

Comment

Samantamukha (All-seeing) Avalokiteśvara and Khotan: Comments on Zhang Xiaogang's Paper

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HERE, I will examine some questions of interpretation raised by Prof. Zhang Xiaogang's 2019 article, 'Belief in the Lotus Sutra among the Khotanese Residents of Dunhuang'.¹

The translation 'Avalokiteśvara Universal Gate' deserves a relook.² The Sanskrit epithet *samanta-mukha* used for Avalokiteśvara means one who keeps watch everywhere on all events at all times. He is the Bodhisattva of surveillance and safeguards all in dire circumstances. He averts trials, saves from fires, delivers from troubles caused by rakshasas, and severs the bonds of those imprisoned in fetters and chains. He shatters to pieces the swords and staves of attackers. Burton Watson translates the term as "universal gateway".³ The word *mukha* means 'face' and the compound signifies that he keeps a watch (*mukha*) at all times (*samanta*) and in all places to safeguard his devotees. The Central Asian routes were infested with highway bandits and security was a crucial concern. The 16 arhats were invited from Khotan to China, and they had to be accompanied by a lay (Upāsaka) comrade-in-arms Dharmatāla / Dharmatrāta whose very name suggests that he was a hieratic guardian. He possessed infinite resourcefulness, wisdom and commanding presence. He is a manifestation of Avalokiteśvara, who is omnivident (or all-seeing, *samanta-mukha*) and hence omnipresent and omnipotent. Dharmatāla created a tiger from his right knee to guard the arhats. The tiger is portrayed on his right-hand side. The popularity of the worship of Avalokiteśvara goes back to the Buddhist period of Central Asia when his blessings were a sine qua non for safety, and this chapter of the Lotus Sutra gained independent status as the Avalokiteśvara Sutra that could be carried as a lucky talisman. More than 5000 copies of this sutra from Dunhuang (Tunhuang) are preserved in libraries across the world.

The Lotus Sutra was extremely popular in Khotan as indicated by several Chinese texts. The Gazetteer of the Western Regions states that the palace of Khotan had the Sanskrit version in 6500 gāthās. Kumārajīva's version seems to have been translated from a Kuchean

version. Fragments of many Sanskrit manuscripts of the Lotus Sutra have been discovered from Khotan. The so-called Kashgar manuscript is actually from Khotan and was sold to Russian and other collectors in Kashgar. Its donor was a Khotanese whose colophon ends the manuscript. Fa-hsien (Faxian) obtained the Devadatta chapter from Khotan. Li Geng, the Crown Prince of Khotan, made copies of it as a prayer for the recovery of his father from illness.

Yulin Cave 32, where the female donor is the Princess of Khotan, the queen of the military governor Cao Yanlu, shows the emergence of the Treasure Tower. Its mural of Mañjuśrī riding a lion denotes the King of Khotan and the mural of Samantabhadra has the Gośrīṣa mountain of Khotan as the background. The two Buddhas Śākyamuni and Prabhūtaratna are sitting together in a pavilion-shaped stūpa. The two Buddhas are depicted in caves 150, 152 and 237 of Dunhuang. Cave 237 has images related to Khotan. According to Prof. Zhang Xiaogang, “Whether they have any special religious meaning remains to be studied.”⁴

The intimate connection between Khotan and the Lotus Sutra is signified by Prabhūtaratna Buddha. The name of Khotan has been transcribed by Hsüan-tsang (Xuanzang) as Gostana and it is attested in the Khotanese document Ch 1. 0021a as Gaustama and Gamsta. Hsüan-tsang’s transcription was wrongly restored as Kustana, which does not exist. Fa-hsien stayed at the Gomatī monastery. About 20 *li* to the south-west of the royal city was Mount Gośrīṅga, according to Hsüan-tsang.⁵ A Tibetan annal of Khotan is titled Gośrīṅga-vyākaraṇa. A legend has been created from the incorrect etymology of *go* ‘cow’ and *stana* ‘breast’. P.O. Skjærvø says that the origin and meaning of the element *go-* remain unknown.⁶ In the panegyric to Viśa Saṃgrāma (P 2787), Khotan is called Ratna-janapada. *Go* is the Chinese *yü* ‘jade’, pronounced *ngwok* in Foochow, *nguoh* in Ningpo, *gyoku* in Japanese and *ngok* in Annamese.⁷ Khotan was the main source of jade for China. The second element *-stana* or *-stan* is the Iranian toponymic suffix ‘land’ as in Hindustan. Thus Gostana means the ‘Land of Jade’. The Tibetan name Li-yul can refer to *li* ‘a kind of jade’.⁸ The Gośrīṅga-vyākaraṇa mentions the Gomasālagandha *caitya*, which was brought into being by Śāriputra and Vaiśravaṇa. It was the blessing of Khotan. This *caitya* had great sanctity, having been the abode of great *yoga-r̥ṣis*. It was a major trading centre of jade (*go*) and the precious gem *masaragalra*, which was associated with Dīpankara, the Buddha of the Past. *Ratna* in the name of Prabhūtaratna Buddha was considered especially propitious for the booming trade in jade, which was an ancient lifeline of Khotan. The

Khotanese gave sericultural attributes to Gaṇeśa and Maheśvara, as silk was their main export. The defence of flourishing Khotan was ensured by dedicating panels depicting palladia named in their chronicles. The sacred texts were an affirmation of their deep faith in Buddhism, which had brought them spirituality and prosperity, as well as international status vis-à-vis China, as the home of powerful Buddhist manuscripts for the Chinese emperors to ensure the elimination of all evil destinies (*sarva-durgati-pariśodhana*).

Notes

- ¹ Zhang 2019.
- ² Ibid., 57.
- ³ Watson 1993, 298.
- ⁴ Zhang 2019, 64.
- ⁵ Beal 1884, 313.
- ⁶ Skjærvø 1987, 784.
- ⁷ Giles 1912, 13, 630.
- ⁸ Ibid., 6945.

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