

Visualization in Daoism and Buddhism: The Introspection and the Expedition

In the modern western context, the concept visualization has been long equated to Buddhism, but this strong association ignores the visualization practice in other religions. This analysis strives to compare and identify the Buddhist visualization practices and its Daoist counterparts using images and other art materials. The display of images will serve to illustrate the Daoist or Buddhist visualization culture behind different artistic elements.

To summarize the differences between Daoist and Buddhist visualizations, I use the two keywords, introspection and expedition to denote Taoist visualization and Buddhist visualization respectively. Although Taoist visualization sometimes also engages outward journeys and likewise Buddhist visualization includes some esoteric inward practices, two nouns above are sufficient to capture the general tendencies of Daoist and Buddhist visualizations.

The first difference lies in the goal of visualization. Dunhuang Cave 254 exemplifies the goal of early Buddhist visualization. The upper parts of the cave feature a dominant display of celestial imageries and cross-legged bodhisattvas.¹ From Fig.1 we can see that the upper register of the main chamber is dedicated to a detailed and grand depiction of the musical paradise by elaborating on the heavenly musicians. The cross-legged position of the bodhisattva identifies the figure as Maitreya implies that the upper portion of the cave is related to the cult of Maitreya Bodhisattva and Tusita Heaven. This identification is consistent with Alan Sponberg's interpretation of the goal of visualization in early Chinese Buddhism: by meditation, Hsuan-Tsang aims to be reborn in the Tusita Heaven.² This goal is demonstrated by the elaborate depiction of the Tusita

Heaven in the upper parts of Cave 254 and this elaborate depiction aims to create a feast for every senses in the Tusita Heaven. Sponberg further explains that Buddhist visualization strive to elaborate on every detail of the imaginary world. This detailed imagination is also supported by the step-by-step manner of visualization from *the Sutra of Visualizing the Buddha of Infinite Longevity*.³

By contrast, Daoist visualization is also very detailed, but it serves a very different goal. Daoist visualizations always revolve around the body. From Fig.2, we can see that Daoists always visualize their body parts as body gods with intricate and distinct characteristics. By visualizing these body parts in detailed physicality is a powerful method to keep them in a good state and promoting health and longevity,⁴ so health and longevity is always the aim of practicing Daoist visualizations.

Many legends of Daoist adepts repeatedly elaborate on how an adept's body parts, especially the cinnabar remained alive after the adept died and decayed into a skeleton. Fig.2 shows us the details of the inner realm of the body in inner alchemy, and each body part is emphasized by its specific location, shape, size, color and surrounding motifs. Especially the cinnabar is depicted as a wheel with flames, supported by the tiger motif and dragon motif, symbolizing the combination of Yin and Yang. This detailed rendering is consistent with Zhou Mi's writing on the viewer's experience with this kind of body charts because it elaborates on the color and specific location of the cinnabar and more importantly, the instruction on one's visualization in relationship to these body parts. By emphasizing the details of the body parts, Daoist visualizations underscore the goal of attaining health and longevity by specifying the body parts.

The second difference goes to the relationship between the practitioner and the outside world. Daoist visualization is an introspection because a Daoist does not see the outside world as alien, confrontational and contrary, but rather a mirror of the internal body. Fig.3 shows "*The Method of Reclining in the Northern Dipper.*" The seven stars illuminate the adept's organs, and his eyes and each picture features a star linked with a specific organ. This picture demonstrates this human-cosmos relationship as comparative and relational. By absorbing the energy or Qi from one of the stars of the Northern Dipper into its corresponding organ, one can promote longevity and health. Fig.4 shows a body chart but also a landscape. The open-boundary nature of this image shows the harmonious interaction between one's body and nature. This openness is contrasted by the enclosed structure of Buddhist visualization images.

In Fig.4, Daoist visualizer transforms one's body into natural formations. The river allegorically denotes one's spine. Similarly, in Fig.5, based on the Daoist background of the painter, it is reasonable to see the sun as the cinnabar although it is a landscape painting with no explicit indication of a human body. All these images exemplify the Daoist visualization as bringing nature into one's body, so the whole process becomes an inward journey.

This harmony between one's visualized world and the outside world is contrasted by the confrontation between a Buddhist visualized world and the outside world. The Buddhist paradise is constructed outside one's body as Dunhuang caves were meant to create a meditative environment distant from the world replete with desires and other "pagan" beliefs. Buddhist visualization creates a different world than the world the practitioner is living in. Dunhuang caves were constructed on cliff walls, which would be

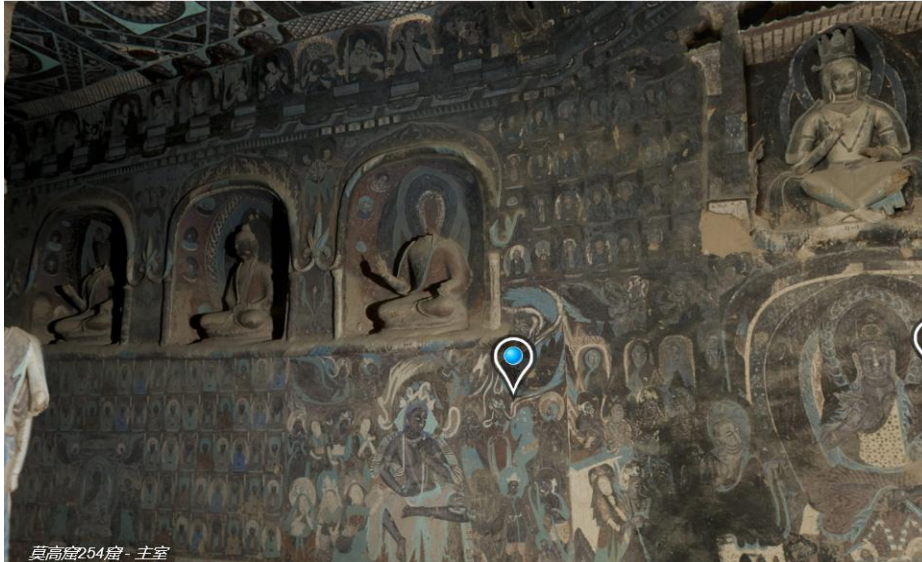
hard to reach without a ladder or stairs. The cave itself takes the practitioner into another world by providing little light but a whole room of heavenly motifs. By contemplating on these motifs, the practitioner can open a door into a different world from his /her own. However, this world is alien and unfamiliar, so one relies on the statues and wall paintings to really get the details of that world while a Daoist practitioner barely needs any visual aids. This kind of visualization reveals the human-world relationship as confrontational, which is consistent with the Buddhist teaching that the present world is filthy and sinful, thus one needs to sever one's tie with this world to enter a better world.

Despite the difference between introspection and an expedition, both Daoist and Buddhist visualizations are cosmological. Fig. 7 shows a Daoist visualizes traveling beyond the three heavens, the heaven of desire, the heaven of forms, and the heaven of the formless. "The Three heavens" is a cosmological concept borrowed from Buddhism. Buddhist visualizations also try to structure a hierarchical cosmos to suggest the result of visualization as traveling beyond one's world and reach otherworldly heaven, such as the Tusita Heaven.

In conclusion, I want to summarize the difference between Daoist and Buddhist visualizations as the divide between introspection and expedition. As the phrase, "Great Expedition" is always associated with the Great Journey to leave "old and rotten Europa" and discover the idealized "new land," Buddhist visualization uses the meditative surroundings as visual aids to reach "the shore of America." Comparatively, Daoist visualization is an introspection because it tells one that "new land" will be revealed from your own body if you seek inward with brightened eyes because your body parts are your ships.

Illustrations:

Fig. 1



The upper parts of the north wall and west wall of Mogao Cave 254 (screenshots from <https://www.e-dunhuang.com/cave/10.0001/0001.0001.0254>)

Fig. 3

Descent of the Seven Stars of the Northern Dipper into the Bodily Organs, from the *Precious*

Texts of Flying High in the Inner Landscape, from *the Correct Tradition of the Jade Hall*, details.

Daozang. Ming dynasty, dated 1445. Woodblock print. Ink on paper.

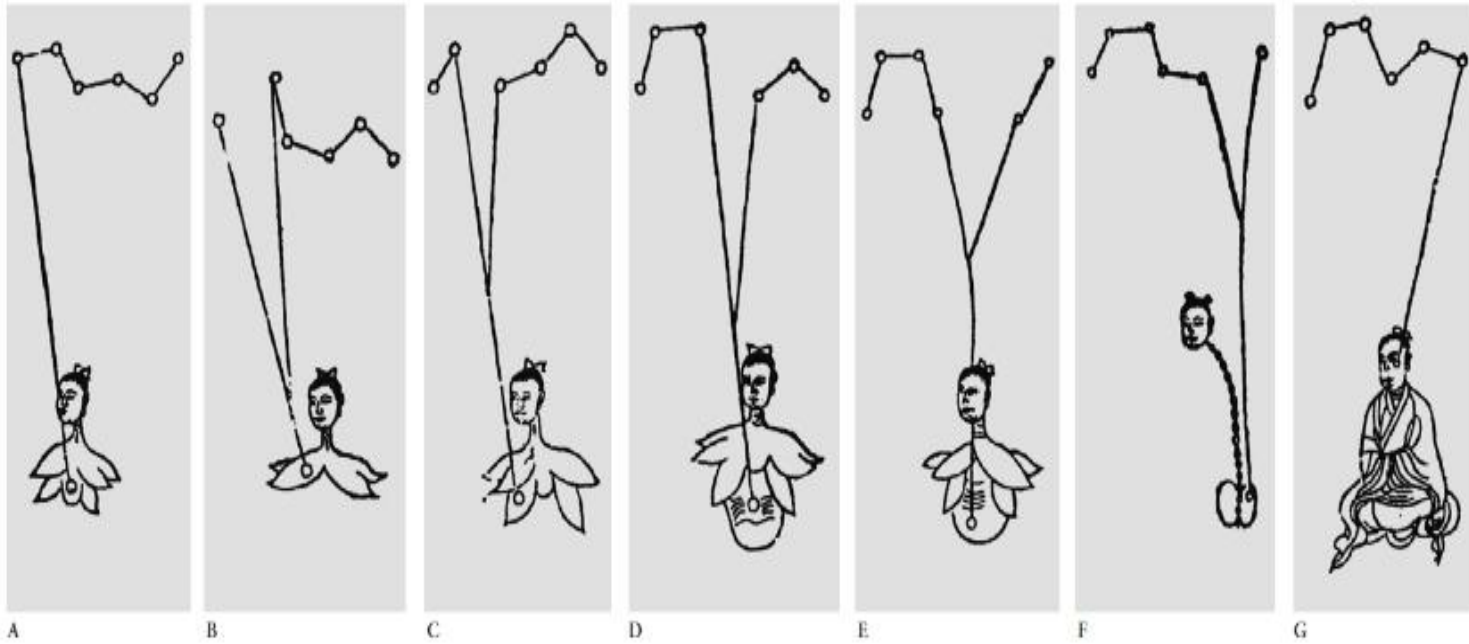


Fig. 4

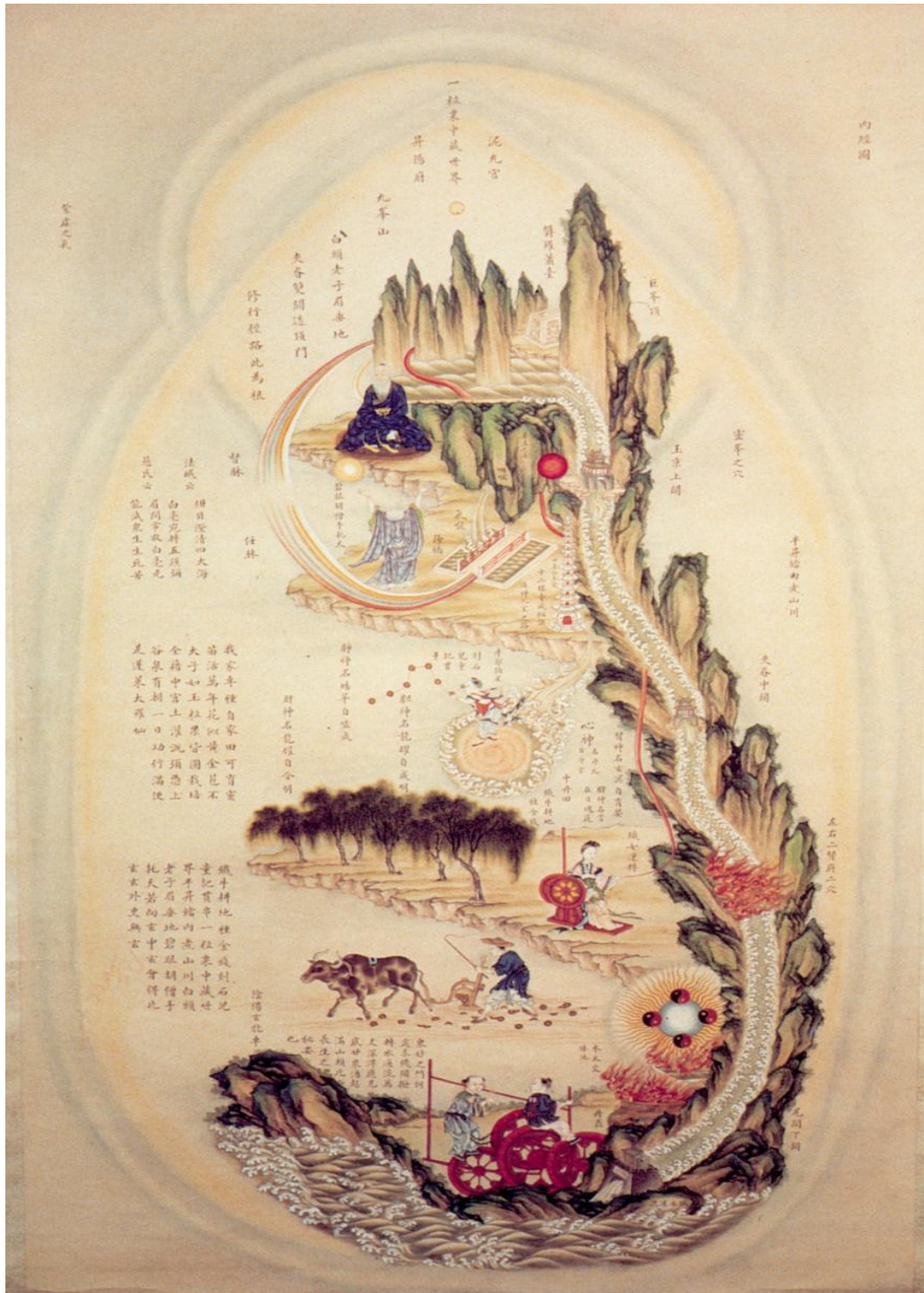


Chart of the Internal Passageways. Qing dynasty, nineteenth century. Ink and color on silk.

Fig. 5



Mountain and Water Painting. Ink on Paper. Ming Dynasty.

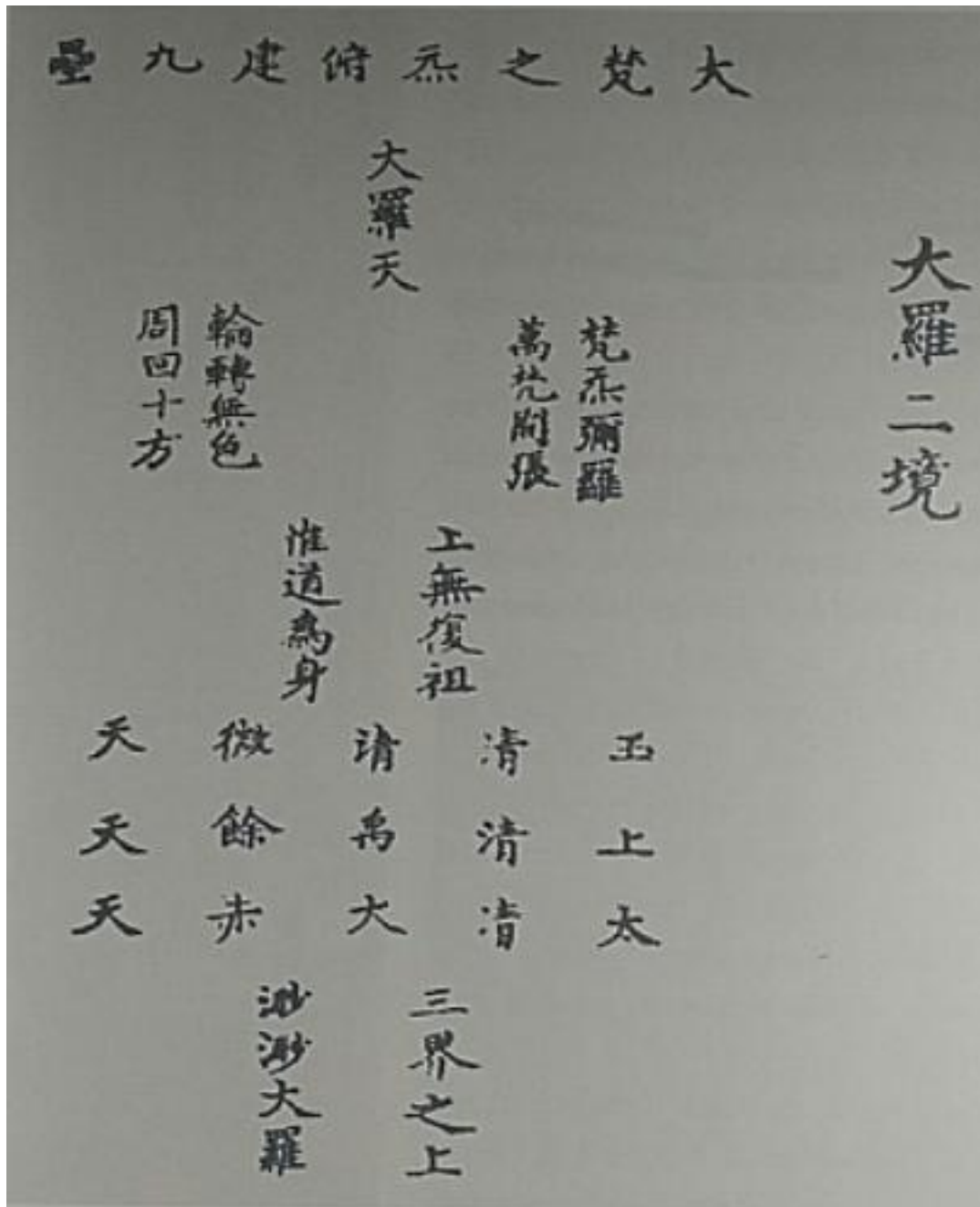
Fig. 6

The Peripheral Paintings of the 16 Visualizations in Mogao Cave 172

Left: Sections of South wall; Right: Sections of North Wall



Fig. 7



Two realms of the Heaven of the Grand Network, from Great Rites of Highest Clarity and Numinous Treasure, detail. (from Diagrams of Daoist heavens. *Daozang*. Ming dynasty. Ink on paper.)

¹ Stanley K. Abe, "Art and Practice in a Fifth-Century Chinese Buddhist Cave Template," *Ars Orientalis*, Vol. 20 (1990), pp. 1-31, accessed February 25, 2019, https://www.jstor.org/stable/4629399?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#page_scan_tab_contents.

² Alan Sponberg, "Meditation on Fa-Hsiang Buddhism," in *Traditions of Meditation in Chinese Buddhism*, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1986), 15-43.

³ *The Sutra of Visualizing the Buddha of Infinite Life as Expounded by Shakyamuni Buddha*, 1-32.

⁴ Shih-shan Susan Huang, "Imagery of Body and Cosmos," in *Picturing the True Form*, (Cambridge (Massachusetts): Harvard University Press, 2012), 27.

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