The English word “paradise” evokes a host of meanings, from the garden of Eden to an enclosed oriental park. None of these concepts was shared by the ancient Chinese. So what do we mean when we borrow this word to label certain ancient Chinese images? Since no hard-and-fast definitions for an image of “paradise” can be found in ancient Chinese texts, a sensible strategy in answering this question may be to draw first a rough “boundary” of paradise images by distinguishing them from other images which, though often associated with unworldly realms, pertain to different concepts and employ different visual forms. Once this boundary is established, we can proceed to explore its changing content, thereby tracing the development of paradise images from their first appearance in early Chinese pictorial art to their integration with Buddhist concepts and iconography. Following this strategy, the first part of this paper provides a general mapping of paradise images in the art of the Han Dynasty (206 BC – AD 220), and the second part focuses on Western Paradise images in early Chinese Buddhist art, exemplified by some important works dating from the sixth century to the eighth century.

Paradise Images in Pre-Buddhist Art

Paradise and a “Happy Homeland”

Paradise images can be distinguished from three other groups of popular motifs in pre-Buddhist Chinese art. The first group consists of art forms that imitate and idealize reality in order to construct a posthumous home for the dead. Chinese mortuary art during the Han Dynasty is characterized by an intense longing for images of a “happy homeland”.

The basic impulse here is fear: any place away from home invokes the sense of danger, and the most feared space is the world of death, which represents a stage beyond lived experiences. The places where the deceased would enter might be full of harmful ghosts and spirits, and the soul might encounter great dangers on its journey to the afterlife. Such fears became the central motivation of the shamanistic ritual called “Summoning the Soul”, practised before or right after death. Significantly, in the prayers chanted in this ritual, even Heaven is described as a terrible place where “tigers and leopards guard the nine gates, with jaws ever ready to rend up mortal men”. After listing the perils in all the six directions, the shaman summarizes his message: “All the quarters of the world are full of harm and evil.” He then turns to the new theme of the deceased’s “quiet and reposeful home” and describes its magnificent buildings, delicious food, loyal servants, and beautiful singing girls. This home is by nature personal – it is prepared for and only for an individual. Paradise, in contrast, is an imagined “public space” in ancient Chinese thinking: it never belongs to anyone but is open to all. The art of a “happy homeland”, with its abundant scenes of banquets, music and dance performances, and other aspects of social life, extends this life into the afterlife. Paradise, on the other hand, is never considered a natural extension of this life. Though still connected with the human world, it is imagined to be found at the edge of the earth and thus represents the geographic point farthest from home. A home demands attachment; paradise results from alienation. The path to paradise is therefore necessarily full of dangers; people who determine to pursue it must subject themselves to various kinds of risks – either to make dangerous journeys or take toxic drugs. Paradise never duplicates this world, but only transforms and transcends it.

When necromancers of the Qin and Han era were spreading the lore of the famous Penglai Islands, they told their audience that the immortal islands were in the Eastern Sea. There, all the birds and beasts were pure white, and
all the palaces and gates were made of gold and silver. Gazed at from afar, the islands looked like clouds, but as one drew nearer, they seemed instead to be submerged under the water. 

Interestingly, instead of describing Penglai as an island of earth and rock, the necromancers found its imagery in a mirage.

The same task was faced by early Chinese artists in creating visual forms of paradise: how could an immortal mountain be depicted based on a worldly model? This dilemma explains why landscape scenes in Han art fall into two divergent but coexisting modes. The first mode is characterized by a bird’s-eye view: layers of rolling hills, with gentle contours and lush vegetation, overlap toward the horizon (figure 1). The hills and the adjacent fields provide an environment for human activities such as farming, raising livestock, and salt mining. Both the drawing style and iconography serve to forge an idealized natural world in which people (happily) live and work. The second type of landscape imagery in Han art pertains to the immortal domain or paradise (figures 2 and 3). Those fantastic peaks – triadic, wave-like, or mushroom-shaped – were never based on natural landscape. Instead, they acquired a non-representational vocabulary from three different sources: Chinese pictographic writing, traditional symbols of longevity, and a reinterpretation of pre-Han decorative art.

Briefly, the triadic form of the Chinese character shan (mountain) provided a basic structure with which to visualize fantastic mountains (see figure 3). Alternatively, an immortal mountain was described as “resembling the shape of a flat basin, narrow at the bottom and broad on the top”. It is tempting to associate this image with Mount Sumeru. But the earliest example of this mushroom-shaped mountain, painted on a first-century lacquer box from Lelang in present Korea (see figure 2), was apparently modelled on the magic fungus lingzhi, the basis of an elixir to induce longevity. Finally, elements of immortal paradise were derived from abstract decorative patterns, which were increasingly supplied with literary meaning during the period from the Eastern Zhou to the Han. In intricate patterns people saw fairy precincts, as well as divine animals running through a geometric maze; a widespread belief in the universal energy qi further reinforced such imaginings. 

While this short summary can hardly document the complexity of the historical processes through which paradise images gradually emerged, it confirms that these images were non-descriptive; rather, they were “ideational” or allegorical – images of the mind.
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Salt mining and hunting. Pictorial tile from Sichuan province. Late Eastern Han, second century AD. 40.8 x 46.7 cm. Chongqing Municipal Museum.
2
The Queen Mother of the West on Mount Kunlun. Painting on lacquerware from Lelang, present-day Korea. Early Eastern Han, beginning of first century AD.

3
A painted coffin from Mawangdui tomb 1, Changsha, Hunan province. Second century BC. A three-peaked mountain flanked by auspicious animals is presented on both (a) a side panel and (b) the front panel.

Paradise and Heaven

Going one step further, we should distinguish paradise images from depictions of heaven or the sky. Although later on the boundaries between heaven and paradise were gradually blurred, the two had different implications and belonged to different sign systems in Han art. Heaven may be perceived as an astronomical entity. For example, Sima Qian reported that the tomb chamber of the first Qin emperor was decorated as an artificial universe (figure 3), using the phrase “Above were all of the Han and a painted on its central beam (figure 4), opposed figures portrayed on the gable. No paradise is here heaven and earth constitute a cosmological imposed on the mortuary structure.

Heaven may also be represented by one pictorial formula rooted in the Confucian concept of heaven as the source of absolute authority. The heaven is deeply rhetorical, often reflecting special political theories and concerns. In the famous
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Heaven may also be represented by omens – a pictorial formula rooted in the Confucian concept of heaven as the source of absolute authority. This image of heaven is deeply rhetorical, often reflecting specific political theories and concerns. In the famous Wu Liang shrine established in AD 151, for example, rows of omens
engraved on the ceiling dictate the political conditions for their manifestation (figure 5a), thereby demonstrating the political identity of Wu Liang as a “retired worthy”. While this political heaven is juxtaposed with the Confucian paragons portrayed on the walls, to the east and west—two directions traditionally associated with refuge and immortality—the Queen Mother of the West and the King Father of the East occupy the two triangular gables (figure 5b). Surrounding them are winged immortals as well as divine animals and birds.9 From the close of the first century BC the Queen Mother, an old figure in Chinese mythology, gained popularity among commoners as the mistress of a western paradise. Her significance as a

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Unlike the isolated, two-dimensional omen images executed in a “catalogue format”, the realm of the Queen Mother offers a reachable space. We find in some pictures that lay people, perhaps the souls of the deceased, are travelling toward the Queen Mother or have already
5. Relief carvings on the Wu Liang shrine, Jiaxiang, Shandong province, AD 151.
(a) Omen images on the ceiling.
(b) The Queen Mother of the West and the King Father of the East on the gables.
5
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(a) Omen images on the ceiling.
(b) The Queen Mother of the West and the King Father of the East on the gables.

6
The Queen Mother of the West and her court. Pictorial tile. Late Eastern Han, second century AD. Excavated from Qingbaixiang tomb no.1 at Xindu, Chengdu, Sichuan province. Sichuan Provincial Museum.

7
A journey to the Queen Mother of the West. Clay stand of a "magic tree". Late Eastern Han, second century AD. 20 cm. Excavated in Bei Hai near Chengdu. Sichuan Provincial Museum.
entered her court (figure 6). This court thus differs from heaven in another fundamental sense. While heaven is absolute and self-sustaining, paradise is imagined to be the final destination of a journey. That people can reach paradise through certain mysterious channels holds out the hope of transcending the imperfect, mundane world. One of the most sophisticated representations of such a journey is found on a sculptured clay base from Sichuan (figure 7). Consisting of pointed and mushroom-shaped peaks, the immortal mountain Kunlun is hollowed out and is surrounded by wave-like clouds. It seems less a mountain of solid rocks than a mirage, a fleeting illusion.

Nevertheless, men and women are still managing to climb this column-like mountain and appear on three levels. This design recalls a passage from Master Huainan (Huainan zi), a second-century BC text, which describes three stages in the quest for eternal happiness: "He who climbs onto the Chilly Wind peak will achieve deathlessness; he who climbs twice as high onto the Hanging Garden will become a spirit...; he who climbs twice as high again will reach Heaven and will become a god." This spiritual journey is visualized in this sculpture, and at the end of the journey, on the top of the mountain, is the Queen Mother, the embodiment of the complete attainment of immortality.

Paradise and Symbols of Immortality

Finally, we should distinguish paradise images from other symbols of immortality, which proliferated during the Han era. Although the concept of paradise in early China was inseparable from that of immortality, immortality symbols included a wide range of mythological figures, animals, birds, plants, and objects. Any one of them alone could symbolize the attainment of eternity. But paradise had to be a place; the closest such Chinese concept before the arrival of Buddhism, as mentioned earlier, is xianshan or an "immortal mountain". At first, the image of a xianshan was little more than a silhouette of a triadic or mushroom-shaped peaks (see figures 2 and 3). But even this rudimentary form implies a place that had the potential to absorb other immortality symbols to enrich itself. This process of absorption demanded certain organizing principles - hierarchy, symmetry, and perspective - which helped transform individual motifs into internal features of an imaginary space. The development of paradise images thus combined two parallel processes - a constant increase in iconographic features and a steady improvement in compositional design.

A breakthrough in the development of paradise images toward a spatial representation was the establishment of a visual centre and hence a hierarchical order of images. The Queen Mother on her mountain throne gained an iconic status (see figures 5 and 6). She is portrayed frontally as a solemn image of majesty, ignoring the surrounding crowds and staring at the viewer beyond the picture. The viewer's sight is guided to the centre, to be confronted directly by the goddess. The composition, therefore, is not self-contained, as its significance relies on the existence of a viewer or worshipper outside it. In fact, the design of this paradise image is based on the assumption that there is a viewer/worshipper and that there is a direct relationship between the icon and the viewer/worshipper. The two principal features of such pictures - compositional symmetry and the frontality of the central figure - imply and sustain the works' religious function.

On the other hand, this picture is still troubled by an internal conflict: while the Queen Mother's court is much enlarged and enriched, it is depicted alongside the immortal mountain, which remains a traditional, symbolic form. Clearly, once paradise changed its signification in people's minds from a symbol to an imaginary place, the simple profile of an immortal mountain had to go. The subject of depiction became the Queen Mother's court seen in a bird's-eye view. We should not overlook the
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importance of this development, since it marked the beginning of a new type of paradise image, conceived and constructed as an architectural compound. Around the late second century, a que-gate was depicted to mark the boundary of the Land of the Blessed (figure 8). During the Han Dynasty que-gates were customarily erected in front of palaces and tombs; the image of a que-gate thus lends double meaning to a painted paradise, making it both a place of imperial authority and a realm beyond death.

A ceremonial complex then occupied the centre of paradise. Examples of such images, dating from the third to the fourth centuries, are conventionally sculpted on “soul jars” from south-eastern China (figure 9). It is possible that these jars were inspired by Buddhist reliquaries. Indeed, Buddha-like deities as well as foreign donors and musicians are crowded on the top, surrounding a multi-layered building which Wai-kam Ho has identified as the legendary Hall of Light. It is

Perhaps the region of Huiyuan in the Amitabha Paradise, the most famous in the Chinese tradition, should be added here. In the eighth century, especially from the Liao and Jin, there were several examples of paradise painting. In the last century, however, the importance of Buddhist art in the Western world has

Paradise
The Queen Mother of the West and her paradise. Line drawing of clay stand of a "money Han". Late Eastern Han, second century AD. Excavated in 1993 from Dujiangui tomb 22 at Guanghan, Sichuan province. Guanghan Municipal Museum. Drawing by Wu Hung.

perhaps no coincidence that these objects came from a region where the eminent monks Zhidun (313–366) and Huiyuan (344–416) spent their lives spreading the faith in Amitabha and his Western Pure Land. Zhidun wrote a famous essay praising Amitabha and his “grand palaces of seven treasures”; in 402 Huiyuan assembled his followers before a statue of Amitabha and made a vow to be reborn in the Buddha’s paradise.11 Soul jars integrate elements from indigenous shamanism, Daoism, and Buddhism, and were likely commissioned by members of a local Buddhist sect.12 Illustrations of the canonical description of Buddhist paradise, however, did not appear until at least two centuries later, as a result of both the independent growth of Buddhist art and a conceptual transformation of the Western Pure Land in China.

Paradise Images in Early Buddhist Art
From Icon to Paradise

Created in 420, a mural in cave 169 at Binglingsi has been considered the earliest dated example of the Western Paradise (or Western Pure Land; Sukhavati) painting. This identification is based on an accompanying inscription, which names the central Buddha figure Amitayus (Wu liangshoufo), the master of the Western Pure Land. The painting, however, does not show any architectural features pertaining to an imaginary place. This phenomenon is also observed at Dunhuang, where many compositions that have previously been identified as Western Paradise images are almost indistinguishable from iconic representations of the “Buddha Preaching the Law”.13 It is true that one such image on the eastern wall of cave 285 (dated to 539) bears the names of Amitayus and attending Bodhisattvas, so that the Japanese scholar Higashiyama Kenko has thus identified it as “the earliest representation of the Western Pure Land” at Dunhuang.14 But like the Binglingsi example, this work does not show the lotus pond, magnificent buildings, or scenes of rebirth ascribed to the Western Paradise. It is therefore still an Amitayus icon, not an intended depiction of his heavenly kingdom.

Three examples tentatively dated to the mid-sixth century mark the real beginning of the representation of the Western Paradise.15 The first is a mural in cave 127 at Maijishan, probably a Western Wei Dynasty (535–556) work according to its artistic style (figure 10). The second is a Northern Qi (550–577) stone carving from Xiangtangshan in Hebei province, now in the Freer Gallery of Art in Washington, DC (figure 11). Both works depict the Western Paradise as a well-defined architectural space enclosed by a pair of magnificent que-towers; reborn souls emerge in a lotus pond in front of the Buddha.16 These iconographic features are shared by the third example, a relief carving on the back of a famous stele discovered from the Wansuo site in Chengdu (figure 12). Two scenes in this carving together define the work’s pivotal position in conjoining old and new traditions to represent imaginary places. Following the Han convention of depicting a “happy homeland” in funerary art (see figure 1), the layered hills in the lower scene provide a setting for human events (here probably Buddhist parables). It contrasts the strict architectural system in the upper scene, which not only supplies a physical environment for the Western Paradise, but also structures other images and regulates perception. The hills have curving contours and a diffused visual focus; the paradise is centralized and geometric. The former encourages a literary reading of narrative episodes; the latter demands mental concentration on the Buddha and seems to be related to the practise of visualization.

A large “Western Paradise” mural on the southern wall of cave 220 at Dunhuang exemplifies the next stage in the development of paradise images (figure 13). Created about a century after the three works discussed above, the Buddha kingdom has now become extremely elaborate: it is crowded with figures, architectural structures, trees and flowers, auspicious jewels, and water and clouds. The Amitayus Buddha dominates the centre of this magnificent architectural complex, accompanied by the two great Bodhisattvas Avalokiteshvara and Mahashamaprapta on either side. Surrounded by crowds of minor divinities, these three deities dwell upon lotus thrones rising above a rectangular lotus pond, in which many tiny children — symbols of reborn souls — emerge in water or in lotus buds. The pond is framed by a continuous railing and again flanked by two multiple-storied towers; the drawing of these architectural forms conveys a strong sense of three-dimensionality. In front of the pond, musicians and dancers are presenting their arts. All these new features result from an intense effort to depict the Western Paradise as an illusory place, as wonderful and desirable as one could imagine.

One of the many new motifs in this painting is a plant growing in the centre of the pond; each of its branches bears a lotus bud containing a reborn infant. It is interesting to note that although the painting generally has a symmetrical layout, the painter added a ninth branch to the left, thereby violating the compositional balance (see
Amitabha's Pure Land.
Line drawing of mural in Maijishan cave 127.
Western Wei, 535–556.

Amitabha's Pure Land.
Xiangtangshan cave temple, Hebei province.
Northern Qi, 550–577.
Stone carving; 158 x 305 cm. Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.

Amitabha's Pure Land.
Stone relief carving on the back of a stele discovered from the Wanfosi site in Chengdu. Mid-sixth century. Chengdu Municipal Museum.

Western Paradise. Mural on the southern wall of cave 220 at Dunhuang, Gansu province. AD 642.
12
Amitabha's Pure Land.
Stone relief carving on the back of a stele discovered from the Wanfosi site in Chengdu. Mid-sixth century. Chengdu Municipal Museum.

13
Western Paradise. Mural on the southern wall of cave 220 at Dunhuang, Gansu province. AD 642.
also figure 14). This decision must have been deliberate and is possibly related to the concept of the “nine ranks of rebirth”. Several different versions of Pure Land sutras were available at Dunhuang when cave 220 was constructed, but only the Guanjing or the Visualization Sutra mentions this concept. It is therefore a plausible assumption that this painting was based on this sutra, not on the Amitabha Sutra as most scholars believe, and that it marked the beginning of a new type of paradise painting, whose focus gradually shifted from the representation of the Western Paradise to the visualization of Western Paradise.

Visualizing Paradise

A number of Indian “visualization” (guan) sutras were translated into Chinese during the fifth century and played an important role in the development of Chinese Buddhist art. Most of these texts teach how to visualize Buddhist deities, including various Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. The Visualization Sutra, translated by Kalayas between 424 and 442, was the only sutra which concentrates instead on the visualization of the Western Paradise. This sutra attracted wider attention when Chinese monks began to write commentaries on it in the late sixth century. The first commentary, written by Huiyuan of the Jingying Temple between 570 and 592, still emphasized the practice of meditating upon the Buddha, thus continuing the old tradition of guanfo (visualization of the Buddha). This emphasis found a parallel in the art of this period: although the Western Paradise began to acquire a physical form in painting, Buddhist icons continued to dominate artistic creation, and artists were not yet concerned with visualizing the Western Paradise.

A fundamental change occurred in the early Tang Dynasty in the mid-seventh century: icons of Buddhist deities increasingly became integral elements of paradise scenes, which were again elaborated with narrative elements that teach the technique of visualization. This transformation can be understood in light of a parallel change in the translation of the Sanskrit word Sukhavati (Western Paradise). According to Kotatsu Fujita, 290 Chinese sutras mention Sukhavati. Among these, sutras appearing before AD 220 simply transliterated Sukhavati as xumoti or xuhemoti. This suggests that this Indian concept was totally foreign to the translators, who could not find a compatible Chinese term for it. From 220 to the early seventh century, the most popular Chinese term used to translate Sukhavati was anê, which means “peace and happiness”. From the early Tang reign onward, anê was replaced by jile, meaning “extreme happiness”. This last change in the conceptualization of the Western Paradise, which signified the heightening attraction of the paradise, seems to have corresponded to the emergence of a great number of paradise representations in the early Tang era, and their increasing elaboration: at least fifteen large Western Paradise murals made during this period have survived at Dunhuang; many more such paintings are recorded in Tang texts. Both changes in translation and art in turn reveal a fundamental shift in Buddhist practice from “visualization of icons” to “visualization of paradise”.

As mentioned earlier, the first commentary on the Visualization Sutra, written by Huiyuan between 570 and 592 still emphasized “visualization of the Buddha”. This emphasis was continued by later commentators until Shandao (613–681) wrote his commentary in the mid-seventh century, around the time when cave 220 was constructed. Shandao’s commentary differs from the older ones in declaring that all people – nobles as well as commoners – have the opportunity to be born into the Western Paradise. He also claimed that the traditional Chinese virtue xiao (filial piety) was an essential part of Buddhist conduct, making the sutra more acceptable to Chinese society. More important for art, Shandao believed that successfully visualizing Sukhavati was the key to the attainment of eternal happiness. According to him, this religious practice was demonstrated by the Buddha himself in teaching Queen Vaidehi to “see” the Western Paradise step by step through meditation. This belief explains why he recorded his personal experience of visualizing the Western Paradise at the end of his commentary to the Visualization Sutra, and why he dedicated his life to creating some three hundred wall paintings of the Western Paradise. With the strong support of Shandao and his followers, the Visualization Sutra became increasingly popular; a type of “visualization” (guan) painting emerged in the seventh century and acquired a standard form in the eighth century.

This standard form is a tripartite composition combining three different pictorial modes, each with separate but interrelated religious significance: a dominant iconic image as the object of worship, a pictorial story as a “commentary” on the sutra, and a visual guide for meditation (figure 15). The central paradise scene differs markedly from the narrative side-scenes in both religious function and visual logic. It is a single-framed, symmetrical picture centred on the Amitayus Buddha. The strong visual
centralization is not only caused by the Buddha’s focal position, extraordinary size, and solemnity, but is also reinforced by the architectural setting which, employing a linear perspective system, guides the viewer’s gaze toward the Buddha.

In contrast, the two side-scenes depict multiple events, which, instead of representing paradise, help the worshipper to comprehend the Visualization Sutra and to learn the visualization techniques. Based on Shunsho’s (1255–1335) explanation of the famous Taima Mandara, Arthur Waley has proposed that the Ajatasthratu story – the content of the right panel of the tripartite composition – is depicted here according to Shandao’s commentary on the sutra. Shandao interpreted Ajatasthratu’s evil conduct as a supreme example of “contradictory causation” (niyuan) that would eventually lead to good. (Thus if King Bimbisara had not slain a rishi, the rishi would not have been reborn as Ajatasthratu; and if the rishi had not been born as Ajatasthratu, Ajatasthratu would not have imprisoned his father; and if he had not imprisoned his father, his mother could not have visited him in prison and so on, leading finally to the point at which Ajatasthratu’s crime leads the queen to call upon Buddha, and hence to her reception of the “sixteen visions”.)

The painted Ajatasthratu story, therefore, both explains human misconduct and offers hope: sin will lead to good if human beings follow Queen Vaidehi’s example. The continuing narrative, now starting from the top of the other side panel, represents the various stages of Vaidehi’s spiritual cultivation (figure 16). Following Shakyamuni’s secret instruction of the “sixteen meditations”, she meditates on the setting sun, on floating water, and then on various components of the Western Paradise. In this process, she gradually discovers the splendidous of the Buddha Land, until Amitayus and all his golden host appear before her eyes. This narrative thus finally leads back to the central composition, which presents the result of the meditation practised by the queen or any faithful worshipper: with one’s own eyes one beholds Amitayus and his wonderland. The sequential reading from the meditation scenes to the Amitayus paradise is supported by an additional fact: Vaidehi’s final visions, that of the rebirth itself, are not illustrated among the side-scenes but are shown in paradise.
centralization is not only caused by the Buddha’s focal position, extraordinary size, and solemnity, but is also reinforced by the architectural setting which, employing a linear perspective system, guides the viewer’s gaze toward the Buddha.

In contrast, the two side-scenes depict multiple events, which, instead of representing paradise, help the worshipper to comprehend the Visualization Sutra and to learn the visualization techniques. Based on Shunsho’s (1255–1335) explanation of the famous Taima Mandara, Arthur Waley has proposed that the Ajatasatru story – the content of the right panel of the tripartite composition – is depicted here according to Shandao’s commentary on the sutra. Shandao interpreted Ajatasatru’s evil conduct as a supreme example of “contradictory causation” (niyuan) that would eventually lead to good. (Thus if King Bimbisara had not slain a rishi, the rishi would not have been re-born as Ajatasatru; and if the rishi had not been born as Ajatasatru, Ajatasatru would not have imprisoned his father; and if he had not imprisoned his father, his mother could not have visited him in prison and so on, leading finally to the point at which Ajatasatru’s crime leads the queen to call upon Buddha, and hence to her receiving the “sixteen visions”.)

The painted Ajatasatru story, therefore, both human misconduct and offers hope: sin will lead to a human being’s following Queen Vaidehi’s example. The continuing narrative, now starting from the top of the side panel, represents the various stages of Vaidehi’s spiritual cultivation (figure 16). Following Shakyan’s secret instruction of the “sixteen meditations”, she meditates on the setting sun, on floating water, and various components of the Western Paradise. In the process, she gradually discovers the splendours of the Buddha Land, until Amitayus and all his golden horses appear before her eyes. This narrative thus finally back to the central composition, which presents the meditation practised by the queen or any faithful worshipper: with one’s own eyes one beholds Amitayus and his wonderland. The sequential reading of the meditation scenes to the Amitayus paradise is supported by an additional fact: Vaidehi’s final visions, that of the paradise itself, are not illustrated among the side-scenes but shown in paradise.

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14 Three groups of reborn souls. Detail of the Western Paradise painting in Dunhuang cave 220. Drawing by Ning Qiang.

15 Visualization of the Amitayurdhiyana Sutra (Amitayus’s Western Paradise). Mural in cave 320 at Dunhuang, Gansu province. First half of the eighth century.
Privatizing Paradise

Returning to the paradise painting in Dunhuang cave 220 (see figure 13), we find that reborn souls are depicted in this work in three forms and locations. The first group, as mentioned earlier, consists of nine children residing in lotus buds (see figure 14). The second group includes children who have just emerged from the buds, playing in the pond and enjoying their new life in paradise. The third group are two small Bodhisattvas: kneeling on lotus pedestals in front of Avalokiteshvara and Mahasthamaprapta, they have now joined the Buddha’s assembly in the Western Pure Land. Understood against Buddhist texts, these three groups of images may represent the “three bei (generations) of the nine degrees of rebirth”, a concept stated in Buddhist scriptures including the Visualization Sutra. Viewed in the context of the cave, however, such groupings had a more specific meaning and embodied the private desire of a specific family.

From remaining inscriptions and donor’s portraits in cave 220, we know that this cave was constructed by the Zhai family at Dunhuang in 642. Its identity as a “family chapel” is clinched by the three large characters, Zhai jia ku (the Zhai family cave), at the exact centre of the back wall, right below the central Buddha statue and facing anyone who entered the cave. Textual and archaeological evidence further reveals that large religious services, such as the “lamp-lighting” ritual on the Buddha’s birthday (on the eighth day of the fourth month of the Chinese lunar calendar), were staged here, and that this cave was in continuous use by the family over a long period.24 The date of its construction links the cave to an important event in the Dunhuang area. Two years before the cave’s completion, in 640, the Tang government army finally conquered the kingdom of Gaochang (Karakhooja) through a series of violent battles. Dunhuang, then the headquarters of the Tang troops, supplied human and material resources for the military operation. Some members of the Zhai family served in the government army; it is not inconceivable that some of them died or were wounded in battle. This historical background explains why the family decided to establish a Buddhist cave at this moment and why it chose to paint a large “Healing Ritual” of the Bhaishajyaguru (Medicine Buddha) on the cave’s north wall.25

Similar concerns may have underlain the creation of the Western Paradise painting on the opposite south wall: it most likely commemorated those family members who died in the war. On a more general level, the mural also symbolized the family’s desire for unity in the Buddha Land: the nine lotus buds grow from the same root; and the three groups of reborn souls (see figure 14) symbolize the rebirth of all past, present, and future family members in the paradise depicted in the cave. The painting therefore resumed the sociological function of an immortal paradise depicted in a Han tomb or funerary shrine (see figures 6–8), which was likewise dedicated to departed ancestors and provided them with a most wonderful place to be reborn. Indeed, although differing in iconography, the images of the Buddhist Western Pure Land and the pre-Buddhist immortal paradise both supported a family-oriented society, whose needs for continuation through ancestral
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worship had to transcend the different religious traditions to which these images originally belonged.

Notes
1. Wu Hung is the author of the first part of this paper; Ning Qiang is the primary author of the second part.
2. Such diverse meanings of “paradise” have provided a basis for different authors to define and discuss paradise images. For example, in her book, Paradise As a Garden, George Braziller (New York 1979), Elizabeth B. Moyrihan defines a paradise as a “walled garden” according to the word’s etymology. Other writers focus on Christian iconography.
3. See Wu Hung, “Myths and Legends in Han Funerary Art: Their Pictorial Structure and Symbolic Meanings as Reflected in Carvings on Sichuan Sarcophagi”, in L. Lim, ed., Stories from China’s Past, Chinese Cultural Center (San Francisco 1987), pp. 72-81, especially, pp. 75-76.
4. Two such shamanistic prayers, “Zhaohun” (Summoning the Soul) and “Dazhao” (The Great Summons), have survived. See David Hawkes, tr., The Songs of the South, Penguin Books (New York 1985), pp. 219-38.
6. For a full discussion, see Wu Hung, “A Sanpan Shan Charit Ornament and the Xiangrui Design in Western Han Art”, Archives of Asian Art XXXVII, pp. 38-59, especially, pp. 46-48.
9. Ibid.
10. For a detailed discussion of the myths of the Queen Mother of the West and Mt Kunlun, see ibid., pp. 108-41.
15. In some of these pictures the Buddha preaches in front of a pond which, however, cannot be taken as a definite feature of Sukhavati.
17. It has been suggested that a stele from the Wanfosi site in Chengdu originally bore a scene of the Western Paradise on its back. But the surviving images, including a diagonal bridge over a pond, are too fragmentary to support this argument.
18. For a comprehensive discussion of these early Pure Land images, see Dorothy Wong, “Chinese Buddhist Steles of the Northern and Southern Dynasties (386-589):