

Juqu Mengxun's Buddhism-Politics System Drawing on the Kushan Empire: A Case Study of Mogao Cave 275 in Dunhuang, China

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Abstract

The research provides an in-depth analysis of the precious artifacts in Dunhuang Mogao Cave 275, as well as the literature and Mahayana scriptures related, from the Political Science of Religion (PSR) perspective, aiming to discuss the history that Juqu Mengxun tried to make Northern Liang a Kushan-style Mahayana regime. According to the findings, Mahayana, whose teachings were used by Juqu Mengxun to consolidate his political status, had a considerable influence on Northern Liang's political pattern, cultural expression, and social structure. The research demonstrates the profound influence of Mahayana on the Northern Liang community and reflects Juqu Mengxun's deep insight into and strategic use of Mahayana. The achievement of this research is expected to provide a new clue for the community to explore Buddhism and the political dynamics on the ancient Silk Road.

Keywords: Juqu Mengxun, Northern Liang, mahayana Buddhism, religious politics

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

This study is expected to further enrich and deepen the existing pool of Dunhuang Political Science of Religion (PSR) findings and make a proactive contribution to providing another development route for Dunhuang Studies. From the PSR perspective, we attempt to dig deeper into the religious beliefs, political background, and socio-cultural environment during the Northern Liang period, so as to reveal more historical and cultural connotations of the kingdom. In essence, this research is a PSR study that aims to understand the complex interactions between religion and politics that help form unique social and cultural characters, providing a deeper insight into the pluralism and diversity of Northern Liang. Hopefully, this research should serve as a supplement to the community's knowledge of Dunhuang Studies and offer a new perspective and inspiration for relevant research activities.

1.2 Research Significance

Few studies out of the massive pool of Dunhuang Studies take PSR as the perspective to research Mogao Cave statues. This research approach is even rarely adopted for the exploration of the period when Juqu Mengxun was on the throne of the Northern Liang kingdom; it was the critical time the masterpieces in Mogao Caves inherited the past and broke new ground and when religion and politics intertwined dynamically. Taking Mogao Cave 275 as the case, the research focuses on the Mahayana regime, founded by Juqu Mengxun in Northern Liang and based on the legacy of the Kushan Empire's Buddhist politics, in an attempt to fill a gap in this field.

1.3 Research Method and Subject

In light of the practical conditions and research objectives, we chose desk study as the method, which involves review and analysis efforts of copious literature, documents, and data. Theoretically, we followed the PSR method suggested in the *Principles of Religion*. In addition, *The Kushan Buddhist Political Tradition and Mahayana Buddhism*, by Professor Gu Zhengmei, provided important references for us to understand the characteristics of the Mahayana regime, for its excellent idea about the fusion between Mahayana Buddhism and political power.

Based on our core findings, it was concluded that, during the Northern Liang period, Juqu Mengxun tried to

build a regime to govern the state via Mahayana, a regime that drew on the Kushan politics of Buddhism. His attempt was an embodiment of the close relationship between Mogao Cave grotto art and religious politics. Through an in-depth analysis of Cave 275, we disclosed that the way Juqu Mengxun tried to govern Northern Liang with the Mahayana doctrine should be attributed to the influence of the Kushan Empire's tradition of Buddhist politics. Our innovative perspective provided a new clue to Mogao Caves' historical continuity and the ancient political systems, religions, and artistic styles involved. Also, this research offered important historical evidence and insights into the research on the relationship between religion and politics.

2. Kushan Empire & Mahayana

Born in India, Buddhism rose and fell over 1,700 years ago and almost disappeared from its original land by the late 13th century AD. However, it does indicate the extinction of Buddhism, but a geographical transfer of its cultural center. Particularly, Mahayana Buddhism spread towards East Asia, through the ancient Silk Road, and found itself a new home in Dunhuang, a geographically unique place in China (Guihua, 2015).

2.1 Fusion of Kushan Empire and Dunhuang Buddhist Art

Located in the heart of the ancient Silk Road in Central Asia, the Kushan Empire played a crucial role in promoting the spread of Mahayana from India to East Asia and had a profound impact on Dunhuang. Thanks to the frequent trade affairs and cultural exchanges, the teachings and art forms of Mahayana flew into Dunhuang and blended with local Buddhist art and cultural landscapes, facilitating the formation of Dunhuang-featured Buddhist art (Frankopan, 2016).

The Mahayana beliefs transferred to Dunhuang had been greatly influenced by the Kushan Empire, particularly the religious modeling system (i.e., Gandharan art, in which Jataka tales and paintings of Buddha's life occupy an important position) (Yinggang, 2019). In Mogao Cave 275, on the west side of the Cave's north wall, the *Prince's Journey to the Four Gates*, as one of the earliest paintings of Buddha's past life, depicts Buddha's experience on earth. In addition, there are Sakyamuni's stories of doing good as reincarnations before he attains true enlightenment and becomes a Buddha; on the north wall's middle section, there are stories of Buddha's past life as a self-sacrificing king, King Sivi, King Chandraprabha, among others.

2.2 Juqu Mengxun & Northern Liang Buddhism

The Kushan Empire introduced Buddhism via the ancient Silk Road to Dunhuang, together with a number of Mahayana sutras and Gandharan statues. The monks had contributed a lot to the spread of Mahayana beliefs.

When Juqu Mengxun killed Duan Ye and seized Northern Liang, he claimed himself as the "King of Hexi" and managed to unify the Liangzhou region. However, the legitimacy and succession of his throne were challenged. In this context, there was quite a possibility that Juqu Mengxun turned to a peaceable religion to provide moral and religious support for his rule, as a way to consolidate his imperial power and political rule, because the support from such a religion would certify the legitimacy of his accession to the throne, promote social stability, and win the hearts of the public (Yufu & Ling, 2022).

Therefore, Mahayana Buddhism, which already had a foundation of followers in Dunhuang, was the ideal choice for Juqu Mengxun to fulfill his political demands (Yaolong, 2022). It turned out that Mahayana, with its popularity and far-reaching influence, served as a powerful tool to help consolidate Juqu Mengxun's imperial power and political rule. Inspired by the Kushan Empire, Juqu Mengxun integrated Mahayana deeply with the governance system likewise, rendering Northern Liang one of the most important centers for sutra translation in China during his reign. Northern Liang was then proactive in inviting eminent monks from Sindhu (India) to come to teach the Dharma and translate Buddhist scriptures. Dharmaksema, in particular, made a great contribution to the spread and popularization of Chinese Buddhism by translating several important Buddhist scriptures in Northern Liang, including *Mahāparinirvāna Sūtra* (*Mahaparinirvana Sutra*) and *Mahāvaiṣṭya Sūtra*.

Not only was Juqu Mengxun proactive in promoting the translation and transmission of classic Buddhist works but also issued an edict to order the excavation of grottoes, the most famous being Tiantishan Caves, the first grottoes built under the auspices of a sovereign in Chinese history.

Unfortunately, few works from this period were found in Tiantishan Caves due to earthquakes, persecution of Buddhists, and reconstruction, which makes Mogao Cave 275 (built AD 397-439) that is highly consistent with Juqu Mengxun's reign (AD 401-433) particularly valuable. Cave 275 provides precious examples for the research of the Gandharan-style modeling system in Mogao Caves and is also the witness of a Mahayana-based governance system established by Juqu Mengxun in Northern Liang.

3. Juqu Mengxun & Cave 275: Fusion of Kushan Legacy and Northern Liang Politics

The Northern Liang kingdom ruled by Juqu Mengxun was influenced profoundly by the legacy of Kushan Buddhist politics, which has been proven by the Buddhist artworks that integrated Kushan Buddhist elements and Northern Liang politics in Cave 275. The frescoes embody the epitome of the Kushan Buddhist art style and the Northern Liang regime's strategy of using Buddhism to consolidate its rule and promote cultural exchanges.

3.1 Legacy of Kushan Buddhist Politics

Kujula Kadphises, the founder of the Kushan Empire, incorporated Buddhism into his political system and ruled the empire under Mahayana teachings, striving to claim himself as both "Chakravartin" in the secular world and the "Prince of Dharma" in the religious world (i.e., the ideal ruler advocated by Buddhist ethics). Kujula succeeded in governing the empire with Mahayana ethics and codes, and his political practice that integrated religious ethics and governance ideas was a great contributor to the prosperity of Mahayana Buddhism during the Kushan Empire (Zhengmei, 1992).

The politics-religion pattern of governance culminated in the reign of Kaniska, the third Kushan ruler, who designed the gold coin that subtly incarnated his secular and religious identities: on the front, it said "King of Kings, Kaniska of Kushan", with his portrait engraved; on the back, there was the image of Maitreya Bodhisattva. As a result, Kaniska was endowed with kingship and theocracy, and his authority was circulated, just like the coins (Yinggang & Ping, 2019).

3.1.1 Chakravartin: Universal Ruler and Ideal King

Chakravartin is the core of the Buddhist conception of kingship. Literally, "Chakra" is often understood as a kind of wheel-like weapon used in war or perhaps the wheels of a chariot, in the sense of "whose chariot is rolling everywhere without obstruction". This conception echoes the titles usually used in the Ancient Near East, such as "King of Kings" and "Universal Ruler". After Buddhism absorbed and transformed the concept of "ruler", it claimed the ruler as the equivalent of a Buddha on earth. In other words, the highest in the religious world is the Buddha, while the highest in the secular world is Chakravartin (Yinggang, 2017).

Why is Chakravartin regarded by Buddhism as a universal ruler on earth?

First, Chakravartin is depicted in Buddhism as one who possesses supreme force and authority, figuratively meaning Buddhist pursuit and imagination of an ideal ruler. This is fully reflected in the *Lotus Sutra (Anlexing Vagga)*: Shakyamuni Buddha once describes the martial arts of Chakravartin by saying, "as strong as a wheel turning sagely king" and "like a mighty king". Also, he compares the Lotus Sutra to the bright pearl in the hair of Chakravartin, which he will never give to others, to emphasize that the *Lotus Sutra* is the top Buddhist teaching and is worth its supreme status (Fahua, 2010).

Second, Shakyamuni Buddha would reincarnate as Chakravartin as long as the sentient beings require. In the *Mahaparinirvana Sutra (Vol. 41: Fanxing Vagga)*, Shakyamuni Buddha makes a clear statement to Kasyapa:

"Shan nan zi, huo you zhong sheng tan yu cai huo, wo yu qi ren zi hua qi shen zuo zhuan lun wang, yu wu liang sui sui qi suo xu zhong zhong gong ji ran hou jiao hua, ling qi an zhu a nuo duo luo san miao san pu ti" (Wuchen, 2015).

The general idea is that Shakyamuni Buddha is willing to fulfill the needs of the sentient beings in any way, including reincarnating himself as Chakravartin to offer whatever they need and guide them towards spiritual awakening and liberation.

Third, Chakravartin is the Future Buddha. In the *Compassionate Lotus Sutra* (Acheng, 2019), Chakravartin vows:

"Wei zhong zhong zhuang yan qing jing fo tu. Shi zun, wo jin fa yuan ling wo de cheng a nuo duo luo san miao san pu ti. [...] Yuan wo shi jie you wu nv ren ji qi ming zi. [...] Shi zun, ruo shi jie qing jing, zhong sheng ru shi zhe, ran hou cheng a nuo duo luo san miao san pu ti."

After Chakravartin makes his vow, Treasure-Store Tathagata tells him the title he will be bearing:

"Ru yu shi shi, dang zuo fo hao wu liang shou ru lai, ying gong, zheng bian zhi, ming xing zu, shan shi, shi jian jie, wu shang shi, diao yu zhang fu, tian ren shi, fo shi zun."

That means Chakravartin will be the Buddha of Limitless Life (also known as Amitayus Buddha) in the future.

Above, the reason why Chakravartin is regarded as a secular universal ruler in Buddhism is that he possesses worldly power, spreads the Dharma, and acts as a spiritual leader. Coupled with the identity of the Future Buddha, Chakravartin represents the Buddhist pursuit of an ideal ruler and social order.

3.1.2 Maitreya Bodhisattva: Is He the Future Buddha or Chakravartin?

Why Maitreya Bodhisattva, the Future Buddha, was considered the symbol of kingship, like Chakravartin? Is it because Chakravartin will likewise be a Buddha? Why did Juqu Mengxun (and the rulers of the Kushan Empire) believe that Chakravartin could help improve the divinity of their thrones?

First, Maitreya Bodhisattva is the successor of Shakyamuni Buddha and will be born as a Buddha in the saḥā world. According to the *Madhyama Agama (Chapter 13, Vol. 66: Shuoben Jing)*:

“[Shi jia mo ni] Fo fu gao yue, ‘Mi le! Ru yu wei lai jiu yuan, ren shou ba qian sui shi, dang de zuo fo, ming mi le ru lai. [...] Ru dang you wu liang bai qian bi qiu zhong, you ru wo jin wu liang bai qian bi qiu zhong.’” (Hengqiang et al., 2012).

Mahayana predicts that, when the time is ripe, Maitreya Bodhisattva will descend from his miraculous abode in Tuṣita Heaven and be reincarnated as a Buddha on earth to lead all sentient beings to liberation. This will be a major event second only to Shakyamuni Buddha and opens a new era in Buddhism.

Second, Maitreya Bodhisattva is so authoritative because he was ordained to be a Buddha by Shakyamuni Buddha himself. This moment is clearly recorded in the *Madhyama Agama (Chapter 13, Vol.66: Shuoben Jing)*:

“Er shi, zun zhe a nan zhi fo shi fo. Yu shi, zun zhe hui gu gao yue, ‘A nan! Ru qu jin lv zhi cheng yi lai, wo jin yu yu mi le bi qiu.’ Er shi, zun zhe a nan shou shi zun jiao, ji qu jin lv zhi cheng yi lai, shou yu shi zun.

Yu shi, shi zun cong zun zhe a nan shou ci jin lv zhi cheng yi yi, gao yue, ‘Mi le! Ru cong ru lai qu ci jin lv zhi cheng zhi yi, shi fo fa zhong. Suo yi zhe he? Mi le! Zhu ru lai, wu suo zhu, deng zheng jue, wei shi jian hu, qiu yi ji rao yi, qiu an yin kuai le.’

Yu shi, zun zhe mi le cong ru lai qu jin lv zhi cheng yi yi, shi fo fa zhong.”

As a yet-to-be Buddha, Maitreya Bodhisattva receives the cassock from Shakyamuni Buddha and starts to oblige the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. Although Maitreya Bodhisattva has not yet attained Buddhahood, he has taken over the responsibility of spreading the Dharma from Shakyamuni Buddha and will be presiding over the edification work, after Shakyamuni Buddha, in the saḥā world and enjoying supreme authority.

Third, Maitreya Bodhisattva has an inextricable link to Chakravartin (Yufu, Qi, & Ling, 2022).

The answer to the question of whether Maitreya Bodhisattva is the same person as Chakravartin depends on the identity of Ajita, a Buddhist disciple. In the *Lotus Sutra (Fenbie Gongde Vagga: Chapter 17)*, Shakyamuni Buddha calls Maitreya Bodhisattva by the name of “Ajita”. Thus, it can be concluded that at least in the *Lotus Sutra*, Maitreya Bodhisattva and Ajita are the same person.

According to *Madhyama Agama (Chapter 13, Vol.66: Shuoben Jing)*, however, they are not the same person. When Shakyamuni Buddha is preaching, Ajita vows to become Chakravartin:

“Er shi, zun zhe a yi duo zai zhong zhong zuo. Yu shi, zun zhe a yi duo ji cong zuo qi, pian tan zhao yi, cha shou xiang fo, bai yue, ‘Shi zun! Wo yu wei lai jiu yuan, ren shou ba wan sui shi, ke de zuo wang, hao ming yue luo, wei zhuan lun wang, cong ming zhi hui, you si zhong jun, zheng yu tian xia, you ji zi zai [...]’”

Ajita is rebuked for this request:

“Yu shi, shi zun he zun zhe a yi duo yue, ‘ru yu chi ren!’ [...] Wei ru zuo shi nian, “Shi zun! Wo yu wei lai jiu yuan, ren shou ba wan sui shi, ke de zuo wang, hao ming yue luo, wei zhuan lun wang [...]’”

Despite the rebuke, Shakyamuni Buddha predicts that Ajita will become Chakravartin:

“Shi zun gao yue, ‘A yi duo! Ru yu wei lai jiu yuan, ren shou ba wan sui shi, ke de zuo wang, hao ming yue luo, wei zhuan lun wang [...]’”

After that, Shakyamuni Buddha continues to preach to the monks, and Maitreya Bodhisattva makes a vow, which corresponds to Shakyamuni Buddha’s prediction that Maitreya Bodhisattva will become Maitreya Buddha, as mentioned above. His vow is as follows:

“Er shi, zun zhe mi le zai bi zhong zhong. Yu shi, zun zhe mi le ji cong zuo qi, pian tan zhao yi, cha shou xiang fo, bai yue, ‘Shi zun! Wo yu wei lai jiu yuan, ren shou ba wan sui shi, ke de cheng fo, ming mi le ru lai.’”

Therefore, the Ajita who vows to become Chakravartin and the Maitreya Bodhisattva who vows to become a Buddha, are two different figures in *Madhyama Agama (Chapter 13, Vol.66: Shuoben Jing)*.

Nonetheless, as we can read from the *Lotus Sutra*, in which Shakyamuni Buddha calls Maitreya Bodhisattva “Ajita”, Ajita and Maitreya Bodhisattva should be the same person, which means that, as Mahayana Buddhism

beliefs continued to develop, the two characters, Ajita (who vows becoming Chakravartin) and Maitreya Bodhisattva (who will be a Buddha in the future) gradually merged into the same figure.

Most importantly, Maitreya is in the Tusita Heaven as a Bodhisattva and will reincarnate and attain true enlightenment on earth. Since Chakravartin is the king of the sentient world, it can be deduced that, when Chakravartin is on earth, Maitreya Bodhisattva will reincarnate and become Maitreya Buddha on earth. In other words, Ajita and Maitreya Buddha share the same figure in the mortal world.

If Juqu Mengxun intended to establish a Mahayana-based governance system in Northern Liang, he would probably follow Kaniska to build statues of Maitreya Bodhisattva and Chakravartin. The statues represent not only Juqu Mengxun's pursuit of kingship but also embody his expectation of Buddhism. Maitreya, as the Future Buddha, represents the salvation and hope of Buddhism; Chakravartin, coupled with theocracy and kingship, epitomizes the authority and sanctity of Juqu Mengxun as a ruler.

Therefore, the statues of Maitreya and Chakravartin in Mogao Cave 275 should be the immediate material evidence of the historical fact that Juqu Mengxun built a Mahayana-based governance system in Northern Liang.

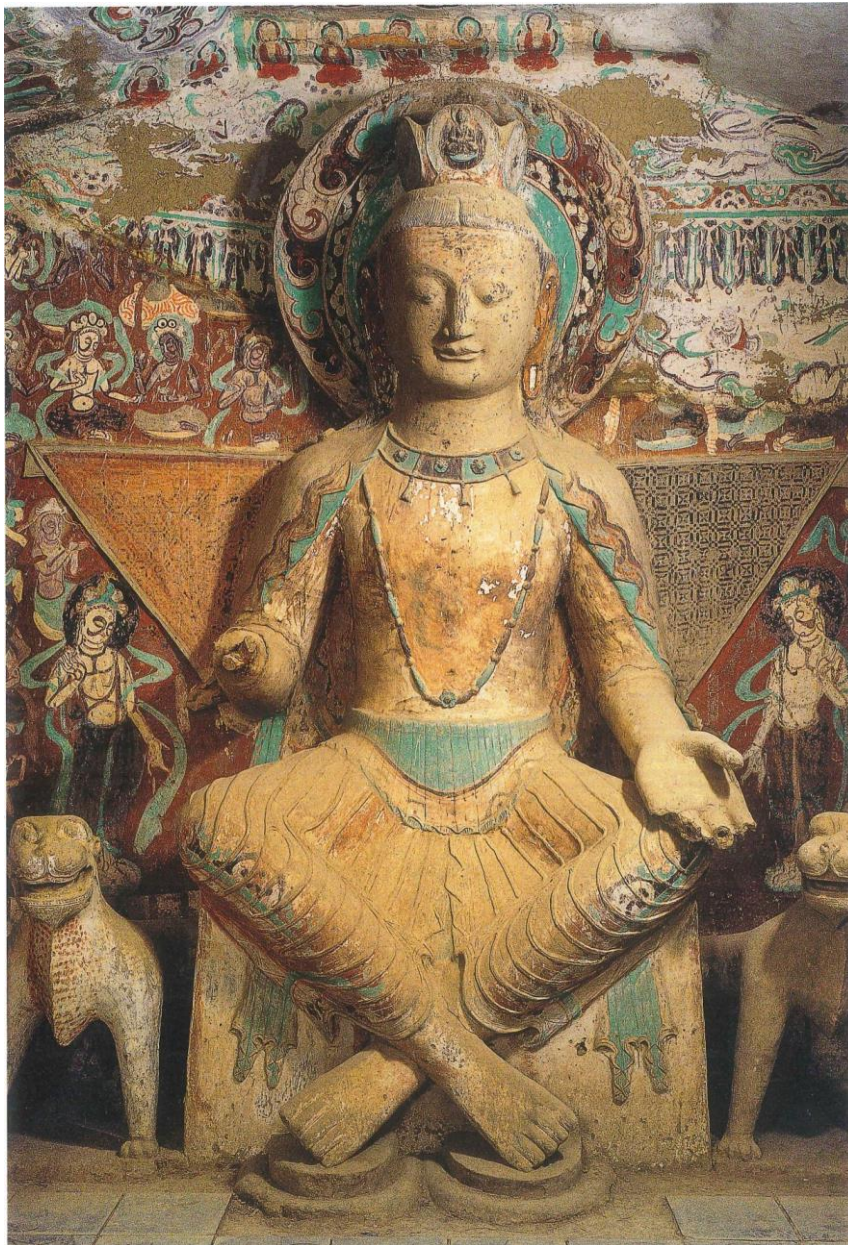


Figure 1. The Cross-Legged Maitreya Bodhisattva Statue on the West Wall in Mogao Cave 275

Source: Editor-in-Chief, Dunhuang Research Institute; edited by Liu Wenshan et al. 'Painting' has words: Dunhuang Grottoes' [M]. Changsha: Hunan Literature and Art Publishing House, September 2023, p. 4.



Figure 2. The Seated Statue of Northern Liang Chakravartin on the West Wall in Mogao Cave 275

Source: Acheng. Tanyao Five Cave [M]. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, January 2019, p. 109.

Above, Figures 1 and 2 are from Mogao Cave 275, dug during the Northern Liang period: the cross-legged Maitreya Bodhisattva statue (Figure 1) is the main Buddha statue, while the seated Chakravartin statue (Figure 2) is an accessory.

Maitreya Bodhisattva, as the Future Buddha who carries the world's vision of an impeccable era, implies moral and spiritual revival. Throughout history, many rulers utilized religious symbols to enhance their authority and sanctity. Chakravartin, identified as the ideal ruler, indicates unification. Thus, their combination is a powerful tool to strengthen the throne's legitimacy and divinity, consolidate the power, and assert the kingship supramundane.

The presence of the cross-legged Maitreya statue and the Chakravartin statues in Cave 275 fully demonstrates Juqu Mengxun's attempt to consolidate his power with the help of Mahayana Buddhism to highlight the legitimacy of his throne. In addition, this practice helped render Juqu Mengxun as a supramundane, supreme ruler, demonstrating his pursuit of power and his desire for kingship.

4. Between Power and Faith: Juqu Mengxun's Pragmatic View of Buddhism

Juqu Mengxun believed in Buddhism and promoted Buddhist culture and art actively in the early years, but

became hostile after several setbacks. In AD 429, he sent Juqu Xingguo, the crown prince, to attack Western Qin, but the expedition was a failure and the crown prince was taken prisoner. Later, Helian Bobo conquered Western Qin. The crown prince was defeated by Tuyuhun and killed in turmoil. Juqu Mengxun blamed the flop on Dharmaksema for his divination and ordered the destruction of pagodas and temples and the expulsion of monks. He even killed the monks who were taking refuge on his way to patrol Mount Yangshu.

After witnessing a mysterious manifestation, Juqu Mengxun abandoned his extreme behavior. Dharmaksema had once carved a stone statue of Juqu Mengxun's mother, which Juqu Mengxun would visit on her death anniversary. One year, on the way to the statue, the guards from the temple told Juqu Mengxun that the statue had been weeping ever since the edict of expelling the monks. He decided to see for himself and saw tears dropping from the statue's eyes. At once, he knelt and bowed his head in deep regret. Then, the edict was withdrawn^[14].

His behaviors that violated basic Buddhist teachings and ethics necessitate our reconsideration of Juqu Mengxun's attitude towards Buddhism – when it is useful, it should be promoted; when it is useless, it should be discarded. Undoubtedly, Juqu Mengxun was a typical pragmatist about Buddhism.

In light of his policies and practices, it can be inferred that Juqu Mengxun appreciated the role of Buddhism in state governance and, at the same time, adhered to the supremacy of kingship by not allowing any religious authority to transcend his power. Thus, Juqu Mengxun used Buddhism probably not for his sincere faith but rather for his presence on the throne, knowing that Buddhism could be an important tool for consolidating power and strengthening governance. Certainly, once the religious authority becomes a threat to his rule, any extreme measures that may assert the authority should be acceptable.

5. Conclusion

This research is a case study of Dunhuang Mogao Cave 275, aiming at exploring Juqu Mengxun's attempt to build Northern Liang, a Kushan-style Mahayana regime. Under the leadership of Juqu Mengxun, Buddhist beliefs and reverence were deeply rooted in Northern Liang and intertwined with the kingdom's governance system, posing a profound impact on its culture and art. His order of building a cross-legged Maitreya statue and a Chakravartin statue in Cave 275 was an ingenious strategy that integrated the sanctity of Buddhism with the majesty of kingship, fully displaying the people the legitimacy and sanctity of his rule, even if he was an unorthodox king. Also, this practice embodied his urgent quest for peace and security. In an era where wars broke out, Juqu Mengxun chose Buddhism as a tool of strategic significance to promote political stability and social harmony.

The research interprets the history of Northern Liang innovatively and provides an important perspective for the research on the spread of Buddhism along the ancient Silk Road and the local regimes' politics-religion strategies. It is advisable that future research explore the fusion of Buddhism and political power in different regions or periods, as well as the significance of such fusions on the way the community understands the relationship between religion and politics at present.

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