LI GONGLIN’S WHITE LOTUS SOCIETY PICTURE

Except for a few non-Buddhist paintings, Li Gonglin’s original works have all vanished, leaving us no actual examples from which to study the relationship between his Buddhist art and his ardent religious thought. Chapter Two’s discussion of his Longmian Mountain Villa demonstrates how even faithful copies of a Li Gonglin original permit fruitful study. Paintings discussed in Chapter Three included those documented and inscribed by his contemporaries and those recorded in the Xuanhe huapu. Later records tend to be embellished and therefore inaccurate; without images to verify their statements, the reliability of these later writings is harder to determine. Even the iconographic content and design of Danxia Visits Layman Pang, stylistically comparable to the Southern Song Li Gonglin tradition, were the product of the post-Li Gonglin era. This painting’s existence demonstrates the popularity of Li Gonglin’s works, but the painting itself is not a trustworthy copy of Li’s work. Even during Li’s lifetime his students had already begun forging his works for sale. The demand for his work did not diminish with his passing; new iconographies in the Li Gonglin style circulated on the market and were passed down in history.

Among works attributed to Li Gonglin or modeled after his original, White Lotus Society Picture, like Thirty-two Manifestations of Guanyin, preserves Li Gonglin’s iconographic design, allowing another rare opportunity to study his Buddhist beliefs through visual imagery. Li Gonglin painted many versions of White Lotus Society Picture, in both handscroll and hanging-scroll formats, which appear to have shared one iconographic design. Among many extant copied versions, three are closely related to Li Gonglin’s originals. One was painted in 1081 for his cousin, lifelong companion, and coreligionist Li Chongyuan 李沖元. This hanging-scroll composition (92 × 53.8 cm) is preserved in a late Ming or early Qing copy in the Nanjing Museum (Fig. 10). A Southern Song artist transformed the 1081 composition into a handscroll (28.1 × 459 cm), now in the Shanghai Museum (Fig. 12). The third version, also a handscroll (34.9 × 849 cm), is a copy by the painter’s nephew Zhang Ji 張激 (act. late eleventh-early twelfth c.), and is now in the
Liaoning Provincial Museum (Figs. 11A–11K). The final two chapters of this book focus on this painting subject to analyze Li’s artistic renditions of his Pure Land faith.

Beyond these three paintings, this study relies on Record of the “Lotus Society Picture” by Li Gonglin’s brother Li Desu 李德素 and another account, identically titled, by his cousin Chongyuan. Li Desu’s Record, written sometime between 1075 and 1109, is now preserved in an 1109 transcription by Zhang Ji and describes the iconography of one of the lost early versions of Li Gonglin’s White Lotus Society Picture, painted when the artist was in his twenties.1 Li Chongyuan composed his Record within a month of receiving the 1081 version.2 Both Records are invaluable not only because they are accounts of Li Gonglin’s depictions written by his family members who had directly witnessed his undertaking, but also because their very detailed descriptions of the paintings, especially in Li Chongyuan’s Record, are the most reliable written accounts of Li Gonglin’s original designs.

Probably during Li Gonglin’s own lifetime, and certainly from 1109, collectors, Buddhist and Confucian alike, searched for these Records and mounted copies of them with different versions of White Lotus Society Picture. The Southern Song author Lou Yao 樓鎬 (also pronounced Lou Yue; 1137–1213) attested that Chongyuan’s Record had been mounted with both handscroll and hanging-scroll versions of the picture. By the late Ming and early Qing Chongyuan’s Record had become the more popular of the two, and was often paired with hanging-scroll versions of White Lotus Society Picture.

These two Records were additionally distributed through printed books; Li Desu’s was included in the Southern Song monk Zongxiao’s 宗曉 (1151–1214) compilation Lebang yigao 樂邦遺稿 (Anthology of Preserved Pure Land Literature), and Li Chongyuan’s was included in a later edition of the “Hagiographies of the Eighteen Noble Worthies of the Lotus

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1 Precisely when Li Desu completed his Record of Lotus Society Picture cannot be ascertained, but its content suggests a date between 1075 and 1109. In this Record Li Desu mentioned Chen Shunyu’s 陳舜俞 “Lianshe shiba gaoxian zhuang 聯社十八高賢傳 (Hagiographies of the Eighteen Noble Worthies of the Lotus Society),” which was included in Chen’s Lushan ji 蓮社十八高賢傳 with a 1075 preface by Li Chang 李常 (T. 51, p. 1024c). The 1109 date is derived from the date of Zhang Ji’s first inscription.

2 For the full text of this Record, see Gao Shiqi 高士奇 (1654–1704), Jianggun shubua xiaoxia lu 江村書畫錄 (JCSHXXL, preface 1693, Baoyitang reprint, date unknown), vol. 3, pp. 29b–30a.