

Similarities Between the Offering Structure of Yuhua Pavilion and the Amitabha's Pure Land Thangka

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Abstract. This article discusses the connections between Yuhua Pavilion and the Four Tantras of Esoteric Buddhism, as well as how Yuhua Pavilion integrates Manjushri faith and Amitabha Pure Land beliefs. The article also compares the similarities between Yuhua Pavilion and the Amitabha's Pure Land Thangka, highlighting the corresponding relationships in structure and the enshrined deities. Finally, the article explores the integration of the Four Tantras of Esoteric Buddhism with Pure Land thought during the Qing Dynasty and the doctrinal rationale for this integration.

Keywords: Yuhua Pavilion; Tibetan Buddhism; Four Tantras of Esoteric Buddhism; Amitabha's Pure Land.

1. Introduction

Amitabha's Pure Land Thangka (Fig. 1), with a vertical length of 30.5 centimeters and a horizontal width of 22 centimeters, is an 18th-century silk thangka with colored pigments, currently housed in the Palace Museum. The Qing court also used this as a blueprint to create silk tapestries and embroidered thangkas. However, compared to other thangkas on the same theme of Amitabha's Pure Land, this thangka shows significant differences in the organization of its pictorial content, which should be related to the unique Buddhist doctrines formed within the Qing palace.



Fig. 1 Amitabha's Pure Land Thangka from the Collection of the Palace Museum

Wang Jiapeng once identified the Amitabha's Pure Land Thangka in "The Thangka Catalogue of the Palace Museum" as a Tibetan work from the 18th century. Due to the limitations of the catalogue, Mr. Wang Jiapeng has not provided a detailed argument, and the information on the creation period and location is quite general. In addition to this, other scholars often use the Amitabha's Pure Land Thangka as supplementary material while studying other subjects. For example, Wang Zilin, in his research on the Pure Land practice site in the Qing palace, found the inheritable relationship at the iconographic level between the Amitabha's Pure Land Thangka and

the Thangka of Qianlong Emperor's Portrait at Pule Temple. He point out "The Qianlong Buddha Attire Portrait (i.e. this type of thangka with Qianlong's imperial attire as Buddha) employed the compositional pattern of the Pure Land, such as pavilions, lotus ponds, and deities." [1] Hu Qingqing, in her work Qianlong's Imperial Buddha-Attired Thangka and the Cult of Manjushri, proposed that the decorative elements of the Amitabha's Pure Land Thangka have an inheritable relationship with the decorative elements of the Thangka of Qianlong's Imperial Buddha-Attired Portrait at Pule Temple. [2] However, the author believes that this unique series of thangkas is not an isolated copy existing independently in the Forbidden City, but should have its corresponding field and veneration system. Therefore, the author wishes to further explore the development of Tibetan Buddhism in the Qing palace by comparing the structure of this thangka with that of the Yuhua Pavilion.

2. The Basic Situation of Yuhua Pavilion

2.1 Geographic Location and Architectural Structure of Yuhua Pavilion

Yuhua Pavilion is located inside the Chunhua Gate of the Forbidden City and is the tallest building in the western part of the Forbidden City. It has east and west wing buildings, behind the pavilion is the Fanzong Building, and it is adjacent to the Baohua Hall on the north side, making it the main venue for Tibetan Buddhist ritual activities within the Qing Dynasty's imperial palace.

2.2 Yuhua Pavilion and the Fourfold Tantra

The Yuhua Pavilion building consists of four floors: The first floor has three four-meter-high cylindrical enamel mandalas, each enshrining the three main deities of the Gelug School's Anuttarayoga Tantra: Guhyasamaja, Hevajra and Yamantaka. The rear hall is separated into a second-level fairy building, and the lotus canopy of the fairy building is inscribed with "The Pure Land of Amitabha Buddha in the West" indicating that the first and second levels are the Infinite Hall recorded in the archives. The Royal Workshop Records (造办处活计档): "Diary entry from the 19th day of the fourth month in the 19th year of Qianlong's reign: By imperial decree: 'When will the mandala be ready?' Immediately replied: 'For the time being, it is not possible to gild. If gilded and then left on display, the gold may wear off and become rough and old. We, your servants, will gild and install it before the completion of the Infinite Light Hall.'" The third floor enshrines Vajradhatu Vairocana Buddha, Supreme Merit Buddha, Amoghasiddhi Buddha, Vairocana Buddha, and the Buddha of Salvation. The fourth floor enshrines Vajradhara, Vajra Heruka, and Cakrasamvara.

3. Amitabha's Pure Land Thangka and Yuhua Pavilion

3.1 The Integration of Yuhua Pavilion with Manjushri Faith

Luo Wenhua believes that: "Since the introduction of Tibetan Buddhism to Han Chinese areas during the Yuan Dynasty, the Yuhua Pavilion of the Qing Dynasty is the first to fully and systematically express the ideas of the four sections of Esoteric Buddhism and their pantheon. This is absolutely not seen in Tibet. It has a strong component of proclaiming doctrine." [3]

The layout of the Yuhua Pavilion in the Qing Dynasty's Forbidden City is considered a precedent for the combination of Manjushri faith, the four Tantras of the Esoteric School, and the Pure Land of Amitabha Buddha. Its internal layout was arranged by the Third Panchen Lama, Ngawang Lobsang Palden Yeshe, in accordance with the doctrines and practice rituals of the Gelug Sect. Wang Jiapeng, in his article "The Origin of Yuhua Pavilion" also cited a large number of Qing Dynasty palace archives, which recorded Emperor Qianlong's meticulous requirements during the construction, reflecting the emperor's own will and wishes. When we compare the vertical spatial arrangement of the Amitabha's Pure Land Thangka with the Pure Land of Amitabha Buddha and the four sections of Esoteric Buddhism in the Yuhua Pavilion, we find a certain degree of similarity.

The Yuhua Pavilion has established a structure that combines the Esoteric Buddhism's four sections with the Pure Land of Amitabha — the four sections of Esoteric Buddhism are above, and the Pure Land of Amitabha is below. This is similar to the structure in the Amitabha's Pure Land Thangka, where the Guru and the pantheon of deities of the Gelug sect form the refuge field above, and the Pure Land of Amitabha is below.

Table 1. Three Scheme comparing

Level	Name	Level	Name
Kriya Tantra	Amitayus	Carya Tantra	Vajra Ratna
	Avalokitesvara		Buddhalocana
	Avalokitesvara		Ananda
	Jvala		White Attire
	White Tara		Blue Tara
	Green Tara		Vajrapani
	Sita Tara		Vajramusti
	Golden Light Buddha		Blue Vajra
	White Umbrella		White Hayagriva
	Vajradhatu		Vajradhara
Yoga Tantra	Merit Tathagata	Anuttara Yoga Tantra	Vajra Authority
	Supreme Merit		Cakrasamvara
	Samantabhadra		
	Buddha of Salvation		

The twenty-six main deities of the four sections of Esoteric Buddhism enshrined in the Yuhua Pavilion match the twenty-six deities in the Amitabha's Pure Land Thangka after excluding the three insets of Tsongkhapa and his disciples, not only in number but also in overall function, despite differences in the specific deities venerated.

3.2 Comparative Analysis of Yuhua Pavilion and "Amitabha's Pure Land Thangka"

The deities venerated in the Yuhua Pavilion are strictly arranged according to the four sections of Esoteric Buddhism on each floor: Kriya Tantra, Carya Tantra, Yoga Tantra, and Anuttara Yoga Tantra. The arrangement of deities in the thangka appears more chaotic, with Tsongkhapa, Vajradhara, Guhyasamaja, Heruka, and Yamantaka arranged vertically along the central axis.

Placing Tsongkhapa, Vajradhara, and Guhyasamaja at the center seems to emphasize the protection of esoteric teachings and the important status of Manjushri's emanation in the thangka. In conjunction with the sutras on both sides of the refuge field, the sutras also have symbolic and implied meanings for Manjushri Bodhisattva. This compositional arrangement may emphasize the presence of Emperor Qianlong, who is an emanation of Manjushri. In the top and first layer of the three mandalas in the Yuhua Pavilion, Guhyasamaja, Yamantaka, and Chakrasamvara are all enshrined, among which Guhyasamaja and Yamantaka are closely related to Manjushri Bodhisattva. In Tibetan Buddhism, the term "Guhya" or "Ji Mi" carries the connotation of secrecy. According to the Ratnakuta Sutra, Vajra Peak Chapter, the Dharma Prince (i.e, Manjushri Bodhisattva) vowed to be a Vajra warrior, always close to the Buddha, and to protect all secret matters when sentient beings attain Buddhahood. Therefore, Guhyasamaja is related to this vow of Manjushri Bodhisattva, embodying the wisdom and the secret protective qualities of Manjushri. Yamantaka is considered to be the teaching wheel body of Manjushri Bodhisattva, manifesting to subdue the anger and hostility of devas, ghosts, and sentient beings.

The third floor of the Yuhua Pavilion features a transformed system of the Five Dhyani Buddhas, which can be corresponded to the Five Dhyani Buddhas surrounding Vajradhara in the thangka. The reason why this level breaks through the general configuration of the Five Dhyani Buddhas and replaces them with other deities is due to the reliance on different Yoga Tantra classics. Five Dhyani Buddhas originate from the "Tattvasamgraha Sutra," (《摄真实经》) while the five Buddhas in the Yuhua Pavilion are derived from the "Ritual for the Purification of All Negative Rebirths"

(《一切恶趣清静仪轨》)。The structure of the Yuhua Pavilion, which integrates the Esoteric Buddhism's four sections with the Pure Land of Amitabha, is more oriented towards liberating from the sufferings of the six realms of samsara compared to the traditional structure of the Five Dhyani Buddhas. However, overall, the configuration of the third floor of the Yuhua Pavilion is distinct yet spiritually aligned with the traditional configuration of the Five Dhyani Buddhas.

3.3 Integration of the Fourfold Tantra and Pure Land Thought

During the Qing Dynasty, the Pure Land teachings were widely disseminated and accepted in Han Chinese areas. At the same time, due to the royal family's faith in Tibetan Buddhism, it further developed in Han Chinese regions. Starting from the Kangxi period, a regular chanting system was established in the palace. On the occasion of the emperor's and empress's birthday, a large number of great lamas from Beijing would chant the "Sutra of Infinite Life" to pray for the longevity and well-being of the emperor and empress, and for the eternal continuation of the nation. This special faith background and the rulers' desire for longevity provided the basis for the combination of the four sections of Esoteric Buddhism and the Pure Land teachings in royal buildings such as the Yuhua Pavilion, creating conditions for the integration of these two ideologies in places like the Yuhua Pavilion and the Amitabha's Pure Land Thangka.

The integration of Esoteric Buddhism's four sections and the Pure Land teachings is not merely a product of royal faith and desires. The Third Panchen Lama, through his profound Buddhist knowledge, carefully constructed the integration of Esoteric Buddhism's four sections and the Pure Land teachings in the Yuhua Pavilion, which also stemmed from considerations within Buddhist doctrine. As stated: "All Tathagatas are the Dharmakaya, permeating all sentient beings' minds. Therefore, when you think of the Buddha, this mind is the thirty-two marks and eighty secondary signs. This mind becomes the Buddha." This aligns with the concept of Vairocana Buddha's "wisdom of the Dharma realm" in Tibetan Esoteric Buddhism.

In terms of doctrine, the four sections of Esoteric Buddhism and the Pure Land teachings have a high degree of compatibility. The essential consistency between the purpose of sequential practice in Tibetan Buddhism and the ultimate destination of the Pure Land school is also the basis and prerequisite for their integration.

In summary, the integration of "Esoteric Buddhism's four sections - Manjushri faith - Amitabha faith" reflected in the Amitabha's Pure Land Thangka is a unique doctrine formed in the Yuhua Pavilion of the Qing Palace. Therefore, the author believes that it was not a pre-painted tribute from Tibet, but rather a commission by the court based on the unique doctrines formed in the Qing Palace (especially in the Yuhua Pavilion) to Tibetan Gelug painters, or it was completed by Tibetan resident painters in the capital.

4. Summary

This article has delved into the intricate connections between Yuhua Pavilion and the Four Tantras of Esoteric Buddhism, shedding light on how the pavilion encapsulates both Manjushri faith and Amitabha Pure Land beliefs. By drawing parallels between the architectural and spiritual elements of Yuhua Pavilion and the Amitabha's Pure Land Thangka, we have uncovered a profound integration of religious iconography and practice within the Qing Dynasty's imperial context. The analysis underscores the distinctiveness of the Qing palace's Buddhist doctrine and its influence on the artistic and religious expressions of the time. The Third Panchen Lama's role in orchestrating this synthesis within Yuhua Pavilion, aligning with both doctrinal considerations and the emperor's personal aspirations, highlights the depth of the integration between Esoteric Buddhism and Pure Land teachings. This integration is not only a reflection of the royal family's faith but also a testament to the compatibility of these Buddhist traditions. This study offers a deeper understanding of the evolution and synthesis of Tibetan Buddhism within the Qing imperial palace, particularly within the sacred space of Yuhua Pavilion.

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