigious people – children and servants – seen first. Next, the viewer sees the lay adults and then the monks and nuns, who serve as the intermediary figures between the lay believers and the Buddha.

The other visual convention for three-dimensional space is found in the background carvings. In Lady Yuchi’s shrine, the Maitreya’s halo is composed of pointed lotus leaves surrounded by an outer band containing ten seated Buddha figures. The sculptor has rendered the ribbons flying from the bodhisattva’s head in fine lines “over” the Buddha figures, in an attempt to create the illusion of the figures appearing behind the diaphanous fabric of the ribbons. This illusionism is not unique. In Huicheng’s shrine, a similar effect of “in front of” was created in the halo of the main Buddha. The innermost band depicts the petals of a lotus flower encircled by a string of pearls or jewels, the middle one bears ten apsarasas kneeling in adoration, and the outer band is composed of a strand of jewels and another twelve
apsarasas. Ten of them fly in the ether, holding objects of offering to the Buddha, but the two that flank his head are kneeling on lotus flowers connected by their stems to a point outside the Buddha’s nimbus Fig. 10. These figures were probably not intended to be read as part of the halo, but as figures flying in front of the halo. In bronze sculptures, this effect of floating figures can be created by suspending them from wires, but in stone it can only be suggested by illusionistic means. The illusion may have been increased with contrasting colors of paint.

Who Positioned the Shrines?

The evidence given so far suggests that patrons did expect their shrines to be seen and to be read in some detail. Other shrines, however, suggest there were other factors at work in the placement of shrines beyond the issue of visibility. The configuration of the three shrines dedicated by Huicheng, Lady Yuchi, and Yuan Xiang is an interesting case. Huicheng sponsored the outermost large seated Buddha shrine, and as the illusionistic detail in the background carvings suggests, a viewer standing on the floor in 498 would have been able to read the imagery with ease. Immediately above the large Buddha shrine by Wei Lingzang, which sits next to Huicheng’s shrine, is Lady Yuchi’s Maitreya shrine, while squeezed directly above hers is the Maitreya shrine sponsored by Yuan Xiang and his mother Fig. 5. Lady Yuchi’s shrine was between three and four meters above the floor, and Yuan Xiang’s was even higher, at about five meters high. Such placement would scarcely afford the same degree of visibility as that of Huicheng’s shrine.

Let us examine the language of Lady Yuchi’s dedication. On a large relief stele to the right of the niche is the following inscription:

In the eleventh month of the nineteen[teen]th year of the Taihe era (December 495), Lady Yuchi, the wife of Qiumuling Liang [Mu Liang], Commissioned with Extraordinary Powers, Minister of Works, and Prince of Changle, having asked the artisans to engrave stone to make this image of Maitreya for her late son Niujue, prays that Niujue be released from the stratified realm [of existence] and rise to roam in a region without obstacle [to enlightenment]. If he should be reborn, may he be born in the heavens above, where all the Buddhas are. If he should be reborn in this world, may it be in a place of wonderful joy, free from delusions. If he should be bound by sufferings, may he immediately be released from the three evil paths [of rebirth] and be forever cut off from the destinies bound by causation. May all sentient beings receive this blessing.14

The date of 495 in Lady Yuchi’s shrine requires some explanation. How could her shrine be dated earlier than the one dedicated by Huicheng, who initiated the original program? I believe that her shrine was commissioned shortly after Huicheng sketched out the set of eight large Buddha shrines, but that, being smaller, it was finished and dedicated earlier.
Fig. 6: Ceiling shrines, Guyang Grotto: Gao Jiaofang for her grandson (shrine no. 45), Great Consort Hou for her grandson (no. 99), women’s lay society headed by Yin Aijiang (no. 89), anonymous (no. 67).

Fig. 7: Worshiper, Lady Yuchi’s shrine.

Fig. 8: Worshiper procession, Fasheng’s shrine, Guyang Grotto, 504.
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Lady Yuchi was the wife of the man in charge of rebuilding Luoyang into a royal capital, and surely Mu Liang must have known about the work that Huicheng and his co-sponsors were doing out at Longmen. Possibly Huicheng even had to apply to him for permission to engage stone-workers at the site. In that case, Mu Liang would have had knowledge of the excavation even before it began. Once his wife learned of the project, she could have conceived a plan to generate merit for the soul of their late son Niuju by sponsoring a shrine.

The position of Lady Yuchi’s shrine, between the shrines of 498 dedicated by Huicheng and Yuan Xiang and his mother, argues for the following sequence of events. In 493 or shortly thereafter, Huicheng sketched out the eight large Buddha shrines. Not long after that, Lady Yuchi began her shrine, and in 495 or after, Yuan Xiang began his family’s shrine, above that of Lady Yuchi. An examination of the place where the two shrines meet reveals that the bottom part of Yuan Xiang’s niche, consisting of a low-relief procession of worshipers, is arranged awkwardly around the high-relief arch of Lady Yuchi’s niche. The figures of the monks who begin the procession on the right have been truncated for lack of room. This suggests the top of Lady Yuchi’s niche had already been carved when the sculptors of Yuan Xiang’s shrine, working from the top down, reached the bottom of his niche, only to find they had not left quite enough room for the procession scene.

The awkward positioning of the prince’s shrine raises the question of who determined the placement of the shrines. To suggest some possible answers, let us first examine Yuan Xiang’s dedicatory inscription to shed light on the time frame of the shrine’s commission and completion. The inscription begins:

On the eleventh day of the twelfth month of the eighteenth year of the Taihe era (22 January 495), the August Emperor [Xiaowen] personally led the six armies south on a punitive expedition against the traitor Xiao. 

維太和之十八年十二月十一日 皇帝親御六旌南伐蕭逆。

This is a euphemistic statement of the fact that on 22 January 495, Emperor Xiaowen led the Northern Wei troops south from Luoyang into Southern Qi territory. His excuse for the invasion was expressed as concern for the stability of the rival southern state, where two months earlier, Xiao Luan had murdered the puppet ruler Xiao Zhaowen (Prince of Haining, r. 494) and set himself up as Emperor Ming (r. 494–98). Thus, “the traitor Xiao” in this inscription refers to Xiao Luan, the new ruler of the Southern Qi dynasty. Emperor Xiaowen’s real goal, of course, was to conquer the south and unify China under Northern Wei rule. When Xiao Luan took power, Emperor Xiaowen proceeded to Luoyang, where he mobilized the armies and the nation for war and then departed at the head of his armies to attack the Southern Qi. When he left Luoyang, he put his youngest half-brother, Yuan Xiang, then nineteen, in charge of the civil government.

The inscription continues:

The military and civil companies parted at the bend in the river Luo, and the voices of those leaving and those staying separated past [Yi]que [Longmen]. The Great Consort, by means of holy and excellent rules, gave advice to those around her and helped the
troops. [I, Yuan Xiang], disciple [of the Buddha], with a heart endowed with filial piety, took her words as my model and offered up my tears. That same day, the Great Consort returned home. [Passing] Yichuan, [she] made a vow, for the peace and security of [herself], the mother, and [myself], the son, to have made one Maitreya statue to be established at this [place].

The Great Consort was Gao Jiaofang, the mother of Yuan Xiang. She evidently accompanied him in the party of civil officials giving a send-off to the armies south of the capital. Afterward, somewhere near Yichuan, where the Yi River does bend sharply (which may be what Yuan Xiang meant instead of the river Luo), they turned around to return to Luoyang. If they had returned to the capital by sailing down the Yi River, they would have passed between the cliffs at Longmen (Yique), where they could hardly have missed observing the work being done to excavate Guyang Grotto.

The inscription continues:

On the twenty-third day of the ninth month of the twenty-second year (23 October 498), the carving of this dharma image was completed. As a result, I sponsored a vegetarian feast and had [this inscription] engraved in stone to manifest my feelings and to fulfill the earlier intent [of my mother]. My perpetual prayer is that my mother and I myself, her son, enjoy forever these years wherein this conversion [reigns] and that my relatives, maternal and paternal, live always in such glorious times. May all sentient beings share in this blessing. Made on the twenty-third day of the ninth month of the twenty-second year of the Taihe era of the Great Wei (23 October 498) by the Palace Attendant and Protector-General Yuan Xiang, Prince of Beihai.

The inscription reveals the identities of the lay people in the procession. The leading male and female figures are likely intended to represent Yuan Xiang and Lady Gao, whose position at the head of the procession probably obviated the need to identify them to the contemporaneous viewer. The five male figures with children’s hairstyles should be Yuan Xiang’s sons and other members of the younger generation. Though his biography in “The History of the Northern Wei” mentions only two sons, Hao (495–530) and Xu (502–530), his mother’s dedication for her grandson Bao reveals he had at least one more. The others would be younger male relatives, such as his distant kinsman Yuan He (d. 523), who appears with Yuan Xiang in the procession underneath the shrine by monk Fasheng. The other adult woman in the procession is probably Yuan Xiang’s wife, and the remaining younger women are likely members of Yuan Xiang’s household, such as concubines, daughters, or other relatives of his or his wife.
Fig. 9: Maitreya Bodhisattva, Lady Yuchi’s shrine.

Fig. 10: Detail of Huicheng’s shrine.
Three monks and three nuns lead the lay believers in the procession. Although they are not identified here, the monks are likely the same Seng Liu, Seng Long, and Seng Dao in the donor procession beneath Fasheng’s shrine. Seng Long also sponsored several inscriptions for intrusive shrines carved around the prince’s shrine. Two of the nuns can be identified as Fazhen and Minghui, who are also in Fasheng’s procession and who also had inscriptions carved near Yuan Xiang’s shrine. These people were probably the monks and nuns of the Prince of Beihai’s household.

As Yuan Xiang’s inscription reveals, his mother made the vow to have a statue produced at Longmen in January of 495. Lady Yuchi’s inscription gives a date of December 495, which is likely the date of completion of the shrine. If it took around a year to make a shrine of that size, then Lady Yuchi’s was likely begun around January of 495, the very time that Lady Gao made her vow. If the two shrines were ordered and the work commenced around the same time, they could have been placed one on top of the other because that was easiest for the sculptors to manage. They would have needed to prepare only one work site on the north wall, erect only one set of scaffolding, and so on. It could be that the sculptors placed the shrines.

On the other hand, if the two shrines were ordered at the same time, the patrons may have requested proximity. Lady Gao and Lady Yuchi were of the same generation. In 495, Lady Yuchi was just over forty, while Lady Gao was probably in her mid- to late thirties, given that her son Yuan Xiang was nineteen in that year. Lady Yuchi’s husband was a member of the royal family, and Lady Gao had been the consort of Emperor Xianwen, so they belonged to the same small group of elites and likely knew each other. Perhaps Lady Yuchi did not hear of the work at Longmen from her husband Mu Liang. Maybe she was with the civilian party that bade farewell to the troops south of Longmen in January of 495. If so, she would have traveled back to the capital with Lady Gao, seen the cliffs at Longmen with her, and made her own vow for her deceased son at the same time that Lady Gao vowed to make her shrine for herself and her son. The two women might have communicated their orders to the stone-workers (with Yuan Xiang sent as proxy for his mother) at the same time, perhaps requesting to have their shrines placed close together.

If the patrons did choose the site for their shrine, did they choose a blank space that was made into a shrine for them, or did they choose a shrine from among several that had already been made? I do not believe the shrines were made on speculation, for the simple reason that the space in the ceiling was not used efficiently or systematically. Presumably, artisans working on speculation would wish to maximize profits by saving on time, labor, and materials, yet only in the eight large Buddha shrines in the first register was there efficient and systematic use of space. Above these shrines, however, there was no apparent system for the size or spacing of the niches. The variety of shrines of all different sizes, some with inscriptions but most without, suggests each patron proposed what size niche they would like to commission and what type of inscription.

Inscriptions: Issues of Legibility

Viewers of these shrines engage in three different modes of reading. The high-relief sculpture is read as a single-image icon; like a ritual bronze vessel it is instantly recognizable by its familiar contours, geometric shape, and utter symmetry. The bas-relief carvings
are read pictorially. Various devices are used to create the illusion of three-dimensional space, and the viewer is to understand the bas-reliefs as working together with the main image to create a realm in three dimensions. Inscriptions, except for labels in cartouches, do not interact with the imagery, but are read separately as texts.

Were the inscriptions intended to be legible? It is one thing to recognize the silhouette of a human form twenty feet away, but quite another to read inch-high characters at that distance. According to Schopen, “a considerable number of (Indian) Buddhist inscriptions were never intended to be seen, let alone read.” Could this also be true of Northern Wei dedicatory inscriptions? Miswritten names and other mistakes (excluding variant characters) are ubiquitous, and characters were sometimes left unfinished. One suspects the donors would not have been pleased with these less-than-perfect inscriptions, and I wonder if perhaps they never saw them. Were the inscriptions largely spiritual in function, rather like the exquisitely written stone epitaphs covered with massive stone lids that were placed in Northern Wei tombs, which were produced to be read once by human eyes, at the funeral, and after entombment, only by the spirit bureaucrats of the netherworld?

It seems there were two types of inscriptions in Guyang Grotto. One type, while intended to operate in the spiritual realm to direct merit to named beneficiaries, also had social or political content. These lengthy inscriptions, written in florid parallel prose, allude to the classics and have a rhetorical purpose toward the living. They are written on large relief steles, mostly at eye level. These factors suggest they were indeed meant to be read.
This type is exemplified by the inscriptions dedicating the large Buddha shrines, such as those by Huicheng, Wei Lingzang, and the Sun Qiusheng group, who were the original donors of the grotto. A sample of Wei Lingzang’s inscription conveys its flavor:

Wei Lingzang of Julu and Xue Fashao of Hedong, we two, seeking the favor of the brilliance from the [white curl of] hair [i.e., the ūṇā between the Buddha’s eyebrows that emits light] illuminating the East and lacking the advantage of [the future Buddha Maitreya having descended from] the Tusita Heaven and [being reborn on earth in] Ketumati, we made bold to exhaust our families’ wealth to make one stone image such that none of the auxiliary figures have been omitted. We pray the imperial house may long flourish and the myriad regions render homage and bring tribute. We pray that [Wei Ling]zang and the others will stand like the three acacias on a solitary peak and flourish like the nine date trees in a magnificent garden. May their perfumed fruits multiply more and more, their thorny branches especially thrive, their entire families blossom gloriously, and their blessings flow over onto their descendants.

Some inscriptions on intrusive shrines raise more questions about their audience. They are clearly intended to communicate with the spirit realm, but whether they also address the human realm is open to interpretation. These inscriptions tend to be briefer, with mainly personal content. I suggest that Lady Gao’s inscription for her late grandson was intended only for the karmic mechanism. It reads:

My grandson Bao was lost to this world... All his life he was without offense, and still he was unable to avoid the misfortune of an early death. Now for Bao this image is made, that he may forever escape the hundred sufferings. The Great Consort of the Princedom of Beihai of the Wei, née Gao, had this made for her grandson Bao.

Compare this to the content of an inscription by another Northern Wei aristocrat. In 503, Great Consort Hou, the widow of Tabgatch Helüehan (d. 480), Prince of Guangchuan, sponsored a Maitreya Bodhisattva shrine with the following dedication:

On the seventh day of the tenth month of the fourth year of the Jingming era (11 November 503), Great Consort Hou, the Grandmother of the Prince of Guangchuan, believing that the longer this kalpa has gone on, the farther we have strayed from the dharma, has tread a path to encounter icons and teachings and personally sought out dharma masters, but even so, although I had the honor to be united with the purple radiance [i.e., to marry into the imperial family], I soon had my whole life turned upside-down [when my husband and son passed away prematurely]. Alone I raised my young
grandson to continue the rule of our border princedom. My heart, transparent as ice, found refuge only in truth and silence. Now I have made this single Maitreya image, and I pray that this slight cause for merit will provide a quickening of my spiritual intelligence, that in my present incarnation I will have perpetual peace and joy, and that I comprehend fully the teachings of wisdom. Later, in my existences to come, I will discontinue any acts lacking clarity. Further, [I pray that] I extend into the future the mysterious fruit of the principle of emptiness.

Further, [I pray that] my descendants may live many years, that their spiritual vows will be rapidly achieved, that their progeny will multiply and flourish, that their blessings will shine for myriad generations, that the imperial house will forever prosper, and that the marvelous dharma will expand and broadcast enlightenment to all people who are in confusion and ignorance and not yet awakened.

Clearly, Lady Hou prayed to a supernatural force (Maitreya or the dharma-kāya?) for an increase in spiritual maturity, but her statements about the decline of the age and about the difficulties she faced in her life might well have been addressed to a contemporaneous social audience, almost as if to argue that her misfortunes were not the result of her own sins. There is no other factor by which to distinguish these shrines, in terms of legibility or desire for legibility. Both are Maitreya shrines of the same size and degree of detail, and both are high overhead in the ceiling. If one inscription could be read by someone standing on the floor of the grotto, then surely the other could be, too. Why one woman’s prayer for her grandson differed from the other’s, however, and what that tells us about their intended audience, remains open to speculation.

Notes


4 Śākyamuni’s robe is being held by his disciple Kāśyapa, who waits in a state of suspended animation at Mt. Kukkutapāda to give it to Maitreya when he is born on earth to become the next Buddha. The robe is the symbol of the lineage of earthly Buddhas. See Nattier, Jan, The Meanings of the Maitreya Myth, in: Sponberg, Alan/Hardacre, Helen (eds.), Maitreya, the Future Buddha, Cambridge 1988, p. 46, n. 60.

5 Inscriptions for these shrines are found in Liu/Li 1998: Gao Jiaofang (no. 2288), Daojiang (no. 2229), Huigan (no. 1846), and Huile (no. 1850). See also Liu Jinglong 2001 and Liu Jinglong/Yang Chaojie (eds.), Longmen shiku zonglu (Comprehensive record of the Longmen Grottoes), 12 vols., Beijing 1999, vols. 8–9.
The first is from "The Stele for the Yique Buddha Shrine," Liu/Li 1998, no. 0074, while the second is for the shrine sponsored by a lay society called "The Old and Young of the Sishun Ward, Henan District, Luozhou," Liu/Li 1998, no. 0077.


For Yuan Xu, see Wei Shou 1974, *juan 21 shang*, p. 565. Yuan Xu and his elder brother Yuan Hao (495–540) died at the hands of the would-be usurper Erzhu Rong (d. 530) when Emperor Wu of the Liang (r. 502–49) attempted to place Yuan Hao upon the Northern Wei throne.


Wei Shou 1974, *juan 16*, p. 396, reports that Yuan He became a monk. His biography is on p. 398.


Photographic Acknowledgements

Liu Jinglong 1997, figs. 4, 52, 26, 32, 186, 28, 55, 71: 1, 2, 4, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11; Liu Jinglong 2001: 3, 5, 6.