

# *Yuan Dynasty Religious Art View*

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**Abstract:** The Yuan Dynasty was a special period ruled by ethnic minorities. It was the tradition of the horseback people to give preference to martial arts over literature, and the feudal society developed until the Song Dynasty, when the ritual and music system was complete, and the Yuan Dynasty opened a new horizon for it. On an objective level, the cultural background and the abolition of the imperial examination system by the ruling class made the literati determined to return to seclusion, and on a subjective level, culture was not dominated by Confucian norms, the creative environment was freer, and the arts showed diversified development. The ruling class respected Tibetan Buddhism as the state religion, the literati were indifferent and reclusive, and the common people were happy with the secularism.

## **1. Ruling class aesthetics influenced by the Nepalese style of statuary**

### **1.1 Reasons for the Yuan rulers' love of Tibetan Buddhism**

The History of Yuan states that “The Yuan dynasty revered Buddhism, especially the Tibetan emperor's teacher is not the same as the ancient times<sup>[1]</sup>”. The Yuan dynasty respected Tibetan Buddhism as the state religion, and the rulers loved Tibetan Buddhism can be discussed from three aspects, firstly, Tibetan Buddhism was a political means for the Yuan rulers to recover Tibet. The Mongol leaders realized that Tibetan Buddhism, as a religious faith, had a high political status in Tibetan areas and played a particularly important role in their control of the economic and cultural development of Tibet, so they had a positive attitude toward the development of Tibetan Buddhism.

The second is the role of Tibetan Buddhist culture itself. The Mongols practiced shamanism, which had a natural fusion with Tibetan Ben-Religion, and Tibetan religious leaders used the unique Mongolian-Tibetan culture to gain the trust of the Yuan rulers. At the same time, Tibetan Buddhism believed that life consisted of the mutual stimulation and interaction of chakras, qi, and points, and its explanation of the structure of life catered to the needs of the Yuan rulers.

Finally, in terms of the external environment, the flourishing of Tibetan Buddhist art in the Western Xia had lessons for the Yuan rulers. The Western Xia's courtesy to Tibetan Buddhism was due to the kinship between its Dangxiang Qiang and Tubo in the clan. Before the founding of the state, Tibetan Buddhism was developed in western Gansu and eastern Qinghai, and a number of Buddhist cultural centers were formed. Tibetan Buddhist art reached its peak during the annexation of western Tibet during the Western Xia period. After that, Yuan annexed Xixia and Tibetan Buddhism spread in Xixia, which provided the Mongolian rulers with a geopolitical advantage to

accept Tibetan Buddhism.

## 1.2 The Art of Statue Making in Yuandadu

As a place where the ruling class gathered power, the art style of Yuandadu could represent the preferences of the ruling class at that time. Exploring the artistic characteristics of the "Western Heavenly Sanskrit Statues" in Yuandadu, we can see that they originated from Nepal. The transmission route is based on the innate geographical factors between Nepal and Tibet, and the art of Nepalese iconography was introduced to Tibetan region and combined with its own Ben-Religion.

The facial image of the Buddha became secularized with the artisan's skill, and the intermarriage of Nepalese with surrounding ethnic groups gave the nation a multi-ethnic appearance. The image of the Buddha in the Mara period (Figure 1) combines the features of various ethnic groups in Nepal, including the broad, flat face of the Mongolian race and the high nose and thin lips of the Europa and Aryan races. This makes the Buddha's face soft and refined, and makes him a beautiful man who can represent the characteristics of Nepal. "By the late Mara period this facial feature was continuously enhanced, with slender eyebrows connected to the line of the nose in an inverted herringbone, a nose as wide as the corners of the lips, and a slightly upturned mouth with a smiling expression, which is a typical Nepalese feature of the Buddha's face."<sup>[2]</sup> In addition to the facial features, the artistic characteristics of Nepalese statues are also a major feature of their body posture. The transition from the chest to the waist of the Buddha is clearly exaggerated, which is unique to Nepalese statues and is fundamentally different from the pre-Indian Gandhara and Mathura statues. The Nepalese statue has reduced the waist profile and focused more on the thick limbs. The depiction of the clothing pattern still follows the art style of Mathura, showing a flat treatment of the clothing pattern.



Figure 1: Shakyamuni Partial 13th century Nepal, Rubin Museum Collection, USA



Figure 2: Shakyamuni statue, 1265 Collection of the National Palace Museum, Beijing



Figure 3: Manjushri Bodhisattva statue, 1305 Collection of the National Palace Museum, Beijing

The Nepalese artist Anigo was sent to Tibet by King Malla to work on Buddhist architecture and statues, and later followed Basiba to the capital, where he designed and presided over the construction of numerous Buddhist sites. The Buddhist statues created by Anigo were so influential that not only the Tibetan region, but also Yuandadu and Hangzhou area began to absorb and digest the Nepalese style. The History of Yuan records: "Anigo, born in Nibolo, was good at painting and casting gold for statues. All the statues of the two capital temples and the viewpoint are mostly from his hands.<sup>[3]</sup>" His works are known as "Western Heavenly Brahman statues", and the statues of Sakyamuni (Figure. 2) and Manjushri (Figure. 3) collected by the Forbidden City in the second year of the Yuan Dynasty and the ninth year of the Yuan Dynasty are their representatives. Comparing the style of Nepalese statues with those of Yuandadu, it can be seen that the Buddhist artworks of Yuandadu are the products of Sino-Tibetan exchange and integration, still maintaining the requirements of Nepalese statues with large heads and small bodies, broad shoulders and thin waists, but with changes in details and clothing patterns. To sum up the artistic style of Yuandadu: first, its forehead is wide and flat, and its face is square and highly recognizable. This aesthetic style was formed by incorporating the unique look of Mongolian race on the basis of Nepalese style and has distinctive characteristics of the time. Secondly, it changes the upward eyebrows of Nepalese statues to curved eyebrows and meditative meditation with slightly open eyes. Thirdly, the late Dadu-style statues have realistic clothing patterns, which are different from the Nepalese thin clothing and body, and have more obvious Han characteristics, and also provide a style reference for the Chinese and Tibetan style statues of the Ming and Qing dynasties.

## 2. Literati Painting fusion of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism

The literati retired from the political environment is said to be the Yuan ruler choke off the career path of the literati, from the patriotic spirit is not to serve the Yuan dynasty officials. The Yuan rulers had a clear attitude towards the opening of religion, and the literati mostly upheld the concept of unity of the three religions. The unity of the three religions refers to the upholding of Confucianism's filial piety, fraternal loyalty, faithfulness, the rounding of Taoism's tranquility and inaction, and Buddhism's emptiness and transcendence, which is the result of the idea of taking Confucianism as the root and taking Taoism's and Buddhism's consciousness. Huang Gongwang, Wu Zhen and Ni Zan of the Yuan Dynasty literati paintings uphold the ideology of the unity of the three religions.

## 2.1 Huang Gongwang's idea of literati painting

Huang Gongwang was influenced by his family's positive thinking and went into officialdom with strong political ambitions. The first half of his life as a government official because of the involvement and imprisonment, after release from prison, retired from officialdom, began to believe in Taoism, changed his name to 'Dachi'. Huang Gongwang's thoughts are the epitome of the anxious and helpless mentality of literati life under the political mechanism of the Yuan Dynasty. In his later years, he concentrated on the creation of paintings, and visited all over Jiangsu, to collect creative material for his landscape paintings. His ink painting techniques were based on the strengths of various schools of thought, and he developed a long hemp chapped that was more suitable for the scenery of Jiangnan on top of Dong Yuan's hemp chapped, and used thick and pale ink and brush to create the bland and innocent Fuchun River. His transcendental ink painting is the same as the Buddhist idea of Nirvana.

## 2.2 Wu Zhen's Ideas of Literati Painting

Wu Zhen lived in seclusion in his hometown, read Buddhist classics and mastered Taoist texts, and also accepted Confucianism in his thinking. Being aware of the low status of the literati in the difficult times, he was willing to live in seclusion and keep his will in poverty, and never got entangled with the officialdom, and he seldom appeared in the activities of the literati in the Yuan Dynasty. He loved the nobility of plum and called himself "Taoist of Plum Blossoms" and "Monk of Plum Blossoms". His fishermen's works are a reflection of his personal life, holding simplicity and keeping truth. From Wu Zhen's calligraphy and painting inscriptions, we can see that the most friends he made were Taoist monks and monks, including the monk Song Yan. During his life, he was influenced by the ideas of Taoism and Buddhism, and pursued Taoism and Buddhism in the chaotic times of the Yuan Dynasty to find peace.

## 2.3 Ni Zan's Ideology of Literati Painting

Ni Zan is the painter who pursues the most spirit of writing in the Yuan Dynasty, and the "Yi Qi" emphasized many times in his painting theory is to transcend the objective objects and pursue the noble and elegant in his heart. He was an open-minded man who left the mundane world behind to indulge in the landscape, to release his emotions, to understand the spirit of Taoism and Buddhism, and to nourish the mind of the literati with the breath of nature. His thought was to avoid the world and seek seclusion, and to be close to nature, and his paintings were "to write about the breath in his chest". The composition adopts the method of ping and distant, taking the near and distant scenes and discarding the middle one, with one river and two banks, as an opening and closing. No one is painted in the painting, and the dead trees survive in the cracks of the shore. The brush and ink are thick and light, clear and simple. The natural landscape becomes a kind of physical manifestation of spiritual repository and a spiritual repository of Ni Zan's thoughts, which led the Yuan Dynasty literary world to be filled with an unprecedented reclusive sentiment. His landscapes focus on the expression of his mind, change the ancient method, and pursue the mood of brush and ink. The picture is highly generalized, the composition is a constant order, and the painting is an expression of the state of mind.

The literati paintings of the Yuan Dynasty were influenced by the religious thought of a specific period in China, and their aesthetic consciousness was freed from the hobbies of the ruling class and turned to the pursuit of the combination of Taoism and Buddhism to express the thoughts and emotions of the creative subjects for the purpose of "self-entertainment".

### 3. Folk Buddhist Art in Pursuit of Realistic function

#### 3.1 Buddhism paintings of Maitreya's Buddhahood Sutra on the west wall of the Grand Hall of Qinglong Temple

The Qinglong Temple in Jishan County, Shanxi Province, was built in 662, and the two frescoes in the Grand Hall of temple are both Yuan Dynasty frescoes, the east wall is called The picture of Sakyamuni preaching and the west wall is called "Maitreya's Buddhahood Sutra Change " (Figure 4). The west wall central Maitreya Buddha was sitting in a posture with legs hanging down, wearing a red semi-cloak type robe, feet under the two lotus platform. The Kalavinka is placed in a pair on either side of the head halo of Maitreya Buddha.



Figure 4: Maitreya's Buddhahood Sutra Change on the east wall of the Grand Hall

The west wall of the Kalavinka often appeared in the Western Pure Land variant before Yuan, but in the Yuan period turned to appear in the Maitreya Pure Land variant, what is the reason for the shift from the Western Pure Land to the Maitreya Pure Land? The author tries to answer this question from the perspective of the development of both beliefs. In the Han Dynasty, Maitreya beliefs were more popular than Amitabha beliefs, and the monks preached that Maitreya had a similar birth to Sakyamuni, and that his statue was the same as Sakyamuni's. Therefore, Maitreya beliefs were more easily accepted and spread in Han. In addition, the development of Yogacara in the mainland also had a positive impact on the spread of Maitreya beliefs. In terms of classical doctrine, the Amitabha faith focused more on meditation practice and was popular among the literati and scholars who studied the doctrine; the belief in Maitreya's Lower Life depicted the wonderful human world after Maitreya became Buddha and was relied upon by the lower classes.

Although the beliefs of Maitreya and Amitabha developed in contradiction to each other, the activities of the sects and monks were not absolutely separate. The White Lotus sect, which developed in the Southern Song Dynasty, believed in Amitabha in the early stages and switched to Maitreya in the later stages. The White Lotus Sect is a product of the Tiantai Sect and the Pure Land Sect. The style of the Tiantai Sect is "double movement of cessation and observation" and "double enlightenment of meditation and wisdom" <sup>[4]</sup>. The aim of Pure Land Buddhism is to combine the practitioner's self-cultivation with Amitabha's vows to guide the practitioner to the Western Pure Land, so it focuses on practical cultivation. During the Yuan period, the sect turned to the belief in Maitreya, especially the belief in Lower Life, and led the people to believe in a better world after Maitreya became Buddha, making them expect to escape from the real world of suffering. From the

object of Maitreya Lower Life sutra, we can see the development process of the local Chinese sect towards secularization, no longer centering on the universal preaching of the Western Pure Land and the Tusita Heavenly Pure Land and focusing on the spirit of righteousness, but instead pursuing the Maitreya Lower Life world that meets the expectations of the people and following the pattern of salvation thought. By looking at the evolution of Amitabha and Maitreya beliefs through the lens of White Lotus Buddhism, we can see that the belief in the Maitreya Lower Life was the choice of the people in the social era.

### 3.2 Buddhism paintings of Medicine and Buddhism paintings of Prajvalosnisah in the Grand Hall of the lower temple of Gongshengji Temple

Guangsheng Temple, the temple was built in the first year (147) of Emperor Huan of the Eastern Han Dynasty, and was rebuilt in the autumn of the ninth year of Dade (1305). The two murals in the Grand Hall of the lower temple of Guangsheng Temple date from the same Yuan Dynasty, the east wall is named "Medicine Buddha Sutra Change" (Figure 5), and the west wall is named "Prajvalosnisah Change" (Figure 6).



Figure 5: Medicine Buddha Sutra Change on the east wall of the Grand Hall

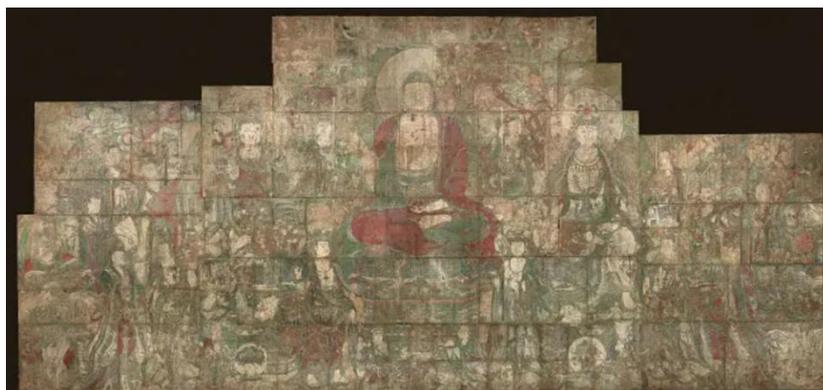


Figure 6: Prajvalosnisah Change on the west wall of the Grand Hall

Since the Sui dynasty, the Medicine Buddha variation has been an important form of Buddhist sutra art, and its configuration is usually combined with the "Western Pure Land Variation", but a new form of combination of Medicine Buddha and Prajvalosnisah appeared in the central and southern regions of Jin in the Yuan dynasty in Shanxi, which is different from the "Eastern Pure Land Variation" and the "Western Pure Land Variation". This is one of the few examples during the Yuan dynasty. Due to historical reasons, the four frescoes of such combinations in the southern Jin region went to foreign countries and became the earliest precedent for foreign scholars to come into contact with Buddhist art images in Han-land.

Why did examples of the combination of Medicine Buddha and Prajvalosnisah during the Yuan period? The author attempts to answer this question from both the religious background and the social environment.

There are many similarities between the belief in Medicine Buddha and the belief in Prajvalosnisah. The Medicine Buddha Sutra proclaims that the Lord of the Eastern Glazed Pure Land, Medicine Buddha, has made twelve great vows, and that if believers worship the name of Medicine Buddha or the sutras, they can drive away diseases and receive many benefits. In times of war, all sentient beings seek nothing but health and peace, and the Medicine Buddha Sutra adds a strong sense of presentism by saving all sentient beings from their illnesses, removing the evil disease of ignorance, relieving the doom of the nine horizontal deaths, and burning lamps to renew their lives. The main content of the Sutra of Prajvalosnisah is that Shakyamuni eliminates disasters by recounting the Prajvalosnisah sutra. It is believed that the movements and changes in the positions of the stars can foretell blessings and disasters. By making offerings to the stars and deities, the effects of the calamitous stars are eliminated and the blessings of the blessed stars are obtained through the power of Prajvalosnisah. Interpreted from the classical point of view, both have the utility of tending to avoid harm.

During the Tubo period, there were frequent exchanges between Tibetan Buddhism and Chinese Buddhism, and the religious art developed and grown in the same soil made it easier for the Chinese to accept. Tibetan Buddhist cultural exchanges laid the historical and cultural foundation for the spread of Tibetan Buddhism in the mainland. The Mongolian inhabitants have lived in the northern alpine and arid regions since ancient times, living as nomads and highly dependent on the natural environment, just like the Xixia. The poor living conditions of the Xixia people, the harsh climate and the frequent occurrence of natural disasters made the people helpless against disasters and they had to rely on the providence, so astrology was deeply rooted in the social life. The Yuan Dynasty revered the faith of Medicine Buddha and the faith of Prajvalosnisah is the inheritance of the religious art of Xixia. At the same time, such a combination is Yuan Dade seven years of a large earthquake in south-central Shanxi after the occurrence, in which illustrate the people at this time to face the powerlessness of natural and man-made disasters, only to tell to the gods to pray for shelter. From the composition of the two murals, it can be seen that the murals are not Pure Land performance, but sacrificial scenes, so the content of the sutra changes expressed in the Yuan Dynasty is more in line with the function of Medicine Buddha and Prajvalosnisah to eliminate disasters and relieve difficulties. Therefore, the post-earthquake reconstruction of Guangsheng Temple first appeared the combination of Medicine Buddha and Prajvalosnisah murals.

Xu Heng, an early Yuan scholar, advocated the following: "Apply the principles of heaven and see them in action. He opposed the idea of turning the science into something far-reaching and difficult to do." [5] Focusing on the "daily use of people's livelihood" [5], Yuan dynasty philosophy upheld the theory into practice and focused on the relationship between theory and daily life. In the choice of folk Buddhist art subjects, the painter chose Buddhism paintings of Maitreya Lower Life Sutra, Buddhism paintings of Medicine Buddha, and Buddhism paintings of Medicine Buddha, which shows that the mainstream of Yuan Dynasty folk believed in the Pure Land as still, and the transfer of Kalavinka shows the origin of Amitabha's Pure Land and Maitreya's Pure Land, and the combination of Medicine Buddha and Prajvalosnisah answers the people's vision of expecting to cure diseases and eliminate disasters.

#### 4. Conclusion

The Yuan dynasty was a vast region, and the ruler allowed different religions to develop together, making the painting and sculpture activities of different sects more active than ever before. With the

policy of "parallel development of multiple religions", Tibetan monks came to the mainland in large numbers, and Tibetan Buddhism continued to spread in the mainland. Confucianism, Daoism, Chinese Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhism created a splendid traditional Chinese culture in the process of integration and development, leaving a historical mark in the fields of painting, sculpture and architecture.

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