

# Belief in the Lotus Sutra during the Tibetan Period

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**D**URING the Tibetan occupation of Dunhuang (781-848 CE), the Lotus Sutra was still popular in Dunhuang. In addition to the preservation of Lotus Sutra manuscripts among Dunhuang documents written during the Tibetan period, the Dunhuang Grottoes preserve six Lotus Sutra transformation tableaux from this period, while Mogao Cave 361 contains a Dharma Flower tower in the style of a Lotus Flower Stupa. These indicate that during the Middle Tang period at Dunhuang, belief in the Lotus Sutra was entrenched. Lotus Sutra veneration during this time continued with the practices of the High Tang period with added elements of esoteric Buddhism as belief in the Lotus Sutra evolved. By sorting out the materials on the Lotus Sutra from Middle Tang Dunhuang documents and the Dunhuang caves, this article summarizes the development and special features of the belief in the Lotus Sutra during this period.

## 1. The Lotus Sutra of the Middle Tang Period at Dunhuang

There are three important translations of the Lotus Sutra in Chinese: the *Zheng fahua jing* 正法華經 (The Lotus Sutra of the Correct Dharma), translated by Dharmarakṣa of the Western Jin Dynasty (c. 286 CE), the *Miaofa lianhua jing* 妙法蓮華經 (The Lotus Sutra of the Wonderful Dharma), translated by Kumārajīva of the Later Qin Dynasty (c. 406 CE), and the *Tianpin Miaofa lianhua jing* 添品妙法蓮華經 (The Supplemented Lotus Sutra of the Wonderful Dharma), translated by Jñānagupta and Dharmagupta of the Sui Dynasty (c. 601 CE). Among these, the translation by Kumārajīva was the most popular, and comprises the largest number of Lotus Sutra manuscripts from Dunhuang. Specifically, during the Tibetan rule of Dunhuang (781–848 CE), in Dunhuang documents P.3807 and S.2079, the *Longxing si cangjing mulu* 龍興寺藏經目錄 (The Catalogue of Texts from Longxing Temple) records four classics based on the Lotus Sutra: the *Fahua sansei jing* 法華三昧經 (The Lotus Meditation Sutra, one-volume), the *Fahua*

*jing* 法華經 (The Lotus Sutra, seven-volume: Mahayana retranslated sutra), the *Zheng Fahua jing* (10-volume: Mahayana retranslated sutra), and the *Fahua lun* 法華論 (The Treatise on the Lotus Sutra, one-volume: Mahayana treatise). This means that besides storing Kumārajīva's seven-volume *Miaofa lianhua jing*, together with Dharmarakṣa's translation of the 10-volume *Zheng fahua jing*, Longxing Temple, Dunhuang's official monastery, also held copies of the translation of the *Fahua sansei jing* by Zhiyan 智嚴 of the Liu Song Dynasty and the one-volume *Fahua lun*.

Most extensively circulated and used during this time were Kumārajīva's *Lotus Sutra of the Miaofa lianhua jing* and the *Zheng fahua jing* by Dharmarakṣa. Dunhuang manuscript P.3432, the first volume of the *Longxing si gongyang fojing mulu* 龍興寺供養佛經目錄 (Catalogue of Buddhist Scriptures Donated to Longxing Temple), has written as its initial colophon, meaning that this was likely to have been a scripture donated to Longxing Temple during the Tibetan Period, among them was the seven-volume *Miaofa lianhua jing*, thus explaining that this scripture was used in the offering of scriptures. Dunhuang document P.3010, the *Longxing si linian peibu canji lu* 龍興寺歷年配補藏經錄 (Record of Restored Scriptures over the Years for Longxing Temple) notes that in the year 808 the 10-volume *Zheng fahua jing* was restored. In the middle of the 'Dianfuli' on Dunhuang document S.5676, the words "Zheng fa hua 正法花" (True Dharma Flower) and "Fahua jing" appear, which should be divided into the translated volumes of Dharmarakṣa and Kumārajīva according to the writing at the end of the manuscript. This is proof of the exchange of scriptures during the Tibetan Period, while at the same time demonstrating that the *Zheng fahua jing* and the *Miaofa lianhua jing* were in actual circulation at the time. S.6515 contains Kumārajīva's *Miaofa lianhua jing* with a final inscription that it was copied in 809, making it clear that this seven-volume version of the *Fahua jing* was the most popular version. Dunhuang documents have also preserved seven items of the Lotus Sutra in Tibetan: mss P.t.0572, P.t.1239, P.t.1262, No.190, No.191, No.192 and No.351. I. Thus, during the Middle Tang both Chinese and Tibetan versions were popular at the same time, meaning that it is very likely that both the Chinese and Tibetans shared a belief in the Lotus Sutra.

## 2. Dunhuang Transformation Tableaux of the Lotus Sutra during the Middle Tang

Regarding research on Lotus Sutra transformation tableaux of the Tibetan period at Dunhuang, the two most important works are those of He Shizhe 賀世哲 (*Dunhuang shiku quanji: Fahua jing huajuan* 敦煌石窟藝術全集：法華經畫卷)<sup>1</sup> and Shimono Akiko 下野玲子 (*Tubo tongzhi shiqi Dunhuang 'Fahua jing bian' xiaokao* 吐蕃統治時期敦煌〈法華經變〉小考),<sup>2</sup> both of which focus on Mogao Cave 159 and discuss the special characteristics of the Lotus Sutra transformation tableaux during the Middle Tang period. Professor He Shizhe's work in particular analyses in detail several Middle Tang Lotus Sutra tableaux, highlighting important evidence about the value of the Lotus Sutra tableaux for the meaning of the scripture during the Middle Tang. At the back of the book is an addendum with statistics provided for the chapters for the Lotus Sutra transformation tableaux. There are six extant murals of the Lotus Sutra dating from the Middle Tang in Dunhuang, which include Mogao Caves 154, 159, 231, 237, 472 and 144. The specific depictions of each chapter from the sutra are listed in Table 1.<sup>3</sup>

From the table below and compared with the High Tang, Lotus Sutra transformation tableaux are an effective means of illustrating details and are able to combine in an orderly fashion several chapters into a single tableau. During this period, the folding screen-type format began to occupy the lower register in order to supplement the contents of the sutra tableaux.

Furthermore, Mogao Caves 159, 231, 237 and 144 have screens illustrating the sutra tableaux content, while in comparison Cave 154 has no screens but more chapters appear. The surface area of Middle Tang Lotus Sutra tableaux seems extremely high, and several types of altered formats of the basic Lotus Sutra transformation tableaux continued to be used into the Late Tang. These sutra transformations that depict, in an even more orderly fashion, chapters of the Lotus Sutra reflect in images the special aspects of the Lotus faith that appeared in the Middle Tang. It is important to note that during the Middle Tang period the Lotus Sutra transformation tableaux often appear in tandem with the Avatamsaka Sutra transformation tableaux, becoming a fixed combination which henceforth unfolded as a tradition — the Lotus Sutra and the Avatamsaka Sutra in parallel.

**Table 1**

Chapter title/Cave number	154	159	231	237	472	144
1. Introduction	√	√	√	√	√	√
2. Expedient Means	√	√	√	√	√	√
3. Simile and Parable	√	√	√	√	√	√
4. Belief and Understanding	√	√	√	√	√	√
5. The Parable of the Medicinal Herbs		√	√	√		
6. Bestowal of Prophecy						
7. The Parable of the Phantom City		√	√	√		√
8. Prophecy of Enlightenment for Five Hundred Disciples		√	√	√	√	√
9. Prophecies Conferred on Learners and Adepts						
10. The Teacher of the Law		√				
11. The Emergence of the Treasure Tower	√	√	√	√		√
12. Devadatta	√	√	√	√		√
13. Encouraging Devotion						
14. Peaceful Practices	√	√	√	√		√
15. Emerging from the Earth	√	√	√	√		√
16. The Life Span of the Thus Come One		√	√	√		
17. Distinctions in Benefits						
18. The Benefits of Responding with Joy		√				
19. Benefits of the Teacher of the Law						
20. The Bodhisattva Never Disparaging	√	√	√	√		√
21. Supernatural Powers of the Thus Come One						
22. Entrustment						
23. Former Affairs of the Bodhisattva Medicine King	√	√	√	√		√
24. The Bodhisattva Wonderful Sound			√			
25. The Universal Gateway of the Bodhisattva Perceiver of the World's Sounds			√		√	
26. Dharani			√			
27. Former Affairs of King Wonderful Adornment			√	√		
28. Encouragements of the Bodhisattva Universal Worthy			√			
Total	10	16	19	15	6	12

### 3. The Esoteric Lotus Stupa in Mogao Cave 361

In addition to transformation scenes from the Lotus Sutra, on the eastern wall of Mogao Cave 361 (Middle Tang) above the door is the only depiction of the Lotus Stupa in Dunhuang (Fig.). The painting measures 91.0 × 58.0 × 90.0 cm, in the very middle of which is the Lotus Stupa (also known as the Many Treasures Stupa or Prabhūtaratna Stupa). The 'Emergence of the Treasure Tower' chapter



Fig. Lotus Stupa on the eastern wall of Mogao Cave 361 (reproduced by the author)

of the Lotus Sutra is the most important chapter for the doctrine of the Lotus Sutra. The Treasure Tower arising out of the earth is evidence of the Pure Dharma:

[I]n the treasure tower is the complete body of a Thus Come One. Long ago, an immeasurable thousand, ten thousand, million asamkhyas of worlds to the east, in a land called Treasure Purity, there was a Buddha named Many Treasures. When this Buddha was originally carrying out the bodhisattva way, he made a great vow, saying, 'If, after I have become a Buddha and entered extinction, in the lands in the ten directions there is any place where the Lotus Sutra is preached, then my funerary tower, in order that I may listen to the sutra, will come forth and appear in that spot to testify to the sutra and praise its excellence.'<sup>4</sup>

Because the Many Treasures Stupa rose into the sky accompanied by the Buddhas of the Ten Directions, this image is also known as the 'Assembly in the Sky'.

It is thus that the two Buddhas sitting together in the Many Treasures Stupa is a symbol for the Lotus Sutra. The illustration above the door on the eastern wall of Mogao 361 is not simply the Many Treasures Stupa but also a picture of a group of attending Buddhas along with Mañjuśrī and Samantabhadra, below which are bodhisattvas emerging from the

earth. Thus, this image could even be called a thumbnail of the Lotus Sutra assembly in the air, even a representation of the entire Lotus Sutra tableau. In the middle of the image is the Many Treasures Stupa, inside which are the two seated Buddhas. On the north side is the Buddha extending his left hand in the *abhaya mudrā* (symbolizing fearlessness and friendship), the right hand placed in the centre of his chest. The Buddha on the south side has his left hand placed on his stomach, while the right is in front of the chest in the *dharmacakra mudrā* (teaching Dharma). Thus, it is possible to see slight differences between the two Buddhas in the stupa; however, now there is no way to distinguish which one is Śākyamuni and which Prabhūtaratna. The seated pair of Śākyamuni and Prabhūtaratna embody a special relationship to time and space, with Śākyamuni as the present Buddha and Prabhūtaratna as a Buddha of the past; the two appearing at the same time in the same space conveys the special temporal concepts that Śākyamuni is alive but is not and Prabhūtaratna is but is not. In other words, the image of Śākyamuni and Prabhūtaratna seated together in the same stupa represents a concept of time where past and present are one, making the time in this mural a direct link to eternity. On the two sides of the stupa are a total of six groups of figures, each with one Buddha and two bodhisattvas hovering in the air. These represent manifestations of the Buddhas of the ten directions attending the scene, Buddhas who are Buddhas of the ten directions of the same time, but not of the same space. The concept of time uniting Śākyamuni and Prabhūtaratna in this very small tableau of the assembly in the sky thus represents concepts of space of the Buddhas of the ten directions and space-time of the past and present.

On the north side of the Many Treasures pagoda is Mañjuśrī riding a lion accompanied by an entourage and on the south side Samantabhadra riding an elephant, also accompanied by an entourage. These two illustrations cannot be directly found in Buddhist sutras. The earliest appearance in Mogao caves of depictions of Mañjuśrī and Samantabhadra on either side of the Many Treasure stupa is in Cave 331:

The painter also added many buddhas from other chapters and even other scriptures, which were placed symmetrically around the Dharma Flower assembly. For example, the lion on the left and the elephant on the right are not from the preface of the Lotus Sutra. Mañjuśrī is the main bodhisattva of the Chinese Association, but the three different Chinese translations of the Lotus Sutra do not mention him riding a lion. The origin of Mañjuśrī riding a lion is the *Tuoluoni ji jing* 陀羅尼集經 (Dhāraṇī Collection Scripture) from the

early Tang Dynasty. It can be seen that some of the contents of the Lotus Sutra tableau are from other Buddhist scriptures. Among the 18 great bodhisattvas who went to the Lotus Assembly, there was no Samantabhadra Bodhisattva. The image of Samantabhadra riding an elephant appears in the chapter entitled, the ‘Encouragement of Bodhisattva Samantabhadra’ of the Lotus Sutra, which records the story of Śākyamuni saying that although after his own nirvana, if someone recites the Lotus Sutra then Samantabhadra Bodhisattva riding a six-toothed white elephant will come to protect them. It can be seen that the artist often combines the contents of other chapters according to the needs of the layout.<sup>5</sup>

Sun Xiaogang 孫曉崗 has already discussed the issue of the symmetry of Mañjuśrī riding a lion and Samantabhadra riding an elephant in his book *Wenshu pusa tuxiang xue yanjiu* 文殊菩薩圖像學研究,<sup>6</sup> which mentions this configuration in ‘Golden Wheel of the Buddha’s Crown’ of the *Tuoluoni ji jing*. Mañjuśrī riding a lion and Samantabhadra riding an elephant on the two sides of the Dharma Flower Stupa are related to the popularity at the time of the oppositional transformation tableaux of Mañjuśrī and Samantabhadra. “Mañjuśrī is wisdom and Samantabhadra is practice” is a common interpretation and the two together represent “being knowledgeable in a myriad practices”. The main sage between Mañjuśrī and Samantabhadra can be not only Śākyamuni, but also other Buddhas, and even Guanyin bodhisattva in the later period. This may be related to the notion that the two together are “being knowledgeable in a myriad practices”. Thus, the Lotus Flower Stupa with Mañjuśrī riding a lion and Samantabhadra riding an elephant and their entourages on either side can also convey this meaning.

On both sides of the bottom corner of the picture is a bodhisattva worshipping the Lotus Flower Stupa with hands pressed together. It should be noted that the two bodhisattvas differ from the Buddhas and bodhisattvas attending the assembly above. The sacred multitude arrives riding clouds, but it is only under these two bodhisattvas that there are no auspicious clouds. Therefore, the two bodhisattvas are likely intentionally differentiated from those in the assembly in the sky, indicating that they may have emerged from the ground or from the sea. Comparing the picture as a whole with contemporaneous Lotus Sutra transformation tableaux, it can be seen that this small picture in Cave 361 is very similar to the assembly in the sky part of Middle Tang Lotus Sutra transformation tableaux, and takes the most concretely representative picture to express the meaning of the Lotus Sutra.

What is most unique about Cave 361 is the shape of the Lotus Flower Stupa, which, with many more curves, is very different from that in the Lotus Sutra transformation tableau. As Xiao Mo 萧默 says in his *Dunhuang jianzhu yanjiu* 敦煌建築研究:

The stupa-style tower in murals have [*sic*] variations, such as the example of Cave 361 from the Middle Tang Dynasty, that with the exception of a painting of a wooden two-storey pavilion tower with a wide curved surface, there is also a single-layer masonry stupa in esoteric style. Although it is made of masonry, it is complicated and magnificent, and not inferior to a wooden structure.<sup>7</sup>

Not only does the Lotus Sutra have a prominent place among exoteric Mahayana teachings but it is also important in Chinese esoteric Buddhism. The scripture of the Lotus Sutra calls itself “the secret store [*garbha*] of the Tathāgata”, and most scholars believe that of the esotericism of the *vajra* and *garbha* maṇḍalas, the *vajradhātu* comes from the Avataṃsaka Sutra and *garbhadhātu* from the Lotus Sutra. In the Tang Dynasty, the Lotus Sutra was also regarded as one of the “Three Scriptures Protecting the Country”. The master Amoghavajra, who had a major influence on Hexi esoteric Buddhism, emphasized the use of esoteric teachings to protect the country throughout his life, practising the three esoterica of body, speech and mind as enjoined in the thought of the Lotus Sutra. In order to practise the Lotus Sutra, Amoghavajra compiled the *Chengjiu miaofa lianhua jing wang yujia guanzhi yigui* 成就妙法蓮花經王瑜伽觀智儀軌 (Manual to Achieve [*siddhi*] Visualization and Knowledge of the King of the Lotus Sūtra through Yoga) which recommends selecting a spot and setting up an altar like the method in the *garbhadhātu* and its practice of mantras. Amoghavajra’s emphasis on the Lotus Sutra added an esoteric element to faith in the Lotus Sutra.

Some of the rituals of confession in Buddhism also consider the Many Treasures Stupa as proof of the achievements of confession and repentance. The *Foshuo guan Puxian pusa xingfa jing* 佛說觀普賢菩薩行法經 (Meditation on the Bodhisattva Samantabhadra’s Practice of the Dharma) states that:

Having finished purifying the organs of the eyes, the practitioner should again further read and recite the Mahayana sutras, kneel and repent during the six periods of the day and night, and say, ‘Why can I only see Śākyamuni Buddha and the buddhas who emanated from him, but cannot see the Buddha’s relics of his whole body in



the stupa of the Buddha Prabhūtaratna? The stupa of the Buddha Prabhūtaratna exists forever and is not extinct. I have defiled and evil eyes. For this reason, I cannot see the stūpa'. After speaking thus, the follower should again practice further repentance. After seven days have passed, the stupa of the Buddha Prabhūtaratna will spring out of the earth.<sup>8</sup>

Mogao Cave 361 is a representative esoteric cave of the late Tibetan period in Dunhuang. The Lotus Flower Stupa is painted on the east wall above the door, and is the last focal point of the entire cave. That is to say, when everyone finishes ritual practices in the cave, they will finally turn their eyes to the Many Treasures Stupa on the east wall above door. The Many Treasures Stupa is a testament to their efforts, and also clarifies that everyone in the end will see the Many Treasures Stupa, representing the successful completion of ritual ceremonies. Therefore, the lone appearance of the Lotus Flower Stupa representing the confirmation of the success of the rituals is the greatest difference between the Middle Tang and the High Tang and previous depictions of the Lotus Flower Stupa.

#### 4. Conclusion

In summary, during the period of Tibetan rule of Dunhuang, the tradition of belief in the Lotus Sutra continued from the Northern Dynasties, and traces of this belief can be found in both scriptures and images. At this time, the most popular versions of the Lotus Sutra were Kumārajīva's *Miaofa lianhua jing* and Dharmarakṣa's *Zheng fahua jing*. By this point, this time illustrations from the Lotus Sutra had been transformed into a relatively fixed format, which had an important impact on the representation of the Lotus Sutra after the late Tang Dynasty. In addition, the appearance of an esoteric Lotus Flower Stupa in Mogao Cave 361 indicates the esotericization of belief in the Lotus Sutra, which was an important development in the evolution of the Lotus Sutra during this period.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> He Shizhe 賀世哲, Editor-in-Chief, *Dunhuang shiku quanji: Fahua jinghua juan* 敦煌石窟藝術全集：法華經畫卷 (The Complete Works of Dunhuang Grottoes, Paintings of the Lotus Sutra) (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 1999), 90–105.

- <sup>2</sup> Shimono Akiko 下野玲子, 'Tubo tong zhi shi qi Dunhuang 'Fahua jing bian' xiao kao 吐蕃統治時期敦煌〈法華經變〉小考' (A Small Examination into the 'Lotus Sutra Transformation' Tableaux during the Tibetan Period at Dunhuang), in Fan Jinshi 樊錦詩 and Dunhuang Research Academy 敦煌研究院, eds, *Dunhuang Tufan tongzhi shiqi shiku yu Zang chuan fojiao yishu yanjiu* 敦煌吐蕃統治時期石窟與藏傳佛教藝術研究 (A Study on the Grottoes and Arts of Tibetan Buddhism during the Tibetan Period at Dunhuang) (Lanzhou: Gansu jiao yu chu ban she, 2012), 201–12.
- <sup>3</sup> Table 1 is based on He Shizhe's Appendix I: 'A Table of Statistics on Each Chapter in Lotus Sutra Transformation Tableaux' in the volume *Dunhuang shiku quan ji: Fa hua jing hua juan*. Among these, the image in Mogao Cave 472 is heavily damaged and difficult to make out; Mogao Cave 144 is dated to the transition period between the Middle and Late Tang periods.
- <sup>4</sup> Burton Watson, trans., *The Lotus Sutra* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 171.
- <sup>5</sup> He Shizhe, Editor-in-Chief, *Dunhuang shiku quanji: Fahua jing hua juan* 敦煌石窟藝術全集：法華經畫卷 (The Complete Works of Dunhuang Grottoes, Paintings of the Lotus Sutra) (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 1999), 41-42.
- <sup>6</sup> Sun Xiaogang 孫曉崗, *Wenshu pusa tu xiang xue yanjiu* 文殊菩薩圖像學研究 (A Bodhisattva of Wisdom: Iconography Study) (Lanzhou Shi: Gansu ren min mei shu chu ban she, 2007), 45–49.
- <sup>7</sup> Xiao Mo 蕭默, *Dunhuang jianzhu yanjiu* 敦煌建築研究 (Architectural Research of Dunhuang Grottoes) (Beijing: Wen wu chubanshe, 1989), 162.
- <sup>8</sup> Dharmamitra, trans., *Foshuo guan Puxian pusa xingfa jing* 佛說觀普賢菩薩行法經 (Meditation on the Bodhisattva Samantabhadra's Practice of the Dharma), T277, no. 9: 391.

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