

# Buddhism in Central Asia II

*Practices and Rituals, Visual and Material Transfer*

*Edited by*

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# Beyond Spatial and Temporal Contingencies: Tantric Rituals in Eastern Central Asia under Tangut Rule, 11th–13th C.

*Carmen Meinert*

## 1 Introduction<sup>1</sup>

At the time of Tangut rule (ca. 1038–1227, in Chinese sources known as Xixia 西夏) over Eastern Central Asian lands, space—the physically tangible space, geographic reality, as well as the religiously imagined space including one's own body—had become thoroughly defined by Buddhist conceptualisations. A special feature of Tantric Buddhism is that one's own body is perceived as a sacred space. As I argue elsewhere that

the Tangut territory was as a sacred environment filled with pagodas, *stūpas*, monasteries, and caves. These elements were mediums through which the Buddhist divine was seen, visualised and experienced. They represent a thorough transformation that would not have been possible without extensive imperial patronage.<sup>2</sup>

Whereas in the publication quoted above, I investigate aspects of the creation of tantric sacred sites from the point of view of Tangut imperial patronage, here, I would like to move a step further and look at some of those sacred sites from the perspective of religious practice, especially from the perspective of tantric ritual practice. How did tantric practitioners in medieval Eastern

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1 I am indebted to Henrik H. Sørensen, Knut Martin Stünkel, Dylan Esler, and an anonymous reviewer for very valuable suggestions on how to improve an earlier draft of this chapter. All remaining mistakes are my own.

2 Carmen Meinert, "Creation of Tantric Sacred Spaces in Eastern Central Asia," in *Buddhism in Central Asia I—Patronage, Legitimation, Sacred Space, Pilgrimage*, ed. Carmen Meinert and Henrik H. Sørensen (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2020), 246–247. [https://static.ceres.rub.de/media/filer\\_public/fd/cf/fdcf9c3e-95b6-47c8-8e4a-330d21b4476e/meinert\\_sorensen\\_2020\\_buddhism\\_in\\_central\\_asia\\_i\\_meinert\\_offprint.pdf](https://static.ceres.rub.de/media/filer_public/fd/cf/fdcf9c3e-95b6-47c8-8e4a-330d21b4476e/meinert_sorensen_2020_buddhism_in_central_asia_i_meinert_offprint.pdf). A map of the Tangut Empire and its territories around 1150 is in *ibid.*, 252–253 and on the website of the BuddhistRoad project at <https://buddhistroad.ceres.rub.de/en/visual-aids/>.

Central Asia perceive geographic reality and experience the world they lived in? How did they perceive themselves in relation to the world beyond or to a divine realm in particular? Is it possible to investigate this relationship on the basis of materials available to us today? This should be possible, at least to a certain degree. Of course, it would be presumptuous to argue that we are able to know exactly how medieval tantric practitioners perceived their physical environments and their bodies, how they perceived sacred spaces, and how they acted in those spaces. Nonetheless, I would like to propose a new reading of the sources by combining an analysis of material evidence with a close textual reading in order to come a step closer to asymptotic convergence of divine (space). Therefore, the aim of the present chapter is to show the movement from 'here-and-now' to 'there' in a Buddhist context, or to retrace the potential movement from immanence to transcendence. I take tantric ritual practices as an example, as evidenced in the archaeological, visual, and textual materials from Dunhuang (敦煌) and Karakhoto during the period in question and place emphasis on materials related to the cult of Vajravārāhī, a female deity whose cult enjoyed great popularity in the Tangut Empire. One specificity of tantric ritual practice is that not only the physical space becomes the locus of immanence and transcendence, but in this process, the human body changes status as well, and is perceived as part of both.<sup>3</sup> My analysis of ritual practice is primarily based on the definition of ritual developed in the Heidelberg research consortium *Ritual Dynamics*.<sup>4</sup> A ritual manual, or more precisely, the evocation rite (Skt. *sādhana*), such as is under investigation here, features a normative description of the divinity in her or his sacred space and an instruction on how to activate her or his divine presence in this world, as well as in one's own body, through a carefully choreographed performance. Rituals, in a narrower sense, are patterns for action and organisation, which are usually consciously created, following a certain set of rules. They remain relatively stable and are rich in their symbolism, yet may be continuously adjusted through performance and actualisation. Rituals reduce the unpredictability, uncertainty,

3 I show elsewhere, based on Chinese ritual manuals from Karakhoto related to the cult of Vajravārāhī, that in tantric ritual practice the transformation of one's own body into a divine body is a thoroughly sensual experience. See Carmen Meinert, "Embodying the Divine in Tantric Ritual Practice: Examples from the Chinese Karakhoto Manuscripts from the Tangut Empire (ca. 1038–1227)," *Revue d'Études Tibétaines* 50 (2019): 56–72.

4 The *Collaborative Research Center 619 "Ritual Dynamics" Socio-Cultural Processes from a Historical and Culturally Comparative Perspective* was funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) from 2002 to 2013. See the website at <http://www.ritualdynamik.de/index.php?id=1&L=1>, accessed June 12, 2020.

and contingency in human actions by prescribing generally accepted forms of practice and action.<sup>5</sup>

## 2 Transcendence–Immanence Distinction (TID)

The reader may ask why I choose to apply the concept of transcendence and immanence, developed in the context of mainly Christian studies, to refer to ‘here-and-now’ and ‘there’ when dealing with Central Asian materials and non-Christian religious traditions. What would the benefit be for such an endeavour? A rich body of material is available that documents religious life and meaning for medieval Buddhists from Eastern Central Asia. However, this material is rarely acknowledged outside a narrow academic field. Here, I attempt to make it available to a broader readership in religious studies and, thereby, to move a rather small discipline out of its niche existence. Framing this material within current discourses in religious studies is one step in this direction. Furthermore, narrower fields of research, such as my case study of tantric material from medieval Eastern Central Asia, may also benefit from such an approach that frames them in discussions on the transcendent–immanent distinction. I suggest that we are able to gain a more nuanced understanding of tantric rituals and the sources—beyond what a purely philological or art-historical or archaeological approach might be able to offer—namely, a meta-perspective. The latter allows explicating the steps in understanding religiously connotated materials and processes of generating religious meaning which otherwise would remain unnamed or merely in thoughts. It is an academic method for making decisions in the analysis of even the most transcendent, religiously connotated matters comprehensible; it allows for traceability in each single instance, while still remaining outside inner-religious discourses. Thus, such a meta-perspective as an academic method aims at asymptotic convergence to the religious experience of non-dualism, which is the very pivot of Tantric Buddhist practice.

So here, I follow the idea of Volkhard Krech, sociologist of religions and director of the Center for Religious Studies (CERES) in Bochum, of understanding the religious field as one element of the societal field that distinguishes itself from other fields by providing a *special way of addressing and coping with contingencies*, namely, through establishing the distinction of a transcendent dimension versus an immanent dimension:

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5 Christiane Brosius, Axel Michaels, and Paula Schrode, ed., *Ritual und Ritualdynamik. Schlüsselbegriffe, Theorien, Diskussionen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 15.

Religion provides the dimensions of the dialectic processes between the psychological and the social—knowledge, experience, actions and the relationship to the material (also already coded and psychologically represented in social communication)—with a specific transcendental meaning and thus is a special form of dealing with contingency. A surplus value is thus attached to social and cultural circumstances, which they otherwise do not enjoy in other forms of treatment. The way in which the transcendental sense is specifically symbolised (temporally, spatially, materially, in terms of shaping actions and cognitions) depends on cultural conditions and is defined in distinction from other rationalities.<sup>6</sup>

How does one go about approaching and coming to terms with a specific transcendental notion? When searching for a viable methodology, I was further inspired by discussions and research facilitated at CERES in the framework of the KHK *Dynamics in the History of Religions between Asia and Europe*,<sup>7</sup> which tested *tertium comparationis* in order to allow for comparative research in religious studies. During the academic year of 2016–2017, when we questioned how to operationalise the TID as a *tertium comparationis* in religious studies,<sup>8</sup> the following became clear: In order to be able to use the notion of transcendence in conceptualising religions, particularly non-Christian traditions, it is necessary to avoid “the fallacy of not taking the manifold gradual distinctions of the concept into consideration.”<sup>9</sup> Rather than focusing solely

6 Volkhard Krech, “Dynamics in the History of Religions—Preliminary Considerations on Aspects of a Research Programme,” in *Dynamics in the History of Religions between Asia and Europe. Encounters, Notions, and Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Volkhard Krech and Marion Steinicke (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2012), 22.

7 For information on this collaborative research project funded by the BMBF for 12 years, see the following website: <https://khk.ceres.rub.de/en/>.

8 A summary of the overarching topic of TID is provided in KHK, “Transcendence & Immanence,” accessed May 16, 2020. <https://khk.ceres.rub.de/en/research/overarching-topics/transcendence-immanence/>; and in Knut Stünkel, “KHK Working Paper Series: VII: Immanence/Transcendence,” last modified June 2017, accessed May 16, 2020. [https://static.ceres.rub.de/media/filer\\_public/3e/33/3e33ee48-f3e4-4eb3-a2e7-259bf6d8abb4/er-khk-7\\_transcendence\\_170628.pdf](https://static.ceres.rub.de/media/filer_public/3e/33/3e33ee48-f3e4-4eb3-a2e7-259bf6d8abb4/er-khk-7_transcendence_170628.pdf).

9 It is thanks to the efforts of my colleague Knut Martin Stünkel that the results of the KHK discussions that crystallised in a three-level model of TID will be published soon as Chapter v of his monograph; Knut Martin Stünkel, “TID: The Transcendence-Immanence Distinction: Religion as Contrast,” in *Key Concepts in the Study of Religions in Contact* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, forthcoming), 1. Many thanks go to Knut Stünkel for kindly allowing me to read the draft of his chapter and quote from it. Whenever I refer to page numbers of Chapter v on TID from his forthcoming monograph, it is to the yet-unpublished version of the chapter made available to me on June 13, 2020. This way, passages may be easily found later in the

on an absolute notion of any specific type of transcendence (e.g. God, Buddha, *nirvāṇa*), which is, as a relational notion, valid only in contrast to immanence, it is more helpful to identify a *transcending process*.<sup>10</sup> Thereby, it is possible to approach the question when a phenomenon potentially attributed with religious meaning, that is a religioid phenomenon, may, in fact, be identified as conveying a specific form of religious transcendence. Knut Martin Stünkel, my colleague at CERES who formulated the outcome of the year-long discussion of the interdisciplinary research consortium, introduced a three-level model of the TID (comprising basic, formal, and specific religious transcendence) as “a tool that may serve in the process of *comparison* of phenomena, or rather, that may be described as religious (or ‘*religioid*’) phenomena.”<sup>11</sup> *Basic transcendence*, according to Stünkel, refers to religioid material that bears the potential of developing into religious phenomena, but does not necessarily need to do so; it is, however, the liminal or transcending process that marks a shift in

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published version. In this chapter, Knut Stünkel also critically discusses the advantages and disadvantages of using TID as a *tertium comparationis* and carefully argues in favour of using a three-level TID model as an analytical tool in order to decipher more clearly when a specific religious transcendence is attributed to a religioid material per se. I discuss this further below. Knut Stünkel also refers to Niklas Luhmann and his system theory, where he claims that the specific code of religious systems is the primary code of transcendence–immanence distinction, which gives rise to religious communication. For a critical review of the applicability of Luhmann’s assumption for religious studies broadly speaking and for non-Christian traditions specifically, see Christoph Kleine, “Niklas Luhmann und die Religionswissenschaft: Geht das Zusammen?,” *Zeitschrift für Religionswissenschaft* 24.1 (2016): 47–82.

10 I should point out that in recent years, the notion of transcendence is discussed in buddhological scholarship as well. Two stimulating readings are: Dan Lee, “The Buddha and the Numen: Postmodern Spirituality and the Problem of Transcendence in Buddhism,” *International Journal of Dharma Studies* 4.14 (2016): 1–16; and Bruce M. Knauff, “Self-Possessed and Self-Governed: Transcendent Spirituality in Tibetan Tantric Buddhism,” *Ethnos* 84.4 (2017): 557–587. Lee argues that historical Buddhism does, in fact, contain transcendence, analysing it in relation to the new spirituality movement’s understanding of the term, thereby relying on Rudolph Otto’s early 20th century description of numen (transcendence) as *mysterium tremendum*. Compared to Lee who aims at proving the existence of transcendence in Early and Mahāyāna Buddhism, I am focusing on the *how* (a transcending process) rather than on the *what* (a specific notion of transcendence). More interesting for my study is Knauff who applies the ‘absorption hypothesis’ developed by Tanya Luhrmann and others in the context of Evangelical Christianity to Tibetan Tantric Buddhism. Interesting here is the idea that a transcendent reality is analysed as a viscerally experience, much in line of what I describe further below as ‘embodied mind’. See also Tanya M. Luhrmann, Howard Nusbaum, and Ronald Thisted, “The Absorption Hypothesis: Learning to Hear God in Evangelical Christianity,” *American Anthropologist* 112.1 (2010): 66–78, particularly 66–67.

11 Stünkel, “TID: The Transcendence-Immanence Distinction,” 2.



perspective, but with regard to essentially the same reality. As a concept, *formal transcendence* implies some type of self-reference or second-order observation that points beyond the everyday reality of 'here-and-now' to 'there'; on an object-language level, it is often performed by a reflecting individual, for example by a religious practitioner in the case of religious practice. *Specific religious transcendence* may be ascribed to a specific religious achievement (e.g. ascending to becoming an immortal, accomplishing buddhahood, etc.) accomplished by a religious performer; with regard to texts, linguistic markers are important in order to identify the turn from formal to specific religious transcendence.<sup>12</sup> In applying this three-level model as an analytical tool for deciphering a transcending process, it is crucial to bear in mind that:

[a]s usual, the three levels have to be considered as being mere analytical distinctions that do, in fact, interrelate in praxis (for example: certain object-language level expressions of basic transcendence might be interpreted in terms of specific transcendence (if there is an elaborated doctrinal theology)).<sup>13</sup>

Thus, the TID may serve as an interpretative paradigm to understand movements from 'here-and-now' to 'there' in religious perceptions of space and time, knowledge and practice.<sup>14</sup> However, as religion proper has to tackle the problem of observation of the unobservable or of how to express the

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12 For a comprehensive discussion of the three-level model of transcendence, see Stünkel, "TID: The Transcendence-Immanence Distinction," 10–16. With reference to previous research in this area, Knut Stünkel further proposes the following notions: for basic transcendence, the deictic act of 'pointing at'; and for formal transcendence, the concepts of 'pointing out' and 'standing back and looking beyond'. I refrain from using these notions because I suggest, as is clear in my examples below, that the three-level model of transcendence might be applicable to concrete materials in a much broader sense. Although 'pointing at' and 'pointing out' are useful heuristic categories to approach the transcending process in general, they are too limiting in describing the dynamic process as such. As a result of our discussion, Knut Stünkel also reformulated this idea and stressed the deictic situation (*ibid.*, 18–20). Moreover, it should be noted that, at the end of his chapter on TID, Stünkel suggests that any type of binary opposition or contrast that is pointed at and reflected upon may serve as the most basic expression of TID. He does so in order to avoid explicit dichotomies (a and non-a) and to arrive at potential intermediate stages (e.g. aa) for a potential starting point of a transcending process. *Ibid.*, 68–70.

13 *Ibid.*, 17.

14 It should be noted that even the contrast 'here' and 'there' refers to basic transcendence, at least in the case of dealing with religioid material.

inexpressible transcendence, it has to present transcendence by immanent means.<sup>15</sup> My concrete examples from Tantric Buddhist rituals documented in Central Asian material show that the locus of immanence, may it be a physically tangible cave or one's own body, becomes the locus of transcendence, a sacred space or a divine body, which also results in a different notion of time. Transcendence as otherwise inaccessible space beyond the immediate reality, may, therefore, be localised. As it is associated with spatial metaphors and thus to processes of movement,<sup>16</sup> it is worthwhile to look for such indicators on the object-language level when analysing specific ritual procedures (see my analysis of tantric ritual texts further below).

In an attempt to reconstruct a potential religious context, a Tantric Buddhist context, for Eastern Central Asian Buddhist sites under Tangut rule, in the following, I first provide evidence of why and how the Mogao Caves (Chin. Mogao ku 莫高窟) in Dunhuang were most likely not solely sites for funerary rites, ancestry cults, and such—as suggested by Robert Sharf in his thought-provoking article *Art in the Dark: The Ritual Context of Buddhist Caves in Western China*<sup>17</sup>—but were, in fact, also places of Buddhist meditation, and

15 Volkhard Krech, *Wo bleibt die Religion?: Zur Ambivalenz des Religiösen in der modernen Gesellschaft* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2011), 41. See also, Stünkel, "TID: The Transcendence-Immanence Distinction," 5.

16 Krech, *Wo bleibt die Religion?*, 11.

17 Robert Sharf, "Art in the Dark: The Ritual Context of Buddhist Caves in Western China," in *Art of Merit: Studies in Buddhist Art and Its Conservation*, ed. Sharon Cather, David Park, and K. Wangmo (London: Archetype, 2013), 38–65. Particularly on page 60, Robert Sharf says: "In the end, there is little compelling evidence that the shrine caves [at Mogao] we see today were designed with meditating monks in mind." And "[...] with the exception of a few larger grottoes such as the colossal-image caves which were, in all likelihood, open as public places of worship, I have suggested that the majority of the shrine caves at Mogao functioned as private memorial chapels, and that the inner precincts of these chapels were entered only rarely."

The article by Robert Sharf is just one reaction to previous scholarship. The following publication paved the way for the hypothesis that the temporal concomitance between the spreading of Chan meditation practices and the erection of caves was not casual but rather causal: Liu Huida 劉慧達, "Beiwei shiku yu Chan 北魏石窟與禪 [Northern Wei Caves and Chan]," *Kaogu Xuebao* 考古學報 [Journal of Archaeology] 50.3 (1978): 338–339. The thesis was reviewed and improved by Stanley K. Abe, "Art and Practice in a Fifth-Century Chinese Buddhist Cave Temple," *Ars Orientalis* (1990): 1–31. It was eventually challenged in the above mentioned article by Robert Sharf which further triggered the scholarly discussion: Eric M. Greene, "Death in a Cave: Meditation, Deathbed Ritual, and Skeletal Imagery at Tape Shotor," *Artibus Asiae* 73.2 (2013): 265–91; Angela F. Howard, "On 'Art in the Dark' and Meditation in Central Asian Buddhist Caves," *The Eastern Buddhist* 46.2 (2015): 19–39. A useful summary of existing literature on this topic is provided in Greene, "Death in a Cave," 265–266, fn. 1.

more specifically, of tantric (ritual) practice, and thereby, scholars should interpret them as sacred spaces. Here, I further explore the arguments of my colleague Henrik H. Sørensen, who provides ample evidence for the use of caves as ritual spaces.<sup>18</sup> Second, as an example of tantric ritual practices that were also relevant in Tangut ruled Dunhuang, I suggest a new reading of ritual texts related to the female deity Vajravārāhī, as found in the Karakhoto collection of Chinese manuscripts, and analyse them with the analytical tool of the above-introduced three-level model of TID. As I suggest elsewhere, it is meaningful to consider materials from various locations in relation to each other, as well as from a network approach.<sup>19</sup> To avoid misunderstandings, I am not aiming at providing clear proof that a specific cult, such as Vajravārāhī, was practiced in one particular cave at the Mogao Cave complex; nonetheless, the Vajravārāhī cult, as one of the most popular in tantric circles during Tangut times, may exemplify tantric ritual practice in locales like Tangut ruled Dunhuang.<sup>20</sup>

Thus, I bring ritual texts into conversation with the archaeological and visual evidence from Dunhuang and Karakhoto in order to approach the question of time in a tantric ritual context. I thereby hope to offer a different understanding of space and time, as perceived by tantric practitioners in Eastern Central Asian lands under Tangut rule, from an academic perspective focused on the point of view of a religious practitioner and with reference to the TID.

18 Henrik H. Sørensen recently also published a response to Robert Sharf. He argues that it is false to conflate Sinitic funerary practice with Central Asian Buddhism. He strongly suggests, on the basis of information provided in Dunhuang manuscripts and *in situ* inscriptions in the Mogao Caves from the 9th and 10th centuries, that some caves were also used for meditation and ritual purposes, that lamps were, in fact, lit on certain festivities to enter the caves, and that ritual worship was performed in some caves. See Henrik H. Sørensen, “Light on Art in the Dark’: On Buddhist Practice and Worship in the Mogao Caves,” *BuddhistRoad Paper* 5.6 (2022). I suggest that we see a continuation of this use of the caves under Tangut rule in the 12th century as well.

19 Meinert, “Creation of Tantric Sacred Spaces in Eastern Central Asia,” 246. Much in line with my suggestion, Sam van Schaik argues that Tantric Buddhism, as documented in the Dunhuang manuscripts, developed into a flexible system for group formation that cut across boundaries of class, clan, and ethnicity, extending to various locations in the Central Asian Buddhist network. Sam van Schaik, “Tibetan Buddhism in Central Asia: Geopolitics and Group Dynamics,” in *Transfer of Buddhism across Central Asian Networks (7th to 13th Centuries)*, ed. Carmen Meinert (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2016), 57–81.

20 Weirong Shen points to the great popularity of the Vajravārāhī cult in the Tangut Empire. See Weirong Shen, “Reconstructing the History of Buddhism in Central Eurasia (11th–14th Centuries): An Interdisciplinary and Multilingual Approach to the Khara Khoto Texts,” in *Edition, éditions: l’écrit au Tibet, évolution et devenir*, ed. Anne Chayet et al. (Munich: Indus Verlag, 2010), 337–362, particularly 348. Only the Mahākāla cult seems to have been equally popular. See Haoran Hou’s chapter in this volume: “Mahākāla Literature Unearthed from Karakhoto”.

### 3 Evidence for Tantric Practice from the Tangut Empire

#### 3.1 *Material Evidence: Physical Space and Tangible Objects*

Among the 492 decorated caves in the Mogao Cave complex in Dunhuang, Cave 465 is the only cave featuring an elaborate Tantric Buddhist iconographic programme (fig. 10.1).<sup>21</sup> In a previous study, I suggest that the frescos in the cave were most likely produced under Tangut imperial patronage.<sup>22</sup> The central focus of the cave is the cult of Cakrasaṃvara and Vajravārāhī, and in line with Toni Huber, I argue that:

Tibetans had followed the pilgrimage routes of the Indian Tantric *pīṭha* sites. Such sites were primarily understood as related to internal yoga practice meant to realise a *maṇḍala* of a given deity within one's own body, i.e. as a *vajra* body (Skt. *vajrakāya*), also manifested in the external world with certain deities presiding in the geographical 'vajra body'.<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, I suggest that this trend to relocate the superimposed *vajra* body onto its own geographical realm also occurred under Tangut rule, and that we may understand Mogao Cave 465 as an exquisite example of such a tantric ritual space. Here, I provide further evidence in support of my hypothesis that Cave 465 is, in fact, a tantric site in the *pīṭha* cultic circuit and is in the vicinity of charnel grounds. This is evident on the microcosmic level of depictions of deities within the cave, as well as on the macrocosmic level of the location of Cave 465 in a larger sacred space. Charnel grounds were preferred sites for

21 Detailed images of the whole cave are published in Yang Xiong 楊雄 and Wu Jian 吳健, ed., *Dunhuang shiku yishu. Mogao ku di siliuwu ku (Yuan)* 敦煌石窟藝術·莫高窟第四六五窟(元) [Art from the Caves of Dunhuang, Mogao Cave 465 (Yuan)] (Nanjing: Jiansu meishu chubanshe, 1996).

22 Meinert, "Creation of Tantric Sacred Spaces in Eastern Central Asia." Other scholars also suggest that Cave 465 was built under Tangut rule. See also, Xie Jisheng 谢继胜, "Mogao ku di 465 ku bihua hua yu Xixia kao 莫高窟第465窟壁画绘于西夏考 [Study of the Wall Paintings in Mogao Cave 465 from Tangut Times]," *Zhongguo zangxue* 中国藏学 *China Tibetology* 2 (2003): 69–79; Ruan Li 阮丽, "Mogao ku di 465 ku mandaluo zaikao 莫高窟第465窟曼荼罗再考 [Study of the Maṇḍala in Mogao Cave 465]," *Gugong bowuyuan yuankan* 故宫博物院院刊 [Journal of the Museum of the Forbidden City] 168 (2013): 61–83; see also the discussion of the recent pigments analysis in Cave 465 through imaging spectroscopy in Sotiria Kogou, "Investigation of the Complementary Use of Non-Invasive Techniques for the Holistic Analysis of Paintings and Automatic Analysis of Large Scale Spectral Imaging Data" (PhD diss., Nottingham Trent University, 2017), 99–145.

23 Quoted from Meinert, "Creation of Tantric Sacred Spaces in Eastern Central Asia," 250. See also, Toni Huber, "Where Exactly are Cāritra, Devikoṭa and Himavat? A Sacred Geography Controversy and the Development of Tantric Buddhist Pilgrimage Sites in Tibet," *Kailash* 16.3–4 (1990): 124–125.



FIGURE 10.1 Mogao Cave 465, Dunhuang, late 12th c. (?)  
 YANG AND WU, *DUNHUANG SHIKU YISHU. MOGAO KU DI SILIUWU KU*  
 (YUAN), PL. 3 (P. 34)

tantric meditative practice, and in tantric literature are often referred to as the eight cemeteries or eight charnel grounds (Skt. *aṣṭa śmaśāna*).<sup>24</sup>

In my previous study, I also suggest that in order to fully appreciate Cave 465, it needs to be understood in the context of other related sites and findings from the Tangut Empire, such as visual and textual findings from Karakhoto.<sup>25</sup> In related visual images, we find not only depictions of tantric deities, such as Vajravārāhī, but also information that is relevant to tantric ritual practice. As such, Karakhoto *thangka* x2388, which depicts Vajravārāhī as central deity,<sup>26</sup> vividly illustrates the place where her ritual practice is to be performed, namely, in charnel grounds (figs. 10.2–3). There are endless skulls and bones

24 For the mythological background and Buddhist appropriation of the eight charnel grounds, see Robert Beer, *The Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs* (Boston: Shambhala, 1999), 250–251. An excellent study on skulls and associated charnel imagery, which are particularly found in the genre of the *Yoginī* Tantras, is in David B. Gray, “Skull Imagery and Skull Magic in the *Yoginī* Tantras,” *Pacific World: Third Series* 8 (2006): 21–39.

25 Meinert, “Creation of Tantric Sacred Spaces in Eastern Central Asia,” 246.

26 The image of Vajravārāhī (x2388) from Karakhoto is published in The State Hermitage Museum, Northwest University for Nationalities, and Shanghai Chinese Classics Publishing House, *Khara-Khoto Art Relics Collected in the State Hermitage Museum of Russia*, pl. 143. The image is also on the museum website: <https://www.hermitagemuseum.org/wps/portal/hermitage/digital-collection/25.+archaeological+artifacts/477192>, accessed May 20, 2020.



FIGURES 10.2–3 Vajravārāhī *thangka* and detail of a chanel ground surrounding the mandorla of the central deity. Karakhoto, late 12th/early 13th c. (?)  
X2388, THE STATE HERMITAGE MUSEUM, ST. PETERSBURG

surrounding her mandorla. A similar scene, though not as clearly discernible as x2388, is portrayed in Mogao Cave 465. In the eastern section of the northern wall, above the mandorla of Cakrasaṃvara, there is a meditator practising in a charnel ground (figs. 10.4–5).

Presumably, these depictions, although they represent a *topos* clearly transferred from the Indian cultural context that developed in the religious encounter with purity concepts of brahmanical traditions, do not simply refer to the basic Buddhist assumption of ‘existence as impermanent’ but were taken literally: charnel grounds *are* perfect sites for accomplishing tantric practice. They are ideal places for completely cutting through all attachments to mundane reality and seeing death, not as something impure (as in the brahmanical tradition in India), but as an opportunity for awakening, for accomplishing the Buddha’s *dharmakāya*, the ultimate body of truth, within a mundane context of immanent reality.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, it is worthwhile to look at the Mogao Cave complex as a whole, in order to better understand the specific location of an individual cave within a tantric iconographic programme, Cave 465; it is on the macrocosmic level of the sacred site of the Mogao Cave complex that Cave 465 forms part of the Northern Section of the Mogao Caves (Chin. Mogao ku beiqū 莫高窟北区). These caves partially function as burial sites and so present a somewhat similar situation to the charnel grounds, insofar as they are also associated with death and impermanence. Recent Chinese excavations at and scholarship on the site prove that the Northern Section, which stretches for about six hundred metres, mainly supported practical functions with caves used for habitation, meditation, and burial. Cave 465 is situated at its most northern end, far away from the much busier Southern Section (fig. 10.6). The Southern Section, which covers about 1000 m, was primarily used for worship at its temples and shrines.

In 2004, the Dunhuang Academy published three volumes dealing with just the Northern Section, the *Dunhuang Mogao ku beiqū shiku* 敦煌莫高窟北区石窟 [The Northern Section of Caves in the Mogao Caves at Dunhuang];<sup>28</sup> this publication is a great resource for investigating the exact location of Cave 465 and its immediate surroundings. The volumes list all locations with

27 Gray, “Skull Imagery and Skull Magic in the *Yoginī* Tantras,” 23–26.

28 Peng Jinchang 彭金章, Wang Jianjun 王建军, and Dunhuang Yanjiuyuan 敦煌研究院, ed., *Dunhuang Mogao ku beiqū shiku* 敦煌莫高窟北区石窟 [The Northern Section of Caves in the Mogao Caves at Dunhuang], 3 vols. (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 2004). In vol. 2, following p. 12, there are two maps 3A and 3B. In there, the whole Northern Section is divided into five parts (part A to E), which are of various lengths. Figures 10.8 and 10.11 in this chapter are copies of these maps, to which I add dots to indicate the location of specific caves. I also provide distances of other caves in relation to Cave 465.



FIGURES 10.4–5 Cakrasamvara and detail of a meditator in the charnel grounds surrounding Cakrasamvara's mandorla. Mogao Cave 465, northern wall, eastern section, Dunhuang, late 12th c. (?) YANG AND WU, *DUNHUANG SHIKU YISHU. MOGAO KU DI SILIUWU KU (YUAN)*, PLS. 82, 84 (P. 113, 115)





FIGURE 10.6 Sketch of Southern Section (above) and Northern Section (below) of Mogao Cave complex near Dunhuang with location of Cave 465 (red dot added by author)

SHICHANG MA, "BUDDHIST CAVE-TEMPLES AND THE CAO FAMILY AT MOGAO KU, DUNHUANG," IN *WORLD ARCHAEOLOGY* 27.2 (1995): FIG. 3, 306–307

their associated findings, some of which include human bones. Altogether, the remains of 53 bodies, including skulls, were found, roughly dating to the period from the 7th to the 13th centuries.<sup>29</sup> Burial, most likely of Buddhist practitioners of some type, was an ongoing social practice. One can only speculate that it must have been a privilege to leave behind one's bodily remains in a location of high Buddhist prestige, such as the Mogao Caves. As a tantric ritual space, Cave 465 was, in fact, built on top of two burial caves: Cave B42 (entered to the right of the main entrance of Cave 465) and Cave B43 (entered to the left of the main entrance of Cave 465) (figs. 10.7–8).<sup>30</sup> Cave 465 was likely excavated by 839, according to a Tibetan inscription on the southern wall of the entrance to the main hall.<sup>31</sup> However, it was only decorated with the still-visible tantric iconographic programme more than 350 years later, most likely under Tangut rule in

29 Thanks to Henrik H. Sørensen who brought this useful list to my attention. See also Henrik H. Sørensen, "On Meditation Caves and Cave-Dwelling Ascetics in Dunhuang, 9th to 13th Centuries," *BuddhistRoad Paper* 5.1 (2020): 23.

30 According to C14 tests, some bones found in Cave B42—the burial cave below Cave 465—date to the year 664. See Peng, Wang, and Dunhuang Yanjiuyuan, *Dunhuang Mogao ku beiqu shiku*, vol. 1, 107.

The building of Buddhist monasteries at or near charnel complexes already had a long tradition in India. See Gregory Schopen, "Archaeology and Protestant Presuppositions in the Study of Indian Buddhism," *History of Religions* 31.1 (1991): 13–14.

31 Huo Wei discusses the authenticity of the Tibetan inscription, which reads, "Whole cave built in the 25th year of the Tibetan [reign]." Unfortunately, I do not have access to the Tibetan script. Huo Wei refers to previous scholarship by Jin Weinuo (金维诺), who calculated the year 839 on the basis of the treaties between Tibet and Tang China, where the year 821 is given as the seventh year of the Tibetan reign. Huo Wei 霍巍, "Dunhuang Mogao ku di 465 ku jianku shiji zaishen 敦煌莫高窟第 465 窟建窟史迹再探 [Exploration of the Building History of Mogao Cave 465 in Dunhuang]," *Zhongguo zangxue 中国藏学 China Tibetology* 3 (2009): 189. It should be mentioned, though, that the date is controversial for other scholars, because the cursive Tibetan script was only



FIGURE 10.7 Main entrance to Mogao Cave 465 on top of burial Cave B42 (to the right of the lower steps of the staircase) and Cave B43 (to the left of the lower steps of the staircase)

YANG AND WU, *DUNHUANG SHIKU YISHU. MOGAO KU DI SILIUWU KU (YUAN)*, 13, FIG. 3



FIGURE 10.8 Sketch of the northern-most end (part E) of the Northern Section of Mogao Cave complex near Dunhuang with the locations of Cave 465 (red dot) and burial Caves B42, B43, and B48 (yellow dots—all dots and references to four caves added by author)

PENG, WANG, AND DUNHUANG YANJIUYUAN, *DUNHUANG MOGAO KU BEIQU SHIKU*, VOL. 2, FOLLOWING P. 12, MAP 3B (PART E)



FIGURE 10.9 Interior of burial Cave B42 with the remains of a deliberately cut human skull  
 PENG, WANG, AND DUNHUANG YANJIUYUAN, *DUNHUANG MOGAO KU BEIQU SHIKU*, VOL. 1, PLS. 20.3-6

the late 12th century. We do not know how the cave was used between the time of excavation and decoration. However, given its immediate surroundings, I do not think it is surprising that Cave 465 was the site chosen for a tantric iconographic programme at a time when Tantric Buddhism enjoyed Tangut imperial patronage.

Apart from the fact that Cave 465 was created in conjunction with burial sites, we know that of the 53 bodily remains found in the Mogao Cave complex, 15 show traces indicating that the skulls were removed from the body or skeleton, and part of the skull was deliberately cut off; of these, 5 are found in Cave B42 (fig. 10.9), immediately below Cave 465, and 5 are found in Cave B48, also in the immediate vicinity of Cave 465, only about 15 metres to its left (fig. 10.8). That the skulls were, in fact, purposefully sawn off is more clearly visible in an example from burial Cave B109, a cave also located in the Northern

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popular much later than the 9th century, and because the date was not applied in the usual Tibetan way of naming years.



### 5.B109 窟 (1) 男性被切割颅骨 (侧面)

FIGURE 10.10 A deliberately sawn-off human skull and found in burial Cave B109  
 PENG, WANG, AND DUNHUANG YANJIUYUAN, *DUNHUANG MOGAO KU  
 BEIQU SHIKU*, VOL. 3, PL. 192.5

Section, about 480 metres to the left side of Cave 465 (fig. 10.10).<sup>32</sup> Since there is not yet a date available for when the skulls were sawn off, we can only gather additional information on the use of the skulls when interpreting them in the larger context.

Why would medieval Central Asian people—presumably Buddhists—at a sacred Buddhist site like the Mogao Caves and in the immediate vicinity of the sole Tantric Buddhist cave, cut off the upper part of a skull, if not for the purpose of ritual use?<sup>33</sup> In fact, in the Northern Section of the Mogao Cave

32 For the exact location of Cave 109 in part A of the Northern Section, see Peng, Wang, and Dunhuang Yanjiuyuan, *Dunhuang Mogao ku beiqu shiku*, vol. 2, line drawing of cliff with cave nos. following p. 12, fig. 3A.

33 Henrik H. Sørensen has already suggested this object was used in tantric ritual practice. Sørensen, “On Meditation Caves and Cave-Dwelling Ascetics in Dunhuang,” 28. It is worth to mention here the discussion between Eric Greene and Angela Howard mentioned further above. Howard, “On ‘Art in the Dark,’” 31 shows that Greene thinks skulls (objects or in paintings) in caves were generic depictions with no further specific bearing on the

complex in Cave B121 (fig. 10.11), about two hundred metres to the left of Cave 465, two objects were found: a stand and a neatly cut oval-shaped piece of the upper part of a skull (fig. 10.12), whose shape indicates it was likely used as a tantric ritual object—a skull cup (Skt. *kapāla*), which is a ritual object that is used as a libation vessel for practices related to many wrathful and protective deities.<sup>34</sup>

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function of the cave (Greene, “Death in a Cave,” 270–271), but on the other hand concludes that one of the usages of a cave with skull images or objects points to a specific use of the cave, namely for pre-death ritual practice (ibid., 292). However, contrary to Greene, my argument is that the specificity in the Mogao Caves in Dunhuang is that we do not simply have skulls (or images of skulls), but skulls of which are purposefully sawn off the upper parts. This is a fine but important difference. My argument is that we see a further use of existing skulls which were originally clearly linked to funerary rites: the sawn-off skulls were used for tantric ritual practice. Greene looks at a very different context, namely at Mahāyāna Buddhism, but not, as in my case, at Tantric Buddhism.

Moreover, Greene (ibid., 276, fn. 57 and 58) mentioned that “similar skulls have been found at sites around the Taklamakan Desert, and there is at least one example from Ajina-tepe in modern Tajikistan.” Unfortunately, at the time of revision of this article (and due to Covid-19 related restrictions) I was not able to check the photos as mentioned in the footnotes by Greene in the following publications: Louis Hambis, ed., *Toumchouq: Mission Paul Pelliot* (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1961), vol. 1, figs. 193, 196, 291; Boris A. Litvinskij and Tarama I. Zejmal, *The Buddhist Monastery of Ajina Tepa, Tajikistan: History and Art of Buddhism in Central Asia* (Rome: Istituto italiano per l’Africa e l’Orinet, 2004), fig. 89.

- 34 One may wonder whether the oval object found together with the skull cup in Cave B121 served as a stand for a skull cup instead of as a lamp, as some Chinese scholars suggest (see figs. 10.12 and 10.17 for comparison). See my argument in favour of identifying it as a stand in the text below. Moreover, it would be useful to do a C14 test to date the object, in order to gain more information about this specific skull cup; the skull cup might even match one of the other cut skulls mentioned in this list? See, Peng, Wang, and Dunhuang Yanjiuyuan, *Dunhuang Mogao ku beiqiu shiku*, vol. 3, 487. Unfortunately, the quality of the image (fig. 10.12) is not good enough to clearly see how many sutures the skull has. According to later Tibetan Buddhist tradition, the number of sutures has an influence on the potency of the skull cup; those with more than three may even be harmful. Kulturstiftung Ruhr Essen, ed., *Tibet: Klöster öffnen ihre Schatzkammern* (Munich: Hirmer, 2006), 518, cat. no. 116. This entry for a 19th-century skull cup from Tibet (cat. no. 116) also gives a classification of human skulls. It references a publication not available to me; Andrea S. Loseries-Leick, *Tibetische Knochenschnitzereien. Tradition und Praxis im Wandel der Zeit, eine Datenerhebung unter Berücksichtigung historisch-ethnographischer Quellenmaterials (10.–20. Jhd.)* (Graz, Vienna: unpublished PhD diss.). A thorough description of the meaning of skull cups in tantric ritual contexts is provided in Beer, *The Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs*, 263–267. Skull cups are not only used as peripheral ritual implements, but also do play a central role in tantric rituals. They have a dual association with awakening and death, i.e., they are used to manifest the ultimate accomplishment of buddhahood and are also used to achieve mundane ends (e.g. in rites aimed at the destruction of an enemy). Moreover, charnel-ground imagery and practices were directed toward Hindu critics, most likely brahmins, who saw skull cups as impure

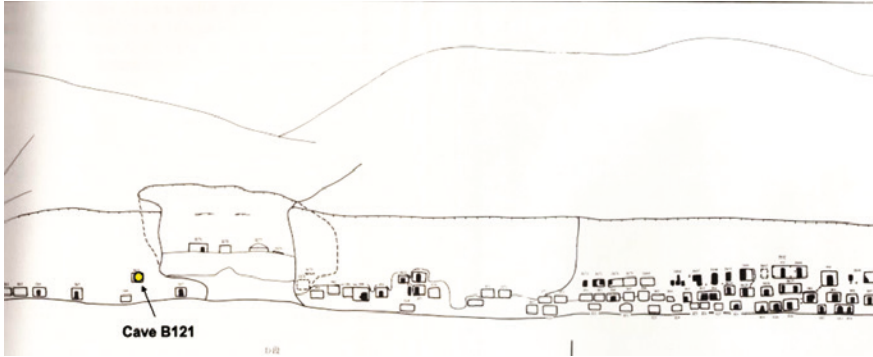
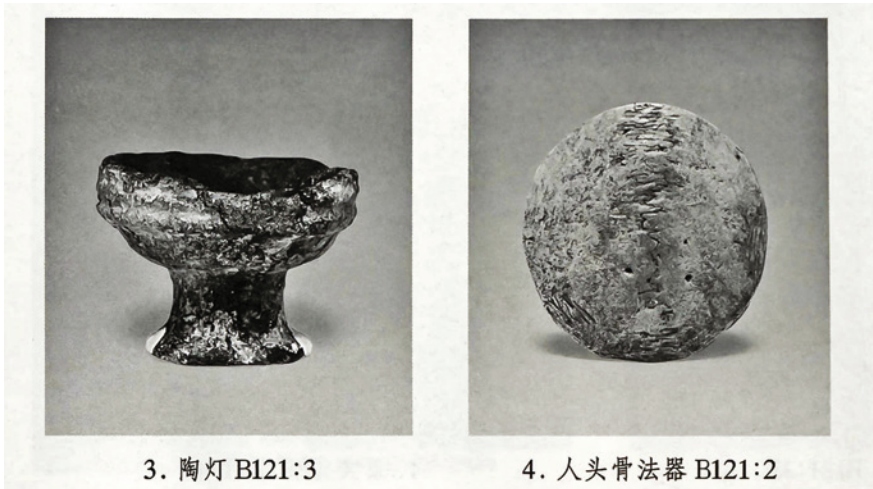


FIGURE 10.11 Sketch of part D of the Northern Section of the Mogao Cave complex near Dunhuang with the location of Cave B121 (yellow dot and reference to cave added by author)

PENG, WANG, AND DUNHUANG YANJIUYUAN, *DUNHUANG MOGAO KU BEIQU SHIKU*, VOL. 2, FOLLOWING P. 12, MAP 3B (PART E)



3. 陶灯 B121:3

4. 人头骨法器 B121:2

FIGURE 10.12 Ritual skull cup and lamp (or stand for a skull cup?) found in Cave B121  
PENG, WANG, AND DUNHUANG YANJIUYUAN, *DUNHUANG MOGAO KU BEIQU SHIKU*, VOL. 2, PLS. 62.3–4

A variety of paintings from Mogao Cave 465 and Karakhoto show the use of skull cups by tantric practitioners. In Cave 465, on the central section of the northern wall, there is a depiction of Hevajra in union with his consort and

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compared to conches, which they considered to be pure and were used in Vedic rituals. See Gray, "Skull Imagery and Skull Magic in the *Yogini* Tantras," 26, 29–32.

holding his defining attribute, skull cups; more relevant to our topic, to both sides of the lotus-flower base that the deities stand on, there are depictions of a local tantric master with a white hat and an Indian (?) master both having skull cups used as ritual offering vessels and placed in front of them (figs. 10.13–15). Furthermore, in another example of a Vajravārāhī *thangka* x2394 from Karakhoto, there is a figure of a tantric master in the lower-right corner of the *thangka*; he holds a *vajra* and bell in his hands, with a skull cup on a stand in front of him (figs. 10.16–17).<sup>35</sup> In fact, that stand looks exactly like the object found in Cave 121 (fig. 10.12, left image). Therefore, we may infer that the skull cup found in Cave B121 was, in fact, used as a ritual object in tantric practice.

Although scholars argue that Cave B121 was used as a burial cave,<sup>36</sup> I suggest that it was also used as a meditation cave, in which tantric practice was performed in a setting similar to a charnel ground. This is also supported by fragments of scriptures found in the cave, including 18 fragments of Tangut printed texts, provisionally referred to by Chinese scholars as *Zhu mizhou yaoyu* 諸密咒要語 [Essential Words of All Esoteric Spells].<sup>37</sup> Four of those fragments (B121: 18–1, 18–2, 18–12, 18–13) seem to be related to yogic dream practice, that is how to dream in a conscious manner,<sup>38</sup> a tantric meditation practice well-known in the region since Tangut rule, as, for example, evidenced in the Chinese Karakhoto manuscript A 15 *Menghuan shen yaomen* 夢幻身要門 [Quintessential Instruction on the Illusory Body of Dream].<sup>39</sup> In such a burial-meditation cave (see also Cave B42 in fig. 10.9), one could easily envision a meditator practising among bodily remains, just as it is depicted in a scene in Cave 465 (fig. 10.5).

35 The State Hermitage Museum, Russia, Northwest University for Nationalities, and Shanghai Chinese Classics Publishing House, *Khara-Khoto Art Relics Collected in the State Hermitage Museum of Russia*, pl. 144. The image can also be downloaded on the museum website; <https://www.hermitagemuseum.org/wps/portal/hermitage/digital-collection/25.+archaeological+artifacts/477198>, accessed May 26, 2020.

36 Peng, Wang, and Dunhuang Yanjiuyuan, *Dunhuang Mogao ku beiqiu shiku*, vol. 2, 146.

37 *Ibid.*, vol. 2, 140–141 and plates 54.3–59.4.

38 Haoran Hou kindly confirmed this information for me by looking into the Tangut fragments (May 7, 2020). A study of these fragments would shed more light on the actual meditation practice described in the texts.

39 Karakhoto manuscript A 15 is published in Shi Jinbo, Wei Tongxian, and E.I. Kychanov, ed., *Ecang Heishuicheng wenxian* 俄藏黑水城文獻 *Khara Khoto Texts Preserved in Russia* (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1996–1998), vol. 5, 244–246, fol. 1–5. See also the following study of the text with an identification of the Tibetan equivalent; Weirong Shen, “Studies on Chinese Texts of the Yogic Practices of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism Found in Khara Khoto of Tangut Xia. Quintessential Instruction on the Illusory Body of Dream,” *Cahiers d’Extreme-Asie* 15 (2015): 187–230.



FIGURES 10.13–15

Hevajra and details of a local master with white ceremonial hat and skull cup (bottom left) and an Indian (?) tantric master with skull cup (bottom right). Mogao Cave 465, northern wall, central section, Dunhuang, late 12th c. (?)

YANG AND WU, *DUNHUANG SHIKU YISHU. MOGAO KU DI SILIUWU KU (YUAN)*, PLS. 91, 105–106 (PP. 122, 134–135)







FIGURES 10.16–17 Vajravārāhī *thangka* and detail of tantric master with a white skull cup on a stand. Karakhoto, late 12th/early 13th c. (?)  
X2394, THE STATE HERMITAGE MUSEUM, ST. PETERSBURG

Thus, Cave B121 is a rare case that allows us to understand the lived space of a cave in Mogao informed by our understanding of tantric practice. What can we say about this specific cave, and by inference, about other caves used for ritual purposes, with regard to the TID? If we apply the analytical tool of the three-level model of TID established by Knut Martin Stünkel, we may identify palimpsests of religious meaning attributed to physical space and material objects. Firstly, a cave excavated from a rock is simply a hole dug into a stone; however, it does have the potential of developing into a religious phenomenon because the very act of excavation is religiosified when it takes place in the context of an environment with a long-documented history of Buddhist activities. Thus, an excavated cave at the Mogao Cave complex fulfils the criterion of religioid material for *basic transcendence*. As Cave B121 has remains of objects, a skull cup and ritual texts, that were likely used by a religious practitioner—more precisely, a tantric practitioner meditating in a charnel ground—we have at least a hint to a reflecting individual, likely with some type of vision to move beyond the everyday reality of ‘here-and-now’ to ‘there’, which is a criterion for *formal transcendence*.

### 3.2 *Textual Evidence for Tantric Rituals in Relation to Physical Space*

In order to get a step further in our understanding of a practitioner’s perception of space, that is, in the transformation of a physical space into a sacred space, and thus, in analysing a potential *transcending process* leading to specific religious transcendence, we need to investigate specific tantric ritual procedures, which were also potentially practised in the Mogao Caves. So far, I have not come across any relevant texts anywhere in the Northern Section of the Mogao Caves—which does not mean that there are none—however, a ritual text from the Karakhoto collection describes in detail how and where to perform tantric rituals. As the female deity Vajravārāhī constitutes a main focus of Cave 465—Ruan Li suggests that a Vajravārāhī statue used to be enthroned on the central altar (fig. 10.1), which originally had five tiers<sup>40</sup>—it is necessary to look at Vajravārāhī ritual texts to investigate the potential uses of that cave. I suggest that, apart from any other usages, Cave 465 was most likely used for communal rites because of its large size and, by inference, that other burial-meditation caves—such as Cave B121 discussed above—were used for individual meditation practice, due to their smaller sizes.

40 Ruan Li, “Mogao ku di 465 ku mandaluo zaikao.” Paul Pelliot took a photo of the altar that shows five tiers before its destruction and incorrect reconstruction (the latter is still visible nowadays). See Monique Maillard ed., *Grottes de Touen-houang. Carnet de notes de Paul Pelliot: inscription et peintures murales. VI.—Grottes 146a à 182 et divers* (Paris: Collège de France, 1992), pl. 347.

An interesting example for our query into ritual practices related to Vajravārāhī is found in a Chinese ritual text from Karakhoto, A 14, *Jingang haimu jilun gongyang cidī lu* 金剛亥母集輪供養次第錄 [Stages of Making Offerings to and the Feast Gathering of Vajravārāhī] (fig. 10.19).<sup>41</sup> It is a rather detailed instruction on how to perform a communal offering to Vajravārāhī, in order to please the deity and, at the same time, to strengthen the cohesion of the tantric ritual community.<sup>42</sup> It is meant to be led by an accomplished ritual master. The structure of the ritual is as follows: firstly, the *maṇḍala*, which will serve as the seat of the deity, and offerings to the deity are prepared, and the community is purified through ritual bathing; secondly, the deity is invited into the *maṇḍala*, and eventually, the practitioner's self-identification with deity takes place—the union of the pledge deity (Skt. *samayadevatā*) and the wisdom deity (Skt. *jñānadevatā*);<sup>43</sup> thirdly, the divinity, that is, the wisdom deity, is sent back to her realm; and fourthly, the *maṇḍala* is dissolved and its components are discarded in a pure place.

Let us take a closer look at the first two sections of the ritual text: the preparations for the *maṇḍala*, establishing the *maṇḍala*, and self-identification with the deity. What are the prerequisites to evoke the divine presence during a communal feast offering? In order for the ritual to be performed correctly, and thus, efficaciously, the following criteria need to be met: (1) the right time, (2) the right place, (3) the right agents, (4) the right altar, and (5) the right offerings. In detail, these are as follows:

- 1) The right time: the ritual is to be performed on the “8th, 15th, 23rd, 25th, or 30th day of the month or on an auspicious day like a rising star, for three days, seven days, or one month, etc.,”<sup>44</sup>
- 2) The right place: the ritual is to be performed “at a feast offering palace such as a charnel ground [at which one] draws a *maṇḍala*,”<sup>45</sup>
- 3) The right agents: a master (Chin. *shi* 師), someone who holds the *samaya* to act as a ritual servant (Chin. *yi ju jiyuren, ling zuo xingren* 一具記句人, 令作行人), a community of practitioners (Chin. *zhu chanding ren* 諸禪定人), and “a ritual servant with a wrathful expression to guard the entrance

41 The Chinese Karakhoto manuscript A 14 is published in Shi, Wei, and Kychanov, *Ecang Heishuicheng wenxian*, vol. 5, 241–244, fol. 1–7.

42 I studied a different part of this ritual manual from the point of view of the meaning of senses in tantric ritual practice. Meinert, “Embodying the Divine in Tantric Ritual Practice,” 63, 67–68.

43 For a description of this part of the meditation practice, see below, n. 60.

44 A 14, fol. 1.1–3: 應於月八, 十五日, 二十三, 二十五, 月盡, 或勝星等吉祥之日, 作三日, 七日, 一月等。

45 A 14, fol. 1.3: 於屍堂林等處集輪宮內, 作一曼拏囉。

with a stick” (Chin. *xingren zuo fennu xiang, zhi zhang shou men* 行人作忿怒相, 執杖守門) to the charnel ground, which is the offering palace (A 14, fol. 1.9–14);

- 4) The right altar: a multi-, red- or white-coloured *maṇḍala* with an eight-petalled lotus and a source of *dharma* (Chin. *fasheng gong* 法生宮)<sup>46</sup> on top of it (A 14, fol. 1.4–6);
- 5) The right offerings: offerings of flowers, incense, butter lamps, perfume, fruits, and such, placed on the lotus flower; two offering plates with food; further victory banners, banners, and umbrellas (A 14, fol. 1.6–9).

If we compare the information given in this ritual text with the setting of Cave 465 in terms of (2) the right place, Cave 465 certainly fulfils the criteria of a ritual space built on a charnel ground; it has an (4) altar on which to place the deity’s *maṇḍala* with an eight-petalled lotus and a source of *dharma*; (5) offerings, such as flowers and banners, are even partly visible as decorations on the originally five-tiered altar (see fig. 10.1 above).<sup>47</sup>

Moreover, in the Karakhoto Collection, we find the fragment x2405 with an image of a *maṇḍala* with an eight-petalled lotus and a triangle, that is a source of *dharma* (fig. 10.18), just as it is described in the ritual text. The catalogue does not further identify fragment x2405, but simply refers to it as “Lotus Maṇḍala”, tentatively dated to the 13th/14th centuries (?).<sup>48</sup> However, given the overall context and related materials from Karakhoto and Dunhuang, I would tend to date x2405 to the late 12th to early 13th centuries. What we have here is, indeed, the basis for invoking Vajravārāhī: her seed syllable *BAM* (in the centre of the triangle) and her *mantra* *HA RI* (on the left side of the triangle), *NI* (on the right side of the triangle), and *SA* (not visible in this fragment, on the bottom of the triangle) are written in Tibetan script.<sup>49</sup> Given the size of the fragment (29.5 × 58 cm), could it not be that this silken image was used for a ritual purpose, such as during a feast offering like the one described in the ritual text *Stages of Making Offerings to and the Feast Gathering of Vajravārāhī*? There are

46 The meaning of the term ‘source of *dharma*’ is explained in the text below. See n. 50.

47 Cave 465 is the only cave in the Mogao Cave complex with such an altar. Moreover, we may assume that the altar was used for other Tantric ritual purposes as well, e.g. fire offerings (Chin. *shaoshi* 燒施, Skt. *homa*). A Tangut inscription on the southern wall in the front chamber mentions that such a rite was performed by a certain master. See Huo, “Dunhuang Mogao ku di 465 ku jianku shiii zaishen,” 191.

48 The State Hermitage Museum, Russia, Northwest University for Nationalities, and Shanghai Chinese Classics Publishing House, *Khara-Khoto Art Relics Collected in the State Hermitage Museum of Russia*, pl. 175. Moreover, the image is also on the museum website; <https://www.hermitagemuseum.org/wps/portal/hermitage/digital-collection/25.+archaeological+artifacts/477209>, accessed May 27, 2020.

49 Thanks to Jan-Ulrich Sobisch for confirming this information (May 2, 2020).



FIGURE 10.18 Fragment of *maṇḍala* with an eight-petalled lotus and a triangle at its centre with the seed syllables in Tibetan script to invoke Vajravārāhī. Karakhoto, late 12th/early 13th c. (?)

X2405, THE STATE HERMITAGE MUSEUM, ST. PETERSBURG

three vertical folds and one horizontal fold in the material, which indicate that the image was folded, and perhaps also that it was unfolded when being used, like during a ritual performance.

There is additional information in the ritual text *Stages of Making Offerings to and the Feast Gathering of Vajravārāhī* relevant to understanding Mogao Cave 465's potential use as a ritual space. If we look at (3) the agents mentioned in the ritual text, what are their roles in the main section (the second section) of the ritual, when the divine presence is actually invoked? The master clearly acts as the head of rite, as master of ceremonies. He establishes the *maṇḍala* and uses other ritual implements—two skull cups are used as offering vessels and another skull cup is used to place a mirror on top of it—to create the seat where Vajravārāhī and her retinue of the six buddha mothers are invited to manifest themselves in front of the ritual master and the community of practitioners. The relevant passage from this second section of the ritual text (see also fig. 10.19) reads as follows:

[fol. 2.11] In front of the master are two skull cups [(Chin. *touqi* 頭器)]<sup>50</sup>  
 [fol. 2.12] filled with alcohol [(Chin. *xuluo* 須囉, Skt. *sura*)] that is already

50 According to Robert Beer, the two skull cups, as polarity symbols are placed as offerings to the left and right of the main deity, who is visualised in the centre, and contain liquids that represent the white and red *bodhicitta* drops. The white *bodhicitta* drop, often male semen, is placed to the right side of the main deity (in the mother Tantras, such as

blessed according to a quintessential instruction. [fol. 2.13] On a mirror, smear alcohol mixed with vermilion powder [(Skt. *sindura*)]. [fol. 2.14] [Upon this], draw a source of *dharmā* [(Chin. *fasheng gong* 法生宮)],<sup>51</sup> and in its middle, draw the syllable *BAM* [(Chin. *bang* 邶)]. Around the *BAM*, [fol. 2.15] draw the *HA* [(Chin. *he* 合)] syllable *mantra* [*HA RI NI SA*]. In the triangle [(Chin. *sanjiao* 三角)], write [the seed syllables] *OM* [fol. 2.16] *ĀḤ HŪṀ* [(Chin. *an ya hong* 唵啞吽)<sup>52</sup>].<sup>53</sup> Outside the palace, in the four [cardinal] directions, draw four *svastikas* [(Chin. *yinglu* (*zong*) 應驢(騮)]<sup>54</sup>. In the *maṇḍala* [fol. 3.1], place a precious jewel. And on top of it, place a [nother] skull cup filled with blessed [fol. 3.2] alcohol. The [prepared] mirror is placed on top of [that skull cup]. The master [spreads] the blessed alcohol on [fol. 3.3] all the offerings, [so that] everything turns into ambrosia [(Chin. *ganlu* 甘露, Skt. *amṛta*)]. Then, the ritual servant offers flower garlands to the master and others [fol. 3.4], prostrates, and says [to the ritual community]:

[fol. 3.5] ‘*dākas* and *ḍākinīs*, please listen to me!

[We] pay homage to [all] *dākas* and *ḍākinīs*,

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Cakrasaṃvara and Vajravārāhī), and the red *bodhicitta* drop, often uterine blood, is placed to the left side of the main deity. See Beer, *The Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs*, 264. In the present ritual manual, however, both skull cups are filled with alcohol. Also see below for my discussion of *bodhicitta* drops within the body in internal meditation practice.

- 51 The Chinese term *fasheng gong* (法生宮) is a word-by-word translation of the Tibetan term *chos 'byung* (Skt. *dharmodayā*), source of *dharmā*. It can be represented as either a single triangle (as in Karakhoto *thangka* x2405, fig. 10.18) or two juxtaposed triangular shapes. Also see below for further explanation, including in my translation of the yogic exercise of the subtle body in ritual text A 19. In a nutshell, the source of *dharmā* signifies an absolute, pure space that can give rise to all phenomena.
- 52 The three syllables *OM ĀḤ HŪṀ* represent the purification of the body, speech, and mind. See Elizabeth English, *Vajrayoginī: Her Visualization, Rituals, and Forms* (Boston: Wisdom, 2002), 166.
- 53 In this ritual text, the *maṇḍala* of Vajravārāhī is drawn externally, whereas in ritual text A 19 (see my discussion below), it is visualised internally.
- 54 The Chinese text reads *yinglu* (應驢), which does not make sense. I suggest that the second character *lu* (驢)—which is hard to read and seems to be a simplified writing—is a spelling mistake for *zong* (騮), so that *yingzong* (應騮) should be read as a transliteration of the Tibetan term *yung drung*, meaning *svastika* (卍). See also my translation of a similar passage of ritual text A 19 fol. 2.3 below, and an image of a source of *dharmā* with bliss swirls (Skt. *nandyāvartaḥ*) instead of *svastikas* in the four cardinal directions in English, *Vajrayoginī*, 80, fig. 19. When *svastika* are turning very quickly, they appear to be rotating circles, so are called ‘bliss swirls’; the example English gives is of bliss swirls rotating anticlockwise.

[fol. 3.6] in order that [we] may eliminate obstacles and be filled with happiness.

May [we all] abide in the non-dual *samādhi*.

[fol. 3.7] *Samadi chiluo mahe* [(三摩底吃羅麻訶)]:

[fol. 3.8] After having requested like this, each [individual from the community of practitioners] visualises [(Chin. *jie* 解)] oneself as Vajravārāhī. The ritual assistant [fol. 3.9] places the incense mixed with the red flowers on the master's six places [i.e., his six *cakras*], namely, on the navel and so on.<sup>55</sup> [fol. 3.10] After every [practitioner] has entered into meditation and has recited 108 times the *mantra* [of the deity], [fol. 3.11] then they are allowed to move the hand drum [(Chin. *fagu* 法鼓, Skt. *damaru*)] and [ring] the bell in front of the master. At that time, at the navel [of each practitioner], the *BAM* syllable emanates lights and invites [fol. 3.12] into the natural palace [(Chin. *zixing gong* 自性宮)]<sup>56</sup> Vajravārāhī and [her retinue] of the six buddha mothers [(Chin. *liu jia fomu* 六甲仏母)] to come down [fol. 3.13] in the space in front of them. [The practitioners] prostrate, grant offerings to [the deities], and so on, and recite *JAḤ* [fol. 3.14] *HŪM BAM HOḤ* [(Chin. *zan hong jian he* 拶吽鑊和)]<sup>57</sup>. Then [the deities] dissolve into the mirror, the syllables and the *mantras* mingle together [fol. 3.15] as non-dual. After having visualised like this, do prostrations, offerings, and praises towards the mirror *maṇḍala*, the buddha mothers, and so on [fol. 3.16]—and [fol. 4.1] act according to your wishes.<sup>58</sup>

55 There are various *cakra* systems. Usually, if four places or *cakras* are mentioned, they are the navel, heart, throat, and crown. If six are mentioned, the two added are the secret place (genitals) and the centre: the place between the eyebrows, where the third eye is depicted in deities. See Beer, *The Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs*, 144.

56 I wonder whether the Chinese term *zixing gong* (自性宮), natural palace, is either a synonym or a misspelling for the Chinese term *fasheng gong* (法生宮), source of *dharma*, already used above in the text. The meaning, however, seems to be similar and refers to the *maṇḍala* of the deity set up on the altar.

57 These syllables signify the union of the visualised pledge deity (Skt. *samayadevatā*) and invited wisdom deity (Skt. *jñānadevatā*). In detail, *JAḤ* refers to the summoning of the wisdom deity; *HŪM* causes its entry into the pledge deity; *BAM* represents the binding of both forms; and *HOḤ* expresses the gratification of the fused forms. See English, *Vajrayoginī*, 167–168. See also the quote in n. 60 below.

58 A 14, fol. 2.11–4.1: [fol. 2.11] 其師面前二頭 [fol. 2.12] 器內，滿盛須囉，依要門捺受已。於 [fol. 2.13] 一明鑿上塗須囉，疹須鷓囉已。 [fol. 2.14] 畫一法生宮，中央書一瑯字。瑯字 [fol. 2.15] 周圍，書合字咒。於三角內書唵 [fol. 2.16] 啞吽。宮外四方，畫四應驢 [= 駱]。於曼拏 [fol. 3.1] 囉中，置一馬尼。上用一頭器盛捺受 [fol. 3.2] 者須囉，以鏡置上已。師用須囉洒 [fol. 3.3] 諸供養，皆盛甘露。方令行人於師 [fol. 3.4] 等處施花鬘，禮拜白云：

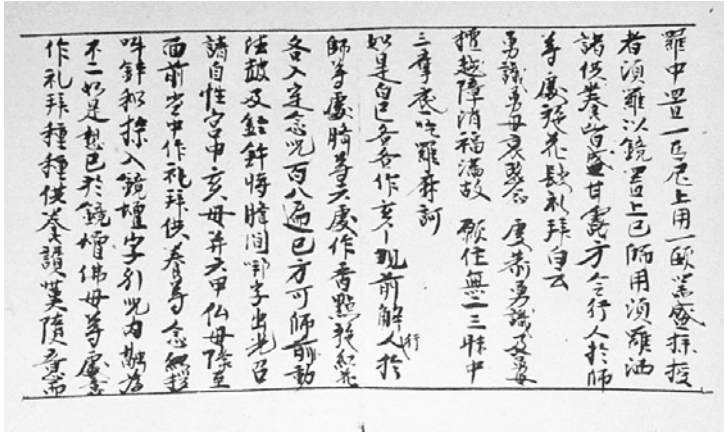


FIGURE 10.19 A 14. *Jingang haimu jilun gongyang cidilun* 金剛亥母集輪  
 供養次第錄 [Stages of Making Offerings to and the Feast  
 Gathering of Vajravārāhi]. Karakhoto, late 12th/early 13th c. (?)  
 SHI, WEI, AND KYCHANOV, *ECANG HEISHUICHENG*  
 WENXIAN, VOL. 5, A 14, 242 (FOL. 3)

This ritual text describes the established altar as the frame for the divinity, which simultaneously gives authority to the ritual master, since he is able to gather and direct the powers of the divinity.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, we may gather from the text that the encounter with the divine presence in this specific context is not just a subjective event (of the master), but is also very much a social one—this ritual is *not* solely about a subjective inner experience, but it is about a *communal process*. The ritual master needs the community of practitioners in order to properly perform the rite, because in this special ritual, his role as mediator with a divine entity is recognised by the community—and only through this does he gain the necessary authority and power. Moreover, master and disciples are bound to each other through their tantric commitments

[fol. 3.5] 勇識勇母哀愍念

虔恭勇識及勇母

[fol. 3.6] 檀越障消福滿故

願住無二三昧中

[fol. 3.7] 三摩底吃羅麻訶

[fol. 3.8] 如是白已, 各各作亥母現前解。行人於 [fol. 3.9] 師等處, 躋等六處作香點, 施紅花。 [fol. 3.10] 各入定, 念咒百八遍已, 方可師前動 [fol. 3.11] 法鼓及鈴杵。時躋間瑯字出光, 召 [fol. 3.12] 請自性宮中亥母並六甲仙母降至 [fol. 3.13] 面前空中, 作禮拜供養等, 念拶 [fol. 3.14] 吽鑊和, 捺入鏡壇, 字引咒內, 融為 [fol. 3.15] 不二。如是想已, 於鏡壇佛母等處, 意 [fol. 3.16] 作禮拜, 種種供養讚嘆, 隨意而 [fol. 4.1] 作。

59 Robert Sharf, "On the Allure of Buddhist Relics," *Representations* 66 (1999): 84.



or pledges (Skt. *samaya*). It is this bond that ensures the efficacy of a tantric ritual, even for participants unable to engage in the complex visualisations. It is as if the link to the elite practitioners (i.e. the master and experienced meditators) through pledge is enough to guarantee the benefits (for the wider community) of participating in such a ritual. The communal event is, thereby, charged through a reciprocal effect.

In fact, the ritual master and the community fulfil two different functions in the ritual act. In his 1981 study *Man's Quest for Partnership*, the anthropologist Jan van Baal hypothesises that every ritual act of veneration has two basic aspects: one is turned to the realisation of contact and communication with the supernatural or divine, and the other to the expression of awe by the observance of a respectful distance.<sup>60</sup> Whereas in the Vajravārahī text's context, the initial contact, interaction, and immediate communication with the divinity is reserved for the ritual master, the community of practitioners express their respect and initial distance to the deity through preliminary rites of purification (ritual bathing), certain physical stances (prostrations), confessions, and the request that the deity may take care of them. Without the distance that is expressed by the community, the nearness of the ritual master to the divine sphere would not be possible for this specific rite. Both are two sides of the same coin and absolutely interdependent.

Let us return to the initial question of how to conceptualise the transformation of a physical space, such as Mogao Cave 465, into what I suggest was a sacred space, the question which led us to explore some details of a tantric ritual procedure described in the ritual text A 14 *Stages of Making Offerings to and the Feast Gathering of Vajravārahī*. Cave 465—built on top of burial Caves B42 and B43—provides the clearly defined ritual space of a charnel ground and an entrance that could be protected by a guard (A 14, fol. 1.14: “a ritual servant with a wrathful expression to guard with a stick the entrance”). Attention would be focused on the mirror *maṇḍala*, located in the charnel ground. When the ritual master summons the wisdom deity (Skt. *jñānadevatā*) from the sphere of emptiness perceived as luminous to merge with the pledge deity (Skt. *samayadevatā*) in that specific mirror *maṇḍala*, the physical space of such a cave on a charnel ground would be transformed as well and turn into the locale of a transcendent presence.<sup>61</sup>

60 Jan van Baal, *Man's Quest for Partnership: The Anthropological Foundations of Ethics and Religion* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1981), 163. I did not have access to this publication. It is quoted in John S. Strong, “Images: Veneration of Images,” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade, vol. 7 (New York: MacMillan, 1987), 103.

61 For a description of this process, see Tadeusz Skorupski, *The Buddhist Forum*, Volume VI (Tring: The Institute of Buddhist Studies, 2001), 83: “In the first instance, one creates a mental image of the particular deity in conformity with its iconic representation as

If we apply Knut Martin Stünkel's three-level model of TID mentioned above, we are now able to identify an additional step in the analysis of the *transcending process*. A cave, as a place for religious practice, can be identified as a religioid phenomenon and thus as an indication of *basic transcendence*. Given the information presented about the ritual master from the ritual manual analysed above, we can now clearly identify a reflecting individual, who is able to move beyond the everyday reality of 'here-and-now' to 'there', which is a criterion for *formal transcendence*. Furthermore, the ritual master is skilled in actually summoning a divine presence into the ritual location—an accomplishment of a specific religious achievement that, in the terminology of Knut Martin Stünkel, would correspond to the accomplishment of *specific religious transcendence*. Thus, it is possible to apply Stünkel's three-level model of TID to identify specific steps in the transcending process, as it is prescribed in the ritual text.

I suggest that we read Cave 465 as a physical space that is transformed into a sacred ritual space through the performance of a rite, such as the above-described communal offering to Vajravārāhī, which is also through a transcending process (most likely, such a process was a certainty from the point of view of the religious practitioner). If Cave 465 was used in such a way, one may wonder whether the two burial caves B42 and B48 in its immediate vicinity—each of which contained five skulls with their upper parts deliberately cut off—functioned as the local supply for skull cups used in tantric ritual practices performed in Cave 465, or in local tantric rituals *per se*.

Last but not least, one iconographic detail connects the ritual text A 14 *Stages of Making Offerings to and the Feast Gathering of Vajravārāhī* to Cave 465. Through the ritual practice, "Vajravārāhī and [her retinue] of the six buddha mothers" (A 14, fol. 3.12) are summoned. From visual images, we know that at least two ritual systems related to Vajravārāhī were transmitted in the Tangut Empire: the fivefold *maṇḍala* of Vajravārāhī, composed of Vajravārāhī with a

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explained in its *sādhana* text. This image is called the pledge-being (*samaya-sattva*) or the pledge-deity (*samayadevatā*), and it represents a visionary mental representation of the deity, which is comparable to the eidetic images produced during the *kaśīṇa* meditation. Next, one recites the deity's seed syllable (*bīja* or *hṛdaya*) and summons the corresponding representation called the knowledge-being (*jñāna-sattva*) or the knowledge-deity (*jñānadevatā*) from the sphere of emptiness perceived as luminosity. The iconic appearance of the knowledge-being is identical to the mentally projected image of the pledge-being. However, it is not a mere vision, but essentially, so far as the meditator is concerned, a true and potent aspect of the deity. One welcomes the knowledge-being and then merges it with the pledge-being. Once the two beings are fused together into one indistinguishable union, which is often compared to water mixed with water, one is confronted with a fully perfected deity with whom one can interact in a variety of ways as specified in ritual and meditational texts."

retinue of four two-armed goddesses in each of the four cardinal directions<sup>62</sup> (e.g. Karakhoto *thangka* x2394, fig. 10.16 above; also in Karakhoto *thangka* x2388); and a sevenfold *maṇḍala* of Vajravārāhī, that is Vajravārāhī with a retinue of six four-armed goddesses.<sup>63</sup> It is the latter one that is described in the ritual manual, here referred to as the retinue of the six buddha mothers, and is, in fact, depicted in Mogao Cave 465 and Karakhoto *thangka* x2393 (figs. 10.20–22).<sup>64</sup> In Karakhoto *thangka* x2393, the attributes that the six goddesses within Vajravārāhī's flaming mandorla hold are clearly visible: a skull cup and a curved knife (Tib. *gri gug*, Skt. *katari*) in the lower hands and a tantric staff (Skt. *khaṭvāṅga*) and a hand drum (Skt. *damaru*) in the upper hands. Although the attributes held by the six goddesses within Vajravārāhī's mandorla in Mogao Cave 465 are not clearly discernible, they are visible in the upper register above the central image of Vajravārāhī, where the six goddesses appear a second time (fig. 10.21).

62 English lists the names of the four attending goddesses as “Dākinī in the east, Lāmā in the north, Khaṇḍarohā in the west, and Rūpiṇī in the south.” See English, *Vajrayoginī*, 183.

63 I was not yet able to identify the names of those six goddesses. Moreover, Skorupski mentions that Vajravārāhī “also presides over four *maṇḍalas* of her own and has some seven iconic representations as an individual deity.” See Skorupski, *The Buddhist Forum*, 65.

64 For Karakhoto *thangka* x2393, see The State Hermitage Museum, Russia, Northwest University for Nationalities, and Shanghai Chinese Classics Publishing House, *Khara-Khoto Art Relics Collected in the State Hermitage Museum of Russia*, pl. 142. The image is also on the museum website; <https://www.hermitagemuseum.org/wps/portal/hermitage/digital-collection/25.+archaeological+artifacts/477197>, accessed May 28, 2020.

Another visual example of Vajravārāhī with a retinue of six goddesses is a *thangka* from the Western Trans-Himalaya, which I discuss in a previous publication; Meinert, “Creation of Tantric Sacred Spaces in Eastern Central Asia,” fig. 10.13. That *thangka* was first published in Deborah E. Klimburg-Salter, *The Silk Route and the Diamond Path: Esoteric Buddhist Art on the Trans-Himalayan Trade Routes* (Los Angeles: UCLA Art Council, 1982), pl. 112. Interestingly enough, both *thangkas* (Karakhoto *thangka* x2393 and the one from the Western Trans-Himalaya) are identified as belonging to the same style, the Kadampa Style, associated with the Kadam school (Tib. *bka' gdams pa*), established by Dromtönpa Gyelwé Jungné (ca. 1005–1064, Tib. 'Brom ston pa rGyal ba'i 'byung gnas), the main disciple of Atiśa Dīpaṅkaraśrījñāna (982–1054, Tib. A ti sha Mar me mdzad dpal Ye shes) who arrived in Western Tibet in 1042. Despite both *thangkas'* stylistic similarity, Pratapaditya Pal suggests that the Karakhoto painting “was very likely meant for a Chinese patron as is indicated by the empty cartouches besides the monks and the *mahāsiddhas*.” Pratapaditya Pal, *Tibetan Paintings. A Study of Tibetan Thankas Eleventh to Nineteenth Centuries* (New Delhi: Bookwise, 2000), 29–45, quotation on p. 42. Although this is a careful observation, the possibility of Tangut patrons should not be ruled out, since they had assimilated many Sinitic cultural practices. For a discussion of the connections between Atiśa Dīpaṅkaraśrījñāna and the Tangut Empire, see also Iain Sinclair's chapter in this volume: “The Serlingpa Acala in Tibet and the Tangut Empire.”



FIGURES 10.20–21

Vajravārāhī with retinue of six goddesses within her mandorla (top) and a detail of one of the goddesses from the upper register, second to the left above the central deity (bottom). Mogao Cave 465, western wall, northern section, Dunhuang, late 12th c. (?)

YANG AND WU, *DUNHUANG SHIKU YISHU. MOGAO KU DI SILIUWU KU (YUAN)*, PL. 44 (P. 77) AND PL. 59 (P. 89)



FIGURE 10.22 Vajravārāhī *thangka* with retinue of six goddesses. Karakhoto, late 12th c. (?)

X2393, THE STATE HERMITAGE MUSEUM, ST. PETERSBURG

### 3.3 *Textual Evidence for Tantric Ritual Practice beyond Contingencies of Bodily Space and Time*

The analysis of the Karakhoto ritual text A 14 *Stages of Making Offerings to and the Feast Gathering of Vajravārāhī* allows for understanding the transformation of a physical space into a sacred space, or of 'here-and-now' into 'there'. The ritual text prescribes an external yogic practice, namely, drawing the *maṇḍala* of Vajravārāhī on the physical space of an altar at a charnel ground, during the process of a communal offering. On the other hand, the Karakhoto ritual text A 19 *Jingang haimu chanding* 金剛亥母禪定 [The Meditation on Vajravārāhī] also describes the transformation of one's own body into a divine body, and thus is an instruction for an individual's ritual practice. According to the prescription provided in the text, the divine presence, Vajravārāhī, is visualised internally in order to direct the powers of the divinity within one's own subtle body with the aim of accomplishing awakening within that very coarse, immanent body.<sup>65</sup> As I already discussed this ritual text from the point of view of the senses,<sup>66</sup> for the present context, I merely add some observations with regard to the TID and additional explanations based on related materials, in order to approach the question what makes any ritual text, or this particular religious text, convey a specific religious transcendence. As Stünkel suggests for the analysis of a transcending process,<sup>67</sup> in this ritual text, it is also possible to identify spatial metaphors on the object-language level and thus processes of movement that enable us to localise references to both immanence and transcendence, that is in downward (written in red) and upward (written in blue) movements respectively. The analysis of these movements allows one to make some conclusions about tantric ritual practice with regard to my understanding of the practitioner's perception of bodily space and time.

The structure of the ritual text is as follows: (1) preparatory actions (including taking refuge, generating *bodhicitta*, visualising the root teacher) (A 19, fol. 1.1–5), (2) description of the deity (A 19, fol. 1.5–fol. 2.2), (3) the main yogic exercise in two parts (A 19, fol. 2.3–11), (4) resting in a non-conceptual state

65 The Chinese Karakhoto manuscript A 19 is published in Shi, Wei, and Kychanov, *Ecang Heishuicheng wenxian*, vol. 5, 257–258, fol. 1–4.

66 Meinert, "Embodying the Divine in Tantric Ritual Practice," 64–66. As the publication is also available through open access, one may easily access lengthy translations of the ritual manual. See [http://himalaya.socanth.cam.ac.uk/collections/journals/ret/pdf/ret\\_50\\_04.pdf](http://himalaya.socanth.cam.ac.uk/collections/journals/ret/pdf/ret_50_04.pdf).

67 See the section on TID above and Stünkel, "TID: The Transcendence-Immanence Distinction," 11.

(A 19, fol. 2.11–15), and (5) results (A 19, fol. 2.16–fol. 3.2).<sup>68</sup> For my analysis of object-language markers of movement relevant to the transcending process, I provide examples from sections (2), (3A), and (5), and present my translation once more.

3.3.1 The Meditation on Vajravārāhī: (2) Description of the Deity  
Section (2), the description of the deity, reads as follows:

[One should visualise that one] immediately [fol. 1.6] turns into Vajravārāhī. She is naked, of red colour, has two faces, two arms, and each face has three eyes. [fol. 1.7] Her hair is hanging down loosely on the back. Her right one is a sow face and her left one is a wrathful face. [fol. 1.8] Her right sow face **looks upwards** [(Chin. *you Haimian qu shang* 右亥面覷上)], her left wrathful face **looks downwards** [(Chin. *zuo fennumian qu shang* 左忿怒面覷下)]. [fol. 1.9] On the forehead she wears a five-skull crown and bites the teeth together. The right hand holds a curved knife, and in her left hand she holds a skull cup filled with blood, and it seems as though she is drinking it. [fol. 1.10] Against her left [arm] she holds a tantric staff. Her crown ornament, an eight-spoked wheel, earrings, [fol. 1.11] necklace, bracelet, armband, belt, and so on are all made of human bones [(Chin. *rengu* 人骨)]. [fol. 1.12] The left leg is bent, the right is lifted, [which] looks like a dancing gesture. She is standing on a corpse and a sun disc.<sup>69</sup>

The very fact that Vajravārāhī has two faces (instead of the one face of ordinary beings) points to her ability to be present in both realms: in the ‘here-and-now’ immanent reality, expressed in the sow’s face, and in the transcendent realm of ‘there’, represented in the wrathful face. Similar ritual texts from the Tibetan tradition describe the two faces of Vajravārāhī as illustrating the two aspects of reality, that is, the relative (Tib. *kun rdzob*) and the absolute (Tib. *don dam*); the

68 For a full translation of a similar and very elaborate Vajravārāhī evocation see the appendix in my publication: Carmen Meinert, “Production of Tantric Buddhist Texts in the Tangut Empire (11th to 13th C.): Insights from Reading Karakhoto Manuscript φ 249 + φ 327 金剛亥母修習儀 *Jingang haimu xiuxi yi* [The Ritual of the Yogic Practice of Vajravārāhī in Comparison with Other Tantric Ritual Texts],” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 44 (2021).

69 A 19, fol. 1.5–12: 自身頓 [fol. 1.6] 成亥母, 裸形赤色, 二面二臂而各三目, [fol. 1.7] 散髮背披, 右亥面覷上, 左忿怒面覷 [fol. 1.8] 下。額嚴五骷髏。露牙齧齒。右手 [fol. 1.9] 執鉤鎌, 左手執滿血法杖, [The character *gong* 杖 is equivalent to the homonym 觥] 作喫飲 [fol. 1.10] 相。左抱闊章渴。頂嚴八輻輪, 耳璫, 項 [fol. 1.11] 瓔, 手腳腕釧, 腰帶等, 皆人骨所 [fol. 1.12] 成。拳左翹右, 如作舞勢, 死屍日輪上 [fol. 1.13] 立。

two faces are a pair, two sides of a coin, so that one cannot get the one without the other.<sup>70</sup> The eyes of the sow's face look from 'here-and-now' upwards to 'there', from the immanent to the transcendent realm; whereas the eyes of the wrathful face, illustrating the absolute, consequentially look down from the transcendent realm to immanent reality (the movement of the two faces is also visible in Karakhoto *thangka* x2393, see figs. 10.22 and 10.27).<sup>71</sup> Thus, there are not only two elements but four intertwined with each other; namely, two elements of movement between transcendence and immanence and two faces representing both aspects. Therefore, in the sentence in question from the ritual manual, we can mark the sow's face, representing the immanent aspect, in red, and the wrathful face, representing the transcendent aspect, in blue: "Her right **sow face** looks upwards, her left **wrathful face** looks downwards."

We may even go a step further to see that both sides of reality are, in fact, inherent in each single aspect, or in our case, in each face as well. Such an explanation of the two faces of Vajravārāhī is provided in the related Chinese Karakhoto manuscript TK 329 *Sizi kongxingmu jiwen juanshang* 四字空行母

70 I am grateful to Iain Sinclair for pointing out relevant Tibetan materials and for making his own unpublished work available to me (March 2020). In the transmission of Vajravārāhī/Vajrayoginī ritual texts in the Śābarapāda system, one of the main lineages transmitted from India to Tibet between the 8th and 12th centuries, the following two ritual texts provide the reference of the two faces as representing the relative (the sow's face) and the absolute (the wrathful face): (1) *Grub pa'i rdo rje rnal 'byor ma'i sgrub thabs* [Vajrayoginī Ritual Text of Accomplishment], Derge Tōhoku no. 1545, fol. 190a–192b, here fol. 191a: [...] *de yi g.yas ni phag dgong ste, de bzhin g.yon pa'i khro mo'i zhal, kun rdzob and ni don dam gnyis, zhal ni gnyis su rab tu brjod* [...]; (2) *dPal rdo rje rnal 'byor ma'i sgrub thabs* [Ritual Text of the Glorious Vajrayoginī], Derge Tōhoku no. 1550, fol. 197a–199a, here fol. 197b: [...] *de yi g.yas ni phag dgong ste, de bzhin g.yon pa khro mo nyid, kun rdzob don dam rang bzhin gyis, zhal gnyis su ni rab tu grabs* [...]. See also a translation of these passages in Iain Sinclair, "The Great Śābara's Process of Invocation of the Vajra Yoginī: Annotated Translation," unpublished draft, 2020, 10: "[She] has a sow's face on the right and a furious face to the left, the face pair illustrating the conditioned and the absolute." Sinclair also pointed out to me in a conversation that one has to imagine the deity dancing, continuously turning around her head(s), so that one sees the sow's face first, the conditioned/immanent one, and then the wrathful face, the absolute/transcendent one. For the problem of dating the Indian yogi Śābara, see English, *Vajrayoginī*, 10, 12–13, table 2.

71 Although the example of Vajravārāhī's two faces as representing relative and absolute truth or reality shows very well how the deity can be interpreted in terms of immanence and transcendence, it is, however, necessary to investigate this model further, since tantric deities come in all kinds of shapes, sizes, and number of heads. Could the model be equally applied to a deity with three or more heads? This question is beyond the scope of this chapter, but is a worthwhile query for future research. Thanks to Dylan Esler for pointing out this idea to me.



記文卷上 [Notes on the Four-Syllable Ḍākinī: Volume One],<sup>72</sup> a commentary on another, yet unidentified, Vajravārāhī (ritual) text.<sup>73</sup> The text describes itself as an “orally transmitted quintessential instruction of the practice of [Vajra]vārāhī” (Chin. *Haimu erchuan yixiu jimen* 亥母耳傳求修劑門) (TK 329, fol. 2.15). Here, we find the following explanations of the sow face: it is “true emptiness [that] represents non-conceptuality” (Chin. *zhenkong zhe, biao wu fenbie, ji Haimian ye* 真空者, 表無分別, 即亥面也); and of Vajravārāhī’s main face: “The compassion and loving kindness adorned with self-nature is the original wrathful appearance” (Chin. *yan cibeij ju zixing zhe, ben fennu xian ye* 言慈悲具自性者, 本忿怒相也) with the additional description of it as “adorned with nine characteristics” (Chin. *ju jiu xiang ye* 具九相也)<sup>74</sup> (TK 329, fol. 4.19–20). Here, the fundamental binary structure (immanence–transcendence, relative–absolute) is inherent in each aspect: in the deity with two faces as a whole, as well as in each part, that is in each single face. Thus, although the sow’s face represents relative truth (as stated in the Tibetan materials), the

72 The Chinese Karakhoto manuscript TK 329 is published in Shi, Wei, and Kychanov, *Ecang Heishuicheng wenxian*, vol. 5, TK 329, 116–120 (fol. 1–9). Penghao Sun studies the text with regard to the transmission lineage, potentially going back to the Indian master Padampa Sanggyé (d. 1117, Tib. Pha dam pa Sangs rgyas), and provides an English translation of the relevant first paragraph (TK 329, fol. 1.1–12). See Penghao Sun, “Pha-dam-pa Sangs-rgyas in Tangut Xia: Notes on Khara-khoto Chinese Manuscript TK329,” in *Kōbeshi gaikokugo daigaku gaikokugaku kenkyū jo kenkyū nenpō* 神戸市外国語大学外国学研究所研究年報 *Current Issues and Progress in Tibetan Studies. Proceedings of the Third International Seminar of Young Tibetologists, Kobe 2012* 51 (2013): 505–521.

73 Thanks to Weirong Shen for reading and discussing this manuscript during his stay in Bochum in February 2018. The manuscript provides a Sanskrit equivalent of the title as *Śrīvajrayoginīsiddhi* (TK 329, fol. 4.7–8). As line eight reads, “Siddhi [(Chin. *xidi* 西底)] means practice [(Chin. *qixiu* 求修)],” Weirong Shen suggested that this is a mistake and that the characters *qixiu* are, in fact, the equivalent of Tibetan *sgrub thabs* (ritual text, Skt. *sādhana*), such that the title would be *Śrīvajrayoginīsādhana*.

Moreover, we discussed whether the Tibetan root text had a Tibetan commentary, such that this manuscript would be a translation of that Tibetan commentary (which is what Weirong Shen suggested). Alternatively, I suggest that this manuscript is a Chinese commentary produced in the Tangut Empire based on a Tibetan root text or a Chinese translation of the Tibetan root text (February 24, 2018).

The manuscript has question and answer sections, which remind me of a Tibetan genre (in Tibetan known as *zhus lan*) that could be an indicator for both our theories—either included in the text for didactic reasons or the recording of actual question and answer situations that occurred during an oral instruction, which was then later written down and edited, as can be seen in the interpolations.

74 The nine characteristics are mentioned in the ritual text at the centre of the discussion here, A 19 *The Meditation on Vajravārāhī*, with three of each pertaining to the deity’s body, speech, and mind. A 19, fol. 2.1–2. See my translation in Meinert, “Embodying the Divine in Tantric Ritual Practice,” 65.

absolute is inherent in it as well—just as if both sides of reality are within everything. This very fact is explicit in the description of the wrathful face, representing the absolute, in the TK 329 “self-nature”—meaning a reference to the emptiness aspect, the absolute/transcendence—and “compassion and loving kindness”—referring to the quality of inherent enlightened activity in the realm of the relative/immanence.<sup>75</sup>

### 3.3.2 The Meditation on Vajravārāhī: (3) Yogic Exercise (A)

Let us return to the ritual text A 19 *The Meditation on Vajravārāhī* to analyse a transcending process and thus to further identify spatial metaphors on the object-language level. The ritual text says that once the practitioner evokes the presence of Vajravārāhī in herself or himself, she or he uses it for (3) the specific yogic practice (A) of the subtle body in order to direct the transcendental power of the deity within one’s own immanent body. The relevant instruction reads as follows:

Then, [in Vajravārāhī’s navel, who is evoked in the practitioner, there is] a source of *dharma* [(Chin. *fasheng gong* 法生宮)] [fol. 2.3] [and four anticlockwise-turning bliss swirls in the four cardinal directions surrounding the triangle (?)].<sup>76</sup> On the triangle [(Chin. *sanjiao* 三角)], visualise [fol. 2.4] the three syllables *OM ĀḤ HŪḤ* [(Chin. *an ya hong* 唵啞吽)] and, on their left side,<sup>77</sup> the syllable *BAM* [(Chin. *bang* 邦), surrounded anticlockwise by the *HA* [(Chin. *he* 合)] syllable *mantra*, [i.e. *HA RI NI SA*].<sup>78</sup> [fol. 2.5] **Hold up the lower part [energy]** [(Chin. *qing ti xiabu* 輕提下部)], **close down the upper energy** [(Chin. *bi shang qi* 閉上氣)],<sup>79</sup>

75 Although I resolved the tension between the two different descriptions of Vajravārāhī’s two faces presented in the quoted texts, it should be mentioned that it could also simply be that we are dealing with different commentarial traditions that explain the symbolism of the faces in different ways. Thanks to Dylan Esler for pointing this out to me.

76 There are about eleven (?) characters crossed out or highlighted (on purpose?), that are illegible. This reading is simply a guess on the basis of a similar passage in another Vajravārāhī ritual text. See English, *Vajrayoginī*, 80. On the same page (fig. 19), there is also an image with a source of *dharma* with *mantra* syllables and bliss swirls. See also n. 53 above for a similar passage in my translation of Karakhoto text A 14.

77 The three characters *zuo yan you* (左嚴有) are smaller interpolations between lines 3 and 4.

78 This refers again to the *mantra* of Vajravārāhī, just as in the above-translated passage of the Karakhoto text A 14.

79 There are about seven (?) characters are crossed out or highlighted that are illegible. The following four characters *shi dong fasheng* (時動法生) are written on the left side of the crossed out or highlighted passage between lines 4 and 5.

then swiftly turn the source of *dharmā* [in the navel] [fol. 2.6] anticlockwise. Because of the power of turning, the surrounding *mantra*<sup>80</sup> syllables emanate red lights.<sup>81</sup> These touch the syllable *BAM* [(Chin. *bang* 瑯)], then from the syllable *BAM*, red [lights] emanate emanate also.<sup>82</sup>

[between fol. 2.6–7] United in the central channel [(Chin. *dimai* 帝脈, Skt. *avadhūti*)], [the lights] go upwards and touch the great bliss *cakra* [i.e. the crown *cakra*] *HAM* [(Chin. *hang* 頤)]<sup>83</sup> syllable. Then a drop of white and cool *bodhicitta* [(Chin. *pu(ti) xin* 菩(提) 心)]<sup>84</sup> melts down, [fol. 2.8] and immediately, one visualises<sup>85</sup> the emptiness and great bliss [experience of union].<sup>86</sup>

Twice in this section, there are object-language markers of movement relevant for the transcending process. Firstly, it says that the practitioner should hold up the energy of the lower *cakra* and close down the breathing from the upper part; it is thus an exercise of breath control. Secondly, and more importantly, the closing of the upper and lower parts of the lateral channels<sup>87</sup> of the subtle body allows for the movement of energy in the central channel, with red lights moving upwards and a drop of white *bodhicitta*, that is of vital essence (Tib. *thig le*), melting down. A practitioner who is able to engage in the yogic exercise prescribed here would be familiar with the tantric physiology of the subtle

80 The four characters *zhouwei zhou zi* (周圍咒字) are an interpolation between lines 5 and 6.

81 There are about four (?) characters crossed out or highlighted that are illegible.

82 The eleven characters *chu zhu bang zi, bang zi yi chuguang, er guang* (觸著瑯字, 瑯字亦出光, 二光) are an interpolation between lines 5 and 6, and the writing goes beyond the frame.

83 In my previous translation in Meinert, “Embodying the Divine in Tantric Ritual Practice,” 66, n. 35, I incorrectly used the pronunciation *HŪM* (Chin. *hong*) instead of *HAM* (Chin. *hang*) for the character 頤.

84 There are about six (?) characters at the end of line 7. About seven (?) characters in the beginning of line 8 are crossed out or highlighted and thus are illegible.

85 The eight characters *yu guangxiang chan er xia dun fa* (與光相纏而下頓發) are an interpolation between lines 7 and 8, next to the passage that is crossed out or highlighted.

86 A 19, fol. 2.2–8 (a □ indicates a crossed out or highlighted character that is thus illegible; characters in **bold** are interpolations between the respective lines): 次法生 [fol. 2.3] 宮□□□□□□□□□□□□三角上, 想唵 [fol. 2.4] 阿吽三字, 左巖有一瑯字, 以合字咒左繞. 輕 [fol. 2.5] 提下部, 閉上氣□□□□□□□□□□時, 動法生宮, 左 [fol. 2.6] 急旋轉. 旋轉力故, 周圍咒字, 出赤光色, □□□□觸著瑯字, 瑯字亦出光, 二光 [fol. 2.7] 相纏, 入都帝脈內, 上衝, 觸著大樂輪頤字時, 冥消落白色涼冷菩[提] 心 □□□□□□, [fol. 2.8] □□□□□□與光相纏而下, 頓發空樂想.

87 For a description of the central and lateral channels, see below. The upper ends of the two lateral channels are the right and left nostrils. This is why it is said to stop breathing through the nose helps with centring one’s energy in the central channel only (fig. 10. 24).

body, or the *vajra* body (Skt. *vajrakāya*), to be able to realise the coarse body as a divine palace or temple and thus as the locale for awakening. However, the description of this most crucial passage in the ritual text is very terse and needs further explication in order to be fully comprehended in the context of the transcendence–immanence distinction.

So far, I have not come across a detailed description of the subtle body within the Karakhoto materials; nonetheless, given the description in this ritual text, we can assume that knowledge of the subtle body was present in Tangut times as well. Therefore, for additional explanation of the tantric subtle body, I will refer to a 13th-century Tibetan source, the *rDo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* [Hidden Description of the Vajra Body], by the Tibetan master Yangönpa Gyeltsen Pelzang (1213–1258, Tib. Yang dgon pa rGyal mtshan dPal bzang) of the Drukpa Kagyü school (Tib. *'brug pa bka' brgyud pa*). This is the closest source I could find, with regard to sectarian affiliation and chronology, that discusses the awakened mind not in abstract terms but, just as in the ritual text, as “embodied mind.”<sup>88</sup>

In order to properly navigate the energy within the body, according to the Karakhoto ritual text A 19 *The Meditation on Vajravārāhī*, one has to have knowledge of the subtle body. From the outset, tantric physiology is intricately linked to conceptions of how a mind undergoing rebirth blends with semen and ovum.<sup>89</sup> Accordingly, the physiology of the subtle body is believed to develop around the third week of conception. As the embryo grows, the first energy centre, the navel *cakra*, emerges. The channels originate from this, first the upward and downward central channel, then the two lateral channels, and

88 This term was coined by Elio Guarisco, who not only translates the *Hidden Description of the Vajra Body* by Yangönpa, but also gives an excellent introduction to the knowledge of the subtle body at the advent of the Mongol conquest of Tibet and the Eurasian continent. See Gyalwa Yangönpa, *Secret Map of the Body: Visions of the Human Energy Structure*, ed. Judith Chasnoff, trans. Elio Guarisco (Arcidosso: Shang Shung Publications, 2015), 42–47. The original Tibetan text is available on the BDRRC website; Gyalwa Yangönpa, “rDo rje lus kyi sbas bshad [Hidden Description of the Vajra Body],” in *Collected Works*, vol. 2 (Thimphu: Kunsang Tobgey, 1976), 397–497, accessed June 17, 2020. <https://www.tbrc.org/#!rid=W1KG17449>. I quote from this translation and particularly, from Guarisco’s very lucid and comprehensive introduction.

The idea of ‘embodied mind’ is comparable to transcendence viscerally experienced in Evangelical Christianity. See the articles mentioned above: Knauff, “Self-possessed and Self-governed,” 557 and Luhrmann, et al., “The Absorption Hypothesis,” 66–67.

89 For an excellent book on the Tibetan medical system, see Janet Gyatso, *Being Human in a Buddhist World: An Intellectual History of Medicine in Early Modern Tibet* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015). In “Part II: Bones of Contention” (*ibid.*, 143–286) Janet Gyatso also explores the relationship between the tantric subtle body and human anatomy, including conflicting understandings of the heart from both perspectives.

then all the other *cakras* at the places where the lateral channels are entwined and form knots (for an illustration of the subtle body structure, also used in the Tibetan medical tradition, see fig. 10.23). Since the mind is completely embodied through the channels, it can, therefore, be affected by yogic exercises focusing on the body. The central channel, representing non-dual reality, is the main focus of yogic practice. The central channel represents non-dual reality, whereas the lateral channels represent duality—a split occurring when reality is not perceived but misperceived as subject and object duality. Thus, one's energy has to be brought from the lateral channels to the central channel by closing down the lateral channels. When mind is inserted into the central channel, non-dual reality—the true nature of things, an emptiness inseparable from bliss—is said to be realised.<sup>90</sup> Moreover, according to tantric physiology, all energies or vital essences in the channels are subsumed under white and red constituents (vital essences or *bodhicitta*), which derive from the intermingling of the father's semen (white constituent) and mother's ovum (red constituent). These are said to be united in the navel *cakra* until birth. Once the umbilical cord is cut, the white constituent is said to ascend to the crown *cakra*, held in the shape of the inverted seed syllable *HAM*, whereas the red constituent is said to descend to the lower end of the central channel, just below the navel *cakra* (fig. 10.24).<sup>91</sup> These two locations in the subtle body, crown *cakra* and navel *cakra*, as the seats of the white male constituent or *bodhicitta* and the red female constituent or *bodhicitta* respectively, are commonly depicted in ritual practice as polarity symbols in two skull cups placed as offering vessels to the deity on the altar—just as it is prescribed in the above-translated passage of ritual text A 14 *Stages of Making Offerings to and the Feast Gathering of Vajravārāhī* (A 14, fol. 2.11).<sup>92</sup>

The description of the yogic exercise given in the Karakhoto ritual text A 19 *The Meditation on Vajravārāhī* hints at a meditative process through which the event just described—the separation of the red and white constituents in the central channel—is, in fact, reversed and non-duality (once again) experienced on a bodily level. After visualising oneself as the deity, the practitioner directs Vajravārāhī's powers, which are located in the source of *dharma* in the navel *cakra*.<sup>93</sup> The purpose of the yogic exercise is to bring the energy from the

90 Here, I follow the description of tantric physiology given in Guarisco's introduction to and translation of Yangönpa's *Hidden Description of the Vajra Body*. See Yangönpa, *Secret Map of the Body*, 42–47, 234–241.

91 *Ibid.*, 90–91.

92 See also, Beer, *The Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs*, 264.

93 Yangönpa describes the shape of the navel *cakra* as triangular, just like the source of *dharma*, which is visualised as the seat of the deity and mentioned in both of the

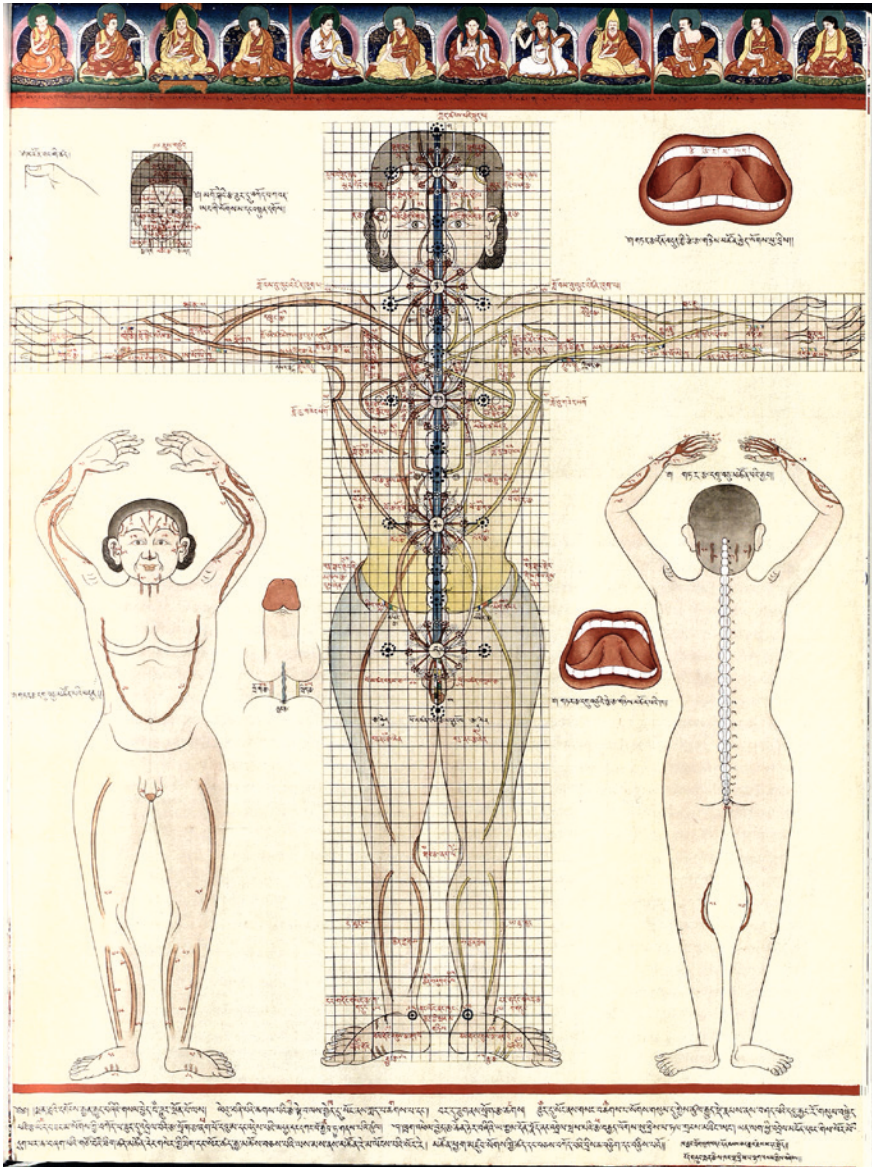
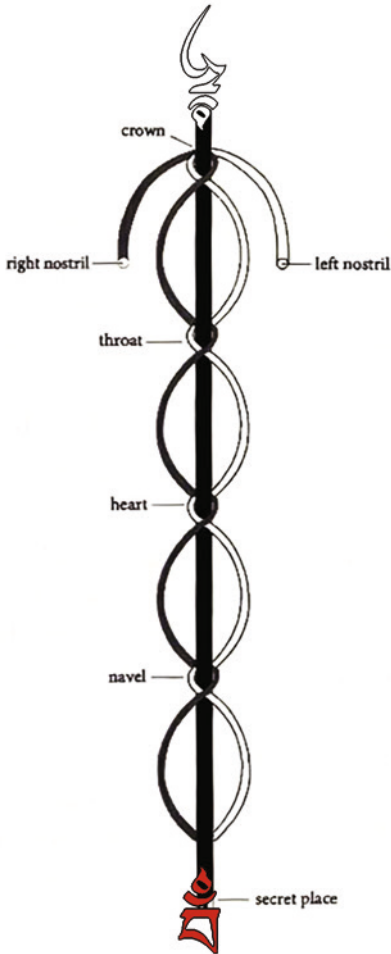


FIGURE 10.23 Tibetan medical *thangka* from the Blue Beryl. Tibet, 18th c. HAR 81836, RUBIN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK. [HTTPS://WWW.HIMALAYANART.ORG/ITEMS/81836](https://www.himalayanart.org/items/81836)



### THREE PRINCIPAL CHANNELS

FIGURE 10.24 Central and two lateral channels of the subtle body with the position of the seed syllables red *BAM* and white inverted *HAM* (added by author) in the central channel

THE THIRD KARMAPA  
RANGJUNG DORJE, *THE  
PROFOUND INNER PRINCIPLES*,  
TRANS. ELIZABETH M.  
CALLAHAN (BOSTON, LONDON:  
SNOW LION, 2014), 185, SKETCH  
THREE PRINCIPAL CHANNELS

outer channels into the central channel. Then, an inner heat is generated in the central channel through activation of the source of *dharmā*, here resulting in the upward movement of red light. Through the heat of the red constituent, the white constituent, located in the form of the seed syllable *HAM* at the crown *cakra*, melts down, and as it does, it flows down, blissfully pervading the other *cakras*, and resulting in the union of red and white constituents in the heart centre—according to tantric views, the re-establishing of the human condition before the umbilical cord was cut, is experienced as the union of emptiness and great bliss.<sup>94</sup> The latter already points to the results of the meditative practice; I will discuss these further below.

What enables the upward and downward movements in the central channel—object-language markers of movement to allow one to identify a transcending process—is the activation of the source of *dharmā*; it gives rise to the divinity and all unconditioned phenomena. In her excellent study of the deity Vajrayoginī, Elizabeth English provides the following description of the source of *dharmā* (Skt. *dharmodayā*):

The triangle is the “origin of existents” (*dharmodayā*) or “source of [all purified] *dharmas*” (*dharmodayaḥ*), a spatial and visual metaphor for the unoriginated, transcendental plane of reality. Terms such as the Dharma body (*dharmakāyaḥ*), suchness (*tathatā*), and the sphere of Dharma (*dharmadhātuḥ*) are also applied to the *dharmodayā*, and it is often said to “have the nature of the *dharmadhātu*” (*dharmadhātusvabhāva*) or to be “one with the *dharmadhātu*” (*dharmadhātumaya*). As a “source” or “origin,” the *dharmodayā* is also equated with the female sex organ or womb (*bhagaḥ, yoniḥ*). This imagery is highlighted by its inverted triangular shape (▽), which is a simulacrum of the pubis.<sup>95</sup>

Thus, transcendence is visualised within this very immanent body.<sup>96</sup> Much in line with this description, textual and visual materials from Karakhoto show

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Karakhoto ritual texts (A 14, A 19) analysed in this chapter. It is comparable to the *maṇḍala* from Karakhoto *thangka* x2405 (fig. 10.18), which has an eight-petalled lotus and a triangle at its centre with the seed syllables in Tibetan script to invoke Vajravārāhī. Moreover, Yangönpa says: “At the lower tip of this [central] channel is the so-called ‘vital essence of Vārāhī,’ or ‘mare’s face fire-crystal,’ which is the support for the fire-accompanying [wind] in the shape of the syllable A [...]” See *ibid.*, 253.

See my discussion of the source of *dharmā* below.

94 See also English, *Vajrayoginī*, 175.

95 English, *Vajrayoginī*, 149.

96 Here, we have, in fact, proof of the assumption I mention above—in my discussion of the TID (part 2) with reference to Volkhard Krech—that religion proper has to tackle the



the transmission of this knowledge in the Tangut Empire as well. It is illustrated in the Vajravārāhī *thangka* x2391, which depicts the deity standing on a corpse in the centre of a source of *dharma* (fig. 10.25).<sup>97</sup>

Moreover, the Chinese Karakhoto manuscript TK 329 *Notes on the Four-Syllable Dākinī* quoted above, provides the following description of the *vajra* body:

The so-called original body of the three realms [(Chin. *sanjie* 三界)] means that because the [fol. 5.21] three deeds [of body, speech, and mind] are pure, therefore, it is the original body of the three realms.

The purity of body means [fol. 5.22] that it is an excellent and marvelous palace [(Chin. *shengmiao gong* 勝妙宮)]; it is the original body of the realm of desire [Chin. *yushi* 欲界]. Why is this? Because it is born within the source of *dharma* [(Chin. *fasheng gong* 法生宮)].

[fol. 5.23] The purity of speech means to recite the *mantra* of the [four-] syllable *dākinī*. The characteristics of form come and go and increase; they are the original body of the realm of form [(Chin. *sejie* 色界)].

[fol. 5.24] The purity of mind means that thoughts about the body of Vajravārāhī represent that appearance is emptiness [(Chin. *xiang gui kong* 相歸空)].

Vajravārāhī is non-conceptual and identical to the [fol. 5.22] *dharma-kāya* [i.e. the ultimate body of truth]. Thus, it is the original body of the realm of formlessness [(Chin. *wusejie* 无色界)].<sup>98</sup>

This passage elucidates the transfigured experience of bodily space of a practitioner. To accomplish Vajravārāhī's presence within one's own coarse body is

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problem of expressing the inexpressible transcendence; it has to present transcendence by immanent means. Krech, *Wo bleibt die Religion?*, 41.

97 For Karakhoto *thangka* x2391, see The State Hermitage Museum, Russia, Northwest University for Nationalities, and Shanghai Chinese Classics Publishing House, *Khara-Khoto Art Relics Collected in the State Hermitage Museum of Russia*, pl. 148. The image is also on the museum website; <https://www.hermitagemuseum.org/wps/portal/hermitage/digital-collection/25.+archaeological+artifacts/477196>, accessed June 7, 2020. However, on the website, the *thangka* is referred to as x2392. Other Karakhoto *thangkas* showing Vajravārāhī arising from a source of *dharma* are x2390 and x2392 (according to the numbering in the book publication).

98 TK 329, fol. 5.20–25 (characters in **bold** are interpolations): [fol. 5.20] 言三世界之本躰者, 即指 [fol. 5.21] 三業清淨, 故是三界之本躰也。身清淨故, 即 [fol. 5.22] 勝妙宮, 是欲界本躰。何故。法生宮內所出生故。[fol. 5.23] 語清淨者, 誦咒字母, 色相出入增長, 是色界本躰也, [fol. 5.24] 意清淨者, 想亥母身, 表相歸空, 亥母无分別, 同 [fol. 5.24] 法身故, 是无色界本躰也。



FIGURE 10.25 Vajravārāhī *thangka* with deity depicted in the centre of a source of *dharma*. Karakhoto, late 12th c. (?)

X2391, THE STATE HERMITAGE MUSEUM, ST. PETERSBURG

explained as leading to the experience of the deity's *vajra* body, speech, and mind, which represent the purity of the three realms of *saṃsāra*. Here, we have another example in which the body becomes a divine body, transcending the boundaries of ordinary conceptions and limitations.

Moreover, earlier in the text quoted above, all of Vajravārāhī's qualities are described, providing an excellent explanation of how Vajravārāhī got her name.

[fol. 2.22] Because she has no attachments, often appears [in union with] bliss and emptiness, and is born without attachment to time [(Chin. *buzhao shifen er chusheng* 不着時分而出生)], therefore, she is named [fol. 2.23] sow [(Chin. Hai 亥)]. She is called mother [(Chin. mu 母)] in order to express the appearance of wisdom and the principle of *dharma* nature. Because she is able to give birth, [fol. 2.24] empty and without obstructions, she is able to benefit sentient beings. She can give birth to all phenomena, which are in accordance with the principle. [fol. 2.25] [All this] is in accordance with the meaning of nurturing and growing of sentient beings. This is the temporary explanation.

The ultimate explanation concerns the emptiness of the body of the central channel [(Skt. *avadhūti*)]. [fol. 2.26] It is the channel that gives birth to *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra*, and possesses the appearance of the four *cakras*, gives birth to various channels, and nurtures the body. [fol. 3.7] All born in this world and beyond this world are born from the central channel; that is why she is called [fol. 3.8] mother. Because she possesses incomparable, extraordinary merits, that is why she is called the sow mother [(Chin. Haimu 亥母)].<sup>99</sup>

With regard to observations concerning the transcendence–immanence distinction (TID), we may draw the following conclusions for the perception of bodily space and time. Firstly, according to the ritual text A 19 *The Meditation on Vajravārāhī*, the visualised deity within the coarse body of the practitioner has at its centre a source of *dharma* representing unoriginated, transcendent

99 TK 329, fol. 2.21–3.8 (characters in **bold** are interpolations): [fol. 2.22] 以无執着, 空樂常顯, 不着時分而出生故, 故名 [fol. 2.23] 亥也。言母者, 表現勝惠之相, 法性之理, 具出生 [fol. 2.24] 故, 空无質碍, 能利有情, 出生諸法, 內契於理 [fol. 2.25] 內合眾生長養義故。望增義說也究竟說則中脈體空, [fol. 2.26] 能生涅槃生死之脈, 具四輪相, 轉生諸脈, 長養身 [On folio 3, there is an overlap with some lines from the previous page. As the text is a scroll, the text continues on fol. 3.7.] 軀[(=軀)], 所生世出間世 [(=世間)] 皆從阿瓦惡帝而出生故, 故名 [fol. 3.8] 母也。有此无比具勝德故, 故名亥母也。

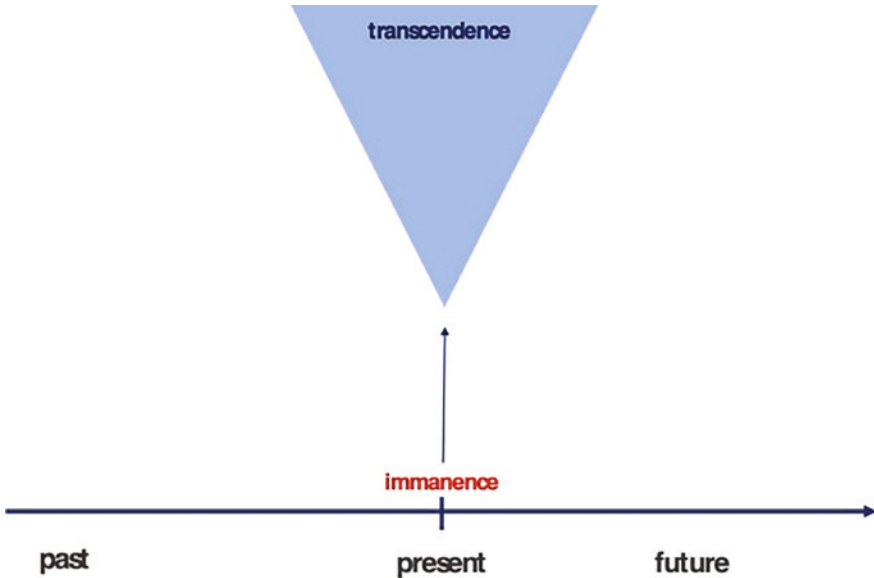


FIGURE 10.26 Perception of three times in the immanent plane of reality  
SKETCH BY CARMEN MEINERT

reality. Connected to it is the central channel, equally representing non-dual reality. When a “drop of white and cool *bodhicitta* melts down” (A 19, between fol. 2.6–7) in the central channel, the process of separation that was initiated at the time the umbilical cord was cut, and gave rise to the perception of duality within an immanent coarse body, is said to reverse to the perception of non-duality within a transcendent subtle body; a drop of transcendence melts down. This is an interesting intersection between concept and physicality. Secondly, a different understanding of time is also related to this perception of a transcendent body. In the commentary TK 329 *Notes on the Four-Syllable Dākinī*, Vajravārāhī is also described as being “born without attachment to time” (TK, fol. 2.22). Therefore, I suggest that the yogic exercise (A), as prescribed in ritual text A 19 *The Meditation on Vajravārāhī*, also allows the practitioner to overcome temporal contingencies, that is, the perception of the three times of past, present, and future, which are the conditions of immanence (fig. 10.26), and to reach a perception of time without beginning or end, a transcendent time—or even more precisely: a time beyond the concepts of immanence and transcendence. Thus, the experience prescribed in the text is the transcendence that, within this very coarse body, manifest in immanent reality (fig. 10.27). I am not able to come to a definite conclusion yet, as to whether we may infer that transcending spatial contingencies has priority

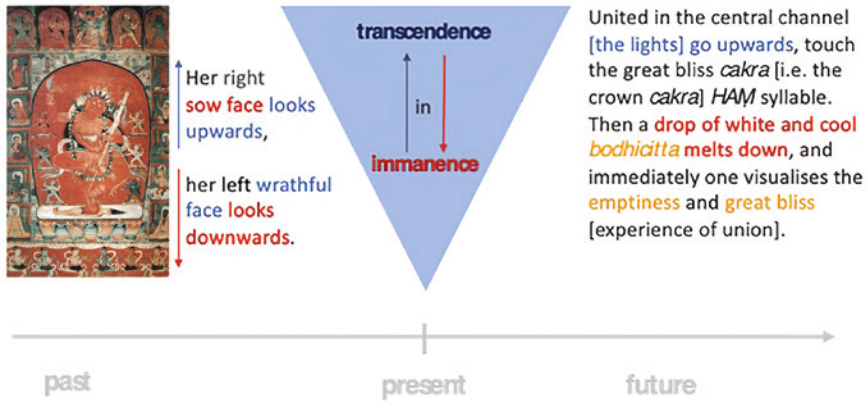


FIGURE 10.27 Perception beyond temporal contingency in bodily experience of transcendence in immanence  
SKETCH BY CARMEN MEINERT

over transcending temporal contingencies—that the former is a precondition for the latter—or whether both aspects emerge simultaneously. I suggest that the second option is more in line with doctrinal positions. However, this question should be dealt with in a separate study.

3.3.3 The Meditation on Vajravārāhī: (5) Results of Yogic Practice  
Finally, I would like to return to the question raised at the beginning of this subsection (3.3), namely, the question of what makes a ritual text such as A 19 *The Meditation on Vajravārāhī*, in fact, a specific religious text, conveying—in the terminology of Stünkel—a case of specific religious transcendence. I suggest that, on an object-language level, the tipping point in the transcending process can be identified in the following sentence: “Then a drop of white and cool *bodhicitta* melts down, and immediately one visualises the emptiness and great bliss [experience of union]” (A 19, fol. between fol. 2.6–7). It is here that specific Buddhist terminologies are used, namely, *bodhicitta*, emptiness and great bliss (written in green and in orange in figure 10.27). And it is here, when applying Stünkel’s three-level model of TID, that *formal transcendence* turns into a *specific religious transcendence*. The ritual text, in fact, continues to use such terminology (written in green) in the following description of the results of the yogic exercise:

If one [fol. 3.1] is practising like this, one will obtain the two kinds of accomplishments [(Chin. *erzhong baoguo* 二種果報, Tib. *dnegos grub gnyis*)]. Firstly, the ordinary accomplishments [(Chin. *huabao* 化報, Tib. *thun mong gi dnegos grub*)], [fol. 3.2] namely, to obtain the eight

accomplishments [(Chin. *bagong* 八功, Tib. *thun mong gi dngos grub brgyad*)]<sup>100</sup> and the five aspects [of awakening]<sup>101</sup> [(Chin. *wuyan* 五驗, Tib. *mngon byang lnga*)]. Secondly, the supreme accomplishments [(Chin. *guobao* 果報, Tib. *mchog gi dngos grub*)], to obtain the three bodies [of a buddha] [(Chin. *sanshen* 三身, Tib. *sku gsum*)]<sup>102</sup> and the five wisdoms [(Chin. *wuzhi* 五智, Tib. *ye shes lnga*)]<sup>103</sup>.<sup>104</sup>

Finally, the accomplishments of the prescribed yogic practice may be summarised as the attainment of the specific religious transcendence, namely, of the three bodies of a buddha accompanied by the realisation of all buddha qualities, such as omniscience and non-conceptuality, allowing the religious performer to move beyond ordinary perceptions and spatial and temporal contingencies.

#### 4 Conclusion

With this new reading of material, visual, and textual sources from Tangut ruled Eastern Central Asian Buddhist sites, I suggest understanding the caves in the Northern Section of the Mogao Cave complex—particularly Cave 465, with its exquisitely decorated tantric iconographic programme, and burial-meditation caves, such as B121—as sites for tantric ritual practice and, thereby, as sacred sites. I see Cave 465 as a temple-like structure that would have allowed gatherings of a small Tantric Buddhist community (similar to the way certain halls in Tibetan temples are used for specific ritual purposes). Burial-meditation caves, on the other hand, would have served as retreat

100 The eight ordinary accomplishments are the accomplishment of celestial realm, sword, pill, fleet-footedness, vase, *yakṣa*, elixir, and the balm of magic sight.

101 The two characters *wuyan* (五驗) are an interpolation between lines 1 and 2. The Chinese term *wuyan* (literally, five experiences) seems to render the Tibetan term *mngon par byang chub lnga*, meaning the Five Aspects of Awakening. These refer to the five aspects of the visualisation of a deity in the development stage (Tib. *bskyed rim*)—namely, the moon disc, sun disc, seed syllable, symbolic attribute, and complete form of the deity.

102 These three bodies of a buddha are the *nirmāṇakāya* (Chin. *huashen* 化身), the emanational body; the *sambhogakāya* (Chin. *baoshen* 報身), the enjoyment body; and the *dharmakāya* (Chin. *fashen* 法身), the body of truth.

103 The five wisdoms are the *dharmadhātu* wisdom, mirror-like wisdom, wisdom of equality, discriminating wisdom, and all-accomplishing wisdom.

104 A 19, fol. 2.16–3.2 (The characters in **bold** are interpolations between the respective lines.): 若如 [fol. 3.1] 是修定者, 得二種果報. 一化報而 [fol. 3.2] 獲八功**五驗**. 二果報, 證得三身**五智**.

places for individual tantric practitioners (similar to the ways Tibetan Buddhists withdraw to hermitages or caves for prolonged periods of retreat). The analysis of two Chinese Karakhoto ritual texts (*A 14 Stages of Making Offerings to and the Feast Gathering of Vajravārāhī* and *A 19 The Meditation on Vajravārāhī*) gives us a glimpse into the types of ritual practices that might have been performed by groups or individual tantric practitioners at that Mogao Caves.

As I previously argued, I suggest that Cave 465 was decorated under the patronage of the Tangut imperial court.<sup>105</sup> Tangut rule over Dunhuang came to an end with the Mongol conquest in 1227, which meant the end of Tangut imperial patronage. However, this does not rule out the fact that Tantric Buddhist communities continued to live at and in the vicinity of the Mogao Caves. An inscription on the eastern wall of the front chamber of Cave 465 mentions that, in Mongol times, in the year 1335, the site was referred to as a secret temple (Chin. *mimi si* 秘密寺), a reference also found in Yulin Cave 29 (Chin. Yulin ku 榆林窟), which was produced in Tangut times.<sup>106</sup> We do not know exactly when ritual objects like the stand with a skull cup found in burial-meditation Cave B121 (fig. 10.12) were in use—whether during Tangut dominion over Dunhuang or after. Nonetheless, I suggest that the late 12th to early 13th century is the time when Tantric Buddhist communities would have been present at the Mogao Caves, a hypothesis that is corroborated by Karakhoto visual images (figs. 10.16–17).

My application of the three-level model of the TID, established by Stükel, to the two just-mentioned ritual manuals proves that it is possible to identify a *process of transcending* on the object-language level of the ritual texts. Thereby, we are able to explicate and identify a transformation from an ordinary perception of immanent reality to a divine, transcendent perception of space, both of physical as well as of bodily space. Or in other words: Applying the TID model to tantric rituals and spaces we are able to explicate *how* religious meaning is generated in detail. It is an academic method for making decisions in the analysis of even the most transcendent, religiously connotated matters

105 Meinert, “Creation of Tantric Sacred Spaces in Eastern Central Asia.”

106 See Huo, “Dunhuang Mogao ku di 465 ku jianku shiii zaishen,” 193; Peng, Wang, and Dunhuang Yanjiuyuan, *Dunhuang Mogao ku beiqiu shiku*, vol. 2, 224. The fragmentary inscription in six lines reads: 昌府□塔寺僧人 [...] 遼吉祥秦州僧 [...] 吉祥山丹□ [...] 于元統三年 [1335] [...] 八日到此秘密寺 [...] 紀耳. According to Huo, the term for the description of Yulin Cave 29 is Secret Hall (Chin. *mimi tang* 秘密堂). For Yulin Cave 29 in relation to Mogao Cave 465, see Meinert, “Creation of Tantric Sacred Spaces in Eastern Central Asia,” 254. For the location of Yulin in relation to Dunhuang, see *ibid.*, 252–253, map 10.1.

comprehensible; it allows for traceability in each single instance, while still remaining outside inner-religious discourses. Thus, such a meta-perspective as an academic method aims at asymptotic convergence to the religious experience of non-dualism, which is the very pivot of Tantric Buddhist practice.

Moreover, it is not the case that anything divine always immediately evaporates (back) into transcendence. On the contrary, the presence of a divine being is a process that needs to be regulated: it is confirmed through ritual performance. And due to the very stereotype of rituals, the repeatability of the path from immanence to transcendence is particularly well possible. Ritual is a constant symbolic mediation between immanence and transcendence. It stands not only for itself but also for something else; this is what ritual does in ritual performance. Thus, my examples illustrate a Buddhist solution to the problem of how to express the inexpressible transcendence by means of immanence.<sup>107</sup> Last, but not least, a transcendent perception of space also allows a different perception of time, a time beyond contingencies, a timeless or transcendent time.

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<sup>107</sup> Krech, *Wo Bleibt die Religion?*, 41. See also, Stünkel, "TID: The Transcendence-Immanence Distinction," 5.