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Seeing Buddhas in Cave Sanctuaries

INTRODUCTION

The fact that Buddhist cave sanctuaries functioned as sites for meditation has long been assumed and acknowledged among scholars of Buddhist art. However, questions of how these activities were actually pursued by worshippers in Buddhist circles within a given time and region, and how they related to other possible layers of meaning in a specific symbolic and functional space, merit further elucidation. The question of whether interior images were intended as actual aids in the so-called visualization process needs reassessment to provide a more rigorous understanding of the function of images in the Buddhist milieu. In fact, we need to exercise caution against the use of the term “visualization,” since it has been too broadly applied and is as yet unsupported by precise evidence.

This article addresses these issues by examining one representative cave sanctuary constructed by members of a Buddhist devotional society, and refurbished and used by a celebrated monk during the late sixth century in Henan province. I refer to the Xiaonanhai Cave 小南海石窟. The article discusses the art-historical problem of how to reconstruct religious practice on the basis of material remains with special focus on the act of seeing. In short, this is a case study under the rubric of a broader theme, “Seeing Buddhas in Cave Sanctuaries.”

Before going into further discussion, we need to address a set of conflicting scholarly assumptions concerning so-called “meditative visualization caves (*changuan ku* 禪觀窟).” Some have argued that the lack of ornamentation inside certain caves was due to their use in “meditation,” while others have maintained that the presence of rather

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complicated imagery inside other caves was related to their use in “visualization.”¹

This ambiguity leads to a problem that the field of Buddhist studies has long grappled with – defining the terms “meditation” and “visualization,” often too vaguely or narrowly applied to certain Buddhist practices. As Alan Sponberg observes, there is no consensus regarding which Buddhist concept corresponds to the terms.² Therefore, the only practical approach is to define each case by carefully analyzing how the practice was understood by a specific group or individual in the context of a specific time and place. Thus my discussion will only utilize the passages carved at the site and the monastic biographical account, which will be weighed against surviving textual and visual evidence of the time.

CONSTRUCTION

The Xiaonanhai Cave dates to the late sixth century, but the use of such a site for meditation had at least a century-old tradition in China, with roots reaching perhaps even further back to Indian and Central Asian precedents. The most prominent examples of caves used for meditation that predate Xiaonanhai include some of the Northern Liang caves and the Northern Wei caves at Dunhuang, sites that certain modern scholars have regarded as places for “meditation and visual-

¹ E.g. regarding the lack of ornaments in Daliusheng Cave 大留聖窟 close to the Xiaonanhai Cave and Dazhusheng Cave 大住聖窟, Ding Mingyi suggests that it might be due to the fact that the cave was built for the Chan 禪 meditation conducted by Daoping 道憑; Ding Mingyi 丁明夷, “Gongxian Tianlong Xiangtang Anyang shuchu shikusi 鞏縣天龍響堂安陽數處石窟寺,” in *Zhongguo meishu quanji diaosubian* 中國美術全集雕塑編 vol. 13, ed. Chen Mingda 陳明達 and Ding Mingyi (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1989): 32. For the Dazhusheng Cave, Angela Howard similarly states, “the cave’s décor is very restrained and sober because the cave was used for meditation”; Howard, “Buddhist Cave Sculpture of the Northern Qi Dynasty: Shaping a New Style, Formulating New Iconographies,” *Archives of Asian Art* 49 (1996): 20. Ning Qiang argues that the “image hall (Cave 275)” at Dunhuang was made for “visualization” especially related with the “miracle of seeing Maitreya after visualizing the images or meditating” as instructed in sutras; Qiang, “Patrons of the Earliest Dunhuang Caves: A Historical Investigation,” in *Between Han and Tang: Religious Art and Archeology in a Transformative Period*, ed. Wu Hung (Beijing: Cultural Relics Publishing House, 2000): 496–512.

² The diversity of Sanskrit terms encountered in the technical discussion of Buddhist meditation practices speaks to this difficulty: *dhyāna*, *samādhi*, *samatha*, *vipāśyanā*, *samāpatti*, *anusmṛti*, *yoga*, and *bhāvanā*. See Alan Sponberg, “Meditation in Fa-hsiang Buddhism,” in *Traditions of Meditation in Chinese Buddhism*, ed. Peter N. Gregory (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1986): 17. Robert Sharf advances “thinking,” “contemplation,” “discernment” and so on over “visualization” for an English equivalent of terms such as *kansō* and *kannen*; Robert H. Sharf, “Visualization and Mandala in Shingon Buddhism,” in *Living Images: Japanese Buddhist Icons in Context*, ed. Robert H. Sharf and Elizabeth Horton Sharf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001): 163, 186.

ization” or “meditative visualization” (*changan* 禪觀).³ Several caves constructed during the Northern Qi and Sui dynasties are also thought to have functioned in this way. The Xiangtangshan 響堂山 Cave in particular provides evidence supporting this interpretation: there are textual records such as the biography of the monk Yuan Tong 圓通 which indicates that numerous monks connected with important temples of Ye came to the cave temples of Mount Gu (Xiangtangshan Cave) to practice seated meditation (*zuochan* 坐禪) in the year 574.⁴

However, the Xiaonanhai Cave differs in significant ways from the above examples. At the major sites of Dunhuang, Yungang, Longmen, and Xiangtangshan, to name a few, cave temples were the central construction and the focus of the complex. Some of these caves were probably not intended primarily for monastic practice proper nor wholly devoted to meditation, but were rather used for memorial services or as merit-making activities on the part of local elites. At Xiaonanhai, however, the cave is very small, measuring 1.34 meters in depth, 1.19 meters in width and 1.78 meters in height, just enough room for a single individual, and is not a part of a larger group of caves, leading one to conclude that the cave was not the center of the site. It was rather built for meditation, an activity that might have otherwise been performed in a meditation hall, done in a style matching the nearby Yunmensi 雲門寺 (Cloud Gate Temple) monastery architecture. The placement of the Xiaonanhai Cave, close to the monastery but far enough away to create a feeling of isolation, constitutes a physical manifestation of one of the monastic ideals of the time, that of modified asceticism. At the same time, it should be noted here that any space can have manifold functions. The intentions of those involved in constructing a cave, making images, and carving sutra passages are hardly monolithic, and may include the accumulation of merits for donors, memorialization of a particular monk, canonization of certain texts in the process of preservation, the hierarchical categorization of individual monks or a lineage, and the legitimization of particular teachings and practices.

³ Liu Huida 劉慧達, “Beiwei shiku yu chan 北魏石窟與禪,” in *Zhongguo shikusi yanjiu* 中國石窟寺研究, ed. Su Bai 宿白 (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1996): 331–48; He Shizhe 賀世哲, “Dunhuang Mogaoku beichao shiku yu changuan 敦煌莫高窟北朝石窟與禪觀,” in *Dunhuang yanjiu wenji* 敦煌研究文集, ed. Dunhuang wenwu yanjiusuo 敦煌文物研究所 (Lanzhou: Gansu renmin chubanshe, 1982): 122–43; Qiang, “Patrons of the Earliest Dunhuang Caves,” 489–529.

⁴ *Taishō shinshū daizokyo* 大正新修大藏經, ed. Takakusu Junjirō 高南順次朗 and Watanabe Kaigyoku 高邊海旭 (Tokyo: Taishō issaikyō kankōkai, 1924–1932; hereafter, *T*) 2060, 50: 648a. Katherine R. Tsiang, “Monumentalization of Buddhist Texts in the Northern Qi Dynasty: The Engravings of Sutras in Stone at the Xiangtangshan Caves and Other Sites in the Sixth Century,” *Artibus Asiae* 56, 3–4 (1996): 247. The biography of the monk Dao Feng 道豐 records a similar example of a meditating monk in a cave temple; *T*. 2060, 50: 647c.

Although here I will focus on the act of seeing Buddhas in the Xiaonanhai Cave, this does not necessarily rule out other functions for the same space.⁵

The Xiaonanhai Cave is situated at a critical junction in the history of cave sanctuaries in Chinese Buddhism. First, it has an intimate relationship with the most celebrated monk of the time, Sengchou 僧稠 (480–560), and secondly, the cave is marked with definitive dates of construction and reembellishment, conclusively situating it within this crucial time period in the development of Buddhist imagery in China. In this respect it differs from other major caves that either lack any indication of their patrons (users) or their construction dates. The Xiaonanhai Cave is explicitly and verifiably dated within the second half of the sixth century and indelibly marked as a product of this unique cultural period. Lastly, but no less importantly, the Xiaonanhai Cave is arguably the best example to analyze the way texts, images and rituals share a complex relationship of intertwined meanings and interpretations within a single space. The engraved texts and carved images offer irreplaceable clues to concretely discern the form and function of the rituals performed in the cave. The hope behind the study of any cave temple – to delve into the varied functions of the cave by examining the intricate connections between the space, its production, consumption, and visual representation – finds its most promising possibility in the case of Xiaonanhai.

The Xiaonanhai Cave indeed challenges our prevailing knowledge regarding Chinese Buddhist caves in the field of art history, but it has not figured extensively in Western scholarship owing to its poor state of preservation, modest scale, and location in a coal-mining area far from a metropolitan center. Several works in Asian scholarship, however, stand out in helping to shape our current understanding of the cave and to give my research interest a more detailed frame of approach. The Xiaonanhai Cave started receiving scholarly attention in 1988, when the Henan Provincial Institute for Research and Protection of Ancient Architecture published the results of their on-site investigation.⁶ The representation of the nine-grade rebirth in the Western Pure Land in

⁵ For a more fully developed discussion on various functions of the cave, see Sunkyung Kim, “Decline of the Law, Death of the Monk: Buddhist Texts and Images in the Anyang Caves of Late Sixth-Century China,” Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 2005.

⁶ Henansheng gudai jianzhu baohu yanjiusuo 河南省古代建築保護研究所, “Henan Anyang Lingquansi shiku ji Xiaonanhai shiku 河南安陽靈泉寺石窟及小南海石窟,” *Wenwu* 文物 (1988.4): 1–14, 20. Ding Mingyi’s survey article in 1989 deals with several caves, including Gongxian 鞏縣, Tianlongshan 天龍山, Xiangtangshan 響堂山, as well as caves in Anyang 安陽, and marks the first publishing of color photos of each cave. See Ding, “Gongxian Tianlong Xiangtang Anyang,” 26–51. Another of his articles emphasizes the doctrinal aspect embed-

the Central Grotto at Xiaonanhai called for particular scrutiny since it is the earliest example of the theme in Chinese art, as noted by Katsuki Genichirō 勝本言一郎.⁷ Li Yuqun 李裕群 investigates the relationship between sutra carving activity and the cave temples in the Ye area, giving the Xiaonanhai Cave as one example.⁸ Yen Chuan-ying's 顏娟英 articles on Xiaonanhai mainly focus on its relation with the eminent monk Sengchou and discuss its use as a site for Chan meditation.⁹ Eileen Hsu's recent dissertation and Inamoto Yasuo's 稻本泰生 articles on Xiaonanhai also emphasize the connection between the cave and Sengchou's biography as well as related rituals.¹⁰ While the present study critically incorporates the above-mentioned findings, it deploys a different interpretation of the cave with a specific focus on the role of the image/text object and its relation to meditation.

The Xiaonanhai Cave is located in the village of Shanying 善應, 21 kilometers southwest of the present-day city of Anyang in Henan Province. Its name, Xiaonanhai, means "small southern sea," and is derived from the river which flows past it. The site consists of three grottoes, today designated simply as Eastern, Central, and Western, that were carved into the rocky cliffs of Mount Guigai 龜蓋山 around the middle

ded in the three caves at Anyang including Xiaonanhai and argues against the conventional knowledge that northern Buddhism focused more on practical activities than Buddhist doctrine. See Ding Mingyi, "Beichao fojiaoshi de zhongyao buzheng 北朝佛教史的重要補正," *Wenwu* (1988.4): 15–20. Liu Dongguang published a short article dealing with specific issues related to this site; Liu Dongguang 劉東光, "Youguan Anyang liangchu shiku de jige wenti ji buchong 有關安陽兩處石窟的幾個問題及補充," *Wenwu* (1991.8): 74–78.

⁷ Katsuki Genichirō, "Shōnankai sekkutsu chūkutsu no sambutsu zōzō to kuhin ōjōzu huchō ni kansuru ikkosatsu 小南海石窟中窟の三佛造像と九品往生圖浮彫に關する一考察," *Bijutsushi* 美術史 vol. 45, no. 1 (February, 1996): 68–86. Angela Howard focuses on the new iconography of the Northern Qi dynasty as seen in the Xiaonanhai Cave and others; Howard, "Buddhist Cave Sculpture of the Northern Qi Dynasty: 6–25.

⁸ Li Yuqun 李裕群, "Yecheng diqu shiku yu kejing 鄴城地區石窟與刻經," *Kaogu xuebao* 考古學報 (1997.4): 443–79.

⁹ Yen Chuan-ying 顏娟英, "Xiaonanhai shiku yu Sengchou 小南海石窟與僧稠," in *Fojiao sixiang de chuancheng yu fazhan* 佛教思想的傳承與發展, ed. Shi Hengqing 釋恆清 (Taipei: Dongda tushu gongsi, 1995): 561–98; Yen Chuan-ying, "Bei Qi changuanku de tuxiangkao 北齊禪窟的圖像考," *Tōhō gakuho* 東方學報 70 (1998. 3): 375–440.

¹⁰ Eileen Hsiang-ling Hsu, "The Xiaonanhai Cave-chapel: Images of Deeds and Aspirations," Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1999; Inamoto Yasuo, "Shōnankai chūku to Sōshū zenshi: Hokusei sekkutsu kenkyū josetsu 小南海中窟と僧稠禪師: 北齊石窟研究序說," in *Hokuchō Zui Tō Chūgoku bukkhō shisō shi* 北朝隋唐中國佛教思想史, ed. Aramaki Noritoshi 荒牧典俊 (Kyoto: Hōzōkan, 2000) 270–303; Inamoto Yasuo, "Shōnankai chūku to metsuzui no shisō 小南海中窟と滅罪の思想," *Nara kokuritsu hakubutsukan kenkyū kiyō* 奈良國立博物館研究紀要, no. 4 (2002): 1–44. Although not wholly devoted to the Xiaonanhai Caves, Katherine Tsiang's work on the Xiangtangshan Caves and other sites sheds light on the issue of the monumentalization of Buddhist texts during the Northern Qi dynasty. See Katherine R. Tsiang, "Monumentalization of Buddhist Texts in the Northern Qi Dynasty: The Engravings of Sutras in Stone at the Xiangtangshan Caves and Other Sites in the Sixth Century," *Artibus Asiae* 56, 3–4 (1996): 233–61.

of the sixth century.¹¹ Of the three, the Central Grotto is the best preserved, containing valuable inscriptions, sutra engravings and intriguing images both on interior and exterior surfaces (figure 1).

The story of the construction and renovation of this Central Grotto is documented in a dedicatory inscription carved on the far right section of the façade above its entrance (figure 2):¹²

In the first year of the Tianbao era of the Great Qi (550 C.E.), the Dharma master Sengfang from Lingshansi Temple, the now-deceased noble scion Lin of Yunyang, and others directed the people of the district to carve this stone cave and make a likeness of the true face [of the deity].¹³ In the sixth year (555), the State

¹¹ Mount Guigai is a southern offshoot of the Taihang Mountains 太行山脈, which extend along the border of present-day Hebei 河北 and Henan 河南 provinces. The Western Grotto used to be located about 40 meters from the Central Grotto, and the Eastern Grotto used to be 500 meters from the Central Grotto. Owing to the extensive limestone cutting in this region, however, the Central and Eastern Grottoes were cut down to cubic forms, removed from their original sites, and ended up as freestanding monuments.

¹² *Anyang xianzhi jinshilu* 安陽縣志金石錄 2-6, in Gui Tai 貴泰 and Wu Muchun 武穆淳, *Anyang xianzhi* 安陽縣志, 1819, *Zhongguo fangzhi congshu, Huabei difang* 中國方志叢書華北地方 vol. 108 (Chengwen chubanshe, 1967): 799-800. The additional inscriptions outside of the cave were introduced in *Anyang xianzhi jinshilu*, but left out in the site report by the Henan Provincial Institute for Research and Protection of Ancient Architecture; *Anyang xianzhi jinshilu* 2-6, 812. Just below the dedicatory inscription on the upper right of the entrance, there is a partial inscription that continues to the bottom of the guardian figure on the right side. The whole inscription is comprised of three parts. The first regards the text engraving outside the cave, stating that the monk Sengxuan 僧賢 made an offering, Sengxian 僧纖 from Yunmensi 雲門寺 wrote the characters, and a general named Penghui 彭惠 made donations for the project. Yen Chuan-ying mentions that there is no available information about these monks in the biographical texts of eminent monks. See Yen, “Bei Qi changuanku,” 397. The second inscription is a short passage chosen from the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*, the “Guangming bianzhao gaoguidewang pusa pin 光明遍照高貴德王菩薩品,” *T.* 374, 12: 497b. It reads, “After the Thus-come (Buddha) achieved nirvāṇa, he cut the (circle of) birth and death forever. Listening with the sincerest mind, immeasurable joy will be obtained 如來證涅槃永斷於生死若能至心聽當得无量樂.” This is a verse quoted from the story of a Bodhisattva offering his flesh in order to cure a sick person and then achieving enlightenment. The last inscription is drawn from the Buddha’s teaching to Prince Ajatasatru in the “Yiqie dazhongsuowen pin 一切大眾所問品” from the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*; *T.* 374, 12: 426c-27a. This is a verse told by the Buddha to Mañjuśrī, stating, “All are afraid of the sword and rod, no one fails to love one’s own life. By comparing one’s own generosity towards oneself, do not kill or indignantly flog anybody 一切畏刀杖無不愛壽命怨己(可)為喻勿煞(殺)怒(勿)行杖.” Given the fact that the first five characters of the inscription start in the upper part, and that the passage is interrupted by the entrance and the guardian figure, it is implied that the inscription was carved later than the images and maybe later than the other sutra engravings. Opposite this inscription, a very short additional carving is found below the guardian figure on the left. It reads, “Calling the Buddha to mind, calling the Dharma to mind, calling the Saṃgha to mind 念佛念法念僧.” It recapitulates the idea of “taking refuge in three jewels,” the Buddha, Dharma and Saṃgha. However, it is difficult to verify exactly when this additional carving took place. Given the fragmentary nature of the additional inscriptions on the right and an unbalanced short passage on the left, they are unlikely to have been planned during the first phase of the sutra engraving or simultaneously with the main part above the entrance.

¹³ *Yiren* 邑人 is translated as “the people of the district,” but it can be understood as members of a Buddhist devotional society called *yishe* 邑社, or simply *yi* 邑. For details, Dorothy

Preceptor of Great Virtue and Meditation Master Sengchou had improvements made to enhance the appearance [of the deity]. At that time, he wished to have the Golden Word [of the Buddha] carved and recorded [there], so that its glory would endure into latter ages. However, his fortunes changed, and in the first year of the Qianming era, the cyclical year of *gengchen* (560), he suddenly died at the hermitage of the Yunmensi Temple. The masses looked up to our late master [Sengchou], and in accordance with his visualization methods, engraved sutras in stone to transmit and preserve them.¹⁴ 大齊天保元年靈山寺僧方法師故雲楊公子林等率諸邑人刊此石窟佛像真容至六年中國師大德稠禪師重營修成相好斯備方欲刊記金言光流末季但運感將移暨乾明元年歲次庚辰於雲門寺奄從遷化衆等仰惟先師依准觀法遂鑿石班經傳之不朽¹⁵

From the inscription, we know that the cave was first made in 550 by the Dharma master Sengfang 僧方 with the help of others, probably members of a *yi* society, or *yishe* 邑社.¹⁶ More importantly, it indicates that the famous meditation master Sengchou, a mentor to Emperor Wenxuan 文宣帝 (r. 550–559), was later involved in its redecoration.¹⁷

C. Wong, *Chinese Steles: Pre-Buddhist and Buddhist Use of a Symbolic Form* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004): 18–19, 36–38, 43.

¹⁴ I revised the translation of this dedicatory inscription based on Katherine Tsiang's and Eileen Hsu's translations; Tsiang, "Monumentalization of Buddhist Texts," 234; Hsu, "Xiaonanhai Cave-chapel," 14, 16.

¹⁵ *Anyang xianzhi jinshilu* 2–6, in Gui Tai and Wu Muchun, *Anyang xianzhi*, 799–800.

¹⁶ Regarding the identity of Sengfang 僧方, Katherine Tsiang introduces Koichi Shinohara's opinion that he might be Sengfang 僧昉, who worked as a translator at the time. Tsiang also suggests that if Sengfang is the one who worked with the Indian monks Gautama Prajñārucci and Yupaśūnya as a translator of Buddhist texts, the noble scion Lin may refer to Tanlin, who is also recorded to have worked with Prajñārucci; Tsiang, "Monumentalization of Buddhist Texts," 234, n. 3. Katsuki Genichirō notes that a monk named Sengfang 僧方 is mentioned in the biography of Senglun 僧倫 as the one who made an effort to spread the Buddha's teaching beginning in the Kaihuang era (581–600); Katsuki, "Shōnankai sekkutsu chūkutsu," 70. However, according to my own research, the phrase that Katsuki mentions, "Kaihuangchu fangxing fofa 開皇初方興佛法," merely indicates "From the early Kaihuang era, Buddhism now revived" rather than "From the early Kaihuang era, a monk named Fang revived Buddhism"; *T.* 2060, 50: 601c. Instead, several lines after the phrase, there is a passage recording that Senglun practiced *lanruo* 蘭若 for twenty years in the mountain with two masters, Fang and Yuan. I think that the master Fang here might designate Sengfang although we do not have further information; *T.* 2060, 50: 601c.

¹⁷ According to the biography of Sengchou in Daoxuan's *Xu gaosengzhuàn* 續高僧傳 (Continuation of Biographies of Eminent Monks), the Northern Qi Emperor Wenxuan 文宣帝 ordered the construction of Yunmensi, Cloud Gate Temple, at Mount Long 龍山, 80 *li* (about 25 miles) southwest of the then capital city of Ye during Tianbao 天保 2 (552); Daoxuan, *Xu gaosengzhuàn* 16, *T.* 2060, 50: 554b. Meanwhile, Daoxuan also recorded that Sengchou was invited to be an abbot in the Shiku dasi 石窟大寺 (Great Stone Cave Temple) around the same time when the emperor built Yunmensi. The identity of the Great Stone Cave Temple is uncertain. But, now scholars agree that it could be the North Cave of the Northern group at Xiangtangshan. For details, see Alexander Soper, "Imperial Cave-chapels of the North-

Although we can acknowledge Sengchou's conception of the idea to engrave the sutra in around 555, the earliest probable date for the ac-

ern Dynasties: Donors, Beneficiaries, Dates," *Artibus Asiae* 28, no. 4 (1966): 260; Liu, "Yuguan Anyang liangchu shiku," 78; Yen, "Xiaonanhai shiku yu Sengchou," 583; Yen, "Bei Qi changuanku," 399; Katherine R. Tsiang Mino, "Bodies of Buddhas and Princes at the Xiangtangshan Caves: Image, Text, and Stupa in Buddhist Art of the Northern Qi Dynasty (550-577)," Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1996, 184; Katsuki, "Shōnankai sekkutsu chūkutsu," 72; and Hsu, "Xiaonanhai Cave-chapel," 27.

Sengchou was asked by the emperor to reside there. We do not know when that began, but Sengchou in fact lived there at the time of his death, aged 81 during Qianming 乾明 1 (560). Whether this temple was the original site for the Xiaonanhai Cave complex is difficult to decipher, especially because the physical surroundings of the cave have all been destroyed, depriving us of a deeper understanding of the cave's proximate environs. The textual evidence, however, suggests a close association between the Yunmensi temple and the Xiaonanhai Cave. To examine this further, an analysis of the possible connection between the Xiaonanhai Cave site and Mount Long is a step in the right direction. Historical records about the geographical surroundings, including descriptions of the nearby mountain and village, can be found in an early text such as the *Shuijingzhu* 水經注 (Li Daoyuan 酈道元 [d. 587], *Shuijingzhu*, juan 9 [Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1990]: 203) and several local gazetteers of the Ming and Qing dynasties, eg., the *Zhangde fuzhi* (Cui Xuan 崔銑, *Zhangde fuzhi* 彰德府志, 1522, *Tianyige zang Mingdai fangzhi xuankan* 天一閣藏明代方志選刊 14 [Taipei: Xinwenfeng yingyin, 1985] 1. 11-12), the *Anyang xianzhi* (Gui and Wu, *Anyang xianzhi*, 127), and the *Linxian zhi* 林縣志 (Yang Chaoguan 楊潮觀, *Linxian zhi*, vol. 4, 1-2 (1752), quoted in Yen, "Xiaonanhai shiku yu Sengchou," 561-62. In particular, the *Zhangde fuzhi* informs us that Shanying village, where the Xiaonanhai Cave is presently located, is situated southeast of what was called "Dragon Mountain" (Cui Xuan, *Zhangde fuzhi*, 1.11-12). In addition, the *Anyang xianzhi* cites a document from the *Chenxian zhi* 陳縣志 that says that Mt. Shanying 善應山 is located southeast of Dragon Mt. (Gui and Wu, *Anyang xianzhi*, 128). In other words, Xiaonanhai Cave is located in the Shanying village that was very close to Dragon Mt., which was again the locus for Yunmensi temple. According to Daoxuan's document on Yunmensi temple, there once was a meditation cave and a big river or a pond in front of it; *T.* 2060, 50: 555a. Daoxuan adds that after the Northern Zhou's persecution of Buddhism, Yunmensi was given to Daifu You Weiwen 大夫柳務文, who later let his relative Xin Jian 辛儉 keep the temple while he was preparing to move his family into the temple. However, the protective god of the temple became so angry that Xin Jian eventually died. In the early Sui dynasty, the temple was revived and became famous once again, but during the Daye 大業 era (605-618), thieves raided the temple, and there was a fire that burnt all the buildings, leaving only the Buddha Hall and monks' cells. Daoxuan specifically states that he went to the site himself in the early year of the Zhen'guan 貞觀 era (627), lamenting that it was only a ruined site by that time; *T.* 2060, 50: 555b.

Among the possible candidates for the Yunmensi site in the vicinity of Shanying, Xiangtangshan Cave has no large body of water nearby (a point also raised by Yen, "Xiaonanhai shiku yu Sengchou," 583). The presence of the river near Xiaonanhai Cave and the hint of the individual meditation cave mentioned by Daoxuan lead to the conclusion that the Yunmensi site is closely related to Xiaonanhai Cave. Wen Yucheng argues that the Xiaonanhai Caves and the adjoining temple are on the site of the original Yunmensi; Wen Yucheng 溫玉成, *Zhongguo shiku yu wenhua yishu* 中國石窟與文化藝術 (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin meishu chubanshe, 1993): 330-31. Yen Chuan-ying also argues for this possibility; Yen, "Xiaonanhai shiku yu Sengchou," 583; Yen, "Bei Qi changuanku," 399.

The *Xu gaosengzhuan* records that a temple named Guangyansi 光嚴寺 was originally the historic Yunmensi; *T.* 2060, 50: 555a. The biography of Zhishou 智首, who entered the court with Lingyu 靈裕 (518-605) during the Sui dynasty, states that Yunmensi was renamed Guangyansi during the Zhen'guan era (627-649); *T.* 2060, 50: 614c. The name Guangyansi appears only once among the funerary stupa reliefs at Mount Bao 寶山 and no other remains exist today. The stupa relief no. 46 has an inscription identifying it as an ash stupa of the Dharma Master Huideng 慧澄 from Guangyansi; Ouchi Humio 大内文雄, "Hōsan Reisenji sekkutsu tamei no kenkyū 寶山靈泉寺石窟塔銘の研究," *Tōhō gakuho* 69 (1997): 300.

tual sutra engraving in this cave is 560. Not mentioned in the inscription is the fact that Sengchou was also portrayed as a primary figure offering worship to the Buddha at the cave, carved in relief on the interior north wall.

In sum, we know that the cave underwent at least four different stages of construction and redecoration. In the dedicatory inscription, three distinct phases are mentioned: the initial construction of the cave by Sengfang and others in 550, the refurbishment by Sengchou in 555, and the engraving of sutra passages and a dedicatory inscription by Sengchou's pupils in 560. Finally, there are additional carvings of short passages outside the cave, the flow of which is interrupted by the entrance and the guardian figure, and the date of these remains unknown.¹⁸ Yet as the cave lacks any definitive signs indicating its layers of construction sequence, the chronology is problematic. Some scholars suggest that the initial construction was devoted solely to the sculpted icons, whereas others assume that the relief and the statues were made simultaneously.¹⁹ Others argue that the front wall was a later construction whereas the two lateral walls were of the first stage.²⁰ Still others reject any attempt to separate the phases, attempting diligently to treat the whole cave as the unified culmination of Sengchou's plan.²¹ The prevailing view envisions a staggered construction, with Sengfang first finishing the sculptures, Sengchou undertaking the redecoration, and then the final text engraving being completed by his followers after 560, with perhaps those followers adding a final touch of their own in the form of sculptures or reliefs. This view, however, brings up the question of when the relief portrait of Sengchou on the front wall was carved, since it could have been made in the second stage by Sengchou himself or in the third stage by his followers. I see no compelling evidence of any trace of discontinuity between the different stages in the construction of the sculptures.²² The placement of the high relief of triad icons on each wall and the diverse relief scenes bear no evidence of awkward

¹⁸ For details, see note 12.

¹⁹ Katsuki takes a position for the simultaneous carving for reliefs and statues; Katsuki, "Shōnankai sekkutsu chūkutsu," 76.

²⁰ Liu, "Youguan Anyang liangchu shiku," 75.

²¹ Eileen Hsu identifies the work on the sculptures in two stages, in 550 and 555; Hsu, "Xiaonanhai Cave-chapel," 13-44.

²² Another possibility is that the portrait was made in the first stage by Sengfang and other *yi* society members for the sake of Sengchou. The hypothesis that the cave was made for Sengchou from the first phase was raised by Wen Yucheng, *Chungguk sōkkul kwa munhwa yesul* 中國石窟寺 文化藝術, translated by Pae Chindal 裴進達 (Seoul: Kyōngin munhwasa, 1996): 168. Yen Chuan-ying suggests that the cave was unfinished at the first stage, later finished by Sengchou, with his portrait added in this second stage; Yen, "Bei Qi changuanku," 398.

overlap or pause in the work process, signs often used to detect “intrusive” images in other caves.²³ I therefore tentatively conclude that the original plan for the layout and sculptures for the cave did not include sutra engraving, but the engraved passages outside the cave correlate with the content of the sculptures and the overall scheme.²⁴ A conclusive date and agent for each component of the cave will continue to be elusive, but it is safe to assume that the entire project revolved around Sengchou’s meditation method and teaching.

Sengchou’s biography records that he initially refused several high official positions offered by emperors.²⁵ The first offer was made by the Northern Wei emperor Xiaoming 孝明帝 (r. 515–527) who issued three invitations. Sengchou declined all three, saying “Under heaven, there is nothing that is not your majesty’s territory, [therefore] I beg [you to allow me] to reside in the mountain to practice my Way in order not to harm the Great Penetration (*datong* 大通).”²⁶ The emperor accepted his decision and bestowed offerings upon him. The next invitation was made by the Emperor Xiaowu 孝武帝 (r. 532–534) of the Northern Wei in the first year of the Yongxi era 永熙 (532), and again Sengchou refused the summons to the court. The Emperor ordered a meditation chamber (*chanshi* 禪室) built for him to have gatherings for devotional offerings.²⁷

²³ Liu Dongguang suggests that the triad icons on the front (north) wall wear different garments and show more robust modeling, thus they are closer to the Northern Qi style seen in Xiangtangshan Cave, whereas the icons on the east/west walls are more similar to the Northern Wei style. Accordingly, he concludes that the seated Buddha and standing disciples on the front wall were re-carved when Sengchou renovated the cave in 555, while the sculptures on the east/west walls were not retouched. See Liu, “Youguan Anyang liangchu shiku,” 74–75. Hsu, “Xiaonanhai Cave-chapel,” 158, follows this opinion. The assumption, however, fails to address how a stylistic discrepancy could appear within a mere five-year period. Also, the co-existence of different styles in one monument or even in one sculpture is not unusual in any period. Lastly, it is hard to imagine why Sengchou would re-carve the statue only on the front wall, leaving the lateral walls untouched.

²⁴ A similar observation is presented by Li Yuqun in his research on the caves and sutra engravings in the Ye area; Li, “Ye Cheng diqu shiku yu kejing,” 455.

²⁵ *T.* 2060, 50: 554b–c.

²⁶ *T.* 2060, 50: 554a. *Datong* 大通 probably means Mahābhijñā Jñānābhīhū (“great Buddha of supreme penetration and wisdom”).

²⁷ *T.* 2060, 50: 554a. The relation between *chanshi* 禪室 and *chanku/changuanku* 禪窟/禪觀窟 is yet to be explored. In the later period there is evidence distinguishing the meditation hall from the cave space. The record is particularly interesting, since it is also related to the monk Sengchou. Ding Mingyi provides information on a small Buddhist temple called the Dingjin chanyuan 定晉禪院, in Wuan county 武安縣 of Hebei province. The temple is claimed to have been the site where Sengchou attained enlightenment. A stele dated Tiancheng 天成 4 (929) documents that the temple was once furnished with a “*chantang* 禪堂 (Chan meditation hall),” a “*shishi* 石室 (rock chamber),” and several “*zuochan peng* 坐禪棚 (shelters for seated meditation);” Ding, “Beichao fojiaoshi,” 17. Also standing at this temple was a large tree (*dachoushu* 大稠樹) under which, according to a semi-fictitious legend, the monk had an enlightenment

It seems clear in this latter refusal that there was a direct association between this performative gesture of declining a worldly reputation and the acquisition of a space for quiet meditation. The description of the meditation chamber suggests a hall of sufficient size for monastic gatherings, not a modest cave such as Xiaonanhai which could accommodate only one individual at a time. What stands out, however, is the fact that the emperor recognized the necessity for a separate place for meditation, indicating that such a requirement was common knowledge.²⁸

Sengchou's consistent refusal of imperial summons is understandable given the political turmoil of the late Northern Wei; he might simply have wished to avoid involvement at court until the situation stabilized.²⁹ Yet, his refusal of subsequent invitations and the emperor's respect for Sengchou's demeanor nevertheless would indicate a

experience. To commemorate this event, people named the temple Chou Chanshi zhi si 稠禪師之寺, or "Temple of the Chan Master Chou"; Hsu, "Xiaonanhai Cave-chapel," 26. Thus, it becomes clear that during the tenth century there existed in one temple these separate entities: "Chan meditation hall," "rock chamber," and "shelters for seated meditation." For this stele ("Dingjin chanyuan qianfoyiwei 定晉禪院千佛邑碑"), see Gui and Wu, *Anyang xianzhi*, 802.

²⁸ The use of a special meditation space is echoed in a practice found in Xinxing's 信行 (541–594) Three Levels Movement. According to Daniel Stevenson, Xinxing utilized a special chamber of quietude (*jingshi* 靜室); Daniel Bruce Stevenson, "The T'ien-t'ai Four Forms of Samādhi and Late North-south Dynasties, Sui and Early T'ang Buddhist Devotionalism," Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1987, 347. In his *Zhifa* 制法 (or *zhizhongshi xufa* 制衆事緒法, Assorted Rules for Community Regulation), Xinxing alludes to different modes of activity including "an intensive cultivation of the Way through continuous meditation in a special chamber of quietude, *jingshi*." In addition, he describes how practitioners who wish to engage themselves in the "uninterrupted cultivation over the six intervals of the day and night (*liushi xue xiangxu zuo ye* 六時學相續作業)" essentially discern the images of Buddha continually (*guanfo* 觀佛). This practice is marked by confession and veneration before the Buddhas at six intervals. In Xinxing's account, the individual of the superior grade is able "to sit in isolation in a chamber of quietude (*jingshi*), close his eyes, and discern the Buddha in his featureless body of Dharma essence"; *ibid.*, 357. However, for individuals of the "third grade," that is, those of a lesser spiritual capacity who cannot pursue seated meditation at all, the performance of sitting in isolation in a special chamber was not allowed and instead such a practice was reserved for the believer of a better capacity. This fact corresponds well with the context and use of the caves at Xiaonanhai.

The Three Levels Movement is not the only group who utilized the quiet chamber in isolation for meditation. The Tiantai 天台 master Zhiyi 智顛 (538–597) also mentioned using such a space. In the *Lizhifa* 立制法, Zhiyi categorizes three modes of religious practice in the Tiantai community: 1) "Practicing seated meditation by resorting to the (community) hall" (*yitang zuochan* 依堂坐禪); 2) "attending to the practical affairs of the community of monks" (*zhi sengshi* 知僧事); 3) "performing penance in a sanctuary or place of practice set apart from others" (*biechang chanhui* 別場懺悔); *ibid.*, 44. Among the three, the repentance conducted in a sanctuary set apart from other places is noticeable as it recalls the special chamber of quietude, *jingshi*. Although Xinxing's practice and Zhiyi's formula are applied to certain groups, that is the Three Levels Movement and the Tiantai School, they apparently reflect the contemporaneous thought of the ideals for monastic lives and practices during the late sixth century.

²⁹ Hsu, "Xiaonanhai Cave-chapel," 21.

shared notion of what was the proper manner of handling an issue like an imperial invitation.

As Sengchou's reputation grew, Emperor Wenxuan offered an invitation in the second year of the Tianbao 天保 era (551), saying:

Since hearing of your virtue I have thought often of you, and wish to meet with you. I have issued a decree in Dingzhou, to have you give a sermon to the many people in Ye. As complacency is not conducive to righteousness, please consider coming to Chengmingsi 承明寺 [temple], carrying your staff and providing salvation to the suffering of the world by widely proclaiming the unsurpassable truth. After your visit, you may return to the mountains. You will be free to stroll anywhere in the east and west, [and] no one will force you to stay.³⁰

In response to this heartfelt and persuasive entreaty, Sengchou "stood up and dusted off his clothes" and accepted the invitation, thus reversing his decision to stay on the mountain for the rest of his life. He was welcomed by the emperor, who came in person to the outside of the city gate to greet him. Following his sermon on the emptiness of all things in the world, Sengchou taught the emperor the "Four Bases of Mindfulness" (*sinianchu* 四念處) meditation method in great detail.³¹ Afterwards, the emperor received the bodhisattva precepts (*bodhisattva śīla*), resulting in several imperial orders, including a ban on hunting and fishing and a call for the release of all captive hawks, as well as his personal abstention from the consumption of meat and alcohol.³² Sengchou was ultimately appointed Chief Abbot of the Great Stone Cave Temple (probably the imperially-sponsored Xiangtangshan cave temple) and received the donation of Yunmensi, built by the emperor out of concern that poor roads would render Sengchou's previous temple inaccessible and make consultation difficult.³³ Bowing to the emperor's wish, Sengchou remained at the Yunmensi and refurbished the adjacent Xiaonanhai Cave, presumably for his own meditation.

³⁰ *T.* 2060, 50: 554a. Translation mine.

³¹ *T.* 2060, 50: 554b.

³² *T.* 2060, 50: 554b. The same account is found in the *Shijia fangzhi* 釋迦方志 (Regional Spread of Buddhism) also written by Daoxuan during Yonghui 1 (650); *T.* 2088, 51: 974c. For a contradictory image for Emperor Wenxuan as a devout Buddhist and as a cruel, insane ruler, see *Bei Qi shu* 北齊書, chapter 4; Soper, "Imperial Cave-chapels," 261–62.

³³ For the relationship between Xiaonanhai Cave and Yunmensi, see note 17; *T.* 2060, 50: 554b.

IMAGE AND CONTEXT

Sengchou's legacy is most closely associated with his quintessential meditation method, *sinianchu*.³⁴ In his biography, the methods of "Cessation and Insight" (*zhiguan* 止觀) and "Sixteen Extraordinary and Victorious Methods" (*shiliu shushengfa* 十六殊勝法) are analogous to a prologue and epilogue to *sinianchu*. In order to make this point clear, it might be beneficial to briefly introduce various meditation methods that Sengchou was said to have attempted and his monastic journey delineated in the biographical account. His career as a monastic figure began in his twenties after an experience when he suddenly grasped the Buddha's teaching. Disillusioned by mundane affairs, Sengchou took to reading Buddhist texts, and, in the process, miraculously realized their entire meaning. He subsequently renounced his household at the age of twenty-eight and went to Jingmingsi 景明寺 to receive the precepts from master Sengshi 僧寔. Sengchou then studied the meditation practice of "Cessation and Insight" with a Chan master Daofang 道房, who was an excellent disciple of Chan master Batuo 跋陀.³⁵ However, his initial effort with "Cessation and Insight" practice did not work for him. As Jan Yun-hua 冉雲華 suggests, it is unclear if Sengchou was ever even involved with this method.³⁶ The confusion is due first to the fact that although the term *zhiguan* was used very frequently in the Tiantai school, especially from the seventh century onwards, it was not found in any other sources related to Sengchou's coterie. Secondly, from information gathered from a manuscript discovered at Dunhuang called the *Dacheng xinxing lun* 大乘心行論, it is possible that the character *zhi* 止 of *zhiguan* was mistakenly written for *zheng* 正, of *zhengguan* (that is, *Correct Insight*).³⁷

³⁴ In the *Xu gaosengzhuan*, Daoxuan delineates the series of unexpected twists that mark the transformation of Sengchou's life from a respected Confucian scholar to an eminent Buddhist monk. *T.* 2060, 50: 553b–55b. Born at Changli 昌黎 in 480 with the surname Sun 孫, and growing up in Julu 鉅鹿 in present-day Hebei province, Sengchou diligently studied Confucian classics and history, later earning the status of the Erudite of the National University 大學博士. His reputation as a Confucian scholar impressed the court of the Northern Qi and his familiarity with Confucian virtues probably helped him to maintain a good relationship with the court as a mentor for the emperor even after he became a Buddhist monk.

³⁵ In the *Xu gaosengzhuan* biography of Chan master Batuo 跋陀, his name is given as Fotuo 佛陀; *T.* 2060, 50: 551a; see also Jan Yun-hua, "Seng-ch'ou's Method of Dhyana," in *Early Ch'an in China and Tibet*, ed. Whalen Lai and Lewis R. Lancaster (Berkeley: Berkeley Buddhist Studies Series 5, 1983), 54. He was a Central Asian monk, and both Fotuo and Batuo are Chinese transcriptions of "Buddha" or "Bhadra". See Paul Pelliot, "Notes sur quelques artistes des Six Dynasties et des T'ang," *T'oung Pao* 22 (1923): 262–64, quoted in Bernard Faure, *Chan Insights and Oversights: An Epistemological Critique of the Chan Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993): 133.

³⁶ Jan, "Seng-ch'ou's Method," 56–57.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 57.

Whatever Sengchou's relation to this method, he was not successful in acquiring the concentration level that he had pursued. Intriguingly, however, Sengchou is said to have written a book entitled "The Method of Cessation and Insight" in two fascicles during his late years, reportedly just before his passing away at the age of eighty-one. The book was written in response to a request submitted by Li Jiang 李獎, a *huangmen shilang* 黃門侍郎, and many great masters 大德, asking Sengchou to summarize the essence of Chan. His biography states that the book was so popular that many households kept a copy of it. What is puzzling is that Sengchou recommended the very method that he had failed at in the initial stage of his career. The interpretation of this is rather vexing. We may consider that his relation to this method might be like that of a spiral development. After mastering a high level of meditation (and experiencing court recognition), he revisited the method that he had first tried a long time ago and found it to be effective the second time around, and the biographer might not have felt it necessary to record this detail. Another possibility is that the first *zhi* of *zhiguan* in the first account was written correctly, whereas the second entry was a mistake for *zhengguan*. This would mean that whereas Sengchou failed to attain proper concentration by *zhiguan*, he found the *zhengguan* appropriate for recommending to others. At any rate, we do not have any other material evidence related to this book of *zhiguan* that Sengchou is said to have written. In fact, the book was not listed either in the Sui dynasty catalogue or any other Buddhist text catalogues, thus suggesting that by the Sui dynasty the book was already lost.³⁸ Daoxuan's record notes that Sengchou "had controlled his thoughts (*liannian* 斂念) for a long period of time, but completely without either concentration or realization."³⁹

However, when he intended to leave the mountain and to recite the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*, he came across a monk from Mount Tai (Taiyue 泰岳) who gave him beneficial instructions for meditation. The monk suggested, "In cultivating *dhyāna*, you should be sincere and without any other will than carefulness, since all sentient beings who have spirit universally possess the initial taste of *dhyāna*."⁴⁰ Following this advice, Sengchou practiced composing his mind and finally attained the perfect absorption of thought. He rooted his meditation on the "Four Bases of

³⁸ For example, the *Suishu jingjizhi* 隋書經籍志 does not have an entry for this book. See Jan Yun-hua 冉雲華, *Zhongguo chanxue yanjiu lunji* 中國禪學研究論集 (Taipei: Dongchu chubanshe, 1990), 65.

³⁹ *T.* 2060, 50: 553c; Jan, "Seng-ch'ou's Method," 54.

⁴⁰ *T.* 2060, 50: 553c.

Mindfulness” (*sinianchu*) from the “Chapter on Sagely Conduct” of the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* and arrived at the stage of not being distracted by desire and thoughts, even in a dream. It is this method that he taught later in his career to the Emperor Wenxuan of the Northern Qi dynasty.⁴¹

After five years, Sengchou learned the “Sixteen Extraordinary and Victorious Methods” from the Chan master Daoming 道明 at Mount Changgong 障供山.⁴² While eating as little food as possible and pursuing a long period of practice, he is said to have developed an even purer mind. Later, he went to the Shaolinsi 少林寺 and explained his experience to the famous master Fotuo, who praised Sengchou so highly as to say, “From Pamir eastward, if there is the highest state of Chan, you are the person who knows it.”⁴³ Regarding the “Sixteen Extraordinary and Victorious Methods” and the monk Daoming, there is no further reference beyond this meager description. Jan observes that the inclusion of this method raises some confusion, since the textual accounts for it belong to the so-called Hinayāna tradition while Sengchou was notably inclined towards the Mahāyāna tradition, as seen in the fact that his teaching involved the six pāramitās and the Bodhisattva path.⁴⁴ How or whether we should reconcile these facts remains unanswered. Characteristics of meditation in Hinayāna and Mahāyāna, as well as the relation between them, are not fully understood, thus the topic deserves more study at a later time.

What is noteworthy in light of the present discussion is that the only text mentioned in relation to Sengchou’s meditation training is the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*. This helps to explain the prominent placement of a particular chapter from this text on the wall of the Xiaonanhai Cave (figure 1A). A large area to the left of the entrance is devoted to a long passage from the “Chapter on Sagely Conduct” (“Shengxing pin 聖行品”), the twelfth chapter from the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* (figure 3). It focuses on contemplating the body as impure and utterly filthy, then expounds on the fourfold stage of Mindfulness, namely, *sinianchu* (see my appendix).⁴⁵

⁴¹ *T.* 2060, 50: 554b.

⁴² The earlier occurrence of the term “Sixteen Extraordinary and Victorious Methods” is in the *Xiuxing daodi jing* 修行道地經, a *dhyāna* text translated into Chinese by Dharmarakṣa in 284 C.E.; *T.* 606, 15: 216a. According to Jan, “Seng-ch’ou’s Method,” 61, this method was understood to be based on a reflective awareness of the breath and one’s mental process.

⁴³ *T.* 2060, 50: 554b.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁴⁵ It was difficult to recognize the full text from my on-site investigation. The original Chinese text is in *T.* 374, 12: 433c–34b, as well as *Anyang xianzhi jinshilu* 2–6, in Gui and Wu, *Anyang xianzhi*, 800–2; with comparison between Yen Chuan-ying’s 1995 version, Yen Chuan-ying’s 1998 version, and Hsu’s 1999 version. In comparison to the Chinese text, I follow Hsu’s translation, but with several revisions. For the translation of the carved part, see Appendix.

One method mentioned in the chapter is the “meditation on impurity” (*bujingguan* 不淨觀); it offers perhaps the most striking example of a “canonical” attitude towards the human body. Robert Sharf regards this practice as “particularly efficacious in eradicating attachment to the body, whether it be lust directed to another or vanity with regard to oneself.”⁴⁶ It is a practice which by its very nature is contradictory to the veneration of the relics, such as bone fragments or ash collected from the cremation of venerated masters. Sharf attempts to find a way to reconcile “the apparent gap between the descriptions of the festering corpse as an object of loathing and the adoration of relics as manifestations of Buddhahood” in the mortuary processes of purification, such as cremation or mummification.⁴⁷

Though in this case the passage on visualizing on the body’s impurity was from the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*, similar practices are introduced and encouraged in several other sutras and exegetical texts, indicating the efficiency of such methods in monastic disciplines. These include the *Guanfo sanmei hai jing* 觀佛三昧海經, translated by Buddhahadra (359–429); the *Dazhidulun* 大智度論, translated by Kumārajīva in 402–405; *Chanmi yaofa jing* 禪秘要法經 attributed to Kumārajīva; *Dacheng yizhang* 大乘義章, written by Huiyuan, and *Mohezhi guan* 摩訶止觀, *Fajie cidi chumen* 法界次第初門, *Shichan boluomi cidi famen* 釋禪波羅蜜次第法門, and *Miaofa lianhuajing xuanyi* 妙法蓮花經玄義, all written by Zhiyi.⁴⁸ The number of such texts indicates that the practice was regarded as an effective means to overcome attachments to the physical world and hindrances to enlightenment. Whether the focus of meditation was one’s own body or another’s, or a living body or a corpse, the arrangement of these meditation methods varied considerably, perhaps corresponding to different traditions or groups.

Sengchou’s biography in the *Continuation of Biographies of Eminent Monks* states that he practiced contemplation on death, information that has been overlooked in previous studies on Sengchou’s teaching and practice. According to his biography, Sengchou performed contemplations on death (*sixiang* 死想) so arduously that he never feared

⁴⁶ Robert H. Sharf, “The Idolization of Enlightenment: On the Mummification of Ch’an Masters in Medieval China,” *History of Religions* vol. 32, no. 1 (1992): 3.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴⁸ *T.* 643, 15: 625b; *T.* 1509, 25: 218a; *T.* 613, 15: 244b; *T.* 1851, 44: 697c, 735 c; *T.* 1911, 46: 122b–23b; *T.* 1925, 46: 675c; *T.* 1916, 46: 495b–544b; *T.* 1716, 33: 719c. Meanwhile, from the general contemplation on the impurity of the body developed a more specific contemplation on the nine stages of a decaying corpse. For this practice, see Fusae Kanda, “Behind the Sensationalism: Images of a Decaying Corpse in Japanese Buddhist Art,” *The Art Bulletin* (March, 2005): 24–49.

robbers.⁴⁹ Instead, his practice allowed him to overcome the fear of death, inspiring him to deliver his would-be attackers a persuasive sermon and even to convert them. Here, the term *sixiang* complicates matters, because it has multiple meanings; it can be contemplation of the thought of death or it can imply an image that goes with it. As one of ten kinds of contemplation (*shixiang* 十想), it most likely means conventional contemplation of death itself.⁵⁰ At the same time, it is noteworthy that the method which follows *sixiang* in the litany of the ten contemplations is the “contemplation on impurity” (*bujingxiang* 不淨想).⁵¹ This begs the question: if *bujingxiang* readily brings to mind *bujingguan*, with the former meaning contemplation whereas the latter connotating “visualization,” what about *sixiang*? Is there any way that the *sixiang* can be associated with visualizing death? In any case, this information in Sengchou’s biography seems to bolster the claim for Xiaonanhai’s possible connection with the practice, especially meditation on an impure body or a corpse presumably deriving from his contemplation of death.

Yet despite Sengchou’s obvious enthusiasm for meditation on impurity, the cave contains many images that do not depict the “abominable body.” These images include three Buddha triads, reliefs depicting the Buddha Lands, teaching scenes, episodes from Buddha’s previous life story (*jātaka*), and the debate between Vimalakīrti and Mañjuśrī. Why on earth did they need such positive images if Sengchou and his followers only concentrated on the “meditation on impurity” or *sinianchu*? Do we have any evidence for the presence of any other meditation or visualization method?

In principle, the *sinianchu* meditation method did not require positive imagery since it is based on the idea that physical, mental, and sensory perception is nothing but a chance amalgamation of interdependent and impermanent forces, the four following factors: body (*shen* 身), sensation or consciousness (*shou* 受), mind (*xin* 心), and things in

⁴⁹ *T.* 2060, 50: 553c.

⁵⁰ The ten kinds of contemplation are as follows: 1) contemplation of impermanence 無常想; 2) contemplation of suffering 苦想; 3) contemplation of lack of a self (*anātman*) 無我想; 4) contemplation of the impurity of what we eat 食不淨想; 5) contemplation that it is impossible to find happiness in this world 世間不可樂想; 6) contemplation of death 死想; 7) contemplation of the impurity 不淨想 of our physical bodies; 8) contemplation of severing passions and delusions 斷想; 9) contemplation of becoming free 離想 of desires; 10) contemplation of exhausting 盡想 [our karmic bonds]. Paul Swanson, “Shixiang,” *Digital Dictionary of Buddhism* (2003–2004), [http://www.buddhism-dict.net/cgi-bin/xpr-ddb.pl?53.xml+id\('b5341-6of3'\)](http://www.buddhism-dict.net/cgi-bin/xpr-ddb.pl?53.xml+id('b5341-6of3')).

⁵¹ *T.* 1. 1: 51b, 54c; *T.* 26, 1: 602c; *T.* 99, 2: 270b; *T.* 125, 2: 741c, 780a; *T.* 375, 12: 626b; *T.* 1911, 46: 23c; *T.* 1925, 46: 676b.

general (*fa* 法).⁵² The method has one contemplate 1) the body as impure and utterly filthy; 2) sensation, or consciousness, as always resulting in suffering; 3) mind as impermanent, merely one sensation after another; and 4) things in general as dependent and without a nature of their own.

Accordingly, only after analyzing and contemplating the four factors can one realize that their true nature contradicts the qualities and characteristics that we normally ascribe to them.⁵³ In other words, physical, mental, and sensory afflictions are the source of misleading confusion and suffering, therefore recognizing them as illusory is the first step towards enlightenment. *Sinianchu* is said to be one of the oldest teachings accepted by all Buddhists.⁵⁴

In understanding *sinianchu*, the term *wuting* 五停, or *wuting xinguan* 五停心觀 (the five-fold procedure, or five stops in quieting the mind) needs to be mentioned briefly, since it is often understood as a prerequisite to *sinianchu*. *Wuting* is defined as “the five meditations for settling the mind and ridding it of the five errors of desire, hate, ignorance, self, and a wayward or confused mind.”⁵⁵ The objects of the five meditations are the vileness of all things, compassion for all, causality, right discrimination, and breathing.⁵⁶

What interests us is that the term *wuting* is mentioned in a Dunhuang manuscript related to Sengchou’s meditation method.⁵⁷ The “Chou chanshi yi 稠禪師意” (“The intention of *Chan* master Chou”) has a passage that implies the importance of the “five-fold procedure, or five stops.” Jan Yun-hua has translated the passage as follows:

Q: What is called *dhyāna*?

R: *Dhyāna* is concentration. As it is achievable in sitting, so it is called *dhyāna*.

⁵² Charles Muller, “Sinianchu,” “Sinianzhu,” *Digital Dictionary of Buddhism* (2003–2004), [http://www.buddhism-dict.net/cgi-bin/xpr-ddb.pl?56.xml+id\('b56db-5ff5-4f4f\)](http://www.buddhism-dict.net/cgi-bin/xpr-ddb.pl?56.xml+id('b56db-5ff5-4f4f))

⁵³ Jan, *Zhongguo Chanxue*, 59.

⁵⁴ Jan, “Seng-ch’ou’s Method,” 57.

⁵⁵ William Edward Soothill and Lewis Hodous, *A Dictionary of Chinese Buddhist Terms* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co. Ltd., 1934; reprint, Taipei: Ch’eng Wen Publishing Company, 1975): 114.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 114.

⁵⁷ There are five manuscripts discovered at Dunhuang from which one can get a glimpse into Sengchou’s meditation method: “Xiande ji yu Shuangfengshan getan xuanli shier 先德集於雙峰山各談玄理十二” (“Twelve profound truths discoursed upon by (masters of) foremost virtue gathering at Mount Shuangfeng”); “Chou chanshi yi 稠禪師意” (“The intention or outline of Chan master Chou”); “Chou chanshi yuefang liaoyoulou 稠禪師藥方療有漏” (“Chan master Chou’s medical prescription for mental disturbances or afflictions”); “Dacheng xinxing lun 大乘心行論” (“Treatise on the mental practice of Mahāyāna”); and a hymn in sixteen verses; Jan, *Zhongguo chanxue*, 77–84. The Pelliot manuscript no. 3559 contains all five of these.

- Q: When *dhyāna* is called concentration, does it mean the concentration of mind or body?
- R: Sitting cross-legged concentrates the body; mental control concentrates the mind.
- Q: The mind is formless, how can it be looked upon and concentrated?
- R: It is like wind having no form of its own; one can determine it through the wavering of things [blown by the wind]. Likewise, the mind is formless, but it is immediately knowable when it contacts things. When the mind is controlled and ceases contact, it is called concentration.
- Q: Five stops on eighteen realms (*dhātu*) are called concentration. When the eyes see material objects (*rūpa*) and the mind experiences mental objects (*nāma*), how can this be called concentration?
- R: The mind arises when objects are seen, and things waver when the wind blows. When the wind stops, objects (things) will be peaceful; and when objects vanish, the mind will rest. When the mind and objects are all vanished, concentration and peace will be achieved spontaneously.⁵⁸

Knowing that Sengchou would not have referred to himself using a respectful title such as “Chou chanshi,” we can surmise that he himself did not write these texts. However, they provide us with an understanding of how other people understood Sengchou’s meditation, either during his own time or later.

In fact, this Dunhuang manuscript is thought to have stemmed from a group of documents connected with Sengyong 僧邕 (543–631), an outstanding disciple of Sengchou. A biography of Sengyong tells a story of his mastering the same meditation method as described here.⁵⁹ He is said to have learned the method from Sengchou in only a few days at Yunmensi. Sengchou was impressed and praised him by saying to others “The Five Stops and Four Bases of Mindfulness are [now] completely in this disciple (Sengyong)!”⁶⁰ More interesting for us is that Sengyong later became a follower of Xinxing’s 信行 Three Levels Movement. This provides a hint that the meditation method imbedded in the nearby Dazhusheng Cave 大住聖窟 as well as the Xiaonanhai Cave

⁵⁸ Underline mine. The original text is introduced in Jan, *Zhongguo chanxue*, 101. I refer to the English translation in Jan, “Seng-ch’ou’s Method,” 58–59.

⁵⁹ *T.* 2060, 50: 583c. In the famous Tang-dynasty epitaph for Sengyong, composed by Li Boyao 李百藥 (565–648) and written by Ouyang Xun 歐陽詢 (557–641), the “Five Stops” method is mentioned again. See *Quan Tang wen* 全唐文, 143 (Taipei: Datong shuju, 1979), 1819; Jan, *Zhongguo chanxue*, 94.

⁶⁰ *T.* 2060, 50: 583c.

might have shared a connection with the practice related to Sengchou and Sengyong. In any case, it becomes clear from both the manuscript and Sengyong's biography that *wuting* and *sinianchu* were the essence of Sengchou's meditation method.

Again, we return to the question: did Sengchou need any image for his meditation? If the practice had required an appropriate image for aiding in meditation, it would most likely have been an anatomical depiction of body parts, particularly of an "unclean" body such as a decaying corpse or a skeleton. Indeed just such paintings are found in the Toyuk Caves in Turfan, in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, where monks are shown meditating on a skeleton and on a decaying body (on the left wall of the side chamber in Cave 42 and on the lower register of the right wall in Cave 20 at Toyuk, respectively).⁶¹ Similar depictions in the Kizil caves and the Tepe-Shotor cave have led Miyaji Akira to conclude that meditation on an impure body or a corpse/skeleton was indeed practiced in Central Asian regions.⁶²

Although the caves at Toyuk, Kizil, and Tepe-Shotor are all thought to have been used for meditation, the content and context of the images are very different from those of the Xiaonanhai cave. At these sites, monks are depicted in meditation on impurity as well as in other meditation practices on the Pure Land. Objects to be meditated upon are shown as well as images of meditating monks, signposts with which other practicing monks could identify. Specifically, they do not only show *what* to visualize, but *who* visualizes and *on* what.

No such scenes are depicted at Xiaonanhai: chosen instead are various types of positive images. The ceiling rises to form a truncated pyramid with a lotus in the center, and each corner is carved in imitation of a pleated curtain with hanging jewels, thus creating the illusion that the ceiling is a canopy, a common practice in cave temples of the sixth century. Each wall has a group of sculptures in high relief, so accentuated that they appear from the front to be freestanding. On the main (north) wall is a seated Buddha with two monks (figure 4), while

⁶¹ Miyaji Akira 宮治昭, "Turfan, Toyuk sekkutsu no zankankutsu hejiga ni tsuite: Jōdozu, Jōdo kansōzu, fujō kansō zu トウルファン・トヨク石窟の禪窟窟壁畫について: 浄土圖・浄土觀想圖・不浄觀想圖" (1), *Bukkyō geijutsu* 佛教藝術 221 (1995), pl. 18; Miyaji Akira, "Turfan, Toyuk sekkutsu no zankankutsu hejiga ni tsuite: Jōdozu, Jōdo kansōzu, fujō kansō zu (2)," *Bukkyō geijutsu* 223 (1995), pl. 19.

⁶² Miyaji Akira, *Nehan to Miroku no doshogaku* 涅槃と彌勒の圖像學 (Tokyo: Kitten Hobokan, 1991); 425-35, pl. 245, 249. Regarding the images at Kizil, Gregory Schopen suggested that some of the skulls and skeletons painted on the wall have nothing to do with meditation; rather they functioned as warnings or seals (Schopen's presentation for a seminar called "Buddhist Cave Temples of the Kucha Kingdom," organized by U.C.L.A. Central Asia Initiative and the Cotsen Institute of Archeology, November, 2009).

each lateral wall (east and west) features a standing Buddha with two Bodhisattvas (figures 5, 6).

These three interior walls are also decorated with low reliefs, variously depicting a jātaka story, images of donors, and visions of the Pure Land. On the north wall, the section to the left of the main Buddha is devoted to a depiction of the Brāhmana jātaka (*Shishenwenjitu* 施身聞偈圖).⁶³ It is divided into three strata, each complemented by a cartouche with a passage from the *Nīrvāṇa Sūtra*. One passage gives the first half of Indra's verse, "All is not constant, this is the law of life and death 諸行無常是生滅法," while another reads, "The extinction of life extinguishes self; only the silent extinction is true joy 生滅滅已寂滅爲樂." The corresponding space to the right of the main Buddha is comprised of an upper and a lower section. The upper shows a seated Buddha on a hexagonal throne, a standing Bodhisattva, and a lion, below which is inscribed a passage from the *Dazhidulun*. It reads, "There is nothing comparable to Buddha above heaven or below heaven; nothing comparable [to him] in the ten directions of the world, either. I have seen all the things in the world, [however] Buddha is superior to all beings and things 天上天下無如佛十方世界亦無此 世間所有我盡見一切無有如佛者."⁶⁴ It shows a well-planned arrangement of stories on the left section and the upper right section: a jātaka story telling of an ascetic brahman residing on Snow Mountain, and the Śākyamuni bodhisattva's praising the Tīṣya Buddha (Fushafo 弗沙佛) who was meditating inside Treasure Cave (*baoku* 寶窟) on Snow Mountain. The significance of "a cave in a mountainous setting" is reflected in these two tales and it echoes within the Xiaonanhai Cave.

In the lower part of the right section, there is a portrait of a standing monk holding a small incense-like object in his right hand, surmounted by a long lotus stem rising up from behind him (figure 7). The figure is identified as Sengchou by an accompanying inscription that reads, "Monk Sengchou makes offerings 比丘僧稠供養." That a jātaka story is placed in juxtaposition to Sengchou's image, to the left of the main Buddha, implies a connection between Śākyamuni and Sengchou, perhaps

⁶³ I choose to describe the cave interior from the perspective of a visitor, designating the directions by looking inward, from the entrance toward the main wall. However, when I describe a figure's attribute, I follow the figure's own perspective, i.e. naming the proper left hand or the proper right foot.

⁶⁴ *T.* 1509, 25: 87c. Meanwhile, Yen Chuan-ying points out that the same passage was from the *Fo benxing ji jing* 佛本行集經; *T.* 190, 3: 670a. The date for the translation of this text is thought to have been between 589 and 591, which is later than the construction of Xiaonanhai Cave. However, scholars do suggest the possible existence of an earlier translation of the text; Yen, "Bei Qi Changuanku," 431, n. 11.

indicating that the monk was to be favorably compared with a previous incarnation of the Buddha. Such an interpretation is understandable when we take into account the fact that modification of this cave was based on the teachings of Sengchou, that the space was used by the monk himself, and that it was Sengchou's followers who had the sutra passages engraved to emphasize his authority in the visual realm.

On the east wall, two teaching scenes are represented in a long horizontal space, one for Śākyamuni's first teaching in the Deer Park and the other for Maitreya's teaching to the heavenly audience.⁶⁵ On the west wall are the famous "nine grades of rebirth" in the Western Pure Land. This is the earliest representation of the theme in China. This long horizontal space features reborn souls who rest either on a rectangular throne, a lotus flower, or even wrapped inside a lotus bud. Each scene is accompanied by a corresponding cartouche offering a brief label on the grade of the reborn soul or on the particular component of the realm.⁶⁶ On the south wall, above the entrance, a relief depicts the dialogue between Vimalakīrti and Mañjuśrī.

Of these images, the relief on the west wall seemingly suggests a possible relation with visualization, primarily due to its obvious connection with the *Sūtra on the Visualization of the Amitāyus* (Guan Wuliangshou jing 觀無量壽經).⁶⁷ However, the complete lack of passages

⁶⁵ The cartouche for the former is too eroded to be legible. The cartouche for the latter reads "When Maitreya gives teachings to the heavenly audience 彌勒爲天衆說法時."

⁶⁶ There are eleven cartouches accompanying the rebirth scene, nine of which are legible and clearly drawn from the the *Sūtra on the Visualization of the Amitāyus*. From the right, they read: "seven-jeweled □□ tree 七寶 □□ (道場?) 樹," "five-hundred jeweled pavilion 五百寶樓," "rebirth in the lowest level of highest grade 上品下生," "rebirth in the middle level of highest grade 上品中生," "rebirth in the highest grade 上品往生," "rebirth in the highest level of middle grade 中品上生," "rebirth in the middle level of middle grade and the lowest level of middle grade 中品中生中品下生," "water with eight excellent qualities or virtues 八功德水," "rebirth in the lowest grade 下品往生."

⁶⁷ If we can compare the doctrine expressed in the relief with that of the roughly contemporaneous Pure Land belief milieu, the former can be situated between two masters, Tanluan 曇鸞 (476–542) and Daochuo 道綽 (562–645). Tanluan is famous for his meditation method that concentrated on Amitābha. From Bodhiruci, Tanluan developed meditative visualizations to ensure rebirth in the Amitābha's Pure Land of Sukhāvātī. Interestingly, Tanluan was influenced by Bodhiruci, who translated the *Shidijing lun* 十地經論 (discussed below, just before "Epilogue"). Sengchou is thought to have had a relationship with such a group of meditation monks; Bruce C. Williams, "Seeing through Images: Reconstructing Buddhist Meditative Visualization Practice in Sixth-Century Northeastern China," *Pacific World*, Third Series Number 5 (Fall, 2005), 39. Tanluan advocated reliance on Amitābha and rebirth in the Pure Land, without explicating the details of the latter, which he thought was based on the special merit built up by Amitābha when he was Bodhisattva Dharmakāra. Tanluan mentioned only indirectly that the Western Pure Land transcends the cycle of birth and death, thus beyond the Three Realms; see David Chappell, "Tao-ch'ō (562–645): A Pioneer of Chinese Pure Land Buddhism," Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1976, 243. For Tanluan in detail, see Roger Corless, "T'an-luan's Commentary on the Pure Land Discourse," Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin,

mentioning or implying the Pure Land cult in the sutra carving at Xiaonanhai renders uncertain any direct connection between the so-called “visualization on the Pure Land” delineated in the sutra and Sengchou’s circle.⁶⁸ Rather, it seems more likely that the active employment of desirable imagery inside the cave presents another layer of meaning. These many sculptures and reliefs on the interior surfaces of the cave present a plethora of images of Buddhist deities and different realms of the Buddha Land. But how can these images be interpreted in light of the carved sutras outside? Another engraved passage on the outer wall sheds light on this question. Next to the dedicatory inscription above the entrance, there is a multiple-verse passage entitled “Hymn on the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra* 華嚴經偈讚.” Beginning with the title, the inscription continues for four verses:⁶⁹

The brightness of the Buddha Dīpaṃkara, the light of the
Tathāghata of Bright Illumination, illuminates all,
and is the most auspicious of all.
Buddha once visited this place,
thus this is the most auspicious of all.

The glory of the land of ten directions is superior to wonderful
flowers,
and priceless jewelry (that adorns this land) is like the scent of a
rare fragrance.

1973. Daochuo, however, paid relatively more attention to the Western Pure Land as it fit into Buddhist cosmology, and offered a practical solution for laymen and clergy alike to ensure rebirth in it, namely recitation of the name of Amitābha (*nianfo* 念佛). Although Daochuo mainly recommended this recitation in regards to meditation, he also promoted the benefits of visualizing the Buddha (*guanfo* 觀佛). Daochuo sometimes blurred the distinction between *guanfo* and *nianfo*; Chappell, “Tao-ch’o,” 274.

⁶⁸ Similarly, previous scholarship arguing that the center of meditative visualization at Xiaonanhai was the sculpted image on the north wall and that it should be identified as Vairocana needs to be supported by more concrete evidence. Doctrinally, the engraved passage presents the emphatic illumination of the combination between the stages of the bodhisattva path and the *sinianchu* method. This teaching of the ten-stage path later became one of the doctrinal tenets of the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra*, and thus its association with the Huayan 華嚴 teaching is significant. Grounding their analysis on the existence of the ten-stage bodhisattva path in the engravings, as well as the presence of the “Hymn on the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra*” (as discussed below) scholars have appraised the central image as Vairocana, the main deity of later Huayan teachings. See Yen, “Xiaonanhai shiku yu Sengchou,” 584; and Hsu, “Xiaonanhai Cave-chapel,” 34–44. However, the identity of the main Buddha in this cave has not yet been settled, and it was only later, during Tang, that the main deity of the Huayan teaching was determined to be Vairocana. Perhaps, it is reasonable to say that the conflated identity of Śākyamuni/ Vairocana played a role in this cave. Accordingly, it seems inappropriate to assert that the iconic object of visualization was the Buddha Vairocana. For details, see Kim, “Decline of the Law, Death of the Monk,” Chapter Four.

⁶⁹ I referred to Eileen Hsu’s translation in general with a few revisions; Hsu, “Xiaonanhai Cave-chapel,” 37–38.

They all naturally come about,
and are best suited for cultivating the Dharma trees.

Dancers and musicians of ten directions
produce abundant and harmonious sounds.
There are also many wonderful verse-hymns,
praising the true virtues of all Buddhas.

The grace of the Buddha Vairocana is without obstacles,
and is the most auspicious of all.
Buddha once entered this chamber,
thus this place is the most auspicious of all.

The first verse is drawn from the “Chapter on Buddha’s Ascending to the Summit of Mount Sumeru” (“Fosheng xumiding pin 佛昇須彌頂品”), the seventh chapter of the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*, while the second and the third are from the sixth chapter, the “Chapter on the Sage-head Bodhi-sattva” (“Xianshou pusa pin 賢首菩薩品”).⁷⁰ The former praises the Dīpaṃkara Buddha, one of the Buddhas of the Past, and the latter praises the heavenly surroundings and virtues of the many Buddhas. Originally, the auspicious place praised in the first verse designates Indra’s Palace of Correct Views, located at the summit of Mount Sumeru and visited by past Buddhas. Yet, the praise of the palace fits within the cave context, making the cave itself all the more auspicious. The fourth verse, however, is not from a preexisting sutra, and was presumably composed by the person who initiated the sutra engraving. It apparently follows the model of the first verse, praising Dīpaṃkara Buddha, but instead praises the wisdom of Vairocana Buddha and remarks that he once entered this cave, thus marking it as especially auspicious. It is noticeable that *chu* 處, meaning “the place,” is deliberately replaced by *shi* 室, “the chamber,” a clear reference to the stone chamber of this grotto.

The above verses indicate that the interior of the Xiaonanhai Cave was conceived as an auspicious space, one visited by deities and perhaps still occupied by them.⁷¹ Unlike the “meditation on impurity” cited by the prominent exterior sutra carving, this interior visual realm

⁷⁰ *T.* 278, 9: 441c; *T.* 278, 9: 434c. Hsu suggests that Sengchou himself composed this whole verse modeled after hundreds of similar verse-hymns in the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*. However, as noted above, the verse-hymn is not a completely new form of composition. It is rather a newly coined phrase for a combination of preexisting verses from a couple of chapters of the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*.

⁷¹ The story of the Buddha entering a cave and staying inside or leaving his image/shadow inside is well known. For a representative discussion of the subject, see Nobuyoshi Yamabe, “*The Sūtra on the Ocean-Like Samadhi of the Visualization of the Buddha: The Interfusion of the Chinese and Indian Cultures in Central Asia as Reflected in a Fifth Century Apocryphal Sūtras*,” Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1999, 263–97.

presents another layer of practice, one intended to create an ideal environment for cultivating Dharma. Because the dedicator/maker decorated the interior to create an idealized space filled with manifestations of myriad Buddhas, then perhaps another sutra passage carved on the façade points to an additional meaning associated with the practice of visionary repentance.

The far-left outer wall of the cave includes a relatively short verse from the “Chapter on Pure Conduct” (“Fanxingpin 梵行品”) of the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*.⁷² It is titled “Gāthā Praise (*jizan* 偈讚)” and follows directly after the “Shengxingpin,” or “Chapter on Sagely Conduct,” without any break or space. It reads as follows:

Now that I saw the Buddha, [and] obtained the wholesome virtuous roots among the three moral qualities of activity, I wish to return this merit to the unsurpassable True Law (Thusness). I have made offerings to the Buddha, the Dharma and the Saṃgha [community of monks and nuns], [and] by this merit I wish the Three Treasures to be always present in this world. By the various merits obtained, I wish the four kinds of demons to be defeated and gone.⁷³ I now repent before the Buddha those sins I committed in encountering bad intimates or friends in three ages, [and] I wish not to commit such a sin again in the future. I wish for all sentient beings to aspire to the attainment of Perfect Wisdom and to always contemplate all the Buddhas of the Ten Directions. I further wish that all sentient beings subjugate their afflictions (煩惱 *kleśa*) forever, realize Buddhahood and become like the Bodhisattva of Sublime Virtue (妙德, Mañjuśrī).⁷⁴

This verse from the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* may constitute an attempt by the maker of the engraving to explain and justify the reason behind the cave’s production. The passage articulates a desire for merit-making as well as the idea of taking refuge in the three jewels, repenting in front of Buddha, defeating evil, and finally aspiring to enlightenment and achieving Buddhahood. The text, the last of those sutras carved on the façade, succinctly encapsulates the goal of the cave, its related activities, and the aim of those who made and embellished it.

⁷² *T.* 374, 12: 485a–b.

⁷³ The four kinds of *māra* (demons) that annoy living beings; Charles Muller, “*Simo* – Four Demons,” *Digital Dictionary of Buddhism*, (2003–2004), [http://www.buddhism-dict.net/cgi-bin/xpr-ddb.pl?56.xml&id\('b56db-9b54'\)](http://www.buddhism-dict.net/cgi-bin/xpr-ddb.pl?56.xml&id('b56db-9b54')).

⁷⁴ Translation mine.

Among these related activities, the practices of “seeing,” “offering,” and more importantly “repenting before the Buddha” stand out as particularly relevant. The above passage is taken from the sutra’s climax, where King Ajatasatru, who had killed his father, repents before the Buddha, who in turn forgives and expunges the King’s past sins.⁷⁵ In its original context, the verse is sung by King Ajatasatru after seeing the real Buddha, but here on the cave façade “seeing the Buddha” could be interpreted as seeing the image of the Buddha inside the cave, or the manifestation of the Buddha conjured by a practitioner as a result of visualization, or as a mental image/cognitive picture that a practitioner was able to compose.⁷⁶ Although sentences mentioning the repentance itself are only a part of the passage, the fact that the whole passages were taken from King Ajatasatru’s repenting scene would seem to emphasize a message of repentance and forgiveness.

The close relationship between repenting and seeing the Buddha is not limited to the interior layout or carved passage of Xiaonanhai. The relationship was already found in the practice of meditative visualization expounded in the *Sūtra on the Ocean-Like Samadhi of the Visualization of the Buddha* (*Guanfo sanmeihai jing*), for example, a text indicating that practitioners needed to purify themselves and repent in order to attain the appropriate visualization, especially of the Buddha’s face.⁷⁷ The practice described in the sutra, however, seems to be intended as visualization on a single Buddha image, proceeding in detail from the toes to the head in a sufficiently lit hall, and as such, it differs from meditation conducted in front of small multiple Buddha images in a confined, dark cave sanctuary, for example.⁷⁸ This latter case might

⁷⁵ Inamoto Yasuo suggests that the Emperor Wenxuan’s misbehavior while drunk, hostility toward his own mother, and his heartfelt regret afterwards shows similarities with Ajatasatru’s experience in the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*. He further argues that given Emperor Wenxuan’s close connection to Sengchou and the Xiaohanhai Cave site, Sengchou’s teaching on the repentance and forgiveness might have appealed to the Emperor as well as his own disciples; Inamoto, “Shōnankai chūku to metsuzui,” 22–24.

⁷⁶ Although in a different setting, the history of European medieval monasticism provides useful insights into early medieval monastic culture in China; Mary Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images, 400–1200* (Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature 34. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 1998).

⁷⁷ For further discussions on the relationship between the visualization of the Buddha’s physical marks and the repentance ritual, see Stanley K. Abe, “Art and Practice in a Fifth-Century Chinese Buddhist Cave Temple.” *Ars Orientalis* 20 (1990): 7; Bruce Charles Williams, “*Mea Maxima Vikalpa*: Repentance, Meditation, and the Dynamics of Liberation in Medieval Chinese Buddhism, 500–650 C.E.,” Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2002, 139–44; Williams, “Seeing through Images,” 33–89; Nobuyoshi Yamabe, “Visionary Repentance and Visionary Ordination in the Brahmā Net Sūtra,” in *Going Forth: Visions of Buddhist Vinaya*, ed. William M. Bodiford (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2005): 17–39.

⁷⁸ *T.* 643, 15: 691a. The *Sūtra on the Ocean-Like Samadhi of the Visualization of the Bud-*

be better understood as meditation/contemplation and repentance in a visual setting rather than “visualization” with aids.

The most vivid contemporaneous evidence for such a ritual involving small Buddha images in a cave sanctuary is found at the nearby Dazhusheng Cave, constructed by Lingyu 靈裕 in 589 at Lingquansi 靈泉寺, not far from Xiaonanhai.⁷⁹ Evidence of the use of Dazhusheng in the repentance ritual is found in the inscribed passages of the “Text of Repentance” and the extensive lists of Buddhas’ names – the “Names of the Twenty-five Buddhas” engraved on the upper register on the outside wall, and the “Names of the Fifty-three Buddhas,” “Names of the Thirty-five Buddhas,” and “Names of the Buddhas of the Ten Directions” on the lower register.⁸⁰ These are ritual texts, whose significance lies in their oral performance, specifically in the visionary repentance ritual.⁸¹ Their presence at the site makes it tempting to assume that

dha also instructs that the practitioner “imagine (*xiang* 想)” two images after “seeing/visualizing” (*guan* 觀) one image; then to “imagine” three images after “seeing (*jian* 見)” two images and so on until reaching ten images; then finally to “imagine” a whole room full of Buddha images. The terms *xiang*, *guan*, *jian* in connection with actual practice need to be explored in more detail.

⁷⁹ Among the extant rubbings of the inscription in the Dazhusheng Cave, the title of the text is provided by the Academia Sinica rubbing, “The Text of the Abridged Repentance for Reverencing [the Buddha Names] of the Seven Registers” (*Lue li qijie foming chanhui deng wen* 略禮七階佛名懺悔等文). According to Stevenson, these *qijie foming* liturgies center around veneration and confession before various sets or rosters of Buddhas. The title seems to imply that there were seven such sets, but in most instances the rite itself actually contains nine. See Stevenson, “The T’ien-t’ai Four Forms of Samādhi,” 272.

The Dazhusheng inscription is the earliest dated exemplar of this ritual text. The next earliest datable version is in Zhisheng’s 智升 *Ji zhujing lichanyi* 集諸經禮懺儀, compiled in 730. The “Buddha Names of Seven Registers” has been connected with the Three Levels Movements, but some scholars suggest that it belongs in the lineage of the Ten Stages; Williams, “Seeing through Images,” 37–70. This point would be shared with Tokiwa Daijō, who in a 1927 article placed Xinxing within the framework of the Ten Stages lineages as influenced by Lingyu; Tokiwa Daijō 常盤大定, “Sangaikyō no bodai toshite no Hōzanji 三階教の母胎として寶山寺,” *Shūkyō kenkyū* 宗教研究 4/1 (1927): 35–56. This opinion is succeeded by Nishimoto Temura 西本照真, *Sangaikyō no kenkyū* 三階教の研究 (Tokyo: Shunjūsha, 1998).

⁸⁰ For the arrays of Buddhas in the prologue, the Dazhusheng Cave utilized three different sources for stipulating the ritual text, the *Foshuo guan yaowang yaoshang erpusa jing* 佛說觀藥王藥上二菩薩經 (Scripture on the Visualization of the Two Bodhisattvas, King of Healing and Supreme), the *Shizhu piposha* 十住毘婆沙 (*Dasabhimvibhāṣa*, Discourse on the Ten Stages), and the *Ocean Sūtra*. Except for the arrays of Buddhas in the prologue, the repentance prayer of the remaining text is taken from the *Foshuo jue ding pinijing* 佛說決定毘尼經 (*Vinaya-viniścaya Sūtra*); *T.* 325, 12: 39a. Rather than the arrays of the Buddha names, it is the making of Fifty-three Buddhas, Thirty-five Buddhas, or Twenty-five Buddhas that is mentioned in the seventh-century inscriptions in the Longmen Caves; Mizuno Seichi 水野清一 and Nagahiro Toshio 長廣敏雄, *Kanan Rakuyō Ryūmon sekkutsu no kenkyū* 河南洛陽龍門石窟の研究, vol. 2 (Tokyo: Zauhō kankōkai, 1941): 248, no. 8; 264, no. 180.

⁸¹ A few early monumental works by Rhi Khi-yong, Shihori Ryōdō, and Tanabe Hajime still function as a starting point for the study of this topic, and recent works by Daniel Stevenson and Kuo Li-ying provide a helpful basis for drawing scholarly attention to the significance of repentance rituals. See Rhi Khi-yong, *Aux Origines du “Tch’an-houei”: Aspects Bouddhiques*

any practitioner performing the repentance ritual was probably able to insert the names of the Buddhas by reading them at the relevant points. Yet, since they are all located outside the cave, the question remains as to how the repentance ritual was incorporated with the inner space of the cave.⁸²

One thing is clear, however; the Thirty-five Buddhas from the lists were singled out again inside the cave as individual images accompanied by their inscribed names. It is relevant here to remember that the *Vinaya-viniṣcaya Sūtra* (*Foshuo jueiding pinijing* 佛說決定毘尼經) commands that the repentance should be done “surrounded by” the thirty-five Buddhas, and moreover, requires that a practitioner should contemplate the respective qualities of those Buddhas.⁸³ By doing so correctly, the practitioner is supposed to see the manifestation of the Buddhas during the ritual. The sutra is not only the original source for the “Text of Repentance” at Dazhusheng, but also the oldest source for a visionary repentance ritual. Accordingly, the images of Thirty-five Buddhas on the side panels inside the cave came to be understood as a visual device for “repenting surrounded by Thirty-five Buddhas,” as prescribed in the *Vinaya-viniṣcaya Sūtra*.⁸⁴

The text suggests that seeing the Buddha, feeling his presence before the practitioner, wishing for the elimination of karmic offenses, and finally obtaining the Buddha’s guidance are all intertwined. This intimate connection was also addressed in a Dunhuang manuscript attributed to the eminent monk, Xinxing. Many elements of Xinxing’s

de la Pratique Pénitentielle (Seoul: The Korean Institute for Buddhist Studies, 1982); Shihori Ryōdō 塩入良道, “Chūgoku bukkyō girei ni okeru zange no juyō katei 中國佛教儀禮における懺悔の受容過程,” *Indogaku bukkyōgaku kenkyū* 印度學佛教學研究 11, no. 2 (March, 1963): 356–57; Shihori Ryōdō, “Chūgoku bukkyō ni okeru raisan to butsumyō kyōten 中國佛教における禮懺と佛名經典,” in *Yūki kyōju shōju kinen bukkyō shisō ronshū* 結城教授頌壽記念佛教思想史論集 (Tokyo: Taizō shuppan, 1964): 569–90; Tanabe Hajime 田辺元, *Zangedō toshite no tetsugaku • shi no tetsugaku* 懺悔道としての哲学・死の哲学 (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1946); Stevenson, “The T’ien-t’ai Four Forms of Samādhi”; Kuo Li-ying, *Confession et Contrition dans le bouddhisme chinois du V au X siècle* (Paris: École Française d’Extrême-Orient, 1994).

⁸² For a possible reconstruction of the rituals practiced outside and inside the cave, see Li Yumin 李玉珉, “Baoshan Dazhushengku chutan 寶山大住聖窟初探,” *Gugong xueshu jikan* 故宮學術季刊, vol. 6, no. 2 (Winter 1998): 26–29.

⁸³ The relevant selection reads as follows: “Śāriputra, like this, a Bodhisattva should visualize (*guan* 觀) these Thirty-five Buddhas as if they were before your eyes, contemplate the merits that the Tathāgatas possess, and in this way perform your purification and repentance. If the Bodhisattva is able to purify this offense, then numerous Buddhas will manifest their bodies and discourse upon a variety of actions (*xing* 行, conduct, phenomenal changes, or conditioned things) in order to guide sentient beings, and make the disillusioned, foolish sentient beings achieve (Enlightenment);” *T.* 325, 12: 39a–b (translation mine).

⁸⁴ For the ritual of chanting the names of Thirty-five Buddhas, confessing sins, and ordination (self-ordination), see Nobuyoshi, “Visionary Repentance,” 28–34.

Three Levels Movement drew from Lingyu's circle, and the Dazhusheng Cave functioned as a matrix for such inspiration including the use of the "Buddha Names of Seven Registers (*qijie foming* 七階佛名)" rite as well as the foreboding of the *mofa* period.⁸⁵ The "Method of Making Vows for Six Periods of the Day and Night (Zhouye liushi fayuan fa 晝夜六時發願法)," attributed to Xinxing, which is a part of the "Text of Revering Buddha and Repentance (Lifo canhui wen 禮佛懺悔文, S2547)," has a set of instructions for a visionary repentance ritual.⁸⁶

Dazhusheng Cave and Xinxing's ritual text offer interesting questions when compared with the carved passages and reliefs at Xiaonanhai. The end of the *jizan* at Xiaonanhai is exactly the same as a part of the *qijie foming* text of the Three Levels Movement found in Dunhuang.⁸⁷ Moreover, the cartouche in the Brāhmana jātaka on the north wall at Xiaonanhai also has the same "Verse on the Impermanence (Wuchangji 無常偈)" as both in Dazhusheng and the *qijie foming* text.⁸⁸ The presence of the same ritualistic phrases at Xiaonanhai and at Dazhusheng and in Xinxing's circles suggests that the same visionary repentance ritual was also recognized, if not systematically practiced, at Xiaonanhai.⁸⁹

In this light, the interior images of Buddhas and Buddha Lands could function as useful devices for "seeing Buddhas," and "repenting before Buddhas" as well as essential components for celebrating an

⁸⁵ Nishimoto, *Sangaikyō no kenkyū*, 46.

⁸⁶ *Dunhuang Baozang* 敦煌寶藏 21, 202b. Yabuki Keiki 矢吹慶輝, *Sangaikyō no kenkyū* 三階教の研究 (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1927), 512-13, suggests that this text absorbed an instruction from the Ten Stages School. Yet, Xinxing's writing on the repentance ritual included in the tenth section of the *Zhifa* 制法 does not have an instruction for entering the stupa or visualizing images. The original manuscript of the relevant part from Xinxing's *Zhifa* and its interpretation are in Nishimoto, *Sangaikyō no kenkyū*, 442-43.

⁸⁷ The corresponding part is as follows: "I wish all sentient beings aspire for the attainment of Perfect Wisdom and always contemplate on all the Buddhas in the Ten Directions. I again wish all sentient beings subjugate afflictions forever, realize Buddhahood and become like the Bodhisattva Sublime Virtue (Mañjuśrī)." Yabuki, *Sangaikyō no kenkyū*, 520. This point is also suggested by Yen, "Bei Qi changuan ku," 403. Inamoto Yasuo also argues for the common passages found in Xiaonanhai Cave engraving, Xinxing and Zhiyi's ritual texts. Inamoto, "Shōnankai chūku to metsuzui no shisō," 6-7.

⁸⁸ "All is not constant, this is the law of life and death. The extinction of life extinguishes self; only the silent extinction is true joy 諸行無常 是生滅法 生滅滅已 寂滅為樂." Inamoto, "Shōnankai chūku to metsuzui no shisō," 7.

⁸⁹ Inamoto Yasuo argues that the coexistence at Xiaonanhai of the rebirth scenes in the Western Pure Land on the west wall and the carved passages of Ajatasatru's repentance story testifies that this cave was used for the repentance combined with the visualization method expounded in the *Guan Wuliangshou jing*. I agree with his basic argument, but the cave's relation with the visualization on the Western Pure Land needs to be explored with more evidence as mentioned before; and even so, it only explains the west wall inside the cave without addressing the entire iconographic program. See Inamoto, "Shōnankai chūku to metsuzui no shisō," 1-44.

auspicious space. In the dedicatory inscription it was claimed that his followers “looked up to the late master Sengchou, and *in accordance with his visualization method* (觀法), engraved these sutras in stone to transmit and preserve them,” so it follows that these carved passages refer to the most representative aspects of Sengchou’s meditative visualization. The engraved sutra in conjunction with related images could be a recorded testimony of his teaching on such meditation, presumably including visionary repentance.

Let us once more return to the major portion of the sutra carving from the “Chapter on Sagely Conduct” located on the façade, and to what it reveals about the immediate purpose of the *sinianchu* meditation as practiced in the cave. It reads, “Once *sinianchu* is obtained, one can dwell upon the stage of forbearance and endurance. When a *bodhisattva mahāsattva* dwells upon this stage, he can tolerate greed, desire, evil and ignorance... he can tolerate every physical and mental trouble and distress. This is why it is called ‘dwelling on the stage of forbearance and endurance.’” This would indicate that the immediate goal of *sinianchu* was the attainment of the “stage of forbearance and endurance (*kanrendi* 堪忍地),” which was the first of ten stages (*bhūmis*) of a bodhisattva’s progress to perfect enlightenment.

These ten stages of development were introduced in the *Daśabhūmikasūtra Śāstra* (*Shidijing lun* 十地經論), a commentary on the *Daśabhūmika Sūtra* (*Shidi jing* 十地經), which was translated into Chinese by Kumarajīva. Attributed to Vasubandhu, the *śāstra* commentary was reportedly translated by three famous monks, Ratnamati, Bodhiruci, and Buddhaśānti 伏陀扇多, who is often identified as Buddha/bhadra. Interestingly, Sengchou is presumed to have belonged to this lineage, since he was a disciple of Daofang, who learned from Buddha/bhadra.⁹⁰ The importance of *sinianchu* in Sengchou’s larger doctrinal scheme can be seen in his focus on the ideal of the bodhisattva path, a focus shared during the Northern Dynasties and common to Buddhist monastic elites in the Anyang region where he lived.⁹¹

EPILOGUE

Given that the epitome of Sengchou’s meditation method was *sinianchu*, and that the engraved portion of the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* at the Xiaonanhai Central Grotto deals with precisely this practice, it is likely that

⁹⁰ For a general explanation of the *Dilun* 地論, see Williams, “Seeing through Images,” 37–40.

⁹¹ Hsu, “Xiaonanhai Cave-chapel,” 64–65.

the grotto acted both as a visual “manifesto” of this practice and possibly as a ritualistic space within which the practice was pursued. It is also important, however, to examine the role of the other carved sutras to determine what other methods of meditation they reference, and how images *in situ* were incorporated into those methods.

Meditation and visionary repentance in the sixth century encompassed a wide variety of methods and settings. Examples of different approaches for repentance include: the *fangdeng* 方等 repentance, Lotus repentance, and the *qing Guanyin* 請觀音 repentance articulated by Zhiyi; and the visionary repentance before thirty-five Buddhas practiced by Lingyu and Xinxing. Zhiyi’s method required four separate rooms consisting of a central sanctuary, a bath house, and two ante-chambers, or alternatively either a hall consisting of a sanctuary with a high throne and an adjoining room, or an isolated hall with an altar inside.⁹² The Lingyu/Xinxing method used images of thirty-five Buddhas engraved on panel reliefs, as at Dazhusheng Cave, or engraved on the reverse of a Buddhist stele, as at Dingxian.⁹³ The need for a separate hall specially set aside from other monastic affairs for the sole purpose of meditation and repentance was well recognized in other monastic writers’ manuals.⁹⁴ How a small conventional meditation cave decorated with diverse images fits into this context is a question that I attempted to address in this study – a question that must be explored further in the future.

The actual physical space of a cave presents any number of interpretations. It can be seen as a hermitage removed from worldly affairs, a symbolic site of death-and-rebirth analogized to a tomb/womb, a locus of revelation, a depository of divine texts, a sacred realm inhabited by a deity, a microcosmic replica of the deity’s other world, and a metonym of the practice of mountain worship.⁹⁵ This last point

⁹² For further details, see Daniel B. Stevenson, “The Four Kinds of Samādhi in Early T’ien-t’ai Buddhism,” in *Traditions of Meditation in Chinese Buddhism* ed. Peter N. Gregory (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1986), 61–75.

⁹³ Matsubara Saburō 松原三郎, *Chūgoku bukkyō chōkoku shiron* 中國佛教雕刻史論 (Tokyo: Yoshikawa kōbunkan, 1995), pl. 419. For the relationship between Buddhist steles and repentance ritual, see Dorothy C. Wong, “What’s in a Buddha’s Name: Case Study of a Sixth-Century Chinese Buddhist Stele from the Shaolin Monastery,” in *Treasures Rediscovered: Chinese Stone Sculpture from the Sackler Collections at Columbia University* (Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery and Columbia University, 2008): 16–26.

⁹⁴ See note 28.

⁹⁵ Rolf Stein proves that some sutras describe the Buddha staying in a stone chamber before preaching. See Rolf Stein, *The World in Miniature: Container Gardens and Dwellings in Far Eastern Thought*, trans. Phyllis Brooks (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990). The Daoists shared the significance of the “stone chamber” by using it as another term for the grotto-heaven (*dongtian* 洞天) or grotto chambers (*dongshi* 洞室). It is the place where immortals and

highlights the idea of the mountain as a place of refuge from social turmoil, political unrest and persecution, as well as a place of seclusion, liberation and transcendence. The cave also resonates with the idea of grotto-heavens, a concept permeating indigenous Chinese systems of thought such as Daoism. In the Buddhist context, those implications seem to have survived, with a religious meaning imposed upon them. Several biographies of Buddhist monks of the late sixth century mention the use of caves as a meditation space, so much so that they were seen as interchangeable with a hermitage in terms of use. The association of the hermit image with a cave or mountainous setting was one of the monastic ideals of the time. Sengchou's refusal of worldly fame and insistence on a modest space for practice was echoed in a substantial number of monks' biographies.

In his day, Sengchou was northern China's most influential meditation master. However, as Jan Yun-hua points out, Sengchou's meditation method, revered as the foremost practice for calming the mind and realizing the true nature of things, may have ironically precipitated its own decline due to its reliance on hermit-like practices and an indifference to worldly fame.⁹⁶ His Xiaonanhai Cave remains to this day as a concrete monument, literally cementing the memory of Sengchou's ideals and practices before they had been forgotten.⁹⁷

Returning to the engraved sutra texts at the site, the carved text outside the cave starts with the dedicatory inscription, continues with the "Hymn on the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*," and ends with the passages from the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*. As Katsuki argues, the engraved parts of the "Hymn on the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*" and the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* at the Xiaonanhai Cave can be seen as characteristic of Northern Qi Buddhist trends.⁹⁸ He refers to Tsukamoto Zenryū's observation that the *Avatamsaka Sūtra* and

transcendents were believed to reside; *ibid.*, 288, 292, 345. The symbolic importance of Daoist grotto-heavens was elaborated as their being sites of refuge, initiation, and finally transcendence. For further discussion, see Stephen R. Bokenkamp, "The Peach Flower Font and the Grotto Passage," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 106 (1986): 65-77; Franciscus Verellen, "The Beyond Within: Grotto-heavens in Taoist Ritual and Cosmology," *Cahiers d'Extreme Asie* 8 (1995): 265-90; and Liu Shufen, "Death and the Degeneration of Life: Exposure of the Corpse in Medieval Chinese Buddhism," *Journal of Chinese Religions* 28 (2000): 10.

⁹⁶ Jan, *Zhongguo chanxue*, 77.

⁹⁷ As Chen Jinhua points out, the physical artifacts associated with Sengchou's meditation provide a different picture from that of his biography which only focuses on the conventional method of *sinianchu*. Chen Jinhua suggests that the inscriptions found in these grotto-complexes demonstrate that Sengchou's meditation methods were based on a combination of the *Nirvāṇa* and *Avatamsaka* sutras, and was crucial for the later development of the Mahāyāna meditation tradition in China. Chen Jinhua, *Monks and Monarchs, Kinship and Kingship* (Kyoto: Scuola Italiana di Studi sull'Asia Orientale, 2002), 153.

⁹⁸ Katsuki, "Shōnankai sekkutsu chūkutsu," 72.

the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* were the primary texts in Buddhist circles during this period, where they were seen as the first and the last teachings by Śākyamuni.⁹⁹

In light of those “Golden Words,” words supposedly chosen by Sengchou or his disciples, the dedicator/maker/refurbisher of the Xiaonanhai Cave risked distracting or obstructing the main message by filling all the remaining available space with the celebrated images of Buddhas and Buddha Lands.¹⁰⁰ Why take that risk, and was it deliberate? Did the images at Xiaonanhai function as a sort of starting point for visualization and/or as expedients that would eventually be negated as the meditation advanced, and the practitioner’s spiritual capability developed? Was the repentance ritual a precursor to a more systemized visualization practice, or was it supposed to be simultaneously pursued with visualization, or both?¹⁰¹ Did the practitioner at Xiaonanhai strive “to discern the fundamental emptiness of mind and phenomena throughout all phases and activities of the ritual,” as in other types of repentance rituals?¹⁰² Was the coexistence of the engraved passages and the images of deities a chance survival of random arrangements? Is there any possibility that there originally existed an actual object for meditation on impurity such as a deceased body inside the cave, of which no trace now remains? As if unraveling a woven cloth by pulling on a single thread, many questions can be teased from this line of inquiry, questions which remain to be addressed.

⁹⁹ Tsukamoto Zenryū 塚本善隆, *Gisho Shaku-Rō shi no kenkyū* 魏書釋老志の研究 (Kyoto: Bukkyō bunka kenkyūsho shuppansha, 1961): 38.

¹⁰⁰ For the possible danger posed by the expedient means of seducing the practitioner deeper into delusion and attachment, see Stevenson, “The Four Kinds of Samādhi,” 81.

¹⁰¹ For a discussion on the visionary experience as purification, see Nobuyoshi, “Visionary Repentance,” 34–36.

¹⁰² Stevenson, “The Four Kinds of Samādhi,” 74.

Appendix

[The Buddha] then addresses the gentleman: bodhisattva mahāsattva, the sagely conduct is to examine your own body, from the top of the head to the tip of the toes. Among them, there are only those such as the hair, nails, teeth, the unclean and filthy, the skin, flesh, tendons, bones, spleen, kidneys, heart, lungs, liver, gall-bladder, intestines, stomach, urine and feces, mucus from the nose, saliva and tears from the eyes, as well as the fat, grease, membranes of the brain, bone marrow, bloody pus, and all the arteries and veins. When the bodhisattva contemplates these [anatomical parts of the body] by visually examining them, he has these thoughts: Which of them are me?; And on which does my [existence] depend?; Wherein do they dwell?; And to whom do I belong? [The bodhisattva] also reflects: Are the bones me?; Or am I separate from them? At that time, the bodhisattva penetrates into the skin and flesh and visualizes only the bones. He then reflects: the colors of the bones vary; they are either yellow-green, reddish white or grey. In this way, the bones are not me. Why is it so? For I am neither yellow-green, reddish white nor grey. When the bodhisattva concentrates his mind and visualizes these [i.e. the bones], he is able to eradicate all sensual desires.

[The bodhisattva] again reflects: all these bones are interdependent. Resting upon the foot bones are the ankle bones; resting upon the ankle bones are the shin-bones; resting upon the shin-bones are the knee caps; resting upon the knee caps are the thigh-bones; resting upon the thigh-bones are the buttock-bones; resting upon the buttock-bones are the waist-bones; resting upon the waist-bones are the spine bones; resting upon the spine bones are the ribs. Also resting upon the spine bones are the neck-bones; resting upon the neck-bones are the chin-bones; resting upon the chin-bones are the teeth, upon which resting the skull. Also resting upon the neck-bones are the upper arm-bones; resting upon the upper arm-bones are the forearm-bones; resting upon the forearm-bones are the wrist-bones; resting upon the wrist-bones are the palm-bones, and resting upon the palm-bones are the finger-bones. In this way the bodhisattva-mahāsattva visualizes the bones [in his body], and at this time all of them are separated. Once he has achieved this visualization, the three desires/illusions are all cut off. These are the lust for form, beauty and softness to the touch. When the bodhisattva-mahāsattva visualizes the green bones, he sees that the entire universe appears green. Such is the case when [he] visualizes the yellow, white, and grey colors of the bones. When the bodhisattva-mahāsattva is contemplating these (the colors of the bones), rays of green, yellow, white and grey emanate from between his eyebrows, and he sees the image of the Buddha within each of them.

Once I have a view of the Buddha, I ask: “If this unclean body is but a chance amalgamation of interdependent units, how is it that I am able to sit down, rise up, walk, stay, bend, extend, look down and up, and how is it that I can also see, blink, exhale, inhale, feel sad and cry, feel happy and laugh? If there is not an activating agent to make them happy, who (what) causes them?” Once I have made this inquiry, all the Buddhas in the rays suddenly disappear. So I reflect: perhaps the mind [which has caused thinking] implied that I have an ego-self (or I am self-conscious), therefore the Buddhas do not want to speak to me. Then I begin to contemplate this mind (or thought). Like flowing water, it comes and goes, arises and disappears, so this condition of transitoriness suggests that they are not caused by a concrete agent such as an ego-self. Again I reflect: if thinking is not caused by an ego-self, perhaps it is the ego-self that makes exhaling and inhaling pos-

sible, which are [natural activities because of] air. Air is one of the four elements of which all things are made. Among the four elements, which one exists because of the existence of my ego-self? Not the solid earth, neither the liquid water, nor the air. I further reflect: the body with all its components does not exist because of the existence of an ego-self. There is only the functional self manifested in the combinations of various elements such as the heart and air; like those [images] conjured up by incantations or magic, [which are illusory and transitory]. Therefore, this unclean body is an amalgamation of interdependent elements. Then, from where come greed and desires? When being humiliated and scolded, from where arise anger and rage? My body is an unclean and filthy entity comprising thirty-six physical parts and excretions; I wonder what can be the object of humiliation and abuse. When being verbally abused, I can try to think which sound actually causes the abuse. Since each single sound cannot cause any form of abuse, more sounds cannot, either. For this reason, I should not feel angry. When someone physically abuses me, I can also try to think about it in the same way. From where does this abuse arise? Thus I reflect: because someone uses his hands, a knife, or a staff to hit or beat my body, [the action] is called physical abuse. [If so], what reason do I have to be mad at others? I should be blamed for the abuse since it is my own body that triggers it, and also because I received a body of five substances of an intelligent being (*wuyin* 五陰). Just as there is a target, and so, it will be hit by an arrow, I have a body, therefore I will be hit. If I am unable to tolerate this, my mind will not be able to concentrate and then I will lose proper thoughts. If I lose proper thoughts, I will be unable to distinguish the good from the bad. If I am unable to distinguish the good from the bad, I will perform evil acts. When I perform evil acts, then according to the karmic law, I will be transmigrated to the realms of hell, animals, and hungry ghosts. When the bodhisattva reflects on this, he has already obtained the method of *sinianchu*. Once that is obtained, one can dwell upon the stage of forbearance and endurance (*kanrendi* 堪忍地). When a bodhisattva-mahāsattva dwells upon the stage of forbearance and endurance, he can tolerate greed, desire, evil, and ignorance. He can also tolerate cold and hot conditions, hunger and thirst, or such insects as gadflies, mosquitoes, and fleas. He can also tolerate wintry storms or severe rain, and various diseases as well as humiliation and verbal and physical abuse. In all, he can tolerate every physical and mental trouble and distress. This is why it is called “dwelling on the stage of forbearance and endurance.”



*Figure 1. Xiaonanhai
Central Grotto*

*Northern Qi, 6th century;
Anyang, Henan province.
Photo by author. In this
article all illustrations
concerning Xiaonanhai
Grotto assume dating and
siting as per the preceding
information here.*

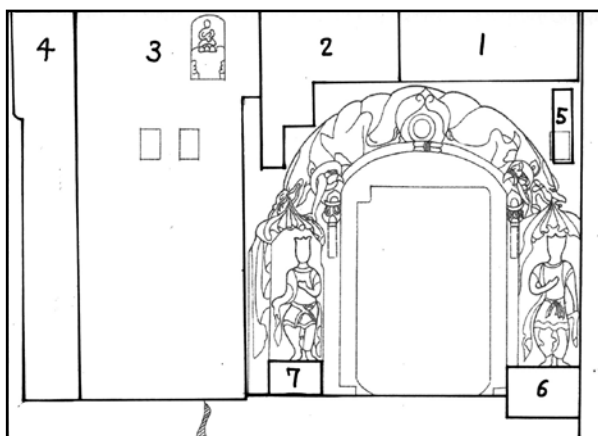


Figure 1A. Diagram for Sutra Engraving, Xiaonanhai Central Grotto

Author's melange of images, with keyed sites; based on image in Yen Chuan-ying, "Bei Qi changuanku de tuxiangkao" (cited in full, n. 9), pl. 36, and on image in Henansheng gudai jianzhu baohu yanisuo 河南省古代建築保護研究所, Baoshan Lingquansi 寶山靈泉寺 (Zhengzhou: Henan renmin chubanshe, 1991), pl. 57.

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|--|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. dedicatory inscription 2. hymn on Avatamsaka Sūtra 3. chapter "Sagely Conduct" (Shengxingpin 聖行品) from Nirvāṇa Sūtra 4. chapter "Pure Conduct" (Fanxingpin 梵行品) from Nirvāṇa Sūtra | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5, 6. additional dedicatory inscription/
passage from Nirvāṇa Sūtra
(Guangming bianzhao gaoguide wang pusa pin 光明遍照高貴德王菩薩品) and Yiqie dazhongsuowen pin 一切大眾所問品 7. "Calling the Buddha to mind, calling the Dharma to mind, calling the Saṃgha to mind 念佛念法念僧." |
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Figure 2. Dedicatory Inscription, Façade, Xiaonanhai Central Grotto

Photo by author.



Figure 3. Sutra Engraving on Façade, Xiaonanhai Central Grotto

*Sutra text is “Shengxingpin 聖行品” from Nirvāṇa Sūtra.
Photo by author.*



Figure 4. North Wall, Xiaonanhai Central Grotto

Photo by author.



Figure 5. East Wall, Xiaonanhai Central Grotto
After Zhongguo meishu quanji (cited in full, n. 1) 13, pl. 192.



Figure 6. West Wall, Xiaonanhai
Central Grotto
After Zhongguo meishu quanji 13,
pl. 193.



*Figure 7. Relief with Inscription, North Wall, Xiaonanhai Central Grotto
The inscription reads: "Monk Sengchou makes offerings." Photo by author.*