

# Extraterritorial Images and Horizontal Scroll Composition: On the Northern Wei "Nine-Coloured Deer Benson" from Cave 257 of Mogao Caves and the Transformation of China

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**Abstract:** Along with the introduction of Buddhism, Buddhist paintings were also introduced into China from India through the western region to the east. It naturally continued the Tianzhu and Western painting style in the process of eastward transmission, and then with the deepening of the dissemination and the traditional painting of the Central Plains continue to collision and integration, in the gradual incorporation of the artistic elements of Chinese painting and language, began to move towards the road of Buddhist painting "Chinese". Dunhuang Mogao Cave murals are undoubtedly the most comprehensive and complete mural paintings reflecting the development of Buddhist murals "Chinese" outstanding representatives. In this paper, we take the mural painting "Nine-coloured Deer Benshengtu" in Cave 257 of Mogao Caves of Northern Wei Dynasty as an example, study and interpret the "Nine-coloured Deer Benshengtu", explore the artistic style and transformation of "Sinicisation" of Buddhist paintings of the Northern Dynasty with the character image, painting technique and composition.

**Keywords:** nine-coloured deer Bunsen, Chinese, horizontal scroll composition

In the second year of Jianyuan of the former Qin Dynasty (366), Le Cong monk excavated the first cave in the Mogao Grottoes in Dunhuang. By the time of the Northern Wei Dynasty, the grottoes had been excavated for purely religious functions, gradually infiltrated with Buddhist story murals for the monks and laymen to "educate and help people". Mogao Grottoes existing Northern Dynasties Grottoes 32 caves, the cave murals are basically well-preserved, the painting theme is mainly for the Buddha said that the map, the story of the Buddha, the story of the Buddha's life, all kinds of karmic stories and feeder statues. Mogao Caves 251, 254, 257, 259, 260, 265, and 487 were opened between about 465 and 500, and were the first phase of the Northern Wei Dynasty after the unification of the north. These caves partially inherited the Mogao Grottoes 268th, 272nd, 275th caves, such as the early three caves images, and mural paintings on the middle and bottom of the three-tiered layout of the Tiangong Kabuki images, compared with the early three caves, there are also more obvious innovations. The Mogao Caves 257th cave in the "nine-coloured deer Bunsheng Tu", is undoubtedly after the introduction of Buddhist paintings into the Middle Kingdom, the Northern Wei Dynasty Pingcheng period of Buddhist painting art style is an outstanding representative.

Mogao Grottoes Cave 257 is a typical central pillar caves, square in plan, the back of the central central tower. Pagoda column east of the main niche, niche plastic leaning Maitreya saying statue. Pagoda column on the remaining three sides of the upper and lower are open niches, respectively, cross-legged Buddha, meditation Buddha, thinking, cross-footed Bodhisattva and other statues. Around the statue of Buddha is also coloured with heavenly kings, bodhisattvas, feeders, flying sky, as well as kabuki, lotus, double dragons and other decorative motifs. The top of the cave and the west, south and north walls are painted with murals, of which the top of the cave is mainly painted with decorative motifs, such as the heavenly beings and the flat chess. In the thousand Buddhas, Rex, between the three walls of the horizontal long story painting. From South wall From the south wall through the west wall to the north wall, there are paintings of the story of Shamata's suicide to keep the precepts, the story of the story of the dog's cause, the story of the life of the king of the nine-coloured deer, and the story of the story of the cause of the woman of Sumati. These Buddhist stories painted on the ochre-red background are mainly about people and animals, with horses and chariots, landscapes, artifacts, and houses as the backdrop. Moreover, they are all horizontal scrolls with comic strip-like compositions, creating a new style of painting in the Mogao Caves. Mogao Caves Mural paintings, a new form of composition, is a classic of

Dunhuang's Buddhist story paintings, and has had a great impact on the subsequent Mogao Caves Mural art since then has had a profound impact on the development of Mogao Grottoes[1].

## 1. Interpretation and Image Composition of the Nine-Coloured Deer Bunsen

The Nine-Coloured Deer Bunsen painting was introduced to Dunhuang in the mid-5th century. It is the only painting of the Nine-Coloured Deer among the classical works of story painting in the Mogao Caves at Dunhuang, and one of the earliest surviving Bunsen variations of the Northern Wei dynasty in the form of a comic strip. It is located on the west wall of Cave 257, under the Thousand Buddhas painting, 95 cm high and 385 cm wide, and is joined on the north side by the first half of the Sumati Female Karma Painting. It depicts a story that a drowning man saved by the Nine-Coloured Deer, then he ungratefully betrays the Nine-Coloured Deer and eventually receives karmic retribution.

Before the Northern and Southern Dynasties, there were three translations of the story of the Nine-Coloured Deer: the first was the Deer in the Bodhisattva's Sutra translated by Zhi Qian. However, in this sutra, there is no king's wife, and the ungrateful drowning man gets the bad reward of "falling to the ground with both hands", which does not match with the picture. The second is the Sutra on the Nine-Coloured Deer translated by Zhi Qian. The third is "The Original Life of Shufan Deer King" in the Six Degrees Sutra translated by Kang Shenghui. The stories in the second and third are more or less the same, but the first one aims to teach the practice of patience and humiliation, while the second one aims to clarify the practice of refinement. The Dunhuang Nine-Coloured Deer murals contain an account of the queen's dream of a nine-colored deer, which is not the same as the account in the Bodhisattvas' Sutra of the True Margin, but is close to the accounts in the Buddha's Sutra of the Nine-Coloured Deer and the Six Degrees of Collecting Sutra. Therefore, it is certain that the Nine-Coloured Deer Sutra on the west wall of Cave 257 in Dunhuang Mogao Caves is based on either the Nine-Coloured Deer Sutra translated by Zhiqian or the Shufan Deer King Sutra translated by Kang Shenghui.



Figure 1: Nine-coloured Deer Bunsen, cited in *The Complete Collection of Dunhuang Wall Paintings I*

According to the Buddha said nine-coloured deer sutra and Mogao Grottoes 257 caves "nine-coloured deer Bensheng Tu" (Fig.1) image composition, combined with contemporary scholars interpretation, I will be divided into this mural 11 storylines, from south to north are: 1. the river free nine-coloured deer; 2. drowning man in the water called out to the sky and begged to be rescued; 3. the nine-coloured deer carrying drowning out of the water; 4. drowning man kneeling to thank the nine-coloured deer to save the grace of life; from north to south are: 5. The queen told a dream, the king offered a reward to catch the deer; 6. the drowned man was greedy for money kneeling to the king to inform; 7. the drowned man for the king to lead the way to the mountain to catch the deer; 8. the king rode a horse into the mountain, the attendant behind the open cover; 9. the crow pecked the ear to wake up the sleeping nine-coloured deer; 10. the nine-coloured deer stood up with its head held high to the king on horseback to complain of the drowned man's ungratefulness; 11. The drowned man was full of sores, the mouth vomited bad smells, and was retributed.

The Nine-Coloured Deer Bunsen painting from Cave 257 of the Mogao Grottoes, with the help of figures, deer, horses, carts, buildings, mountains, rocks and rivers, adopts the compositional form of the Chinese horizontal scrolling serial painting to form eleven consecutive storylines, depicting in detail the whole story in the Buddha's Sutra of the Nine-Coloured Deer. However, the composition breaks with the chronological order of the painting, using a method that begins at the left and right ends and ends in the middle. The "dialogue between the king and the deer" is in the middle of the picture, which is the intersection point connecting the two sets of episodes, and the climax and core theme of the story is to expose and condemn the ungrateful informer, which highlights the idea of karma and the main theme of Buddhism that this story promotes. In addition, in combination with the images of "Shamans Abiding by Precepts and Suicide" painted on the south wall of Cave 257 of Mogao Caves, and "Sumati Women's Margins" painted on the north wall to win over supporters by the use of grace and authority, Hu Tongqing and Wang Yizhi believe that these paintings also involve the consolidation and development of Buddhist monastic organisations.

In the Xinjiang Kizil Caves, we found that there are earlier than Dunhuang nine-coloured deer Bunsheng story images. However, the nine-coloured deer story images in the Kizil Caves are generally single-panel compositions highlighting key episodes in the story, and the basis of the painting is significantly different from the Nine-Coloured Deer Bunsang Picture in Cave 257 of the Mogao Grottoes. As Mr Jin Weino said, "In the Xinjiang mural, the king is not holding a bow but a sword and staff, and it is not the deer that kneels to the king, but the king who makes a salute to the deer, which seems to be similar to what is recorded in the "Deer Pin" in the next volume of the Bodhisattvas' Ben Rim Sutra." In addition, the nine-coloured deer in Mogao Cave 257, the nine-coloured deer, standing tall rather than kneeling to the king, should be related to his representation of Shakyamuni's previous life, and the painter may have accepted the Eastern Jin Dynasty Huiyuan's "Shamen do not respect the king theory" ideas .

## 2. Nine-coloured Deer Bunsen Artistic Style Characteristics

Buddhist painting is accompanied by Buddhism from India through the western region to the east into China. In the process of spreading to the east, it certainly continued the painting styles of Tianzhu and the Western Regions. But with the spread of the depth, it and the traditional painting of the Central Plains continue to collide and integration, and gradually into the artistic elements of Chinese painting, the formation of Buddhist painting with a certain degree of China's local colours. The Nine-Coloured Deer Painting from Cave 257 in Dunhuang is an early example of a painting of Buddhist stories from the Dharma in the Northern Wei Dynasty that incorporates Chinese horizontal scrolls and comic strips. From the subject matter to the modelling of the figures to the painting techniques, it is typical of the tradition of Buddhist painting in the Dzungaria. The composition of the images and the modelling of the buildings and carriages are typical of the Chinese style. In the following, we will analyse the artistic style of the Nine-Coloured Deer in Cave 257 at Dunhuang in terms of the figure, the painting technique and the composition.

### 2.1. Extraterritorial characterisation

The characters in the Nine-coloured Deer Bensheng Tu are all obvious Indian and Western characters. Characters are delicately drawn, dynamic and beautiful, vivid, fully expresses the look, inner activities and spiritual character of each character. For example, in (Fig. 2), the drowning man is kneeling and facing the king when he informs the king, with both eyes on the king, revealing the villainous mentality of greed for money and selfishness; the king raises his hand in a gesture, with his eyes like a torch, showing his overbearing majesty; and the queen puts her right arm on the king's shoulder, leaning on the king in a bewitching gesture, with a haughty expression, highlighting her greediness, hypocrisy, and complex mentality[2].



Figure 2: Nine-coloured Deer Bunsen



*Figure 3: Nine-coloured Deer Bunsen*

In the picture of the Nine-Coloured Deer accusing the king of the drowning man's ingratitude (Fig. 3), the Nine-Coloured Deer holds its head high and makes an impassioned speech to the king. Nine-coloured deer's demeanour, showing the stubborn character of not yielding to evil, vividly depicts the nine-coloured deer's fearlessness, perseverance in justice, the spirit of opposing evil, giving it an extremely personified character, highlighting the karma and the main theme of Buddhism, which is the idea of karma and Buddhism that is propagated in this story. This is one of the remarkable features of this mural. This is completely different from the Indian and Western murals, the depiction of the long kneeling tears, a look of pity the image of the nine-coloured deer. The nine-coloured deer standing up in this mural, Mr. Duan Wenjie believes that the long-term acceptance of Confucian ethical and moral thinking, Dunhuang painters, in the creation of the role of subjective consciousness, especially on the selection of the storyline and the portrayal of the characters, the painter showed their own understanding of the characters and evaluation, and injected their own feelings of love and hate.

## **2.2. Painting Technique of "Convexity"**

Although some parts of the picture have turned grey and black due to age, the original brush strokes are still faintly visible.

The figures in the painting are rendered along the contour line of the torso, and the interior is overlapped with ink colours to form a thick and light colour scale, without paying attention to the details of the carving, and the eyes and nose of the people are highlighted with white powder dotted with highlights. This is similar to the painting of the mountains in Cave 254's "Nanto's Homecoming" and in Jiuquan's Dingjiazha Wei and Jin Dynasty mural tombs. The depiction of horses in the paintings is very realistic, and although there is a difference between white, green and black in the colour scheme, the painting technique is based on the depiction of flat paint and partial rendering, and the shape and form of the horses are also clearly programmed and decorative (Fig. 3).

Convex rendering, and white powder eye sockets, white bridge of the nose point highlights of the painting method, is typical of "Tianzhu legacy", and the same period of Xinjiang Cave murals and Indian cave mural painting techniques in the same lineage. But the rendering of the Indian cave murals, you can see that the painter is strictly in accordance with the structure of the human body rendering, to show the skin's light and dark, unevenness and sense of volume. This rendering method through the Xinjiang to Dunhuang, has undergone a certain programmatic and conceptual transformation. From the cave murals of the Northern Liang and Northern Wei periods at Dunhuang, we can find that the rendering of the human body is no longer rendered in strict accordance with the relationship between the skeletal muscles as in the Indian Buddhist murals, but is instead haloed along the borderline of the human body's contours, but it still exhibits the bold and mellow, distinctive style of Indian and Western painting. In 2015, the tomb of Han Shouluo Bak's wife, Xinghe Jiang, of the Northern Wei dynasty at the Fuqiao Power Plant in Datong, Shanxi Province, unearthed a piece of imperial Xing In 2015, a Buddhist portrait stone coffin from the third year (469) of the Northern Wei Dynasty was unearthed (Fig. 4), in which the paintings used the Tianzhu concave-convex painting method. This suggests that the special painting technique of "concave-convex rendering" from India had already exerted a more general influence in northern China during the Pingcheng period of the Northern Wei Dynasty.





Figure 4: Buddha statue on the main wall of the stone outer coffin of Xinghe Jiang, cited in *Art Research* 2020.02

### 2.3. "Horizontal scroll" comic strip composition



Figure 5: Line drawing of the nine-coloured deer Bunsen, cited in *Dunhuang Studies* 1991.3

Horizontal scroll composition, one of the most important forms of composition in traditional Chinese painting, has been commonly used in Han portraits. The use of the traditional Chinese horizontal scroll composition has also become one of the symbols of the beginning of the Sinicisation of Dunhuang murals. In Cave 257 of the Mogao Grottoes, the Nine-Coloured Deer (Fig. 5) breaks with the prismatic format of the Western cave murals and instead employs the traditional horizontal scroll composition of Han paintings, which arranges the storyline in a sequential, narrative style, with scattered, flat columns on a long scroll. The plot is cleverly divided into a "comic strip" scene through the mountains and houses, and the layout and the movements of the characters make the whole story a whole, with a sparse composition, a balanced and harmonious distribution of images, and a tight and vivid storyline. The compositional technique of "the people are bigger than the mountains" is also used to deal with the proportional relationship between the characters and the scenery, making the characters more prominent. The southern section of the mural (Fig. 6) is divided by mountains, rivers, similar to the diagonal shape of the spatial composition, although it produces a certain sense of spatial depth, but still not out of the two-dimensional plane of the spatial category. The red ground battle covered with flowers is considered to be derived from the Persian tradition, which makes the picture richer and the composition fuller, but the layout is not free from uniformity and programme.

In addition, there is also the design of the inscription between each picture, presenting the traditional form of Han and Jin paintings of "left picture, right history", and the existing copy of Gu Kaizhi's "Women's History" from the Eastern Jin Dynasty, as well as the paintings of the lacquer screen of Sima Jinlong's tomb of the Northern Wei Dynasty in Datong, are undoubtedly a true reflection of the form of this painting composition at that time. Although the content of the inscriptions no longer exists today, the position of the inscriptions in each group of pictures is obvious. This undoubtedly reveals that this period of Buddhist paintings by the influence of the Central Plains style of painting, and presents the fusion of Chinese and foreign characteristics, is the beginning of the mural painting of Buddhist caves Chinese. This composition, not only in the Mogao Grottoes, a period of the Beiliang three caves (268, 272, 275 grottoes) to the main body of the composition of the main mural does not appear, and in the same period with the 257 grottoes and other caves mural paintings are not common. Different plots intertwined together, not only the narrative is cumbersome, and the picture is crowded and complicated, the atmosphere is heavy, lacking a sense of order and life.



Figure 6: *Nine-coloured Deer Bunsen painting (southern section)*



Figure 7: *Deer King Bunsen paintin*

Earlier than Cave 257, the Deer King Benson Painting (Fig. 7) in Cave 38 of Kizil in Xinjiang is just a nine-coloured deer complaining to the king about the drowning man's ingratitude painted in a prismatic grid, forming a unique prismatic composition form in the early days of Kizil Cave mural paintings. As Mr Duan Wenjie said: "(Nine-coloured deer story painting) into the Yangguan and Yumenguan after the creative thinking of the painters, the content and form of the mural has undergone great changes, breaking through the Indian independent circular relief and the Guzi diamond format of the story of the Bunsheng group format, inherited the Han and Jin Dynasty episodic painting traditions, the use of scrolling continuous paintings, and the old 'left chart, right history'. The title of 'Left Picture, Right History' was also used. Formally it also enhances the national characteristics."However, unlike the horizontal scroll composition of Han paintings, "The Nine-Coloured Deer Bensheng Tu" breaks the distribution of the storyline in chronological order and unfolds it sequentially, and instead adopts a serial painting composition that starts from the ends and ends in the middle, where the most contagious moments in the whole picture - the "King Deer Dialogue " scene is merged into one. This ingenious way of composition reflects the artist's deep understanding of the story of the Nine-Coloured Deer's nativity and his superb compositional skills[3].

### 3. Conclusion

The Nine-Coloured Deer Bunsenku from Cave 257 of the Northern Wei Dynasty is one of the most exquisite classic comic-strip style story paintings in the Mogao Caves, and an outstanding representative of early Buddhist paintings of the Northern Dynasties. It is based on the expression of Indian Buddhism classic themes, figures and painting expression techniques, painted a very Indian, Western Region Buddhist painting style. At the same time, it has absorbed the traditional Chinese horizontal scroll composition to a certain extent, presenting a story scroll with scattered points and flat columns, and

presenting the whole plot of the story of the Nine-Coloured Deer Bunsen in a complete and vivid way. The frescoes have distinctive characters and subtle ideas, highlighting the theme and idea of karma and retribution preached by Buddhism. Through the composition of horizontal scrolls, vivid figures, skilful painting techniques and extremely decorative artistic language, the painters began to incorporate the expression of Chinese local painting on the basis of foreign religious ideas, artistic images and painting techniques, so that the painting of the Nine-Coloured Deer presents a rough and simple, majestic and mellow artistic style.

## References

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