

## Characters in Tubo Clothes and Miniature Vimalakirti Sutra Paintings in Dunhuang Frescoes

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**Keywords:** Dunhuang; Tubo; Vimalakirti sutra; sutra paintings.

**Abstract:** Vimalakirti is the name of a Bodhisattva. Vimalakirti Sutra Paintings in Cave No.159 and Cave No.9 of Mogao Grottoes in Dunhuang were drawn during the period of Tubo (Tibetan regime in ancient China) in late Tang Dynasty. The two paintings have the same theme; they are representative works of different periods. They manifest the patterns of Miniature Vimalakirti Sutra Paintings through Pusa Xing Pin (the conduct of Bodhisattva), and show the same emotional tendencies towards characters in Tubo clothes in different historical periods. Combining with the political status of Zhang during the period of Tubo, as well as the cooperation and competition between Yi'chao Zhang and Tubo generals when the Guiyi Army Regime was establishing, the special description of Tibetan characters in Miniature Vimalakirti Sutra Paintings in Cave No.159 and Cave No.9 may also reflect the attitudes of Zhang's family and even the upper class of the Guiyi Army towards the Tubo Regime. Officially showing hostility, they actually befriended to the Tubo government.

### 1. Introduction

When the Tubo government dominated Dunhuang (a county-level city in northwestern Gansu Province, Western China), *btsan-po* (Kings of Tubo) appeared in *Fang Bian Pin*, a type of Vimalakirti Sutra Paintings. In pictures, these characters wear Tubo clothes, followed by attendants and listen to the sermon. These paintings can be found in Cave No.159, Cave No.231, Cave No.237, Cave No.359 and Cave No.360 in Mogao Grottoes, and reflect the history of Tubo's domination of Dunhuang. In the late Tang Dynasty, with the establishment of the Guiyi Army Regime, characters wore Tubo clothes appeared in Vimalakirti Sutra Paintings and listened to the sermon on their own. Typical images can be found in Cave No.9, Cave No.85, Cave No.108 and Cave No.138 of Mogao Grottoes. In a few cases, "Miniature Vimalakirti Sutra Paintings" can be found above the image of Vimalakirti; *Fang Bian Pin* which should depict various kings listening to the sermon only depicts a *btsan-po* (the king of the Tibetan Empire) and his servants. The pattern is consistent with the layout of paintings which show *btsan-po* and his servants listening to the sermon in Dunhuang murals drawn in the Tubo era. These images could only be found in Cave No.159 and Cave No.9 in Mogao Grottoes; they were drawn during the Tubo reign and in the late Tang Dynasty respectively. The scholars did not pay enough attention to them. The author attempts to make a tentative study on Tibetan characters and related issues in these miniature sutra paintings.

Up to now, iconography researches, literary studies and document researches related to Vimalakirti Sutra have achieved fruitful results. Mature research achievements have been obtained in terms of basic image interpretation, its relation to popular literature, and analysis of characters' clothes. Since the 1930s, Shi Hu, Wei-nuo Jin, Qing-xiang Chen and Shi-zhe He have made a basic research on related issues about the Vimalakirti Sutra, including its development process, the interpretation of contents, changes in artistic styles and interaction between texts and paintings. The gradual advancement in the research of Vimalakirti Sutra Paintings has laid a solid foundation for us to understand and discuss related issues.

### 2. The Property of "Miniature Vimalakirti Sutra Paintings"

In Cave No.159 and Cave No.9, "Miniature Vimalakirti Sutra Paintings" can be found above the

image of Vimalakirti. The compositions of pictures are as follows.

The Miniature Vimalakirti Sutra Paintings in Cave 159 include Fang Bian Pin (around the Manjusri Bodhisattva and Vimalakirti, their disciples, fairies, emperors of the Central Plains and Tubo are listening to the sermon), Manjusri Wen Ji Pin (Manjusri sit opposite with Vimalakirti), Guan Zhong Sheng Pin (goddesses stand on the opposite side of Sariputta, one of two chief male disciples of the Buddha) and Xiang Ji Fo Pin (Bodhisattva is offering and pouring rice). (Figure 1)

The Miniature Vimalakirti Sutra Paintings in Cave No.9 include Fo Guo Pin (the Buddha sit cross-legged, up in the middle of Manjusri and Vimalakirti), Fang Bian Pin (around Manjusri Bodhisattva and Vimalakirti, their disciples, fairies, btsan-po and other kings are listening to the sermon), Manjusri Wen Ji Pin (Manjusri sit opposite with Vimalakirti), Bu Si Yi Pin (borrow seats from the lamp Buddha) and Guan Zhong Sheng Pin (goddesses stand on the opposite side of Sariputta). (Figure 2)



Figure 1. The miniature and normal Vimalakirti Sutra Paintings on the east wall of Cave No.159



Figure 2. The miniature and normal Vimalakirti Sutra Paintings on the north wall of Cave No. 9

Shi-zhe He named this picture as "Holding Many People on the Palm" and pointed out that "it is actually the miniature version of Vimalakirti Sutra Painting in the Middle Tang Dynasty". [1] According to the book of The Vimalakirti Nirdeśa Sutra, one day, Vimalakirti led disciples to a garden. After disciples paying respect for Buddha, the Buddha explained his ideas through a dialogue with Aahnan. The Buddha expressed that "attitudes and actions of Sugatas are all Buddhist affairs" and that "the merits and virtues of all Buddha are equal, but in order to enlighten all sentient beings, we have to teach them in different ways." This scene has been depicted repeatedly in Vimalakirti Sutra Paintings since the early Tang Dynasty. These pictures show disciples paying respect for Buddha. The Buddha of Sakyamuni is surrounded by disciples of Bodhisattvas. Vimalakirti stands on the right side of the picture. The Vimalakirti Nirdeśa Sutra describes the scenario as follows. "At that time, Vimalakirti asked Manjusri, 'can you come with me to visit the Buddha of Sakyamuni? We will attend and make offerings to the Buddha with other bodhisattvas.' Manjusri said, 'That's good! Today is the right time.' Vimalakirti then used his mighty power to lift the masses together with their seats, put them on his right palm, and set off to the place where the Buddha lived. When he arrived, he placed the masses on the ground. The he bowed to the foot of the Buddha, turned seven circles to the right, then placed his palms together on his chest and stood on one side..." [2]

### 3. Characters in Tubo Clothes in Miniature Vimalakirti Sutra Paintings

#### 3.1 Characters in Tubo clothes in miniature Vimalakirti sutra paintings.

Miniature Vimalakirti Sutra paintings are rare in Dunhuang, but there are a number of similarities between paintings found in these two caves. The Vimalakirti Sutra Paintings on the south of the East Gate of Cave No.159 depicted btsan-po and his servants listening to the sermon; they are regarded as

a typical representative of similar images created in the Tubo era in Dunhuang Grottoes. Coincidentally, as far as the details of expression are concerned, the single btsan-po portrait painted on the northern wall of Cave No.9 should be the most meticulous portrait in Dunhuang murals created in the post-Tubo era. Although characters in Tubo clothes belong to the group of mortal Kings listening to the sermon, in pictures, they all stand outside the queue and keep a distance from other emperors. They are relatively independent. In the same period, they can be easily recognized compared with other Vimalakirti Sutra Paintings depict characters in Tubo clothes. It can be estimated that the builders of caves deliberately expressed these characters in Tubo clothes.

In addition, in these two caves, the so-called "Miniature Vimalakirti Sutra Paintings" can be found above the Vimalakirti in paintings. The unique feature is that, Fang Bian Pin specially depicts btsan-po and servants listening to the sermon, which can only be found in paintings created in the Tubo period. These characters have identical costumes and postures with figures in Tubo clothes depicted when the Tubo government dominated Dunhuang during the Middle Tang Dynasty. The miniature in Cave No. 159 vividly shows the image of btsan-po in a red robe with lapel; it seems that the emperor appears in the picture by his own. In the picture of Cave No. 9, the btsan-po stands in the middle, wearing a white robe with lapel. As the color fades, the basic outline can only be seen faintly. Behind him, servants wearing black robes hold up the canopy. The canopy can be seen clearly above the head of the King. In front of the btsan-po, two attendants stand opposite with each other; one person carries a long knife on his waist. Miniatures and the emphasis on Tibetan characters follow the tradition of depicting btsan-po listening to the sermon in Vimalakirti sutra paintings of Tubo period, and conform to the solitary btsan-po portrait in the picture of various kings listening to the sermon. This special pattern cannot be found in other caves built at the same time.

### **3.2 Reasons for characters in Tubo clothes.**

In Dunhuang documents, the Bianwen of Huai-shen Zhang (Bianwen is a popular form of narrative literature flourishing in the Tang Dynasty) wrote, "In Ganzhou, Liangzhou, Guazhou and Suzhou, walls has collapsed. Our people live together with ugly Tubo residents; the clothing custom has been ruined. The only exception is Shazhou County; life here is no different from the hinterland." In the Report to the Uighur Tian Kehan Written by Ten Thousand Shazhou People, the author expressed, "as the southern Tibetan was in turmoil, the local governor in Shazhou took this opportunity to mobilize common people to work together. Yi-chao Zhang repelled the Tubo official. People can wear Han clothes and get rid of ugly Tubo residents forever..." It can be found Tubo people were called as "ugly Tubo residents" for many times.

After the establishment of the Guiyi Army, there were a large number of Tubo people lived in Dunhuang area; many groups were organized under the influence of Tubo government. On one hand, the Guiyi Army set up a special department to manage these people; on the other hand, these people were placed in different villages under the management of the Gui-yi regime. [3] When these people participated in social activities such as the construction of caves, they may paint images to show their nationality identity

Although Bianwen of Huai-shen Zhang and other materials reflect people's hatred toward the Tubo government, the images of btsan-po were still depicted in Vimalakirti sutra paintings. In pictures of various kings listening to the sermon, we can still find btsan-po standing in front, wearing clothes similar to images created in the Middle Tang Dynasty. This may indicate that during the decades after the Tibetan Empire was overthrown, people's hatred toward Tubo was not be as strong as materials recorded; at least murals can show this tendency.

## **4. Miniature Vimalakirti Sutra Paintings in Light of Exchanges between Dunhuang and Tubo**

After the Guiyi Army occupied Hexi which had been ruled by Tubo before, the general sent envoys and paid allegiance to the Tang Dynasty. However, they did not have enough connections with each other. At that time, the Tang Dynasty was deeply troubled by separatist regimes; it was difficult for the emperor to provide necessary assistance to Shazhou, which located at the other end of Hexi Corridor. Seeking a breakthrough in besieging, it became a practical need for the Guiyi Army to

reconcile with the Tubo government. The Tibetan Empire collapsed in the latter half of the ninth century, which made it possible for Guiyi Army to establish new ties with scattered military forces in Tibet.

#### **4.1 Exchanges between Dunhuang and Tubo reflected in the Report to the Uighur Tian Kehan Written by Ten Thousand People in Shazhou.**

In the later period of Zhang's reign, the relationship between Zhang's family and Tubo eased, since Guiyi Army needed to defend against the Uighur military and other peripheral troops in Ganzhou. In the Report to the Uighur Tian Kehan Written by Ten Thousand People in Shazhou, the Guiyi Army officers explained to the Uighur governor in Ganzhou that they did not collude with Tubo. "Local official swear to residents again that he would not contact Tubo. People follow the official. Now we have a holy governor, we really appreciate that and we build a temple to worship your highness. We will never contact Tubo... The God can see our loyalty. Our people swear to obey your rules, rather than the regulations of Tubo government. Now we are one family, please do not listen to rumors." From the content, we know that the Uighur Regime dispatched troops since the Jinshan State colluded with Tubo. Guiyi Army and Tubo had close relations, which made the Uighur Regime feel very uneasy. The article was written shortly after July 26 in 911. Therefore, the Guiyi Army should have been contacted Tubo for a long time. Cave No. 9 was built around 898. Both of the cave and the article were created in the reign of Cheng-feng Zhang, the last ruler of Guiyi Army.

#### **4.2 The relationship between Zhang's family, the establishment of Guiyi Army Regime and the Tubo Government.**

Under the domination of Tubo Government. During the period of Tubo rule, Zhang's family, as a large local family, occupied an important position in the Tubo ruling group in Shazhou. Yi-chao Zhang took over the position of the Commander in Chief, and went to Lasha during the period of Tubo rule. According to 17 Poems about the Moral Governance of Shanghe Xidao Jiedushi and Auspicious Signs and the Preface, "At that time the minister went to Lasha. The God lead him to a river, in which dragons and fairy birds can be found... The beautiful scenery is the fruit of minister's benevolence."

Around the establishment of Guiyi Army Regime. The Zhang's family occupied important position in the period of Tubo rule; they did not blindly reject Tubo in the process of overthrowing the Tibetan Empire. Instead, they united troops under the command of Bi-bi Shang and Huai-guang Tuo-ba, who inclined to yield to the Tang Dynasty, and combated with the Lun Kong Re military groups in Helong area. In September of 851, Bi-bi Shang's troops were attacked by Lun Kong Re and fled from Ganzhou to Guazhou. The Lun Kong Re military groups may be scarred by Yi-chao Zhang's forces and did not move forward. They went to loot several cities in Hexi. "Bi-bi Shang's force did not have enough food. The chief left Huai-guang Tuo-ba to guard the state of Shanzhou, and leaded a force with three thousand people to the west of Ganzhou. Lun Kong Re heard that Bi-bi Shang abandoned Shanzhou; the general leaded 5,000 light cavalry to chase Bi-bi Shang's force to Guazhou. Knowing that Huai-guang Tuo-ba was guarding the state of Shanzhou, they swept eight states include Xishan and Guozhou in Hexi area,... The land of five thousand miles are totally barren." [4] Li Lu pointed out that, "Yi-chao Zhang had formed an alliance with Bi-bi Shang and Yan-xin Shang. They cooperated with each other, so he could report to the Tang Emperor that the area controlled by Bi-bi Shang and Yan-xin Shang was a part of Luding River and Huang Shiyi Zhou which were under his own governance." [5]

Under the governance of Guiyi Army. During the period of Guiyi Army's Regime, its eastern boundary was adjacent to Tubo adherents. New History of Five Dynasties recorded that Tibetans settled in the area between Yumen Guan and the boundary between Guazhou and Shazhou. "Going northwest 500 miles you can reach Suzhou; crossing the Jinhe River, then going west 100 miles you can reach Tianmen Guan; going west 100 miles again you can reach Yumen Guan, where is the settlement of Tibetans. Tubo men wear China hats; Tubo women plait their hairs, wearing Tibet beads...The west border of this area is Guazhou and Shazhou..." [6] Since the Tubo settlement was adjacent to the government of Guiyi Army, until Cao's Guiyi Army period, when Jiedushi passed

through the territory of Tubo, the envoy had to use the name of Guiyi Army as cover. The Letter from Cao, the Jiedushi of Guiyi Army to Tubo Chief Officer recorded, "Tubo Chief Officer, the summer is hot. I am thinking of you. How is everything going in the tribe?... I give you a woven Kouduan and three strains of yak tail. Yan Cao, Jiedushi of the Guiyi Army. "

From these materials, we can see that in the late period of Cao's Guiyi Army Regime, there were still Tubo inhabitants living in the eastern border. The letter expressed, "I give you a woven Kouduan..." means that Cao still had nominal jurisdiction over these Tibetan adherents. According to Tubo people lived in the eastern boundary and the condition of Tibetan households, it can be estimated in the late Tang Dynasty and afterwards, Tang and Tubo culture still deeply integrated in Dunhuang area.

#### **4.3 The Cave No. 159 and Cave No. 9 may be jointly built by Tibetans and the Zhang's family.**

In Cave No.159 and Cave No.9, the Vimalakirtin Sutra Paintings emphasize Tibetan characters explicitly or implicitly, which manifest the Tubo thoughts and feelings of cave builders. It should be said that Tibetans are also patrons of these cave paintings. Frescoes in Cave No.159 and Cave No.9 have prominent Tang features. Among donors in the West niche of Cave No.159, there are only women and monks; no male donors could be found. Women donors wear Tang costumes; their faces are round and plump. According to relevant documents, they are all women and nuns in the family; there is no inscription about male. According to the characteristics of cave supporters during the period of Tubo rule, the missing of male supporters indicates that the main patrons of paintings are Tang people. In addition, the inscription of Shisan Niang of Zhang's Nephew appeared in the niche of the west wall of the main chamber seems to indicate that the cave was built by Zhang's family. Accordingly, Cheng-feng Zhang's statue also appeared in Cave No. 9, which is the only cave with Cheng-feng Zhang's statue in Dunhuang Grottoes.

The emergence of two miniature paintings in different periods seems to imply that the two caves may be jointly built by Tibetans and the Zhang family. It reflects the integration and friendship between Tubo ethnic groups and the ruling group represented by Zhang's family in different periods under the influence of Tang culture.

### **5. Summary**

In Zhang Huai Shen Bei, Zhang expressed that during the period of Tubo's domination, they had "harbored resentment for a hundred years" and "there was no way to redress an injustice". However, Zhang and his family have been benefited from Tubo's domination to the earlier stage of Guiyi Army Regime. It is necessary for scholars to reexamine diplomatic rhetoric and propaganda contents contained in these documents. Combining with the political status of Zhang during the period of Tubo, as well as the cooperation and competition between Yi'chao Zhang and Tubo generals when the Guiyi Army Regime was establishing, the special description of Tibetan characters in Miniature Vimalakirti Sutra Paintings in Cave No.159 and Cave No.9 may also reflect the attitudes of Zhang's family and even the upper class of the Guiyi Army towards the Tubo Regime. Officially showing hostility, they actually befriend to the Tubo government.

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