

# Interpretation of Mogao Cave 285 from the Perspective of the Lotus Sutra

Zhang Yuanlin

Translated by Neil Schmid

## 1. Introduction

COMPLETED in the fifth year of the Datong era of the Western Wei Dynasty (539 CE), Mogao Cave 285 has a central chamber with an inverted dipper ceiling and square plane shape. Between three niches on the main wall, various images of the three major Hindu gods were painted, including Viṣṇu and Maheśvara and His attendant, along with images of the Four Heavenly Kings who protect the Dharma. On the lower part of the north and south walls are four small meditation caves each. Above the four meditation caves on the south wall, the ‘Story of the Five Hundred Bandits’ was painted, along with a preaching image of Śākyamuni and Prabhūtaratna seated together, while murals of four Buddhist stories can be seen on the walls between the caves. On the entire north wall are seven preaching images. Directly opposite the image of the ‘Two Buddhas Seated Together’ on the southern wall, the first of seven images from the west on the north wall is again a preaching image of the ‘Two Buddhas Seated Together’, but here there are two separated Buddhas sitting on two Sumeru thrones and flanked by attendant bodhisattvas. In the other preaching images (on the north wall) appear Amitāyus Buddha (the Buddha of Infinite Life), Kāśyapa Buddha and Kanakamuni Buddha. On both sides of the door on the east wall, are identical large-scale preaching images. And on the north side, the name of the Buddha of Infinite Life as the main Buddha appears.

The richness and diversity of the contents of the murals of Cave 285 have long been the focus of researchers. In particular, are the five stories from different Buddhist scriptures of the south wall randomly spliced together or in a main line? Are they related to the ‘Two Buddhas Seated Together’ in the preaching image on the same wall? Are the seven images of preaching to the assemblies of different donors a series or are they strung together as a single line of thought? What is the name of the first image starting from the west? Furthermore, is there any correlation between the contents of the four walls of this cave? How do they work together with this

cave as a meditation cave? I believe that all these questions related to the contents may be resolved through the Lotus Sutra and offer an interpretation of the entire contents of this cave from the perspective of the Lotus Sutra in this article.

## **2. An Interpretation of the Lotus Sutra Image of Meditating on the Buddha Nature: Combination of ‘Two Buddhas Seated Together’ with Murals of Stories on the South Wall**

The south wall of the cave is divided into three parts from top to bottom. The upper part is a row of 11 flying beings with musical instruments in their hands. The middle part of the wall from east to west is painted with a horizontal strip illustrating the ‘Story of the Five Hundred Bandits’. At the west end is a layout of a preaching image depicting the two Buddhas Śākyamuni and Prabhūtaratna seated together. The lower part consists of four small meditation caves. Above the wall between the mediation caves is a series of murals in vertical strips of four stories from east to west: the ‘Story of Devotion of Elder Bhadra and His Sister’, the ‘Story of Buddha Saving the Water Buffalo’, the ‘Story of the Śrāmaṇera Killing Himself Keeping the Vows’ and the ‘Jataka of the Brahmin Hearing a Gāthā’. Regarding the structure form of these five story murals, there is also a form of a long horizontal scroll of murals and a form of single mural. Among them, the ‘Five Hundred Bandits’ was painted on the whole wall, as the central mural of the south wall. The other four images were painted on the lower part of the south wall between the meditation caves and are in a relatively minor position (Fig. 1: Details are at the end of article).

There are differing interpretations of the meaning of these five painted stories. Some believe that they are only a straightforward expression of Śākyamuni’s deeds in previous lives, while others hold



Fig. 1

that they promote the bodhisattva practice of sacrificing the body to hear the Dharma. Some believe that they are related to local Dunhuang practices of the time, promoting the idea of “putting down the butcher’s knife to become a Buddha”, and others think that they are related to the sense of impurity at that time. There are also those who hold that they are related to the loosening of monastic discipline at the time. Some scholars have also noticed the possible connection between the ‘Story of the Five Hundred Bandits’ and the ‘Two Buddhas Seated Together’ at the western end of the preaching the Dharma image and linked it to the notion of “attainment of Buddhahood by evil persons” in the Lotus Sutra.<sup>1</sup>

I think that although these five stories were from four different scriptures, they were painted on the same wall because they have a common philosophical basis — the notion in the Lotus sutra that “all beings possess the Buddha nature.” As stated in the Chapter on Expedient Means:

Because the Buddhas, the World-Honored Ones, appear in the world for one great reason alone. Shariputra, what does it mean to say that the Buddhas, the World-Honored Ones, appear in the world for one great reason alone?

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.<sup>2</sup>

The creators of the content of the south wall of Cave 285 borrowed the Buddhist stories from different scriptures and very cleverly gave a visual interpretation to their ideas. At the same time, they took contemplative practices such as “holding the precepts” and “sacrificing the body to hear a gāthā” from the Lotus Sutra and expressed them visually.

First of all, through the combination of the ‘Story of the Five Hundred Bandits’ and the ‘Two Buddhas Seated Together’ as well as the ‘Story of Devotion of Elder Bhadra and His Sister’ and the ‘Story of the Buddha Saving the Buffalo’, they visually interpreted the Lotus Sutra teaching that “all living beings possess the Buddha nature”, especially the attainment of Buddhahood by an evil person and a woman, which

are the main themes on the Buddha nature in the Lotus Sutra. It is worth noting that, in contrast to the story painted in the Northern Zhou Dynasty's Mogao Cave 296, an image of meditating monks holding a sutra scroll appears above the image of the meditating monks deep within the mountains after the devotion (conversion) of the 500 bandits. Although the scripture does not record reciting with a sutra scroll held in the hand, the mural shows five monks representing the 500 bandits who became Buddhist disciples reciting in the hands in the mountains from a hand-held scroll. Furthermore, the attendants of Śākyamuni and the Prabhūtaratna in the 'Two Buddhas Seated Together' image here are depicted as two disciples, whereas normally the attendants of the two Buddhas would be bodhisattvas (Fig. 2). Such detailed change made some connections between these two murals originally from different Buddhist scriptures.

A disciple of Kumārajīva, Zhu Daosheng 竺道生, focused on the Buddha's nirvana nature in his research and put forth for the first time the idea that everyone can become a Buddha. In the 10th year of the Xuanshi era (420) of the Northern Liang, Dharmakṣema translated the 40-volume Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra which promoted the central doctrine that "all sentient beings possess the Buddha nature and the Buddha is permanent with no change at all." The 'Story of the Five Hundred Bandits' in the chapter 'Brahmacarya' (Pure Practices), wherein the evil



Fig. 2

persons take refuge in Buddhism, is a strong testament to this doctrine. The 'Devadatta' chapter of the Lotus Sutra (the 'Seven Treasures Stupa' chapter in the *Zheng fahua jing* 正法華經 [The Lotus Sutra of the Correct Dharma]) also describes the idea of the "attainment of Buddhahood by evil men". Devadatta is Śākyamuni's cousin who, in the course of his practice, established another religious order and plotted to harm Śākyamuni, one of the "Five Cardinal Sins", and so descended into hell. But in the 'Devadatta' chapter of the Lotus Sutra, Devadatta becomes a sage who causes Śākyamuni to preach the Lotus Sutra, and no amount of perfidy prevents him from becoming a Buddha.<sup>3</sup> The Lotus Sutra strongly emphasizes the merit of upholding this chapter, "The Buddha told the Bhikshus, 'In the future if a good man or good woman hears the Devadatta chapter of the *Miaofa lianhua jing* 妙法蓮華經 (Lotus Sutra of the Wonderful Dharma) and believes and embraces it in a pure heart without any doubts, he will not fall into the realm of hell, hunger or animal[ity]. He will be born in the presence of the Buddhas of the ten directions and always hear this Sutra wherever he may be born.'"<sup>4</sup> This is very similar to the meaning expressed in the narrative depiction of the 'Story of the Five Hundred Bandits'. The reason why this story appears in combination with the 'Two Buddhas Seated Together', a symbol of the Lotus Sutra, is that both of them have a common philosophical basis. But this alone is not enough. The creators also continuously draw on two other examples from the different sutras, expressing the idea that "all living beings possess the Buddha nature", that is, women and animals too possess the inherent nature to become Buddhas. The 'Story of the Devotion of Elder Bhadra and His Sister' says, after the devotion (conversion) of Bhadra's elder sister, that "the Buddha preaches the Dharma to make them get eyes to see the truth. Those who accept the precepts of devotion will be not different from disciples." It indicates that women also have the Buddha nature. This is similar to the idea of attainment of Buddhahood by women that the 'Devadatta' chapter of the Lotus Sutra expounds through the dragon daughter who becomes a Buddha.<sup>5</sup> The idea of attainment of Buddhahood by women reflected in the dragon daughter story is an important advancement of the Lotus Sutra in the theory of the Buddha nature, and it is one of the most significance points in the history of development of Mahayana Buddhism. Apart from the 'Devadatta' chapter, the chapter on Bodhisattva Medicine King states that, "After the tathāgata's nirvana, if a woman who hears the Dharma of this sutra and practises it in the end of [the] world of five impurities, then she will go to [the] Kingdom of security and see the Buddha of Infinite Life."



The 'Story of the Buddha Saving the Water Buffalo' indicates that animals too belong to the realm of "all living beings" expressed in the Lotus Sutra and possess the inherent Buddha nature. As stated in the last verse of the story, "At that time, the World-Honored One told the monks, the Tripitaka monks of that time are very evil cows among the group; many disciples of that time are 500 people who released the cows."<sup>6</sup> What this story expresses is the same as the earlier two stories of the 500 bandits and of the elder Bhadra and his sister, based on the idea that "all being possess the Buddha nature". Although these three stories come from different sutras and respectively take up the idea of the devotion of evil men, women and beasts and worms, all of them are directly related to the thought in the Lotus Sutra that "all living beings possess the Buddha nature".

Second, through the combination of the other two images ('Story of the Śrāmaṇera Keeping Precepts and Killing Himself' and 'Jataka of the Brahmin Hearing a Gāthā') on the south wall with the image of the 'Two Buddhas Seated Together', the creators visually show the Lotus Sutra practice of sacrificing the body for the sake of the precepts. The purpose of the 'Story of the Śrāmaṇera Keeping Precepts and Killing Himself' is to emphasize that monks should keep the precepts during their practice. In scale the image for this story is second to the one on the 'Story of Five Hundred Bandits'. As we know, the 'Peaceful Practices' chapter of the Lotus Sutra discusses the practice which those who embrace the Lotus Sutra must observe to keep the precepts. This was later carried out by the Tiantai School as its main practice. According to the association of bodhisattva, a monk of mediation should follow the precept not to be with young girls, virgins or widows alone or receive young boys as disciples:

[T]he bodhisattva or mahasattva should not, when preaching the Law to women, do so in a manner that could arouse thoughts of desire in them, nor should he delight in seeing them. If he enters the house of another person, he should not engage in talk with the young girls, unmarried women or widows. Nor should he go near the five types of unmanly men or have any close dealings with them. He should not enter another person's house alone. If for some reason it is imperative to enter alone, he should concentrate his whole mind on thoughts of the Buddha. If he should preach the Law for a woman, he should not bare his teeth in laughter or let his chest become exposed. He should not have any intimate dealings with her even for the sake of the Law, much less for any other purpose.

He should not delight in nurturing underage disciples, shramaneras or children, and should not delight in sharing the same teacher with them.”<sup>7</sup>

In the mural of the “Story of the Śrāmaṇera Keeping Precepts and Killing Himself”, the *śrāmaṇera* is not attracted by the charms of a woman, keeps the precepts of his body and takes his own life to show his resolve. What the mural indicates indeed matches the thought of the ‘Peaceful Practices’ chapter of the Lotus Sutra that monks of meditation should keep the precepts in their practice. It indicates that the creators of the cave wanted to emphasize the importance of keeping the precepts during the practice of the Lotus Sutra. The ‘Jataka of the Brahmin Hearing a Gāthā’ expresses the tradition of the bodhisattva who never begrudges the body for seeking the Dharma; however, it appears here with a much broader meaning. The Lotus Sutra and related commentaries repeatedly discuss the importance of the *gāthā* as follows: “With even a single *gāthā*, all shall achieve Buddhahood without doubt.”<sup>8</sup> In his work the *Miaofa lianhua jing xuan zan* 妙法蓮華經玄贊 (Praise of the Profundity of the Scripture of the Lotus of the Wonderful Law), the founder of the Yogācāra School of the Tang Dynasty, Kuiji 窺基 states, “Even for one *gāthā* [of the Dharma], one casts oneself into the fire. Even half *gāthā* is worthy of the sacrifice of the body.”<sup>9</sup> In the *Tiantai yun foxin yin ji* 天台伝仏心印記 (Commentary on the Record of Tiantai’s Transmission of the Buddha’s Mind-seal) on the monk Huaize’s 伝灯 *Tiantai yun foxin yin ji zhu* 天台伝仏心印記註 (Record of Tiantai’s Transmission of the Buddha’s Mind-seal), Chuandeng 懷則 quotes from the ‘Jataka of the Brahmin Hearing a Gāthā’ to fit the practice of the Tiantai School:

A long time ago, the Buddha was a Brahmin and performing ascetic practices in the Himalayas. There was a *rākṣasa* who said, “All things change, this is the law of birth and death.” Hearing this I have searched for the entire *gāthā*. The *rākṣasa* is hungry and thirsty and must obtain meat and blood to eat, such is the explanation. Therefore he later obtained half a *gāthā*. The commentary says: “When the Dharma of rising and ceasing itself ceases, Nirvana is the greatest joy.” Such is the writing on trees and rocks, therefore one sacrifices the body.<sup>10</sup>

I believe that these lines are the best proof that the mural of the ‘Jataka of the Brahmin Hearing a Gāthā’ in this cave is painted as a part of images from the Lotus Sutra. The same combination actually appeared

half a century earlier in the Lotus stele of the Southern Dynasty. The Sichuan Provincial Museum currently preserves a stele of the first year of the Yongming era (483) of the Southern Qi Dynasty, which was unearthed at Mao County in Sichuanng. The upper bas-relief part of the stele has the two Buddhas Śākyamuni and Prabhūtaratna seated together in a niche and the boy Snow Mountains meditating in the mountains right below the niche. Next to the boy, the famous verses are engraved: “All things change, this is the law of birth and death. When the Dharma of rising and ceasing itself ceases, Nirvana is the greatest joy.” (Fig. 3) Therefore, it can be said that the combination of two images from different sutras in Cave 285, expresses the thought of the Lotus Sutra as based on earlier pictorial traditions. Such a pictorial tradition continued up to the Kamakura era in Japan. The Honkoji Temple in Shizuoka Prefecture has a mandala of the 14th century and the third image expresses the thought of the ‘Encouraging Devotion’ chapter of the Lotus Sutra through the story of the boy Snow Mountains, who is Śākyamuni in a previous birth, sacrificing his body for a *gāthā*. This story is borrowed from the Nirvana Sutra (Fig. 4). It shows that even in the 14th century when the Lotus Sutra was a fully developed in the form of tableaux, images and texts from the Nirvana Sutra were still employed to express its ideas and meaning.<sup>11</sup>

I believe that these five stories from different Buddhist sutras on the south wall illustrated philosophical concepts of the Lotus Sutra:



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



theory of the inherent Buddha nature, keeping of precepts and method of practice. Through the ‘Story of Five Hundred Bandits’, the Cave expresses the concept of the Lotus Sutra that “all living beings possess Buddha nature” as the Sutra’s main goal and emphasizes the keeping of the relevant precepts and the practice of “body sacrifice”.<sup>12</sup>

### 3. Visualization of the Buddha in the Lotus Sutra: Combination of ‘Two Buddhas Seated Together’ and ‘Seven Buddhas of the Past’ on the North Wall

In the past century, a number of scholars have interpreted the seven preaching images on the north wall from different angles (Fig. 5). Pelliot was the earliest scholar to name the seven preaching images. He inferred from the names of remaining murals and designated the seven images ‘Seven Buddhas of the Past + Buddha of Infinite Life’.<sup>13</sup> In the *Dunhuang shiku neirong zonglu* 敦煌石窟內容總錄 (Catalogue of Pictorial Contents in Cave Temples of Dunhuang), edited by the Dunhuang Cultural Relics Research Institute, the preaching image of the ‘Two Buddhas Seated Separately’, the first mural from the west, was named ‘Two Buddhas of Śākyamuni — Prabhūtaratna’ (Fig. 6) and the names of other Buddhas were confirmed as Kāśyapa Buddha, Kanakamuni Buddha and the Buddha of Infinite Life through the remaining inscriptions. However, the catalogue does not explain the fifth and sixth murals of preaching from the west.<sup>14</sup> Since then, an academic delegation of Tokyo University of the Arts (Japan) also has paid attention to this point.<sup>15</sup> The *Chūgoku sekkutsu tonkō bakkōkutsu* 中国石窟·敦煌莫高窟 (*Dunhuang Mogao Grottoes [Caves of China]*) also names the first mural ‘Śākyamuni, Prabhūtaratna’.<sup>16</sup> However, the book does not explain an inconsistency in the name of the Buddha of Infinite Life, the seventh mural from the west on the north wall, with the inscription.



Fig. 5



Fig. 6

Among the many researchers on Dunhuang, Mr He Shizhe 賀世哲 is the only scholar who has published an articles on the name of the preaching murals of the north wall. He published ‘莫高窟第285窟北壁八佛考’ (The Eight Buddhas of the North Wall of Cave 285 of Mogao Grottoes) and then followed it up with ‘讀窟札記 — 重新解讀莫高窟第285窟北壁八佛’ (Reading the Notes on the Grottoes — Reinterpreting the Eight Buddhas on the North Wall of Cave 285 of Mogao Grottoes).<sup>17</sup> In his first article, Mr He separated the first mural from the west on the north wall into two parts from east to west: ‘Preaching Śākyamuni’ and ‘Preaching Maitreya’, and named the seven murals of the north wall the preaching image of the ‘Seven Buddhas of the Past + Maitreya Buddha’ from east to west. In the latter article, he revised the names of the first article to designate the preaching image on the north wall the ‘Buddha of Infinite Life’ and the ‘Seven Buddhas of the Past’ from east to west. He again separated the first image from the west into two parts from east to west as the ‘Preaching Kanakamuni Buddha’ and ‘Preaching Kāśyapa Buddha’. Based on the *Dafang deng tuoluoni jing* 大方等陀羅尼經 (Great Vaipulya Dharani Sutra) translated by Northern Liang monk Fazhong 法眾, in Gaochang, Mr He believes that the eight Buddhas in the seven preaching images might have been used for prayer and confession when a good man or a pious woman conducted the seven-day practice based on this scripture. However, I think that he still fails to clearly explain the

following two key issues. First of all, 10 Buddhas appear in this Sutra, but there are only eight Buddhas on the north wall of Cave 285. In this regard, Mr He explains that the two Buddhas ‘Thunder Sound King Buddha of the Past’ and ‘Buddha of the Secret Dharma Treasury’ were not painted because the section of the seven-day practice of this Sutra mentions only the first seven Buddhas including ‘Sikhin Buddha’, and does not mention the last two Buddhas. However, only five out of 10 Buddhas are mentioned in two volumes of ‘Bestowal of Prophecy’ and the three volumes of ‘Dream Practice’, but the remaining five Buddhas are not mentioned. An even bigger discrepancy is that Kāśyapa Buddha and the Buddha of Infinite Life are not mentioned for the seven-day practice but they appear in the mural on the north wall. Second, Mr He believes that the eight Buddhas are painted from east to west, based on the positions of Kanakamuni Buddha and Kāśyapa Buddha. If, as Mr He believes, the creators omitted the names of the last two Buddhas, then these two Buddhas should be placed in the first and second positions from the west according to the order of the seven-day practice, instead of their actual second and third positions. Mr He has not yet explained this mismatch satisfactorily. He also does not provide sufficient explanation of the fact that the two Buddhas share the same pair of attendant bodhisattvas, and still reserves his answer as to “the reason why the seventh and eighth images were painted as one”.

From this point of view, it is necessary to examine further whether the seven preaching images on the north wall are directly based on the *Dafang deng tuoluoni jing* or used in the seven-day practice. First of all, regarding the order in which the seven preaching images are created, votive text of the Preaching Kāśyapa Buddha, the second from the west, bears the date “大代大魏大統四年歲次戊午八月中旬造” (Created in the middle of the eighth month of Wuwu, fourth year of Datong, Dadai / Dawei). The text of the Preaching Kanakamuni Buddha, the third from the west, bears the date “大代大魏 八□中旬造” (Created in the middle of the eighth... Dadai / Dawei). The fifth image from the west bears “大代大魏大統五年四月廿八日造” (Created on the twenty-eighth date, the fourth month, the fifth year of Datong, Dadai / Dawei) and the seventh image from the west shows “大代大魏大統五年五月廿一日造訖” (Created and Completed on the twenty-first date, the fifth month, the fifth year of Datong, Dadai / Dawei). It is thus obvious that they are painted from west to east.<sup>18</sup> Second, for the first preaching image from the west, I identify Śākyamuni and Prabhūtaratna as the ‘Two Buddhas Seated Together’. For the remaining six preaching images, as the votive texts show, the second and third images from the west are Kāśyapa Buddha

and Kanakamuni Buddha of the 'Seven Buddhas of the Past', and the seventh image from the west is the Buddha of Infinite Life. The fourth image from the west, according to the order of the 'Seven Buddhas of the Past', must be 'Krakucchanda Buddha'.<sup>19</sup>

The name of the fifth image from the west should, with high possibility, be Visvabhū Buddha. From this angle, there is also high possibility that the creator initially not only planned to name the two Buddhas Prabhūtaratna



Fig. 7

Buddha and Śākyamuni Buddha in order eastwards, but also to name the main figures of the remaining six images 'other six Buddhas' of the 'Seven Buddhas of the Past'. However, the last name was changed due to the tendency of donors' personal faith. Furthermore, the "mistake" or "change" of the name of the Buddha of Infinite Life, the seventh image from the west (Fig. 7), has generated a dispute. However, as we can see from the images the donors on the north wall and their arrangement, Cave 285 was designed and guided by the monks and Dharma masters and created with joint donation by the local elites. Furthermore, since the interior structure was therefore incredibly well-ordered and every single small part was strictly checked, a mistake could not have been made in naming of the image which was the important part of the Cave. Even if the painters had made a mistake at the time, they could have modified it soon after it was discovered and it would not have been left for posterity. The possibility of "change", however, I believe to be more likely. The original plan was to place the 'Vipaśyin Buddha' as the first of the 'Seven Buddhas of the Past'. However, it could be changed into the 'Buddha of Infinite Life' later, if the donor objective changed. The Vipaśyin Buddha as the Buddha of the past was replaced with the Buddha of Infinite Life, which as the choice of name should be respected vis-à-vis the image it represented. In fact, if we consider the image in relation to the preaching images of the Buddha of Infinite Life on both sides of the door on the east wall of this Cave, we can understand that the creator of the Caves originally



wanted to express faith in the Buddha of Infinite Life as a key theme and the change of image still fitted into the philosophical system of the cave (details are mentioned later in the article).

Based on the foregoing analysis, these seven preaching images on the north wall can reasonably be named ‘Śākyamuni Prabhūtaratna + Seven Buddhas of the Past (not actual number) + Buddha of Infinite Life’. Furthermore, this combination has a common philosophical basis which is the Lotus Sutra concept of the infinite Buddha’s life and eternal Buddha’s body.

First of all, the Many Treasures Stupa emerges from the earth and it proves that all the words of Śākyamuni are true, indicating the eternal nature of the Dharma. After Śākyamuni enters the Many Treasures Stupa, Prabhūtaratna gives half the seat to Śākyamuni and sits together with him to preach the Dharma. It proves that Prabhūtaratna and Śākyamuni are truly one Buddha. Śākyamuni has already become the Buddha a long eternity in the past and the Buddha’s life is eternal. In his *Miaohua lianhua jing houxu* 妙法蓮華經·後序 (Postface to the Lotus Sutra of the Wonderful Law), the śramaṇa Sengrui 僧睿 gives more explicit commentary to the meaning of “infinite Buddha’s life and eternal Buddha’s body” represented by the two Buddhas Śākyamuni and Prabhūtaratna. He explained how the external form is incidental to the underlying eternal nature of the Buddha.<sup>20</sup>

The Liang Dynasty monk Fayun 法雲 also explains the spiritual meaning of the Prabhūtaratna seated with Śākyamuni in his *Fahua yiji* 法華義記 (Record on Meanings of the Lotus Sutra):

This is to say that Prabhūtaratna and Śākyamuni are indestructible Buddhas and sitting [together] is that Śākyamuni was not born and exists. Śākyamuni and Prabhūtaratna sit together. This means the twin trees [under which Śākyamuni entered Nirvāṇa] weren’t actually destroyed.<sup>21</sup>

Dunhuang manuscript S.4102, the third volume of the *Fahua jing yi* 法華經義 (Meaning of the Lotus Sutra) written by the monk Fashun 法順 recounts how Buddhas of the past continue to be present.<sup>22</sup> This manuscript was copied in the sixth century. However, research by Mr Fang Guangchang 方廣錫 has shown that the commentary covers Kumārajīva’s original work before scholars revised the content.<sup>23</sup> It is clear that the Lotus Sutra expresses the idea of eternal Buddha’s body through the ‘Two Buddhas Seated Together’, demonstrating that the Buddha of the past and the Buddha of the present are one. The thought



of the Lotus Sutra was already understood and accepted by Chinese monks by the Eastern Jin / Northern Southern Dynasties period.

Next, we discuss the ‘Seven Buddhas of the Past’. The ‘Seven Buddhas of the Past’ were mostly employed as an example in the Northern Dynasty period to discuss the transmission of Buddhist Dharma. For instance, the *Shi-Lao zhi* 釋老志 (Treatise on Buddhism and Daoism) of the *Wei shu* 魏書 (History of the Wei) explains: “Before Śākyamuni, there were six Buddhas. Śākyamuni followed the six Buddhas to achieve his enlightenment and appeared in bhadrakalpa.” The Lotus Sutra also mentions the ‘Seven Buddhas of the Past’. For example, in the ‘Prophecy of Enlightenment for Five Hundred Disciples’ chapter, Pūrṇa is regarded as the “foremost among people who preached the Law”. Since he was an old Buddha from countless millions of eons past, Pūrṇa has preached to the ‘Seven Buddhas of the Past’, preached to the present Buddha in bhadrakalpa and various Buddhas in the future, and made offerings to various Buddhas. The sutra says:

Monks, Purna was foremost among those who preached the Law in the time of the seven Buddhas. He is also foremost among those who preach the Law in my presence now. And he will likewise be foremost among those who preach the Law in the time of the future Buddhas who appear in the present Wise Kalpa, in all cases protecting, upholding, aiding and proclaiming the Law of the Buddha.<sup>24</sup>

Although the Sutra does not mention the term ‘Seven Buddhas of the Past’, in itself, it is clear that it refers to the ‘The Seven Buddhas of the Past’. The founder of the Tiantai School Nanyue Huisi 南岳慧思 (515–77) also discusses this in his *Fahua jing anle xingyi* 法華經安樂行儀 (Peaceful Practices of the Lotus Sutra). According to him, those who just recite the Lotus sutra and practise the Lotus Flower Samadhi, can “see Śākyamuni, the Seven Buddhas and also the Buddhas of the ten directions and the three existences with the eyes purified”.<sup>25</sup>

It is obvious that the ‘Seven Buddhas of the Past’ also clearly explains the Lotus Sutra’s thought of infinite Buddha’s life and eternal Buddha’s body. The creators of Cave 285 who lived in faith, used the ‘Seven Buddhas of the Past’ a concept known to many followers, in order to represent the infinite Buddhas of the past and combined with the Buddha Prabhūtaratna, based on their profound learning of Buddhism and thorough understanding of the Lotus Sutra. In this way, the statues of ‘Śākyamuni and Prabhūtaratna’ appeared in the north wall of Cave 285 in combination with the preaching images of the ‘Seven Buddhas of the Past’.

The use of such a combination to express the thought of the Lotus sutra was not limited to the Dunhuang Caves. This combination also can be seen in the Yungang Caves of the Northern Wei Dynasty. One research statistic gives 17 cases of ‘Seven Buddhas of the Past’ carved on the arch of the niche in which the two Buddhas sit together (Fig 8).<sup>26</sup> In particular, Cave 184 of the Northern Wei Dynasty in the Bingling Temple clearly exhibited such a combination. In the early 1980s, extensive archaeological work was carried out twice in succession in this cave, which eventually revealed murals of Northern Wei Dynasty from the eastern side of the north wall and on the northern side of the east door. It turned out that all of the murals applied the style of the late Northern Wei Dynasty.<sup>27</sup> For example, one Northern Wei mural with two layers was found on the eastern side of the north wall. On the upper level, the seven Buddhas appear and the names of all the Buddhas have survived. From left to right they are as follows: ‘第一□婆佛 the first ... po Buddha’, ‘第二識佛 the second Shi Buddha’, ‘第三□□佛 the third... Buddha’, ‘第四拘留佛 the fourth Juliu Buddha’, ‘第五拘那含牟尼佛 the fifth Kanakamuni Buddha’, ‘第六迦葉佛 the sixth Kāśyapa Buddha’, and ‘第七釋迦牟尼佛 the seventh Śākyamuni Buddha’. On lower level is the image of ‘Two Buddhas Seated Together’ and the names are ‘釋迦牟尼佛 Śākyamuni Buddha’ and ‘多寶佛 Prabhūtaratna Buddha’ (Fig. 9).

These examples show that artistic expression of the Lotus Sutra thought “Buddha body resides for eternity” through the ‘Seven Buddhas of the Past’, was already being done in the Northern Wei Dynasty period of Dunhuang. Judging from the time when it appeared, I believe that such artistic expression was disseminated from the east westwards to Dunhuang. It had a direct impact on the design of Cave 285. In



Fig. 8



Fig. 9

addition, the seven preaching images on the north wall were created with donations from different people and are a valuable source to show the activities for merits of the Dharma Flower (Lotus Sutra) associations in Dunhuang during the Northern Dynasties. Many scholars have suggested that the Dharma Flower associations generally consisted of ordinary people or villagers.<sup>28</sup> However, I believe that the seven images in Cave 285 were created with donations from aristocrats from different ethnicities, and may reflect the composition of local Dharma Flower associations in Dunhuang. It can be said that these images are a valuable early source of visual information on the activities of Dharma Flower associations in Dunhuang.

#### **4. Convergence of Belief in the Lotus Sutra, the Pure Land and the Infinite Life: the Buddha of Infinite Life on the East Wall**

Cave 285 is the first of the Northern Dynasties Grottoes of the Mogao Caves to clearly show an image of Amitāyus Buddha's preaching and three such images can be found in it. As discussed earlier, the inscription accompanying the donors' names below the first image from the east of the seven preaching images in the middle of the north wall clearly indicates that this is an image of the Buddha of Infinite Life. It replaced the first of the original 'Seven Buddhas of the Past', Buddha Vipāśyin.<sup>29</sup> Two large-scale preaching images appear symmetrically north and south of the door in the east wall (Fig. 10). The inscription accompanying the preaching image on the north side of the door is still faintly visible. The main Buddha sitting in a lotus position is named '无量壽佛 Buddha of Infinite Life'.<sup>30</sup> There is another similar preaching image on the south side of the door in the east wall. The images and layout are almost identical with those on the north side. Although the accompanying inscription is now blurred and different to read, it is again, as on the north side, the 'Buddha of Infinite Life'.

During the Northern and Southern Dynasties, those who sought rebirth in Amitabha's Pure Land embraced the Lotus Sutra. This is recorded in many places in the life stories of monks.<sup>31</sup> Scholars believe that such earlier practice of Chan and Pure Land, especially reciting in unison of the Pure Land and Dharma Flower (Lotus Sutra) must be the original form of practice of the Tiantai School which later taught about embracing the Lotus Sutra to go to the Pure Land. Tiantai monk Zhisheng 智顗 (538–97) made a vow to go to the Pure Land through the practice of the Lotus Sutra, as did Guanding 灌頂 (561–632).<sup>32</sup> Likewise, embracing the Lotus Sutra as the means to go to the Pure Land as the



Fig. 10

goal of meritorious activities is expressed as a common ideal in the seven preaching images on the north wall. This can be seen from the votive text below the preaching images. For example, the goal of the vow below the seventh preaching image of the Buddha of Infinite Life from the west is to be reborn in the Pure Land and equally attain sambodhi.<sup>33</sup>

In addition, I believe that the appearance of the two preaching images of the Buddha of Infinite Life in Cave 285 is also related to the fusion of the Dharma Flower (Lotus Sutra) faith in the eternal body of the Buddha and the Northern Dynasties period faith in the Buddha of Infinite Life or the infinite life of the Buddha. According to the tradition, Bodhisattva Nāgārjuna stated that the Buddha of Infinite Life could be identified with the limitless life, and Kumārajīva translated this identification in the *dazhidu chupin pusa shilun* 大智度初品菩薩釋論 (First Chapter of Treatise on the Commentary of Bodhisattva, Great Treatise on the Perfection of Wisdom), number eight 'the Discourse on Bodhisattvas'. It says, "At the time of Amitabha Buddha, one's life is countless incalculably long eons."<sup>34</sup> Mr Tang Yongtong 湯用彤 also believes that the Northern Dynasties faith in the Buddha of Infinite Life is related to the prolongation of one's life. He says, "This thought should be included into worship of the Buddha of Infinite Life, which means that it was already popular during the Southern Dynasties and did not start with Shandao 善導".<sup>35</sup> Dr Tsukamoto Yoshitaka 塚本善隆 has carefully examined the eight notes on Northern Wei-style statues related

to the Buddha of Infinite Life in the Longmen Grottoes. He found that the notes on these statues do not express a clear desire to go to the Pure Land of Amitabha; on the contrary, they have something to do with prayers for “longevity and immortality”.<sup>36</sup> Modern researchers who have studied the Chinese translation, the Sanskrit text and the Tibetan text of the Lotus Sutra also believe that the Buddha of Infinite Life was incorporated later in the Lotus Sutra and the “infinity of life” was brought into focus. Thus, the “Buddha in the Lotus Sutra is viewed at the stage of the (finite) life, but an eternal Śākyamuni in the Lotus Sutra expresses the infinite life.”<sup>37</sup>

It should be noted that there are many apocryphal texts among the Dunhuang manuscripts. ‘Bodhisattva Aśvaghōṣa’, chapter 30 of the *Miaofa lianhua jing* (P.3008)<sup>38</sup> likely from the northern area of the Western Jin states, “For those who do evil, Śakra (Śakro devānāmindraḥ) accepts the text and passes it down to hell. King Yama then sends the Five Officials of Hell to shorten [the] lifespan of the evil, take days of life and make each [a] target of death.” Mr Tang Yongtong also pointed out that the creation of this apocryphal text is related to the belief in life prolongation in northern area Buddhism.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, there is a high possibility that the author of the text was attached to the *Miaofa lianhua jing* precisely because the Lotus Sutra’s thought of the “eternal Buddha’s body” and “infinite Buddha’s life” and the practical idea of pursuit of “life prolongation” in Buddhism resonated among followers to some extent. It is worth noting that Kumārajīva’s translation, *Miaofa lianhua jing*, was more popular in the Dunhuang area than Dharmarakṣa’s *Zheng fahua jing* at the time of opening of Cave 285, but the name “Buddha of Infinite Life” was chosen instead of “Amitabha” for the Cave. As mentioned earlier, it can be said that the thought of the “infinite Buddha’s life” is related to the name. Therefore, the large-scale preaching image of the ‘Buddha of the Infinite Life’ replaced that of ‘Buddha Vipasyin’ and was painted along with the ‘Two Buddhas Seated Together’ and ‘Seven Buddhas of the Past’ on the north side of the door in the east wall. It can be said that the image of the ‘Buddha of Infinite Life’ in Cave 285 has a double meaning. On the one hand, it reflects the Lotus Sutra’s thought of the “eternal Buddha’s body”; on the other hand, it expresses the strong desire of the donors to pray for rebirth in the Western Pure Land as shown by the large-scale preaching images of the ‘Buddha Infinite Life’ on the south and north sides of the door in the east wall.



## 5. Participants in the “Lotus Association” Assembly: Image of the Protectors of Dharma on the West Wall

The west wall of this cave has three niches. Above them are depicted the Sun and Moon gods with their attendants. On the wall between the large central niche and the small niche on the south side are the three-faced and eight-armed Mahābrahma, the three-eyed Śakra, and on the outside are heavenly beings and the immortal Vasu. On the wall between the large niche and the small niches on the north side is the three-faced and six-armed Maheśvara (Śiva) in lalitāsana position riding a white ox (or cow). Below is Kumāra riding a peacock and Gaṇeśa or Vināyaka. In Buddhism, Viṣṇu is translated as *piseniutian* 毘瑟紐天, Śakra devānāmindraḥ is translated as *shidihuanyin* 釋提桓因, and Śiva is named as Maheśvara (*maxishouluo* 摩醯首羅) also known as *Dazi zaitian* 大自在天. On the lower level of both murals are two images of the four guardian kings wearing armour and holding a spear and a pike in their hands (Fig. 11). Do the images that appear here have a connection to the Lotus Sutra?

According to the Introduction to the Lotus Sutra, when Śākyamuni was to preach the Lotus Sutra on Vulture Peak in Rajgir, innumerable bodhisattvas, *śravaka* disciples and heavenly deities attended the assembly:

At that time Shakra Devanam Indra with his followers, twenty thousand sons of gods, also attended. There were also the sons of gods Rare Moon, Pervading Fragrance, Jeweled Glow, and the Four Great Heavenly Kings, along with their followers, ten thousand sons



Fig. 11

of gods.

Present were the sons of gods Freedom and Great Freedom and their followers, thirty thousand sons of gods. Present were King Brahma, lord of the saha world, the great Brahma Shikhin, and the great Brahma Light Bright, and their followers, twelve thousand sons of gods....

There were four gandharva kings, the gandharva king Pleasant, the gandharva king Pleasant Sound, the gandharva king Beautiful, and the gandharva king Beautiful Sound, each with several hundreds of thousands of followers.<sup>40</sup>

All the characters who appear in the scripture — besides the Buddha, bodhisattvas and disciples — such as Candradeva, the Four Heavenly Kings, Śakro devānāmindraḥ and His attendant, Maheśvara and His attendant, Brahmā and His attendant, the King of Kinnaras and His attendant, the King of the Gandharvas and His attendant, were painted on the west wall of Cave 285. Flying beings dispersing flowers inside the niches and on the wall on both sides represent the Gandharvas and Kinnaras. Therefore, I believe the image on the west wall could represent the various deities attending the “Dharma Flower Assembly”.<sup>41</sup>

## 6. Creating the Atmosphere for the Practice of Dharma Flower Samadhi

Each chapter of the Lotus Sutra has contents related to meditation, which means that the Lotus Sutra can be regarded as an important scripture for the practice of meditation in Mahayana Buddhism. After his translation *Miaofa lianhua* in 406, Kumārajīva created a method of contemplative meditation based on ‘The Emergence of the Treasure Tower’ chapter of the Lotus Sutra, that is, the “*fahua sanmei* 法華三昧” (Dharma Flower Samadhi) method. The *Siwei lueyao fa* 思惟略要法 (Abbreviated Essential Methods of Discernment) explains in detail the *fahua sanmei* meditation method.<sup>42</sup> According to this, the visualization of Prabhūtaratna Buddha of the past and Śākyamuni Buddha of the present sitting together in the Treasure Tower with all the Buddhas of the ten directions and three existences is central to understand that the past, present and future are seamlessly one. In most caves where the monks of the Northern Dynasties practised *fahua* meditation, which was popular among them, such images of the ‘Two Buddhas Seated Together’ were painted or installed to aid in the *fahua sanmei*

visualization. Thus, I believe that all the elements related to the Lotus Sutra in Cave 285 were to create the atmosphere for the practice of *fahua sanmei* meditation.

Cave 285 is a typical meditation grotto among cave temples. Not only were four small meditation caves created in the north and south walls for monks to practise meditation, but also 36 monks who sit in meditation in a hut or in the mountains were painted on the lower part of the four slopes of the ceiling. In the mountain forest all sorts of wild animals and hunting images have been painted to recreate an atmosphere of meditation within the mountains. In addition, the creators have also skilfully used images of the 'Two Buddhas Seated Together' and the five stories in combination on the entire south wall to emphasize specifically that evil persons, women and animals can also attain Buddhahood. By doing so, they wanted to express the Lotus Sutra concept that all living beings possess the Buddha nature, as well as the ideal method of *fahua sanmei* meditation based on the Lotus Sutra teaching: "that all living beings of the so-called ten directions and three existences, whether they are great or small, once they name themselves *nanwufo* 南无佛 (Namu Buddha), they would become Buddhas". At the same time, they combined the image of Śākyamuni and Prabhūtaratna Seated Together with those of the 'Seven Buddhas of the Past' and the 'Buddha of Infinite Life', and supplemented this combination with innumerable beings becoming Buddhas in the lower part between the preaching images and the four meditation cells. Furthermore, they clarified the Lotus Sutra's view on Buddha bodies that the Buddha's life is infinite and Buddha's body is eternal, and the *fahua sanmei* meditation of the Dharma realm that teaches concentration "on the image of Śākyamuni Buddha sitting together with Prabhūtaratna in the seven-jeweled stupa atop Mount Gr̥dhrakūṭa and of bodies of the Buddha of the ten directions pervading in the land [to which] all living beings had been transferred". These intentions are also emphasized by the 'preaching image of the three Buddhas' above the door of the east wall. It can be said that the theme of Cave 285 is clear while the structure is indeed elaborate; therefore, the *fahua sanmei* meditation method is specifically embodied here.

Finally, it should be pointed out that the Buddha of Infinite Life is also one of the important "objects" of dhyāna contemplation (sitting in meditation). In fact, the rise of faith in the Buddha of Infinite Life in China was initially closely linked to contemplation and chanting. During the Eastern Jin Dynasty, on the July 28, 402, 123 eminent leaders and monks including Huiyuan 慧遠 and Liu Yimin 劉遺民 before a statue of

Amitabha at Prajñā Terrace Hermitage formed an association to recite the Buddha's name and practice the three *samadhis* based on the *Banzou sanmei jing* 般舟三昧經 (Pratyutpanna Samadhi Sutra) in hope of rebirth in the Western Pure Land. It is recognized as the origin of the belief in Chinese Buddhism in Amitabha's Pure Land. *Chu Sanzang jiji* 出三藏記集 (Compilation of Notices on the Translation of the Tripiṭaka) mentions, "At the hermitage, Huiyuan held a *zhai* and made a vow to go to the Western Pure Land in front of a statue of Buddha of Infinite Life."<sup>43</sup> However, the vow that those 123 comrades including Huiyuan, Xie Lingyun 謝靈運 and Liu Yimin made was not to recite Buddha's name on their deathbeds as the later Pure Land School teaches, but to practise the *samadhi* of Buddha. As Mr Tang Yongtong says, "Recitation of Buddha by Huiyuan is obviously to practise meditation, not to just call out the name Buddha as laypeople did in after times."<sup>44</sup> Mr Shi Daoyu's 釋道昱 statistics on the small number of Pure Land practitioners during the Northern Southern Dynasties as recorded in the *Gaoseng zhuan* 高僧傳 (Lives of Eminent Monks) and the *Biquini zhuan* 比丘尼傳 (Biographies of Buddhist Nuns), also show that the faith in the Pure Land during the Northern Southern Dynasties are often associated with dhyāna contemplation.<sup>45</sup> As mentioned earlier, Cave 285 was a site for practice of *fahua sanmei* meditation. On the north wall, a preaching image of the Buddha of Infinite Life was painted after the image of Buddha Vipaśyin, the first of the Seven Buddhas of the Past, along with votive expressing the desire to be reborn in the Pure Land. Moreover, on both sides of the door in the east wall are large preaching images of the Buddha of Infinite Life. All of these indicate that the practice of *fahua sanmei* meditation blended with the belief in Amitabha's Pure Land as well as combined practices of Chan and Pure Land.<sup>46</sup> It can be seen that the later Tiantai School later upheld the Lotus Sutra, implementing practices for rebirth in the Western Pure Land. Cave 285 already contains the seeds of all these ideals that were just systematized and theorized by those who followed.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Li Jingjie 李静杰, 'Guanyu Yungang di jiu shi 关于云冈第九、十窟的图像构成' (On the Composition of the Images in Yungang Caves 9 and 10), *Fojiao yishu* 佛教艺术, no. 267 (2003).

<sup>2</sup> *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* (referred to as [T]) T9, 4.

<sup>3</sup> T9, 34.

<sup>4</sup> T9, 35.

- <sup>5</sup> T9, 35.
- <sup>6</sup> T4, 232.
- <sup>7</sup> T9, 37.
- <sup>8</sup> T9, 8.
- <sup>9</sup> T50, 698.
- <sup>10</sup> T57, 372.
- <sup>11</sup> Nara National Museum 奈良国立博物館, ed., *Tokubetsu-ten: Bukkyō setsuwa no bijutsu* 特別展 仏教説話の美術 (Special Exhibition: Art of Buddhist Narratives) (Nara: Nara National Museum, 1990), 98–99 [Figs 55-3, 55-4]; Willa. J. Tanabe, *Paintings of the Lotus Sutra* (New York and Tokyo: John Weatherhills, Inc, 1988), Pl. 40 and Fig. 161.
- <sup>12</sup> For Fahua classification thought and its influence on Dunhuang Grottoes, see Zhang Yuanlin 張元林 and Wei Yingchun 魏迎春, ‘Shilun Fahua panjiao sixiang dui Dunhuang Beichao—Suidongku zhi yingxiang 試論法華判教思想對敦煌北朝—隋洞窟之影響’ (On Fahua Thought and Its Influence on the Dunhuang Caves from the Northern Dynasties to Sui Dynasty), *Dunhuang yanjiu* 敦煌研究 (Dunhuang Research), no. 5 (2008).
- <sup>13</sup> Geng Shengyi 耿昇譯, *Boxihe biji* 伯希和筆記 (Paul Pelliot’s Notes) (Gansu: Gansu renmin chubanshe, 1994), 248.
- <sup>14</sup> Dunhuang Research Institute 敦煌文物研究所, ed., *Dunhuang Mogao ku neirong zonglu* 敦煌莫高窟內容總錄 (Catalogue of Contents of Dunhuang Mogao Caves) (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1982).
- <sup>15</sup> Tokyo University of the Arts 東京藝術大学, *Tonkō sekkutsu gakujutsu chōsa hōkokusho* 敦煌石窟學術調查報告書 (Report on the Academic Research Of Dunhuang Caves) (Tokyo: Tokyo University of the Arts, 1985).
- <sup>16</sup> Dunhuang Research Institute 敦煌文物研究所, ed., *Chūgoku sekkutsu / Tonkō Bakkōkutsu* 中国石窟·敦煌莫高窟 (一) (Chinese Caves / Dunhuang Mogao Grottoes vol. 1) (Beijin / Tokyo: Wenwu chubanshe / Heibonsha, 1982), 216 [Figure description 23].
- <sup>17</sup> He Shizhe 賀世哲, ‘Mogao ku di 285 ku beibi bafo kao 莫高窟第285窟北壁八佛考’ (A Study of the Eight Buddhas on the North Wall of Cave 285 of Mogao Grottoes), in *1990 nian Dunhuangxue guoji xueshu yantao hui lunwenji* 年敦煌學國際學術研討會論文集 (Proceedings of the 1990 International Symposium on Dunhuang Studies) (Shenyang: Liaoning Fine Arts Publishing House, 1994), 236–55; ‘Shishi zhajji – chongxin jiaodu Mogao ku di 285 beibi bafo 石室札記——重新解讀莫高窟第285窟北壁八佛’ (Note on the Stone Chamber – A Reinterpretation of the Eight Buddhas on the North Wall of Cave 285 of Mogao Grottoes), *Dunhuang yanjiu* 敦煌研究 (Dunhuang Research), no. 1 (2003).
- <sup>18</sup> The Report from the Tokyo University of the Arts states that the seven preaching scenes were completed in nine to 10 months. However, I believe that this should also take into account the cold winter weather, as well as the inability to operate in the cave and other factors, so the actual time to paint them would not have been so long.
- <sup>19</sup> Regarding the name of the preaching scenes, there are two views on the ‘Buddha of Infinite Life’ and ‘Krakucchanda Buddha’. Mr He Shizhe has been amended to the latter according to the *Boxihe biji*. This article follows that explanation.
- <sup>20</sup> T9, 62.
- <sup>21</sup> T33, 661.



- <sup>22</sup> T85, 175.
- <sup>23</sup> Fang Guangchang 方廣鎬, 'Dunhuang yishu zhong de Miao fa lian hua jing ji Lianhua jing ji you guan wenxian 敦煌遺書中的妙法蓮華經及有關文獻' (The Lotus Sutra of the Miraculous Dharma and Related Documents), *Zhonghua foxue xuebao* 中華佛學學報 (Chinese Journal of Buddhist Studies), no. 10 (1997).
- <sup>24</sup> T9, 27.
- <sup>25</sup> T46, 698.
- <sup>26</sup> Wang Yanqing 王雁卿, 'Yungang shiku qifo zaoxiang ticaian qianxi 雲岡石窟七佛造像題材淺析' (An Analysis on the Theme of the Seven Buddha Statues in the Yungang Grottoes), in *Yungang shiku guoji yantao hui lunwenji* 雲岡石窟國際研討會論文集·研究卷 (Proceedings of the 2005 Yungang Grottoes International Symposium / Research Volume 2005) (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 2006), 251–62.
- <sup>27</sup> Bingling Temple Grottoes Cultural Relics Depository, Gansu Provincial Museum 甘肅省博物館、炳靈寺石窟文物保管所, 'Binglingsi shiku laojun dong Bei Wei bihua qingli jianbao 炳靈寺石窟老君洞北魏壁畫清理簡報' (Brief Report on the Cleaning of the Northern Wei Mural in the Laojun Cave of Bingling Temple Grottoes), *Kaogu* 考古 (Archaeology), no. 8 (1986).
- <sup>28</sup> (1) Kuramoto Shōtoku 倉本尚德, *Hokuchō bukkyō zōzōmei kenkyū* 北朝仏教造像銘研究 (Studies of Inscriptions on Northern Dynasties Buddhist Sculpture) (Kyoto: Hōzōkan, 2016), 31–215; (2) Yan Shangwen 顏尚文, 'Beichao fojiao shequ gongtong ti de fahua li yiyi zuzhi yu huodong – yi Dong Wei Li shi heyi zaoxiang wei lie 北朝佛教社區共同體的法華麗邑義組織與活動——以東魏李氏合邑造像碑為例' (Buddhist Communities of the Northern Dynasties and Their Dharma Flower Association Organizations and Activities: Using the Li Family Association Statue of the Eastern Wei Dynasty as an Example), *Foxue yanjiu zhongxin xuebao* 佛學研究中心學報 (Journal of Buddhist Studies Center), no. 1 (1996): 167–84.
- <sup>29</sup> Regarding the fourth preaching scene from the west on the northern wall, there are some scholars who believe that it is a preaching scene of the Buddha of Infinite Life. However, this view is not uncontested. Because of the contradictions recorded in the *Boxihe biji*, and given there is no cartouche, this article does not follow that explanation.
- <sup>30</sup> Dunhuang Research Institute, ed., *Chūgoku sekkutsu / Tonkō Bakkōkutsu*, 217.
- <sup>31</sup> *Gaoseng zhuan* 高僧傳 (Lives of Eminent Monks); T50, 356.
- <sup>32</sup> Shi Daoyu 釋道昱, 'Zhiguan zai zhongguo fojiao chuqi mituo xinyang de diwei 止觀在中國佛教初期彌陀信仰的地位' (On the Status of Śamatha and Vipāśyanā in Amitabha Belief in the Early Days of Chinese Buddhism), *Yuanguang foxue xuebao* 圓光佛學學報 (Yuan Kuang Journal of Buddhist Studies), no. 2 (1997).
- <sup>33</sup> Dunhuang Academy 敦煌研究院, ed., *Dunhuang Mogaoku gongyang ren tiji* 敦煌莫高窟供養人題記 (Donor Inscriptions from Mogao Caves of Dunhuang) (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1986), 117.
- <sup>34</sup> T25, 93.
- <sup>35</sup> Tang Yongtong 湯用彤, *Han Wei Lian Jin Nanbeichao fojiao* 漢魏兩晉南北朝佛教 (Buddhism in Han, Wei, Both Jins and Northern and Southern Dynasties) vol. 1 (Beijing: Peking University Press, 1983), 264–65.
- <sup>36</sup> Tsukamoto Zenryū 塚本善隆, *Tsukamoto Zenryū chosaku-shū dai ni kan: Hokuchō bukkyō shi kenkyū* 塚本善隆著作集 第二卷 北朝佛教史研究 (Collected Works of Zenryu Tsukamoto vol. 2: Study of Buddhist History during Northern Dynasty) (Tokyo: Daitō shuppansha, 1942), 436.

- <sup>37</sup> Hirakawa Akira 平川彰等 and Li Baoyao 林保堯, trans., *Fahua sixiang* 法華思想 (Lotus Sutra Thought) (Taipei: Taipei Foguang shan, 1998), 228–34.
- <sup>38</sup> According to the Shi Pingting's 施萍婷 statistics, among Dunhuang manuscripts there are a total of six such apocrypha. See Dunhuang Academy 敦煌研究院 and Shi Pingting eds, *Dunhuang Yishu Zongmu Suoyin Xinbian* 敦煌遺書總目索引新編 (Catalogue and Index of Remained Documents in Dunhuang) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2000).
- <sup>39</sup> Tang Yongtong, *Han Wei Lian Jin Nanbeichao fojiao* 漢魏兩晉南北朝佛教 (Buddhism in Han, Wei, Both Jins and Northern and Southern Dynasties) vol. 2 (Beijing: Peking University Press, 1983), 582.
- <sup>40</sup> T9, 2.
- <sup>41</sup> However, the Buddha in the main niche is sitting upright and not in a lotus position, which is inconsistent with the passage where it is recorded. Or it could be confusion on the part of the sculptors.
- <sup>42</sup> T15, 300.
- <sup>43</sup> *Chu Sanzang jiji* 出三藏記集 (Compilation of Notices on the Translation of the Tripiṭaka), vol. 2, 15; T55, 109.
- <sup>44</sup> Tang Yongtong, *Han Wei Lian Jin Nanbeichao fojiao* vol. 1, 264–65.
- <sup>45</sup> Shi Daoyu, 'Zhiguan zai zhongguo fojiao chuqi mituo xinyang de diwei'.
- <sup>46</sup> Yan Juanying also noticed the visualization background that appears in the preaching scene of the Buddha of Infinite Life in this cave. She believes that the 'Seven Buddhas of the Past' and Buddha of Infinite Life drawn together is a reflection of visualization of the Pure land and the bodhisattva path being combined at that time. Yan Juanying 顏娟英, 'Bei Qi changuan ku de tuxiang kao – cong Xiaonanzhai shiku dao Xiangtangshan shiku 北齊禪觀窟的圖像考——從小南海石窟到響堂山石窟' (A Study of Images in Northern Qi Meditation Caves: From the Xiaonanzhai Grottoes to the Xiangtangshan Grottoes), *Dongfang xuebao* 東方學報 (Journal of the Orient), no. 70 (1998), 375–440, appearing in Yan Juanying, ed., *Meishu yu kaogu* 美術與考古 (Fine Arts and Archaeology), vol. 2 (Beijing: Zhongguo dabaike quanshu chubanshe, 2005), 50070.

### Figure Details

Fig. 1: Murals on the south wall, Mogao Cave 285

Fig. 2: Two Buddhas Seated Together on the south wall, Mogao Cave 285

Fig. 3: Stele of the first year of Yongming era of the Southern Qi Dynasty (Collection of the Sichuan Provincial Museum)

Fig. 4: Sacrifice of the body for a gāthā (Collection of the Honkoji Temple)

Fig. 5: Preaching images on the north wall, Mogao Cave 285

Fig. 6: Two Buddhas Seated Together on the north wall, Mogao Cave 258

Fig. 7: Buddha of Infinite Life on the north wall, Mogao Cave 285

Fig. 8: Two Buddhas Seated Together + Seven Buddhas of the Past on the east wall, Yungang Caves 13

Fig. 9: Two Buddha Seated Together and Seven Buddhas of the Past on the north wall, Cave 184 of Bingling Temple

Fig. 10: Buddha of Infinite Life on the north side of the door in the east wall, Mogao Cave 285

Fig. 11: West wall, Mogao Cave 285

**About the Author and Translator**

**Zhang Yuanlin** is chief librarian and director of the Comparative Research Center on the Silk Road and Dunhuang, Dunhuang Academy. He is a specialist in Buddhist and Dunhuang iconography, especially in relation to that along the Silk Road. He has recently published his book *Research on Dunhuang Images of the Lotus Sutra from the Northern Dynasties to Sui Dynasty* ( 隋时期敦煌法华图像研究, 2017).

**Neil Schmid** 史瀚文 is research professor at the Dunhuang Academy. He has published on a wide variety of subjects in Dunhuang Studies ranging from Dunhuang literature to material culture and art history. Among other book projects, he is currently preparing *A Guidebook to Scholarly Resources for Dunhuang Studies* 国际敦煌学学术资源全集 in English and Chinese.