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An Attempted Interpretation of the Thousand-Eyed Seated Buddha Wooden Tablet Paintings Unearthed in Damagou Township, Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region

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If imagery could reflect the exchange between the exploratory spiritual characteristics of Indian religions and the attention of Chinese thought to social reality, the thousand-eyed seated Buddha wooden tablet paintings unearthed in Damagou Township, Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region would be an excellent case in point. The paintings represent an important stage in the evolution of a series of images related to this phenomenon by showing how differences in thoughts influenced those images.

In 2006, the Xinjiang Archaeological Team from the Institute of Archaeology of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences excavated Buddhist Temple No. 2 at Tuopulukedun in Damagou Township. Based on the remains of manuscripts and coins, the initial stage of construction can be dated to the eighth century CE or earlier. A collection of wooden tablet paintings was found at the site, including two with drawings of the thousand-eyed seated Buddha (06CDF2:0027 and 06CDF2:0028) (Figures 1 and 2). The “thousand eyes” feature is the main subject of both drawings; this style has not appeared elsewhere in China. The figures do not wear crowns, suggesting that they are portraits of Buddha, not Bodhisattva.

If so, the religious presentation of the wooden tablet paintings from Damagou Township has two problems. First, the “thousand eyes” do not blend with the portraits of the Buddha. The two are separate and do not form a single entity. The “thousand eyes” presented here differ from those of later periods that are integrated with images of Buddha or Bodhisattva: They are presented instead as their alternate persona. Therefore, it is difficult to perceive from direct observation that these deity eyes manifest the mighty power of the portrayed Buddha. Second, the “thousand eyes” feature occupies a
much larger proportion of the wooden tablet paintings than the images of Buddha, covering nearly the entirety of the wooden tablets. This is derived from a stylistic tradition that is different from the thousand-handed and thousand-eyed Avalokitasvara Bodhisattva, which was very popular in China at a later time. In addition, fragments of a mural depicting the thousand-handed and thousand-eyed Avalokitasvara Bodhisattva (06CDKF1:001) were also found at the Damagou Township site. However, its image
than what we have now,” at least in the Vedas [Feituo 吠陀], “the eye and its ability to gaze or scan are considered a component of rituals and worship,”[7] which itself can be considered the origin of the conceptual basis of the Brahmanical culture represented by the “thousand eyes.” Even though the images on the paintings are not exactly the same, the thousand-eyed seated Buddha wooden tablet paintings are a form of symbolism used by Esoteric Buddhism where it was initially propagated in the East. This also shows that despite similar subject matters, the wooden tablet paintings and murals unearthed from the Damagou Township site have different images and designs, suggesting that they may convey different ideas and expressions.

The “thousand eyes” is an important image in Indian culture. It is to the Indians both an illusion and a reality. Even though in the Buddhist tradition there is the story of Kunala (the heir apparent of Ashoka Maurya) who was slandered by his stepmother and blinded after his eyes were plucked out, and “later used the tears of young men and women to wash his eyes and regain his sight,”[8] the concept of the “thousand eyes” has its origin in Brahmanism. The Rigveda [Liju Feituo 梨俱吠陀] records that the omnipresent, greatest emperor in the universe, Varuna, “is a thousand-eyed deity”;[9] that “Purusa has a thousand heads, a thousand eyes and a thousand feet”;[10] and that “among the many deities of Hinduism, the great god of the universe has a thousand eyes, which is a symbol for the ability to perceive all things.”[11] “Some of the earliest Indian artwork appears after the production of various texts of the Vedas,”[12] and thus would naturally be influenced by the Vedas. The
thousand-handed and thousand-eyed Avalokitasvara Bodhisattva was also connected to early Hinduism. "In the Esoteric School of Hinduism, Shiva’s power (Sakri, the female companion for spiritual cultivation) is represented by the “eye” (Netra). The shape of the eye is similarly another characteristic of Bodhisattva’s appearance in its thousand-handed and thousand-eyed image (every palm has a round, wide-open eye). This image occasionally overlaps with the figure of the 11-headed Bodhisattva and is presented as one entity or is considered the same kind of image."[13]

Regarding the Purusa deity in the Rigveda, mentioned earlier in this article, Zhongyi Rao points out that “this deity has a thousand hands, a thousand eyes, a thousand feet; he fills heaven and earth, and is the master of all things. This is the same as the Chinese myth of the so-called Julinghu, who attained utmost virtue and had the ability to create mountains and valleys, and build rivers.” The saying appeared later that it has only appeared since the Eastern Han Dynasty.” Rao further considers this Chinese saying a result of the introduction of Brahmanical thought to China.[14] Because early Brahmanical culture lacked visual expression, its influence in China was limited. Images corresponding to this belief did not exist or were at least inferior to the kind of “thousand eyes” affixed to the body of Bodhisattvas in later periods.

Considering that “the god who has a thousand heads has eyes everywhere,”[15] the arrangement of the “thousand eyes” on the thousand-eyed seated Buddha wooden tablet paintings from Damagou Township closely resembles the stylistic portrayal of “Ramayana” in the Upanishads [Aoyi shu 奥义书]. Since the “thousand eyes” fills heaven and earth, it has to transcend all iconographic structures, including images of Buddha and Bodhisattva. The presentation of the “thousand eyes” has to fill all voids, as portrayed on the wooden tablet paintings, in order to satisfy the masses. However, this kind of expression is even more akin to “the symbol of god’s kingdom,” mentioned by Zongsan Mou, “and not schema”[16] – i.e., more of the meaning of the symbolism represented by the symbols. Such an abstract means of conveying iconography, however, makes it difficult for Chinese people to understand the doctrines in the Vedas.

From the perspective of the origin of consciousness, the style of combining the “thousand eyes” and deities during the spread of Indian religious culture to China is reflected in the Khotanese text, Incantations for Exorcizing the Fifteen Ghosts [Dui zhi shiwu gui hushenfu 对治十五鬼护身符], discovered in Khotan Prefecture, Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region. According to Qing Duan’s translation and interpretation, Incantations for Exorcizing the Fifteen Ghosts is one of Esoteric Buddhism’s consecration rites (sima-bandha), wherein the terms “Avalokitasvara Bodhisattva” and “Shaykamuni Buddha” confirm its Buddhist character. But the nickname of the Brahmanical deity, Sakra devanam indrah (“thousand-eyed Mahadeva”), also appears in the text. And since “‘thousand-eyed Mahadeva’ appears in the Sanskrit segment of the long scroll,” this suggests that “at least during the formation of this long scroll of talismanic tantra, the help of the traditional Indian great deity Sakra was needed for the Bodhisattva to bring the gift of conception and childbirth. At this point, Bodhisattva was not called ‘thousand eyes,’ because the ‘thousand eyes’ images still belonged to Sakra. At least at this stage, the interweaving of Bodhisattva and Sakra is clearly observed, and it may have been this kind of interweaving that propelled the emergence and maturation of various images of Bodhisattvas, whereas elements of Hindu deities slowly faded away.”[17] Similarly, these materials also illustrate the artistic forms of Khotan Prefecture at the time, which were influenced to varying degrees by various thoughts and ideas.

This suggests that the concept of the Buddhist “thousand eyes” originated in Brahmanism but became the thousand-handed and thousand-eyed Bodhisattva commonly seen in Chinese Buddhism
through a process of change and assimilation. If the thousand-eyed seated Buddha wooden tablet paintings unearthed in Damagou Township belong to an early style, then the prince with his body covered in eyes that appears on the illustrations of the Bengali miniature painting Astasahasrika Prajnaparamita Sutra [Baqian song banruo boluomiduo jing 八千颂般若波罗蜜多经] (circa eleventh century CE) would be a manifestation of another kind of artistic style of Buddhistic Brahmanism (Figure 4).[18] This kind of iconography was no doubt increasingly influenced by Brahmanical ideas, because “the thousand eyes pattern” on the palms or the body “is very well-known in Hinduism.”[19] What is common between this illustration and the thousand-eyed seated Buddhas on the wooden tablet paintings from Damagou Township is that they all “cover the full board [with eyes]” to express the concept of “infinity.” This further demonstrates the genesis of the latter from India. Of course, these paintings will not be found east of the Yumen Pass (aka Jade Gate or Pass of the Jade Gate).

The popular “thousand eyes” in China gradually obtained a stronger Buddhist flavor, and its visual construction also became more explicit, lineal and tangible. The thousand-handed and thousand-eyed Bodhisattva painting unearthed from the Hongfo Stupa in Helan County, Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region could be considered a stylistic transition: “The head of the Bodhisattva in the image is damaged and missing; the nirmanabuddha is still there; a countless number of hands can be seen, their gestures natural and varied, with different handprints; an eye is drawn in the middle of each palm, encircled by red flames.”[20] The distribution of the thousand-eyed palms across the entire painting is noteworthy. These hands with eyes do not have a lineal connection with the body of the Bodhisattva, and do not indicate clearly or hint at the presence of arms between the hands and the body. This makes it similar in conceptual expression to the Damagou Township seated Buddha wooden tablet paintings. The unvarying correspondence between the eyes and the hands, however, reveals a sense of regularity in a limited space, which agrees with the common trait of Chinese thought. Furthermore, the excavators also followed the thought pattern when they named the wooden tablet paintings unearthed from Damagou Township “thousand-eyed seated Buddha”; they used the term “thousand” to convey “extensive” or “infinite,” the former being a numeric expression derived from the literature, the latter an iconographic expression. This kind of cognitive connection also comes from India.

Wooden tablet paintings with such a composition may have appeared because this kind of iconographic structure used to express ideas is represented best in paintings, especially when conveying the concept of infinity. It is more difficult to communicate
symbolic meaning using other artistic forms, such as sculpture. The seated Buddha image on the two wooden tablet paintings unearthed from Damagou Township can be considered the ultimate form of expressing ideas such as infinity.

When the ideas conveyed by the images are relatively demarcated, regular and rendered tangible, the artistic form can be more diverse and is not limited to painting. Obviously, there must have been a transition. The north wall of Grotto K54 and the east wall of Grotto K361 in the Mogao Grottoes, etc., built in the Tang Dynasty, are painted with the image of the thousand-handed and thousand-bowled Manjusri. Even though the relationship between the eyes and the hands has become standardized, illustrations remain that suggest the notion of infinity. It is difficult to draw a linear connection between the thousand hands carrying bowls and the body of the Manjusri inside the aura of Manjusri Bodhisattva. The thousand-handed and thousand-eyed Bodhisattva figure in Grotto K8 at Dafowan at Baoding Mountain in Dazu District of Chongqing Municipality has a similar composition.

Yet these more abstract expressions are not as palpable as the sculptures of the common thousand-handed and thousand-eyed Bodhisattva that later became popular. Because three-dimensional figures instill a more mysterious and majestic religious appeal, and the area of Damagou Township was already at the time part of the territory of the Tang Empire and within the sphere of Han cultural influence, the “thousand eyes” image that entered China through the Hexi Corridor (aka Gansu Corridor) was more easily accepted and transformed into a materialized impression when the expression of the infinite with the finite was used as a “divination” approach. Therefore, after the zenith of the Tang Dynasty, the popular thousand-handed and thousand-eyed Bodhisattvas were commonly portrayed in visual terms by uniting the eyes, hands and body, and furnishing it with the symbolism of representing the infinite with finite “numbers.” Especially after the Avalokitasvara Samadhi Sutra [Qianguan yanguan zizai Pusa mimi fajing 千光眼观自在菩萨秘密法经] was translated into Chinese by Sobara (aka San Mei Su Fu Lou), the so-called “forty methods” – i.e., using forty arms with palms adorned with eyes to express the number “thousand” – became popular. Because the number “forty” can give a visual impression of “many,” representing the presence of “many” hands and eyes, and since the design is relatively simple, it became the main image for thousand-handed and thousand-eyed Bodhisattvas in China.

Lastly, the discovery of the Damagou Township thousand-eyed seated Buddha wooden tablet paintings as a manifestation of a fusion with Indian religious culture is not by accident. In 1990, Sven Hedin discovered three pieces of wooden tablet paintings unearthed from the Dandan Ulike site.
paintings in a Buddhist-styled D.VII house at the Dandan Ulke (aka Dandanuwulike) site, adjacent to the Damagou Township site. Among them was a piece numbered D.VII.6 with a painting of the Brahmanist Shiva (Figure 5) on its front side: “three heads, four arms, riding two bulls.” In 2002, a Sino-Japanese expedition revisited the Dandan Ulke site and reexamined D.VII, and discovered several images associated with Brahmanism in the Buddhist temple CD4. For example, the second deity from the left portrayed at the lowermost part of Mural CD4:05 has a “child face; three heads and four arms; one hand supporting the sun, one the moon and one holding a bird at the same time; in front of the seat is a peacock looking backward with its head raised,” which the excavators thought to be congruent with the image of Karthikeya (Pancika recorded this in the tantric commentaries). These prove that “the deities related to Hindu myth discovered at Dandan Ulke still adhere to basic iconographic traditions.”

Since “many Buddhists also worship Hindu and Chinese deities, which is different from Christianity and Islam,” it is therefore entirely possible that there was an intersection of Buddhist and Brahmanical ideas and images, which provided an opportunity for the appearance of new images. The author once wrote: “The Silk Road was a major passage of east-west cultural interaction in medieval times, and it was also the path on which foreign religions entering China must have traveled. Apart from the Mahayana schools of Buddhism, Manichaeism, Zoroastrianism, Nestorianism, Islam, etc., also used this path for their missionary work.” “Brahmanism and Brahmanical culture also entered China via the Silk Road and left traces in its Xinjiang section,” manifested indirectly by the way Buddhist imagery evolved. Therefore, it can be seen that the multitude of Buddhist images inside grottoes and temples along the Silk Road not only facilitated the introduction of Buddhism into China as a “teaching [viz., religion] of images,” but the designs also began to conform more to the Chinese system of thought and further synthesized as the images evolved. They could then more clearly express infinity with a finite number. The thousand-eyed seated Buddha wooden tablet paintings from the Damagou Township site are a testament to this transition period.

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Ling Li from the National Museum of China once provided the author a similar “painting of eyes,” which is kept in the collection of Guimet Museum in Paris and is included in the Manuscripts Collected by Paul Pelliot. The composition of this image is similar to that of the seated Buddha wooden tablet paintings unearthed from the Damagou Township site: The eyes are concentrated, without delimitation, inside and outside the central figure. According to the artistic style of this painting, it should be dated to the middle Tang Dynasty period, which means there is yet another transitional stage for the introduction of this kind of painting to China.

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[13] [France] Stein, Rolf Alfred. 1997. "Guanyin, cong nanshen bian nūshen yili" 觀音，从男神变女神一例 (Bodhisattva: An Example of the Transformation from Male Deity to Female Deity). In Faguo hanxue 法國漢學 (French Sinology), Vol. 2. Tsinghua University Press. He also mentioned in a footnote that, "Visnu and Durga both have 'thousand eyes.' Purusa's thousand heads, thousand eyes, and thousand feet have all appeared in the Rigveda [Lîju Feituo 梨俱吠陀], where there is the story of Bodhisattva."


[19] Chen, Yuning and Xiaofang Tang. 2010. Xixia yishushi 西夏艺术史 (The Art History of the Western Xia Dynasty), p. 96. Shanghai Sanlian Book Shop. The authors also think that this image is similar to the thousand-handed and thousand-eyed Bodhisattva in Grotto K8 at Dafowan on Baoding Mountain, Dazu District of Chongqing Municipality. "The thousand hands radiating from the Bodhisattva’s top, left and right, resembles a peacock fanning its tail."

[20] Considering Chinese Buddhist images, Foulk T. Griffiths and Robert H. Sharf. think that the philology of the word "xiang" (image) and the way it is used in Daode jing 道德经 (Tao Te Ching) and Yi jing 易经 (The Book of Changes) illustrate the mysteriousness and creativity behind its connection with "life-like schema copies" in ancient China. See "Lun zhonghiji Zhongguo chanshi xiaoxiang de yishi gongneng" 大唐时期中国禅师肖像的仪式功能 (On the Ritual Use of Chan Portraiture in Medieval China), in Zhongguo chanxue 中国禅学 (Chan Studies), Vol. 5. China Social Sciences Press. The "life-like schema copies" refers to the portraits of founders of Buddhist sects, and the use of the finite to convey the infinite is precisely the kind of divination practice found in Yi jing and Daode jing.


[22] See [2], p. 38.

Dandan Ulike in 2002). Xinjiang wenwu 新疆文物 (Xinjiang Cultural Relics). Images with multiple arms, multiple heads or beast heads with human bodies, which might be related to Brahmanism, are mentioned in the text.


[26] See [4], p. 63.

[27] Yan, Yaozhong. 2012. "Sichou zhilu Xinjiang duan zhong de Poluomen wenhua" 丝绸之路新疆段中的婆罗门文化 (The Brahmanical Culture on the Xinjiang Section of the Silk Road). In Qiucixue yanjiu 龟兹学研究 (Studies of Ancient Kucha), No. 5. Xinjiang People’s Publishing House.


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