

Visualizing Familial Order: Female Donor Images in Mogao Cave 156 at Dunhuang

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Abstract

Mogao Cave 156 preserves a remarkable group of clearly identified female donor images, providing important evidence for understanding kinship, social identity, and visual culture in Dunhuang during the Guiyijun (Return-to-Allegiance Army) period. Previous studies have primarily examined Cave 156 through the perspectives of political history, Zhang Yichao's military authority, donor identification, and patronage systems, while the role of female donor imagery in constructing lineage identity and family memory has received comparatively limited attention. Focusing on the female donors in Cave 156, this article investigates how inscriptions, cartouches, iconographic features, and spatial organization contributed to the formation of a lineage-oriented visual program within the Buddhist cave space. It argues that these female images functioned not merely as representations of individual patrons but as visual instruments through which the Zhang clan articulated kinship relations, political legitimacy, and collective memory. Their integration into the cave's broader representational structure reveals that female donors occupied an active role in the construction of family identity, expanding beyond the subordinate visual positions often assigned to female donors in earlier grotto contexts. Through an analysis of female donor imagery, this study demonstrates that Cave 156 reflects the changing function of donor representation during the Guiyijun period, when Buddhist cave construction increasingly became a medium for expressing family order, lineage continuity, and social authority. The female donors of Cave 156 thus provide a significant perspective for examining the intersection of gender, family, and political identity in Dunhuang visual culture.

Keywords: Mogao Cave 156, female donors, lineage identity, visual culture, Dunhuang

1. Introduction

In 848 CE, amidst internal strife within the Tibetan Empire, Zhang Yichao, a native of Shazhou, led a popular uprising that overthrew seventy years of Tibetan rule and reclaimed the eleven prefectures of Hexi. Three years later, the Tang court established the Guiyijun (Return-to-Allegiance Army) at Shazhou, appointing Zhang Yichao as the Military Commissioner (Jiedushi) over the region, with his seat of administration in Dunhuang. With the rise of the Guiyijun regime, the Mogao Grottoes entered a new golden age. From Zhang Yichao's uprising in 848 until the collapse of the Guiyijun regime following the Western Xia conquest of Shazhou in 1036, a total of 71 new caves were excavated and 11 earlier caves were renovated at Mogao. Among these, Mogao Cave 156 stands out as one of the most representative monuments of this era. It was commissioned by Zhang Huaishen—nephew of the first Military Commissioner—to commemorate his uncle's historic achievement in recovering Hexi. Cave 156 is rich in content, mixing Exoteric and Esoteric elements, with its front chamber, corridor, and main chamber well preserved, displaying diverse artistic styles and exquisite workmanship. What attracts the most attention is the large number of donor images painted on the walls of the corridor and the main chamber. Compared with caves of previous dynasties, the number and scale of female donors in Cave 156 significantly increased, occupying important spatial positions in the cave and becoming an important part of the visual space of the cave. From the perspectives of spatial research and iconographic research, this paper discusses the identity composition, spatial

layout, and cultural significance of the female donors in Cave 156, and analyzes how family relations in real society were transformed into visual order in Buddhist space.

2. Cave 156 and the Transformation of Donor Imagery into Lineage Representation

After the establishment of the Guiyijun regime, Dunhuang moved from the Tibetan period to the rule of the Zhang kinship, local society restored stability, and economic activities re-developed. This transition restored local stability and revitalized economic activities; yet, the enduring and profound impact of Tibetan Buddhist policies on local society and livelihoods remained undeniable. Consequently, Guiyijun generals and local gentry clans commissioned numerous “merit caves” (gongde ku) to pray for blessings and commemorate their achievements. Concurrently, as the de facto rulers of the Guiyijun regime, the Zhang kinship urgently needed to consolidate their political legitimacy and social influence through diverse channels. The construction of Cave 156 was completed precisely under this background.

During the construction of merit caves, in order to accumulate merit, seek protection, display family prestige, and leave names for future generations, donor images gradually became one of the core contents of the caves. Donors painted images of themselves and their families inside the caves, symbolizing that they were guarding the Buddhist Dharma at all times and worshipping the Buddha day and night, thereby praying for the Buddha to bless the family’s peace. The construction of large caves required a large amount of funds and was usually presided over by great and prominent families. By rendering donor portraits alongside detailed cartouches of names and official titles on the murals, these caves became potent symbols for flaunting lineage pedigree and projecting local political and economic dominance. Thus, the merit cave served not only as a physical vehicle for devotees to manifest their pious faith but also as a medium through which they hoped to preserve their visages for eternity, achieving a form of “spiritual immortality.”

Cave 156 contains a total of 37 male and female donor portraits, constructing a clear and comprehensive family genealogy. The emergence of this vast corpus of donor imagery demonstrates, on one hand, that members of the Zhang kinship were devout Buddhists who commissioned grottoes to accumulate merit and seek spiritual liberation in the afterlife. On the other hand, it reflects how the Zhang kinship embraced the pervasive Buddhist fervor of the era as a contemporary trend, while simultaneously projecting Zhang Yichao’s monumental achievement in reclaiming the Hexi region. Crucially departing from preceding dynasties, the female donor images within this cave are no longer confined to marginalized corners; instead, they occupy primary spatial zones, such as the main chamber and the corridor, alongside their male counterparts. Functionally, these female donor portraits in Cave 156 served not only a religious, devotional purpose but also operated as mechanisms for chronicling clan history, broadcasting lineage status, and reinforcing collective family memory.

3. Female Donors and the Construction of Zhang Clan Genealogy

Based on extant cartouches and iconographic evidence, the female donors in Cave 156 comprise Zhang Yichao’s mother, wives and concubines, sisters, nieces, and daughters, thereby encompassing pivotal female figures across multiple generations of the Zhang clan. In contrast to the limited presence of female donors found in standard caves, Cave 156 presents a far more comprehensive composition of individual identities, functioning effectively as a visual manifestation of a family genealogy.

On the north wall of the corridor, three standing female donor portraits are arranged facing the main chamber. The blue-ground small cartouche for the first donor has been blackened by smoke and lost; however, within a stele-shaped cartouche frame complete with a canopy and a base, the inscription reads: “Imperially Decreed Grand Lady of Song State, Mistress of Henei Commandery, Lady Song of Guangping, whole-heartedly makes offerings” (Chi Songguo Henei Junjun Taifuren Guangping Songshi yixin gongyang). Because the format of this cartouche is virtually identical to that of the first donor portrait on the south wall of the corridor—which depicts Zhang Yichao himself—it is inferred that this figure represents Zhang Yichao’s principal wife, the “Lady of Song State.” The second donor features a base-less and canopy-less small cartouche on a dark grey ground, inscribed with: “Niece Taizhen, Eleventh Daughter, whole-heartedly makes offerings,” identifying her as the daughter of Zhang Yichao’s elder brother, Zhang Yitan. The cartouche for the third donor is no longer extant; based on her spatial positioning, she is deduced to be one of Zhang Yichao’s own daughters, who was younger than his niece. Arranged in sequence, these three female figures constitute a visual display of different generations within the domestic lineage.

Beneath the niche on the west wall of the main chamber, the donor portraits extend sequentially toward the north and south sides, centering around an altar table and an incense burner. The south side features two Buddhist monks and three male donors, while the north side consists of Buddhist nuns and female donors; the monastic and secular realms are thus physically demarcated, standing on two distinct rugs. On the north side, the cartouche of the fourth donor portrait reads: “Dharma Master and Altar-Ascended Eminent Nun Liaokong, Elder Sister [of Zhang Yichao]” (Zishi dengtan dade ni falu Liaokong), confirming her identity as Zhang Yichao’s sister who entered the Buddhist monastic order. Following the nun portraits, the third, fourth, and fifth female donor figures are

respectively inscribed with: “Lady Suo, whole-heartedly [makes offerings],” “Lady Fu, whole-heartedly makes offerings,” and “Lady [illegible], whole-heartedly makes offerings”—all of whom were wives of Zhang Yichao. Based on their spatial positioning and relationship to the male donors aligned on the south wall, it is inferred that the first two female donor figures represent Zhang Yichao’s other wives: Lady Song of Guangping and Lady Lu of Fanyang. Consequently, this section juxtaposes the female members of the Zhang clan who took monastic vows alongside his multiple wives.

Above the entrance on the east wall of the main chamber are four donor portraits. The south side features three male donors; according to their cartouches, they depict Zhang Yichao’s father (Zhang Qianyi), his elder brother (Zhang Yitan), and the cave patron himself (Zhang Yichao). The north side displays a single female donor, inscribed as: “The deceased mother, posthumously title Grand Lady of Song State, née Chen, whole-heartedly makes offerings” (Wangmu zeng Songguo Taifuren Chenshi yixin gongyang), accompanied by two attendants standing behind her. Given the identity of the cave owner, this “deceased mother, née Chen” is deduced to be Zhang Yichao’s mother.

Spanning the lower sections of the north wall and the northern part of the east wall in the main chamber is the Lady of Song State’s Procession, which bears the inscriptions: “The Procession of Lady Song, Mistress of Henei Commandery, Lady of Song State” (Songguo Henei Junfuren Songshi chuxing tu) and “The Carriages and Horses of the Lady of the Minister of Works, née Song” (Sikong furen Songshi xingli chema). Secular in essence, this grand and intricate composition departs from conventional static donor portraiture, mirroring the contemporary ritual systems and actual historical tableaux. Positioned directly opposite Zhang Yichao’s Military Procession, it underscores the exalted status of the Lady of Song State, thereby broadcasting the patron’s illustrious religious background and political preeminence. The female donor images in Cave 156 together constitute a relatively complete female family genealogy, with obvious characteristics of a clan-sponsored cave. The connection between religious space and family space has become increasingly close, and female family members have become an important part of the construction of the Zhang clan’s historical image.

4. Clothing, Cartouches, and the Visual Encoding of Female Identity

The facial features and clothing of the three female donor images in the corridor are relatively similar, and the primary-secondary relationship of the figures is distinguished only by detailed decorations. The first figure, Lady Song, wears a high-waisted skirt, a red large-sleeved jacket (ru), and a high coiffure topped with a floral crown; a grand canopy hovers above her head, and her face is adorned with facial patches in the Uighur style (Huihu zhuang). The second figure, clad in a large-sleeved jacket with small floral patterns on a blue ground and a high-waisted skirt, holds a flower tray in offering; her head and facial adornments mirror those of the first figure. The third figure is virtually identical to the second, though the coloration of her garments appears grayish-black, likely an artifact of flaking and pigment discoloration. The female donor images beneath the niche on the west wall of the main chamber exhibit an even more pronounced degree of schematization. The first four bhiksunis (nuns) possess nearly identical vestments and facial countenances. They are all tonsured, and only the offering objects held in their hands are different: the first one holds a long-handled incense burner, and the second one holds a flower tray for offering. The clothing folds are all similar; they wear high-waisted skirts inside and kasaya (robes) outside, distinguished by the color of the clothing. On the second rug, the five secular figures display near-identical facial countenances. With high coiffures adorned with flowers, they are attired in luxurious high-waisted silk skirts and large-sleeved shirts embellished with diverse patterns; the textiles appear soft, noble, and magnificent as the figures reverently proffer fresh blossoms. Above the entrance on the east wall, the portrait of Zhang Yichao’s mother shares a fundamentally similar sartorial style with the figures beneath the west niche, featuring a large-sleeved jacket, a high-waisted skirt, a translucent silk shawl, and cloud-tipped shoes; her hair is styled in a high coiffure as she holds an incense burner with both hands in pious offering.

Judging from the donor portraiture in Cave 156, the visages of the figures exhibit a distinct tendency toward stylistic conventionalization; there is minimal differentiation in the rendering of facial features among individual female donors. Conversely, pronounced variations manifest in their attire, devotional objects, and spatial positioning. This phenomenon demonstrates that the artisans’ focus was directed not toward individual physiognomy, but rather toward institutional identity. Consequently, the cartouches, garments, and spatial placement coalesced into a unified and critical framework for identifying the respective figures.

The change of concepts reflects the change in the function of donor portraits. When the cave assumed the function of family commemoration, the most important value of the figures did not lie in reproducing their true appearance, but in accurately expressing their position in the family. The hierarchy of clothing, the norms of posture, and the arrangement of figures together formed a complete system of identity expression, allowing viewers to recognize the social and family relations in which the images were situated. The iconographic shaping of female donors in Cave 156, on the one hand, preserves important visual materials of Dunhuang female images during the Guiyijun period; on the other hand, it is also an important part of the visualization of family order.

5. Lady Song's Procession and the Political Visibility of Women

Among the female donors in Cave 156, the status of Zhang Yichao's wife, Lady Song, is particularly important. She not only appears multiple times in the donor procession, but also has an independent Procession Chart of Lady Song, Henei Commandery Lady of Song State, which has a grand scene, numerous figures, an innovative composition, and vivid shapes. The overall picture is divided into three main parts: starting from the west side of the north wall, the front part consists of pole-balancing acrobats, followed by a dance and music troupe, including four dancers and eleven musicians accompanying them; Behind the troupe advances a cohort of equestrians and attendants, trailed by baggage carts and horses. In the central section, Lady Song rides on horseback; adhering to the traditional artistic convention of hierarchical proportion (where major figures are rendered larger than minor ones), she occupies the absolute visual core of the composition. Depicted with an exalted stature, Lady Song wears a floral crown adorned with hairpins, a cyan large-sleeved robe with a cross-collar, and a high-waisted skirt tied at the chest; she sits atop a robust, long-maned white horse. The line work defining her drapery folds, headdress, and the horse's mane remains sharp and crisp, followed by a rearguard of armed escorts. The final section transitions to the northern side of the east wall, where six mounted retainers lead the transport baggage, and the entire procession culminates in a scene of mounted soldiers practicing archery. As scholarship notes, "utilizing procession scenes to flaunt one's achievements, power, and status was the primary motivation for Guiyijun rulers to commission this specific iconographic schema."

Grand in scale, the Lady Song's Procession encapsulates carriages, horses, guards of honor, attendants, and entertainment performances, presenting a solemn and majestic processional tableau. The composition skillfully balances density and openness in its grouping of figures, marking a culmination of traditional Chinese equestrian and figure painting. Positioned directly opposite Zhang Yichao's Military Procession, both murals adopt a horizontal scroll format, each measuring an impressive 8.2 meters in length and 1.05 meters in height; their sheer human scale, the length of the entourages, and the opulence of decorative details collectively project the family's political authority and social ascendancy.

The true significance of the Lady Song's Procession, however, lies in its deliberate integration of a core female family member into the expressive framework of political power. By appearing side by side with Zhang Yichao, Lady Song became a part of the overall authority of the Zhang kinship, reflecting the change of family concepts during the Guiyijun period. Although women were still within the traditional family structure, their iconographic value had exceeded the family subordinate role in the general sense, and they became important media for maintaining family memory and strengthening family legitimacy.

6. Spatial Order and the Visual Construction of Kinship

One of the most noteworthy features of Cave 156 lies in the fact that its donor layout roughly forms a fixed pattern, painting numerous figures from the cave merit patron's family on each wall surface, where males are located on the south side and females are on the north side. The reorganization of family relations in religious space transforms the clan order in real society into a visual order in Buddhist space, and the two form a relatively stable corresponding relationship.

In the cave, the social relations of the donors are expressed through spatial positions, and female family members are arranged in different positions in the cave according to their identity and status, reflecting real kinship relations. Thanks to this, viewers entering the cave can understand the internal relational structure of the Zhang kinship through the arrangement of figures. The corridor, the main chamber, and the area beneath the niche collectively serve as venues for displaying lineage members, synthesizing into a visual space of a deeply commemorative nature.

Observing the distributional patterns of these female donor portraits reveals that the clan members were integrated into a cohesive whole characterized by explicit hierarchies and structure; the Buddhist space thus operated as an essential medium for broadcasting the family framework. From this perspective, family members attained a form of perpetual presence through their iconographic surrogates, while the cave transformed into a critical locus for preserving and transmitting familial memory—ultimately achieving the visual manifestation of a family genealogy.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, the female donor iconography in Cave 156 offers a fresh vantage point for investigating the social fabric and familial culture of Dunhuang during the Guiyijun period. The identities of female donors in the cave are reflected through cartouche inscriptions, iconographic positions, and spatial layout, transforming real-world family member relations into visual expressions in the grotto space. Drawing on theories of visual culture and collective memory, this article approaches Cave 156 not simply as a Buddhist devotional space but as a site where lineage identity was materially and visually constructed. The images of female donors further reflect the multiple meanings of religious and political power in the construction of family order.

The female donor images in Cave 156 embody the family-centered mode of cave construction. The identity markers, arrangement relationships, and ritualistic expressions of the figures together constitute the image presentation of the Zhang kinship in the Buddhist space. Through these images, it can be observed that while the Dunhuang grottoes during the Guiyijun period undertook religious functions, they also became important spaces for constructing the expression of family order and confirming social identity. In this process, the female images connected the individual, the family, and the local social relations, showing the side of grotto art participating in the construction of social order.

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