

Chinese-Buddhist Encounter: Synthesis of Fuxi-Nüwa and *Cintamani* in Early Medieval Chinese Art*

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Abstract

The standard pictorial formula of Fuxi and Nüwa, a pair of indigenous Chinese deities, started to absorb new motifs from Buddhist art during the early medieval period when Buddhism became more prominent in China. In this paper, I focus on the juxtaposition of Fuxi-Nüwa and *cintamani*, a magic Buddhist jewel, depicted on the ceiling of the corridor in the tomb of Lady Poduoluo, Pingcheng, Shanxi (435 CE). Through a detailed visual analysis, I explain the multiple meanings embedded in the combination of the Chinese mythological figures with the Buddhist symbol in the funerary space, thus challenging the previous studies that understand *cintamani* only as a substitute for the sun and moon. This paper furthers the discussion on the hybrid image by investigating the mural painting on the ceiling of Mogao Cave 285 in Dunhuang. Despite their different spatial and temporal contexts, both the tomb of Lady Poduoluo and Mogao Cave 285 present a similar pictorial formula, featuring the hybridization of *cintamani* and the Fuxi-Nüwa pair. This phenomenon invites us to explore the transmission of such motifs. I, therefore, situate the production of the syncretic scheme of Fuxi-Nüwa with *cintamani* within a broader historical context and examine the artistic exchange between Pingcheng and Dunhuang by tracing the movements of images, artisans, and patrons in early medieval China.

Keywords: Fuxi-Nüwa, *cintamani*, mural painting, hybridity, cultural exchange

Kitajsko-budistično srečanje: sinteza Fuxija in Nüwe s kamnom *cintamani* v zgodnji kitajski srednjeveški umetnosti

Izvleček

Standardna slikovna formula upodobitve Fuxija in Nüwe, dveh kitajskih avtohtonih božanstev, je začela vsrkavati nove motive iz budistične umetnosti v obdobju Wei Jin

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Nanbei, ko je budizem postal bolj prepoznaven na Kitajskem. V pričujočem prispevku se osredotočam na jukstapozicijo Fuxija in Nüwe z magičnim budističnim draguljem – kamnom *cintamani*, naslikanima na stropu hodnika v grobnici Gospe Poduoluo v mestu Pingcheng v provinci Shanxi (iz leta 435). S pomočjo podrobne vizualne analize razložim večpomenskost upodobitve, ki se odraža v kombinaciji kitajskih mitoloških figur z budističnim simbolom v kontekstu grobnega prostora, pri čemer postavljam pod vprašaj pretekle študije, ki interpretirajo *cintamani* kot zamenjavo za sonce in luno. V nadaljevanju se diskusija razširi na raziskovanje upodobitve na stropu budistične jame Mogao št. 285 v kraju Dunhuang. Čeprav gre za različne prostorske in časovne kontekste, tako grobnica Gospe Poduoluo kot budistična jama Mogao št. 285 prikazujeta podobno slikovno upodobitev, ki se kaže skozi hibridizacijo Fuxija in Nüwe ter kamna *cintamani*. Ta pojav nas nadalje vodi v raziskovanje prenosa tovrstnih motivov, pri čemer umestim produkcijo sinkretične sheme Fuxija in Nüwe s kamnom *cintamani* v okvir širšega zgodovinskega konteksta in na osnovi prenosa motivov in migracije obrtnikov ter mecenov raziskujem umetniške izmenjave med krajema Pingcheng in Dunhuang v obdobju Wei Jin Nanbei.

Ključne besede: Fuxi in Nüwa, kamen *cintamani*, stensko slikarstvo, hibridnost, kulturna izmenjava

As Buddhism gradually became established in China, it encountered and engaged with local beliefs in various ways during the early medieval period. This process impacted concepts of the afterlife and inspired novel visual vocabularies in Chinese art. In this paper, I focus on the hybrid image of Fuxi-Nüwa 伏羲女媧, a pair of Chinese indigenous deities, and *cintamani* 摩尼寶珠, a magical Buddhist jewel. The synthesis of Fuxi-Nüwa and *cintamani* is a new design in mural paintings produced in the fifth and sixth centuries. Through a contextualized analysis of the hybrid image in its architectural space and historical background, I hope to shed light on encounters and interactions between Buddhism and local Chinese beliefs during the early medieval period.

The example that will be highlighted in this article is from the tomb of Lady Poduoluo 破多羅 in Pingcheng 平城, modern-day Datong 大同 in Shanxi Province. Dated to 435 CE, the tomb of Lady Poduoluo offers the earliest visual evidence to date regarding the synthesis of *cintamani* and Fuxi-Nüwa. Situating *cintamani* in the funerary space, this paper explores how the Buddhist symbol was incorporated into a myriad of Chinese iconographies. I argue that the juxtaposition of Fuxi-Nüwa with *cintamani* embodies multiple layers of meaning and fulfils different functions in the burial context, including the pursuit of immortality, rebirth after death, protection of the funerary space, and signifying the brightness of Heaven.

This paper extends the discussion focused on tombs to imagery found in Buddhist cave temples by investigating the mural painting on the ceiling of Mogao Cave

285 (538 CE). Similar to the Poduoluo mural, Mogao Cave 285 presents the juxtaposition of Fuxi-Nüwa with *cintamani*. Through a comparative reading of the hybridization of the image of *cintamani* with the depiction of Fuxi-Nüwa in these two separate spatial and temporal contexts, I elucidate the second dimension of the Chinese-Buddhist encounter—the fluidity of the boundary between the funerary and Buddhist art. Lastly, I trace the movement of the *cintamani* motif along with the movement of people, in the hope of explaining how the innovative design of Fuxi-Nüwa with *cintamani* migrated from Pingcheng to Dunhuang.

Fuxi-Nüwa and *Cintamani* in the Tomb of Lady Poduoluo

The tomb of Lady Poduoluo is located in the eastern suburb of the city of Datong, a neighbourhood that has a concentration of Northern Wei burials.¹ Inscriptions written on fragments of a lacquered coffin retrieved from the grave help archaeologists to date this tomb to 435 CE. This dating makes the tomb of Lady Poduoluo the earliest mural tomb of the Northern Wei period (386–534 CE) excavated thus far (Datongshi kaogu yanjiusuo 2006, 4–24). The inscription identifies the tomb occupant as “Lady Poduoluo” *Poduoluo taifuren* 破多羅太夫人.² Lady Poduoluo, as indicated by her family name, was from the Poduoluo tribe, a Xianbei 鮮卑 group centred in the county of Gaoping 高平 near modern-day Guyuan 固原, Ningxia. After the Northern Wei annexed this region, the Poduoluo tribe was relocated to Pingcheng in the early fifth century. The inscription also mentions prestigious positions held by her son at the Northern Wei court, suggesting Lady Poduoluo was a Xianbei aristocratic woman. Some scholars even speculated that Lady Poduoluo was a kinswoman of the tribe leader Muiyu 木易於 (Yin 2006, 344–57).

The tomb of Lady Poduoluo is a single chamber brick tomb covered with mural paintings on the four walls, the ceiling, and the corridor (Fig. 1).³ The rear wall of the tomb chamber is reserved for the most significant image of the tomb—highly formalized portraits of Lady Poduoluo and her husband. Centred on the deceased’s portrait, murals at the lower level of the burial chamber depict scenes of

1 The tomb of Lady Poduoluo was excavated in 2005 and details of the tomb were published in 2006, see Datong shi kaogu yanjiusuo (2006). For the distribution of Northern Wei burials in Datong, see Cao (2016).

2 The inscription was first published in the archaeological report, see Datong shi kaogu yanjiusuo (2006). Zhao Ruimin and Liu Junxi analyzed the inscription in detail, see Zhao and Liu (2006). Yin Xian and Lin Sheng-chih also offered insightful readings of the inscription, see Yin (2006) and Lin (2012).

3 For a study of mural paintings in Lady Poduoluo’s tomb, see Seo (2011) and Lin (2012).

various topics, including food preparation, banquets, and ceremonial processions. The upper part of the chamber wall is occupied by a row of mythological animals. Across from the rear wall presenting the couple's portrait is the corridor leading to the tomb entrance. The hybrid image of Fuxi-Nüwa together with *cintamani* (Fig. 2), the focus of this article, is painted on the ceiling of the corridor.

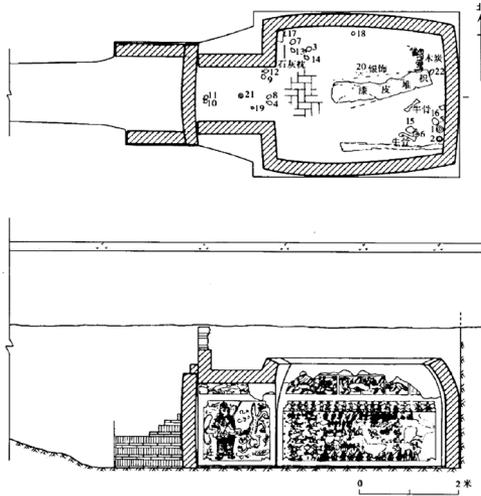


Figure 1: Plan and section view of the tomb of Lady Poduoluo, Datong, Shanxi (After *Datong shi kaogu yanjiusuo* 2006, fig. 3).



Figure 2: Fuxi-Nüwa with *cintamani*, ceiling of the corridor, tomb of Lady Poduoluo, Datong, Shanxi (After *Datong shi kaogu yanjiusuo* 2006, fig. 46).

In the tomb of Lady Poduoluo, Fuxi and Nüwa are represented as half-human and half-snake. Both have square faces and wear floral headdresses. They each join

hands, which are concealed in their sleeves. Their human bodies are facing toward each other, while their serpentine tails, covered with scales, are twisted into three circles. The lower left part of their intertwined tails was already deteriorated upon excavation. Ink was used to outline their human bodies and snake tails, the folds of clothes, and scales on the tails; red pigment was employed to accentuate the contour of the two mythological figures and add more volume to the flat surface.

The way in which Fuxi and Nüwa are depicted in the tomb of Lady Poduoluo follows the iconography of the couple deity that had been codified during the Han dynasty. *Liezi* 列子, a text composed no later than the beginning of the first century CE, mentions that Fuxi and Nüwa feature “a snake body and a human face, an ox head and a tiger nose. [They] have a non-human form, but possess the virtue of the Great Divine” (Zhang 1992, 27). Accordingly, in Han pictorial art, Fuxi and Nüwa are usually represented as a pair featuring a human body and a serpentine tail. One of the best-known examples is the mural painting from the Bu Qianqiu 卜千秋 tomb in Luoyang, Henan (Luoyang bowuguan 1977, 1–12). The two deities occupy two ends of the profusely decorated ridge of the tomb chamber: Fuxi stands next to a disk encircling a three-leg bird, which signifies the sun; Nüwa is next to a circle with a toad and a tree, referring to the moon (Fig. 3). A more common composition of Fuxi-Nüwa presents the couple with intertwined tails. This type of representation is found on carvings inside the Wu Liang Shrine (Fig. 4) (Wu 1989, 245–48). Fuxi on the right is holding a carpenter’s square in his hand, indicating his power of creating the order of the human world. A little boy is situated between Fuxi and Nüwa, denoting their symbolism of fertility.



Figure 3: Fuxi and Nüwa, tomb of Bu Qianqiu, Luoyang, Henan
(After Luoyang bowuguan 1977, plate 1).



Figure 4: Fuxi-Nüwa, Wu Liang Shrine, Jiexiang, Shandong (After Wu 1989, fig. 109a).

While the representation of Fuxi and Nüwa in the tomb of Lady Poduoluo inherits the classical human-body-and-serpent-tail form, common attributes of the couple deity during the Han dynasty—the square, the sun, and the moon—are not included in the fifth-century depiction of Fuxi and Nüwa.⁴ Instead, the tomb of Lady Poduoluo incorporates *cintamani*, a Buddhist jewel, into the established pictorial paradigm of the Chinese deities. The Sanskrit word *Cintāmaṇi* is composed of two parts *cintā* and *maṇi*—meaning thought and jewel, respectively (Monier-Williams 1979, 398, 774). It refers to a gem believed to grant all the desires of its possessor.

The *cintamani* in the tomb of Lady Poduoluo is considered to be the first time in the history of Chinese art that the Buddhist jewel entered into the mortuary space. It is also the first time that the canonical composition of Fuxi and Nüwa, a pair of indigenous Chinese deities, was juxtaposed with a Buddhist element. Prior to the fifth century, *cintamani* was mostly depicted in Buddhist cave temples, such as the Kizil 克孜爾 Caves in Xinjiang (Beijing daxue kaogu xuexi 1997, 84–85), Bingling-si 炳靈寺 (Dong 1986, 148–58), and Jinta-si 金塔寺 (Gansu sheng wenwu kaogu yanjiusuo 1987, 3–6) in the Hexi 河西 Corridor. An example from the funerary context that predates the Poduoluo *cintamani* is the Northern Liang votive stupa dedicated by Gao Shanmu 高善穆 in 428 CE to his deceased parents and discovered near Dunhuang 敦煌 (Wang 1977, 179–88). Appearing on the bottom register of the votive stupa, the *cintamani* is held by a haloed figure

4 It is to be noted that during the Wei-Jin period, the Fuxi-Nüwa image was almost absent in China proper, but appeared in the Hexi Corridor. The present paper emphasizes on comparing and contrasting the Fuxi-Nüwa images of the Han dynasty and those of the Northern Wei. The iconographical development of Fuxi-Nüwa images during the transitional period and how it relates to the Northern Wei examples is worthy of further research.

coupled with one of the Eight Trigrams, thus indicating a convergence of Buddhist practice, filial piety, and Daoism (Yin 2000; Abe 2002).

The significance of the combination of Fuxi-Nüwa with *cintamani* in the tomb of Lady Poduoluo is, therefore, worthy of special attention. Current scholarship usually understands *cintamani* as a substitution for the sun and moon, which often appear together with Fuxi-Nüwa in Han Dynasty art, and thus signifying the brightness of Heaven (Lin 2008; Seo 2011). This reading, albeit reasonable, is far from satisfying. First and foremost, this interpretation is based on the conventional association of Fuxi and Nüwa with the sun and moon, which is only one of many variations of the Fuxi-Nüwa iconography. A simplified understanding of Fuxi and Nüwa hinders us from a multi-faceted reading of its alignment with the Buddhist jewel. Secondly, most scholars fail to pay enough attention to the form of *cintamani* itself, which, as I will demonstrate later, is hybridized with the indigenous Chinese magic fungus and lotus flower. Lastly, the current study barely discusses the context of this image as situated both in the corridor and within the tomb. The combination of *cintamani* with Fuxi-Nüwa is more than a representation of Heaven, as previous studies have suggested; rather, it is embedded with multiple layers of meaning.

In what follows, I will explore the possible connotations of the hybrid images and explain how its use fits into the mortuary context. To do so, I will start with the form of *cintamani* to elucidate the possible connotations of the Buddhist jewel to explain how it is blended into the pair of Fuxi and Nüwa. This paper further contextualizes the hybrid image in the space of the corridor as well as within the tomb to understand its symbolic meaning in the overall pictorial programme. Lastly, I will shift my focus from the tomb of Poduoluo to Mogao Cave 285 in Dunhuang, which also contains a syncretic design of Fuxi-Nüwa and *cintamani*. In turning to Dunhuang, I address the transmission of the motif across the boundary between funerary and religious art, as well as show the artistic exchanges that existed between the Northern Wei capital Pingcheng and the Hexi Corridor.

Four Meanings of the Hybrid Image

To better understand how and why Fuxi-Nüwa and *cintamani* were combined in the funerary space, we first need to investigate the form of the Buddhist jewel. The *cintamani* depicted in the Poduoluo tomb is composed of three parts: a hexagonal core, flames that form the silhouette of an almond, and an S-shaped vegetal stem with a trifurcated end (Fig. 5). Buddhist sutras barely mention the morphology of *cintamani*. The depiction of *cintamani* as a hexagonal jewel surrounded by flames

and growing from a stem is thus more of an artistic creation than a visual translation of the scriptural texts. However, the representation of the *cintamani* in the tomb of Lady Poduoluo was not an entirely new invention; rather, it represents a synthesis of pictorial elements from earlier artistic traditions. The artists who executed the Poduoluo tomb mural deliberately appropriated visual language from the Han Dynasty and the Hexi Corridor to create a Buddhist symbol that best facilitated the deceased's goal for the afterlife.



Figure 5: *Cintamani*, tomb of Lady Poduoluo, Datong, Shanxi
(After Datong shi kaogu yanjiusuo 2006, fig. 46).

The design of the Poduoluo *cintamani* as a diamond core surrounded by an almond-shaped flame can be traced back to Jinta-si near Zhangye 張掖, Gansu. In the Western Cave of Jinta-si, the Buddhist jewel occupies the prestigious position at the top of the niche hosting the main religious icon on the central pillar. The Jinta-si *cintamani* is sculpted into a hexagonal core emanating lights and flames (Fig. 6). The core is painted in blue; an “X” in the centre divides the core into four sections and accentuates the angularity of the diamond core. The curving lines of the flames create a soft contour, contrasting with the core's sharpness. The precise dating of Jinta-si is still under debate, but it is generally believed that both the eastern and the western caves of Jinta-si were first constructed during the Northern Liang period (397–439 CE), and they may have been an imperial project sponsored by the Juqu 沮渠 family, considering the close proximity of these cave temples to the lineage hometown of the Northern Liang royal clan (Gansu sheng wenwu kaogu yanjiusuo 1987, 20). Inheriting the basic form of the *cintamani* in Jinta-si, the Poduoluo *cintamani* keeps the

diamond core and the almond-shaped flame; however, the overall shape of the Buddhist jewel has become slender and elongated.



Figure 6: *Cintamani, Jinta-si, Zhangye, Gansu (Photo by author).*

The most significant change the Poduoluo *cintamani* makes to its predecessor is the adding of an S-shaped stem with a trifurcated end. This S-shaped stem resembles the stem of *lingzhi* 靈芝 or *zhicao* 芝草, a magic fungus or a magic herb popular during the Han Dynasty. *Lingzhi* was often associated with the immortal world: not only do texts abound with records of *lingzhi*'s magical power to elongate life, visual evidence also reveals a close association of the magic fungus with immortality (Wang 2012, 84–87). For example, a pictorial brick from Xinfan 新繁, Sichuan depicts a hare holding a plant and attending to the Queen Mother of the West, the supreme goddess of the immortal world (Fig. 7) (Lim 1987, 34). The plant held by the hare bears three mushroom-shaped caps. A description of *zhicao* in *Lunheng* 論衡, an encyclopaedic collection of beliefs about Chinese religion and folklore, mentions that the herb “carries three leaves on one stem,” lending support to the reading of the plant in the Xinfan brick as *zhichao* (Wang 2017, 1214). The lower part of the Poduoluo *cintamani* is similar to the curving stem and trifurcated ends of the magic fungus on the Han pictorial brick. Most likely, the artist of the Poduoluo tomb is making a reference to the magic herb in depicting the Buddhist jewel in such a manner.



Figure 7: A hare holding the magic fungus, pictorial brick, Xinfan, Sichuan (After Lim 1987, 34).

The conflation of the *cintamani* and the magic fungus is related to the supernatural power they share. People of the Han Dynasty believed that the magic fungus could assist them in obtaining longevity and achieving immortality. *Lunheng*, composed by Wang Chong 王充, states: “*Zhicao* can extend life; it is what the immortals eat” (Wang 2017, 844, 1214). Ge Hong 葛洪, in his alchemical writing, *Baopuzi* 抱朴子, categorized various kinds of fungi and elaborated on their different efficacies with regard to extending life (Ge 1985, 186–97). As for *cintamani*, Buddhist texts describe its ability to cure all kinds of diseases. The most detailed account can be found in the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-sāstra* (*Commentary on the Great Perfection of Wisdom* 大智度論), translated and introduced into China by Kumārajīva in the early fifth century. This text claims that *cintamani* can immediately cure people from diseases resulting from both cold and heat, from the poison of vipers, and from pain afflicting eyes and skin (T1509.25.0477a21–b03). The incredible functions of *cintamani* described in Buddhist texts can be traced to Vedic scriptures, which had already elaborated on the magical power of the *mani* jewel in the first millennium BCE. Nagara Gyoko’s study of *mani* in Vedic texts notes that the Atharvaveda specified that *mani* can help prolong life (Nagara 1986, 1–18). Adding a vegetal stem that recalls the magic fungus helps to communicate the magic power of the Buddhist jewel—especially for those who were not familiar with *cintamani*, which was a newly introduced religious symbol. Interpreting *cintamani* as a hybrid with the magic fungus indicates the good wish to heal the deceased and to prolong life. Moreover, conflating the two objects together—the magic fungus from the indigenous Chinese tradition and *cintamani* from the Buddhist tradition—also reinforces the efficacy of the hybrid jewel.

This first reading of *cintamani* as a synthesis with the magic fungus helps explain its juxtaposition of Fuxi-Nüwa. An established design during Eastern Han, the combination of Fuxi-Nüwa and the magic fungus together allude to longevity and immortality—the ultimate goals the Han Chinese would pursue in the afterlife. On a pictorial stone from Nanyang 南陽, the pair of deities join their hands together and hold a magic fungus between them (Fig. 8) (Xu 2012, 268). The synthesis of *cintamani* with Fuxi-Nüwa in the tomb of Poduoluo is a continuation of this composition, but substitutes the magic fungus with a syncretistic design of the *cintamani*. The new form of *cintamani* as a hybrid of the flaming jewel and a vegetal stem transforms the Buddhist jewel into a symbol that is more understandable and approachable for the Chinese audience. Moreover, combining the hybrid *cintamani* with Fuxi-Nüwa further localizes the Buddhist icon within the Chinese conception of the afterlife.



Figure 8: Fuxi and Nüwa holding the magic fungus, rubbing of the pictorial stone, Nanyang, Henan (After Xu 2012, fig. 1029).

However, evoking the magic fungus is not the only reference the vegetal stem could make. The second interpretation of the *cintamani* concerns the Buddhist idea of the afterlife. The S-shaped stem of the *cintamani* also resembles that of a lotus flower, an embodiment of “rebirth by transformation” in the Buddha land. It is believed that once the deceased is reborn in the Buddha land, he or she can escape the endless cycle of death and birth, thus enjoying an eternity of joy. The

idea of rebirth by transformation is usually translated as a small figure emerging from a lotus flower in pictorial art. In Yungang Cave 18, such an image is carved on the southern wall (Fig. 9) (Yoshimura 1983, 38–41). The long curving stem attached to the two lotus seats is similar to that of the Poduoluo *cintamani*. The conflation between lotus and *cintamani* became more apparent in the sixth century around the Luoyang area. Instead of using a stem to hint at the lotus flower, the image of *cintamani* produced in Luoyang makes a more direct reference to the lotus by introducing lotus petals to support the flaming jewel (Fig. 10). I will return to changes in *cintamani*'s iconography in Luoyang and explain how this is connected with the *cintamani* images produced in the Mogao Caves in the next section of the paper.



Figure 9: Rebirth from lotus flower, Yungang Cave 18, Datong, Shanxi
(After Yoshimura 1983, fig. 27B).



Figure 10: *Cintamani* synthesized with lotus flower, rubbing of the cover of Gou Jing' epitaph
(After Shi 1998, fig. 6).

Reading *cintamani* as a hybridity with the lotus, the symbol of rebirth, is compatible with the meaning of Fuxi and Nüwa, who are first and foremost creation gods. Based on Chinese mythology, Fuxi and Nüwa were initially independent of each

other: Fuxi, the male god, is associated with the formation of human civilization; Nüwa, the female deity, is responsible for the creation of the natural world (Li 2011, 140–61). During the Han Dynasty they were coupled as a unit, featuring separate human bodies with serpentine tails twisted together. This new way of pairing transforms the union of Fuxi and Nüwa into a symbol of fertility and life as well as an expression of the embodiment of the two cosmic forces, *yin* and *yang* (Tseng 2011, 290–95). In the above-mentioned example of Fuxi-Nüwa in the Wu Liang Shrine, a baby appears between the deities, signifying a new life created by the couple. In the Poduoluo tomb, the *cintamani*, positioned in the centre just above the union of Fuxi and Nüwa—the same position as the newborn baby in the Wu Liang Shrine—can be interpreted as the creation of this couple.

Furthermore, the overall pictorial programme in the tomb of Lady Poduoluo is gender-divided, thus reinforcing the notion of *yin-yang* and the creation of life. Centred on the portraiture of Lady Poduoluo and her husband, a group of maids are depicted on the lady's side and male servants on the husband's. Gender differentiation continues to the upper register of the northern and southern walls. The northern wall that is closer to Lady Poduoluo has a row of women featuring square faces, flaring dresses, and flying ribbons around their bodies. Near the husband, the upper register of the southern wall depicts a row of male servants walking in procession. The separation of men and women finally merges on the ceiling of the corridor, which presents the union of Fuxi and Nüwa, symbolizing the combined cosmic forces of *yin* and *yang*. Situated between the couple, the *cintamani* hybridized with the lotus flower indicates the creation of a new life. The joining of Fuxi-Nüwa on the corridor ceiling appears along the axis of the tomb and echoes the portraits of the Poduoluo couple on the rear wall. Thus, in this second reading, the combination of *cintamani* and Fuxi-Nüwa signifies the source of life.

Interpretations of *cintamani* as a magic fungus and as a lotus flower point to different concepts of the afterlife: the magic fungus represents the pursuit of longevity and obtaining immortality in the immortal world; the lotus flower is associated with rebirth in the Buddha land. However, the two concepts do not contradict each other; rather, they provide options in the afterlife. The two different ways to deal with death maximize positive outcomes for the tomb occupant. The pragmatic design of *cintamani* combined with the magic fungus and the lotus flower allows the tomb occupant to choose what best suits him or her. Chinese and Buddhist ideas about death indeed merged as expressed in the hybrid symbolism of *cintamani* with both the magic fungus and lotus flower.

The third reading regarding the combination of *cintamani* with Fuxi-Nüwa can be sought out in the context of the corridor, a transitional space between the tomb

entrance and the burial chamber. The corridor attached to the burial chamber is 1.6m long and 1.4m wide; it is topped by an arched roof 1.8m above the ground. On the western end of the corridor, a brick wall is built to conceal the burial space, separating the tomb chamber and the corridor from the sloping passageway of more than 10m long. Because the corridor demarcates and announces the beginning of the sacred mortuary sphere, it warrants special security concerns.

Murals that cover the corridor signify the protective function of this transitional space. On each of the sidewalls of the corridor there is a guardian figure accompanied by a furious-looking hybrid creature. The warrior-like guardians are fully armed. They both have big eyes, protruding noses, and pointed jaws. The guardian on the northern side, holding a shield in the right hand and a sword in the left, faces the chamber. His counterpart on the southern side faces the entrance. Grasping a sword in one hand with his other hand down at his side, this figure is in a posture that decisively shuts out anyone approaching the funerary space. The hybrid monsters—an animal body with a long tail and a human face—also create a formidable atmosphere. Such monstrous creatures are found in several other Northern Wei tombs and might be the predecessors of tomb guardians *zhenmushou* 鎮墓獸 popular in Tang tombs (Dien 1991, 48–49; Lin 2012, 22–25). Two more door guardians are depicted inside the chamber on the western wall flanking the entrance. Each of door guardians holds a spear and a shield, fulfilling their duty to protect the tomb.

Along with the guardian figures and creatures, Fuxi-Nüwa with *cintamani* adds to the protective force of the corridor complex. Fuxi and Nüwa in the Poduoluo tomb have their own hands joined together and concealed in wide sleeves, a posture that is usually associated with door attendants showing respect. In the Han Dynasty, the mythological couple had already served as protectors (Guo 2007, 132–34). Take the Tomb no. 11 at Dabaodang 大保當, Shenmu 神木 for example: Fuxi and Nüwa stand firmly on two sides of the stone door, guarding the entrance to the funerary space (Fig. 11) (Shaanxisheng kaogu yanjiusuo 2001). Dragons and tigers, two of the directional animals, are aligned with Fuxi-Nüwa flanking the gateway of the Dabaodang tomb. The composition of a slender animal next to Fuxi-Nüwa is also visible in Lady Poduoluo's tomb. Even though the right side of the ceiling is partly damaged, it is safe to imagine that two directional animals would have stood on the outer side of Fuxi and Nüwa, reinforcing their protective force. The *cintamani* also plays a role in protecting the tomb. In his study of the *mani* jewel, Nagara points out that the *mani* had an apotropaic meaning and functioned as a talisman (Nagara 1986, 6). Situated amid images bearing protective meanings, the hybrid image of Fuxi-Nüwa and *cintamani* contributes its own combined effort to guard the tomb.

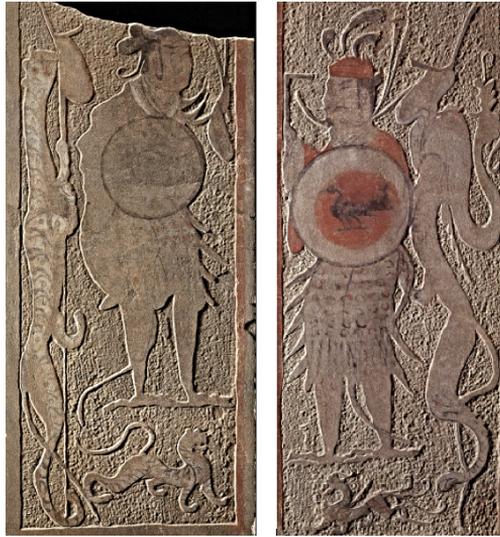


Figure 11: Fuxi and Nüwa with directional animals, Tomb no. 11 at Dabaodang, Shenmu, Shanxi (After Shaanxi sheng kaogu yanjiusuo 2000, plates 60 and 66).

Lastly, I return to the traditional reading of *cintamani* as a substitution for the sun and moon signifying the luminous Heaven. As previous studies suggest, the appearance of *cintamani* situated between Fuxi and Nüwa replaced the celestial bodies in the Poduoluo tomb. Accounts in Buddhist scriptures lend support to this hypothesis. The *Avatamsaka Sūtra* (*Flower Garland Sutra* 華嚴經) praises the fluorescence of *cintamani* that lights up the ten directions and all heavenly halls (T0278.09.0573c17–c22). Here, I hope to add one more piece of evidence by situating the depiction of *cintamani* and Fuxi-Nüwa in the overall pictorial program.

The ceiling of the corridor, where the Buddhist jewel is depicted, is a continuation of the upper register of mural paintings in the main chamber, which belongs to the heavenly realm. The murals in the chamber are divided into two sections: the lower part features secular scenes, such as banquets and processions; the upper part is reserved for the celestial sphere. A row of mythological animals at the bottom of the domed ceiling encircles the four sides, but only the northern wall has been preserved. Above the row of animals we would expect to find a representation of Heaven. However, this area had been destroyed before the excavation and is now lost to us. The location of Fuxi-Nüwa and *cintamani* on the ceiling is at the same level as the row of mythological animals, thus creating a continuous flow of imagery from the corridor to the chamber that denotes the otherworldly space.

To sum up, the juxtaposition of Fuxi-Nüwa with *cintamani* in the Poduoluo tomb played multiple roles within a hybrid scheme. First, *cintamani* was merged with the magic fungus and integrated into the immortal world with Fuxi-Nüwa. Second, it blended with the lotus flower to signify the creation of life and provide the hope of rebirth for the deceased. Third, the Buddhist jewel also substitutes for the sun and moon in the conventional Fuxi-Nüwa image to light up the darkness of the underground. Situated in the corridor, Fuxi-Nüwa and *cintamani* protect the mortuary space together with other guardian figures. Moreover, their position on the ceiling ensured Fuxi-Nüwa and *cintamani* as part of the heavenly sphere of the whole tomb.

From Tomb to Cave, From Pingcheng to Dunhuang

The hybrid scheme of *cintamani* together with Fuxi-Nüwa, first seen in the Poduoluo tomb in 435 CE, reappears one hundred years later in Mogao Cave 285, which is dated by two inscriptions to 538 and 539 CE (Fig. 12). Scholars working on Dunhuang usually celebrate Cave 285 for its innovative pictorial programme that synthesized various cultural traditions (Duan 1995, 11–21). Yet few have noticed the resemblance between the ceiling of Cave 285 and mural paintings in Pingcheng. It is widely accepted that Buddhism's transmission into China followed an eastbound route from Xinjiang through the Hexi Corridor and into northern China;⁵ the construction of the Yungang Grottoes 雲崗石窟 also benefited from Buddhist remains in the Hexi region as well as immigrant artisans and monks from Hexi (Soper 1958, 148–49; Jin 2002, 28–33). In what follows, I explain how the hybrid scheme of *cintamani* and Fuxi-Nüwa in Mogao Cave 285 owe credit to the artistic production in Pingcheng. Furthermore, I use this as an example to showcase the western-bound movement of visual elements that adds another dimension to the conventional eastward spread of Buddhism and Buddhist art.

To begin with, the location and composition of *cintamani* with Fuxi-Nüwa in Mogao Cave 285 resembles that in the Poduoluo tomb. As discussed earlier, the syncretic scheme of *cintamani* with Fuxi-Nüwa is located on the ceiling of the corridor in the Poduoluo tomb, constituting part of the heavenly realm. Comparably, in Mogao Cave 285, the hybrid image is depicted on the pyramid ceiling of the cave temple, which also belongs to the celestial sphere. On the eastern and

5 The southern route of the spread of Buddhism has also been extensively studied. Because Pingcheng and Dunhuang are not part of the southern route, this paper does not include the material from the south into discussion.



Figure 12: *Fuxi–Nüwa with cintamani, eastern slope of the ceiling, Mogao Cave 285, Dunhuang, Gansu (After Dunhuang yanjiuyuan 1995, fig. 143).*

southern slope of the pyramid ceiling, the Buddhist jewel appears at the centre and is flanked by figures on two sides—a composition similar to the one seen in the Poduoluo tomb.

Secondly, the form of the *cintamani* in Mogao Cave 285 was inspired by images of *cintamani* from Pingcheng. The Dunhuang *cintamani* features a hexagonal core and almond-contoured flames, characteristics that are already visible in the tomb of Lady Poduoluo. But unlike the Poduoluo *cintamani*, the flames that surround the core in the Dunhuang *cintamani* are represented in a more decorative and patterned way with busy curving lines, as opposed to the more realistic flames of the Poduoluo *cintamani*. Another element that distinguishes the Dunhuang *cintamani* from that in the Poduoluo tomb is the addition of a plate supported by lotus petals underneath the Buddhist jewel. Moreover, the single stem from which the *cintamani* grows in the Poduoluo tomb is depicted more exuberantly in Dunhuang Cave 285; hill-shaped patterns in blue and black emanate out from the stem all the way up to the flames of the Buddhist jewel.

The elements that differentiate the *cintamani* in Mogao Cave 285 from that in the Poduoluo tomb, however, are not new inventions in Dunhuang. They can still find predecessors in the Pingcheng area. The plate that supports the Buddhist jewel, which is visible in the Dunhuang mural but missing in the Poduoluo tomb, is commonly seen in the Yungang Grottoes. In Yungang Cave 9, for example, four *apsaras* hold a hexagonal *cintamani* resting on a plate on the ceiling of the corridor that links

the ante and rear chambers (Fig. 13) (Mizuno and Nagahiro 1951). The wavy lines filling in the almond-shaped flames also foresee the representation of flames of the Dunhuang *cintamani*. Moreover, both Yungang and Dunhuang examples feature the peculiar oblique lines that help join the flames and plate together.



Figure 13: *Apsaras holding cintamani, Yungang Cave 9, Datong, Shanxi*
(After Mizuno and Nagahiro 1951, plate 38B).

The influence of Pingcheng on Dunhuang is not only visible in the form of the *cintamani*. It is also evident in the representation of Fuxi-Nüwa on the eastern slope of the cave ceiling. The numinous couple in Mogao Cave 285 features common attributes of Fuxi-Nüwa, including human heads, serpent tails, their holding a carpenter's square and compass in their hands and embracing the sun and the moon to their chests.⁶ However, unlike the canonical depictions of Fuxi and Nüwa, the two deities have feet, one bending forward, the other stretching out, as if leaping forward. Their flying ribbons and leaping legs create a sense of movement, which is missing from conventional representations of Fuxi and Nüwa. Intriguingly, these characteristics find parallels on the Zhijiapu 智家堡 sarcophagus discovered in Pingcheng (Fig. 14) (Wang and Liu 2001, 40–51). Moving toward the centre, the two flying figures depicted on the interior of the Zhijiapu sarcophagus have almost identical poses to those of Fuxi and Nüwa in Mogao Cave 285. The waving banners held in their hands are blowing backward, echoing the flying ribbons of the couple deity. In this way, Fuxi and Nüwa in Mogao Cave 285 can be interpreted as a hybridization of the traditional iconography of the progenitor gods and the spirit figures with legs on the Zhijiapu sarcophagus.

6 Most scholars identify the two figures as Fuxi and Nüwa, see Duan (1995, 11–21). However, some scholars suggest they should be understood as bodhisattvas in this context, see He (1987, 1–13).

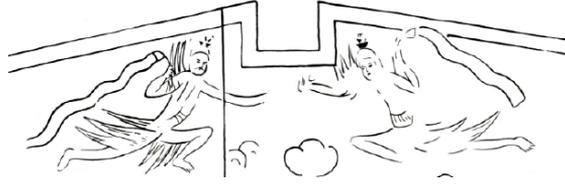


Figure 14: Spirit figures, Zhijiapu sarcophagus, Datong, Shanxi (After Wang and Liu 2001, fig. 8).

The similarities between Mogao Cave 285 and the Pingcheng materials, including the tomb of Lady Poduoluo, the Yungang Grottoes, and the Zhijiapu sarcophagus, indicate the possible transmission of artistic production from Pingcheng to Dunhuang. It is widely accepted that Buddhism, as well as Buddhist art, came from India via Xinjiang, and that it moved eastward through the Hexi Corridor and then into northern China. But once Buddhism took hold in China, it developed locally; artistic production in new Buddhist centres in northern China also started to inspire regions that had received Buddhism earlier. As Su Bai has noted, the construction of early Buddhist caves in Dunhuang was under the influence of Buddhist art from the east (Su 1996b, 214–25). Yagi Haruo's study on the chronology of the cave temples in the Hexi Corridor, which, he argues, date to the late fifth century, casts further doubt on the assumption that Hexi cave temples were constructed earlier than—and thus influenced—the Yungang Grottoes (Yagi 1997, 1–41). The material regarding *cintamani* lends further support to the eastern route, which complicated the western route and created a more dynamic network of transmission via the movement of people and images.

Yet the transmission of the *cintamani* with Fuxi-Nüwa composition from Pingcheng to Dunhuang did not follow a simple and direct route. It could take various paths, even a detour to Luoyang. As mentioned above, one aspect that differentiates the Buddhist jewel in Mogao Cave 285 from the Pingcheng examples is the floral style of the Dunhuang *cintamani*. When analysing the Poduoluo *cintamani*, I have pointed out its possible relationship with the lotus flower and that the full intermingling of the lotus motif and *cintamani* took place in Luoyang. An early attempt to combine lotus petals with *cintamani* can be found in the Guyang Cave of the Longmen Grottoes (Fig. 15), where a pedestal made of lotus petals replaced the plain plate that was popular in Yungang. The new floral paradigm of *cintamani* further developed by incorporating more lotus petals into the design of the Buddhist jewel. The highly ornate cover of Gou Jing's 苟景 epitaph is such an example (Fig. 10) (Shi 1998, 21–29). This became the standardized version of the Luoyang *cintamani*, which later exerted a great influence on the depiction of the Buddhist jewel during the Eastern Wei and the Northern Qi (Lin 2019, 146–50).

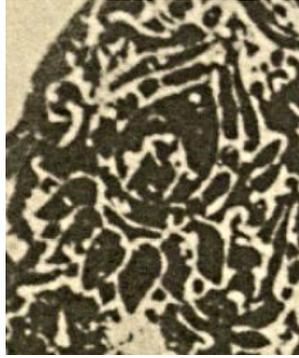


Figure 15: *Cintamani*, Guyang Cave, Longmen Grottoes, Luoyang, Henan
(After Yu and Luo 1985, fig. 24).

The Dunhuang *cintamani* combines the diamond core, a supporting plate, and lotus petals. As such, it is a synthesis of the Pingcheng and Luoyang paradigms. The convergence of characteristics from two regions of northern China in an outpost on the western fringe of the Northern Wei territory can find echoes in the movement of people. The key figure that can be traced via textual evidence is Yuan Rong 元荣, a member of the Northern Wei royal family who was appointed as the governor of the Guazhou 瓜州 in 525 CE and the possible sponsor of Mogao Cave 285 (Su 1996a, 219). Yuan Rong was probably born in Pingcheng before 488 CE.⁷ He later moved to Luoyang when Emperor Xiaowen 孝文 designated the city as the new capital in 494 CE. Having lived in both Pingcheng and Luoyang and taken office in Dunhuang, Yuan Rong and people who had a similar migration experience were capable of synthesizing different artistic traditions and creating something extraordinarily innovative. As a member of the royal house and a high-ranking official, Yuan Rong was likely to have a large entourage, including artisans, accompanying him when he relocated from Pingcheng to Luoyang and later to Dunhuang. The artisans who had access to visual knowledge of the artistic production in the two Northern Wei capitals played a significant role in mobilizing images and appropriating earlier pictorial languages to design the ceiling of Mogao Cave 285. The migration of patrons and artisans during the fifth and sixth centuries facilitated the cultural exchanges among different regions and contribute to artistic innovations.

7 The epitaph of Yuan's younger sister, Yuan Huaguang 元華光, states that she died at the age of thirty-seven in 525 CE. Therefore, the younger sister was born in 488 CE, and Yuan must be born earlier than his younger sister and thus before the relocation of the capital. For Yuan Huaguang's epitaph, see Zhao (1956, 165–66).

Conclusion

In the era of Buddhism's expansion in China, ideas as well as visual languages of death from both Buddhist and indigenous Chinese traditions coexisted. Artists were able to appropriate pictorial elements from both contexts and synthesize them. By focusing on the syncretistic design of Fuxi-Nüwa and *cintamani*, this paper explains that the hybrid motif was created by combining the Buddhist jewel, magical fungus, and lotus together. I further articulate multiple meanings embedded in the hybrid scheme, including the search for immortality, rebirth in the Buddha land, safeguarding the tomb, and illuminating the darkness.

The Chinese-Buddhist encounter is also manifested in the fluid boundary between funerary and Buddhist art. The fact that the syncretic design of Fuxi-Nüwa and *cintamani* appears in both a tomb and a cave temple indicates the boundary between the mortuary and religious sphere was not clearly divided. The fluidity between funerary and Buddhist art during the early medieval period has been subject to a number of significant studies in recent years, such as Lin Sheng-chih's work on Pingcheng materials (Lin 2019, 111–58) and Jie Shi's study on the Dengxian tomb (Shi 2014, 363–403). This research on the hybrid image of Fuxi-Nüwa with *cintamani* and its back-and-forth movement between Buddhist and funerary space adds to the current discussion. Moreover, this hybrid image migrated across time and space. The migration of the image and the evolving iconography of *cintamani* from the Jinta-si cave temple, to the Poduoluo tomb, the Yungang and Longmen Grottoes, and the Mogao Caves illustrate extensive dialogues and exchanges among the Hexi region, Pingcheng, and Luoyang throughout the troubled but innovative early medieval period in the history of China.

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