

A New Chinese Manichaean Painting: *Auspicious Signs Heralding Mānī's Birth*

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Received: June 1, 2024 • Accepted: September 4, 2024

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ABSTRACT

This paper introduces and analyzes a new Chinese Manichaean painting entitled 'Auspicious Signs Heralding Mānī's Birth'. Zhang Peng 张鹏, a doctoral candidate at the Central Academy of Fine Arts (Zhong-yang Meishu Xueyuan 中央美术学院), was the first to notice the Manichaean affiliation of this painting, which was auctioned by the Beijing Poly International Auction Co., Ltd (Beijing Baoli Guoji Paimai Youxian Gongsi 北京保利國際拍賣有限公司) in 2021. This study employs the methods of iconographic comparison and analysis of textual parallels to argue that the recently identified hagiographic painting shares striking stylistic similarities with at least three other previously known Manichaean paintings, and that it can be directly related to one of them.

KEYWORDS

Manichaean paintings, auspicious signs, pomegranate, Fujianese manuscripts

In her 2016 article published in *Orientations*, Morita Miki introduced a new Manichaean painting from the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco.¹ This painting, which is now titled *Mānī's Parents* (ink and colours on silk, 39.7×56.2cm, ca. 14th c., see Fig. 9b), was a valuable addition to

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¹ The authors would like to express their gratitude to Prof. Li Jun 李军 (University of Macau, Central Academy of Fine Arts), Prof. Zheng Yi 郑式 (Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing), Stephen G. Haw, Janisz Horváth, Jorinde Ebert and the two anonymous reviewers for their valuable suggestions, and they accept responsibility for any remaining errors. Our special thanks go to Fan Jeremy Chang and David Armstrong at the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco for providing us with the high-resolution image of the *Mānī's Parents* painting. Our choice of whether to use traditional or simplified Chinese characters depends on the context; we have not attempted to unify the two types of characters. The authors retain the right to cite their respective parts as their own in the future and agree to cite the other author's contribution as his.

the ten Chinese Manichaean paintings known at the time. All previously identified Manichaean paintings originated in Yuan or early Ming China and eventually made their way to Japan and are thus currently held in Japanese museums, monastery, or private collections (see Yoshida and Furukawa 2015). However, the painting identified by Morita is unique because it journeyed on to the USA after being consigned to Harry Packard (d. 1991) by Yabumoto Sōgorō 藪本莊五郎 and was sold to Avery Brundage (1887–1975) in 1967 (Morita 2016: 139). In the final paragraph of her essay, Morita (2016: 139) expressed her hope in the possibility of finding another painting in the future that might be related to the same larger painting to which, in her view, both *Mānī's Parents* and *Mānī's Birth*² (colours on silk, 35.6×56.9 cm; ca. 14th c., Kyūshū National Museum, Dazaifu) paintings belong. It appears that this wish has now been fulfilled.

Zhang Peng 张鹏, a doctoral candidate at the Central Academy of Fine Arts (Zhongyang Meishu Xueyuan 中央美术学院), was the first to notice the Manichaean affiliation and significance of another painting (see Fig. 1) after it was sold on 4 December 2021 at an auction held by the Beijing Poly International Auction Co., Ltd (Beijing Baoli Guoji Paimai Youxian Gongsi 北京保利國際拍賣有限公司).³ As we will argue, this painting represents a new addition to the existing corpus of eleven Chinese Manichaean paintings, five of which (*Mānī's Parents*, *Mānī's Birth*, *Hagiography* [1, 2, 3]) belong to the category of hagiographic narratives that visualise Mānī's life.

According to the information available online,⁴ the anonymous artist's work (Fig. 1) is titled 'Ruìyìng tú 瑞应图' (*Auspicious Signs*) and measures 35×56.5cm.⁵ Despite our best efforts, no further information regarding the current owner or the exact provenance of the painting could be obtained from Poly Auction House. In consideration of the characteristics of mounting, Zhang Peng (email dated 5 September 2024) proposes that the painting was previously held in a Japanese collection prior to being auctioned. The title given by the auction house is justified by the presence of various auspicious signs in the painting, and therefore it has been preserved for future reference. However, the online description linking the painting's subject to the legendary 'Golden Chamber Alliance' (*Jīn guì zhī méng* 金匱之盟) of the early Song dynasty appears to be misleading. The visual motifs in the painting do not support this interpretation. Even the author of the online description found the ceremonial collection of pomegranates, one of the main motifs in the painting, to be incomprehensible from his angle of interpretation.⁶

This paper provides a general description of *Auspicious Signs*, compares it with other Chinese Manichaean paintings, and then offers a preliminary interpretation of the new painting.

² On this painting, see Yoshida 2012, Furukawa 2012, Ma 2016a, 2016b, 2022.

³ 仰之弥高—中国古代书画夜场; 'More Sublime When Looking Up: Chinese Classical Paintings and Calligraphy Evening Sale', LOT 号: 2019, <https://www.polypm.com.cn/assess/special/0/PZ2052508/0/34?>, last accessed: 3 September 2024.

⁴ <https://www.polypm.com.cn/record/artdetail/tlyl/art5195312019/13>, last accessed: 25 March 2024.

⁵ The painting is available online on two websites: Zhonghua Zhenbao Guan 中华珍宝馆: <https://g2.ltfc.net/view/SUHA/61ba216cc116f20ca7780386>; Beijing Poly international Auction Co., Ltd: <https://www.polypm.com.cn/record/artdetail/tlyl/art5195312019/13> (last accessed: 25 March 2024). As can be gleaned from another online image of unfortunately low quality (https://new.qq.com/rain/a/20211117A0BE7X00?suid=&media_id=, last accessed: 14 August 2024), both websites present the painting slightly less complete than in reality, as far as its lower margin is concerned (cf. Fig. 9a).

⁶ 以这样隆重的仪式采送三枚石榴，是令人费解的。(<https://www.polypm.com.cn/record/artdetail/tlyl/art5195312019/13>, last accessed: 25 March 2024).





Fig. 1 *Auspicious Signs*

(colours on silk, 35.0×56.5cm; anonymous owner; image by courtesy of Zhonghua Zhenbao Guan 中华珍宝馆)



1. DESCRIPTION OF THE PAINTING (WITH SOME INTERPRETATION)

Auspicious Signs can be divided into two registers that are demarcated by a pond filled with lotus flowers and an overarching golden bridge with geometrically decorated vermilion railings.⁷ The so-called malachite background is populated with thirty-two human figures, two animals (a white-spotted deer standing beside the upper right building and a barely visible white horse on the right side of the floating divine figure), two buildings located in the lower left and upper right sections, as well as two intertwined trees and various plants, mostly placed on the periphery.

The entire upper register focuses on the ceremonial act of plucking and offering a pomegranate, a fruit identifiable by its calix. In contrast to the online interpretation referring to three pomegranates (三枚石榴), it is argued that the well-known and widely used technique of ‘continuous narration’ or ‘synoptic narrative mode’⁸ (Chinese *yìshí tóngtú* 异时同图) is employed here to portray a temporal chain of events, with a single pomegranate on a single golden plate being plucked, carried and offered.

In the upper register’s left subscene, a lady wearing a carmine headgear and a crimson cloak, with cyanine blue and brown ochre robes visible underneath, stands on a stool and picks a single pomegranate from a small and mostly barren tree with reddish flowers (Fig. 2a). She holds a golden plate in her right hand and plucks the tree’s only pomegranate with her left hand. A long yellow ochre silk scarf, tied around the woman’s head, covers her mouth, which, as emphasized by the online writer,⁹ may be interpreted as a sign of respect towards the fruit.¹⁰ Thus, the motif of the scarf suggests the overall ritualistic nature of this scene. An altar in front of the tree, covered with a tablecloth of light carmine pink and rattan yellow that reaches to the ground, further accentuates this aspect. On the altar, there are three ritual utensils: a higher central one flanked by two smaller ones on either side. To the left of the altar stand four ladies who appear to be court musicians, while a fifth lady kowtows in front of the altar. The act of plucking the pomegranate and the motif of the altar with the five court ladies have a close visual and semantic connection. The pomegranate must have some supernatural quality that makes the ladies treat it with such ceremonial respect.¹¹

The adjacent narrative subscene to the right also maintains these ceremonial sentiments. In this second subscene of the upper register, probably the same lady is depicted wearing the same attire (except for the scarf used to pluck the fruit). She stands in a dignified manner, with both hands holding the gilded plate and the pomegranate resting on it (Fig. 2b). Accompanied by two musicians, she stands in front of an altar with similar utensils. The significance of the plucking woman and the pomegranate she holds is highlighted by her central position to the gaze of the four court ladies. Both the pair standing behind her and the pair flanking the altar look directly at her and the ‘treasure’ on the plate.

⁷ We have done our best to use the colour terms as accurately as possible; however, given that the painting is not available for viewing, the colour terms described on the following pages are, by necessity, provisional.

⁸ See, for example, Dehejia 1990: 374–375, 385–386.

⁹ 口鼻蒙有丝巾，显示极为恭敬 (<https://www.polypm.com.cn/record/artdetail/tlyl/art5195312019/13>, last accessed: 25 March 2024).

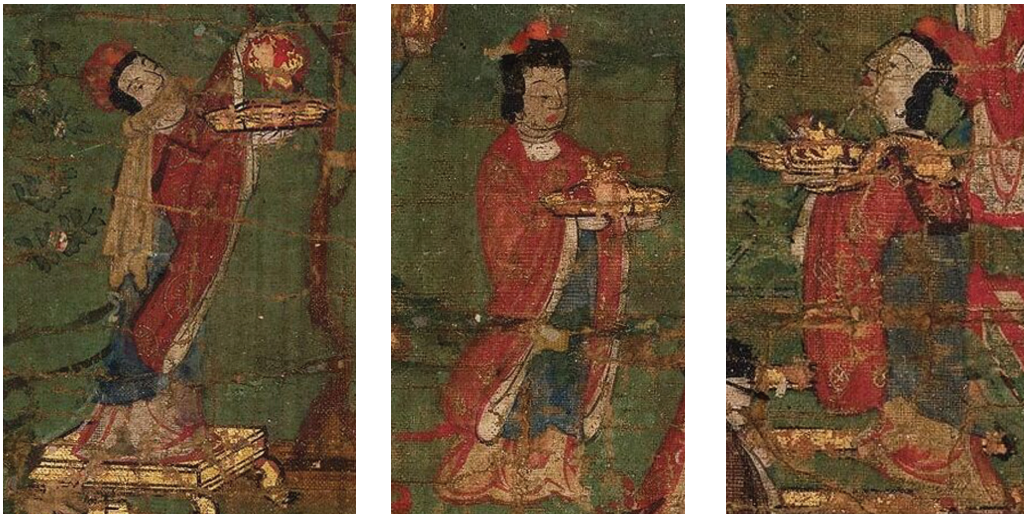
¹⁰ Cf. the Manichaean attitude to plucking fruits (see e.g. BeDuhn 2000: 35–36, 47, 81, 177; see also Fynes 1996).

¹¹ As will become clear from the *Mínshū* 閩書 (1619), this religious devotion is probably not unrelated to the notion that it was Laozi who transformed himself into the pomegranate.



The two figures standing behind the altar, one of whom is damaged, belong to the third sub-scene, in which the same fruit is offered to a queen who is seated within a small building. Four court ladies stand beyond the altar, with two guards flanking the staircase that leads to a palace-like building, in which a seated queen wearing a gilded crown with a pale-blue headcloth and a king with a gilded headgear are respectively accompanied by two female and male attendants. At the base of the staircase, a purple-brown robed official stands in a humble posture. On the staircase itself, a woman stands in clothes identical in colours to the ones in the previous sub-scenes. She presents the pomegranate on the plate to the queen (Fig. 2c). Similarly to the figure with the scarf in the initial scene, this woman also has a distinctive accessory: she wears a golden ornament ('cloud shoulder' collar, *yúnjiān* 雲肩), which is not needed for either picking and carrying the fruit; however, its depiction is justified by the ceremonial act of handing it over to the queen, who is also embellished with a similar golden ornament, as are her two attendants. The building has a complex roof structure consisting of malachite, red and golden layers, and at its rear, the wall is adorned with floral motifs. On the left side of the building stands what appears to be a white-spotted deer with its head lowered.¹²

In summary, it is proposed that the upper register of the painting revolves around a narrative about a single pomegranate that is picked, carried, and presented in all three sub-scenes (Figs. 2a-c). The three female figures are all depicted in identical crimson, cyanine blue and brown ochre attire, whose combination of colours is not shared by any other figure in the painting. The three female figures' (Figs. 2a–c) near-perfect resemblance, however, is marred by the fact that the first and the third figure have different symbols on their cloaks, while these are hardly visible on the second figure's cloak. Nevertheless, each of these figures holds the same golden plate with the same pomegranate, which serves to emphasise the shared identity of these plates and fruits.

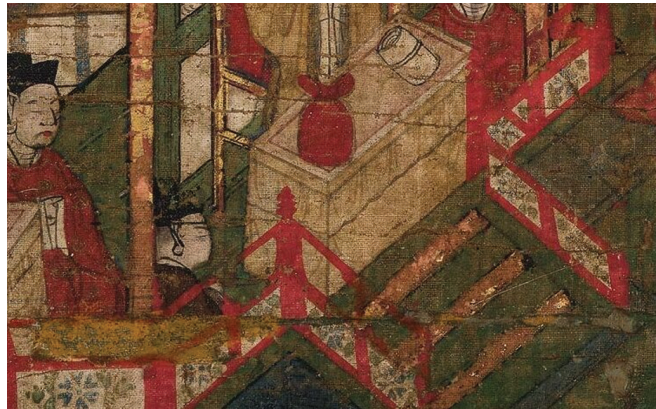


Figs. 2a-c Plucking, carrying and offering the pomegranate
Auspicious Signs (details)

¹² Due to damage on the surface, it is difficult to determine whether this animal figure has one or two antlers. The antler that is clearly visible is located in the middle of the animal's head, between its two eyes.

In the lower register, there is a larger and more complex palace-like building located in the left corner. Its roof structure is similar to that of the upper building. This medium-sized palace is shrouded in two types of cloud: the ‘lower’ one in front of the building is grass green and vermilion, while the ‘upper’ one behind it is cyanine blue and clam white. Inside, a crowned king sits on a throne, flanked by three officials, one slightly hidden, the other two more clearly visible. The former wears a purple-brown garment, while the latter two are clad in crimson garments. All officials wear black headgear. In front of the king stands a table with a tied, whitish paper scroll and a crimson case, which most probably contains the imperial seal (*yùxǐ* 玉璽).¹³ Next to the official on the left, there is a smaller table with a long crimson cloth and another crown. A divine figure, facing the king, is floating on a red cloud and raising the right hand as if teaching or admonishing the king. The right portion of the lower register displays two trees with intertwined trunks, shrouded in bluish-white clouds. Three figures, dressed in cyanine blue, crimson and realgar orange robes respectively, are engaged in conversation beneath the trees.

The preliminary study by Poly Auction House dated the *Auspicious Signs* to the Five Dynasties (AD 907–960) or the early Northern Song dynasty (AD 960–1127). However, Zhang Peng contends that the material culture and the style of the painting are consistent with the characteristics of the Southern Song and Yuan dynasties, as well as the stylistic analysis of the other Chinese Manichaean paintings conducted by Furukawa Shōichi (2010, 2012, 2015). Zhang Peng opines that the style of the building’s roof and hall, and of its railings and arches are not unique to the early Song dynasty. Similar railings are also visible in the *Zhōngxīng Ruìyìng tú* 中興瑞應圖 of the Southern Song dynasty, part of the Long Museum collection, Shanghai (Fig. 3a). Additionally, the wooden screen with flowers in the back depicts the common ‘Zhuāngtáng huā 装堂花’



Figs. 3a-b Architectural railings in *Zhōngxīng Ruìyìng tú* (colours on silk, 34.5×1463.3cm), © Long Museum (龙美术馆, Shanghai) and analogous railings in *Auspicious Signs*

¹³ This possibility has been suggested by Yoshida Yutaka (email, 15 July 2024). A number of visual analogies can be identified within the genre of the ‘Ten Kings of Hell’ paintings. However, in comparison to *Auspicious Signs*, there are also some discrepancies: 1. The seal cases are never placed on the king’s table but are always held by someone else, almost always by a female attendant; 2. Because of the shape of the seal, the cases have a markedly square bottom; 3. The seal cases are rarely crimson or red. It is noteworthy that the iconography of the ‘Ten Kings of Hell’ paintings was widely known among southeastern Manichaeans, as evidenced, for instance, in the so-called Yamato Bunkakan Manichaean painting (see e.g. Kósa 2015b).



(‘Decorated flowers’) subject matter of the Five Dynasties, which, however, remained a popular motif in later periods as well.¹⁴

According to Zhang Peng, other architectural features of the painting reflect its strong association with the buildings after the Southern Song dynasty. For example, the eaves of the two main buildings in the painting are naturally curved upward to form a cornice, which is different from the flat ridge common in the buildings before the Northern Song dynasty and are likely to be a product of the Southern Song dynasty. At the same time, the corresponding relationship between the *dǒugǒng* 斗拱 structure and the capital column in the painting is weak and seems accidental, suggesting decorative functions, which was the practice after the Southern Song dynasty. The typical lotus patterned tiles and painted golden roof in the tile treatment seem to suggest the existence of exquisitely glazed tiles on the surface of the building, which were also gradually increasing in popularity after the Southern Song dynasty (Fu 2011: 18–19). Numerous features of the buildings show that the depiction is closer to the architectural appearance of the Southern Song dynasty or later than to that of the early Northern Song dynasty. A similar propensity towards a later period can be discerned in the case of the garments (e.g. flower-shaped and shell-like crowns, ‘cloud shoulder’ collars).

2. COMPARING ‘AUSPICIOUS SIGNS’ WITH OTHER MANICHAEAN PAINTINGS

After providing a brief description of the image, we proceed to a comparison with already known Manichaean paintings, of which *Mānī’s Parents*, *Mānī’s Birth* and *Hagiography* (3)¹⁵ (112.1×56.5 cm, 14th–15th c.; held in a private collection in Tokyo) offer the best analogies. Even at a cursory glance, the similarities are striking: the style, the colours, and the depiction of buildings and figures offer remarkable analogies. Only a few examples are mentioned here.

Although *Auspicious Signs* has a darker green background, green is clearly the dominant colour in all four paintings. The buildings’ structure, shape, and colours share almost all features, from the alternating green and golden stairs with decorated vermilion railings (Figs. 3b–e) to the bluish pedestals and all the details of the red, golden, and malachite roof structure (Figs. 4a–d), including the motifs of the tiles (Figs. 5a–e), as illustrated in the following images.

The similarities do not end there. There are several other overlapping motifs, such as the various plants in cyanine blue containers with golden mouths, a white horse in the foreground with three red tassels at its right hind leg and a golden-red riding tack, the human figures of the king and queen, the attendants, and the divine messengers.¹⁶ To illustrate one of these examples, the figure of the queen displays obvious parallels in three paintings (Figs. 6a–c):

The identity of the three figures as Mānī’s mother, the queen, is supported by two key elements: firstly, the unique combination of the three colours of her attire, which typically signifies the sameness of two or more figures in these Manichaean paintings; and secondly, the three-pronged gilded crown with a pale-blue headcloth.¹⁷

¹⁴ For a discussion of the historical change of ‘decorated flowers’, see Liu 2009.

¹⁵ On this painting, see Yoshida (with Furukawa) 2016 and Yoshida (with Kumamoto) 2019.

¹⁶ Typical stylistic features shared by these paintings also include an idiosyncratic vertical black line to express the nasolabial folds.

¹⁷ This observation was previously already made by Morita Miki (2016: 143) with regard to the queen figure in *Mānī’s Parents* and *Mānī’s Birth*.



Staircase with decorated railings



Fig. 3c *Mānī's Parents* (detail)

Photograph © and courtesy of the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco



Fig. 3d *Mānī's Birth* (detail)

© Kyūshū National Museum

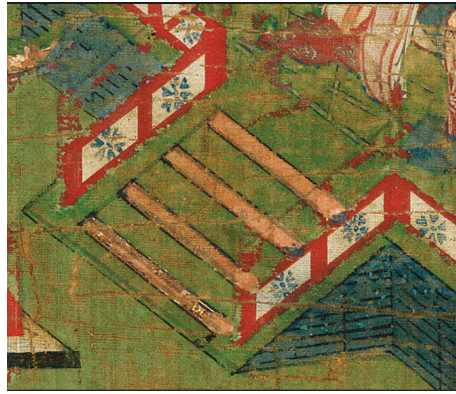


Fig. 3e *Hagiography (3)* (detail)

© Japanese private collection, Tokyo

Roof structures



Fig. 4a *Auspicious Signs* (detail)



Fig. 4b *Mānī's Parents* (detail)

Photograph © and courtesy of the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco





Fig. 4c *Mānī's Birth* (detail)
© Kyūshū National Museum



Fig. 4d *Hagiography (3)* (detail)
© Japanese private collection, Tokyo

Tiles under the roof ridge



Fig. 5a *Auspicious Signs* (detail)



Fig. 5b *Mānī's Parents* (detail)
Photograph © and courtesy of the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco



Fig. 5c *Mānī's Birth* (detail)
© Kyūshū National Museum





Fig. 5d *Hagiography (3)* (detail)
© Japanese private collection, Tokyo



Fig. 5e *Hagiography (3)* (detail)
© Japanese private collection, Tokyo

The queen with attendants



Fig. 6a *Auspicious Signs* (detail)



Fig. 6b *Mānī's Parents* (detail)
Photograph © and courtesy of the Asian Art Museum
of San Francisco





Fig. 6c *Mānī's Birth* (detail)
© Kyūshū National Museum

3. JOINING THE PAINTING *AUSPICIOUS SIGNS* WITH *MĀNĪ'S PARENTS*

As suggested by Morita Miki (2016: 141), it is likely that *Mānī's Parents* and *Mānī's Birth* were originally part of a larger painting. Given the close similarities between *Auspicious Signs* and the other two paintings, it is reasonable to consider joining them, with *Mānī's Parents* being a strong candidate. The motifs on the upper edge of *Mānī's Parents* provide a suitable starting point.

On the upper left edge of *Mānī's Parents*, there is a prominent motif of a blue building platform in isometric perspective (Fig. 7a).¹⁸ As an example of the similarity in 'the architectural style and the decorative elements of the buildings' (Morita 2016: 141), this platform bears a striking resemblance to the one in the *Mānī's Birth* painting (Fig. 7b).



Fig. 7a *Mānī's Parents* (detail)
Photograph © and courtesy of the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco

¹⁸ Its relevance is stressed by Morita (2016: 140–141) as follows: 'The lower part of an architectural foundation is visible in the upper left corner (...) These incomplete parts of painted objects suggest continuation of the narrative beyond these edges—in other words, the existence of other parts that would have formed a larger original painting.'





Fig. 7b *Mānī's Birth* (detail) (brightness and contrast added)
© Kyūshū National Museum

In addition, to the right of the upper edge of *Mānī's Parents*, one can see what at first appears to be two ranges of tiny brown ochre mountains, with a cyanine blue motif in between, over which the image has been cropped (Fig. 8a).

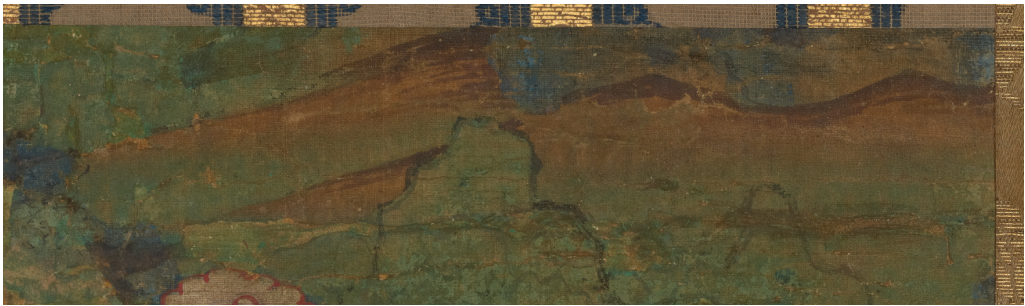


Fig. 8a *Mānī's Parents* (detail)
Photograph © and courtesy of the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco

This brown ochre motif in this and other paintings is arguably meant to represent the soil and is consistently associated with a plant or a tree depicted above it (see Figs. 8b–f).¹⁹

¹⁹ The motif appears in the *Hagiography* (1) and (2) paintings; however, it does not appear in the *Mānī's Birth* image as there are no plants depicted.





Fig. 8b *Mānī's Parents* (detail)
Photograph © and courtesy of
the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco



Figs. 8c-d *Hagiography (3)* (details)
© Japanese private collection, Tokyo



Fig. 8e *Hagiography (3)* (detail)
© Japanese private collection, Tokyo



Fig. 8f *Hagiography (3)* (detail)
© Japanese private collection, Tokyo

Given the clear evidence of cropping in the past, it is logical to investigate whether the motif of the remaining platform of a building on the left and the motif of brown ochre soil in the upper right part of *Mānī's Parents* can be joined to the newly identified painting. The widths of *Mānī's Parents* (56.2cm)²⁰ and *Auspicious Signs* (56.5cm) are almost identical, making a digital compar-

²⁰ This figure is sourced from the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco website ([https://searchcollection.asianart.org/view/objects/asitem/items\\$0040:5454](https://searchcollection.asianart.org/view/objects/asitem/items$0040:5454), last accessed: 9 March 2024). Since Morita Miki's (2016: 139) article originally provided a slightly different size (57.1 cm), therefore we asked the Asian Art Museum to double-check the figure (23 April 2024). We are extremely grateful to Dr. Fan Jeremy Zhang for making this possible.

ison promising. As shown in the digitally joined images below, the result is a perfectly matched and stitched image (Figs. 9a-b): not only does the blue platform continue in isometric perspective in the newly identified painting, but where one would expect a tree to grow out of the brown ochre soil, one sees the motif of intertwined trees.

Joining the two paintings also clarifies why the original, larger painting was cut along these particular lines. As the colourful, auspicious clouds above the huge central palace complex in *Mānī's Parents* were intended to be retained, the horizontal line along which the two parts were separated had to sever the lowermost segment of the medium-sized, palace-like building located in the left corner in *Auspicious Signs*. This left the corresponding part of the building in *Mānī's Parents* desolate and without continuation.

4. INTERPRETING THE NEW PAINTING

In the last part of the paper, a preliminary interpretation of the new image is offered. As previously discussed, *Auspicious Signs* and *Mānī's Parents* can be joined, therefore our interpretation is based on this finding.²¹ It is not within the scope of this paper to present an exhaustive interpretation of this joined image; instead, it will limit itself to preliminary considerations and the interpretation of certain motifs.²²

Prior to offering a brief, preliminary interpretation of certain motifs of the newly identified painting, it is first necessary to consider the nature of the relationship between the visual and the textual remains of Chinese Manichaeism. As proposed by Yoshida Yutaka (2012: 10b), Ma Xiaohu

²¹ Morita Miki's (2016: 143–144) original interpretation of the painting suggests that *Mānī's Parents* represents 'Mani's departure from home to enter priesthood in the *Compendium*, or the account of Mani's public appearance on the day of the coronation of Shapur I (3rd century)...'. In the revised Japanese version of her paper, Morita (2017: 60), partly due to Furukawa Shōichi's suggestion (Morita 2017: 61, n. 7), opined that the central scene in the painting should either depict Mānī at a young age or a scene before his birth. We concur with this latter interpretation.

²² Similarly to the other hagiographic paintings, the *Auspicious Signs* also appears to present a visual narrative of events. Therefore, it is necessary to determine which direction this narrative should be read: from top to bottom or the other way around. For instance, the so-called *Hagiography (1)* unambiguously presents the events in a 'top to bottom' reading: Gulácsi (2015: 394) provides the following titles to the principal units: Sea voyage, Arrival, Welcome, Missionary work, Community established. Similarly, the so-called Yamato Bunkakan Manichaean painting also adheres to the same logic (Gulácsi 2008; Yoshida 2009). It seems probable, though not certain, that *Hagiography (3)* also follows this sequence of reading (see Yoshida 2019: 212), and therefore it would not be unreasonable to assume a similar sequence of reading in the new painting. However, our preliminary reading of the events fundamentally follows the analogous *Xiàshēng zàn* 下生讚, which, if projected on the joined image, reveals a more complex narrative style (MP = *Mānī's Parents*; AS = *Auspicious Signs*; MB = *Mānī's Birth*): 1. Two garden officials observe (MP) an auspicious sign in the form of two intertwined trees (AS); 2. One of them consults with foreign diviners to gain insight into the significance of this phenomenon, while the other one joins two other garden officials to report the event to the royal couple in their palace (MP). In turn, the king entrusts them with the task of plucking a pomegranate (MP), which they subsequently delegate to a group of women (AS); 3. An angelic being visits a king (AS) who later appears at Mānī's birth as one of the three kings (MB); 4. The royal couple proceeds to a smaller building in the imperial garden, where, accompanied by a group of musicians and other palace ladies, a unique pomegranate is plucked, carried and offered to the queen (AS), who, after eating it, becomes pregnant; 5. After returning to the main palace, she is visited by an angelic being (MP) who commands her to find a detached palace where she can give life to her son, Mānī (MB). This interpretation, which is presented here without the visual and textual evidence, is one of the several possible readings of this apparently complex visual narrative.



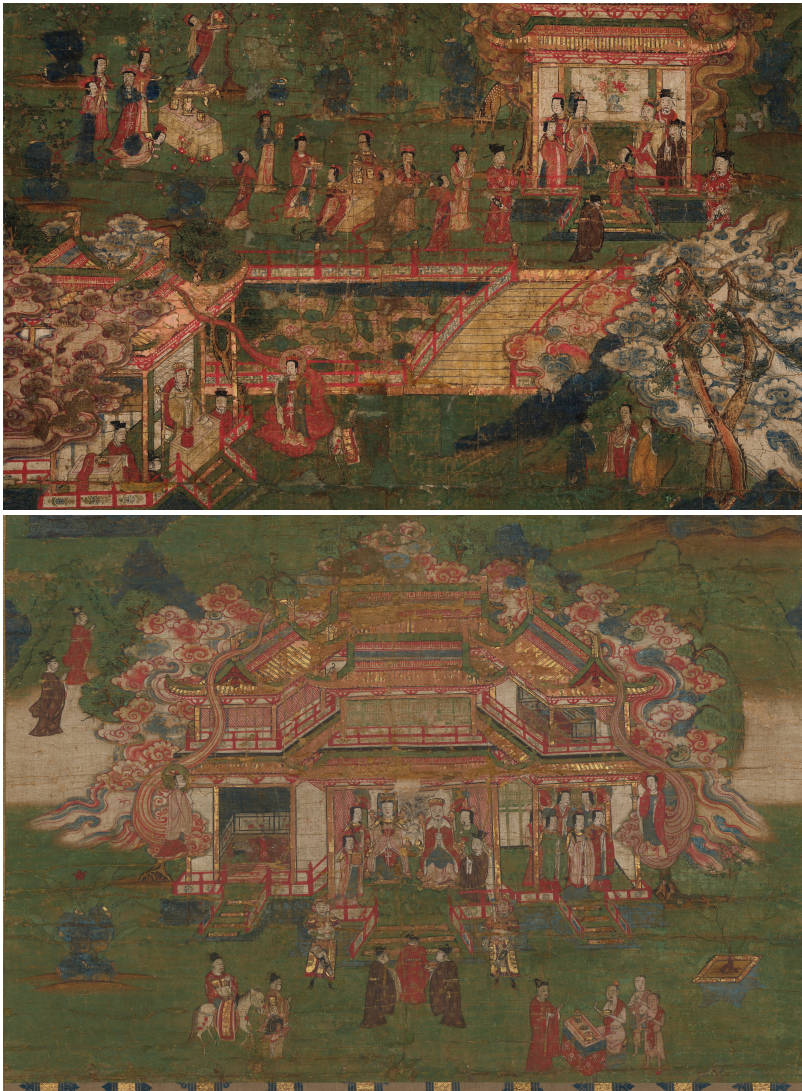


Fig. 9a–b The result of joining the paintings
*Auspicious Signs*²³ and *Mānī's Parents*
(Photograph © and courtesy of the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco)²⁴

²³ As neither the Poly Auction House nor the Zhonghua Zhenbao Guan seems to possess the complete image, the lowermost few millimetres of the *Auspicious Signs* were digitally added by Janisz Horváth based on a complete but low-resolution image accessible online (https://new.qq.com/rain/a/20211117A0BE7X00?suid=&media_id=, last accessed: 14 August 2024). Accordingly, Fig. 9a represents the most complete high-resolution reproduction of *Auspicious Signs* currently available.

²⁴ In the museum, the painting is currently entitled 'Fragment of a Manichaean Mandala' (The Avery Brundage Collection, B67D15), see [https://searchcollection.asianart.org/view/objects/asitem/items\\$0040:5454](https://searchcollection.asianart.org/view/objects/asitem/items$0040:5454) (last accessed: 15 August 2024).



(2016a, 2016c) and Wang Yuanyuan (2014, 2015), the text titled *Xiàshēng zàn* 下生讚 (‘In praise of [Mānī’s] Incarnation’), preserved in the *Móni guāngfó* 摩尼光佛 manuscript (37/5–39/8) from Fujian province, offers a relatively good textual parallel to the the *Mānī’s Birth* painting. The text contains specific details that are reflected in the painting: 1. The first motif is Mānī’s birth from his mother’s chest (MG 38/1-2: 湧化胸間); 2. The second is the joy of the buddhas of the ten directions (MG 38/2-3: 十方諸佛盡歡忻); 3. The third is the grief and stress of the three poisonous demon kings (MG 38/3: 三毒魔王悲煩惱).²⁵

Despite these parallels, it is important to note that based on this text alone, several motifs depicted in the *Mānī’s Birth* painting remain inexplicable: 4. In the upper left and right parts of the painting there are two groups of four angelic beings dressed as warriors; 5. Mānī’s mother, the queen, is shown twice in her palace, accompanied by three and four ladies of the court; 6. From right to left there are groups of six, four and four male figures as well as seven ladies (cf. Ma 2022: 242). These motifs (4–6), which encompass a total of eight angelic and twenty-eight human figures, are not explicitly referenced in the extant Chinese Manichaean texts.²⁶ In the absence of textual references to these figures, any identification is necessarily hypothetical and speculative. To illustrate, the second group of men from the right in *Mānī’s Birth* comprises three individuals wearing crowns and an attendant bearing a canopy above them. Thus, three king-like figures are depicted approaching the newly born Mānī with reverence, as evidenced by the gesture of their hands in *añjali mudrā*. Yoshida and Furukawa (2015: 135) associate them with the biblical Three Magi or Three Kings. However, it must be emphasised that such an interpretation remains hypothetical until there is concrete evidence that the motif of the Three Magi was present in medieval Manichaean circles and that they were conceived as kings.²⁷

A similar example is provided by the paintings ‘Hagiography (1)’ and ‘Hagiography (3)’, which vividly and with numerous details visualise Mānī’s sea voyage to ‘India’ and his various encounters there. The parallel text in the *Xiàshēng zàn* (MG 38/7-8) tersely states that Mānī traversed²⁸ the diverse regions of Persia and India (Gilgit-Baltistan²⁹), where the eight groups of spiritual beings (including the *nāgas* and the *devas*) admired his virtue, and the people praised him (龍天八部咸仰德，人人讚). This is the sole available phrase that serves as the textual background for the approximately dozen scenes depicted in the two aforementioned paintings. While one of these scenes does feature Mānī and his entourage being greeted by various spiritual beings, the majority of the miniature scenes remain unidentified based on the *Xiàshēng zàn*.

In conclusion, there are multiple instances where the visual material is considerably more detailed and elaborate than the extant textual sources; however, there are no known examples where the reverse is true. Two related explanations can be put forth to account for this phenomenon:

²⁵ See, for example, Yoshida 2012: 10; Wang 2014: 80; Wang 2015: 20; Ma 2016a.

²⁶ The MG 38/4-5 does make reference to court ladies (嬪妃) who all welcomed (咸迎) the prince (太子) back to the palace (歸宮裏). However, despite the presence of the court ladies, it does not appear that this return itself is depicted.

²⁷ The Uyghur fragment U 9175 from Bulayıq records the Christian narrative of the Three Magi, see e.g. Zieme 2015 (with references to former research by F. W. K. Müller, A. van Tongerloo, J. Tubach, and L. Olschki).

²⁸ This expression (*jiàncì qiánxíng* 漸次前行) appears in ca. 20 instances in the Chinese Buddhist Canon (cf. Lin 2018: 259).

²⁹ This identification is based on Yoshida Yutaka’s email (21 March 2017): ‘波魯 can be the same as 波路, which denotes Gilgit-Baltistan (Upper Indus region). This place name is variously transcribed in Chinese sources: 勃律, 鉢露, 布露, 不流沙 (= Tib. Bru-zha, from which the designation of Burushaski), etc. Possibly, the original sequence *波斯薄魯 “Persia (and) Baltistan” was mixed up(?)’.



1. The *Xiàshēng zàn* in the MG represents an abridged and succinct synopsis of a more extensive written account that has not yet been identified. Two titles preserved in the so-called Wenzhou Memorial (1120), namely ‘The Scripture of the Descent and Birth of the Crown Prince’ (*Tàizǐ xiàshēng jīng* 太子下生經) and ‘The Scripture of the Father and the Mother’ (*Fùmǔ jīng* 父母經) are potential, but, unfortunately, unavailable candidates (Ma 2016a: 9–10; Ma 2017b: 7–8; Ma 2022: 229); 2. An alternative hypothesis is that there was a longer oral tradition of Mānī’s life, and that local priests used the brief summary only as an *aide-mémoire*, relying more heavily on the illustrative paintings to provide believers with a more detailed narrative on specific occasions. In her 2011 study, Zsuzsana Gulácsi employs the genre of *etoki* 絵解き as an analogy to examine the tradition of images used for didactic purposes in Manichaeism.

Furthermore, it is similarly unclear whether the painters accurately interpreted the narratives that were conveyed to them, whether orally or in writing. A case in point is the above-mentioned three poisonous demon kings (三毒魔王), a motif which was conspicuously interpreted by the painter as three (*sān* 三) demon kings (Mó wáng 魔王) full of poison (*dú* 毒). However, it seems more probable that the text refers to the king of the demons whose modifier is the phrase ‘triplely poisonous’ (*sān dú* 三毒), thus resulting in a noticeable discrepancy between the concepts of the author(s) of the text and the painter of the image.³⁰

In addition, another *caveat* should be mentioned: as Jorinde Ebert (e-mail communication, 30–31 August 2024) has highlighted, there are indications of modern retouching in the new painting. As these retouches mainly concern the ‘decorative’ elements (‘cloud shoulder’ collars, auspicious clouds), they would almost certainly not change our interpretation significantly. Nevertheless, it should be noted that a definitive interpretation of the original painting would only be possible after closer examination of the painting under infrared and ultraviolet light. However, due to the lack of information on the whereabouts of the painting, this is currently not feasible.

In any case, the hagiographic material currently extant from Fujian (*Xiàshēng zàn*) can only partially elucidate the visual imagery present in the paintings. The *Mānī’s Parents* and the *Auspicious Signs* paintings seem to be no exception to this general rule. The motifs depicted in the paintings may have originated from a longer narrative, whether written or oral, but this narrative does not seem to have survived. Therefore, in addition to pointing out the exact parallels between the *Xiàshēng zàn* and the paintings, one can only venture speculation based on the logic of the iconography, and such speculations may prove to be correct or incorrect in the light of future discoveries. Accordingly, in the following section we will focus on the interpretations that have a textual parallel.

In addition to the motifs of the building platform and the brown ochre soil, there is a further motif that connects the two paintings, albeit indirectly. On the upper left part of *Mānī’s Parents* two officials, respectively dressed in purple-brown and crimson attire, stand with their hands clasped in reverence. They direct their gaze towards something that appears to be beyond the edge of the actual painting. Their gesture expresses respect, indicating that they must be looking at something of value. By joining the two paintings, one can better understand what was previously incomprehensible. It appears that the two officials are observing something unusual, which they consider to be an auspicious sign deserving of respect. By following the direction of their gaze, it can be concluded that the auspicious sign is likely the intertwined trees depicted in the newly identified painting.

³⁰ Ma Xiaohé (2022: 230), for example, translates it as ‘the demon king of three poisons’.



The motif of two different intertwined trees (*mùliánlǐ* 木連理) has long been regarded as an auspicious symbol in China (Lippiello 2001: 111–112; Tseng 2011: 125–127). Additionally, other auspicious motifs can easily be identified in the painting, such as the undulating colourful clouds³¹ (*xiángyún* 祥雲; *qìngyún* 慶雲), the white horse³² and the spotted deer³³. It is worth considering the possibility that the latter two animals also convey a more specific meaning, with the white horse being the mount of Śākyamuni (Zhang Peng's proposal), while the white-spotted deer is that of Laozi (J. Ebert's suggestion); in the *Compendium* (cols. 13–19), the births of these two figures are recorded together with that of Mānī.³⁴ Together with the representation of the pomegranate, the central motif in the upper register, all these auspicious motifs seem to indicate the royal couple's harmonious reign and their significant son's (Mānī's) future birth, which is visualized in the *Mānī's Birth* painting *in concreto*. Due to the presence of these motifs, the painting's original title has been retained, although it may be supplemented as follows: *Auspicious Signs Heralding Mānī's Birth*.

Interestingly, the Chinese Manichaean corpus repeatedly mentions auspicious signs in connection with Mānī's birth. The *Compendium*, a summary composed in Chinese at the behest of Emperor Xuanzong 玄宗 (r. 712–756) in 731 AD, describes Mānī's conception and birth as follows:

‘That, the natural endowments and the heavenly omnia (being appropriate), (His mother) conceived; and that, keeping the rules of abstinence and strictly purifying (herself, she) became pregnant; (that) was because of His own pureness. That, having entered existence from (His mother's) chest, He surpassed His age and excelled everyone; and that He evidenced the spiritual verifications nine-fold and answered to the supernatural auspices five-fold; (that) was because His birth was beyond the ordinary.’³⁵

The relevant concepts here are the nine ‘spiritual verifications’ (*shényàn* 神驗) and the fivefold ‘supernatural auspices’ (*línggruì* 靈瑞), closely associated with Mānī's birth. Similarly, recent discoveries from Fujian³⁶ confirm the survival of these motifs. For instance, the *Móní guāngfó* 摩尼光佛 manuscript³⁷ (henceforward abbreviated as MG) briefly recounts Mānī's descent from the Realm of Light to Asūristān (*Sūlín guó* 蘇隣國)³⁸ in the West, ruled by Bádi 跋帝,³⁹ and men-

³¹ On the motif of auspicious clouds, see, for example, Reiter 1991.

³² On the auspicious nature associated with a white horse, see, for example, Bao 2015: 133–135.

³³ On the motif of the deer as an auspicious omen, see, for example, Li and Zhang 2008.

³⁴ For the Chinese text of the *Compendium*, see, for example, Lin 2014: 517–522.

³⁵ Haloun and Henning 1952: 191. *Compendium*, cols. 21–23: 至若資稟天符而受胎，齋戒嚴潔而懷孕者，本清淨也；自胃前化誕，卓世殊倫，神驗九徵，靈瑞五應者，生非凡也。

³⁶ On these manuscripts, see e.g. Chen and Lin 2010; Ma 2014, 2015 [2009], 2021; Lin 2014; Kósa 2015a, 2020; Yang *et al.* 2020.

³⁷ On this manuscript, see e.g. Lin 2014a; Yang and Bao 2015; Wang and Ma 2016, 2021a, 2021b; Ma and Wang 2018; Bao and Yang 2020.

³⁸ See, for example, Wang & Ma 2021b: 21, n. 87.

³⁹ In the Chinese tradition, Mānī's father is a king, thus Mānī is born in a royal palace. The *Compendium* (cols. 18–19), for example, says that ‘Mānī, the Buddha of Light was born into the royal palace of Badi [Pattig] in Asūristān’ (摩尼光佛誕蘇隣國跋帝王宮). Bádi (EMC bat-tej^h) was early on identified as the Western name Pattig and its variants (Henning 1943: 52, n. 4; Haloun and Henning 1952: 190, n. 26). Hé Qiáoyuǎn's *Míngshānzàng* 名山藏 13. [ch. *Wángxiǎngjì* 王享記] renders the name as ‘the king of the country, Badi’ 國王跋帝 (Pelliot 1923: 196), thus using a slightly different character for the first syllable (跋帝, EMC be:t-tej^h). The same characters (跋帝) are used,



tions the ‘nine kinds of manifested auspicious signs’ (MG 28/5–6: *jiǔ zhǒng xiàn língxiáng* 九種現靈祥); similarly, the nine auspicious signs are referred to in the same manuscript elsewhere (MG 75/6: *jiǔ zhǒng língxiáng* 九種靈祥).⁴⁰ Both the *Compendium* (col. 23: *shēng fēi fán* 生非凡) and the MG (5/4: *chāo shì sú* 超世俗) emphasize that these auspicious omens indicate that Mānī’s birth, and thus Mānī himself, was supramundane. Thus, both medieval and more recent Chinese Manichaean texts link Mānī’s birth with various, albeit unspecified, auspicious signs. It is reasonable to assume that the auspicious signs mentioned in the Chinese Manichaean texts were visually elaborated and specified in a larger painting, now divided into several smaller ones, depicting Mānī’s birth.⁴¹

Having clarified the significance of the different auspicious signs in general, the next step is to examine the more specific motif of the pomegranate. Since the entire upper section of the painting, with its three subscenes, focuses on the various stages of plucking, carrying and offering the pomegranate, it should therefore be interpreted in light of the Manichaean motif of this fruit.⁴²

He Qiaoyuan’s 何喬遠 (1558–1632) *Mínshū* 閩書 (1619) is the most significant Ming dynasty source on Manichaeism, and it contains an explicit reference to Mānī’s birth as a pomegranate (7.31b):

‘It is said that more than five hundred years after Laozi had entered the shifting sands in the west, in the *wuzi* year of the Jian’an period of Emperor Xian of the Han dynasty [208 AD], [Laozi] was transformed into a *nàiyùn*. King Bádī’s wife ate it, found it delicious, and then she became pregnant. When the time came, [the child] was born by prying open [her] chest. As for the *nàiyùn*, it is a pomegranate (*shíliú*) from the imperial gardens. This story

for example, in the Pingnan 屏南 (Fujian) manuscript titled *Zhēnmíng kāizhèng wénkē* 貞明開正文科 (W40237 / F35272; Wang 2018: 127). In the new Fujianese corpus there is at least one further variant: The unpublished *Xuèpén bāochàn* 血盆寶鑑 has 跋締: ‘In the West, Sūlín country of Bádī...’ 西方跋締蘇鄰國...’ (Yang *et al.* 2020: 27). It may be worth mentioning here that although Badi’s name contains the character *dì* 帝, and thus his name could have easily been interpreted as ‘Ba, the emperor’ (see, for example, Gardner and Rasouli-Narimani 2017: 95), he is invariably and emphatically called a king (*wáng* 王), not an emperor (*dì* 帝). This unwillingness to call him an emperor is perhaps corroborated by the above-mentioned quotation, which features a similar but different character (締) that cannot mean emperor even at a theoretical level. Since Mānī’s father was a king, Mānī’s birth in a royal palace is a recurring motif: ‘born in a royal palace’ (*Compendium* cols. 18–19 [see above], or col. 26: 誕王宮). The non-Chinese equivalents of the name of Mānī’s father was Syriac Patīq, Middle Persian and Parthian Patīg [ptyg], Arabic Futtaq (and its other variants), Greek Πατέκιος (or Πατρίκιος), and Latin Patticius. While A. Panaino (2004: 249–250) marshals several arguments in favour of a historically reliable information, I. Gardner and L. Rasouli-Narimani (2017) argue that this figure, historically, was not Mānī’s father; nevertheless, according to the Chinese hagiographic narrative he was, and thus one can duly expect him to appear in the Chinese hagiographic paintings.

⁴⁰ An almost identical compound (‘nine auspicious signs’, *jiǔ língxiáng* 九灵祥) is attested in MG 5/4, 70/7.

⁴¹ It is not illogical to assume that the original, complete painting may have included exactly nine auspicious portents, such as intertwined trees, a deer, a white horse, the golden cross, the strange plants, or the motif of the ten angelic musicians. However, at present, this remains speculation.

⁴² Incidentally, in the unpublished Fuqing manuscript entitled *Xièjīng liántái* 謝經蓮台, the name of the country is not the usual Sūlín: ‘(Mānī) was incarnated in the Pomegranate Country, manifested auspicious signs, the queen opened the auspicious fruit, plucked to eat it, and its essence was wonderfully unique. (Mānī) was born through (her) chest (托蔭石榴國, 現祥瑞, 皇后啟瑞果, 摘此吃, 精神異, 胸前化誕)’ (Yang *et al.* 2020: 226). On the motifs and names of pomegranate, see e.g. Laufer 1919: 276–284; Miller 1951; Harper 1986; Chu 2010; Bao and Yang 2016: 263; Ma 2016c: 312–313; Lin 2018: 266–268.



is analogous to that of the grasping of the plum-tree and the coming forth from the left side. His (Laozi's avatar; Mani's) religion is called 'luminous', in his clothing he favoured white.⁴³

The legend as described in this source appears to be closely linked to the ca. 8th century 'Manichaean' version of the *Huàhújīng* 化胡經,⁴⁴ and, therefore, to Laozi's incarnation as Mānī, which must have been a Manichaean addition to an already established concept.⁴⁵ However, the two surviving *Huàhújīng* manuscripts with Manichaean content (P.2007, S.1857) do not contain any reference to the pomegranate.

A further attestation of the motif, here already removed from the *Huàhújīng*, can be found in the MG (37/5–39/8) manuscript from Fujian province, which contains a longer hagiographic narrative, titled *Xiàshēngzàn* 下生讚, i.e. 'In praise of [Mānī's] incarnation.'⁴⁶ This is the most complete Chinese account of Mānī's life available today, and it begins as follows:⁴⁷

'In Praise of [Mānī's] Incarnation

When Mānī buddha was (to be) born, he was incarnated in a pomegranate in Sūlín.⁴⁸ The branch(es) of a tree displayed auspicious signs. The officials of the garden proceeded to the vermilion entrance stairs⁴⁹ to report the rare miracle. (The king) from the Āshījìàn⁵⁰ clan

⁴³ Trans. Lieu 1992: 302 (with *pinyin* added, slightly modified); cf. Pelliot 1923: 201, Lieu 1980: 87; Lin 2011: 96. He 1994: 171–172: 云: 老子西入流沙, 五百餘歲, 當漢獻帝建安之戊子寄形椽暈。國王拔帝之后食而甘之, 遂有孕, 及期, 擘胸而出。椽暈者, 禁苑石榴也。其說與攀李樹出左臂相應。其教曰明, 衣尚白。

⁴⁴ On the *Huàhújīng* in the Manichaean context, see Chavannes and Pelliot 1912: 144–156.

⁴⁵ Pelliot 1923: 200, n.5; Wang 2015. Pelliot (1923: 201, n.4), however, notes that Mānī's mother and a tree are already related in al-Nadīm's *Fihrist*. Pomegranates also feature in Uyghur Manichaean art (MIK III 6278, Gulácsi 2001: 174–775).

⁴⁶ On this narrative, see Lin 2018; Ma 2016a, 2022; Wang 2014, 2015.

⁴⁷ This translation was first presented in 2017 by Gábor Kósa at the conference 'Mani in Cambridge' (25 March 2017, Ancient India and Iran Trust, Cambridge, UK). A similar translation, differing in a couple of important points, has been prepared independently by Ma Xiaohe and Wang Chuan (2019: 389–390), see also Ma 2022: 230–231.

⁴⁸ Depending on the segmentation of the Chinese sentence, two different interpretations emerge: 1. 'When Mānī buddha was (to be) born, he was incarnated in a pomegranate in Sūlín. The branch(es) of a tree displayed auspicious signs' (摩尼佛下生時, 托蔭於蘇隣石榴, 樹枝呈瑞; see Yang and Bao 2015: 96); 2. 'When Mānī buddha was born, he was incarnated in Sūlín. The branch(es) of a pomegranate tree displayed auspicious signs' (摩尼佛下生時, 托蔭於蘇隣, 石榴樹枝呈瑞, see Lin 2014: 470; Wang and Ma 2021b: 25). In light of the analogy presented in the *Mínshū*, in which Laozi is incarnated as a pomegranate, it can be postulated that the first interpretation is more probable. However, Ma Xiaohe (2022: 230), for example, chose the second option and translated the sentence accordingly: 'When Mani buddha descended, he was incarnate in *Sulin* 蘇隣 (Suristān). Pomegranates' branches brought auspiciousness.'

⁴⁹ Bao and Yang (2016: 260) refer to the *Sòngshū* 宋書 (39.1236): '*Dānchí* 丹墀 refers to the palace's red staircase or red floor' (丹墀, 指宮殿的赤色臺階或赤色地面); cf. Lin 2018: 254, n. 4. Kroll *et al.* (2017: 50) define *chí* 墀 as 'the entrance staircase in front of hall or palace, usu[ally] lacquered.'

⁵⁰ There are two possible interpretation of this phonetically transcribed name: 1. Lin Wushu (2018: 265) posits that 阿師健 is an error and the scribe intended to write 金薩健, i.e., Kamsaragān, which is the name of one of the lateral clan branches of the Parthian Arsacid dynasty (247 BC – 224 AD) in Armenia, as this clan name of Mānī's mother appears in the *Compendium* (上錄《下生讚》之“阿師健”無疑應是《儀略》“金薩健”之訛); a similar opinion is voiced by Yang *et al.* (2020: 232). This would indicate that it is the queen, rather than the king, who issues the command to the officials to pluck the pomegranate. Although *shì* 氏 is indeed often used to denote a woman descending from a certain clan, here the queen is not much later identified as *Mòyàn shì* 末艷氏. Furthermore, the first two characters in 阿師健 and 金薩健 greatly differ, making it unlikely that they would be



[Mānī's father] ordered the palace officials to pluck [the pomegranate] and present [it] reverently by holding a plate.⁵¹ Mòyàn [Mānī's mother] ate it with joy, and her beautiful face became happy. A spiritual being admonished (her): “Find a tranquil place in the detached palace!”⁵²

Although several motifs of this description reveal a strong connection with the painting analyzed above, one must bear in mind the *caveats* that one does not know how much further written material was available at the time of the paintings' composition, with how many variations, and what the exact relationship between the visual and the written material is. As mentioned before, a case in point are the titles of some otherwise unknown Manichaean works mentioned in the so-called Wenzhou Memorial (1120) preserved in the *Sòng Huìyào Jíǎo* 宋會要輯稿 (Forte 1973: 238–240). This list of thirteen texts and six paintings includes ‘The Scripture of the Descent and Birth of the Crown Prince’ (*Tàizǐ xiàshēng jīng* 太子下生經) and ‘The Scripture of the Father and the Mother’ (*Fùmǔ jīng* 父母經), both of which may have served for the textual basis of hagiographic paintings identified so far. Be that as it may, if we assume that the *Auspicious Signs* was based on a text that is somewhat related to the *Mínshū* and the *Xiàshēng zàn*, one can notice the following parallels:

1. The *Mínshū* confirms that *nàiyùn* 捺暈 was considered as a pomegranate of the imperial garden or park (*jìnyuàn shíliú* 禁苑石榴). Since Badi's wife, i.e. the queen, ate it, it cannot refer to the tree, only to the fruit itself. Among Laozi's various transformations, this particular fruit is depicted in this case, most likely because it was known that Mānī was born in Asūristān (Sūlín), and this Iranian region was in turn associated with pomegranates, an Iranian fruit introduced to China during the Han dynasty (206 BC – 220 AD) (Laufer 1919: 277–287, Harper 1986: 139–143). As mentioned above, a detailed depiction of the ritual picking of a pomegranate appears

confused. 2. An alternative interpretation is that 阿師健 [EMC: ʔa-ʃi-gian^h] refers to the king's clan, which would accordingly render the name Ašyān(iya) or Ḥaskān(iya). The issue with this interpretation is that our only other source, al-Nadīm's *Fihrist* (10th century), attributes the former clan name to Mānī's mother's lineage: ‘His mother's name was Mays, also said to be Utākhīm and Marmaryam, one of the descendants of the Ashghāniyah’ (Dodge 1970: 773). However, the preceding sentence appears to suggest that Mānī's father originated from a clan with a similar-sounding name: ‘Mānī ibn Futuq Bābak ibn Abū Barzām was one of the Ḥaskāniya’ (Dodge 1970: 773). Accordingly, if one equates Ḥaskāniya and Ashghāniyah, as Dodge (1970: 773, n. 133) tentatively proposes, then Mānī's parents are presumed to have originated from the same clan; if one does not equate them and one wants to reconcile the discrepancy between the Chinese text and the *Fihrist*, then Chinese 阿師健 can be paralleled with Arabic Ḥaskāniya as Mānī's father's clan, though 金薩健 as Kamsaragān still disagrees with Ashghāniyah as Mānī's mother's clan. An important addition to this conundrum is F. de Blois' (and Sims-Williams 2006: 72) emendation of Ḥaskāniya to Kamsaragān, an opinion approvingly endorsed by J. C. Reeves (2011: 36, n. 108). If this emendation is indeed accurate, then al-Nadīm's account associates Mānī's father with the Kamsaragān and his mother with the Ashghāniyah (the Arsacids), while the Chinese sources do this vice versa. Consequently, in this respect, either the *Fihrist* or the Chinese sources must be imprecise. However, regardless of the historical veracity of these sources, it is still noteworthy that these Arabic and Chinese sources, albeit inversely, name the same clans as Mānī's ancestors.

⁵¹ Yang and Bao (2015: 97, n. 1) suggest that *zhī* 之 as the object of *zhāi* 摘 should be inserted here, while Lin Wushu (2018: 254, n. 4) adds *zhū* 諸, which is an abbreviated form of *zhī yú* 之於, and he thus interprets the next two characters (*pēng pán* 捧盤) as a binome for a tray (*tuōpán* 托盤). In sum, Lin Wushu translates this part as follows: ‘they pluck [the pomegranate] and place it on a tray’ (摘下[石榴]放在托盤上). It is clear from the modern Chinese translation that the verb ‘put, place’ (*fāng* 放) should also be inserted. Lin Wushu's interpretation would not change the meaning of the sentence significantly, so I kept the original wording.

⁵² MG 37/5–9; Lin 2018: 252: 摩尼佛下生時, 托蔭於蘇隣石榴, 樹枝呈瑞。園官詣丹墀, 表奏希奇。阿師健氏命宮官摘, 捧盤, 殷勤奉獻。末艷氏喜食, 花顏喜歡, 神人誠責:『別宮安!』



in the upper register of *Auspicious Signs*, during which a pomegranate is respectfully plucked, carried and offered to the queen, i.e. Mānī's mother. This is a prequel to Mānī's mother becoming pregnant via the pomegranate, otherwise widely known as a symbol of fertility (Laufer 1919: 286–287; Harper 1986: 142). In summary, the pomegranate motif is present in Ming and Qing Manichaean written sources, as well as in the new painting.

2. According to the Fujianese MG (37/5–6), 'the branch(es) of a tree displayed auspicious sign(s)' (樹枝呈瑞). The two intertwined trees enshrouded in auspicious clouds appear to be analogous visual motifs. It is possible that the painter associated the auspicious (*ruì* 瑞) character of the tree's branches (*shùzhī* 樹枝) with their being intertwined, although this may not have been the same as the writer's intended meaning. The surrounding auspicious clouds and the carmine ornaments⁵³ hanging from the intertwined trees may serve as further evidence of this 'rare miracle' (*xīqí* 希奇), as subsequently reported by the officials.⁵⁴

3. The Fujianese MG (37/6) furthermore claims that 'the officials of the garden proceeded to the vermilion entrance stairs and reported the rare miracle' (園官詣丹墀, 表奏希奇). In *Mānī's Parents*, one can accordingly notice two officials spotting this auspicious sign, while three officials, also dressed in crimson and purple-brown robes, stand at the entrance staircase with vermilion railings in front of the huge palace. Among the three, the figure in the crimson robe, with head bowed, furthermore appears to be reporting (*biǎozòu* 表奏) something to the king and the queen. The two officials who witnessed the miraculous event are referred to as 'garden officials' (*yuánguān* 園官), and the two officials (Fig. 10a) in the left upper part of *Mānī's Parents* indeed stand among trees in the imperial garden. Based on the unique motifs on their robes, one probably encounters these two officials in the same painting below: the one with the purple-brown robe (Fig. 10b) is a member of the group of three officials reporting the case to the royal couple, while the crimson-robed one (Fig. 10c) stands in front of a table further to the right, possibly inquiring about a divination from three foreign, half-naked figures. The former one, interestingly, appears to hold the same yellow ochre silk scarf that the woman in *Auspicious signs* uses to cover her mouth while plucking the pomegranate.

4. The events in the upper register of the *Auspicious Signs* appear to be analogous to the king's command to the palace official(s) (MG 37/7: *gōngguān* 宮官) to pluck (*zhāi* 摘) the pomegranate and present [it] on a plate (*pán* 盤) with reverence. It should be noted that the MG (37/6) refers to a different group of people than the aforementioned 'garden officials' (*yuángōng* 園官). If the text and the painting are indeed related, then the painter of the new image visualized the palace officials, or to whom they forwarded the task, as women. Specifically, one particular woman, flanked by several attendants, plucks the pomegranate and presents it reverently to the queen on a plate. Unlike the garden officials in *Mānī's Parents*, it is this woman who directly faces the queen at the top the palace stairs, and thus her posture indicates that the pomegranate is handed over to the queen, presumably followed by the subsequent narrative element of the queen's eating

⁵³ We are grateful to Stephen G. Haw, who has suggested (email, 4 Feb 2024) that the carmine motifs on the trees are auspicious ornaments.

⁵⁴ One problem, however, appears to remain: the text seems to imply that the tree exhibiting the auspicious signs must be the pomegranate tree, which has a fruit into which Laozi transformed himself. In the painting, however, the intertwined tree at which the official gaze and which elicits their respect is clearly not identical with the pomegranate tree from which the fruit in question is picked. On closer inspection, however, the Chinese text does not actually claim that the pomegranate tree produced the auspicious signs and thus can be interpreted as two parallel statements: one about Laozi's incarnation as a pomegranate, and another about a tree producing auspicious signs.





Figs. 10a-c. *Mānī's Parents* (details) (brightness and contrast added)
 (Photograph © and courtesy of the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco)

the pomegranate. One may object that it is unusual to identify ‘palace officials’ as women. However, one of the interpretations of the short biography may suggest that the king ordered the male palace officials to look after the collection of the pomegranate, whose task was in turn carried out by women. Another, complementary possibility is that the painter may have thought that Mānī’s mother, who according to the *Compendium* (col. 22) had undergone the process of ritual purification by then, should not be in contact with a male person, and therefore the task of handing over the pomegranate was delegated to a woman.

This paper has introduced a new Chinese Manichaean painting, also proposing that it can be joined with the painting *Mānī's Parents*; moreover, it has hopefully deciphered certain motifs in the new painting; yet, some elusive motifs still require explanation. Furthermore, the iconographic affiliation of the Manichaean hagiographic paintings should be more thoroughly re-examined, particularly in the light of the Manichaean manuscripts from Fujian.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Gábor Kósa is the editor-in-chief of the journal; consequently, he was not involved in the review process in any capacity. The submission was handled by a member of the editorial board.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Gábor Kósa’s parts of this paper were written within the frame of the ARC Discovery Project entitled ‘Manichaean Liturgical Practices from Egypt to China’ (DP190101763).



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