

Dissemination of the Lotus Sutra from India to East Asia

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THE Lotus Sutra has been the most influential of all Sanskrit sutras. Composed very early, around the first century BCE, it inspired devotional practices, and their miraculous benefits are told in numerous tales in East Asia. Its doctrine of *upaya* or expedient means provided a rationale for doctrinal taxonomies in East Asia. It must have been a central text in East India too where the Gupta Emperor Kumaragupta I was devoted to Ekayana according to Xuanzang. It is a work of wonder, a yearning plea of a mind that is human, all too human, trying to reach a state beyond. Kenneth J. Saunders has called the Lotus Sutra the “Gospel of Half Asia”.¹ Together with the Gospel of St John and the Bhagavad Gita, it is one of the three most influential books in the world.

Distinctive Characteristics

(1) The Lotus Sutra is the prime expression of Ekayana or “One Vehicle” where *eka* means “supreme, the only one”. There is only One Vehicle. The Sutra says that it transcends the three different vehicles (*triyana*) of Shravaka-yana (or Theravada), Pratyekabuddha-yana and Bodhisattva-yana.² The three were only expedient devices (*upaya*) to lead beings of different capacities to enlightenment. In fact, only through Ekayana can all beings proceed to Buddhahood. Shakyamuni says that Ekayana is the unifying, complete and final exposition of his teachings. It is the only way, the ultimate way, *ekayana*.

(2) In general, Shakyamuni is flanked by Shariputra and Maudgalyayana, but here they are substituted by Ananda and Kasyapa. Lord Buddha says that the *sthavira* Kasyapa will become a Buddha in the future.³ The basis for the identification of Kasyapa in the Dunhuang caves deserves to be investigated. Shakyamuni announces in the ninth chapter of the Lotus Sutra that Ananda and Rahula will become Tathagatas in the future. The passage relating to Rahula becoming a

Buddha in times to come reveals the paternal affection of Shakyamuni. It is cited in the translation from the Chinese by Burton Watson:

When I was crown prince
 Rahula was my eldest son.
 Now that I have gained the Buddha way
 he receives the Dharma and is my Dharma son.
 In existences to come
 he will see immeasurable millions of Buddhas.
 As eldest son to all of them,
 with a single mind he will seek the Buddha way.
 The covert actions of Rahula
 I alone am capable of knowing.
 He manifests himself as my eldest son,
 showing himself to living beings.
 With immeasurable millions, thousands, ten thousands
 of blessings beyond count,
 he dwells securely in the Buddha's Law
 and thereby seeks the unsurpassed way.⁴

The disciple pair of Ananda, cousin, and Rahula, son, of Shakyamuni represent the resuscitation of the primacy of Shakyamuni vis-a-vis other Buddhas like Amitabha. The Lotus Sutra was a return to Shakyamuni away from the other Buddhas. The familial connection can also be seen in his prophecies of the future Buddhahood of his foster-mother Mahaprajapati and his wife Yashodhara.

(3) Bodhisattvas of Mahayana have been elevated to exalted Mahasattvas. Mahasattva is always preceded by bodhisattva in an adjectival significance. Four Bodhisattva-Mahasattvas, the foremost of the vast host of bodhisattvas in chapter 15 of the Chinese Lotus Sutra, have names:

Vishishtacharitra	Superior Practices
Anantacharitra	Boundless Practices
Vishuddhacharitra	Pure Practices
Supratishthitacharitra	Firmly Established Practices ⁵

The Buddha of the Present and the Past, the two disciples of the historic Shakyamuni, and the four Bodhisattva-Mahasattvas of the Sutra constitute an Eightfold Configuration as follows:



Fig. 1 Painting of Shakyamuni Buddha seated beside Many Treasures Buddha on the southern wall of Dunghuang Mogao Cave 285. It was painted in the sixth century during the Western Wei dynasty (Photo courtesy the Dunhuang Academy, China)

Ananda	Shakyamuni & Prabhutaratna	Kasyapa or Rahula
Bodhisattva-Mahasattva		Bodhisattva-Mahasattva
Bodhisattva-Mahasattva		Bodhisattva-Mahasattva

In earlier studies, this configuration was not identified as specific to the Lotus Sutra and many niches of Dunhuang have been described in general terms without reference to a sutra. A new look at the eightfold configurations in the Dunhuang caves will connect them to the Lotus Sutra. This configuration characterizes the Lotus Sutra as the Ekayana Sutra and implies that it is not a Mahayana sutra.

(4) The Buddha of the Past was Dipankara. The Lotus Sutra substituted him with a new Buddha of the Past, namely Prabhutaratna, “Abounding in Jewels”. He resides in the paradise of Ratnavishuddha, “Bejewelled Purity”. The stupa of Prabhutaratna appears in the sky as a meteoric phenomenon, sparkling and shimmering. Shakyamuni opens the door with his finger to reveal the Buddha Prabhutaratna. The two Buddhas sit side by side in the stupa. It became the symbolic signature of the Lotus Sutra in paint, stone and metal. Almost all the early caves of Dunhuang have representations of these two Buddhas (Fig. 1).

(5) In the Lotus Sutra, Shakyamuni is eternal. He achieved Buddhahood incalculable eons ago, before his historic life.

(6) The 24th chapter of the Lotus Sutra speaks of the miraculous saving powers of Samantamukha Avalokiteshvara. He saves from six perils which are:

- (i) A person fallen into a great mass of fire
- (ii) A person carried away by the current of a river
- (iii) A merchant on a transoceanic ship sailing with bullion and precious metals, cast on an island of giantesses by an untimely vehement gale
- (iv) A person given up to capital punishment
- (v) A merchant caravan rich in jewels attacked by bandits
- (vi) One acting under the impulse of passion will be freed from infatuation. A woman desirous of a son or a beautiful daughter will beget them.

All these were common concerns and as such Avalokiteshvara naturally dominated the scrolls and murals at Dunhuang. These perils are frequently illustrated in paintings from Dunhuang—for example, a Dunhuang painting in the British Museum shows them. The first peril is a man standing in flames into which another has pushed him. It illustrates the verse of the Sutra:

Suppose with evil intent a man should push you down into a fiery pit,
If you then invoke the might of that Avalokiteshvara the fiery pit
will turn into a pond of water.

The title of the chapter has been translated by Burton Watson as ‘The Universal Gateway of the Bodhisattva Perceiver of the World’s Sounds’. The original Sanskrit term *Samantamukha Avalokitesvara* means that “He faces (*mukha*) all directions (*samanta*)” to take care of his devotees everywhere, and devotees can overcome their dangers simply by calling his name. A mural in Dunhuang shows that Sogdian merchants have been forced to unload their goods by bandits. The sword of an executioner of the gang is shattered into small pieces as the merchants recite the name of Avalokiteshvara.⁶

As the saviour from six perils Avalokiteshvara or Guanyin led to the popularity of the Lotus Sutra in Central Asia as well as in China. He was invoked by merchants bringing horses or other goods to China via the Silk Route. They felt safe from attacks by bandits, or from being drowned in a river while crossing makeshift rope bridges, or being

enticed by hallucination-induced ogresses across waterless sands, scorching grounds and endless desolation without seeing a single person for days on end. The outstanding popularity of the Lotus Sutra in China was due to its palliative contribution to international commercial ventures, its philosophical vision among intellectuals and as a sutra for the protection of the country.

(7) The Lotus Sutra ensured the security of the state, of the sovereign and people against troubles, wars, natural calamities and epidemics.⁷ The 13th-century Japanese Buddhist sage Nichiren Daishonin's work *Risshō Ankoku Ron* is on the protection of the country. It was sent to Regent Tokiyori in 1260 CE. It attributes the disasters befalling Japan to slanders against the Lotus Sutra and to reliance on the teachings of Pure Land Buddhism and the worship of Amitabha.

(8) The Lotus Sutra was famous for its parables, which were configured to enlighten common folk in China. These parables could be understood easily by the mass of people and they became "visual dharma" to inculcate ethical values without tears. The seven parables are:

- (i) Three carts and the burning house
- (ii) Wealthy man and poor son
- (iii) Three herbs and two kinds of trees
- (iv) Phantom city and treasure land
- (v) Jewel in the robe
- (vi) Bright jewel in the top knot
- (vii) Skilled physician and his sick children

(9) Lotus in the title of the Lotus Sutra is reminiscent of the ancient Upanishadic concept of "the lotus of the heart, indwelt by the Golden Person of the Sun" or "the one lotus of the sky" which is the Sun or Brahman in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad. In the Samyutta Nikaya the lotus is a metaphor for purity unaffected by the world. The lotus and *saddharma* are closely connected. The Lotus Sutra was pronounced by Lord Buddha on the Vulture Peak which is near Nalanda. Arising from his deep meditation the Buddha suddenly turns to Shariputra and says: "The wisdom of the Buddhas is infinitely profound and immeasurable. The door to this wisdom is difficult to understand and difficult to enter." Shariputra begs Him to expound the true teachings of the Buddhas. The Lotus Sutra is associated closely with the lotus as symbolic of wisdom,

with Shariputra as the foremost in wisdom, with Mount Gridhrakuta—all hailing Nalanda the village of Shariputra as the locus of illumination in their implicit silence. The Lotus Sutra became one of the nine basic scriptures of Buddhism (*nava-dharmah*) in Nepal.

The lotus was also associated with royal rituals. The Pali phrase *abhiseka-mangala-pokkharani* in the commentary on the Dhammapada refers to the lotus tank used in coronation ceremonies.

The lotus blooming from the slush of the ponds became a symbol of purity beyond the travails of life.

(10) The Lotus Sutra was the rejuvenation of Shakyamuni as the Supreme Buddha of Ekayana in contradistinction to Amitabha who arose in the north-west of India and reflects the prominence of Iranian light cosmology. Yasna 31.7 says that it was Ahuramazda who in the beginning filled the blessed realms with light. In Yasna 1.11 the light of the sun is one of the things that glorify Ahuramazda. The second element *ābha* of Amit-*abha* means the sun. Amitabha means the “Transcendent Sun”. The modern Persian *aftab* for sun is Sanskrit *ābhātāpa* “sun-shine”. Uttarapathakas of the north-west are referred to with disdain in Pali commentaries. Ekayana arose in contradistinction to the Pure Land school of Amitabha. The opposition of Nichiren Daishonin to this school goes back to the beginnings of the Lotus Sutra.

Lotus Sutra Goes to Trans-Gandhara

According to Hsüan-tsang, the seventh-century Chinese Buddhist monk and traveler, Shakraditya (Kumaragupta I, r.415–55) was a devotee of Ekayana, whose supreme canon is the Lotus Sutra. Shakraditya had started the construction of Nalanda at the request of monk Hu Rajavamsa of Uttarapatha or Trans-Gandhara. The family name Hu refers to Iranians. Even during the days of the Buddha, there was a flourishing trade in woollen textiles between Nalanda and the Bactrian area. Lord Buddha used to stay with the millionaire Dussa-pavarika who sold woollen overgarments from the city of Dussa, which is still called Doshi and lies midway between Balkh and Bamiyan as an important commercial entrepot. I-tsing, the seventh–eighth-century Chinese Buddhist monk and traveler, relates in his *Lives of Sixty Monks of the T'ang Dynasty* that Uttarapatha had a Tukhara Monastery which was very rich and had an abundant supply of necessities and comforts of life. The Tocharians were of European stock, spoke a European language, and naturally their monastery had to be an abode of decent living. A

Tocharian mummy from Xinjiang has been carbon-dated to 2000 BCE. The Lotus Sutra must have reached north-west India early in the Common Era and China around the first century CE via the Central Asian kingdom of Khotan, along with jade and its beauties.

From Khotan to China

Jade came to China from Khotan. The Queen Mother of the West gifted jade to King Mu (r.956–918 BCE) from the Kun-lun mountains as early as the 10th century BCE. These mountains yielded great quantities of jade, and it was the major export of Khotan. Khotan is called Ratna-janapada, Land of Jade in Sanskrit. Here, *ratna* has the specific meaning of “jade”. The popularity of the Lotus Sutra in Khotan was due to Prabhutaratna Buddha, whose name means “Abounding in Jade”. He occurs only in the Lotus Sutra and in no other text. In Tibetan too Khotan is Li-yul or Land of Jade. Khotan has the unique distinction of having preserved the oldest complete manuscript of the Lotus Sutra in Sanskrit. It has four Khotanese colophons. Several fragments of the Sanskrit Lotus Sutra have been found in Khotan, as has a summary in Khotanese. It is said to have played a prominent role in the defence of Khotan. *The Annals of the Li Country* say that when the Lotus Sutra is recited, conflict is allayed, foreign foes and pestilence are averted.⁸ In the Vimalaprabha-pariprccha, Vimalaprabha wants to hear the Lotus Sutra to realize happiness and freedom from disease for all living beings, to meditate on the *dharani* derived from it, and endow temples where it is enshrined.⁹ As she did not recite the Lotus Sutra every day, she was defeated by the Sumpas.¹⁰ *The Religious Annals of Khotan* say that if the Lotus Sutra is read, enemies, strife, disease, bad years and all evils are allayed.¹¹ The Lotus Sutra must have gone to the imperial courts of China from Khotan along with jade.

Chinese Translations

The Lotus Sutra was translated into Chinese as early as 255 CE by an anonymous monk. It was followed by two translations by Central Asian monks: the Yueh-chih Dharmaraksha did it in 286 CE and Kumarajiva of Kucha in 406 CE. Two centuries later, in 601, Jnanagupta of Gandhara and Dharmagupta of south India translated it. Surpassing them, Kumarajiva’s transcreation measured up to the highest standards of Chinese literary production and that has assured its success for 16 centuries.

Kumarajiva was the son of the princess of Kucha and of Kumarayana of Jibin or Bactria who had given up all his royal duties and come to Kucha. Wondrous signs in the mother manifested the greatness of the child to be born. She retreated to the highly venerated Oriole monastery which was modelled after the Kalavinka-vihara of Peshawar founded by Kanishka. She devoted herself to the study of the sacred language Sanskrit. The *arhat* Dharmaghosha predicted that the child to come was Shariputra himself. She renounced household life and became a nun when Kumarajiva was only seven years old. Kumarajiva had an astounding memory and could recite a thousand *gathas* a day. At the age of nine years he came to Bactria with his mother and started to learn Hinayana texts. After three years both returned to Kucha. On the way, they spent a year at the kingdom of Kashgar which was highly venerated for the bowl of Lord Buddha. Here Kumarajiva studied the Vedas along with their six ancillary sciences. Monk Suryasoma, former prince of Kashgar, introduced Mahayana to him and Kumarajiva realized it as the “excellence of gold”. Henceforward he devoted himself to Mahayana. When Yao Hsing became emperor he invited Kumarajiva to Chang’an, warmly welcomed him and made him “Preceptor of the Nation” in 401 CE. The emperor also summoned eminent monks from all over and started the translation of the sutras.

Kumarajiva translated the Lotus Sutra in an imperial pavilion erected by Emperor Yao Hsing. The emperor himself perused the old translation of this sutra, while Kumarajiva explained the Sanskrit text for a new translation. Kumarajiva found the earlier translations full of obscurities and errors, besides lacking literary elegance. Kumarajiva translated several works, but is famous for the profound version of the Lotus Sutra. When one recites its wonderful verses, one bathes in the pure pond of dharma. The depths of the Kizil Caves, where Kumarajiva had meditated, come alive in his luminescent prose which became the glow of life and mind. It has touched the heart of China for 16 centuries, such that:

All sins are just frost and dew
So wisdom’s sun can disperse them.

In the resonance of their subtlety and haunting light, Chinese ideograms are “word-souls”. Kumarajiva inherited the unusual linguistic association of Sanskrit of India, Tocharian of European nexus and Chinese of the Middle Kingdom. From his rich linguistic sensitivity, he gave to China a language of creative spirituality. Kumarajiva explained to his

collaborator Seng-jui the difference between Sanskrit and Chinese as follows: “Sanskrit rhymed phrases are music. This beauty is lost in Chinese.” Kumarajiva furthered the technique of translation. He strove to convey the plenitude of meaning and abandoned literal transpositions. The universality and power of the Lotus Sutra have been compared to those of rain, which enables all plants to flourish. Dharmakshema (385–433 CE) cured the Northern Liang emperor Meng-hsun with this Lotus Sutra, which had been translated just then.

The Lotus Sutra is like an epic in which a feeling of suspense is created, continually intensified, and never resolved. The Buddha reveals that Ekayana will open the Way to all creatures, so that if a person keeps even a single verse of the Sutra, he will accumulate merit. The glory and brilliance of shifting scenes with descriptions of sounds and scents enhance the imagery. The Sutra has been the vision and the practice in China and a source of creative inspiration. It was and is the Lotus, the jewel of Ekayana. There are two Chinese works of miraculous tales of devotees during the Tang dynasty arranged according to the activities in which they excelled, such as reciting, copying or expounding the Sutra. The *Hung-tsang-fa-hua-ch'uan* by Hui-siang contains stories of the lives of 129 devotees, and the other hagiography, *Fa-hua-ch'uan-chi* by Seng-siang, includes biographies of 180 devotees. Before hand-copying the Sutra, the devotee cleanses himself, wears clean clothes, sits in the correct position of the lotus posture (*padmasana*), and copies the text in a systematic manner, such as writing 20 characters in every column.

Lotus Sutra at Dunhuang

Why did the Lotus Sutra become so central in China? Its Buddha of the Past, Prabhutaratna, means one who abounds in *ratnas*. *Ratna* is used in the specific meaning of jade in Ratna-janapada, the Sanskrit name of Khotan. The Sutra itself refers to *ratna-dvipa* and *maharatnadvipa*.

The *Book of Rites* of the Zhou dynasty states: “The Superior Man competes in virtue with jade.” Chou Kung’s commentary on *I Ching*, the ancient Chinese divination text, says that Heaven is symbolized by jade of the highest strength. The Confucian classic *Li chi* says that jade is all excellent qualities: benevolence, intelligence, righteousness, propriety, music, loyalty, good faith, heaven, the earth, virtue and the path of truth and duty. The rainbow brilliance of jade is heaven and its mysterious qualities are the earth. The *ju-i* (sceptre) of jade had magical powers and was used for defence. Prabhutaratna was correlated to jade and he sanctified imperial power and virtue.



Fig. 2 Central image depicting the teachings of the Lotus Sutra in the Dunhuang Mogao Cave 420 (Photo courtesy the Dunhuang Academy, China)

The Lotus Sutra has been represented in several caves of Dunhuang. Cave 272, dating from the Liang dynasty (421–39 CE), has a mural painting of Shakyamuni with four disciples.¹² The four disciples are actually the four Bodhisattva-Mahasattvas of the Lotus Sutra. The entire composition is a representation of the eightfold configuration detailed earlier. This mural was painted shortly after Kumarajiva's version.

The main niche of Cave 259 of the Northern Wei (439–534 CE) has two Buddhas. Shakyamuni caused a marvellously ornamented stupa to appear out of the earth. It became fixed in mid-air above the assembly. He opened it with his finger to reveal Buddha Prabhutaratna. Prabhutaratna congratulates Shakyamuni for his Teaching and invites him to sit in the stupa. It reinforces that the Buddha is eternal and manifests himself in many forms. This miraculous portrayal has been repeated on temple walls, in images and on stone stelae. "Magic was power in China and with power came the triumph of belief".¹³ This vision of "One Stupa, Two Venerables" dominates the art of Dunhuang in the fifth and sixth centuries.

Cave 420 of the Sui dynasty (581–619 CE) is devoted to the Lotus Sutra. The ceiling shows Shakyamuni preaching to disciples and mahasattvas while the walls are covered with Thousand Buddhas (Fig. 2).

In the parable of the conjured city, a group of weary travelers takes rest in a magnificent city, only to be told later that it is a magical creation. The conjured city symbolizes the three vehicles which were mere expedients. The three vehicles were replaced by the universal and



Fig. 3 Ceremony in the Air in the Dunhuang Mogao Cave 23. It was painted in the eighth century during the High Tang period (Photo courtesy the Dunhuang Academy, China)

life-centred doctrine of the Lotus Sutra. Cave 103 of the High Tang period (705–80 CE) illustrates a caravan traversing a road to reach a cache of precious jewels. The travelers get discouraged midway by hardships and wish to turn back. The guide of skilful devices conjures up a great city on the steep road and tells them to regain their composure. In the middle of the city a stupa emerges around which persons are seen performing circumambulation.¹⁴

The south wall of Cave 217, belonging to the Shenlong period (705–07 CE), shows Shakyamuni preaching the Lotus Sutra. The parable of the ‘Phantom City’ from chapter 7 of the Lotus Sutra shows that Shakyamuni creates a city for those exhausted by the hardships of the journey to rest and resume their journey to the real treasure trove.

The south wall of Cave 45 of the High Tang period is inspired by the chapter on Samantamukha Avalokiteshvara who saves his devotees from a succession of six perils.

Cave 23¹⁵ has a charming mural of the Ceremony in the Air (Fig. 3). It is a symbol of the immense state of being of the Buddha. This wondrous state is latent within the lives of each of us. We too can manifest the state of Buddhahood dormant within us. It teaches us the infinite mobility of life, as explained by Daisaku Ikeda, president of the Soka Gakkai International. Nichiren Daishonin has said, “Your very life is the treasure tower.” When you are lifted in the air from the fetters of the earth of ignorance, you rise into the free skies of the Dharma nature.

Cave 61¹⁶ was constructed between 947 and 951 CE. It is the most prestigious sanctuary in the Mogao Cave complex. Its southern wall shows Shakyamuni preaching the Lotus Sutra in an assembly. A large panel depicts 22 chapters of the Sutra.

Several caves of Dunhuang show the figures of the two Buddhas seated side by side within one stupa. They emphasize that saving all creatures is the epitome of the teachings of the Lotus Sutra. This sutra is not just one of the Mahayana sutras, but verily the root text of Ekayana contradistinguished from the earlier Mahayana.

It reveals that Ekayana is the only one path, far superior to what has been taught before. It holds promises of glories that await its devotees. Its profound influence on the art of China was its universal message that was so central to the unification of the north and south which had to be in harmony as the two wheels of a chariot or the two wings of a bird. Scholarship has considered it a Mahayana text so far and as such missed its *sui generis* character as an Ekayana scripture. New interpretations of the murals will bring fresh insights into its world. The Lotus Sutra was the practical and spiritual life of China.

To conclude, regularity and sanctity of conduct, resistance to attacks of vice, filling the universe with joy like rain make the Lotus Sutra the crown jewel (*siromani*) of all sutras revealed by the Lord. According to Josei Toda, second Soka Gakkai president, the most important idea in the Lotus Sutra is “life force”. When we chant daimoku, the life force of the universe becomes our own life force and gushes forth. We are in harmony with the rhythm of the universe.

Notes

¹ Kenneth J. Saunders, *The Gospel for Asia: A Study of Three Religious Masterpieces: Gita, Lotus, and Fourth Gospel* (New York: Macmillan, 1928).

² B. Nanjio and H. Kern, eds., *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka-sūtra* (St. Petersburg, 1908–12), 79.

³ Ibid., 145.7 *pasyami aham bhiksava buddha-caksusa sthaviro hy ayam Kasyapa buddha bhesyati*.

⁴ Burton Watson, trans., *The Lotus Sutra* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 157–58.

⁵ Ibid., 214.

⁶ Roderick Whitfield, *Dunhuang, Caves of the Singing Sands: Buddhist Art from the Silk Road* (London: Textile Arts Publications, 1995), 316, pls. 109, 110.

⁷ See Jacques May, ‘Chingokokka 鎮護國家, Protection del’ Etat’, *Hôbôgirin* VI, 322–27.

⁸ F. W. Thomas, *Tibetan Literary Texts and Documents Concerning Chinese Turkestan*, pt. 1 (London: The Royal Asiatic Society, 1935), 91.

- ⁹ Ibid., 188–89.
- ¹⁰ Ibid., 235.
- ¹¹ Ibid., 318.
- ¹² Whitfield, *Dunhuang, Caves of the Singing Sands*, 274.
- ¹³ J. LeRoy Davidson, *The Lotus Sutra in Chinese Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954), 15.
- ¹⁴ Whitfield, *Dunhuang, Caves of the Singing Sands*, 297, pls. 312, 314.
- ¹⁵ Dunhuang Research Institute, ed., *The Complete Collection of Dunhuang Grottoes 7* (商务出版社: Hongkong, 1999–2002), pl. 66.
- ¹⁶ Ibid., pl. 102; Whitfield, *Dunhuang, Caves of the Singing Sands*, vol. 2, 335; Dunhuang Institute for Cultural Relics, ed., *The Art Treasures of Dunhuang* (Hongkong: Joint Publishing Company, 1981), 105–08.

Author's Biography

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