

# House of the Tibetan Gods at Feilaifeng

## (Part Two): Mothers of Buddhas, Embodiments of Buddhas' Dharma

Chang Qing  
(Sichuan University)

The Mothers of Buddhas [Ch. *Fomu*] are a particular type of images from Tibetan and Tibetan style Buddhist art. In Buddhism, Buddhas treat the dharma as their master, and Buddhas were born from the dharma. Therefore, the dharma is the mother of Buddhas, and Buddhas reside inside the dharma.<sup>1</sup> Nāgārjuna (150-250), an eminent Indian Buddhist logician who was instrumental in the early establishment of Indian Mahāyāna, says that the perfection of wisdom is the mother of Buddhas. Among parents, the achievement of mothers is the most important, and Buddhas treat wisdom as their mother. The cultivation of wisdom can lead one to see the true original nature of the dharma, and it can reach and achieve anything. The merit and virtue of it is great; so it was named Mother of Buddhas.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, the Mothers of Buddhas is a symbolic name for a type of deities who can obtain and use Buddhist wisdom to deliver sentient beings to enlightenment. Such deities should not be understood to be the biological mother of Śākyamuni or other Buddhas. Although both Han Chinese and Tibetan scriptures record many mothers of Buddhas before the Yuan dynasty, their images had not been crafted by Han Buddhists and artists, but preferred by Tibetan

<sup>1</sup> According to chapter six of *Dafangbian fo baoen jing* 大方便佛报恩经, the translator, probably from the third century, of this sūtra is unknown. See *Taishō* 3.157b.

<sup>2</sup> See chapter thirty-four of *Dazhidu lun* 大智度论 [Great Treatise on the Perfection of Wisdom] by Nāgārjuna, translated by Kumārajīva (343-413), *Taishō* 25. 314a.

people. In the early Yuan period, these images were transmitted into Han Chinese regions from Tibet, and four kinds of Mothers of Buddhas appeared in Feilaifeng images, and they are Uṣṇīṣavijaya, Prajñāpāramitā, Sitātapatra, and Tārā.

### **Uṣṇīṣavijaya, Honored and Victorious Buddhas' Mother Coming from the Uṣṇīṣa**

The most splendid work among the Tibetan-style sculptures at Feilaifeng is found in niche number 84, which contains an eight-armed bodhisattva-like deity, Uṣṇīṣavijaya, Honored and Victorious Buddhas' Mother Coming from the Uṣṇīṣa [Ch. *Dingji Zunsheng Fomu* 顶髻尊胜佛母] as the main focus, with eight attendants (Fig. 1). Number 84 is comprised of three connected rectangular niches. The middle niche is carved in the style of a Tibetan-style stupa with only the middle and top sections of the structure visible. Carved out of the body of the stupa is an arched niche containing the main figure sitting in a lotus posture. On the both sides of the middle niche, there is a lintel connecting the center arch with the side arches. The three connected niches look like three lined up stupas, and the central one is larger than the side ones, forming an architectural structure for the mandala. About thirty-five Sanskrit characters are carved along the edges of the stupa and the side niches. According to Liao Yang's translation, these characters represent the incantations and seed of Uṣṇīṣavijaya, indicating the main figure of the mandala of niche number 84.<sup>3</sup>



**Fig. 1 Uṣṇīṣavijaya, and her attendants.**

**Yuan period (1271-1368); Niche no. 84 of Feilaifeng; Photo by author.**

<sup>3</sup> See Liao Yang 廖旻, "Hangzhou Feilaifeng Yuandai Fanwen shike bianshi" 杭州飞来峰元代梵文石刻辨释 [Transliteration and Identification of the Sanskrit Inscriptions at Feilaifeng], in *Xizang kaogu yu Yishu* 西藏考古与艺术 [Tibetan Archaeology and Art], edited by Huo Wei 霍巍 and Li Yongxian 李永宪, Chengdu: Sichuan People's Publishing House, 2004, pp. 303-304.

The features of the Uṣṇīṣavijaya and the architectural composition in niche number 84 are consistent to the description of this deity in her mandala as recorded in Esoteric Buddhist scriptures. In a Chinese scripture, Uṣṇīṣavijaya is called “The Image of the Merit of Most Victorious Dharani from Uṣṇīṣa”<sup>4</sup> and was born from Buddhas’ Uṣṇīṣa-s. Regarding the mandala served for worshipping and religious ritual of this deity, the sutra says that people should paint the image of Uṣṇīṣavijaya sitting on a lotus pedestal and install it inside a pagoda. Similarly, a pagoda form is carved inside niche number 84. The sutra, in addition, says that the deity has eight arms and three heads, each with three eyes. The left face is blue and features a wrathful expression; the right face, painted a gold color, displays a virtuous expression, while the frontal face is round with white color. Her first right hand holds a Karma-vajra [Ch. *Jiemochu* 羯磨杵]; the second right hand holds a small image of Amitāyus seated on a lotus flower; the third right hand holds an arrow, while the fourth right hand forms a boon-granting gesture. Her first left hand grasps a lasso (*vajrapāśa*), the second left hand holds a bow, the third left hand performs dhyāna mudrā and the fourth left hand holds a precious jar.<sup>5</sup> The iconographic characteristics of the Uṣṇīṣavijaya in niche number 84 generally match what is described in the sutra, but its original painted color has faded to the extent that there is nothing left at the present. Unlike the feature of the Uṣṇīṣavijaya in number 84, the sutra describes Uṣṇīṣavijaya as having a face with a wrathful expression. In addition to the Chinese sutra, some Tibetan scriptures describe a similar feature of Uṣṇīṣavijaya, sharing similar iconographic characteristics to the number 84 Uṣṇīṣavijaya.<sup>6</sup> At Feilailong, a single sculpture of the same type deity with similar

<sup>4</sup> *Wuse nisha zuisheng zongchi gongde xingxiang* 乌瑟腻沙最胜总持功德形象 [The Image of the Merit of Most Victorious Dharani from Uṣṇīṣa].

<sup>5</sup> See *Yiqie rulai wuse nisha zuisheng zongchi jing* 一切如来乌瑟腻沙最胜总持经, *Taishō* 19.409a. This sutra was translated by Northern Song monk Fatian 法天 (trans. 974-1001).

<sup>6</sup> See *Zunsheng fomu tuoluoni jing* 尊胜佛母陀罗尼经 [The Dharani Sutra of the Honored and Victorious Buddhas’ Mother]. The Tibetan version of this sutra and a Chinese translation by Sun Jingfeng 孙敬风 can be seen in *Zangmi xiufa midian* 藏密修法秘典 [Secret canon on the method of practicing Tibetan Esoteric Buddhism], chapter two, Beijing: Huaxia Publishing House, 1991, pp. 553-556. Other two related Tibetan sutras are *vPhags-ma-gtshug-tor-rnam-par-rgyal-mavi-sgrub-thabs* (Skt. *Arya-Uṣṇīṣavijaya-sadhana*) [Dharma of the Achievement of the Sacred Uṣṇīṣavijaya] and *gTshug-tor-rnam-par-rgyal-mavi-sgrub-thabs* (Skt. *Uṣṇīṣavijaya-sadhana*) [Dharma of the Achievement of Uṣṇīṣavijaya], translated by the Tibetan master, Grags-pa-rgyal-mtshan (1147-1216). See Xiong Wenbin 熊文彬, “Hangzhou Feilailong di 55 kan dingji zunsheng fomu jiuzun tancheng kao” 杭州飞来峰第55龛顶髻尊胜佛母九尊坛城考 [Research on the Mandala of Nine Figures of Uṣṇīṣavijaya (and Her Attendants) in Niche number 55 at Feilailong, Hangzhou], in *China Tibetology* 1998 (4): 84-86. In Xiong’s article, niche number 55 is the old number of niche number 84. Lai Tianbing 赖天兵 makes a similar comparison between the *Tuoluoni jing* and the features of the images from number 84. See Lai Tianbing, “Hangzhou Feilailong Yuandai di 84 kan zaixiang tantao” 杭州飞来峰元代第84龛造像探讨 [Study on Yuan dynasty images from niche number 84 at Feilailong, Hangzhou], in *Dunhuang yanjiu* 敦煌研究 2000 (4): 39-40.

iconographic characteristics was carved in niche number 96.<sup>7</sup>

In niche number 84, Uṣṇīṣavijaya is flanked by two standing bodhisattvas, and their identities can be presumably determined by examining sutras. The bodhisattva standing to the right of Uṣṇīṣavijaya in number 84 holds a long-stemmed lotus flower with his right hand (now damaged) and a fly whisk with her left hand (damaged). The forearms and the implements of the bodhisattva carved on the left side of the Uṣṇīṣavijaya are damaged. According to a sutra, the two deities flanked Uṣṇīṣavijaya are Avalokiteśvara and Vajrasattva, and each holds a white whisk.<sup>8</sup> Another sutra says that the two main bodhisattvas are Avalokiteśvara and Mahāsthāmaprāpta. The Avalokiteśvara holds a lotus flower in his left hand and a whisk in his right hand. These are the same implements as those of the bodhisattva to the right of Uṣṇīṣavijaya in number 84, so he is Avalokiteśvara, although the figure holds each attribute with the opposite hand. In the sutra, Mahāsthāmaprāpta holds a vajra with his left hand and a whisk with his right hand.<sup>9</sup> In addition, described in a sutra, Vajrasattva holds a vajra with her left hand and a whisk with her right hand.<sup>10</sup> It seems that the implements held by Vajrasattva and Mahāsthāmaprāpta are interchangeable. However, based on the remains of the bodhisattva to the left of Uṣṇīṣavijaya in number 84, it is not possible that this bodhisattva held a whisk, and whether or not he held a vajra is unknown.

The figure to the left of Uṣṇīṣavijaya in number 84, therefore, may be Mahāsthāmaprāpta or Vajrasattva. If he is Mahāsthāmaprāpta, he and Avalokiteśvara make a pair that is similar to the attendants of Amitayus/ Amitabha. In addition, if this figure is Vajrasattva, it is also reasonable that he and Avalokiteśvara make a pair to assist Uṣṇīṣavijaya. In Esoteric Buddhism, Avalokiteśvara is the chief of division of lotus lower [Ch. *Lianhua bu* 莲花部], located on the right side of the Buddha to symbolize Buddha's great compassion to support righteousness. Vajrasattva is the chief of division vajra [Ch. *Jingang bu* 金刚部], located on the left side of the Buddha to symbolize Buddha's power of wisdom to destroy sentient beings' obstacles of worries and karmas. Because the bodhisattva on the right side of the Uṣṇīṣavijaya is Avalokiteśvara, the composition of the two divisions flanked the Buddha can corresponds to the arrangement of the two bodhisattvas assisting the Uṣṇīṣavijaya in

<sup>7</sup> See Gao Nianhua ed., *Feilai Feng zaoxiang* 飞来峰造像 [Images of Feilai Feng Peak], Beijing: Cultural Relics Publishing House, 2002, fig. 168.

<sup>8</sup> See *Yiqie rulai wuse nisha zuisheng zongchi jing* by Northern Song monk Fatian, Taishō 19. 409a.

<sup>9</sup> On the attributes of the Avalokiteśvara and Mahāsthāmaprāpta in *Zunsheng fomu tuoluoni jing*, see *Zangmi xiufa midian*, pp. 553-556.

<sup>10</sup> See chapter nine of the *Bukong juansuo shenbian zhenyan jing* 不空絹索神变真言经, translated by Tang dynasty monk Bodhiruci 菩提流支 (d. 727), Taishō 20. 270a.



number 84 at Feilaifeng.<sup>11</sup>

Outside the main triad, two *rājas*, kings of light, carved in each side of the rectangular niche in number 84 have distinctive attributes. Each *rāja* is in its own individual arched niche. In the upper left arched niche, the *rāja*'s powerful body is in *alidha* posture (warrior's pose) with his right arm thrusts upward to the right and his right hand raises a hooked staff weapon up to the level of his head. His left hand makes a threatening gesture (the first finger of his left-hand points upward and other fingers curve toward his palm) in front of his chest. He wears a crown, a long scarf, a long snake necklace that ties in front of the left side of his abdomen, and a tiger-skin loincloth as well as bracelets on his ankles. He exposes his torso, legs, and feet. He has a large head, a wrathful facial expression, and his hair flies from his head in a flame-like motion. His abdomen is extremely plump. These reflect some of the standard features of wrathful deities. The other three *rājas* are very iconographically and stylistically similar to the *rāja* just described. However, each of the three other *rājas* holds a different weapon. The *rāja* carved in the lower left niche holds a staff, the one in the upper right niche holds a sword, and the one in the lower right niche holds a double vajra.

We can find similar descriptions of four *rājas* that assist *Uṣṇīṣavijaya* in scriptures. According to sutras, on the east, south, west, and north of the mandala or stupa containing *Uṣṇīṣavijaya* and her attendant bodhisattvas are four wrathful *rājas*: *Acala* holds a sword; *Takkiraja* holds a flaming iron-hooked staff; *Nīladaṇḍa* holds a staff; and *Mahābala* holds a vajra. All of them wear snake necklaces and tiger-skin short skirts.<sup>12</sup> We can determine the identities of the four *rājas* served as guardians in number 84. In the upper left arched niche, the *rāja* is *Takkiraja*. *Rāja Nīladaṇḍa* is carved in the lower left niche. *Acala* is in the upper right niche. In the lower right niche, *Mahābala* holds a double vajra. In number 84, the artists did not carve the four *rājas* to the four directions of the main figure as described in the two sutras.

In niche number 84, a heavenly being is positioned on a lotus pedestal supported by clouds on the both sides of the top of the Tibetan-style stupa, mentioned by texts. Each sits almost frontally with the leg closest to the top of the stupa crossed. The other leg is bent at the knee while the foot rests flat on the lotus pedestal. Each turns and tilts its torso toward the other and holds a precious jar in their hands and extends it as if offering it. Their clothing and jewelry are similar to the bodhisattvas (Fig. 2). A Buddhist scripture says that when people paint *Uṣṇīṣavijaya*'s mandala, they should

<sup>11</sup> See chapter two of *She Da piluzhe'na chengfo shenbian jiachi jing ru lianhua taizang haihui beisheng mantuluo guangda niansong yigui gongyang fangbianhui* 摄大毗卢遮那成佛神变加持经入莲华胎藏海会悲生曼荼罗广大念诵仪轨供养方便会, translated by Tang dynasty monk Śubhakarā 输婆迦罗, *Taishō* 18. 72c, 75b; chapter five of *Dari jing shu* 大日经疏 by Tang dynasty monk Yixing 一行, *Taishō* 39. 632a.

<sup>12</sup> See *Yiqie rulai wuse nisha zuisheng zongchi jing*, translated by Northern Song monk Fatian, *Taishō* 19. 409a; *Tuoluoni jing* in *Zangmi xiufa midian*, pp. 553-556.

paint heavenly beings of Suddhasa raining amṛta [sweet dew] above the Uṣṇīṣavijaya and her attendant bodhisattvas.<sup>13</sup> Another sutra also mentions two heavenly beings of Suddhasa on the top of Uṣṇīṣavijaya's mandala, which corresponds more closely to the arrangement of the two heavenly beings in niche number 84.<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, the two heavenly beings are Suddhasa.



**Fig. 2 Two heavenly beings of Suddhasa.**  
Yuan period (1271-1368); Niche no. 84 of Feilaifeng;  
From Gao Nianhua, ed., *Feilaifeng zaixiang*, fig. 166.

Regarding the function of Uṣṇīṣavijaya and the benefit one could expect for worshipping this deity, the two sutras provide some information. One sutra says that producing the images of Uṣṇīṣavijaya and her attendants is necessary for the recitation of the dharani sutra related to this deity. The function of this dharani is to heal patients and provide people longevity and joy. If people fast in front of the pagoda, make offerings before the images that are installed inside the pagoda, and chant this dharani for fifteen days, these deities would appear before the people. Then all of the people's wishes would be fulfilled.<sup>15</sup> Another sutra also says that Uṣṇīṣavijaya can release people from all kinds of sufferings and guide people to the righteous way.<sup>16</sup> These attractive benefits convinced believers to commission the images of and her attendants in number 84 at Feilaifeng. One can imagine that, after the niche completed, believers probably made their rituals, worships, and offerings as well as prayed for their benefits in front of this niche, as the description and the requirement of above two sutras.

The carving of niche number 84 reflects the worship of Uṣṇīṣavijaya in the Yuan

<sup>13</sup> See *Yiqie rulai wuse nisha zuisheng zongchi jing*, translated by Northern Song monk Fatian, *Taishō* 19. 409a.

<sup>14</sup> See *Zangmi xiufa midian*, pp. 553-556.

<sup>15</sup> See *Yiqie rulai wuse nisha zuisheng zongchi jing*, translated by Northern Song monk Fatian, *Taishō* 19. 407b, 409ab.

<sup>16</sup> See *Zangmi xiufa midian*, p. 539.

period. According to text, among the images in a monastery in Dadu, Uṣṇīṣavijaya was an important deity. In 1310, for instance, Emperor Wuzong commanded officials to produce Buddhist images for a new monastery, and an image of Uṣṇīṣavijaya and six attendant figures were installed in the Northeast Tower.<sup>17</sup> In 1313, Emperor Renzong (r. 1312-1320) requested officials to produce Buddhist images for the Da Shengshou wan'an Monastery 大圣寿万安寺. They also created images of Uṣṇīṣavijaya with six attendants in the Northeast Tower of this monastery.<sup>18</sup> In 1326 when the court commissioned Buddhist images for Da Tianyuan Yansheng Monastery 大天源延圣寺, the artists created images of Uṣṇīṣavijaya with six attendants in the Northeast Tower of the monastery.<sup>19</sup> It seems that the northeast towers of monasteries in Dadu were the main location where images of this deity and her six attendants (two bodhisattvas and four rājas) were installed and people's rituals were conducted. It is likely that niche number 84 at Feilaifeng used to be endowed with the quality as the Northeast Tower in some monasteries of the capital.

Many examples of Buddhist art that still exist in Dadu, Tibet, and Tangut region are valuable for tracing the origin of the pictorial composition of the images in niche number 84 contains a Tibetan-style stupa with a cone-shaped, ribbed section (with 12 rings) followed by a stepped base composed of five stepped units on the top. Above and below the rings, there are rows of lotus petals that create the thirteenth wheel or ring. The main section of this stupa looks like an up-ended bowl. The White Stupa of 1279 in Beijing shares similar features to the stupa in number 84, and the former may have influenced the latter in a direct or indirect way.<sup>20</sup> Three stone Tibetan-style pagodas (dated around 1346) built on a tall platform, with the middle one taller than the two side ones, are located at Juyong pass, Beijing. They demonstrate a tradition of producing three pagodas in a single group, as seen in niche number 84 at Feilaifeng, in the Yuan period capital.<sup>21</sup> In 1997, Robert Fisher published a Tibetan tangka in his book, *Art of Tibet*. He reasonably suggested that this painting was produced around the twelfth century and that it came from central Tibet.<sup>22</sup> This tangka shows a tradition of representing Uṣṇīṣavijaya's mandala similar to the Feilaifeng images. The central section of this tangka depicts the main figure sitting in a Tibetan-style stupa flanked by two standing bodhisattvas, similar to the center of niche number 84. One major

<sup>17</sup> See *Yuandai huasuiji* 元代画塑记 [Record on Paintings and Sculptures from the Yuan Dynasty], compiled by an unknown figure, Beijing: People's Fine Arts Publishing House, 1964, pp. 13-14.

<sup>18</sup> See *Yuandai huasuiji*, p. 15.

<sup>19</sup> See *Yuandai huasuiji*, p. 23.

<sup>20</sup> See Luo Zhewu 罗哲文, *Zhongguo guta* 中国古塔 [Chinese Ancient Pagodas], Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1994.

<sup>21</sup> Su Bai 宿白, "Juyong guan guojieta kaogao" 居庸关过街塔考稿 [Research on the Pagoda at Juyong Pass], in Su Bai, *Zangchuan fojiao siyuan kaogu* 藏传佛教寺院考古, [Archaeological Studies on Monasteries of Tibetan Buddhism], Beijing: Cultural Relics Publishing House, 1996, pp. 338-364.

<sup>22</sup> See Rober E. Fisher, *Art of Tibet*, London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1997, p. 108, fig. 88.



difference is that the four rājas line up on the lower section of the tangka, under Uṣṇīṣavijaya and the two attendant bodhisattvas (Fig. 3). Number 84's four rājas are positioned to the sides of the main figures, closer to the description of the related sutras that positioned the four rājas on the four directions of the central stupa respectively.<sup>23</sup> Transmitted from Tibet, before the Yuan period in the Northwest, Tangut Buddhist in the Western Xia Kingdom also performed rituals involved the deity which can be proved in a printed Uṣṇīṣavijaya-dharani and image excavated from the Baisigou Square Stupa in the Helan mountains west of the present Ningxia Province's provincial



**Fig. 3 Uṣṇīṣavijaya mandala.**  
**Dated ca. 12th century; Tangka, light color on silk;**  
**From central Tibet; From Robert Fisher, *Art of Tibet*, fig. 88.**

<sup>23</sup> Regarding this tangka, Xiong Wenbin realized that it matches the descriptions of Uṣṇīṣavijaya mandala from the related sutras more closely than do the features of niche number 84. See Xiong Wenbin, "Hangzhou Feilaifeng di 55 kan Dingji zunsheng fomu jiuzun tancheng kao," p. 88.



capital Yinchuan. In addition, the complex of 108 stupas, south of Yinchuan along the Yellow River near the present town Qingtongxia, also suggests the worship of the deity during the Western Xia period.<sup>24</sup>



**Fig. 4** Caitya with Buddhist figures.

**Dated ca. 7th century; Located at Patan, Katmandu, Nepal; From Niels Gutschow, *The Nepalese Caitya 1500 Years of Buddhist Votive Architecture in the Kathmandu Valley*, fig. 337.**

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<sup>24</sup> Robert Linrothe, "Xia Renzong and the atronage of Tangut Buddhist Art: The Stupa and the Ushnishavijaya Cult," in *Journal of Sung-Yuan Studies*, 1998 (28), pp. 91-121.

If Dadu served as a transfer, a tradition of depicting certain deities in the niches of stupas in Nepalese Buddhist art probably reveal a source of the architectural arrangement of niche number 84 at Feilaifeng. There is a caitya, a stone stupa, probably carved in the seventh century, located at the Patan at the southeast to Kathmandu. The top section of this caitya is a stupa. The lower story has a square plan with a standing Buddha or bodhisattva figure carved on each side (Fig. 4). Another caitya from Patan perhaps was carved in the ninth to thirteenth centuries, and it has a stupa in the upper section. On each side of the upper story of the caitya are three niches with one seated Buddhist figure in each niche. In addition, on each side of the lower story of the caitya is a standing Buddhist figure carved in each niche.<sup>25</sup> Similar stupas can also be seen in paintings. A Nepalese painting depicts a Green Tārā sitting in a niche, above which one can see three stupas connected to each other, and the middle one is taller than the two side stupas. Pal dated this painting to the fourteenth century.<sup>26</sup> After the thirteenth century, Nepalese artists also inherited this tradition of depicting Buddhist figures in the niches on stupas. A Nepalese painting dated in 1416 depicts an Uṣṇīṣavijaya attended by two standing bodhisattvas painted in front of the main stupa. Other attendants, including four rājas and two heavenly beings of Suddhasa, as well as secondary stupas, surround the main stupa.<sup>27</sup> By examining the above caityas and paintings with similar composition to the Feilaifeng carving, one can see that Nepal probably was one of the original sources for the iconographic combinations and arrangements and the architectural characteristics of niche number 84.

### **Prajñāpāramitā, Mother of Buddhas with Transcendent Wisdom**

The figure carved in niche number 87 of Feilaifeng can be identified as a Yuan period Prajñāpāramitā, the second type of Mother of Buddhas (Fig. 5). In 1986, Hong Huizhen洪惠镇 identified this figure as a Tārā, and he quoted the words from *Commentary on the Vairocana-abhisambodhi-tantra* by the Tang monk Yixing as his evidence.<sup>28</sup> In 2002, Gao Nianhua followed Hong and cited the same passage from

<sup>25</sup> See Niels Gutschow, *The Nepalese Caitya: 1500 Years of Buddhist Votive Architecture in the Kathmandu Valley*, Stuttgart/London: Edition Axel Menges, 1997, fig. 423.

<sup>26</sup> This painting is in the collection of the Cleveland Museum of Art. See Pratapaditya Pal, *Nepal: Where the Gods are Young*, New York: The Asia Society, 1975, p. 81, fig. 40.

<sup>27</sup> This painting is in the collection of Mr. and Mrs. Jack Zimmertnan, see Pratapaditya Pal, *Nepal: Where the Gods are Young*, p. 83, fig. 47.

<sup>28</sup> The words that Hong quoted from *Dari jingshu* are: “This image put his hands together, holding a blue lotus with his hands. The appearance [of his face] is slightly smiling. [其像合掌，掌中持青莲，如微笑形]”. We can see that this book does not mention a sutra case on top of a lotus seen in the Feilaifeng figure. So, this passage cannot be used as evidence to identify the figure of number 87. See Hong Huizhen “Hangzhou Feilaifeng ‘fanshi’ zaoxiang chutan,” [Comment on the Tibetan-Style Images at Feilaifeng, Hangzhou], *Wenwu* 文物 1986(1), p. 52. The old number for number 87 is number 58, which Hong used in his article.

the same book.<sup>29</sup> In 1999, Lai Tianbing re-identified this figure as Prajñāpāramitā but his only supporting evidence was a modern woodblock printed book — hardly a convincing reference.<sup>30</sup> I agree with Lai's opinion, but I would like to provide more substantial evidence to support this idea. The figure of this niche sits in a lotus posture, and she bends her arms at the elbows, and her hands grasp one another as she holds two long-stemmed lotuses in front of her chest. The two lotus flowers are carved on both sides of her body above her shoulders. In addition, there is a sutra case carved on each lotus. The features of this figure correspond to descriptions of Prajñāpāramitā found in Buddhist scriptures, which describe her as the Mother of Buddhas who delivers salvation through wisdom. She looks like a bodhisattva with three eyes and sits in a lotus posture on a lotus platform, wears a crown with five Buddha figures. She holds lotus flowers in her hands in front of her chest. A wisdom Indian sutra case rests on each lotus flower.<sup>31</sup>



**Fig. 5 Prajñāpāramitā.**

**Yuan period (1271-1368); Niche no. 87 of Feilafeng; Photo by author.**

<sup>29</sup> See Gao Nianhua, ed., *Feilafeng zaoxiang*, p. 185.

<sup>30</sup> The book that Lai used to identify niche number 87 is *Mizong wubai foxiang kao* 密宗五百佛像考 [Research on Five Hundred Buddhist Images of Esoteric Buddhism] compiled by Aiwensi 爱文思 and Wang Yantao 王岩涛. However, this text does not contain any publication information such as its date or publisher. See Lai Tianbing, “Hangzhou Feilafeng Zangchuan Fojiao zaoxiang tica neirong bianxi,” in *Wenbo* 文博 1999 (1), pp. 60, 64.

<sup>31</sup> Chapter one of *Tuoluoni jijing* 陀罗尼集经, *Taishō* 18.790b; *Chusheng wubianmen tuoluoni yigui* 出生无边门陀罗尼仪轨, translated by Amoghavajra (705-774), *Taishō* 19.679c.



A figure with these features can be found in a woodblock printed frontispiece of the *Heart Sutra* on Prajñāpāramitā, the Holy Mother of Buddhas dated 1167 from the Western Xia Kingdom.<sup>32</sup> In the center of this print is a bodhisattva-like figure with a similar pose, gestures, and attributes as the Prajñāpāramitā described above. Above this figure is an inscription: “Assembly of the Prajñāpāramitā, Mother of Buddhas”一切如来般若佛母众会 (Fig. 6). Not only the above texts but also this print provide iconographic evidence to support the identification of the bodhisattva-shaped figure in niche number 87 at Feilaifeng as Prajñāpāramitā.



Fig. 6 Prajñāpāramitā Assembly.

Dated 1167; Woodblock print; Excavated from Khara Khoto, Inner Mongolia;  
From Xie Jisheng, *Xixia Zangchuan huihua: Heishuicheng chutu Xixia tangka yanjiu*, fig. 91.

The Feilaifeng niche represents a worship of this deity, transmitted from Tibetan regions or the regions of Tibetan Buddhism in Han-Chinese areas in the second half of the thirteenth and the first half of the fourteenth centuries. Although there are many lost productions of Buddhist art at Yuan period Dadu, there remains a textual reference to Prajñāpāramitā. When the large Tibetan style White Stupa was built in 1279 in Dadu, many images, including Prajñāpāramitā, were installed on the main level of this pagoda.<sup>33</sup> This Prajñāpāramitā was probably a Tibetan-style figure. Because of the close dates between the two works and the requirement of above sutras on the features of this deity, the Prajñāpāramitā figure of the White Stupa probably share some similar iconographic and stylistic characteristics with the one of number 87 at Feilaifeng. The worship of Prajñāpāramitā and producing her images connected the capital and Hangzhou.

<sup>32</sup> *Shengfomu boruo boluomiduo xinjing* 圣佛母般若波罗蜜多心经 [Heart Sūtra on Prajñāpāramitā, the Holy Mother of Buddhas].

<sup>33</sup> See Su Bai, *Zangchuanfojiao siyuan kaogu*, p. 330.





**Fig. 7 Sitātapatra.**  
Yuan period (1271-1368); Niche no. 52 of Feilaifeng; Photo by author.

### **Sitātapatra, Mother of Buddhas Holding a Great White Parasol**

Sitātapatra, the Mother of Buddhas Holding a Great White Parasol, can be easily identified by the presence of her distinctive attribute, the parasol. In Tibetan Buddhist art, Sitātapatra takes various forms with two arms and one head or multiple arms and multiple heads; but all share the same attribute: the parasol.<sup>34</sup> The Sitātapatra in niche number 52 at Feilaifeng can also be identified by the parasol she holds; the inscriptions above the niche mention this deity as well (Fig. 7). The Sanskrit inscription on the lintel above her head indicates to devote to Sitātapatra, according to Liao Yang's translation.<sup>35</sup> A Chinese inscription carved under the Sanskrit inscription says, "Buddha's Mother,

<sup>34</sup> There is a three-headed and six-armed Sitātapatra, dated in the fifteenth century by Chinese scholar, installed in pagoda of Palkhor Monastery in rGyal-rtse county, Tibet. See *Zhongguo zangchuan fojiao diaosu quanji-1-Caisu* 中国藏传佛教雕塑全集-1-彩塑 [Comprehensive Collection on the Sculptures of Tibetan Buddhism in China -I- Colorful Clay Sculptures], Beijing: Beijing Fine Arts Photography Publishing House, 2002, fig. 125. Tibetan-style Multiple-armed and headed Sitātapatra images can be seen in Marilyn M. Rhie and Robert A.F. Thurman, eds., *Wisdom and Compassion: The Sacred Art of Tibet*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1991, figs. 125, 126. In this book, one Sitātapatra is painted on Tibetan tangka, and the authors date it to the first half of the eighteenth century. Another Sitātapatra is a gilt brass sculpture that is dated middle eighteenth century by the authors. In addition, there is a gilt brass two-armed and one headed Sitātapatra in the Palace Museum of Beijing, and it is dated in the eighteenth or nineteenth century. See Wang Jiapeng 王家鹏, ed., *Zangchuan fojiao zaixiang* 藏传佛教造像 [Tibetan Buddhist Images], Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2003, fig. 254.

<sup>35</sup> See Liao Yang, "Hangzhou Feilaifeng Yuandai Fanwen shike bianshi", in Huo Wei and Li Yongxian, eds., *Xizang kaogu yu yishu*, pp. 296-297.

who holds a great white parasol, emerging from the Uṣṇīṣa of all Buddhas” 一切如来顶髻中出大白伞盖佛母。

The function and power of Sitātapatra relies on her parasol. According to scriptures, Sitātapatra is one form of the Buddhas' mother.<sup>36</sup> The white parasol she holds is derived from a canopy, a type of implement used during solemn ceremonies of great powerful kings in ancient India.<sup>37</sup> Buddhism appropriated the canopy as a symbol of Buddha's power, and the meaning of Sitātapatra is “white parasol” or “canopy.” White is a symbol of pureness, so the white parasol symbolizes Buddhas' pure character that reaches out to all sentient beings.<sup>38</sup> The white parasol can radiate light to illuminate the universe without making sentient beings suffer, but rather acts to release their sins.<sup>39</sup> Tibetan Buddhism also indicates that when the Buddhas' Mother holds this miraculous white parasol, it can benefit sentient beings in unimaginable ways.<sup>40</sup>

The Feilaifeng Sitātapatra is an early example of the iconography of this deity. The Sitātapatra sits in a lotus posture and wears a bodhisattva-style crown and dress, all of which have characteristics similar to those of other Tibetan-style bodhisattva images at Feilaifeng, indicating a date to the Yuan period. She bends her right arm slightly and stretches it to the lower left with her right hand in abhaya [no fear] mudrā. Her left hand holds a parasol slightly above and to her left. Most of the extant examples of Sitātapatra images were produced after the fifteenth century, and some two-armed images of this deity have gestures similar to number 52 figure.<sup>41</sup> The Feilaifeng Sitātapatra, therefore, is a precious example for studying the origin of this deity's iconography in Tibetan-style Buddhist art.

The features of the Feilaifeng Sitātapatra correspond to a description from an esoteric sutra for the cultivation of the dharma of this deity. Translated from Tibetan into Chinese in the Yuan period, the sutra states that if a person would like to practice the dharma of Sitātapatra, he should sit on a soft felt in a quiet chamber. Then he should pray in order to release all sentient beings from their transmigrations and for his enlightenment. After the prayer, he should contemplate the assembly of Sitātapatra, sincerely incant to devote himself to the Three Precious Ones — Buddha, Dharma,

<sup>36</sup> See *Da baisan gai zongchi tuoluoni jing* 大白伞盖总持陀罗尼经, translated by Yuan dynasty monks Junbian 俊辨 and Zhenzhi 真智, *Taishō* 19. 406b.

<sup>37</sup> See chapter three of *Ji gudu zhangzhe nv dedu yinyuan jing* 给孤独长者女得度因缘经, translated by Northern Song monk Shihu 施护, *Taishō* 02. 851a.

<sup>38</sup> This explanation can be seen in chapter five of *Fanyi mingyiji* 翻译名义集 by the Song monk Fayun 法云, *Taishō* 54. 1131c.

<sup>39</sup> See chapter one of *Yizi foding lunwang jing* 一字佛顶轮王经, translated by Tang dynasty monk Bodhiruci, *Taishō* 19. 227c.

<sup>40</sup> For more information about the power of Sitātapatra, see *Da baisan gai zongchi tuoluoni jing*, *Taishō* 19. 404c; *Foding da baisan gai tuoluoni jing* 佛顶大白伞盖陀罗尼经 translated by the Yuan dynasty monk Sha-lo-pa, *Taishō* 19. 403ab. Both of these two sutras were translated from Tibetan into Chinese.

<sup>41</sup> Such as a gilt brass Sitātapatra from the Palace Museum of Beijing, see Wang Jiapeng, ed., *Zangchuan fojiao zaoxiang*, fig. 254.

and Sangha. When the assembly becomes rays of light, it will illuminate his body and makes his body also rays of light. Then the person should continuously incant and contemplate the universal emptiness. After contemplating the white Sanskrit letter Om, a spell with mystic power of salvation from the lower paths of transmigration, the letter becomes the golden staff of the white parasol, then the Sitātapatra. Sitātapatra has a slender body, two arms, and one head with three eyes. She sits in the lotus posture and her right hand performs the mudra. Meanwhile, her left hand holds a white parasol in front of her chest.<sup>42</sup> The similar features between the description of the sutra and the Feilaifeng figure are not necessary supporting that the latter must have the same function for Buddhists' practice as mentioned in the former. However, the Sitātapatra in niche number 52 could demonstrate a visual appearance served for the practitioners' imagination on the deity's features, when they cultivated themselves in quiet chambers as required by the sutra. On the other hand, the Feilaifeng figure also could perform the patron's merit with his devoted prayer for a certain purpose, or a similar goal as mentioned in the sutra. Accordingly, the original Tibetan version of this sutra was probably the textual source for the production of the Feilaifeng sculpture.

Worship practices related to Sitātapatra flourished in the Yuan period capital, Dadu. A Chinese text indicates that an image of Sitātapatra and other figures were installed on the main level of the White Stupa, a national artistic project designed by A'nige, suggesting an important role of this deity under Mongol rule.<sup>43</sup> In addition, The History of the Yuan records that in 1270 the first Imperial Protector, vPhags-pa (1235-1280), installed a white parasol above the throne of Khubilai Khan. This implied that he conferred the power equivalent to that of Sitātapatra upon the emperor, endowing the imperial court with spiritual strength. After that year, the Yuan court performed a ritual for Sitātapatra once a year, integrating the significance of this deity into people's social life.<sup>44</sup> Probably the work of Feilaifeng was commissioned under this religious circumstance, with the similar meaning of the images produced in Dadu.

### **Tārā, Mother of Buddhas from the Eyes of Avalokiteśvara**

Buddhist texts tell us that Tārā, the fourth Mother of Buddhas seen at Feilaifeng, was born from the eyes of Avalokiteśvara. She can see the original nature of the dharma, so she was called Universal Eyes [Ch. *Puyan* 普眼].<sup>45</sup> Duoluo 多罗, with the

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<sup>42</sup> See *Da baidan gai zongchi tuoluoni jing* in *Taishō* 19. 404a.

<sup>43</sup> See Su Bai, *Zangchuan fojiao siyuan kaogu*, p. 330.

<sup>44</sup> See Song Lian, *Yuanshi*, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1976, chapter 77, 1926.

<sup>45</sup> See chapter two of *Da piluzhe'na chengfo shenbian jiachi jing lianhua taizang putichuang biaozhi putong zhenyanzang guangda chengjiu yujia* 大毗卢遮那成佛神变加持经莲华胎藏菩提幢标帜普通真言藏广大成就瑜伽, compiled by Tang dynasty monk Faquan 法全, *Taishō* 18. 153c.



meaning of eyes, is Chinese transliteration of Tārā that has been used as early as the Tang period.<sup>46</sup> Her Universal Eyes can accept the Buddha and his dharma and bring all kinds of sentient beings into the fold of the Buddhas.<sup>47</sup> She often intervenes to help sentient beings at precisely the right time, neither early nor late. Therefore, she is represented as a middle-aged woman, neither too old nor too young.<sup>48</sup> Her religious function focuses on rescuing and delivering people from eight types of disasters,<sup>49</sup> including lions, elephants, fire, snakes, thieves, prison, seas, and ghosts.<sup>50</sup> As a result, at least by the Yuan period, the name Jiudu Fomu 救度佛母, the Mother of Buddhas, the Savior and Deliverer, had been used by monks in Buddhist texts to refer to Tārā.<sup>51</sup>



**Fig. 8 Amitāyus with Mañjuśrī and Tārā.**  
Yuan period (1271-1368), dated 1292; Niche no. 99 of Feilaifeng;  
From Gao Nianhua, ed., *Feilaifeng zaixiang*, fig. 89.

The attributes of the Tārā to the right of the Amitāyus in niche number 99 (dated 1292) at Feilaifeng identify her as Green Tārā (Fig. 8). As preceding description from a sutra, this Tārā looks like a middle-aged woman, stylistically similar to the Mañjuśrī to the left of Amitāyus. She tilts her torso slightly to the right and she tilts her head to

<sup>46</sup> See chapter five of *Da piluzhe'na chengfo jingshu* 大毗卢遮那成佛经疏, translated by Tang dynasty monk Yixing (683 or 673-727), *Taishō* 39. 632b.

<sup>47</sup> See chapter five of *Da piluzhe'na chengfo jingshu*, *Taishō* 39. 632b.

<sup>48</sup> See chapter five of *Da piluzhe'na chengfo jingshu*, *Taishō* 39. 632b.

<sup>49</sup> See *Sheng jiudu fomu ershiyi zhong lizan jing* 圣救度佛母二十一种礼赞经, translated by Yuan dynasty monk Anzang 安藏, *Taishō* 20. 479b.

<sup>50</sup> See chapter one of *Foshuo yiqie foshe xiangying dajiao wang jing sheng guan zizai puta niansong yigui* 佛说一切佛摄相应大教王经圣观自在菩萨念诵仪轨, translated by Northern Song monk Faxian 法贤 (trans. 980-1000), *Taishō* 20. 66c. For more information about Tārā, see Stephan Beyer, *The Cult of Tārā: Magic and Ritual in Tibet*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1973.

<sup>51</sup> See *Sheng jiudu fomu ershiyi zhong lizan jing*, *Taishō* 20. 479b.



the left. Her pose is one of royal ease (*lalitasana*), with her left leg bent and her right leg pendant, leaning on the lotus. Her left hand (damaged) holds a long-stemmed lotus in front of her chest, and the lotus flower is carved to the left of her shoulder. Meanwhile, she rests her right hand on her right knee, with her palm facing upward in a boon-granting gesture (*varada mudrā*). Another lotus appears from behind the right side of the deity. According to Esoteric Buddhist texts, Tārā has twenty-one forms. Green Tārā is the most important form among the twenty-one Tārā-s. An illustration of Green Tārā from a sutra features iconographic characteristics similar to the number 99 Tārā figure.<sup>52</sup> One can imagine that the original color of the body of the number 99 Tārā was probably green that has already been faded.

Other Buddhist texts translated into Han Chinese (from the Tang to Song periods) also describe similar features of a Tārā image as the Green Tārā of number 99, as well as their symbolic meanings. Green Tārā's green body is symbolic of her ability to subdue enemies.<sup>53</sup> She holds a blue lotus flower with her right hand, and her left hand forms a boon-granting *mudrā*.<sup>54</sup> The blue lotus flower she holds symbolizes purity.<sup>55</sup> Alternately, she holds a green lotus flower in her left hand, and holds treasures in her right hand.<sup>56</sup> *Utterances on the Sutra of Image-making and Iconometry*, a standard text for the production of Tibetan-style images, says that she sits with her right leg pendant and forms a boon-grant in *mudrā* with her right hand.<sup>57</sup> Obviously, the Green Tārā in number 99 fits into the general descriptions of Esoteric Buddhist texts about this deity.

In addition to scriptures, the Tārā figure in number 99 is also similar to other Green Tārā images in Tibetan or Tibetan-style Buddhist art. The four gilt brass Green Tārā figures in the Palace Museum in Beijing were presented to the Qing court during the Qianlong period (1736-1795). All had been made before the sixteenth century in Tibet and India and are identified by attached yellow strips of paper (Fig. 9).<sup>58</sup> They have similar poses, gestures, attributes, and body styles to those of the Feilaifeng one. Two individual Green Tārā figures at Feilaifeng with similar iconographic and stylistic characteristics as the Green Tārā figure from number 99 are formed in niches numbers 76 and 100.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>52</sup> See *Sheng jiudu fomu ershiyi zhong lizan jing*, *Taishō* 20. 479c.

<sup>53</sup> See chapter five of *Da piluzhe'na chengfo jingshu* by Yixing, *Taishō* 39. 632b.

<sup>54</sup> See chapter two of *Putichang suoshuo yiziding lunwang jing* 菩提場所說一字頂輪王經, translated by Amoghavajra, *Taishō* 19. 199b.

<sup>55</sup> See chapter five of *Da piluzhe'na chengfo jingshu*, *Taishō* 39. 632b.

<sup>56</sup> See chapter one of *Foshuo yiqie foshe xiangying dajiaowang jing sheng guanzizai pusa niansong yigui*, translated by Faxian, *Taishō* 20. 66b.

<sup>57</sup> See chapter one of *Foshuo zaoxiang liangdu jingjie* 佛說造像量度經解 [Utterances on the Sutra of Image-making and Iconometry], translated by the Qing dynasty figure Gongbu Chabu, *Taishō* 21. 948c, 949c.

<sup>58</sup> Zhongguo zangchuan fojiao diaosu quanji bianji weiyuan hui, ed., *Zhongguo zangchuan fojiao diaosu quanji-2-Jintongfo 1*, pp. 14, 15, 28, 52; figs. 34, 35, 71, 134.

<sup>59</sup> See Gao Nianhua, ed., *Feilaifeng zaoxiang*, figs. 153, 154.



**Fig. 9 Green Tārā with yellow strip.**  
**Dated ca. 10th century; Brass; Palace Museum in Beijing;**  
**From Wang Jiapeng, ed., *Zangchuan fojiao zaixiang*, fig. 42.**

The iconographic characteristics of the Green Tārā figures at Feilaifeng can also be traced back to Nepal and India. A Nepalese painting in the collection of the Cleveland Museum of Art, for instance, depicts a Green Tārā sitting in a niche, sharing a similar pose and gesture with the Green Tārā figures from number 76, 99, and 100 at Feilaifeng. Pal dated this painting to the fourteenth century. One difference between the painted Tārā and the Feilaifeng figures is the gesture of the Green Tārā from Cleveland: she blesses a seated monk with her right hand.<sup>60</sup> Although the Green Tārā painting of the Cleveland is later than the figures of the same deity at Feilaifeng, it represents a tradition of depicting the same type of Green Tārā images in Nepal. Green Tārā sculptures iconographically similar to the Feilaifeng figures were also found from India, such as a bronze Green Tārā figure dated the twelfth century from eastern India in the collection of the British Museum in London, and a stone Green Tārā sculpture dated the eighth century in the collection of National Museum in New Delhi, suggesting another possibility of the origin of Feilaifeng Tārā figures.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Pratapaditya Pal, *Nepal: Where the Gods are Young*, New York: The Asia Society, 1975, p. 81; fig. 40.

<sup>61</sup> See David L. Snellgrove, ed., *The Image of the Buddha*, fig. 222 (the editor identifies this figure as a Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara); Pratapaditya Pal, *The Arts of Nepal, Pst 1*, fig. 219.