

A Study of Dharma-Protecting Divine Kings in the Frontispieces of Liao Buddhist Sutra Prints

Huitong Wan*

Turpan Studies Institute, Turpan, Xinjiang, 838000, China

*Corresponding author: Huitong Wan, wanhuiton@Outlook.com

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Abstract: A distinct category of imagery known as “Dharma-Protecting Divine Kings” (护法神王) frequently appears in Buddhist sutra frontispieces across regions including Hebei, Shanxi, Inner Mongolia, Gansu, and Xinjiang. Through a systematic review and analysis of various typologies of these frontispieces, this paper traces their iconographic prototypes and elucidates the underlying combinatory logic and functional mechanisms of such imagery. The visual representation of the Dharma-Protecting Divine Kings originates from the Buddhist belief in the Four Heavenly Kings, manifesting their Dharma-Protecting functions within sutra frontispieces. Furthermore, the pairing of the Dharma-Protecting Divine Kings with the Lengyan Dashi (楞严大师) establishes a functional complementarity between “propagating the Dharma” and “protecting the Dharma.” This iconographic arrangement profoundly reflects the unique ideological pursuit of “preserving sutras and safeguarding the Dharma” in Liao dynasty Buddhism, encapsulating the era’s deep anxiety in the face of the perceived crisis of the “Age of Dharma Decline”.

Keywords: Buddhist Sutra Frontispiece; Dharma-Protecting Divine King; Lengyan Dashi; Khitan Tripitaka

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Guardian god-kings constitute a distinctive and important iconographic group in the history of Chinese Buddhist art. The category may encompass a wide range of Buddhist protective figures, including muscular guardians, heavenly kings, and yakshas. To date, however, comparatively little scholarly attention has been paid to images of guardian deities in Buddhist sutra frontispieces. Cheng Jiajing and Yang Fuxue have observed that the guardian god-king frontispiece from Khara-Khoto TK274 is highly consistent, in both composition and bodily posture, with the woodblock illustrations of the Khitan Canon discovered in the Yingxian Wooden Pagoda. In particular, the seated posture and facial rendering are nearly identical, indicating that the image derives from a Liao-dynasty visual system. Dunhuang fragments preserved in Russian collections display a similar iconographic structure, suggesting that Liao Buddhist prints influenced not only the Western Xia but also Dunhuang.^[1] Wu Xuemei, in “Picturing Jiedi: An Analysis of Western Xia Dharma-Protecting Deity Prints and Their Multidimensional Images,” argues that the image of “Prajna Jiedi” in Western Xia Buddhist printed frontispieces was modeled on narrative traditions found in Tang-dynasty Dunhuang manuscripts and had an independent pictorial tradition. This image also reflects official preferences in religious worship. In the Western Xia context, the cult of such guardian deities served multiple functions: protecting the state and pacifying the people, safeguarding the Buddhist Dharma, and guarding tombs.^[2] Building on existing scholarship, this article examines the combinations and devotional functions of guardian god-kings in Liao Buddhist sutra frontispieces from the perspective of multi-regional visual materials.

1. Classification of Dharma-Protecting Divine Kings in Buddhist Sutra Frontispieces

Buddhist sutra prints are religious images made by woodblock printing. As illustrations placed at the beginning of sutra scrolls or volumes, frontispieces include preaching scenes, narrative transformation tableaux, and images of Dharma-protecting deities. In addition to protectors whose identities are clear, such as Jiedi spirits, Buddhist sutra frontispieces also contain a class of Dharma-Protecting Divine King images labeled “Dharma-Protecting Divine King,” “Dharma Protector (护法神),” “Dharma-Protecting Good Deities (护法善神),” or “Hufa Shengzhu (护法神主).” According to the number of figures in the image, these can be divided into two groups: single Dharma-Protecting Divine Kings, and Dharma-Protecting Divine Kings with attendants. On the basis of the frame and content of the frontispiece, the single-figure examples can be divided into two types, while the images with attendants can be divided into five types.

1.1 Frontispieces with a Single Dharma-Protecting Divine King

Type A: The frame of the frontispiece has a distinctive form: the upper, lower, and right sides are all double lines, while only the left side is a single line. In the frontispiece to a scroll-mounted Amitabha Sutra excavated from the Tiangongsi Pagoda in Fengrun County, Hebei, dated to the Liao Chongxi to Xianyong period (1032-1074),^[3] an inscription reading “Dharma-Protecting Good deities” appears on the left. The protector wears a jeweled crown and has a circular flaming head halo. His eyes are wide open, his nose is high, his beard bristles fiercely, and his expression is formidable. He wears elaborate scale armor, holds a long-handled axe-halberd in his right hand, stands upright, and plants both feet firmly on auspicious clouds. The upper background of the frontispiece is decorated with four floral motifs (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Frontispiece to the Amitabha Sutra. Source: (Fengrun Museum)



Type B: All four sides of the frontispiece frame are double lines. Within the double lines on the left and right sides are two vajras separated by round motifs. The upper half of the frontispiece to the Chui (垂)-character fascicle 47 of the Avatamsaka Sutra from the Yingxian Wooden Pagoda in Shanxi is damaged. In the upper left corner is an inscription reading “护法 □□”; the lower body of the figure resembles the Dharma-Protecting Good Deities in Type A. In addition, the lower part of the frontispiece contains the single characters “heaven,” “above,” “king,” and “human,” interspersed with jewels (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Frontispiece to the Chui (垂)-character fascicle 47 of the Avatamsaka Sutra; Source: (Yingxian Muta Liaodai Mizan991, p.19).



1.2 Frontispieces with a Dharma-Protecting Divine King and Attendants

Type A: The upper, lower, and right sides of the frontispiece frame each consist of two double lines, while the left side is a single line. In the frontispiece to the scroll-mounted Sutra of the Buddha's Peak Heart Avalokiteshvara Sutra from the Tiangongsi Pagoda in Fengrun County, dated to the Liao Chongxi to Xianyong period (1032-1074), the Dharma-Protecting Divine King wears a jeweled crown and has a circular flaming head halo. His face is square, his nose is high and broad, his eyes glare fiercely, and his bearing is austere. The divine king wears armor, is surrounded by cloud vapor, sits atop a yaksha, and holds a sword in his right hand. Another yaksha attendant stands to his left, holding a scabbard in his left hand. Mountains and waves are visible in the background (Figure 3). A similar layout appears in the frontispiece to the scroll-mounted Sutra Spoken by the Buddha on the Mahayana Holy Infinite-Life Definitive Radiance King Tathagata Dharani from the same pagoda (Figure 4), with an inscription reading “护法 □□” in the upper right.

Figure 3. Frontispiece to Buddha's Peak Heart Avalokiteshvara Sutra. Source: (Fengrun Museum).



Figure 4. Frontispiece to the Mahayana Holy Infinite-Life Definitive Radiance King Tathagata Dharani. Source: (Fengrun Museum).



Type B: On the upper, lower, and left sides of the frontispiece frame, two vajras are drawn with floral ornament between them, and the four corners are decorated with fishtail patterns. In the frontispiece to fascicle 1 of the Lotus Sutra from the Yingxian Wooden Pagoda, dated to the fifth year of Baoda in the Liao dynasty (1125), the Dharma-Protecting Divine King wears a jeweled crown, short shoulder armor, and a circular head halo. His face is square, his angry eyes are slightly knitted, his beard curls, and his expression is solemn and majestic. He sits in a relaxed posture on a rock, with his right leg folded, his left leg braced on the ground, his right hand resting on a sword, and his left fist supported on his left leg. To his right is a slender heavenly maiden wearing a floral crown and a long robe; her expression is peaceful and gentle, and she holds a tray

with both hands (Figure 5).

Figure 5. frontispiece to fascicle 1 of the Lotus Sutra. Source: (Yingxian Muta Liaodai Mizang 1991, p.183).



Type C: All four sides of the frontispiece frame are decorated with scrolling-vine patterns. In the Dharma-Protecting Divine King frontispiece to fascicle 20 of the Dirghagama Sutra, no. T74, excavated from Khara-Khoto, an inscription reading “Dharma-Protecting Divine King” appears inside the upper-left frame. The divine king wears a jeweled crown and has a circular flaming head halo. His face is rounded-square, with a moustache above the lips, slightly pursed mouth corners, calm eyes, and a solemn expression. He wears armor, holds a sword in his right hand, sits on a hexagonal Sumeru throne, and is encircled by cloud vapor. To his left stands a yaksha attendant holding a scabbard. Mountains and wave patterns are visible in the background (Figure 6). Similar layouts include Dharma-Protecting Divine King frontispieces from Khara-Khoto in Russian collections (hereafter “Russian Khara-Khoto Collection”), nos. 23A and T75; Dharma-Protecting Divine King frontispieces from Dunhuang in Russian collections (hereafter “Russian Dunhuang Collection”), nos. D1576 and D1572; and examples from Turpan in German collections (hereafter “German Turpan Collection”), nos. 878r+880r, Ch/731r, MIK III 190r, MIK III 7269bv, and others.

Figure 6. frontispiece to fascicle 20 of the Dirghagama Sutra; no. T74. Source: (E cang Heishuicheng wenxian 1997, vol.4, p.365).



Type D: All four sides of the frontispiece frame are decorated with scrolling floral-vine patterns. In German Turpan Collection MIK III 6r, the left side is carved with inscriptions reading “Dharma-Protecting Divine King” and “Fengxianjun fengwei. (冯县郡奉为)” The Dharma-Protecting Divine King wears a jeweled crown and has a circular flaming head halo. His face is full, his brows are tightly furrowed, his eyes glare fiercely, bristling moustache grows above his slightly open lips, and his tense face conveys stern majesty. He wears armor, holds a sword in his right hand, is surrounded by cloud vapor, and the background shows mountain and wave patterns (Figure 7). Although this frontispiece is badly damaged, it can be compared iconographically with the Dharma-Protecting Divine King frontispiece to fascicle 4 of the Fangguang Bore Sutra (放光般若经) in the Zhaocheng Jinzang at Sakya Monastery in Tibet.^[4] The two correspond closely in their scrolling floral-vine frames and subject matter. Through comparison, it can be inferred that this divine king clenched his left fist and sat on a hexagonal Sumeru throne. To his left was another yaksha attendant, holding a scabbard and carrying it on his right shoulder (Figure 8). Similar layouts also include German Turpan Collection Ch 582v, MIK III 564v, MIK III 7486r, Ch/U 7733a+Ch/U 7733b, and Ch/U 8143.

Figure 7. German Turpan Collection MIK III 6r. Source: (Museum of Asian Art, Berlin).



Figure 8. Frontispiece to fascicle 4 of the Fangguang Bore Sutra (放光般若经). Source: (Sakya Monastery in Tibet).



Type E: On all four sides of the frontispiece frame, two vajras are drawn between double lines and separated by round motifs. In German Turpan Collection MIK III 6707r+MIK III 197r, an inscription reading “Dharma Protector” appears in the upper right. The Dharma-Protecting Divine King in the image has no head halo. He wears a jeweled crown; his face is full and his jaw broad and thick. His brows rise while their inner ends are slightly knitted, his eyes are wide open and protruding, and bristling moustache grows above his lips, giving him a fierce expression. The divine king wears armor and a cloak, holds a sword in his right hand, and sits on a Sumeru throne. To his left stands a yaksha attendant, holding a scabbard before his body with both hands and gazing at the protector. Behind and to the right of the protector is a monk holding an incense burner; in

the upper left is an inscription reading “Lengyan Dashi.” Both the protector and Lengyan Dashi are encircled by cloud vapor, while no mountain or wave patterns appear in the background (Figure 9). Frontispieces with similar layouts include German Turpan Collection C294, Ch/U 7732r (Figure 10), and Ch 2265; a Dharma-Protector frontispiece excavated from the Bezeklik Caves in 1980-1981 (Figure 11); Russian Khara-Khoto Collection 08A (Figure 12) and T77; and the frontispiece to fascicle 21 of the Amoghapasha-vikurvana-mantra Sutra in the collection of the Sackler Museum in the United States.

Figure 9. German Turpan Collection MIK III 6707r+MIK III 197r. Source: (Museum of Asian Art, Berlin).



Figure 10. German Turpan Collection Ch/U 7732r. Source: (Museum of Asian Art, Berlin).



Figure 11. Frontispiece excavated from the Bezeklik Caves in 1980-1981. Source: (Turpan Museum).



Figure 12. Russian Khara-Khoto Collection 08A. Source: (E cang Heishuicheng wenxian, vol.6, p.126).



Among the Buddhist sutra frontispieces discussed above, single-figure Dharma-Protecting Divine Kings are relatively rare. All belong to the Liao dynasty and are distributed in Hebei, Shanxi, and related areas; they comprise two types. Frontispieces with a Dharma-Protecting Divine King and attendants comprise five types and are mainly distributed in Shanxi, Hebei, Inner Mongolia, Gansu, and Xinjiang. Those that can be clearly dated to the Liao include Type A: the Sutra Spoken by the Buddha on the Mahayana Holy Infinite-Life Definitive Radiance King Tathagata Dharani and Buddha's Peak Heart Avalokiteshvara Sutra from the Tiangongsi Pagoda in Fengrun County, Hebei, dated to the Liao Chongxi to Xianyong period (1032-1074). Type B: fascicle 1 of the Lotus Sutra from the Yingxian Wooden Pagoda in Shanxi, dated to the fifth year of Baoda in the Liao dynasty (1125). Type C: the Russian Khara-Khoto Collection fragments T74, from the Asura chapter of the fourth division, "Account of the World," in the Agama Sutra Spoken by the Buddha, and 23A, from "The Chapter on Gains" in the Ekottarika Agama. Scholars have identified both as fragments of the Liao-printed Khitan Tripitaka.^[5]

Within Type D, the "Dharma-Protecting Divine King" inscriptions and scrolling floral-vine frames of German Turpan Collection nos. MIK III 6r and MIK III 7486r are basically consistent with the frontispiece to the Liao-period German Turpan

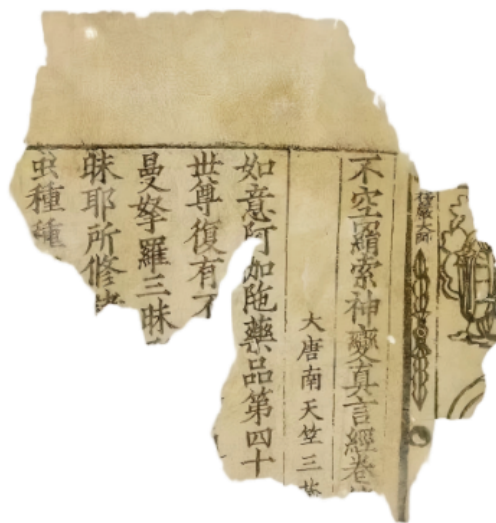
Collection fragment Ch/U 8143r (Figure 13), fascicle 30 of the Amoghapasha-vikurvana-mantra Sutra^[6] The characters for “Dharma-Protecting Divine King” are archaic and weighty, with square and forceful strokes. Horizontal strokes show slight flaring; vertical hooks often end with a pause or in a “crab-claw hook” shape. Overall, the horizontal strokes often begin with a reverse brush entry: the tip first pauses lightly to the left before moving right, and the stroke ends with a slight return, sometimes sharp and sometimes rounded. The final stroke of the “shi” radical in the character “shen” often interlocks with other strokes. The intersections of vertical and horizontal strokes are slightly thickened, suggesting a Liao-period print. In Type E, fascicle 21 of the Amoghapasha-vikurvana-mantra Sutra in the collection of the Sackler Museum in the United States (Figure 14) has lettering similar to Turpan Liao Ch/U 8143r, fascicle 30 of the same sutra, and should likewise be considered a Liao frontispiece.

Figure 13. German Turpan Collection fragment Ch/U 8143r.

Source: (Museum of Asian Art, Berlin).



Figure 14. Frontispiece to fascicle 21 of the Amoghapasha-vikurvana-mantra Sutra. Source: (Sackler Museum in the United States).



The same type of “Dharma-Protecting Divine King” can be further subdivided into different forms (Table 1). Type C frontispieces with a Dharma-Protecting Divine King and attendants can be divided into two forms. Among them, frontispiece T77 is identical to T74, the Asura chapter of the fourth division, “Account of the World,” in the Dirgha Agama, in cloud vapor, frame, background mountains, and waves, but its inscription reads “Lord of Dharma-Protecting Spirits” (Figure 15). It is therefore listed as a separate form.

Type D can be divided into two forms. Compared with the Dharma-Protecting Divine King in fascicle 4 of the Fangguang Bore Sutra in the Jin Tripitaka at Sakya Monastery in Tibet, the German Turpan Collection MIK III 6r figure has a broader and thicker jaw, protruding pupils, more roughly carved eyebrows, slightly pursed lips, an expression in which “anger” exceeds “awe,” and slight damage at the top of the flaming head halo. Comparison shows that German Turpan Collection Ch 582v, MIK III 564v, MIK III 7486r, MIK III 6r, and Ch/U 8143 all belong to this version. By contrast, the mountains in German Turpan Collection Ch/U 7733a+Ch/U 7733b (Figure 16) differ from those in the above frontispieces, and there are no decorative motifs above the mountains; therefore Type D can be divided into two forms. It is worth noting that Types D and C as a whole display a very high degree of similarity. First, the figures are the same, and the scabbards held by the yakshas are all carried on the right shoulder. Second, the divine king’s seated posture is the same: in all examples he sits upright on a hexagonal Sumeru throne. Third, Type C has simpler scrolling-vine patterns, while Type D has more elaborate and ornate scrolling floral-vine patterns, yet both belong to the scrolling-vine motif and may derive from the same prototype.

Figure 15. Russian Khara-Khoto Collection T77. Source: (Ecang Heishuicheng wenxian 1997, vol.4, p.367).



Figure 16. German Turpan Collection Ch/U 7733a+Ch/U 7733b. Source: (Museum of Asian Art, Berlin).



Type E can be divided into four forms, and the inscription “Lengyan Dashi” appears in three positional arrangements. First, in German Turpan Collection Ch/U 7732r the inscription is enclosed separately within a long frame. Second, in MIK III 6707r+MIK III 197r the inscription lies outside the double-direction frame. Third, in the Dharma-Protecting Divine King frontispiece from the Bezeklik Caves and in Russian Khara-Khoto Collection 08A, the inscription is placed between the double lines of the frame. In addition, the round motifs between the double frame lines differ among four examples: German Turpan Collection MIK III 6707r+MIK III 197r, Ch/U 7732r, the Dharma-Protecting Divine King frontispiece from Bezeklik, and Russian Khara-Khoto Collection 08A. Taking these differences together with the positions of the “Lengyan Dashi” inscription, they can be divided into four forms. Although the Bezeklik example and Russian Khara-Khoto Collection 08A are similar in design, the latter has no round motifs between the two vajras in the upper frame. German Turpan Collection Ch 2265 preserves no trace of round motifs in the upper frame; judging from the round motifs inside the frame, it should belong to the same type as Russian Khara-Khoto Collection 08A. The face of the yaksha and the cloud vapor in German Turpan Collection Ch 2294 are consistent with those in MIK III 6707r+MIK III 197r, so they belong to the same version. By contrast, the yaksha’s face and the “Dharma Protector” inscription in Russian Khara-Khoto Collection T77 differ from German Turpan Collection C294. Considering the characteristics of the round motifs, T77 should belong to the form represented by the Bezeklik frontispiece or by Russian Khara-Khoto Collection 08A. The frontispiece to fascicle 21 of the Amoghapasha-vikurvana-mantra Sutra in the Sackler Museum, 1984.297.24, is severely damaged, but it may also belong to one of these two forms.

Table 1: Classification of Buddhist Sutra Frontispieces with Dharma-Protecting Divine Kings and Attendants

Form Type	Type A	Type B	Type C	Type D	Type E
Form I	Fengrun Tiangongsi Pagoda: Buddha’s Peak Heart Avalokiteshvara Sutra frontispiece; Mahayana Holy Infinite-Life Definitive Radiance King Tathagata Dharani frontispiece	Yingxian Wooden Pagoda: Lotus Sutra fasc frontispiece.1, Liao Baoda 5 (1125)	Russian Khara-Khoto Collection T74,23A; Russian Dunhuang Collection D1576, D1572; German Turpan Collection 878r+880r, Ch/731r, MIK III 190r, MIK III 7269bv; Shodo Museum SH.160-10A; 877+80TBI:494-1[7]	German Turpan Collection MIK III 6r; Ch 582v; MIK III 564v; MIK III 7486r; Ch/U 8143.	German Turpan Collection MIK III 6707r+MIK III 197r; C294; C547
Form II			Russian Khara-Khoto Collection T75	German Turpan Collection Ch/U 7733a+Ch/U 7733b	German Turpan Collection Ch/U 7732r

Form Type	Type A	Type B	Type C	Type D	Type E
Form III					Bezeklik Caves Dharma-Protecting Divine King frontis- piece
Form IV					Russian Khara-Kho- to Collection 08A; German Turpan Collection Ch 2265

2. Analysis of the Prototype of the Dharma-Protecting Divine King in Buddhist Sutra Frontispieces

In the frontispieces to Buddha's Peak Heart Avalokiteshvara Sutra and the Sutra Spoken by the Buddha on the Mahayana Holy Infinite-Life Definitive Radiance King Tathagata Dharani from the Tiangongsi Pagoda in Fengrun County, the Dharma-Protecting Divine King assumes the classic posture of sitting atop a yaksha. This iconographic feature is directly related to the sculptural tradition of the Buddhist Four Heavenly Kings and their attendant retinues.^[8] Images of the Four Heavenly Kings seated atop yakshas were already widespread in Dunhuang caves during the High Tang. In the Middle and Late Tang, female figures were added to the attendant retinues of heavenly king images. From the eleventh year of Dali (776) to the second year of Jianzhong (781), the southern Heavenly King on the south side of the east wall in the antechamber of Yulin Cave 25 stands upright, holds a sword in his right hand, and has a yaksha on his left wearing a scabbard slung diagonally at the waist (Figure 17). By the tenth year of Xiantong in the Late Tang (869), the southern Heavenly King beside the south door on the west wall of the antechamber of Mogao Cave 12 sits atop two yakshas; on the right, a yaksha holding a scabbard stands behind the king, an attendant below carries an arrow case, and a heavenly maiden on the left holds a vase (Figure 18). In the gilt silver reliquary casket with a hipped roof and the Four Heavenly Kings from Famen Temple, dated to the fifteenth year of Xiantong in the Tang dynasty (874), Virudhaka, the Heavenly King of the South, sits on two yakshas and holds a sword downward in his left hand, using it to brace against the ground (Figure 19); the yaksha on the right holds a scabbard, and the heavenly maiden holds a vase. In the Liao Baoda fifth-year (1125) printed frontispiece to fascicle 1 of the Lotus Sutra from the Yingxian Wooden Pagoda, the sword-holding posture of the Dharma-Protecting Divine King and the arrangement of the female attendant are both highly similar to Virudhaka in the Famen Temple gilt silver casket. In the other frontispieces, the Dharma-Protecting Divine King is paired with a yaksha holding a scabbard.

Figure 17. Southern Heavenly King on the southern side of the east wall in the front chamber of Yulin Cave 25. Source: (Digital Dunhuang).



Figure 18. Southern Heavenly King beside the southern doorway on the west wall in the front chamber of Mogao Cave 12;

Source: (Digital Dunhuang).



Figure 19. In the gilt silver reliquary casket with a hipped roof and the Heavenly King of the South. Source: (Famen Temple Museum).



It should be noted that although the combination of Virudhaka, the Heavenly King of the South, and a yaksha holding a scabbard is common, it is not a fixed pairing. A yaksha holding a scabbard may also appear beside other heavenly kings. For example, in the western wall painting of the underground palace of the Wugou Jingguang Sarira Pagoda in Shenyang (沈阳无垢净光舍利塔), dated to the thirteenth year of Chongxi in the Liao dynasty (1044), Virupaksha, the Heavenly King of the West, sits on a rock, holds a sword in his right hand, and is accompanied by a yaksha who holds a scabbard behind him with his right hand. In fascicle 47 of the Besson zakki held at Ninnaji in Kyoto, among the four heavenly kings, the southern and western kings hold swords in their hands and the yakshas beneath their feet hold scabbards, while the northern and eastern kings do not hold swords and the swords held by the yakshas beneath their feet are sheathed. This shows that the scabbard-bearing yaksha was not the exclusive retainer of a particular heavenly king. Rather, the figure appears in response to the sword in the king's hand, indicating submission to and service of the Buddhist Dharma.

In addition, images of yakshas holding swords with both hands can also be found. Such figures most often appear as attendants of Vaishravana, the Heavenly King of the North. In niche 5 of the Beishan grottoes in Chongqing, carved in the first year of Jingfu in the Tang dynasty (892), the image of Vaishravana is flanked by figures including a prince, yakshas, rakshasas, Five-Element Daoist heavenly maidens, and heavenly consorts; among them, a yaksha solemnly stands to one side holding a long sword in both hands. On the north wall of the underground palace of the Wugou Jingguang Sarira Pagoda in Shenyang, dated to the thirteenth year of Chongxi in the Liao dynasty (1044), the yaksha to the left of Vaishravana is different: he carries a long sword on his shoulder, giving the figure a more animated posture. The term "Dharma-Protecting Divine King" in Buddhist sutra frontispieces is a relatively broad concept. Any Buddhist protector charged with guarding the teaching and protecting the scripture can be included within the category of Dharma-Protecting Divine King or Dharma-Protecting Good Deities. In Chinese translations of Buddhist scriptures, titles such as "Mountain Divine King,"

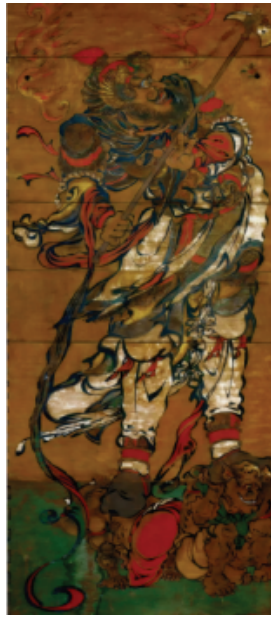
“Wind Divine King,” and “Tree Divine King” appear; most of these divine kings are Indian deities. They are usually grouped in sets of six, eight, or ten. This iconography appears only in the north, began in the fifth century, took shape around the sixth century, flourished in the second half of the sixth century, and gradually disappeared around the Sui-Tang transition.^[9]

As another extremely important group of Dharma protectors, the Four Heavenly Kings were also called “Four Heavenly Divine Kings” in early translations from the second century. The Later Han Sutra Spoken by the Buddha on Warming Rooms and Bathing the Sangha states: “The Buddha told Jivaka: those who arrange baths for the monks and bodhisattvas obtain seven blessings through this cause; they may become ministers, or kings, or the sun, the moon, or the Four Heavenly Divine Kings...First, the Four Heavenly Kings administer the four regions; their radiant bodies are upright, and their majesty protects the four garrisons.”^[10] Because the “Four Heavenly Divine Kings” possessed the function of ruling and protecting the four directions, they were also called the “Four Garrison Kings (四镇王).”^[11] The designation “Four Heavenly Divine Kings” appears in An Shigao’s Later Han translation of the Sutra Spoken by the Buddha on Warming Rooms and Bathing the Sangha, in the Sutra Spoken by the Buddha on the Four Heavenly Kings translated by Zhiyan and Baoyun in the Liu Song, in Bodhiruci’s Tang translation of the Vast Jeweled Pavilion Secret Dharani, and in Amoghavajra’s Tang translation of the Great Teaching-King Sutra of the Thousand-Armed and Thousand-Bowled Manjushri of the Mahayana Yoga Vajra Nature Ocean. Similar terminology, “Four Great Divine Kings,” appears in the Sutra Asked by the Deva Son Shanshuyi, translated by Vimalaksha and Prajnaruci in the Northern Wei, in Bodhiruci’s translations of the Sutra Asked by Brahma Visessacinti and the Wordless Jeweled Casket Sutra, and in the Great Buddha-Crown Extensive Dharani. Regarding the origin of the title “divine king,” Huizhao’s Tang Commentary on the Suvarnaprabhasa Sutra clearly states that the Four Heavenly Kings are also called the Four Heavenly Divine Kings because they command the gods and are therefore called “divine kings.”^[12] In Tang esoteric ritual manuals, moreover, they are also called “Dharma-Protecting Good Deities guarding the four quarters.” (四方镇守护法善神)^[13] With the transmission of Buddhism and the development of sectarian traditions, the functions of the Four Heavenly Kings continued to expand. The Daloutan Sutra records that the Four Heavenly Kings command many ghostly and divine retinues and, every month, send messengers or princes, or personally descend to the human realm, to inspect the good and evil conduct of the people.^[14] By the fifth century, they had begun to acquire the additional functions of protecting the world, the realm, and the ruler.^[15] Although different names emerged through translation lineages and sectarian developments, these changes never departed from the core function of protecting the Buddhist Dharma. The Tang Scripture Asked by the Bodhisattva Great Akasagarbha in the Great Collection clearly proposed the concept that the Four Heavenly Kings protect the Dharma in the Final Dharma age: the Buddha entrusted this teaching to the Four Heavenly Kings, and because the four kings protect the world, this Dharma would long abide in the world and circulate widely.^[16] In the Song, moved by the vast vow of the divine kings to protect stupas and images, uphold the Dharma, and benefit sentient beings in the Final Dharma age, Yuanzhao, when building an ordination platform at Kaiyuan Monastery in Mingzhou, deliberately installed Dharma-Protecting Divine Kings on the platform and prayed that the divine kings would constantly come to protect it, guard the sangha in receiving the precepts according to the Dharma, and thereby ensure that the ordination platform would long endure, that monastic discipline would flourish, and that the seed of Buddhahood would not be cut off.^[17]

The Dharma-Protecting Divine Kings in Liao Buddhist sutra frontispieces inherited the iconographic tradition and protective belief of the Four Heavenly Kings from the Middle and Late Tang. In the frontispiece to the Amitabha Sutra from the Tiangongsi Pagoda in Fengrun County, the Dharma-Protecting Good Deities holds an axe-halberd and tilts his head slightly upward. His attribute and posture are basically consistent with the western heavenly king on the wooden casket inside the Shengzhengzhu Sarira Jeweled Reliquary from Ruiguang Pagoda Temple in Suzhou, dated to the sixth year of Dazhong Xianfu in the Northern Song (1013) (Figure 20). Among frontispieces with Dharma-Protecting Divine Kings and attendants, Type B alone combines the divine king with a heavenly maiden; Types A, C, D, and E all present the divine king together with a scabbard-bearing yaksha. This clearly shows that the Dharma-Protecting Divine King in Liao Buddhist sutra frontispieces took the Four Heavenly Kings as its basic prototype. While Liao painters inherited the iconographic tradition of the Four Heavenly Kings since the Middle and Late Tang, they also developed different compositional variants according to local needs in the spread of belief. The addition of Lengyan Dashi in Type E gave new meaning to Liao belief in Dharma-Protect-

ing Divine Kings.

Figure 20. Western Heavenly King on the inner wooden casket of the pearl reliquary pagoda. Source: (Suzhou Museum).



3. The Meaning of the Combination of Lengyan Dashi and the Dharma Protector

After Shakyamuni entered nirvana, the Buddhist Dharma gradually declined. It was divided into three periods: the True Dharma, the Semblance Dharma, and the Final Dharma. When teaching, practice, and realization are all present, it is called the True Dharma; when teaching and practice remain, it is called the Semblance Dharma; when only teaching remains, it is called the Final Dharma.^[18] According to the Sutra on the Extinction of the Dharma, in the Final Dharma age the first texts to disappear will be the Shurangama Sutra and the Pratyutpanna Samadhi Sutra; the remaining twelve divisions of scripture will then all disappear and no longer appear. Only when Maitreya Buddha appears will sentient beings be saved.^[19] Only the Infinite Life Sutra will remain in the world for another hundred years in order to save beings widely. In the second year of Yongding under the Chen dynasty (558), the Chan master Huisi (慧思), deeply aware of the danger of the Final Dharma, made a great vow to uphold this sutra so that it would not perish and to teach sentient beings until the appearance of Maitreya Buddha.^[20] Regarding the time when the Final Dharma would arrive, the Poxie lun records:

At dawn on the fifteenth day of the second month in the fifty-second year of King Mu, the renshen year, a violent wind suddenly arose, damaging houses, breaking trees, and shaking mountains, rivers, and the whole earth. In the afternoon the sky became dark with clouds. In the west, twelve white rainbows appeared, running north and south and continuing through the night without disappearing. King Mu asked the grand astrologer Huduo, "What sign is this?" Huduo replied, "In the west, a sage has entered extinction; these are signs of decline." King Mu was greatly pleased and said, "I have always feared him. Now that he is about to enter extinction, what need have I to worry?" At that time, the Buddha entered nirvana... According to the scriptures and vinaya, Shakyamuni's True Dharma lasts one thousand years, the Semblance Dharma one thousand years, and the Final Dharma ten thousand years. (穆王五十二年壬申岁二月十五日平旦, 暴风忽起, 发损人舍, 伤折树木, 山川大地皆悉震动。午后天阴云黑, 西方有白虹十二道, 南北通过连夜不灭。穆王问太史扈多曰: 是何征也? 扈多对曰: 西方有圣人灭度, 衰相现耳! 穆王大悦曰: 联常惧于彼, 今将灭度, 联何忧也。当此之时, 佛入涅槃也 依经律云, 释迦正法千年, 像法千年, 末法万年。)^[21]

If the fifty-second year of King Mu of Zhou is taken as 949 BCE, the year of the Buddha's nirvana, then the True Dharma lasted until 51 CE, the Semblance Dharma continued until 1051 CE, and the Final Dharma began in 1052 CE. Liao Buddhism felt deep anxiety about the impending arrival of the Final Dharma in 1052, and therefore sought to "preserve scriptures in preparation for the extinction of the Dharma." In the twelfth year of Chongxi in the Liao dynasty (1043), the inventory note attached to the objects placed in the heavenly palace under the twelfth eave of the North Pagoda at Chaoyang, Liaoning, recorded: "In the Great Khitan state, at noon on the eighth day of the fourth month in the twelfth year of Chongxi, the objects

were reinterred. Since only eight years remain before the Semblance Dharma enters the Final Dharma, this record was made.” The third layer of the four nested gold-and-silver scripture slips excavated from the same heavenly palace is inscribed:” Buried at noon on the eighth day of the fourth month in the twelfth year of Chongxi. The Semblance Dharma has only eight years left.” In the thirteenth year of Chongxi in the Liao dynasty (1044), an underground palace was added within the foundation of the same pagoda. At its center was enshrined a stone dharani pillar, beneath which was carved:” In the Great Khitan state, in the thirteenth year of Chongxi, the jiazhong year, on the jihai day, the eighth day of the renchen month, the fourth lunar month, the objects were reinterred at noon. Seven years remain before the Semblance Dharma enters the Final Dharma.”^[22] It can thus be seen that Liao people were highly alert to the approaching Final Dharma age. Through building pagodas, storing scriptures, and carving inscriptions, they attempted to preserve the Dharma for later generations and placed special emphasis on transmitting and protecting the Dharma.^[23]

The Shurangama Sutra was regarded as the first scripture that would be lost in the Final Dharma age and was therefore highly valued. It was translated in ten fascicles by the Indian monk Paramiti in the first year of Shenlong under the Tang (705). Its full title is The Great Buddha-Crown Tathagata’s Secret Cause of Cultivation and Realization, the Complete Meaning, the Bodhisattvas’ Ten Thousand Practices, and the Shurangama Sutra. It is also commonly abbreviated as the Shurangama Sutra, the Great Buddha-Crown Shurangama Sutra, or the Great Buddha-Crown Sutra. The sutra systematically expounds the essentials of meditative cultivation, including the method of perfect penetration through the ear faculty, the fifty skandha-demons generated from the five aggregates, the sequence of stages in practice, and the causal distinctions among the six destinies plus the realm of immortals, the “seven destinies.” The Shurangama Sutra has an especially powerful function of protecting the True Dharma in the Final Dharma age. After the Buddha’s extinction, reciting the Shurangama Mantra not only brings the support of all buddhas and bodhisattvas; even harmful ghosts, spirits, poisons, and creatures are transformed into supportive conditions for protecting the Dharma.^[24] Although the Bodhisattva Vajragarbha King had already attained unsurpassed bodhi and could have entered nirvana, he vowed not to enter nirvana, specifically in order to protect practitioners in the Final Dharma age who uphold the Shurangama Mantra and cultivate Shurangama samadhi. Whether they practice meditation diligently or wander with distracted minds, he constantly attends and protects them.^[25] The Shurangama Sutra exposes the various disorders of false teachers in the Final Dharma age, who “praise sexual desire, violate the Buddha’s discipline,” and claim to have become buddhas. It warns practitioners that if they do not rely on this sutra to distinguish the fifty kinds of skandha-demons, they can easily go astray and fall among the retinues of demons. Therefore, the Buddha instructed Ananda and later disciples, after his extinction, to “transmit this Dharma-gate and show it to the final age,” so that beings might “awaken to this meaning and not encounter wrong paths,” and might securely enter the knowledge and vision of the Buddha.

^[26] Zhixu’s (智旭) Ming compilation Yuezang zhijin (阅藏知津) calls this sutra “the compass of the teachings, the essential summary of nature and characteristics, the essence of the Dharma-gates of the entire age, and the true seal for becoming buddhas and patriarchs.”^[27] When Master Tongli Hengce of the Liao presided over the carving project of the Fangshan Stone Sutras, limited funds prevented the scriptures from being carved sequentially by cases. Instead, he skipped nine cases of texts, including the cases beginning “fu (覆), qi (器), yu (欲), nan (难), liang (量), mo (墨), bei (悲), si (丝), ran (染),” and made the Shurangama Sutra, in the most important and most urgently preserved “si (丝)” case, the first scripture to be carved. This shows the special importance he attached to the Shurangama Sutra.^[28]

Commentarial work on the Shurangama Sutra began as early as the Tang monk Weique (惟惔). In the Song, interpretation of the Shurangama Sutra can broadly be grouped into three approaches. First, Gushan Zhiyuan (孤山智圆) advocated “establishing contemplation through Heng and Tai,” using the Tiantai doctrinal and contemplative system to explain the scripture. Second, Changshui Zixuan (长水子璇) sought “to promote the lineage through Xianshou (贤首),” clarifying the text through the integrative principles of the Huayan school. Third, Wenling Jiehuan (温陵戒环) inclined toward “explaining the vertical meaning through Chan (禅),” establishing the scripture’s significance for practice from the standpoint of Chan.^[29] Since the Middle Tang, many scholars had commented on the Shurangama Sutra, but Changshui Zixuan alone received the honored title “Lengyan Dashi.”^[30]

Changshui Zixuan was the Northern Song monk Zirui (子璿) (?-1038). He first studied the Shurangama under the Tiantai

master Hongmin, and later paid homage to the Chan master Huijue of Langya Mountain to study Chan practice. He later resided at Changshui, promoted the teachings of the Huayan school, and wrote the *Annotated Commentary on the Meaning of the Shurangama Sutra*. The censor-in-chief Wang Sui wrote a preface for this commentary, which was then printed and circulated.^[31] In the sixth year of Dazhong Xiangfu (1013), the Hanlin scholar Qian Gongyi submitted a memorial requesting that he be granted the title “Lengyan Dashi.”^[32] Because of his commentary on the *Shurangama Sutra*, Zirui came to be placed among Huayan patriarchs such as Qingliang Chengguan (清凉澄观) and Guifeng Zongmi (圭峰宗密). In the *Record of the Rebuilding of the Pavilion for the Pagoda of the Lengyan Dashi*, the Master of the Changshui Commentary, as well as in Tiantai historical works such as *The Orthodox Lineage of the Buddhist Gate* and *The Comprehensive Chronicle of the Buddhas and Patriarchs*, Zirui was included in the Huayan lineage.^[33] Zirui used Huayan as his guiding principle to promote the lineage and interpret the text, namely.^[34] He composed a Xianshou-school commentary on the *Shurangama Sutra* in ten fascicles,^[35] and people recognized that Changshui explained the *Shurangama* from the standpoint of Huayan.^[36] Since the mainstream of Liao Buddhist learning was esoteric Buddhism and Huayan,^[37] Zixuan’s Huayan-based commentary on the *Shurangama Sutra* seems to have had a certain affinity with the intellectual atmosphere of Liao Buddhism. However, no extant Liao textual evidence or archaeological discovery has shown that either Zixuan himself or his *Annotated Commentary on the Meaning of the Shurangama Sutra* circulated in Liao territory. It is worth noting that although Zixuan’s commentary has not been found in Liao lands, it circulated widely in Western Xia. Fragments from the Shanzuigou Grottoes contain material from Zixuan’s *Annotated Commentary on the Meaning of the Shurangama Sutra*, corresponding to fascicles 1, 4, 5, 6, and 8 of the *Shurangama Sutra*. A Tangut annotated version of the *Shurangama Sutra* survives, and the only Tangut commentary version currently known is the Changshui commentary, showing how widely it circulated at the time. In addition, the *Shurangama Sutra* was incorporated into various Western Xia Buddhist texts. The *Essentials Collected from Various Scriptures: The Great Buddha-Crown Tathagata’s Secret Cause of Cultivation and Realization*, the *Complete Meaning*, the *Bodhisattvas’ Ten Thousand Practices*, and the *Shurangama Sutra*, excavated from the Baisigou Square Pagoda, derives from the “Chapter on Mahasthamaprabhata Bodhisattva’s Perfect Penetration through Mindfulness of the Buddha” in fascicle 5 of the *Shurangama Sutra*. The *Collection on Rebirth through the Perfect Cause of Secret Mantras* and the *Preface to the Collected Explanations of the Sources of Chan*, both found at Russian Khara-Khoto Collection, were also clearly influenced by the thought of the *Shurangama Sutra*.^[38]

This indicates that Liao emphasis on the *Shurangama Sutra* more likely derived from its symbolic meaning as a scripture for “protecting the Dharma.” The *Ashoka Sutra* records that before entering nirvana, Shakyamuni entrusted the Four Heavenly Kings with the task of protecting the Dharma treasury after his extinction.^[39] In Dunhuang caves excavated from the Five Dynasties through the Song, during the period of the Hexi Guiyijun regime, the Four Great Heavenly Kings were often painted in the four corners of cave ceilings to guard the four directions and protect the Buddhist realm. This tradition of Dharma protection extended into Buddhist sutra prints. Within the small space at the beginning of a sutra scroll, the Four Heavenly Kings and their retinues became Dharma protectors of the scripture, guarding the continuation of the Buddhist Dharma. The Dharma-Protecting Divine Kings in Buddhist prints and the Four Heavenly Kings in mural painting share an obvious iconographic source. The *Shurangama Sutra* itself emphasizes “protecting the True Dharma,” and the pairing of Lengyan Dashi, the transmitter of this scripture, with the Dharma-Protecting Divine King continued the scriptural tradition of “eminent monks transmitting the Dharma and divine kings protecting it.” Lengyan Dashi takes the propagation of scripture and Dharma as his responsibility, devoting himself to the dissemination of teachings and the continuation of the Dharma lineage. The Dharma protector, through awesome divine power, protects the teaching and the scripture, dispels demonic obstacles, and ensures the unobstructed circulation of the True Dharma. One is primarily responsible for transmission and propagation; the other, for protection. Together they answer the dual needs of “transmitting the Dharma” and “protecting the Dharma” in the Final Dharma age and respond to the Liao Buddhist anxiety over “preserving scriptures and protecting the Dharma.”

4. Conclusions

The different forms of the “Dharma-Protecting Divine King” frontispiece not only display the diversity of Liao Buddhist print art, but also deeply reflect the religious thought and social psychology of the time. The image of the “Dharma-Protecting

Divine King” in Buddhist sutra frontispieces first appeared in Liao printed editions, and its prototype was drawn from the Buddhist Four Heavenly Kings. This special iconographic phenomenon carries profound religious doctrine while also implying distinctive social and secular meanings. From the perspective of Buddhist doctrine, the “Dharma-Protecting Divine King” bears the important mission of safeguarding the Dharma. From the social perspective, it deeply reflects the influence of Final Dharma thought on Liao Buddhism. At the time, society felt deep anxiety that the Buddhist Dharma was about to disappear. Because the Shurangama Sutra was regarded as the first scripture to be lost in the Final Dharma age, the “Dharma-Protecting Divine King” and “Lengyan Dashi,” who propagated that scripture, complemented one another. Their combination jointly responded to the double urgency of “transmitting the Dharma” and “protecting the Dharma” in the Final Dharma age.

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