

The Art of Dunhuang and the Lotus Sutra

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Introduction

THE *Miaofa lianhua jing* 妙法蓮華經 (Lotus Sutra of the Wonderful Law, henceforth Lotus Sutra) from India is the most widely transmitted Buddhist scripture in China since its translation into *Hanyu* 漢語 (*Han/Chinese language*) in the third to fifth century CE.¹ The Lotus Sutra emphasizes the concept of equality and compassionate philosophy of all living beings being saved by Mahayana bodhisattvas. At the same time, it guides human beings to realize the wisdom of Buddhism through various parables which tell relatable, life-like stories. Therefore, the Lotus Sutra has been popular for more than a thousand years. It has spread extensively to every place of China, the Korean Peninsula, Japan, and Southeast Asia.

The mural paintings in the Dunhuang Caves display a great portion of the contents of the Lotus Sutra. Artists from ancient times have depicted stories and ideas from the Lotus Sutra through realistic and evocative paintings on the walls and ceilings of the caves. These rich and precious paintings are not only an important resource for understanding and studying the Lotus Sutra, but they also reveal a history, spanning over a thousand years, of cultural exchanges, mutual learning, and shared development between China and nations beyond its borders on the Silk Road.

Today, when the world is in a tumultuous state owing to uneven socio-economic development, the ideas of the Lotus Sutra have great relevance and practical significance in recreating the world order of peace and coexistence: its spirit of peace and non-violence for opposing war and actions that cause harm; its spirit of equality and compassion for all living beings as the basis for developing economically underdeveloped regions and promoting the common flourishing of the global human community; and its Buddhist wisdom for eliminating

prejudice and ignorance. If the ideas of the Lotus Sutra become deeply rooted in the lives of people, human society will develop in the direction of peace, stability, and coexistence.

The founder of the Institute of Oriental Philosophy, Daisaku Ikeda, has consistently expounded the ideas of the Lotus Sutra and spread its teachings through personal action. For many years, he has been promoting the Buddhist ideas of peace, equality, and coexistence through academic lectures and writings on the philosophy of the Lotus Sutra. Further, his continuous efforts in holding exhibitions on the Lotus Sutra have had significant impact worldwide. He has also made outstanding contributions to creating a social ecology that promotes world peace and harmonious coexistence. Under President Ikeda's leadership, the Institute of Oriental Philosophy and the Soka Gakkai International have forged extensive cooperation with academic institutions worldwide. The Lotus Sutra exhibitions have not only been held in Asian countries such as India, Nepal, and Malaysia but also in European countries such as Spain, England, and France, attracting great interest among people in both Eastern and Western countries.

The Dunhuang Academy collaborated with the Institute of Oriental Philosophy and the Soka Gakkai in organizing the exhibition 'The Lotus Sutra — A Message of Peace and Harmonious Coexistence' in Singapore (2017) and Indonesia (2019). The Dunhuang Caves have preserved Buddhist murals from the fourth century CE to the 14th century CE, a period of over 1000 years. The paintings depict the rich, profound contents of the Lotus Sutra and the history of the daily lives, economic activities, and cultural exchanges of the people who lived along the Silk Road in ancient times. As the institution protecting and administering the Dunhuang Caves, the Dunhuang Academy has always maintained an open-door policy and aims to bring together academic institutions and organizations around the world to jointly research and promote the Buddhist art found here. It intends to continue working with the Institute of Oriental Philosophy and Soka Gakkai International to promote global peace and development through publicizing, exhibiting, and researching Dunhuang culture. The objective is to further mutual exchanges between Eastern and Western cultures by revealing the journey of shared development that is found at Dunhuang, especially in the art of the Lotus Sutra. Encouraging academic and cultural exchanges between China and other countries of the world, based on the ideas of equality, compassion, and coexistence, it is hoped, will contribute to global peace and development.

The Significance of the Dunhuang Caves

The name Dunhuang first appeared in the Han dynasty (111 BCE) period when Emperor Wudi established the ‘four commanderies of Hexi (meaning west of the river)’ that comprised Dunhuang, Wuwei, Zhangye, and Jiuquan. During the Han period, Dunhuang was the western gateway to China. As a result of the prosperity of the Silk Road, Dunhuang became an important center for internal/external political, economic, and cultural exchanges from the Han to the Tang dynasty. This was the time when Buddhism was being widely transmitted from India to China. The excavation and construction of the Dunhuang Mogao Caves 敦煌莫高窟 began in 366 CE and continued over the course of more than a thousand years under successive ruling dynasties. A Tang dynasty inscription recorded that there were more than a thousand caves within the Mogao Caves complex. Today there are 735 extant caves in the Mogao complex. Other than the Mogao Caves, the Dunhuang Caves also comprise the Dunhuang Western Thousand Buddhas Caves (*Xi qianfodong* 西千佛洞; containing 22 caves), the Guazhou Yulin Caves (瓜州榆林窟; containing 42 caves), Eastern Thousand Buddhas Caves (*Dong qianfodong* 東千佛洞; containing 8 caves), and the Subei Five Temples Caves (*Subei wuge miaoshiku* 肅北五個廟石窟; containing 6 caves).

The Buddhist grottoes in the Dunhuang Caves are works of art fusing architecture, sculpture, and mural paintings. A cave niche is normally found in the central location (main wall) of each cave, and a central pillar representing stupas surrounded by niches and statues is also seen in some caves. The walls and ceilings are covered with murals. The murals and wall paintings include: 1) images of Buddhas, 2) paintings depicting stories from Buddhist scriptures, 3) sutra paintings (*jingbian* 經變), 4) traditional Chinese legends, 5) Buddhist historical relics, 6) portraits of donors, and 7) decorative patterns. As Buddhism developed over time, the contents of various Buddhist scriptures were expressed in the form of painted sculptures and murals. Paintings depicting the Buddhist Jataka tales, karma tales, and Buddhist legends were popular in the early murals in Dunhuang caves. The integration of Indian and Central Asian artistic styles with traditional Chinese painting techniques used on Chinese scroll paintings since the Han dynasty formed the common artistic expression for depicting Buddhist stories. The famous examples are the Deer King Jataka in Mogao Cave 257 and the Sudana Jataka in Cave 428.

Sutra paintings became the most popular form of mural paintings with the rise of Mahayana Buddhism in the Sui and Tang periods.

Sutra paintings are large-scale thematic paintings depicting Buddhist scriptures by combining human figures, architecture, landscapes, and other elements to express the magnificent world of the Buddhas. Sutra paintings appeared as a genre during the era of the Sui dynasty and became the main form of mural paintings by the Tang dynasty period. And though they found expression in various forms, their main content — i.e., content based on the sutras — remained the same. There are 33 types of mural paintings in the Mogao Caves, measuring more than 900 pieces (*pu 舖*)² in artworks. Among them, the largest number of sutra paintings are those related to the Longer Sukhāvāṭīvyūha Sūtra (Infinite Life Sutra), Shorter Sukhāvāṭīvyūha Sūtra (Amitābha Sutra), Nirvana Sutra, Maitreya Sutra, Lotus Sutra, Bhaiṣajya-guru-vaidūrya-prabhārāja Sūtra (Medicine Buddha Sutra), *Baoen jing* (Filial Piety Sutra), and Mahāvaiṣṭya Buddhāvataṃsaka Sūtra (also the Avataṃsaka Sūtra or Flower Garland Sutra). From the conditions of these sutra paintings, we can understand how Buddhist scriptures developed and became popular in China from the fourth to the 14th century.

Expressions of the Lotus Sutra in Dunhuang Mural Paintings

In the Northern dynasty period, the content of the Lotus Sutra was mostly expressed through depicting ‘The Emergence of the Treasure Tower’ chapter in which both Shakyamuni Buddha and Prabhūtaratna (Many Treasures Buddha) were seated together while preaching the Law, or dharma. The single expression of the content of ‘The Universal Gateway of Avalokiteśvara’ chapter appeared in the mural paintings of the Sui period. Murals with comprehensive expression of the Lotus Sutra’s contents on the four slopes of the ceiling in Cave 420 were the oldest complete Lotus Sutra paintings.

After the Tang period, the Lotus Sutra paintings became richer in content and the forms of expressions became more diversified. Building upon the artwork of the Sui dynasty, mural paintings in the Early Tang period added content from chapters such as ‘Belief and Understanding’, ‘The Parable of the Phantom City’, ‘Devadatta’, ‘Emerging from the Earth’, ‘Peaceful Practices’, ‘The Benefits of Responding with Joy’, ‘Former Affairs of Bhaiṣajyarāja’, ‘The Bodhisattva Wonderful Sound’, ‘Former Affairs of King Wonderful Adornment’, and ‘Encouragements of the Samantabhadra Bodhisattva’.

Following the Early Tang period, there was a slight increase in artwork (‘The Parable of the Medicinal Herbs’ chapter and others) in the High Tang period. The Middle Tang period saw additional material from

chapters such as ‘Bestowal of Prophecy’, ‘Prophecy of Enlightenment for Five Hundred Disciples’, ‘The Life Span of Tathāgata’, ‘The Bodhisattva Never Disparaging’, and ‘Dharani’. Minor development was seen in the forms of expression such as the symmetry in ‘Emerging from the Earth’ and ‘Devadatta’ chapters.

The Five Dynasties period saw paintings from a total of 24 chapters. Other than ‘The Emergence of the Treasure Tower’ and ‘The Universal Gateway of Avalokiteśvara’ chapters appearing as standalone paintings, there were altogether 32 complete pieces of Lotus Sutra paintings in the Mogao Caves. These paintings include two pieces from the Sui period, two from the Early Tang, one from the High Tang, five from the Middle Tang, nine from the Late Tang, eight from the Five Dynasties, and five from the Song dynasty period.³ Outstanding masterpieces representing each era can be seen in Cave 420 for the Sui dynasty, Cave 331 for Early Tang, Cave 23 for High Tang, Cave 231 for Middle Tang, Cave 156 for Late Tang, and Cave 61 for the Five Dynasties.

In the Northern Wei period, the statues of ‘Two Buddhas Seated Side by Side’ (Shakyamuni and Prabhūtaratna Buddha) appeared in the Dunhuang Caves. This theme comes from ‘The Emergence of the Treasure Tower’ chapter of the Lotus Sutra. As Shakyamuni Buddha is expounding the Lotus Sutra to the assembly, a treasure tower emerges from the earth. When the door of the tower opens, Prabhūtaratna Buddha invites Shakyamuni into the tower and shares his seat. The two Buddhas then sit together to preach the Law. The significance of this content lies in the declaration by Prabhūtaratna Buddha that all Shakyamuni has taught thus far in the Lotus Sutra is true. The statue of the two Buddhas seated beside each other while preaching the Law together in Cave 259, created during the Northern Wei period (Fig. 1), was among the earliest statues depicting this motif in the Dunhuang Caves.

The first statue of the ‘Two Buddhas Seated Side by Side’ in Chinese grottoes was found in Cave 169 (the sixth niche mural) of Bingling Temple built in the first year of the Jianhong era of the Western Qin state (420 CE). This motif was popular during the Northern Wei period and many such statues were found in the Yungang Caves, such as in Caves 5, 6, 11, and 13. The theme of the ‘Two Buddhas Seated Side by Side’ was also used in Caves 126 and 132 of the Bingling Temple built in the Northern Wei period. It is the main content of the Northern Wei statues in Cave 135 of the Maiji Mountain Grottoes as well. The two seated Buddhas in Cave 259 of Dunhuang reflect the prevalence of the Lotus Sutra during the Northern Wei period. The two seated Buddhas are also found on the western side of both the southern and northern walls in



Fig. 1 Western wall of Mogao Cave 259, Shakyamuni Buddha seated beside Prabhūtaratna Buddha, Northern Wei period

Mogao Cave 285 built in the Western Wei period. Paintings of the two seated Buddhas can be seen in Mogao Cave 428 and 461 and Western Thousand Buddhas Cave 8 built in the Northern Zhou period.

Lotus Sutra content became more popular in Dunhuang murals during the Sui dynasty period. Besides the standalone painting of ‘The Universal Gateway of Avalokiteśvara’ chapter in Cave 303, comprehensive sutra paintings with thematic content from the Lotus Sutra also emerged during the same period. The northern slope of the ceiling in Cave 420 was painted with content from the ‘Introduction’, ‘Expedient Means’, and ‘The Emergence of the Treasure Tower’ chapters (Fig. 2); the western slope of the ceiling was painted with content from the ‘Expedient Means’ chapter; the southern slope with



Fig. 2 Northern slope of the ceiling in Mogao Cave 420, partial sutra paintings from the Lotus Sutra, Sui dynasty

content from the ‘Simile and Parable’ chapter, and the eastern slope with content from ‘The Universal Gateway of Avalokiteśvara’ chapter. These mural paintings were the earliest sutra paintings on a larger scale that appeared in the Mogao Caves. Paintings of Eagle Peak (Gridhrakūta) as depicted in the ‘Introduction’ chapter, birds and beasts listening to the preaching of the Law in the ‘Expedient Means’ chapter, and the story of the merchants encountering bandits in ‘The Universal Gateway of Avalokiteśvara’ chapter are masterpieces of Dunhuang mural paintings. The Lotus Sutra paintings in Mogao Cave 420 have the richest details and are the largest in scale among the earliest sutra paintings found. Early forms of scroll-type story paintings were adopted with each wall divided into three long horizontal pictures. However, due to the richly detailed content, the artists did not strictly follow the sequence of long horizontal pictures in their expressions. They normally plotted the paintings by combining the upper and lower layers of the building construction. Examples of this can be found in the painting depicting ‘The Preaching of the Law at the Eagle Peak’ on the northern slope of the ceiling, and the content of the ‘parable of the burning house’ painted on the southern ceiling, in which the layout of the paintings combined two and even all the three horizontal layers. The layout of the paintings was a breakthrough from the long vertical-scroll layout and the sutra paintings emerged as a complete story told via painting.

In the early Tang period, with the rise of Pure Land sutra paintings, scenes of the Buddha preaching were the focus to express the magnificent world of the Buddha. Such sutra paintings became widely popular, and Lotus Sutra paintings also appeared as murals composed of large paintings. On the eastern wall of Cave 331, with the two Buddhas seated side by side expounding the Law at the center, both sides depicted the many bodhisattvas and heavenly beings present during the assembly on Eagle Peak and the Ceremony in the Air. Similar representations are also seen on the ceilings of Caves 335 and 202.

Cave 23 of the High Tang period is the high point of Lotus Sutra murals. This cave was built during the Tianbao era (742–756 CE).⁴ The southern, northern, and eastern walls of the cave, and the eastern and southern slopes of the cave ceilings all have paintings depicting Lotus Sutra content. The center of the northern wall shows a painting of the assembly on Eagle Peak described in the ‘Introduction’ chapter, and around it are paintings from chapters such as ‘The Parable of the Medicinal Herbs’, ‘Expedient Means’, and ‘Belief and Understanding’. The center of the southern wall has a painting of the Ceremony in the Air expounded in ‘The Emergence of the Treasure Tower’ chapter (Fig. 3),

and around it are paintings from chapters such as ‘The Parable of the Phantom City’ and ‘The Universal Gateway of Avalokiteśvara’. The eastern wall depicts paintings from the ‘Introduction’, ‘Former Affairs of Bhaiṣajyarāja’, and ‘Former Affairs of King Wonderful Adornment’ chapters. The eastern side of the cave ceiling, that also has the assembly on Eagle Peak expounded in the ‘Introduction’ chapter at its center, displays content from the ‘Simile and Parable’, ‘Former Affairs of Bhaiṣajyarāja’, ‘Supernatural Powers of Tathāgata’, and ‘Entrustment’ chapters. The southern slope of the cave ceiling depicts paintings of content from ‘The Universal Gateway of Avalokiteśvara’ chapter. Other than a Maitreya Sutra painting depicted on the western slope of the cave ceiling and an Amitābha Sutra painting on the northern slope of the cave ceiling, all other murals in this cave depict content from the Lotus Sutra. Even the Maitreya and Amitābha Sutra paintings show that those who believe in the Lotus Sutra will be reborn in the Tushita heaven or the world of Amitābha after their deaths. Therefore, this cave is also called the ‘Lotus Sutra Cave’.

The Lotus Sutra paintings in Cave 23 show high artistic standard. Whether it is the painting of the Ceremony in the Air or the Assembly on Eagle Peak, scenes of the Buddha preaching are the focus in creating the magnificent world of the Buddha, and the different stories of the Buddhist sutras surrounding it connect many scenes in real life with the world of the Buddha. It combines the reality of the human world with the ideal, perfect world of the Buddha, demonstrating the attainment of perfection in Buddhist sutras. For example, the painting of the



Fig. 3 Southern wall of Mogao Cave 23, Ceremony in the Air, High Tang period

Ceremony in the Air on the northern wall depicts the magnificent scene of the Buddha preaching, while vast mountains and colorful clouds surround the scene. Besides these colorful clouds, many details of the story are illustrated, such as the farming in the rain expounded in ‘The Parable of the Medicinal Herbs’ chapter: Under a sky densely covered by dark clouds, with heavy rain pouring, a farmer is driving an ox to plough the land, while another is carrying grains in the field amidst the rain. The southern wall depicts the scene of the Ceremony in the Air. In the center is a magnificent and exquisite treasure tower, and in the tower the two Buddhas, Shakyamuni and Prabhūtaratna, are seated side by side expounding the Law. Numerous bodhisattvas and heavenly beings surround the treasure tower, sitting or standing, listening to the Law being expounded. The upper part depicts Buddha statues and heavenly beings moving to and fro in mid-air. The scene is spectacular. It is surrounded by scenes of ordinary people living in the mountains and in the city.

After the Middle Tang period, Lotus Sutra paintings gradually developed into a relatively fixed form, such as that on the southern wall of Cave 159 and that on the southern side of the ceiling of Cave 85. Basically, the upper part of the center depicts the Ceremony in the Air, and the lower part depicts the Assembly on Eagle Peak, while the surrounding scenes are of related content such as that from the ‘Simile and Parable’, ‘Belief and Understanding’, ‘The Parable of the Phantom City’, and ‘The Universal Gateway of Avalokiteśvara’ chapters. All the contents of the sutra paintings are expressed in the form of central axis symmetry. This is the composition form of the sutra paintings created in the Tang period and it has a far-reaching influence. Paintings such as those in Cave 85 of the Late Tang period (built in 862–67 CE), Cave 61 of the Five Dynasties period (built in 951–57 CE), Cave 98 (built in 924 CE), Cave 55 of the Song dynasty period (built around 962 CE), and the Lotus Sutra paintings are all in this form of central axis symmetry, expressing the extremely rich content of the Lotus Sutra. In addition to highlighting the central scene of the Buddha expounding the Law, the specific content of the various chapters of the Lotus Sutra are expressed more comprehensively and in greater detail. For example, on the ceiling of the southern slope of Cave 85, a total of 106 inscriptions related to Lotus Sutra paintings from 24 chapters of the Lotus Sutra are preserved. It can be said to be the most abundant and richest content of Lotus Sutra paintings in the caves. In addition, the form of screen paintings that appeared in Cave 76 belongs to the Song dynasty period. Eight screens were used to express the main content of the Lotus Sutra. This is the only example of this form in the caves.

Due to the enduring popularity of the Lotus Sutra, believers were very fond of content related to Avalokiteśvara in the sutra. In the Tang period, the content of ‘The Universal Gateway of Avalokiteśvara’ chapter was copied separately and called the Avalokiteśvara Sutra or Guanyin Sutra. In the Dunhuang murals, there is also a separate depiction of the content of ‘The Universal Gateway of Avalokiteśvara’ chapter, that is, Guanyin Sutra paintings. The composition of these paintings consists of three parts: (1) Avalokiteśvara’s standing image; (2) Avalokiteśvara’s 33 transformations; (3) Avalokiteśvara rescuing those in distress and suffering. The Dunhuang murals have 24 instances of Guanyin Sutra paintings, the first of which appeared in the Sui dynasty period. By the time of the Tang dynasty, the Guanyin Sutra paintings had gradually grown in scale. For example, on the southern wall of Cave 205, with Avalokiteśvara at the center, banners on both sides show scenes of Avalokiteśvara appearing in person to preach and rescuing those in distress and suffering.

The scale of the Guanyin Sutra paintings on the southern wall of Cave 45 of the Mogao Grottoes is larger (Fig. 4). Avalokiteśvara stands in the center of the wall. The upper part, on both sides of it, shows its ‘33 transformations’, which are scenes where it assumed different identities to preach the Law, and the lower part shows Avalokiteśvara rescuing those in distress and suffering. In the part showing rescuing of people in distress and suffering, one finds Avalokiteśvara saving people from fires, shipwrecks, and robbery, as well as assisting *Hu* merchants encountering robbers. These artworks are extremely realistic, and are resources for studying life and society in the High Tang period.



Fig. 4 Southern wall of Mogao Cave 45, Guanyin Sutra painting, High Tang period

The Lotus Sutra Paintings as a Record of Life and Society of the Time

Due to the widespread transmission of the Lotus Sutra among the people, there are abundant depictions of life and society in Lotus Sutra paintings compared to paintings of other sutras. Compared with Western Pure Land sutra paintings, which mainly express the world of the Buddha, the Lotus Sutra paintings place their emphasis on expressions of daily life in the human world. This is probably also because the Lotus Sutra often uses stories of daily life as metaphors to make it easy for ordinary believers to understand the principles of Buddhism being expounded. Therefore, these stories or scenes are also expressed in the murals, which are particularly life-like. This makes the Lotus Sutra paintings full of realistic images depicting life and society which provide us with highly detailed information about the social history of that time.

The 'Simile and Parable' chapter of the Lotus Sutra describes several children who were so engrossed in their games that they did not realize their house was on fire. The elder in the story uses three carts to lure the children out of the fire in order to save them. This scene is an important content of Lotus Sutra paintings. Usually, a larger house is drawn, and some children are depicted singing, dancing, and having fun. For example, on the southern slopes of the ceilings of Mogao Caves 420 and 885, paintings show the architectural structure of houses of that time. In the mural on the southern slope of the ceiling of Cave 85, the house of the elder in the 'Belief and Understanding' chapter is drawn in more detail (Fig. 5). It depicts two doorways to a large courtyard that houses a double-story building within. There is also a stable next to the courtyard, showing what mansions belonging to the wealthy looked like. The ox cart and deer cart outside the house can also be seen as representations of vehicles used during the Tang era.

In the Lotus Sutra paintings on the northern wall of Mogao Cave 23 and the southern wall of Cave 61, there are scenes of farmers at work. In particular, the north wall of Cave 23 depicts a vivid scene of farmers working in the rain. In addition, scenes showing believers worshipping stupas or listening to monks preaching the Law are also very common. On the lower side of the farming painting on the northern wall of Cave 23, there are also scenes that show children gathering sand to form a stupa, and believers worshipping in front of the Buddhist pagoda with music and dance (Fig. 6).

In the Guanyin Sutra paintings also, there are many scenes of secular

life. For example, the Guanyin Sutra painting in Cave 45 shows the well-known scene of *Hu* merchants encountering robbers (Fig. 7). A group of merchants are walking in the mountains with their donkeys, when suddenly bandits brandishing knives come out from behind the rocks. The merchants are terrified and trembling, and their belongings are scattered all over the ground. This scene vividly depicts how merchants on the ancient Silk Road often encountered mishaps. At the bottom of the painting of *Hu* merchants encountering robbers, a nautical

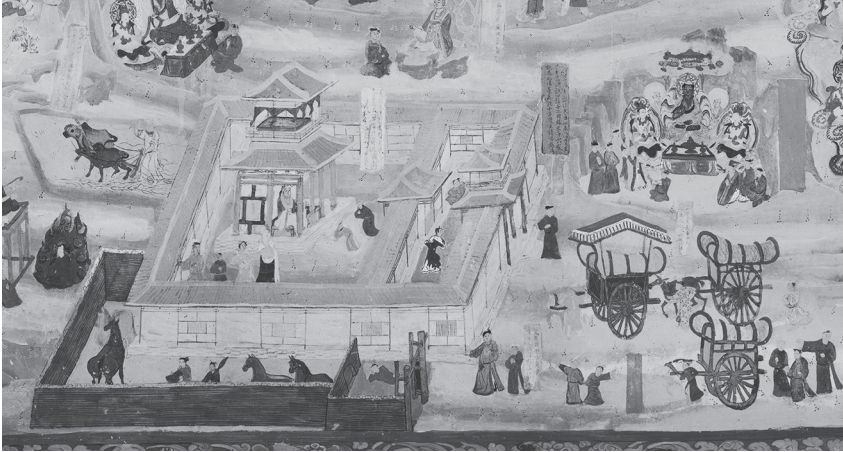


Fig. 5 Southern slope of the ceiling of Mogao Cave 85 showing the house in the 'Belief and Understanding' chapter of the Lotus Sutra, Late Tang period



Fig. 6 Northern wall of Mogao Cave 23, farming in the rain, High Tang period

chart is drawn. There is also a large sailing ship full of people, where several helmsmen are struggling to steer the ship, but they are being attacked by various monsters from around the ship.

The sutra paintings of the Lotus Sutra on the south wall of Cave 159 and Cave 12 depict scenes of war from the ‘Peaceful Practices’ chapter. The mural in Cave 159 shows cavalry in action: the cavalry at the rear vigorously pursues its enemy while the riders in the cavalry in front turn around to shoot arrows from their bows. It is a thrilling scene. The ‘war mural’ in Cave 12 depicts an even grander scene. Two forces are fighting in front of a moat. The cavalry in the city is charging ahead while the soldiers on the other side are furiously shooting arrows. There are wounded horses by a river and several soldiers who have fallen into the river, struggling against the currents (Fig. 8). As a graphic reference material, this painting provides a vivid portrayal of war.

Paintings of content from ‘The Parable of the Phantom City’ chapter in the Lotus Sutra often show a group of people traveling on a treacherous wooden path along the steep slopes of a mountain in search of treasure. This signifies the arduous endeavors of the treasure seekers. Quite a few cave murals contain images of the wooden path, among which the murals in Cave 6 from the Five Dynasties period are the best preserved (Fig. 9). There are winding plank roads between the cliffs. The path’s beams extend from the cliff edge, covered with planks, and



Fig. 7 Southern wall of Mogao Cave 45, *Hu* merchants encountering robbers, High Tang period



Fig. 8 Southern wall of Mogao Cave 12, 'Peaceful Practices' chapter, Late Tang period

railings are set along the edge. The travelers are passing slowly along the wooden path, carrying their bags on their backs. A weary traveler in the distance lies on the ground, resting with his head on his bag.

Thus, one can see how Lotus Sutra paintings show vibrant scenes of the life and society of the time, including all aspects of people's basic needs—clothing, food, shelter, and transportation.

Conclusion

The Lotus Sutra has a long history of transmission in China. According to research by Fang Guangchang, there are more than 5000 scrolls or fragments of the Lotus Sutra among the Buddhist scriptures unearthed from the Library Cave in Dunhuang.⁵ Thus, it can be seen that the Lotus Sutra has been highly valued by the people



Fig. 9 Mogao Cave 6, 'The Parable of the Phantom City' chapter, Five Dynasties period

since ancient times. The Lotus Sutra teaches that all living beings can become Buddhas and the mission of Tathāgata is to guide all living beings to attain Buddhahood on their own. This idea has greatly reduced the distance between ordinary people and Buddhism, enabling the practitioners to feel the existence of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas around them, and at the same time, strengthening the awareness that all living beings are equal. During the construction of the Dunhuang Caves, a period spanning a thousand years, content from the Lotus Sutra was to be found in paintings from every era and became especially popular from the Tang period.

Unlike early murals that only used images of the Buddha to represent beliefs, sutra paintings that were painted over large surfaces created an amalgamation of scenes of Buddha lands with scenes from the human world. There are scenes of mountains and waterways, vegetation, houses and other structures, carriages, and ships, which are realistic scenes that can be found in daily life. There are also a large number of paintings depicting scenes from the daily lives of ordinary people, which include scenes of farmers working the land, merchants traveling, monks preaching the sutras and the Law, and soldiers on a battlefield, even scenes of children playing games. In this way, it would be difficult to distinguish between the real world that humans live in and the ideal Buddha lands. This demonstrates that the relationship between the Lotus Sutra and the lives and society of ordinary people is a very close one.

Viewing these historical scenes today, we not only gain an understanding of Buddhism, history, and culture while experiencing the outstanding artistic standards of ancient paintings, we can also see the brilliance of the ideas of equality, coexistence, and Buddhist wisdom found in the Lotus Sutra.

Notes

- ¹ The earliest Chinese translation of the Lotus Sutra in China is the 10-fascicle or volume, 27-chapter *Zheng fahua jing* 正法華經 (Lotus Sutra of the Correct Law) translated by Dharmaraksha 竺法護 and Nie Chengyuan 聶承遠 in the seventh year of the Taikang period of the Western Jin dynasty (286 CE). In the eighth year of Yao Qin or the Later Qin era (406 CE), Kumārajīva 鳩摩羅什 translated it into a work of seven fascicles or volumes consisting of 28 chapters and called it *Miaofa lianhua jing* 妙法蓮華經 (Lotus Sutra of the Wonderful Law). In the first year of Renshou of the Sui dynasty (601 CE), Jnanagupta 闍那崛多 and Dharmagupta 笈多 produced the *Tianpin miaofa lianhua jing* 添品妙法蓮華經 (Supplemented Lotus Sutra of the Wonderful Law). The Lotus Sutra that has been most widely transmitted to this day is the Kumārajīva version.
- ² This calculation is based on Shi Pingting's 施萍婷 'Mogaoku jingbian tongji biao

莫高窟經變畫統計表’ (Table of Sutra Paintings in the Mogao Caves) in *Dunhuang Academy China*, ed. 敦煌研究院主編, *Dunhuang yishu dacidian* 敦煌藝術大辭典 (Dictionary of Dunhuang Art) (Shanghai: Shanghai Cidian Chubanshe, 2019), 213.

³ See He Shizhe 賀世哲, ‘Dunhuang bihuazhong de fahua jingbian 敦煌壁畫中的法華經變’ (Paintings of the Lotus Sutra in Dunhuang Mural Paintings) in *Dunhuang Academy China*, ed. 敦煌研究院主編, *Dunhuang yan jiu wen ji Dunhuang shiku jingbian* 敦煌研究文集 敦煌石窟經變篇 (Collection of Dunhuang Researches: Edition on Dunhuang Caves Sutra Paintings) (Lanzhou, China: Gansu minzu chubanshe, 2000), 148–53, and He Shizhe 賀世哲, *Dunhuang shiku lungao* 敦煌石窟論稿 (Thesis on the Dunhuang Caves) (Lanzhou, China: Gansu minzu chubanshe, 2004), 135–24.

⁴ He Shizhe 賀世哲, *Dunhuang shiku quanji 7 Fahuajing hua juan* 敦煌石窟全集 7 法華經畫卷 (Collected Works of Dunhuang Caves 7: Paintings of the Lotus Sutra) (Hong Kong: The Commercial Press, 1999), 57.

⁵ Fang Guangchang 方廣錫, ‘Dunhuang yishuzhong de fahuajing zhushu 敦煌遺書中的〈法華經〉注疏’ (Annotations and Commentaries on the Lotus Sutra among the Lost Texts of Dunhuang), *Shijie zongjiao yanjiu* 世界宗教研究 (Studies in World Religion), 1998 (2nd issue).

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