

An Echo from the Ancient Past:

Depictions of the Lotus Sutra in Dunhuang Murals and
Their Message for the Contemporary World

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1. Dunhuang Caves: Cultural Treasure on the Silk Road

1.1 Located on the Silk Road

DUNHUANG is located at the western end of the Hexi Corridor in China's Gansu Province. South of it are the Qilian mountain range and the northern rim of the Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau. To its north lies the Gobi Desert in the southern part of the Mongolian Plateau and to its west the Kumtag Desert, covering about 31,200 sq. km, at the eastern edge of the vast Taklamakan Desert. Snowmelt from the Qilian Mountains feeds the oasis that is Dunhuang, otherwise embraced by the Gobi.

Archaeological evidence indicates that there was human activity in this small Dunhuang oasis 4000 years ago, during the Neolithic period. Various peoples including the Scythian (Saka), Wusun, Yuezhi and Xiongnu were known to have lived in this western region earlier than 2000 BCE. They often waged battles to control the Hexi and Dunhuang areas. One classic novel says, "As each one leaves, another takes stage."¹ Around 200 BCE, the Xiongnu, in succession, drove out the Yuezhi and Wusun peoples, who used to reside in the Dunhuang–Hexi area to the north of the Tianshan mountains, thus controlling the vast lands—including Dunhuang—west of the Yellow River. The Yuezhi people continued to move north until they settled in the valleys of the Amu Darya and Syr Darya in modern Uzbekistan. Their descendants established the Kushan Empire in Bactria—in the northern and western parts of modern Afghanistan, an area influenced by Hellenistic culture—and greatly facilitated the eastern transmission of Buddhism and Buddhist art. After the Xiongnu occupied the Dunhuang–Hexi area, they continued to raid various parts of the Han empire. To establish contact with the Great Yuezhi and Wusun peoples, Emperor Wu of Han twice sent Zhang Qian, Marquis of Bowang, on expeditions to the Western Regions in 138

BCE and 119 BCE. Although Zhang Qian did not achieve the desired outcome, he had, through these expeditions, attained a deep understanding of the geography and culture of the Western Regions and farther areas such as Persia and the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea. Upon his return, Zhang Qian reported his findings to Emperor Wu, thus fortifying the monarch's resolve to defeat the Xiongnu and extend the Han domain to the Western Regions.

Around 119 BCE, the Han army finally drove the Xiongnu out of the Hexi area. Dunhuang and the Hexi Corridor thus came under the control of the Han empire, which established the four Hexi commanderies of Wuwei, Zhangye, Jiuquan and Dunhuang. At the same time, the Han empire connected parts of the Great Wall that were intermittently built by the Qin during the Spring and Autumn–Warring States period, extending it to the Yanze (Lop Nur) region west of Dunhuang. The Han also established two major gateways, the Yumen Pass and the Yang Pass, north-west and south-west respectively of the Great Wall, near Dunhuang, using them to guard the northern and southern routes that led to China. At this point, China's connection to the world west of it was established. Heading out of the Yumen Pass and Yang Pass, via the northern and southern routes bordering Taklamakan Desert, and traveling across the Pamir Mountains, one could reach Central Asia, West Asia, South Asia, Asia Minor and, even farther, the regions of the Mediterranean Sea and North Africa. Heading east, one would pass through the Hexi Corridor to arrive at Chang'an and the Central Plains. This great passageway linking the east and west is the renowned "Silk Road". Dunhuang became a strategic point on the Silk Road because of its location at the intersection between the northern and southern routes. Before the use of maritime channels, this overland passage was the main link between China and the world in the west. However, records and archaeological finds indicate that there were sporadic commercial exchanges between China and the world in the west even before the establishment of the Silk Road.

It must be mentioned that Zhang Qian's trailblazing expeditions to the Western Regions are milestones in the history of East–West contact. Their influence was far-reaching to the extent that 700 years later, in the Tang period, Buddhists in Dunhuang appropriated these historical events to demonstrate the early transmission of Buddhism into China (Fig. 1).

1.2 An outline of Dunhuang cave art

The Silk Road was not only a prominent passageway for people and trade, it was also an important one for cultural exchange and integration.



Fig. 1 Zhang Qian's expedition to the Western Regions (north wall, Mogao Cave 323)

With the opening and flourishing of trade along the Silk Road, many people gathered at Dunhuang, an important hub of exchange. These people included tradesmen, envoys, missionaries and artisans from places such as India, Persia and Sogdiana. As time went by, Dunhuang naturally developed into a multicultural melting pot on the Silk Road. Monks from India and the Western Regions came to propagate Buddhism and Chinese monks heading towards India in search of Buddhism also passed through Dunhuang. Shakyamuni, the founder of Buddhism, lived in the sixth–fifth century BCE, around the time of Confucius during the Spring and Autumn period in China. The ideas of these two historical figures would come to influence the whole of Asia in the following 2000 years. A Han bamboo strip of the first century CE, unearthed in the 1990s at the Xuanquanzhi ruins some 60 km east of Dunhuang, records a place called Xiaofutuli. *Futu* means a Buddhist stupa. From this, we know that Buddhism had been transmitted to Dunhuang at the latest by the Eastern Han.

According to monastic and secular historical records, Zhufacheng, a disciple of Dharmaraksha, the eminent Yuezhi monk also known as the Bodhisattva of Dunhuang, established a monastery and taught his students at Dunhuang as early as the Western Jin period. One of the three extant Lotus Sutra translations, *The Lotus Sutra of the Correct Law* (*Zheng fahua jing* 正法華經), is Dharmaraksha's work at the Qingmen of Chang'an. It is precisely due to the efforts of Dharmaraksha and numerous devotees that Buddhist culture gradually flourished in Dunhuang.

The following description of Dunhuang is found in the section 'On Buddhism and Daoism' of the *Book of Wei*, a work completed in the mid-sixth century CE: "Dunhuang borders the Western Regions. Monastics and laypeople get along with each other well. Many of its



Fig. 2 Cliff face of the Mogao Grottoes

old-style villages have stupas and monasteries nearby.”² Finally, a monk of exemplary conduct arrived on the western bank of the Dangquan River Valley at the eastern foot of Mount Mingsha in 366 CE. On top of Mount Sanwei on the other side, he saw myriad rays of light. He felt that each ray of light contained a Buddha image and thought it was an ideal place for meditation. He excavated the first cave in the area, marking the beginning of the Mogao Grottoes. From then until the 14th century, spanning a thousand years, the continuous efforts of people under various dynastic regimes—of the Sixteen Kingdoms, the Northern Dynasties, Sui, Tang, Five Dynasties, Song, Xixia and Yuan—resulted in 735 caves, with 492 of them containing murals. What are known as the Dunhuang Grottoes today actually consist of—apart from the Mogao Grottoes—the Western Thousand Buddha Caves west of Dunhuang, the Yulin Caves and Eastern Thousand Buddha Caves of Guazhou County, and the Five Temple Caves ruins of Subei Mongol Autonomous County. Mogao is the most representative of Dunhuang Grottoes.

Dunhuang Cave Art is a combination of three elements—grotto architecture, statues and murals. Figure 2 shows the current cliff face of the Mogao Grottoes. The current facade of the cliff from which the Mogao Grottoes were excavated is the result of structural work carried out in the 1960s. Representative of Mogao Grottoes architecture is the 35-m-high statue depicting a seated Maitreya shown in Figure 3, who is housed in a nine-level pavilion-like building. First built during the Tang period, this structure seems to be related to Empress Wu Zetian’s edict to have a Great Cloud Monastery built in every prefecture. From the



Fig. 3 A seated Maitreya housed in a nine-level pavilion-like building



Fig. 4 Buddha in meditation (Mogao Cave 259)

religious perspective, Buddhist statues, which are objects of respect and worship, are the main constituents of the grottoes. According to calculations, there are as many as 2400 painted Buddhist statues in the grottoes, consisting mainly of images of Buddhas, bodhisattvas, the Buddha's disciples, heavenly kings and protective deities. Figure 4 shows a statue of the Buddha in meditation, produced during the Western Liang period. Its face bears a characteristic subtle smile of serene tranquillity, expressing a shade of Eastern beauty. For this reason, tourists have called it the "Mona Lisa of Dunhuang". Eastern statues usually express subtle beauty, rarely displaying the female form uninhibitedly. However, works that candidly express the beauty of the human physique can be found in the Dunhuang Grottoes. Consider the exposed upper body of the Tang-period seated bodhisattva statue shown in Figure 5. Although its upper limbs are missing, the beauty of the human physique displayed in the well-built, well-proportioned chest and abdomen can rival that of Greek sculpture. For this reason, it is also called the "Venus of Dunhuang". The 15.5-m-long reclining Buddha statue in Cave 158, which was excavated during the middle Tang period (786–848), combines the ideal beauty of Indian Buddhist art with traditional Chinese beauty. It may be considered as representative of Dunhuang painted statues.

The murals of Dunhuang fall into seven broad categories: (1) figural paintings, which include those of Shakyamuni Buddha, his disciples,



Fig. 5 Bodhisattva statue
(Mogao Cave 205)



Fig. 6 Painting depicting the monk in
search of scriptures (Yulin Cave 3)

devotees and Buddhist deities; (2) paintings of Buddhist narratives, which include those relating to events in Shakyamuni Buddha's life, Jataka stories recounting his previous lives as a bodhisattva exemplifying Buddhist practices such as forbearance and giving, and Avadana stories recounting the Buddha's life after his awakening; (3) paintings of episodes from Buddhist history, such as historical events and legends; (4) paintings from Chinese mythology, mainly images of legendary gods and demons; (5) paintings of scriptural scenes, such as those depicting the main teachings and contents of certain sutras; (6) paintings of patrons, such as those who gave donations for building certain caves or producing images; and (7) decorative patterns that adorn the architecture of the grottoes, such as altars, painted statues and motifs delineating different sections of murals. Many will relate Dunhuang murals with images of *apsaras* (flying beings), which have become a symbol of Dunhuang artworks. Dunhuang *apsaras* are mainly depicted as drifting and trailing streamers in the air to convey the lightness and grace of their flight. Some scholars also believe that the architectural style of majestic structures found in Tang Buddhist illustrations of the Pure Land is derived from the real palaces of Chang'an. Among the Dunhuang murals, some are based on the eminent Tang monk Xuanzang's travels in Central Asia and India in search of Buddhism, such as the Xixia-period painting shown in Figure 6, that is found in Cave 3 of the Yulin Grottoes, depicting the monk in his search of



Fig. 7 Horse chariot-borne solar deity
(west wall, Mogao Cave 285)

Buddhist scriptures. In this image, one finds the Tang monk in monastic robe, a white “dragon” horse carrying a baggage of scriptures and the monkey king Sun Wukong. Not only do Dunhuang murals depict religious themes, they also present the unlimited richness of various aspects of social and economic life in different periods, such as agricultural production, trade and commerce, astrology, music, dance, clothing and folk customs related to marriage and funerals. Therefore, the Dunhuang Grottoes are indeed a treasure trove found

within the desert, and can be called a “Museum on the Wall” and an “Encyclopaedia on the Wall”.

1.3 The pluralism of Dunhuang cave art

Located at a place of strategic importance on the Silk Road, Dunhuang accommodated not only the Han people from the Central Plains and hinterland but also minority groups from the Western Regions and even people from places lying farther, such as India and Persia. The culture of Dunhuang borrowed elements from India, Central Asia, West Asia and even places as remote as Greece and Rome. As is well known, Hellenistic culture had a far-reaching influence on the ancient Orient due to the eastward expansion of the Macedonian king Alexander the Great, during the period 334–323 BCE. This gave birth to Gandharan Buddhist art in north-western India around the first century CE. Gandharan Buddhist art exhibits distinctive Hellenistic features in its fashioning of the human form as well as clothing patterns. These cultural elements from such remote places were not directly transmitted to Dunhuang but reached there via the art of Asia Minor, Persia–West Asia and Central Asia. Not only can one discern artistic elements from India, Persia and Central Asia in Dunhuang murals, even Ionic and Doric elements of Greek architecture are visible. The murals also depict the Buddhist “goodly sounding bird” (Kalavinka), which resembles the Siren of Greek mythology—a creature with a human head and the body of a bird that

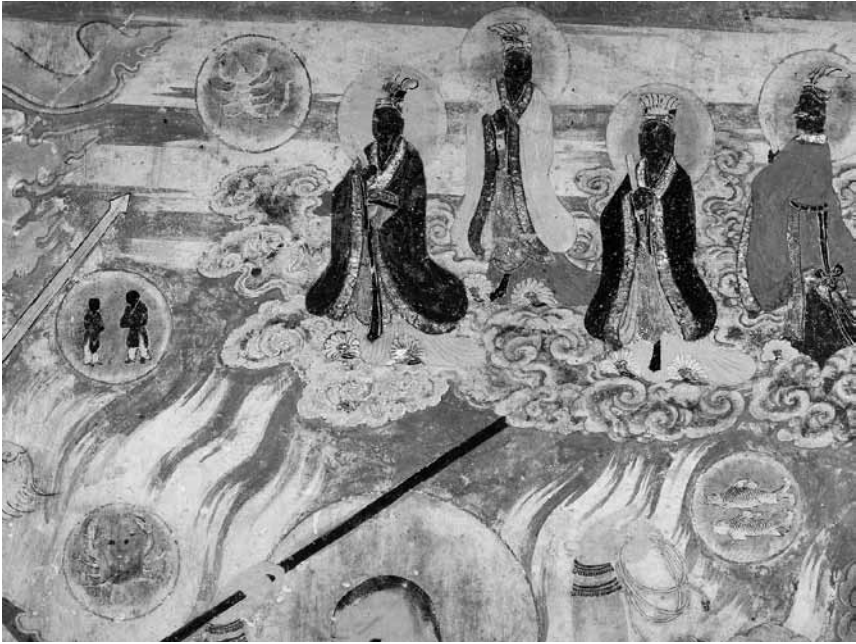


Fig. 8 Map of celestial objects (south wall, Mogao Cave 61)

lures sailors with music and song. The horse-riding solar deity depicted in Dunhuang murals resembles the horse chariot-borne Apollo or Helios of Greek mythology; Mithra, the sun god of Persian Zoroastrianism; and Sūrya, the Vedic sun god (Fig. 7).

On the walls along the corridor of Mogao Cave 61 are images of the 12 ecliptic constellations, with some resembling western descriptions of zodiac constellations such as Scorpius, Gemini, Cancer and Pisces (Fig. 8).

Furthermore, scriptures, sacred images and crucifixes of Nestorianism, a branch of Christianity (also known as Jingjiao in ancient China); Manichean scriptures in Persian; and an image of a Zoroastrian goddess were found in the Dunhuang Library Cave and caves in the northern part of the Mogao Grottoes. Until the 13th century, when the Italian merchant Marco Polo (1254–1324) passed through Dunhuang, these religions were still extant. Indeed, one can say that the pluralism and inclusiveness embodied in the art of Dunhuang also resonated among the peoples of different cultural and religious backgrounds who settled there. The cultural artefacts discovered in the Dunhuang Library Cave also reflect the pluralism of Dunhuang culture and art. The Library Cave (Fig. 9), which was discovered accidentally by the Daoist

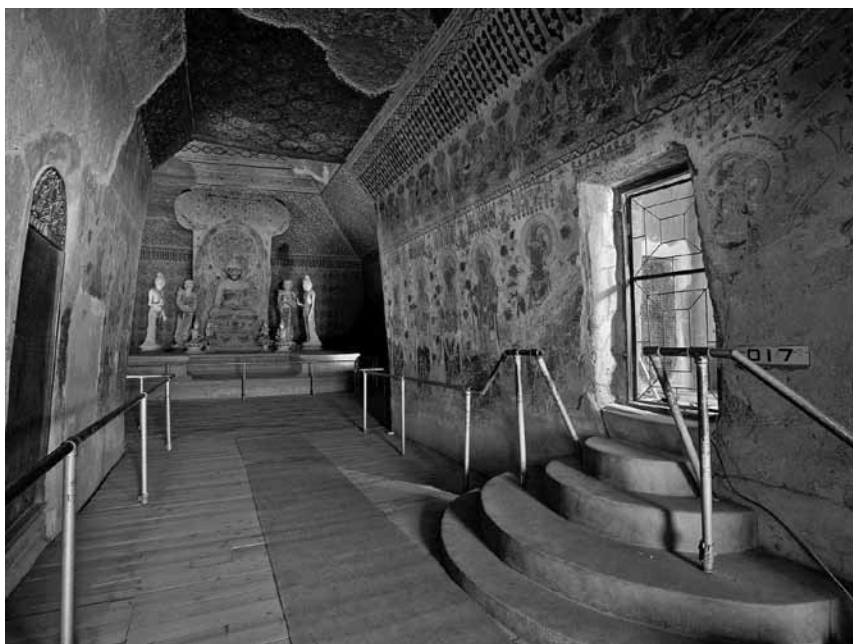


Fig. 9 Exterior of the Dunhuang Library Cave

priest Wang Yanlu on 23 June 1900, preserved about 50,000 ancient documents and paintings from the fourth to the 11th century.

More than 90 per cent of these are Buddhist scriptures. Naturally, as mentioned earlier, there are some scriptures and artefacts of other religions as well. As it is well known, after the discovery of the Dunhuang Library Cave, foreign explorers and scholars arrived in droves. As a result, the cultural artefacts from the Library Cave are now scattered around 30 countries and regions across the world. Apart from China, the bulk of that discovery is now preserved in England, France and Russia. At the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, the Western world's impression of Chinese people and Chinese culture was limited to stereotypical images of the queue hairstyle, "watermelon-like" skullcaps and bound feet of women. After the Dunhuang Grottoes and the Library Cave were discovered, together with artefacts of earlier discoveries in archaeological ruins such as Xinjiang's Loulan (Krorän or Kroraina) and Miran that showed traces of ancient European civilizations including those of Greece and Rome, the Western scholarly world came to have a better understanding of an open period in Chinese history characterized by ancient Chinese texts as being all-inclusive like the sea contains the flows of many rivers. This also brought about

another wave of interest in investigating and researching Eastern and Chinese cultures, finally resulting in the birth of another international field of study—Dunhuang studies. One hundred years later, Dunhuang studies remains a vibrant area of inquiry. Through the tireless efforts of international scholars, we have basically resolved issues regarding the contents of the Dunhuang murals, and are now resolving issues related to the reasons behind their production. Furthermore, as investigations into the history and culture of the Silk Road have thrived, Dunhuang studies has become part of research on the Silk Road and is being further assimilated into research on ancient Eastern and Western cultural exchange.

The diversity and all-inclusiveness manifested by Dunhuang cave art is in fundamental unison with the principal value espoused in the Lotus Sutra—the equality of all sentient beings and the acceptance of differences among people. I personally think that, based on this alone, we who exist in the contemporary world should learn from the ancients and derive some useful inspiration from the art of the Dunhuang Grottoes. Through some images, I would like to share with you my thoughts on the inspiration we can derive from Dunhuang depictions of the Lotus Sutra.

2. Depictions of the Lotus Sutra in Dunhuang Murals and Their Message for the Contemporary World

2.1 The Lotus Sutra and its main teachings

We know that after the emergence of the Lotus Sutra around the first century CE, it was transmitted to China, Korea and Japan via the Silk Road, influencing the Buddhist beliefs of these countries. Today, within the Asian regions where Mahayana Buddhism was transmitted, images, texts and artefacts of the Lotus Sutra are preserved, reflecting the far-reaching influence it had on Buddhism in Asia. According to Chinese Buddhist historical records, the Lotus Sutra was translated six times. Three of these translations are still extant. They are *The Lotus Sutra of the Correct Law* (*Zheng fahua jing* 正法華經) translated by Dharmaraksha during the Western Jin period, *The Lotus Sutra of the Wonderful Law* (*Miaofa lianhua jing* 妙法蓮華經) translated by Kumarajiva during the Later Qin, and *The Supplemented Lotus Sutra of the Wonderful Law* (*Tianpin Miaofa lianhua jing* 添品妙法蓮華經) translated by Jnanagupta and Dharmagupta during the Sui. Among these, Kumarajiva's translation is the most popular and influential. This translation, as we have it today, comes in seven rolls and 28 chapters.

Kumarajiva's 406 CE translation, which originally comprised seven rolls and 27 chapters, increased to 28 chapters during the Northern Qi when the story of Devadatta in the 11th chapter, 'The Emergence of the Treasure Tower', was extracted to become a separate chapter.

In addition to its linguistic elegance, metaphorical efficacy and rich imagery, Kumarajiva's translation of the Lotus Sutra is the most popular among the three extant Chinese translations mainly because the translated teachings strike a chord in the hearts of the people. The Lotus Sutra has two main teachings: one, all sentient beings have the Buddha nature; and the other, the unlimited lifespan of the Buddha. Although the former is not directly mentioned, it is embedded between the lines in chapters of the Lotus Sutra. The latter is expressed mainly through the person of Many Treasures (Prabhutaratna) Buddha, who attained nirvana in the remote past but appeared in the Lotus Assembly to explain that Shakyamuni is not the only Buddha and that the lifespan of Buddhas is unlimited. Shakyamuni's appearance in this world and his nirvana are the Buddha's display of expedient means to teach and convert sentient beings. The sutra's widespread currency is mainly due to the fact that these two teachings deeply impacted the people.

2.2 Depictions of the Lotus Sutra in the Dunhuang Grottoes

The Lotus Sutra also exerted great influence on the Buddhist beliefs and art of ancient Dunhuang. Based on calculations, among the Buddhist scriptures discovered in the Dunhuang Library Cave, there are as many as 6000 manuscripts of the Lotus Sutra and related commentaries—the largest number related to any sutra found in the cave. As many as 99 of the Dunhuang caves directly depict themes related to the Lotus Sutra, while 31 have content related to the various chapters of the sutra. The Lotus Sutra images of the Dunhuang Grottoes are mainly based on Kumarajiva's translation of the sutra. They have their beginnings in a Western Wei cave of the mid-fifth century including a two Buddhas form (Fig. 10).

During the Northern Dynasties period (386–581), the "two Buddhas" (Shakyamuni Buddha and Many Treasures Buddha) form the main theme of Dunhuang Lotus Sutra images. The allegory of the two Buddhas who sit next to each other first appeared in Chapter 11, 'The Emergence of the Treasure Tower', of the Lotus Sutra. Because it creatively expresses the abstract Buddhist idea of the eternity of the Buddha body and the unlimited lifespan of the Buddha, it is also the most widespread of early Chinese images of the Lotus Sutra. Images of the two Buddhas seated next to each other are found in corresponding



Fig. 10 Two Buddhas seated next to each other (niche of the west wall central pillar, Mogao Cave 259)

position on the two opposite—north and south—walls of Mogao Cave 285, which was completed around 539 CE. By the Sui Dynasty (581–618), Dunhuang images of the Lotus Sutra evolved and were expressed in the artistic form of Lotus Sutra tableaux. A sutra tableau consists of depictions of the main contents of a sutra in the form of pictorial panels. For instance, Lotus Sutra tableaux are found on the ceiling of Sui-period Cave 420 and in high Tang-period (706–86) Cave 23, where they run continuously from the north wall to east wall, then to the south wall. From the beginning of the Tibetan occupation of Dunhuang in the middle Tang period, Lotus Sutra tableaux depicting individual scenes from its various chapters became the mainstay of Dunhuang Lotus Sutra images. The basic composition of such tableaux presents scenes of the Assembly on Eagle Peak and the Ceremony in the Air as centrepieces. The other details envelope these scenes in the form of a U shape, from the left to the right (Fig. 11). The number of chapters expressed in each tableau varies; for instance, the tableau on the ceiling of Cave 85 of later Tang period (848–907) displays the contents of more than 24 chapters (Fig. 12). Until the 14th century, up to the Yuan period, images of the Lotus Sutra were still being produced in the Dunhuang caves.

2.3 Dunhuang depictions of the Lotus Sutra and their message for the contemporary world

We can derive three messages from Dunhuang images of the Lotus Sutra.

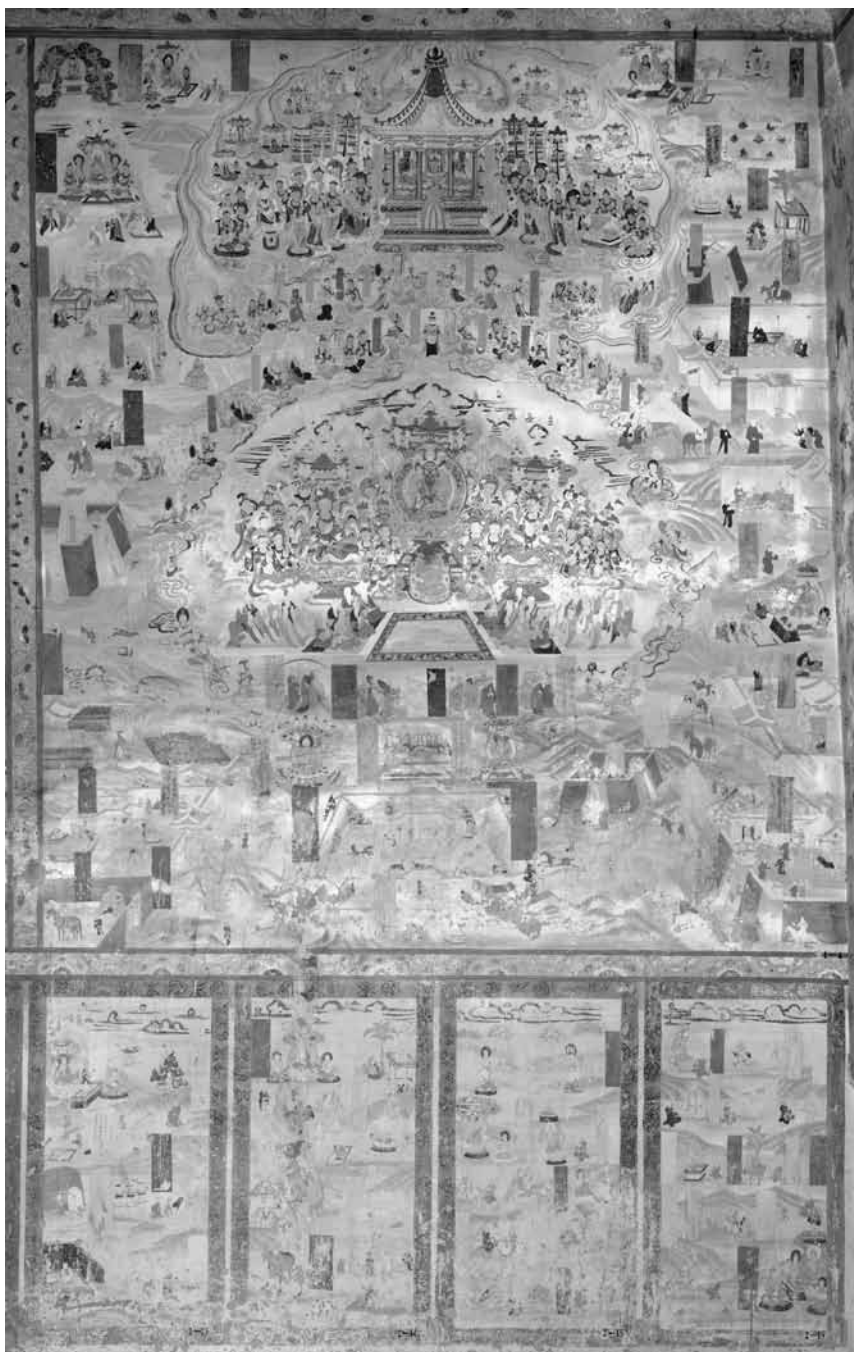


Fig. 11 Lotus Sutra tableau (south wall, Mogao Cave 237)



Fig. 12 Lotus Sutra tableau (south ceiling slope, Mogao Cave 85)

First, the Lotus Sutra’s emphasis on the “undifferentiated” Buddha nature tells us that all sentient beings are equal. Chapter 2, ‘Expedient Means’, clearly explains the purpose of the Buddha’s advent:

The Buddhas, the World-Honored Ones, wish to open the door of Buddha wisdom to all living beings, to allow them to attain purity. That is why they appear in the world. They wish to show the Buddha wisdom to living beings, and therefore they appear in the world. They wish to cause living beings to awaken to the Buddha wisdom, and therefore they appear in the world. They wish to induce living beings to enter the path of Buddha wisdom, and therefore they appear in the world. Shariputra, this is the one great reason for which the Buddhas appear in the world.³

In other words, all sentient beings can attain Buddhahood through the Buddha’s teachings. That is to say, with regard to the attainment of Buddhahood, all sentient beings are equal; they all have the original nature for attaining Buddhahood. In the world of the Lotus Sutra, all sentient beings, whether they are high officials or nobility, peddlers or commoners, or even non-humans, are equal and have dignity, and should be respected. This teaching of equality, which runs through the Lotus Sutra, is also illustrated by images of the Lotus Sutra in the Dunhuang murals. Dunhuang images of the Lotus Sutra contain various forms of sentient beings. Not only are there images of noble beings such as Buddhas, bodhisattvas, their disciples, heavenly hosts and monks, there are also images of emperors, officials and their families, farmers, commoners, children, men and women, bandits, and even wild beasts such as wolves, insects, tigers and panthers. These are the sentient

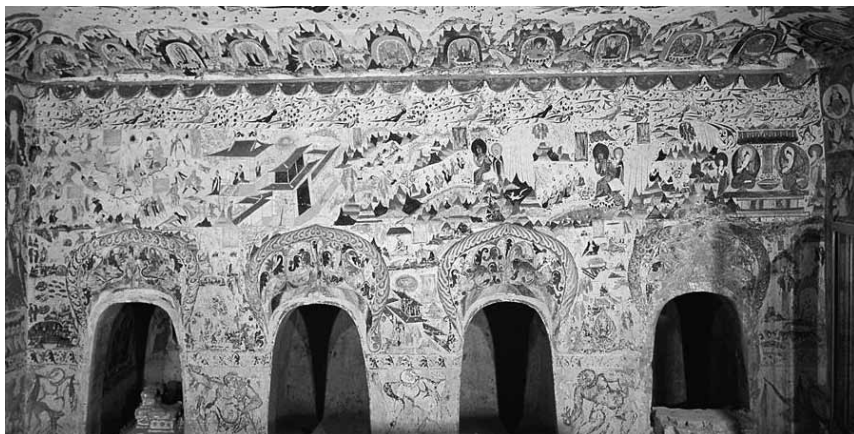


Fig. 13 Story of the five hundred bandits (south wall, Mogao Cave 285)

beings in the Lotus Sutra; they all possess the nature for achieving Buddhahood. For instance, on the entire south wall in Mogao Cave 285 is drawn the ‘Story of the Five Hundred Bandits’ from the Mahāparinirvāna Sūtra (Fig. 13). Following this is a picture of the two Buddhas seated next to each other.

Further, on the lower part of the south wall of the four meditation spaces are drawn the Buddhist stories of the sister of Elder Bhadrīka, the Buddha’s deliverance of the evil ox, a novice monk taking his own life to observe the precepts and the Brahmin who offered his life to learn a verse. This combination of stories illustrates the egalitarian view espoused in the Devadatta chapter of the Lotus Sutra on the possibility of evil people, women and non-humans attaining Buddhahood. These are in turn depicted in a scene from this chapter, in which the dragon king’s daughter and bodhisattvas emerge from the Eastern Ocean Dragon Palace, found in the early Tang Lotus Sutra tableau in Mogao Cave 331 (Fig. 14).

The artists chose to illustrate this scene in a limited space, indicating a profound understanding of the Lotus Sutra’s unprecedented advocacy of the idea that women and other sentient beings also have the fundamental nature for attaining Buddhahood. In later Dunhuang Lotus Sutra tableaux, there are many images depicting the contents of Chapter 12, ‘Devadatta’, such as the dragon girl’s emergence from the dragon palace and her offering of a jewel to the Buddha, indicating that this teaching of the Lotus Sutra on the equality of all to attain Buddhahood had deeply influenced the laypeople of that time. Also, in Dunhuang depictions of the Parable of the Burning House, the three carts are



Fig. 14 Chapter on Devadatta (east wall, Mogao Cave 331)

drawn by a goat, a deer and an ox. Some depictions even have an additional cart drawn by a large white ox (Fig. 15). Just as the elder leading his sons out of the burning house in Chapter 3, ‘Similes and Parables’, of the Lotus Sutra had thought: “These little boys are all my sons and I love them without partiality. I have countless numbers of large carriages adorned with seven kinds of gems. I should be fair-minded and give one to each of my sons. I should not show any discrimination”.⁴ This is a concrete illustration of the egalitarian view of the Lotus Sutra that all sentient beings possess the Buddha nature. We can say that the equality of all sentient beings in their possession of the Buddha nature is the overall theme conveyed by the 28 chapters of the Lotus Sutra.

Today, although countries are differentiated according to size and strength, they are members of one global village. All countries should be equal and independent, and have the right to develop autonomously. Might is not right; they should not be subjected to the law of the jungle. While people are differentiated according to wealth or ability, they have the right to basic survival and development. All people possess dignity



Fig. 15 Three carts and the great white ox cart (west ceiling slope, Mogao Cave 419)

and should be respected. Even evil people can be taught to change for the better, and thereby awakened to the noble nature hidden within their hearts. Animals and plants in the natural world should also be given appropriate protection. If we can realize this and act accordingly, then we will have a peaceful society of mutual coexistence, without wars and chaos, and the earth will be a place where humans and nature coexist harmoniously, a place better suited for our existence and development.

Next, the Lotus Sutra's emphasis on the differences between sentient beings teaches us to acknowledge and embrace differences among people, and to dispense teachings in accordance with the aptitude of the people receiving them. While emphasizing that all sentient beings have the Buddha nature, the Lotus Sutra also acknowledges the differences among them. These differences are not related to the various representations mentioned earlier; they are differences in relation to their understanding—sudden or gradual, deep or shallow—and realization of the Buddhist doctrine. Just as Chapter 5, 'The Parable of the Medicinal Herbs', of the Lotus Sutra has put it: "Though all these plants and trees grow in the same earth and are moistened by the same rain, each has its differences and particulars."⁵

Also, just as the Buddha's disciples state in Chapter 8, 'Prophecy of Enlightenment for Five Hundred Disciples':

World-Honored One, we always used to think to ourselves, We have already attained the ultimate extinction. But now we know that we were like persons of no wisdom. Why? Because, although we were capable of attaining the wisdom of the Thus Come One, we were willing to content ourselves with petty wisdom.⁶

To lead sentient beings to liberation, the compassionate Buddha, as their teacher, thus has to respect the differences between sentient beings and dispense his teachings according to their capabilities and preach with expediency. The Lotus Sutra's acknowledgement of the differences between sentient beings and its advocacy of respecting those differences are undoubtedly illustrated by its seven famous parables. For example, in the Parable of the Impoverished Son (Chapter 4, 'Belief and Understanding'), the son did not know that he was the offspring of the rich and noble man. The trees and plants are differentiated according to their sizes in the Parable of Three Plants and Two Trees (Chapter 5, 'The Parable of the Medicinal Herbs'). The people in the Parable of the Phantom City (Chapter 7, 'Parable of the Phantom City') require the direction of the great guide. The man in the Parable of the Jewel in the Robe (Chapter 8, 'Prophecy of Enlightenment for Five Hundred Disciples') was not aware that there was a jewel hidden in his robe. In the Parable of the Skilful Physician (Chapter 16, 'The Lifespan of the Thus Come One'), the children mistakenly consumed poison. Furthermore, Bodhisattva Never Disparaging still pays respects to those who curse and even beat him. And Bodhisattva Wonderful Sound (Chapter 24, 'The Bodhisattva Wonderful Sound') and Bodhisattva Perceiver of the World's Sounds (Chapter 25, 'The Universal Gateway of the Bodhisattva Perceiver of the World's Sounds') manifest themselves in 33 forms to preach the Buddhist doctrine. All these illustrate that sentient beings are different in their aptitude and that the Buddha and bodhisattvas need to skilfully devise expedient means to teach them according to their circumstances. As Chapter 4, 'Belief and Understanding', of the Lotus Sutra states:

Because the Buddha, knowing that our minds delight in lesser doctrines, employed the power of expedient means to preach in a way that was appropriate for us. So we did not know that we were in truth the sons of the Buddha. But now at last we know it.

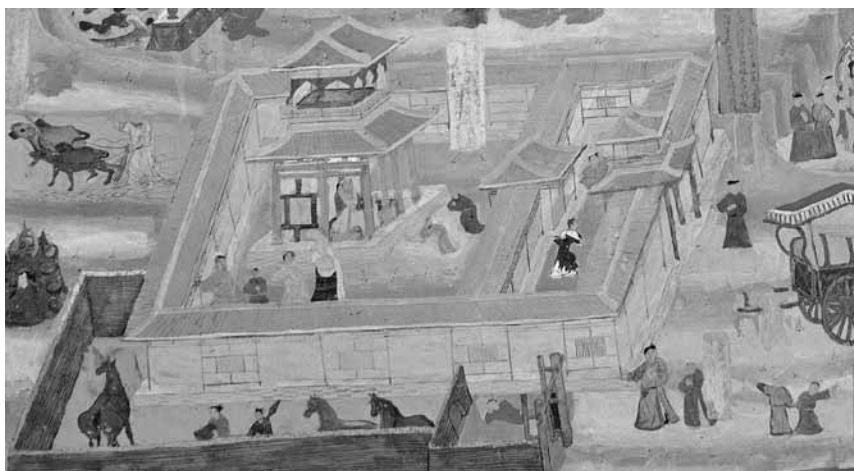


Fig. 16 Chapter on Belief and Understanding (south ceiling slope, Mogao Cave 85)

With regard to the Buddha wisdom, the World-Honored One is never begrudging. Why do I say this? From times past we have in truth been the sons of the Buddha, but we delighted in nothing but lesser doctrines. If we had had the kind of mind that delighted in great ones, then the Buddha would have preached the Law of the Great Vehicle for us.⁷

Images in the Dunhuang Lotus Sutra tableau of Chapter 4, ‘Belief and Understanding’, depict the elder as guiding his impoverished son, who had been wandering for 50 years, patiently and skilfully through various expedient means to realize his fundamental nature (Fig. 16).

Again, as Chapter 5, ‘The Parable of the Medicinal Herbs’ puts it: “Each of the trees big and small, depending upon whether it is superior, middling or inferior in nature, receives its allotment. The rain falling from one blanket of cloud accords with each particular species and nature, causing it to sprout and mature, to blossom and bear fruit.”⁸ There are quite a number of such scenes in the Dunhuang Lotus Sutra images (Fig. 17).

Of particular note is a scene from Chapter 5, ‘The Parable of the Medicinal Herbs’ on the top left of the north wall of Mogao Cave 23 from the high Tang period. The entire painting is divided into left and right panels by three square cartouches that extend from top to bottom. In the left panel, the sky is filled with thick clouds as spring rain falls extensively while a peasant wearing a bamboo hat farms in the rain amidst luxuriant crops and greenery. In the right panel, the peasant is



Fig. 17 Chapter on the Parable of the Medicinal Herbs (south wall, Mogao Cave 237)

carrying the harvested crop, while around him the same luxuriant crops and greenery remain. In the top cartouche, the words “parable of the medicinal herbs” and “parable of cloud and rain” can be clearly discerned. Through this familiar scene of a peasant harvesting crops, the artist expressed the equality of all beings conveyed by the phrase “three plants and two trees, big or small regardless, all received the fruit of the Dharma” and the equality of all to be taught, conveyed by the phrases “one cloud pervasively covers” and “one rain universally dispenses”. This is especially so when these images interestingly depict the peasant and his family resting by the side of the field as they consume homemade delicacies. The picture below, which represents Chapter 2, ‘Expedient Means’, depicts dancers in light and graceful step, with others seated around and children building sand piles. Together, these pictures express an ideal secular life that is happy, peaceful and harmonious (Fig. 18).

This kind of scene is not simply the dream of people of old and is certainly not limited to any particular country or place! Again, as Chapter 7, ‘The Parable of the Phantom City’ expounds:

If living beings hear only of the one Buddha vehicle, then they will not want to see the Buddha, will not want to draw near him, but will immediately think to themselves, The Buddha road is long and far-stretching and one must labor diligently and undergo difficulties over a long period before he can ever attain success!



Fig. 18 Lotus Sutra tableau (partial: northern wall, Mogao Cave 23)

The Buddha knows that the minds of living beings are timid, weak and lowly, and so, using the power of expedient means, he preaches two nirvanas in order to provide a resting place along the road.⁹

Many of the images in the Dunhuang Lotus Sutra tableaux that represent Chapter 7 depict the great guide as conjuring the “phantom city” while leading treasure seekers (Fig. 19). Evidently, whether it is the elder who entices his playful sons out of the burning house, the great guide who conjures the “phantom city” to encourage weary treasure seekers, the elder who patiently and skilfully leads his impoverished son who had wandered for 50 years, or the skilful physician father who devises a plan to make his children ingest his medicine after they had mistakenly consumed poison, all these actually illustrate the Lotus Sutra’s acknowledgement of and respect for the differences among sentient



Fig. 19 Chapter on the Parable of the Phantom City (south wall, Mogao Cave 61)

beings, and its conviction of dispensing teachings in accordance with individual situations.

Paintings representing the contents of the chapter on the Universal Gateway of the Bodhisattva Perceiver of the World's Sounds, an important type of Dunhuang Lotus Sutra image, also persistently depict the Bodhisattva Perceiver of the World's Sounds' manifestation in 33 physical forms, conveying the same message of respect for the differences among sentient beings and the strategy of employing expedient means to teach them. Such representations of the various manifestations of Bodhisattva Perceiver of the World's Sounds, as described in the Chapter 25, of the Lotus Sutra can be found on the entire east ceiling slopes of Cave 303 and Cave 420. The murals cover every living being from 'someone in the body of a Buddha in order to be saved' to 'a

heavenly being, a dragon,... a human or a nonhuman being to be saved'. They reflect the artists' strong identification with the Lotus Sutra's teaching on the equality between people of high and low birth and between humans and non-humans (Fig. 20). This egalitarian view runs through the 29 Dunhuang Lotus Sutra tableaux depicting the deeds of Bodhisattva Perceiver of the World's Sounds. From the beginning of the Tang dynasty, regardless of the simplicity or complexity of Lotus Sutra images, this non-discriminatory view regarding the universal possession of the Buddha nature remains one of the major themes represented by these images.

It is an indisputable fact that in the contemporary world countries are different in size and strength, and people are differentiated by wealth and intelligence. Just as the Lotus Sutra advocates, if we can acknowledge that, at the international level, countries are different based on their history and culture, and respect is given to each of them according to their chosen path of development without imposing one's ideology on



Fig. 20 Bodhisattva Perceiver of the World's Sounds manifesting as dragon king (west ceiling slope, Mogao Cave 303)

others, we would definitely achieve “harmony with differences” and “peaceful coexistence”. At the individual level, one should acknowledge mutual differences and respect each other’s way of life and belief, and not insist on uniformity. Even in education, one should respect differences between students and teach them according to their aptitude.

Lastly, the bodhisattva practice expressed by Dunhuang images of the Lotus Sutra inspires us to love universally, to endure contempt and be tolerant, and to trust others.

The Lotus Sutra especially emphasizes bodhisattva practice. Among its 28 chapters, there are five that specifically expound on the various compassionate deeds of bodhisattvas, from those of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging (Sadaparibhuta), Bodhisattva Medicine King (Bhaishajyaraja), Bodhisattva Wonderful Sound (Gadgadasvara) and Bodhisattva Perceiver of the World’s Sounds (Avalokiteshvara), to those of Bodhisattva Universal Worthy (Samantabhadra). These Mahayana bodhisattvas have made offerings to the Buddhas, delivered sentient beings, and helped the Buddha dispense his teachings. We can say that the Lotus Sutra’s emphasis on bodhisattva practice is its fundamental characteristic. With regard to this, Ming Emperor Taizong or Zhu Di



Fig. 21 Tableau of chapter on Bodhisattva Perceiver of the World's Sounds (Mogao Cave 45)

(1360–1424), in his ‘Preface to the Imperially Produced Mahayana Lotus Sutra of the Wonderful Law’ incisively summarizes:

This truly is the ferry of the ocean of salvation, the torch of wisdom that lights up darkness. If good men and good women, and all living beings could uphold, recite, worship and make offerings to it with wholehearted sincerity, they would immediately get rid of all afflictions, all karmic hindrances, and all hardships of life and death. It is just like a hungry person obtaining food, a thirsty person obtaining drink, a person in the cold obtaining fire, a person in the heat being cooled, a poor person obtaining a treasure, a sick person obtaining a cure, a child having a mother, a traveler obtaining a boat.¹⁰

Bodhisattva Perceiver of the World's Sounds epitomizes the “great love” and “universal love” advocated in the Lotus Sutra through his unflinching efforts to rescue people from various troubles and respond to their pleas, helping them to get rid of the “three poisons” of greed, anger and foolishness, and even manifesting himself in different sentient forms to teach people. The Lotus Sutra's emphasis on bodhisattva practice is fully expressed in Dunhuang images of the Lotus Sutra, especially in images produced under the Sui dynasty depicting the bodhisattva rescuing people from suffering and trouble and teaching people with expedient means. For instance, the entire south wall of Mogao Cave 45, which was excavated during the high Tang period, is painted with images of the bodhisattva saving people from seven kinds of trouble and his 33 manifestations (Fig. 21). In addition, at least 19 chapters of the



Fig. 22 Chapter on the Bodhisattva Never Disparaging (east wall, Mogao Cave 23)

Lotus Sutra including Chapter 25, ‘The Universal Gateway of the Bodhisattva Perceiver of the World’s Sounds’ are found on the three walls of Mogao Cave 23. Similar images illustrating “saving people from various kinds of trouble” and “33 manifestations” of Chapter 25 are again painted on the south ceiling slope of the same cave. The presence of these two murals depicting the same chapter in the same cave amply illustrates the importance placed by the Lotus Sutra on the idea of bodhisattva practice.

Apart from Bodhisattva Perceiver of the World’s Sounds, Bodhisattva Never Disparaging also established another distinctive bodhisattva practice unique to the Lotus Sutra. As Chapter 20, ‘The Bodhisattva Never Disparaging’ describes it:

Many years passed in this way, during which this monk was constantly subjected to curses and abuse. He did not give way to anger, however, but each time spoke the same words, “You are certain to attain Buddhahood.” When he spoke in this manner, some among the group would take sticks of wood or tiles and stones and beat and pelt him. But even as he ran away and took up his stance at a distance, he continued to call out in a loud voice, “I would never dare disparage you, for you are all certain to attain Buddhahood!”¹¹

This is the best expression of the Lotus Sutra’s teaching that everyone is equal in their potential to achieve Buddhahood. Deeply influencing the people of that time, this is one of the popular themes of Lotus Sutra tableaux found in Dunhuang. Scenes from Chapter 20 are also depicted in a big frame above the door on the east wall of the aforementioned Mogao Cave 23, including those where the bodhisattva pays obeisance to four groups of people (monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen) and is cursed



Fig. 23 Chapter on the Bodhisattva Never Disparaging (south wall, Mogao Cave 76)

and beaten by them, and those with people paying respect to him by prostrating themselves on the floor before him (Fig. 22).

Similar scenes are prominently depicted in Lotus Sutra tableaux found in Cave 85 of the late Tang period, Cave 61 of the Five Dynasties period and Cave 76 of the Song period (Fig. 23). Despite being repeatedly misunderstood, cursed and beaten by people, Bodhisattva Never Disparaging does not bear them grudges but instead always pays them respect. Although he is vilified, the bodhisattva does not become angry. Magnanimous and loving, he fully believes that people can be awakened to their noble nature.

In this current age, war, disease, calamity and hunger continuously endanger the existence of humanity, threatening to destroy the peace of the world. If we have big and loving hearts like Bodhisattva Perceiver of the World's Sounds and Bodhisattva Never Disparaging, and can endure a moment or even longer of being wronged or misunderstood, we can be tolerant of others, embracing and forgiving them. From establishing good and harmonious relationships with others, we can proceed to achieving peaceful coexistence among countries, seeking common ground while preserving differences, and finally, establishing a global village without hatred and bloodshed.

3. Conclusion

Chapter 11 of the Lotus Sutra, ‘The Emergence of the Treasure Tower’, states that when Shakyamuni preached the Lotus Sutra for sentient beings on Eagle Peak, the Treasure Tower emerged from the ground and from it came the following utterance of Buddha Many Treasures:

Excellent, excellent! Shakyamuni, World-Honored One, that you can take the great wisdom of equality, a Law to instruct the bodhisattvas, guarded and kept in mind by the Buddhas, the *Lotus Sutra* of the Wonderful Law, and preach it for the sake of the great assembly!¹²

Although the “two assemblies on Eagle Peak” are a thing of the past, the Lotus Sutra’s advocacy of “peace and coexistence” remains preserved in the Lotus Sutra manuscripts in various scripts and the vivid images found in Dunhuang murals—just as Many Treasures Buddha’s great voice, which issued from the tower, echoes for hundreds and thousands of years.

As Daisaku Ikeda states:

[T]he Lotus Sutra has been the most widely disseminated and has captured the imagination of the populace, proof of the scripture’s deep and encompassing religious significance and the force and simplicity with which it is set forth.... Shakyamuni, the historical Buddha, surmounted his inner self and expanded it until it became one with the great outer universe,... When Shakyamuni attained enlightenment, his wisdom and compassion were directed towards salvation of the people.... [T]he Lotus Sutra in particular...has been conspicuously embraced by the people of the East.¹³

Similarly, the images of the Lotus Sutra found in Dunhuang murals declare the ancients’ hope for and pursuit of equality, harmony and tranquillity, thus inspiring us to consider anew how we can achieve an age when people of different ethnicities and beliefs are able to coexist harmoniously and progress together.

Notes

- ¹ Cao Xueqin, *The Story of the Stone*, trans., David Hawkes (London: Penguin Books, 1973), 65.
- ² Translated from Chinese. There are other interpretations such as one based on a publication by Zhonghuashuju [中华书局] (vol. 8: Beijing, 1974), 3032.
- ³ Burton Watson, trans., *The Lotus Sutra* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 31.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 58.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 98.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 150.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 86–87.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 98.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 136.
- ¹⁰ Translated from Chinese.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 267.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 171.
- ¹³ Daisaku Ikeda, ‘On the Lotus Sutra’, in the Institute of Oriental Philosophy, ed., *The Lotus Sutra: A Message of Peace and Harmonious Coexistence* (New Delhi: Eternal Ganges Press, 2017), 10.

Author’s Biography

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Ho Chiew Hui is lecturer in East Asian Buddhism at the University of Sydney. He received his PhD in Religious Studies from Stanford University. Previously, he earned a BA (Honours) and an MA in Philosophy from the National University of Singapore as well as an MA in Buddhist Studies (Distinction) from the University of Hong Kong. Chiew Hui is a former doctoral fellow of the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation and also a recipient of the China Times Young Scholar Award. His research focuses on medieval Chinese Buddhism with an emphasis on Sinitic Buddhist narratives.