

The Representation of the *Lotus Sūtra* in the Mogao Caves

Christine Kontler

AS well as being one of the founding texts of the Great Vehicle, the *Lotus Sūtra* is also one of the oldest to be illustrated. Universally recognised, the first representations focus like a ‘freeze frame’ on the figure of two Buddhas sitting side by side on a throne or in a stūpa, by way of illustrating Chapter XI of the text in its Chinese version, ‘*Vision of the Pagoda of Precious Materials*.’

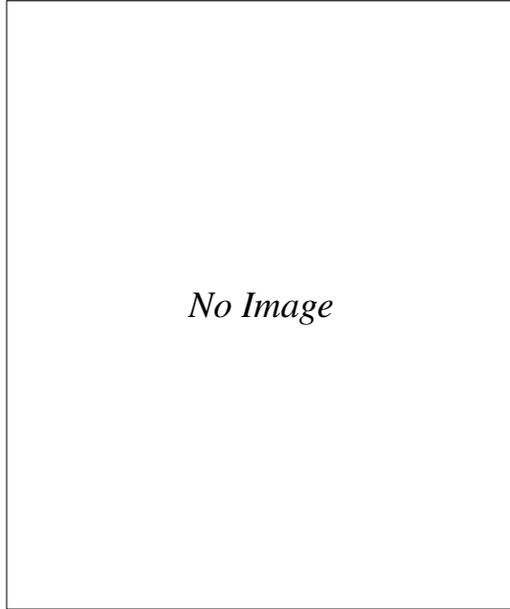
Very stable in its composition, the scene shows Śākyamuni expounding the *Lotus*, seated at the right (on the left when you face the picture) of Prabhūtaratna (‘Many Treasures’ Buddha), the Buddha from the distant past, who had come to his wonderful pagoda to attest to the excellence of his preaching. In line with the lessons in the text attributed to an immensely magnified vision of the Buddha, they are depicted as ‘glorious bodies’ or as ‘shared bodies’ (*sambhoga-kāya* 三善伽迦耶) as per the nascent iconography of the Great Vehicle.

‘Sūtra of Transformation’ Paintings

Using the beautiful Japanese term of ‘One Stūpa, Two Venerables’, the subject appears to be a creation of art known as ‘Gandhāra’. It appears in the first centuries of our era in this ancient Buddhist land on the northwest edge of the Indian subcontinent (present-day Pakistan) and spreads to Central and Eastern Asia to form the kernel of illustrations developed in China between the 5th and 10th centuries, in the period of the formation and the blossoming of Chinese Buddhism.

Chinese scholars were able to identify some forty painted illustrations of the *Lotus* at the Mogao shrine-cave in the Dunhuang oasis, a testament to how remarkable this place is. These pictures belong to a major genre of Buddhist painting, called ‘Sūtra of transformation’ (*bianjing* 變經) or ‘transformation of images’ (*bianxiang* 變相) within the meaning of the Buddhist *nirmāna* of ‘appearance’ of ‘fictional creation’ or of ‘metamorphosis’ of which art is the major means of transmission.

Portrayed either in 3D (modeled statues of Cave 259) or on painted



Śākyamuni Buddha (on the observer's left) and Many Treasures Buddha. Cave 259, Dunhuang Mogao Caves; Northern Wei period, 5th century (*Dunhuang shiku quanji*, Vol. 7, Shanghai Renmin Chubanshe, 2000)

surfaces (Cave 285), the vision of 'One Stūpa, Two Venerables' dominates the arts of Mogao in the 5th and 6th centuries, thereafter integrating into compositions as varied as they are complex.

Dating from the Sui Dynasty (581–619), Cave 420 is entirely devoted to the Lotus with statues and painted groups of disciples and bodhisattvas around a preaching Śākyamuni. On the walls are small figures of Buddhas in meditation, known as the 'thousand Buddhas', showing the radiant presence of these countless Buddhas emanating from the glorious body of Shakyamuni, or those arising from the ten directions of space to participate in his sermon.

On the ceiling, the introductory chapter of the sutra or '*Prologue*' is portrayed with its multiple assemblies centered around a scene of timeless Extinction (west and north sections). The south section is dedicated to Chapter III, called '*The Parable*', which tells the story of the burning house, a metaphor for our world of impermanence and suffering. Like a benevolent father, the Buddha saves his children by sending three carts which, in fact, are revealed as unique, reflecting the supreme doctrine he taught in the *Lotus*.

As for the images on the east side, they describe the succession of

perils from which Bodhisattva Guanyin saves his devotee and also the forms he borrows to approach him and bring him to liberation, in a very detailed illustration of Chapter XXV, ‘*The Universal Gateway of the Bodhisattva Perceiver of the World’s Sounds*’. Often copied, recited and depicted independently, the chapter is most beautifully portrayed in Cave 45, dating from the Tianbao era (742–755) of the Tang Dynasty (619–907) eras where the south wall is devoted entirely to the salvation performed by the Giant of compassion.

It was in fact from the 7th to the 9th centuries that the paintings of Mogao reached their peak. Dating from the Shenlong era (705–707), the south wall of Cave 217 shows Śākyamuni preaching the *Lotus* and setting in motion the turning of the wheel of the Law; above him appears his chosen land or his field of salvific action, which is none other than our fully transfigured world.

In the large central frame with its hieratic figures ranked in order of spiritual importance, small scenes are juxtaposed, forming multiple portions of space in a more free composition, with backgrounds of landscapes or architecture. Among them is ‘The Parable of the Phantom City’ from Chapter VII where the Buddha, like a wise guide, magically creates a city for those exhausted from their journey to stop and rest so that they can resume their trek to the unique treasure of authentic and real extinction.

Rich Imagery Brings Teachings to Life

Illustrations of parables, predictions and wonders... “scènes de genre” show, often in a highly elliptical way, the methods or expedient means (*upāya*), employed by the Buddha of the *Lotus* to invite living beings into the Way of perfect Enlightenment. They are an opportunity for rural depictions, such as the labourer from Chapter V under the beneficial rain of ‘The Parable of The Medicinal Herbs’; they recount the life of a poor son who is kept busy sweeping the stables at a luxurious residence before being entrusted with his father’s inheritance in the edifying story from Chapter IV, ‘*Belief and Understanding*’. Or they show battle scenes, evoking the parable of the pearl without price, bestowed to his most valiant soldiers by the great king of Chapter XIV ‘*Peaceful Practices*’.

Chapel-Cave 61 is the most prestigious in the sanctuary due to its grandeur and to the noble lineage of its sponsor and donor, Lady Zhai, wife of Cao Yuanzhong, Imperial Commissioner of the Dunhuang area in the early 10th century. On the south wall, which you can discover in

this exhibition, a large vertical panel depicts the preaching of the *Lotus*, surrounded by twenty-two of its chapters. Thinking in terms of symmetry along a central axis—in other words the central elevation, the illustration shows, from bottom to top, the burning house—our world—with the reclining Buddha of final extinction and Shakyamuni preaching, and above him the Vision of the wonderful pagoda.

Thanks to their richness, sketched in this lecture in broad strokes, the representations of the *Lotus* at Mogao reveal the harmonic functions of imagery in the Great Buddhist Vehicle, as an ‘offering’ or ‘meritorious act’ accomplished by the disciple making a virtuous gift, as an ‘icon’ for the devotee in their religious or liturgical practices, as the subject and object of contemplation for the meditating follower. Just like reciting a text, imagery instructs and teaches, updates and brings to life teachings that are beyond all worldly scope, while remaining tangible to humanity.

Bibliography

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Author Biography

Christine Kontler is a Sinologist with a Ph.D. in Religious Studies. She is a teaching assistant at the Theologicum of the Catholic Institute of Paris and a member of CREOPS (the Centre for Far Eastern Research at Paris-Sorbonne). Her courses and main publications focus on the religious and artistic traditions of China and the sacred arts of Buddhism. She is the author of *Sagesses et religions en Chine* (Wisdom and Religions in China, Bayard, 1996), *Les voies de la sagesse, Bouddhisme et religions d'Asie* (Ways of Wisdom, Buddhism and religions of Asia, Picquier, 1996, 2nd edition 2005), and *L'art chinois, une histoire culturelle* (Chinese Art, a Cultural History, CNRS pub. 2016).