THE CENTRAL GROTTO IN XIAONANHAI AND THE
BUDDHIST CONCEPT OF ANNIHILATION OF SINS
Understanding Seng Chou’s Enterprises in Light of the Nirvana Sutra
and the Sutra of Visualization of the Buddha of Infinite Life

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The Xiaonanhai Grottoes, built in the Northern Qi dynasty (550 - 577), are located on the outskirts of Anyang in Henan Province and comprise East, Central, and West Grottoes. Of special importance is the Central Grotto, which has a carved inscription (known as the Fangfashi loushi banjing ji) over its entrance relating a general overview of the construction process. This grotto, while small in size, is rich in both visual imagery and text, providing valuable information on Northern Qi Buddhism and cave-temples. Construction on the Central Grotto began in the year Tienbao 1 (550). Five years later, in Tienbao 6 (555), the statues and relief carvings inside the cave were completed, due in large part to the influence of Seng Chou (480 - 560), a monk whose legendary meditation accomplishments had a profound influence on Chinese Buddhist history as a whole. The inscription on the gate is thought to have been carved soon after Seng Chou’s death.

In a previous article entitled “Shōnankai chūkutsu to Sochū Zenji: Hokusei sekkutsu kenkyū josetsu” (The Central Xiaonanhai Grotto and the Chan Master Seng Chou: Introductory Research on Northern Qi Stone Caves)¹, the author presents a fundamental study of this grotto and argues that its most essential elements are based on the Nirvana Sutra (Skt., Nirvana-sutra), a scripture that was formative to the ideology and enterprises of Seng Chou. The author also explains that Buddhists of the day were particularly interested in finding ways to guarantee their salvation and details some of the means by which they attempted to do so.

This article, the second part of the aforementioned thesis, explores the deep relationship between the Central Grotto and the concept of annihilating sins (Ch., miezui). It argues the possibility that this cave, which was originally built as a meditation chamber, was used for confession and repentance rituals. The article then discusses the grotto’s historical significance from a variety of angles, as well as issues surrounding the thought and activities of Seng Chou.

One important element relating the concept of atonement of sins in the grotto is a poem from the Nirvana Sutra included in the incised inscription on the cave’s external wall. The poem contains words of repentance of King Ajatasatru who killed his own father to the Buddha, in response for which the Buddha forgives him and annihilates his past sins. A second factor evincing the connection is the relief carvings on the grotto’s west wall, which contain China’s oldest extant imagery of Amitabha’s Pure Land as described in the Sutra of Visualization of the Buddha of Infinite Life (Skt., Amitayurdhyana -sutra). This sutra also deals with the story of King Ajatasatru and implies the potential for his salvation.

The possibility for rebirth in the Pure Land even by those who have committed atrocious sins may have been one of the major reasons that the Sutra of Visualization of the Buddha of Infinite Life became the leading scripture in Chinese Pure Land Buddhism. The Central Grotto at Xiaonanhai exhibits that this sutra’s message was most likely complimented and enhanced by the concept of sin annihilation found in the Nirvana Sutra.