

DESCRIPTIVE ACCOUNT OF PICTURES
FROM THE CAVES OF
THE THOUSAND BUDDHAS AT TUN-HUANG

BY
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PLATES I, II

THE PARADISE OF BHAIṢAJYAGURU

THE first two plates reproduce portions, on half the scale of the original, from the right and left of a large painting on silk (Ch. lii. 003), remarkable for its noble design, the delicacy of its drawing, and its glowing colours. In spite of the damage it has suffered along its sides and bottom (see *Serindia*, Pl. LVII) it still measures close on seven feet in height and over five and a half feet across. It represents a Buddhist Paradise and, according to M. Petrucci's interpretation, the one presided over by Bhaiṣajyaguru, the Buddha of Medicine, whose cult since an early period has been widespread in Northern Buddhism from Tibet to Japan. His Heaven is placed in the East by sacred texts preserved in the Chinese Tripiṭaka. In their descriptions as well as in our painting Bhaiṣajyaguru's Paradise shares the essential features of that still more popular abode of Buddhist bliss, the Western Paradise, or *Sukhāvati*, presided over by the Buddha Amitābha. Of this the 'Caves of the Thousand Buddhas' have preserved numerous representations both among the pictures recovered from the walled-up chapel (see Pls. VI-VIII, X-XI) and among the mural paintings decorating the temples. But the legendary scenes occupying the side panels of our painting and connected with Bhaiṣajyaguru are different, and so are also certain details in the arrangement and personnel of the main subject. These distinctive features are found again in another somewhat less elaborate picture of Bhaiṣajyaguru's Paradise, reproduced in Plate xxxvi.

His Heaven presents itself in our picture, as in all the large Paradise paintings of Tun-huang, as a great assemblage of celestial beings, elaborately staged on richly decorated terraces and courts which rise above a lotus lake. On the sides and behind the terraces there are seen pavilions and elaborate structures of characteristically Chinese style, representing the heavenly mansions. It is in this sumptuous setting that Chinese Buddhism has visualized from an early period the idea of a Paradise where the souls of believers in the Law may be reborn, free from all taint, in the buds of the lotus lake to enjoy thereafter for aeons, or in popular belief for ever, blissful rest and pleasures in the company of Bodhisattvas, Arhats, and other beatified personalities. The scheme of the whole, as in all representations of Buddhist Heavens among the Tun-huang paintings, is ordered on the strictly symmetrical lines of a 'Maṇḍala', buildings, trees, groups, and even individual figures balancing each other on either side of the picture and all centring round the presiding Buddha in the middle.

Here we see Bhaiṣajyaguru seated with folded legs and wearing a crimson mantle over a green under-robe. While his right hand is raised as usual in the *vitarka-mudrā*, the left holds the begging bowl in his lap. Behind him a couple of flowering trees support a hexagonal canopy of red drapery. A halo and nimbus of manifold but harmoniously blended colours