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From Aniruddha to Upāli—Examining the Compilation of the Sutra of the Buddha’s Mother and the Formation of Chinese Buddhist Scriptures

Xi Li

School of Philosophy, Beijing Normal University, Beijing 100875, China; limoyuxi1987@163.com

Abstract: *The Sutra of the Buddha’s Mother* (*Fomu jing* 佛母經), a Chinese Buddhist scripture, is closely linked to the *Mahāmāyā Sutra* (*Mohe Moye jing* 摩訶摩耶經). However, there is a significant difference between the two *sutras* regarding the narrative story of the Buddha’s nirvana and meeting with his mother, namely the difference in the disciple who travels to Trāyastriṃśa Heaven to inform the Buddha’s mother. The substitution of Aniruddha with Upāli could be attributed to Upāli’s inclusion in Tang dynasty commentaries on “Ānanda Asking the Buddha Four Questions,” where he is depicted as a prominent disciple in the gathering prior to the Buddha’s nirvana. This narrative preference was also reflected in the *Mohe Moye jing*. To a certain extent, this confusion reflects the process of ‘between translation and composition,’ or the compiling and mixing of various texts from different *sutras* and sources to create a new scripture in the Chinese context. In the nirvana images, which contain the inscriptions, the presence of Upāli becomes an important symbol for identifying the classical texts on which the frescoes were painted.

Keywords: *Sutra of the Buddha’s Mother*; *Mahāmāyā Sutra*; Buddhist Apocryphal Sutras



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1. Introduction

The *Fomu jing* 佛母經 [*Sutra of the Buddha’s Mother*, T2919], a Chinese-written scripture or *sutra*, describes the story of the Buddha ordering his disciples to ascend to the Trāyastriṃśa Heaven to invite the Buddha’s mother to meet him before his nirvana. Scholars have investigated and compiled sixty existing documents and fragments, which can be divided into six systems (numbered below as A, B, C, D...) of the sources of this *sutra*.¹ From the richness of its surviving texts,² and the *sutra*’s long span of time in formation, we can gain a glimpse of how widely this *sutra* circulated throughout its history. Additionally, it has been confirmed that the large-scale mural found in the Dunhuang grottoes portraying the scene of the Buddha’s nirvana bears close links to this *sutra*, highlighting its popularity well into the Tang dynasty.

Numerous scholars have suggested a connection between the origin and development of the *Fomu jing*³ and the *Mohe Moye jing* 摩訶摩耶經 [*Mahāmāyā-sutra**, T383], also possibly compiled in China.⁴ By conducting a systematic comparative study of these two *sutras*, this study identifies many similarities between them. However, significant differences persist in the details, such as the nightmares of the Buddha’s mother, what the Buddha said after his rebirth, and the mourning and grief of the Buddha’s mother, among others. Additionally, one aspect overlooked by scholars but deserving greater scrutiny is the disciple who conveyed the news of the Buddha’s nirvana to his mother in the Trāyastriṃśa Heaven.⁵

The reasons for this difference are complex. In various Buddhist commentaries of the Tang and Song dynasties, the *Mohe Moye jing* was also quoted under the name of *Dashu jing* 大術經 to explain the reason why ‘Thus I have heard’ was placed at the beginning of the *Sutra*. On one hand, Upāli appeared among the monks who let Ānanda to ask four questions before the Buddha’s nirvana. On the other hand, the *Dashu jing* was mixed into the *sutra*

that recorded this matter. Upāli thus appeared in the assembly before the Buddha's nirvana and even became a key figure. This statement may have been widely accepted at the time the *Fomu Jing* was written, so when the scripture was compiled, the role of informer to the Buddha's mother was changed from Aniruddha to Upāli.

2. From Aniruddha to Upāli

In T383, Aniruddha informed the Buddha's mother about the Tathagata's entry into nirvana. However, in the various systems of the *Fomu Jing*, Upāli takes the role. This subtle difference is a crucial indicator of which *sutra* the murals in Dunhuang grottoes cave 148 and cave 44 depicting the Buddha's nirvana are based on. Coincidentally, in the *Konjaku Monogatarishū* 今昔物語, *Tenjiku section*, which is a collection of folktales from Japan's Heian Period (794–1185), it was Ānanda who informed the Buddha's mother. Nevertheless, at the end of the *Konjaku Monogatarishū* 今昔物語, it suggests that the story is from the *Fo lin muzi xiangjian jing* 佛臨母子相見經 [the *Sutra of Buddha [Nearing Nirvana] and the Reunion between Mother and Son*], noting that the source is the second juan of the *Mohe Moye jing*. Ānanda is a recurring character in the *sutra* and holds significant importance in the Buddha's nirvana; thus, it is not difficult to understand this change happening throughout the transmission of the *Konjaku Monogatarishū*. In comparison, the reason why Upāli, who does not appear in the *Mohe Moye jing*, holds a distinguished position in the *Fomu jing* may be more complex and difficult to explain.

Before discussing how Upāli became the informant disciple in the *Fomu jing*, it may be worthwhile to examine another crucial instance where he appears, which is when Buddha delivered the Dharmas. Unlike the consistent context of the informant role, there are variations within different versions of the *Fomu jing* concerning the documentation of how the Buddha instructed things following his nirvana.

In system A, the Buddha first instructed all the righteous Dharmas to Upāli, all the *sutra* collections to Ānanda, and all the 'pure precepts' to Kāśyapa, and said, "If Kāśyapa were to come, tell him that the Buddha will not meet him" 若迦葉來，道佛不見。In the subsequent texts, the Buddha inquired where Ānanda was and learned that he was placed under a spell by demons. The Buddha commanded Mañjuśrī to rescue Ānanda using a spell (*dhāraṇī*). Ānanda was rescued and brought to the Buddha's location where he explained why he was trapped and confessed that he did not need to live this life for a kalpa. After this paragraph, the phrase "Thus have I heard" ["如是我聞"] appears in the *sutra*, and mentions the time and location of the Buddha's nirvana, as well as his arrangement of Dharmas to the public: "All the *sutra* collections were entrusted to Ānanda, all the pure precepts were entrusted to Kāśyapa". 一切經書，付囑阿難。戒律文章，悉付迦葉。Although Upāli was still the one who went up to Trāyastriṃśa Heaven and informed the Buddha's mother, he was not instructed with any *sutras* or Dharmas. Thus, the repeated and contradictory content in the same *sutra*, with the different writing structure, indicates that the so-called system A is indeed the product of two textual sources or scriptures bound by the phrase "Thus have I heard".⁶

The first part of the text of system A can be identified as being derived from the Chapter C on Kauṇḍinya of the Northern edition of the *Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra* 北本大般涅槃經. Upon thorough comparison, it becomes evident that the latter is an abbreviated rendition of the former.

The preceding texts of system B are no longer extant and thus cannot be analyzed.

In system C, the record of how the Buddha assigns *sutras* and perceptions is identical to the second part of system A. On the other hand, system C adds "now I have been invited by the demons" 今已受天魔所請 to the messages that the Buddha requested Upāli to report.

System D does not mention how the *sutras* and perceptions are instructed. A significant difference in system D from other systems is that Kāśyapa and Ānanda do not meet the Buddha. This implies that Upāli is the only disciple in the scene and, therefore, is highlighted. Moreover, system D is the most widely accepted of all six systems.

When considering the process of changing the informant from Aniruddha to Upāli, the first part of system A in the *Fomu jing* suggests it may be related to the Buddha's instructions before his nirvana. However, two issues arise.

Firstly, as a Chinese scripture, the so-called line stating "[the Buddha] instructed all the righteous Dharmas were entrusted to Upāli, all the *sūtra* collections were entrusted to Ānanda, and all the pure perceptions were entrusted to Kāśyapa" is different from the consensus of traditional Buddhist narratives.

It is generally believed that Upāli should be instructed with the 'upholding Dharmas'. This statement can be observed in various Buddhist scriptures.

For instance, as mentioned in the *Za ahan Jing* 雜阿含經 [Skt. *Samyukta Āgama*]: "At that time, the Venerable Upāli and other monastics were walking in the area, obeying all the restrictions of Dharmas".⁷ The *Zengyi Ahan jing* 增壹阿含經 [Skt. *Ekottarika Āgama*] also states, "Upāli was the best at upholding Dharmas, never violated or breached any restrictions".⁸ In the commentary book of the *Ekottarika Āgama*, *Fenbie Gongde Lun* 分別功德論 [Skt. *Punya-vibhaṅga*], the author made a further explanation of Upāli being the best disciple at upholding Dharmas. His first was the court barber, wherein he shaved the heads of royalty and wealthy families; the Buddha preached to him about the Dharmas so that he became an Arhat and, therefore, was admired by others. It also emphasized "since Upāli was ordained by the Buddha, he never violated the Dharmas, therefore he was the best." At the same time, this scripture recorded another story: "Upāli asked the Buddha permission to drink alcohol for another sick monastic". After this monastic recovered, Upāli preached and helped him attain enlightenment. The Buddha, therefore, praised him as "really good at upholding Dharmas," and entrusted him Dharma collections.⁹

Secondly, it is worth noting that most versions of the *Fomu jing* available today do not contain the deception of Upāli being instructed with Dharmas as in the first part of the system A. In other systems, Upāli appears to have naturally existed among the important disciples who were present around the Buddha before his nirvana. This contrasts with the previous scriptures' records regarding the Buddha's nirvana. Through the previous discussion, it is evident that Aniruddha, Ānanda, and Kāśyapa are the only disciples of the Buddha who are explicitly named, apart from Subhadra, the last disciple, and the fan-bearer Brahmana. Of the three, Aniruddha is notable for being the first disciple with "clairvoyance" and an important preacher after the Buddha's nirvana. This is why in the *Mohe Moye jing*, he was tasked to go to Trāyastriṃśa Heaven to meet the Buddha's mother. But how did Upāli, who is not featured in other works, raise the question of how and why he was included? This topic deserves further discussion and investigation.

3. *Dashu Jing* and "Ask four Questions"

Generally, classical Chinese texts are compiled from various works from previous generations, not limited to a specific *sūtra*. These scriptures may have different records on a particular issue and may have variations during the process of transmission. This situation could be the reason for the substitution from Aniruddha to Upāli.

Firstly, various Buddhist commentaries commonly use the alternative name *Dashu Sūtra* 大術經 when referring to the content of *Mohe Moye jing*. For example, Huizhao 慧沼 of Dayun temple in Zizhou wrote *Nengxian Zhongbian Huiji Lun* 能顯中邊慧日論 (c. 714): "Furthermore, the *Dashu Sūtra* was completed after the Buddha's nirvana; [the Buddha] preaches the Dharmas to his mother is not it harder to believe but more thorough? And it stated that the Buddha came back alive from nirvana to repay his mother's kindness. Ānanda asked for the name of this teaching and was answered "the *Sūtra of Buddha [Nearing Nirvana] and the Reunion between Mother and Son*", to proclaim for the next generations. This *sūtra* can explain the concept of repaying kindness".¹⁰ From Huizhao's summary, it is certain that the *Dashu Sūtra* is the same as the *Mohe Moye jing*. Another example can be found from Zhizhou's 智周 writing the *Fahua jing xuanzan sheshi* 法華經玄贊攝釋: "Question: According to *Dashu Sūtra*, the Buddha repaid his mother's kindness, expounded the Dharmas to his mother in Trāyastriṃśa Heaven, such words were said only when Buddha was fac-

ing death. Now the time is separated, how can we understand it? Answer: It begins from expounding the Dharma in the heaven, till the golden coffin was reopened. It all constitutes one sutra. Just like the *Avatamsaka Sutra* and *Mahaparinirvāṇa-sutra*, there are plenty of examples in this category”.¹¹ Moreover, in Ruli’s 如理 collection *Cheng weishi lun shuyiyān* 成唯識論疏義演, it states: “Just as *Dashu Sutra* states, the Buddha ascended Trāyāstrimśa Heaven, preached Dharmas to his mother. When he came back, he preached the *Nirvana Sutra* and entered nirvana. Queen Māyā already descended, so the Buddha rose from the golden coffin and preached to his mother. Although there are repeated preaches, there is a clear time progress. All of the Buddha’s preachings to his mother are compiled in the *Dashu Sutra*”.¹² In Qifu’s 栖復 work *Fahua jing xuanzan yaoji* 法華經玄贊要集, he made a clear explanation of two names of the sutra: “Where the preaches from, the *Dashu Sutra*, is the *Mohe Moye jing*. ‘Maha’ translates to ‘Da’, while ‘Māyā’ translates to ‘Shu’, signifying ‘Queen Māyā’ is the mother of the Buddha, known as ‘Dashu’. He ascended to heaven, lived for three months, preached for ninety days, making the *Dashu Sutra*”.¹³

Secondly, the *Dashu Sutra* was referenced in commentaries in the Tang and later periods to elucidate the origin of the *sutra*’s opening phrase “Thus have I heard”. Kuiji writes in his work *Amituo Jing Tongzanshu* 阿彌陀經通贊疏: “The origin of this phrase is found in the *Dashu Sutra*. When the Buddha approached nirvana, Upāli and Aniruddha asked Ānanda to ask four questions: Firstly, who would be the teacher of monastic after the Buddha? Secondly, where should they reside? Thirdly, how to punish deviant monastics? Fourthly, what should be included at the beginning of all the *sutras* and collections? The Buddha answered: after my nirvana, take Pratimuksha as your master; stop at the four foundations of mindfulness; deviant monastics should not be beaten or scolded, just ignore them; put “Thus have I heard” in the beginning of all *sutras* and collections”.¹⁴ Also in Kuiji’s 窺基 work *Miaofalianhua jing xuanzan* 妙法蓮華經玄贊 it states: “the *Dashu* and other *sutras* talk about the origin”.¹⁵ In the *Fahua jing xuanzan yaoji* 法華經玄贊要集, Qifu 栖復 explains, that other *sutras* include the *Cremation Sutra* 闍維經, *Lü zang zhuan* 律藏傳, *Fu fa zang zhuan* 付法藏傳, the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-sāstra* 智度論 indicating that the *Dashu Sutra* and the other so-called scriptures are mixed to construct a comprehensive summary and annotation”. In the *Renwang Huguo Bore Boluomiduo Jing Shu* 仁王護國般若波羅蜜多經疏 Liangben 良賁 writes that “It was the *Dashu Sutra* that recorded disciples asking the Buddha four questions”.

However, in the current version of the *Mohe Moye jing*, it does not include the section where four questions are asked and the phrase “Thus have I heard” is also not present at the beginning.

In Yurong’s 遇榮 work, the *Renwangjing shu fahengchao* 仁王經疏法衡鈔 where he cites the *Dashu Sutra*, there are also plots that we do not see in today’s *Mohe Moye jing*.

“The Buddha said to Ānanda, ‘Go to the back of the garden and practice meditation’. Following the instructions, Ānanda proceeded to sit under a tree and contemplated. As he fell asleep, he dreamed that there was a tree with a flourishing crown and towering trunk. All living beings are dependent on this tree to gather flowers and eat fruits in order to maintain life. Suddenly a strong wind blew the tree down, and all the branches, leaves, flowers, and fruits were scattered. Ānanda was startled and alarmed, knowing that the dream was ominous. So he went to the Buddha and recounted his dream. The Buddha responded: ‘I will enter the phase of annihilation, I have asked you three times and you still haven’t answered, so why bother talking about dreams?’ Ānanda wept inconsolably and was utterly helpless. Aniruddha told Ānanda: ‘Everything is impermanent and subject to destruction. The supreme Dharma king is about to fade away. The deepest Dharma river will evaporate, the light of the Dharma will soon be extinguished. The Dharma mountain will collapse, the Dharma boat will sink, the Dharma bridge will all be destroyed, the Dharma building will fall, the Dharma tree will break, good friends will be gone, the great terror will come, the Buddha’s day will be gone. You should not be worried like ordinary people; our master, the Buddha, has collected three Dharma treasures through all his hard work and gave them to you. If you are depressed, forgot the taste of the Buddha’s true

nectar, emotionlessly drifting in the storm of life and death, how can you escape from the sea of suffering? You can ask the Buddha about the future. How can being depressed help you? Once you are away from the supreme lord, who should you turn to if you still have doubts? Ānanda answered: ‘I am worried and troubled; how can I ask for advice?’ The venerable Wumie (Aniruddha) requested Ānanda to ask four questions in addition to asking whether Buddha could remain in this world instead of entering nirvana. Ānanda followed and said to the Buddha: ‘If Buddha demises, all saints would lose their dignity. Just like there are only stars without the moon in the night. If the Buddha is alive, all saints would be dignified, just like the moon is encircled by all the stars in the night.’ The Buddha answered Ānanda: ‘Meetings are followed by separations, life is followed by death. I have been invited to reach nirvana and I have chosen to accept. If you have other questions, just ask, I will answer.’ Therefore Ānanda asked four questions: who would be the teacher of monastics? Where to reside? How to publish deviant monastics? What to put in the beginning of all the sutras and collections?”¹⁶

This passage is also found in Qifu’s 栖復 *Fahua jing xuanzan yaoji* 法華經玄贊要集, but is not attributed to the *Dashu Sutra*. A comparison between the two works reveals several similarities, but Qifu’s text provides more detailed information than Yurong’s. The words that Aniruddha told Ānanda, from “supreme Dharma” to “the Buddhist days are coming to an end”, mostly are similar to so-called “sound from the void” from Dharmakṣema’s 曇無讖 *Da Boniepan jing* 大般涅槃經 [Skt. *Mahāparinirvāna-sūtra*].¹⁷ Examining its content, the first part describes that Ānanda had a nightmare, dreamed about a strong gust of wind toppling a tree. The Buddha informed him he had entered the phase of annihilation. This narrative can also be found in *Fang deng bo ni huan jing* 方等般泥洹經 and the *Sutra of the Four Children Absorption* 四童子三昧經, but it is absent from the *Mohe moye jing*.

While books and commentaries in the Tang dynasty mixed the story of Ānanda asking four questions into the *Dashu Sutra*, it also caused confusion about who was involved. People who believed it was Upāli who asked Buddha to ask Buddha had different references to the scriptures. For example, Kuiji’s 窺基 (632–682) *Miaofalianhua jing Xuanzan* 妙法蓮華經玄贊 states that when the Buddha was about to enter nirvana, he allowed disciples to ask questions and doubts, at the time, Upāli and Aniruddha requested Ānanda to ask four questions.¹⁸ In *Da Boreboluomiduo jing boreliqufen shuzan* 大般若波羅蜜多經般若理趣分述贊, he also wrote “[the] *Da Zhidu Lun* said it was Aniruddha who let Ānanda ask four questions, the *Da Bei jing* 大悲經 [Skt. *Mahākaruṇā-puṇḍarīka-sūtra*] said it was Upāli; now they said both Aniruddha and Upāli requested Ānanda to ask.”¹⁹ Meanwhile, by the Tang dynasty, other scholars had also identified this issue. In the *Shizhu miaoyan pin* 世主妙嚴品 of the *Xu Huayanjing Lueshu Kandingji* 續華嚴經略疏刊定記, Huiyuan 慧苑 (673-?) pointed out that “some scholars said, in the *Da Bei jing* 大悲經 [Skt. *Mahākaruṇā-puṇḍarīka-sūtra*], it was Upāli who let Ānanda ask questions; but I have examined the scripture and did not find the original text”.²⁰ Another example is Qifu’s collection, the *Fahua Jing Xuanzan Yaoji* 法華經玄贊要集, which states: “Question: the *Nirvana Sutra* stated Aniruddha let Ānanda ask the questions, the *Zhi du lun* 智度論 [Skt. *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-śāstra*] claimed that Upāli requested Ānanda to do so, why is there a difference in the two texts?” Answer: Both Upāli and Aniruddha were present at the gathering, both of them requested Ānanda to ask questions, so there is no conflict with each sutra making such a statement. Question: why couldn’t Aniruddha and Upāli ask the Buddha themselves? Answer: Ānanda was the head of the gathering, so he approached the Buddha and asked”.²¹ However, in the *Da zhidu lun*, we can see that Aniruddha asked Ānanda to ask the Buddha, not Upāli.

In summary, commentaries and texts in the Tang dynasty had multiple mystifications: Firstly, Upāli is involved in the story of Ānanda asking the Buddha four questions; that is, Upāli is presented in the gathering before the Buddha’s nirvana as an important disciple. Second is their source of reference, including the *Dashu Sutra*. For example, Daoyin 道胤 (668–740) wrote the *Yuzhu Jingtang bore boluomi jing xuanyan* 御注金剛般若波羅蜜經宣演, which says: “The origins are *Mohe moye jing*, *Da bei jing*, *Zhi du lun*, etc. The story is described in detail in these sutras. In the *Da bei jing*, Upāli asked Ānanda to ask the Buddha; in

the *Dashu* and other sutras Aniruddha asked Ānanda to ask. In fact, both of them requested Ānanda together, different sutras made different statements".²² The same explanation can also be seen in the *Fahua jing xuanzan jueze ji* 法華經玄贊決擇記.²³ Dingbin定賓, who was invited to Luoyang in 733, wrote in his work *Sifen lü Shu shi Zongyi ji* 四分律疏飾宗義記: In fascicle 2 of the *Zhi du lun*, it states that Aniruddha requested Ānanda to ask questions; in the *Da bei jing* 大悲經, Upāli did so; in the *Dashu Sutra*, both Aniruddha and Upāli asked Ānanda. So, in different sutras, they have different descriptions.²⁴ The *Yulanpen jing shu xiao heng chao* 盂蘭盆經疏孝衡鈔 written in the Song Dynasty stated: "[the] *Dashu Sutra* recorded that the Buddha was invited and nearing his entry into nirvana, Ānanda was deeply sorrowed. Upāli and other disciples requested Ānanda to ask questions about the arrangements after the Buddha's death, which is referred to as the so-called "ask[ing of the] four questions".²⁵

4. The Images of the *Fomu jing* and Upāli

It has been estimated that there are currently 20 extant sutra illustrations from the Tang dynasty in China.²⁶ The inclusion of the illustration stele of the Nirvana Sutra sponsored by Dong Ruxiang 董如相 and others at Dongdu Village 董杜村, Anyi County, brings the total number to 21. While Māyā is absent in the Dunhuang Caves 120, 225, and 185, she is represented in the illustrations of eight other caves, i.e., Cave ④ 332 from the early Tang dynasty, Caves ⑤ 130, ⑥ 39, ⑦ 46, and ⑧ 148 from the high Tang dynasty, as well as Caves ⑨ 44, ⑩ 92, and ⑪ 158 from the mid-Tang dynasty.

Cave 332, built during the early Tang dynasty, features a sequential illustration of the *Nirvana Sutra*, notably emphasizing episodes centering around the Buddha's mother, Queen Māyā. These include the revealing of Buddha's death to her, her coming as a mourner, her wailing at the coffin, the Buddha's rebirth and teaching to her, and her return to the Trāyastriṃśa Heaven. As previously noted, one of the main differences between the *Mahāmāyā Sutra* and the *Fomu Jing* is the bearer of the sad tidings. Inscriptions, which served to recapitulate the subject matter of the images, took form during the high Tang dynasty, influenced by earlier nirvana paintings. The presence of inscriptions clearly identifying the messenger of the Buddha's death allows us to ascertain that the *Fomu jing* is among the scriptures illustrated in these caves. Cave 148 from the high Tang period is one of the caves featuring cartouches identifying "Upāli" as the messenger.

In 776, the 11th year of the *Dali* era (766–779) under the reign of Emperor Daizong of Tang, the Li family of Dunhuang constructed Cave 148 and made a sequential illustration of the nirvana paintings over the cave's southern, western, and northern walls.²⁷ This cave has close relations with Cave 332, as its patron, Li Dabin 李大賓, was the grandnephew of Li Kerang 李克讓, the patron of Cave 332. Cave 332 was built in 698, the first year of the *Shengli* era (697–700) under the reign of Empress of Wu, at a pivotal historical juncture when the Tubo had already seized control of several prefectures in the Hexi and Longyou regions, with Shazhou and Guazhou facing peril. The Li family's belief in nirvana likely had a bearing on the thematic choices for the caves' paintings.

The illustration of the Nirvana Sutra comprises 66 episodes organized into ten groups.²⁸ The painting of "the Buddha entering nirvana" on the western wall portrays Upāli's ascent to the Trāyastriṃśa Heaven to spread word of the Buddha's death, alongside the scene of the Buddha's mother arriving on clouds to mourn her son, situated between a pair of sala trees. In the upper right corner, an inscription reads "Upāli went to the Trāyastriṃśa Heaven to inform Māyā that the World-Honored One entered the nirvana yesterday" 優波利往忉利天報摩耶夫人如來昨日入般涅槃 (Figure 1), corresponding to the image in the upper left of Figure 2.



Figure 1. Nirvana image in Mogao Cave 148.



Figure 2. Mogao Cave 148: The image of entering Nirvana.

During the mid-Tang period, Dunhuang endured Tubo occupation and governance for over six decades, coinciding with the construction of Caves 44, 92, 158, and 185, all featuring illustrations of the nirvana sutras.

The illustration mural within Cave 44, situated in the middle of the western wall, was painted during the mid-Tang period, albeit damaged and incomplete. The composition centers on Śākyamuni, with Māyā and her three attendants depicted on the southern side of the chamber. Adjacent to them, on the right, are five lines of inscriptions describing the six nightmares the Buddha's mother had the night before. On the right side of the inscriptions are Māyā and two attendants, facing Upāli (Figure 3), with an eight-line inscription

referencing Upāli's announcement of the Buddha's nirvana (Figure 4), which is largely the same in text as the fourth version of the *Fomu jing*.²⁹



Figure 3. Illustration of Māyā joining the mourning in the nirvana sutras in Mogao Cave 44 (1).

1. ...asked where the sage had come from and why he appeared so haggard, pale, 問聖人從何方來？顏容憔悴，面色無光。
2. and timid. At that time, Upāli sobbed and cried hoarsely. 狀似怯人。爾時優婆離哽咽聲嘶，
3. After a long time, he spoke that “Mother of the Buddha! Mother of the Buddha! My great teacher, the Tathagata 良久乃語，告言：“佛母！佛母！我如來大師
4. has relinquished his Dharma body and entered nirvana at midnight yesterday. Therefore, 昨夜子時，舍大法身，入般涅槃，故
5. he sent me here to tell his retinue. “When the mother of the Buddha heard these words, 遣我來，告諸眷屬。” 爾時佛母聞此語
6. she punched her whole body, like the collapse of Mount Sumeru, with blood all over her body. 以〔已〕，渾身自撲，〔狀似〕須彌山崩，遍體血現。
7. Like a scarlet Palāśa flower, she suffocated and fell to the ground. Then two goddesses 如波羅奢花，悶絕擗地。時有二天女，將
8. came and sprinkled water on her and she took a long time to recover. 水灑之，良久乃蘇。



Figure 4. Illustration of Māyā joining the mourning in the Nirvana Sutra in Mogao Cave 44 (2).

Depiction of the Nirvana motif and scenes featuring the Buddha's mother are still preserved within the Mogao Caves built during the Five Dynasties period, including Cave 61, constructed between 947 and 951 under the auspices of Cao Yuanzhong 曹元忠, military commissioner of the Returning to Righteousness Army, and his wife. Spanning the lower sections of the southern, western, and northern walls are 128 illustrations depicting various episodes from the Buddha's life, accompanied by a total of 128 inscriptions distributed across 33 screens. The ninth screen on the lower part of the northern wall illustrates "the resurrected Buddha delivering a sermon." In the four-line inscription on the left we read (Figure 5):

1. At that time, as instructed by the World-Honored One, Upāli ascended to the Trāyastriṃśā Heaven to inform Māyā of his nirvana. 爾時優波離奉世尊敕語往忉利天請摩耶以聞世尊滅
2. Māyā raised her hands in the air and pounded her chest like five Mounts Sumeru torn asunder. Blood cascaded over her body. She swooned and fell to the ground, and did not awake until after a long, deep coma. 度渾塹自撲如五須彌山崩遍體血現悶絕擗地良久乃惺（醒）爾
3. When the mother of the Buddha came from the heaven with her attendants to the sala tree grove, she saw that the golden coffin had been buried. 時佛母將諸眷屬從天下來至娑羅林間乃見金棺收斂已

4. When this was finished, she mournfully circumambulated the coffin dozens of times, lamenting, “How distressing, how awful this is!” 畢悲泣繞棺凡數十匝唱言嗚呼苦哉嗚呼苦哉



Figure 5. Image of Nirvana in events of the Buddha’s life in Mogao Cave 61 (1) URL (accessed on 1 November 2023) <https://www.e-dunhuang.com/cave/10.0001/0001.0001.0061>.

The text within the inscriptions is almost identical with that found in S.4270v.

Gong Weizhang 公維章 named S.4270v as “Copy of the Original Inscriptions of the Image of Nirvana in the Events of the Buddha’s Life in Mogao Cave 61” 莫高窟第 61 窟《佛傳·涅槃圖》榜題底稿抄件, arguing that it is a copy rather than the original manuscript due to its omission of the screen number and its placement on the back of a paper, likely undertaken by a monastery student as part of his daily copying exercise.³⁰

A close reading shows that the content of the cartouche text originated from the *Fomu jing*.

We can also see that the imagery depicted within the inscriptions, such as the Buddha’s mother’s descent from heaven, the coffining, and her circumambulation, were painted on the upper part of the eighth screen. This intentional separation of text from imagery within the screen form not only aligns with prevalent painting practices of the era but also reflects the stylization of the Dunhuang mural creation under the Cao family’s Returning to Righteousness Army regime. In terms of details, the Nirvana painting in Cave 61 exhibits clear influence from the illustration of the *Nirvana Sutra* found in Cave 148 from the high Tang dynasty, as discussed earlier (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Image of Nirvana in events of the Buddha’s life in Mogao Cave 61 (2).

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, in the texts and commentaries from the Tang and Song dynasties discussing the origin of the phrase “Thus have I heard” and the story of Ānanda asking the four questions, a slightly confusing albeit widely accepted theory has emerged: The *Dashu Sutra*, which is the *Mohe Moye jing*, included a plot with Upāli requesting Ānanda to ask questions. These texts and commentaries have combined and mixed narratives from previous scriptures and constructed a scenario in which Upāli, Aniruddha, and Ānanda are all gathered at the Buddha’s nirvana. Since the *Fomu jing* has been popular since the middle of the eighth century,³¹ the compiled version of it has added an array of contexts from other sutras based on the *Mohe Moye jing*. Hence, in that situation, it was not surprising that Upāli was added to the gathering before the Buddha’s nirvana and was appointed to Trāyastriṃśa Heaven to inform Buddha’s mother.

Furthermore, in the examples provided, we analyzed the transition from Aniruddha to Upāli within visual representations. This detail plays an indicative role in showing the compilation process of the *Fomu jing*, reflecting an eclectic mix of various scriptures and annotations. Particularly notable are the illustrations depicting the Buddha’s life, characterized by extensive inscription texts, revealing the complexity of the scripture on which they were based. In this context, Upāli appears as a telltale marker of the illustrated scripture. Thus, elucidating the process and potential motives behind the transition from Aniruddha to Upāli holds profound importance not only for understanding the formation of Chinese scriptures but also for gaining unique insights into the visualization of Buddhist scriptures in ancient China.

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Notes

¹ See M. Wang (2021, pp. 168–73).

² For information on the manuscripts of the *Fomu jing*, refer to (Imre Galambos 2020, pp. 62–64).

³ As for the *Fomu jing*, Japanese scholar Keiki Yabuki 矢吹慶輝 introduced it in the book *Meisa yoin kaisetsu* 鳴沙餘韻解説 [Explanations of the Meisa Yoin], and Kawasaki Michiko 川崎ミチコ also made relevant research; refer to Kawasaki (1987). Li Jining 李際寧 compared the differences of the nightmare, heavenly daughter’s name, mourning, impermanence, saying, and so on in different versions of the *Fomu jing* and thought that it was influenced by the Central Asian background in the process of merging

with the *Mahāmāyā Sutra* to form a new scripture. At the same time, it also combines Buddhist reincarnation thought, Chinese traditional gratitude thought, and filial piety. Refer to J. Li (1996). Du Doucheng 杜斗城 and Zhang Ying 張穎 pointed out that the *Mahāmāyā Sutra* and the *Fomu jing* were regarded by Dunhuang people at that time as important scriptures for eliminating disasters and praying for blessings, especially the latter had become an important part of writing scriptures for “my wife”; refer to Du and Zhang (2012). Li Xiaorong 李小榮 noticed that there are great differences in words among the four editions of the *Fomu jing* and pointed out that these editions were written not by one person but according to different needs; refer to X. Li (2012).

4 As for *Mahāmāyā Sutra*, Tanjing 曇景 of Southern Qi Dynasty was regarded as its translator in all previous dynasties. However, some scholars have questioned the nature of the *sutra*. Refer to Masanobu (1954).

5 Although Kawasaki Michiko 川崎ミチコ noticed this difference, she did not further explore the reasons for its formation; see Kawasaki (2019).

6 See (J. Li 1995, pp. 376–77).

7 *Za ahan Jing*, T no. 99, 2: 115b11-13.

8 *Zengyi Ahan Jing*, T no. 125, 2: 557c19-20.

9 *Fenbie Gongde Lun*, T no. 1507, 25: 46b13-c22.

10 *Nengxian Zhongbian Huiri Lun*, T no. 1863, 45: 412b14-18.

11 *Fahua Jing Xuanzan Sheshi*, X no. 636, 34: 31c16-19.

12 *Cheng Weishi Lun Shuyiyuan*, X no. 815, 49: 480c22-481a1.

13 *Fahua Jing Xuanzan Yaoji*, X no. 638, 34: 313b8-10.

14 *Amituo Jing Tongzanshu*, T no. 1758, 331b6-14.

15 *Miaofalian hua Jing Xuanzan*, T no. 1723, 34: 662a5-6.

16 *Renwangjing Shu Fahengchao*, X no. 519, 26: 442a16-b13.

17 *Da Boniepan Jing*, T no. 375, 12: 723a27-b4.

18 *Miaofalian hua Jing Xuanzan*, T no. 1723, 34: 662a7.

19 *Da Boreboluomiduo Jing Boreliqufen Shuzan*, T no. 1695, 33: 27a24-25.

20 *Xu Huayanjing Lueshu Kandingji*, X no. 221, 3: 598a11.

21 *Fahua Jing Xuanzan Yaoji*, X no. 638, 34: 314b9-12.

22 *Yuzhu Jinggāngboreboluomi Jing Xuanyan*, T no. 2733, 85: 19b15-18.

23 *Fahuajing Xuanzan Juezeji*, X no. 637, 34: 154c1-3.

24 *Sifenlv Shushi Zongyiji*, X no. 733, 42: 291b5-8.

25 *Yulanpenjing Shu Xiaohengchao*, X no. 375, 21: 540b14-16.

26 See (C. Wang 2021, pp. 39–46).

27 Regarding the Nirvana Sutra transformation in Cave 148, many scholars have noted its connection to the earlier Cave 332. In her research, Sonya S. Lee meticulously discusses these two caves excavated by the Li family in one chapter; see Sonya S. Lee (2010). After a thorough analysis of the composition and related scenes, Toyama Kiyoshi 外山潔 pointed out that the “rebirth preaching” in Cave 332 is believed to be based on the *Mohe Moye jing*. See Toyama (2002). However, the appearance of Upāli clearly proves that the classical source of the Nirvana image in Cave 148 is the *Fomu Jing*. Kishida Yuri 岸田悠里 conducted a detailed analysis of the scenes related to the *Fomu Jing* in Caves 148 and 61 but did not notice the relevant content in Cave 44, see Kishida (2014). Similarly, Yasuda Haruki 安田治樹 believes that the Nirvana images from the Tang and Song periods in the Mogao Caves are more consistent with the *Fomu Jing*; see Yasuda (2019).

28 Cf. (He 2000, pp. 89–93). For colored images, see (Dunhuang Academy 2000, Figure 147).

29 See (Duan and Fan 2006, Figure 130).

30 See (Gong 2010, p. 28).

31 About the period when the *Fomu Jing* was popular refer to Kaji (1991).

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