

The Image Narration of Jataka: Analysis of The Deer King Survana in Cave 257

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Abstract: The Jataka of the Deer King Survana is one of the vital themes of Dunhuang frescos, which display the combination of Buddhism visual art and Chinese traditional art. The paper compares the differences between the fresco on the west wall in Dunhuang Cave 257, the relief at Bharhut in India, and the murals in Kizil Grottoes by analyzing the distinctive compositions and the adaptations of sutras, and speculates the function of frescos in Dunhuang.

Keywords: Dunhuang, History, Art.

1. Introduction

Dunhuang frescos integrate the style of Buddhism visual art and Chinese traditional art. Chinese painters adapted the Buddhism tales with specific narrative methods in different periods. Jataka, the stories describing Siddhattha's life before he became the Buddha, is one of the themes expressed by painters. The Deer King Survana is one of the important stories among Jataka. And there are abundant images of the tale of the Deer King, such as the relief at Bharhut, the murals in Kizil Grottoes, and the fresco in Dunhuang Cave 257. In the following parts, there would be an analysis of the Deer King Jataka by comparing the differences in the adaptations of the sutras and the compositions among these images, for speculating the purpose of the frescos in Dunhuang.

2. Comparisons Among Three Images

2.1. The Adaptions of The Sutras

The adaptations of the Deer King Jataka are various, while the images of Dunhuang manifest the worship of the Buddha and the emphasis on the law of cause and effect. The early image of the Survana Jataka would be the relief at Bharhut in India in the 2nd century. In China, the murals of the Deer King were found in Kizil Grottoes and Cave 257 of Dunhuang. However, there are various kinds of adaptations of the tales of Survana among these images. Many sutras mention the tales of The Deer King, such as the Sutra on the Collection of the Six Perfection and the Sutra of Condition of Bodhisattva. There is not much difference in the general plots of the Deer King among these sutras. The King Deer named Survana saved a drowned man and the man was thankful for the assistance of Survana. Survana required the man not to tell others about his existence. However, the drowned man betrayed the Deer King because of the money and told the King where the Deer was. The King decided to hunt the Deer, but he gave up after meeting Survana and having a talk with him. Nevertheless, the details of the Jataka in the Sutra on the Collection of the Six Perfection are slightly discriminated from the edition of the Sutra of the Condition of Bodhisattva. From the perspective of the reason why the King hunted Survana, the Sutra of the Condition of Bodhisattva described that the King hunted the Deer King for the beauty and rareness of the Deer [1]. In contrast, The King hunted the Deer because

of the request of the Queen in the Sutra of the Collection of the Six Perfection [2]. On the other hand, the ends of the stories are distinguished except for the part about the prohibition from the King. The Queen was dead because of heartbreak caused by her dissatisfaction with the outcome in the Sutra on the Collection of the Six Perfection [2]. There was no description of the Queen in the Sutra of the Condition of Bodhisattva [1]. The Deer King Jataka in the Sutra of Six Perfection clarified the law of cause and effect as the Queen died because of her greed, while the Sutra of the Condition of Bodhisattva focused on the Buddha's edification.

The relief of Bharhut displayed five plots of the Deer King: the Deer saved the drowned, the King hunted the Deer, the Deer told the story, and the King stopped killing the Deer. The content of the Indian relief was similar to the description of the Sutra of the Condition of Bodhisattva as it did not mention the Queen's request and her end. What the relief of Bharhut attempted to express was not the effects caused by the characters themselves. On the contrary, the fresco in the Cave 257 depicted most of the plots of the Deer King Jataka. Duan divided the Deer King Jataka into ten parts [3]. However, some scenes would share the same figures, so it might be proper to separate the paints into seven blocks: the Deer King saved the drowned, the drowned felt grateful, the Deer King slept in the mountain, the Queen required the King to hunt the Deer King, the drowned informed the hints, the King's army marched, and the Deer King met the King. As the scene of the conversation between the Queen and the King was depicted, the Jataka in Dunhuang approximates the edition of the Sutra of Six Perfection. The Sutra of Six Perfection described the death of the Queen for her greed, therefore, there is the possibility that the painter of the Jataka in Dunhuang attempted to emphasize the law of cause and effect.

2.2. The Composition

The composition of the Deer King Jataka in Dunhuang is specific, which is embodied in the aspect of the arrangement of elements. There are subtle lines based on the sutras that guide the sight of viewers to understand the story in the Indian relief and the frescos of Kizil Grottoes. Wu defined

two kinds of narrative styles of images: episodic representation and iconic representation [4]. Episodic representation is for the story narration, and the characters' motions usually have a certain tendency, which would guide

viewers' sights [4]. On the other hand, iconic representation would be symmetric images that would guide audiences to focus on the center of the images [4].

In the Indian relief, the connections between different blocks depended on the arrangement of the forest and the river, except for the sequence of the story. The flock of the deer was gathering on the left side, while the King and the Queen were on the right side. The river and the forest connected two scenes and surround the center, which created the linear guideline connecting different blocks. Zhan demonstrated that the relationship between the plots of the Indian relief could be described as a spiral, and the guidelines of the images would attract audiences to follow the story and reach the climax in the center [5]. For the narrative purpose, the Bharhut relief seems to be the episodic representation. However, it is vague as some plots were omitted and the arrangement of elements was slightly messy. The orientation of the Deer King in the river would attract viewers' sight to the left side rather than the following plots on the right. The middle elements created the vertical line to split the image into two parts, which weakened the interrelationship between the right side and the left side. On the contrary, the circular tendency is stronger than the linear tendency, which leads audiences to focus on the center immediately. Meanwhile, the river corresponded with the forest, and the deer flock created a symmetric image with the human group. Hence, the Indian relief would be more similar to the iconic representation.

The mural found in Kizil Grottoes would be apparently the iconic image for its arrangement of elements and the symmetric composition. There were two kinds of scenes frequently appearing in the murals of Kizil Grottoes: the King worshipped the Deer King, and the Deer King groveled in the front of the King [5]. A single image is difficult to display the sequential story and the image is obviously symmetric in these images. Therefore, the murals of Kizil Grottoes are iconic representations. On the other hand, the Rhombus-shape paints or the Sumeru were extensively used in the mural of Kizil Grottoes for depicting the surrounding world [6]. These kinds of shapes had influenced the style of the Dunhuang painting in the aspect of separating the plots and creating the environment scenes.

The fresco in Dunhuang is the episodic representation because of its clarified motion tendency and the connections among plots. The fresco in Dunhuang was the scroll comic contraction, which meant that the beginning of the story would be the two edges of the fresco, and the end of the story was in the center of the fresco [7]. Meanwhile, the shape of mountains took the role of dividing different blocks of stories and displaying the surrounding world. Zhan believed that the function of separating the blocks was affected by the Rhombus-shape paints of Kizil Grottoes [5]. Except for the mountains at the bottom, the continuing mountains created the motion tendency from left-top to right-bottom, which clarified the plot and guided the sight of viewers to focus on the climax of the story, which is the encounter between Survana and the King. At the same time, the figures would be shared in some scenes. In the plot of the King's army marching and the meeting of the King and Survana, the figure of the King was the same. And the arrangement strengthened the interrelationship among plots. Hence, the composition of the fresco in Cave 257 displayed the story clearer than the relief at Bharhut and the mural in Kizil Grottoes, which manifested a better narration, though the sequence of the story remains chaotic if the viewers did not know the Jataka.

3. Purpose

The purpose of frescos in Dunhuang is still unclear, and there are two main points: the frescos are a tool for explaining the sutras or for the religious rites. Wu proposed that a single piece of paint or an independent sculpture should be observed together with its surrounding architecture or related religious rites [8]. The Deer King Jataka in Cave 257 was the part of the west wall, which did not the whole image of west frescos in Cave 257. From the perspective of the complete west wall, the fresco would not be the episodic representation but the iconic representation. The Buddha in the center was obviously the center of the whole frescos and the purpose of the fresco seems to be the worship of the Buddha. At the same time, Wu mentioned that the "pien-wen", the transformation text, was hard to read in the dark and the chaotic sequences of the fresco might cause the problems of misunderstanding based on the analysis of the grottoes' structure [8]. It seems that there is strong evidence proving that the frescos in Dunhuang Cave were for respecting the Buddha.

However, there might be certain possibilities that the frescos are for explaining and spreading Buddhism. Wu supposed that the episodic representation was the self-contained structure as it strengthened the stories of characters and audiences are the outsider who was watching, while the iconic representation allowed audiences to become the participants [8]. From this perspective, the Deer King Jataka in Cave 257 might break the continuity of the frescos' purpose because the Deer King Jataka was a narrative story. On the other hand, the conditions of different dynasties might influence the purpose of the frescos. The 257 Cave was constructed in the Northern Wei Dynasty, the period of war. At that time, the Hinaya was spreading, which encouraged people to save themselves [3]. The request of spreading the religion and stimulating people to create was important for the recovery of society to some degree. Therefore, parts of the frescos probably have the function of assisting the expression of transformation texts, but also display the respect of the Buddha.

4. Conclusion

The Deer King Jataka is one of the impressive Buddhism tales, which is adapted in different works. There were the relief at Bharhut in India, the murals discovered in Kizil Grottoes, and the frescos in Dunhuang Cave 257. The differences in the composition and the adaptations of sutras display the distinctive style of Buddhism visual art. At the same time, the combination of Buddhism art and Chinese traditional art expressed that the connections between China and other regions became tighter. From the perspective of the protection of Dunhuang Art, creative adaptations would be one of the vital methods. The movie *Nine-Color-Deer* was an attractive example. The analysis of the sutra and frescos could assist the artists and scholars to understand the stylish figures in the Buddhism visual art and Chinese traditional art, which could allow others to learn more about the beauty of Dunhuang art.

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