

The Image Analysis on Apsara and Sariputta in Vimalakirti Sutra

Taking the areas of the Central China in Sui Dynasty and Dunhuang in Tang Dynasty as examples

Shaoshan Lu
Academy of Art & Design
Tsinghua University
Beijing, China

Abstract—This paper mainly examines the Apsara and Sariputta's performance in Vimalakirti Sutra in the central China of Sui Dynasty and Tang Dunhuang area. It believes that in Sui dynasty, the overall intention of Apsara and Sariputta's performance was vague, but it also gradually formed a fixed pattern of manifestation. In the early stage of Tang Dynasty, Dunhuang was mainly expressing the plot about the heavenly maids scattering blossoms. Later in Tang Dynasty, it added some additional changes about the Apsara and Sariputta. In this paper, based on the characters' postures, gestures, I figured out the specific identities of the four characters and two kinds of configuration forms.

Keywords—Apsara and Sariputta; Central China; Dunhuang area

I. INTRODUCTION

The associated images between Apsara and Sariputta derived from classic Buddhist scriptures --Vimalakirti Sutra. On the basis of the article described, in the Vimalakirti Sutra, Manjusri Bodhisattva has a very interesting dialogue with lay Vimalakirti. At that time, there happened two stories about Apsara and the disciple of Shakymuni. The first was Apsara scattered blossoms. The second was the Apsara changed into Sariputta.[1]

Because the story is very interesting, so from the middle period of northern Wei Dynasty, the two images often appeared with the combination of Vimalakirti and Manjusri and became an integral part of the images in Tang and Song Dynasties. There is specific discussions about the images of Apsara and Sariputta in academic circles, so this paper argues that this two images will still be the main content in Vimalakirti images in a long period of time. It has very significant stage characteristics, and is very necessary to analyze. According to the time and region, the images can be divided into three categories: central China in the North Sui Dynasty, Sichuan region in Tang Dynasty and Dunhuang region in Tang and Song Dynasty.

Because the author has other paper introduced Sichuan region, so this one mainly inspects on the images of Apsara and Sariputta in the central China of Sui Dynasty and Tang

II. THE APSARA AND SARIPUTTA IN CENTRAL CHINA OF NORTH SUI DYNASTY

North Sui dynasty is the first peak of the development for the Vimalakirti images and witnessed the whole development process of the images. In addition to the relevant images of west Qin Bingling temple's 169th wat. The primary stage of Vimalakirti images development was the Yungang Grottoes in northern Wei period. At the same time, the consciousness about presenting the images of Apsara and Sariputta had emerged. Such as the Vimalakirti images on the south wall of 6th wat and the west wall of 14th wat in Yungang Grottoes. (Pic1.2)[2]

In the image of 6th wat, the Manjusri and Vimalakirti stood on the two sides of Shakymuni, they were confronted with two persons who knelt down with folded hands. The man on Manjusri's side is Black Monk and the women on Vimalakirti's side is a top bun nun. The two persons respectively rank after and hold a symmetric configuration position with Manjusri and Vimalakirti, they are in conformity with the identities of Apsara and Sariputta. They are different from other listeners, especially the facial expressions, so they are more likely be Apsara and Sariputta. Their postures may have something related with the time of the architecture habits of Yungang Grottoes in Wei Dynasty. At the same time, other avatars and bodhisattvas are same postures. In the image of 7th wat, there are 4 people who folded their hands and 3 people who knelt down on the floor. So, we can see from the images, those postures were the general practice at that time. From the above information we can draw this conclusion. In this case, the performance is obvious, it only emphasized the identity and their configuration features of Apsara and Sariputta.

In the 14th wat, there stood a woman dressed in bodhisattva style between Manjusri and Vimalakirti, especially in her hand, there is a falling flower, and it is more close to the connotation of Apsara scattering blossoms [3]. In this case, the plots and intention were included in the content, but it seemed to be alone, so, it should be an attempt.

Thus, Yungang Grottoes of northern Wei Dynasty has been shown the Apsara and Sariputta , but it did not form a clear performance mode.



Pic1. The 6th wat of Yungang Grottoes in middle northern Wei Dynasty



Pic2. The low floor of the 14th of Yungang Grottoes in late northern Wei Dynasty

The image of Longmen Grottoes, in middle-late period of Northern Wei Dynasty the image were placed on both sides of the recess lintel or main Buddha's backlight. There were listeners in front of Manjusri and Vimalakirti or they stood in line. The black monk and the top bun nun were the two characters. Such as both sides images of 190th niche of the north wall in Guyang cavern, The man on Manjusri's side is Buddhist Monk and the women on Vimalakirti's side is a top bun nun.(Pic3)[4] In other cases, the Buddhist monk and nun were standing behind the Manjusri and Vimalakirti, showing the difference with the listeners in front of Manjusri and Vimalakirti, such as The images of 48th niche of the north wall in Lianhua cavern.(Pic4.5)[5] Some other cases show the other difference, the top bun were behind the curtain of Vimalakirti and Buddhist monk were standing in the stone house of Manjusri. From the above information,we can know that the express intention of Apsara and Sariputta in Longmen Grottoes is obvious. But in terms of shape,there almost no difference between them and the general disciples and maids, or maybe they were both acting as the attendants of Manjusri and Vimalakirti at the same time.



Pic3 the image of 190th niche of the north wall in Guyang cavern. Longmen Grottoes, in the late period of Northern Wei Dynasty



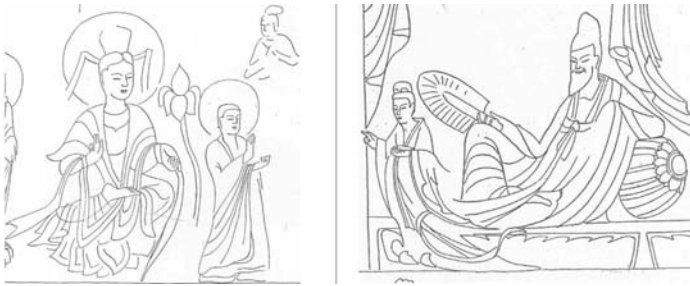
Pic4 the image of 48th niche of the north wall in Lianhua cavern(right side). Longmen Grottoes, in the late period of Northern Wei Dynasty



Pic5 the image of 48th niche of the north wall in Lianhua cavern(left side). Longmen Grottoes, in the late period of Northern Wei Dynasty

In the middle cavern of Binyang wat, Vimalakirti layed on the bed, there were 3 waitresses around him. One was standing in front of Vimalakirti and her hands were hanging up at the same level of her chest. On the Manjusri side, there was the Buddhist monk whose hands were waving and they were talking with each other (Pic6). The behaviors of Apsara and Sariputta in those images were same like the later's images, especially Apsara's gestures. There had similar examples in the Mogao Grottoes in the early stage of Tang Dynasty.[6] From the Vimalakirti image in Mile cavern, we can see that Apsara was placed at the right side below the Vimalakirti, with a lotus bud or a lup in hands(Pic7). Her gesture, ornaments and

position were similar to the images after Sui-Tang Dynasties. Thus it can be seen, Apsara and Sariputta were gradually separated from other listeners and the characteristics of them were more and more obvious.



Left(Pic6) the middle cavern of Binyang wat, Longmen Grottoes, in the late period of Northern Wei Dynasty.

Right(Pic7) north wall of Mile cavern, Longmen Grottoes.

In terms of the stone tablets, It shows a synchronicity with the grottoes statues except same images possess a strong regional features. There exist 2 stone tablets, one is from West Wei Dynasty and the other is from Sui Dynasty. In those two stone tablets, Apsara and Sariputta are very common to see. Please look at the following two pictures: Pic8 is about a stone tablet in Henan Qixian in 543 A.D. [7] Pic9 is about a stone tablet in Henan Huaxian in 582 A.D. In those two stone tablets, the Apsara and Sariputta are very different from the other listeners, they have the prominent positions. In Pic8, they are placed in the center of the stone tablet and on the each side of a sala tree. In Pic9, the size of Apsara and Sariputta are bigger than the common listeners, and they are standing on the two sides, the listeners are siting in a regular way.



Pic8 a stone tablet in Henan Qixian in 543 A.D.



Pic9 a stone tablet in Henan Huaxian in 582 A.D.

What can be seen from the above analysis is that in Sui Dynasty. Apsara and Sariputta show the characteristics of periodic in forms of expression. From the middle period of Northern Wei Dynasty, Longmen Grottoes began to show their intention to express those two figures, and in the late period of Northern Wei Dynasty, it became a fixed expression form which is a symmetrical performance between Manjusri and Vimalakirti. And this feature was more obvious with the time going. Some cases in stone tablets are similar with the images on grottoes, and some expression forms became more complete.

III. THE APSARA AND SARIPUTTA OF DUNHUANG AREA IN TANG-SONG DYNASTIES

Vimalakirti Sutra images of Dunhuang area developed from Sui Dynasty to Song Dynasty. From the very beginning of Tang Dynasty, Vimalakirti Sutra images mainly began to express the Apsara and Sariputta. According to the expression form, the images can be divided into two categories: the first category is that the man in front of Manjusri is Sariputta and the women in front of Vimalakirti is Apsara. The second category is that in each side of Manjusri and Vinlalakirit , there stood those two persons--Apsara and Sariputta. Their connotations are closely linked with the images, so the following are detailed explanation.

The first category mainly appeared in the early period of Tang Dynasty. The postures and gestures of Apsara and Sariputta were diverse. Scattering blossoms and other behaviors became a fixed style--Apsara's hands were put up and one hand was holding up, the other hand was stretching five fingers and doing the gesture to scatter blossoms. The Sariputta on the Manjusri's side was doing the same behaviors or carrying the clothes and shaking flowers. In some cases, you can even recognize the flowers on the clothes. Such as the 334th and 335th wat of Mogao Grottoes in early period of Tang Dynasty(Pic10)[8]. The intention of those two images are obvious.



pic10 The north wall of the 335th wat of Mogao Grottoes in early period of Tang Dynasty ("China's Grottoes • Dunhuang Mogao Grottoes 3" Picture edition 61)

The second category of expression from is that on each side of Manjusri and Vinlalakirit , there stood those two persons--Apsara and Sariputta. This form developed from the early stage of Tang Dynasty to Song Dynasty. According to classical records, Apsara turned Sariputta into a girl, so you can see two Apsara and two Sariputta in the images. The following content will focus on which two are scattering blossoms, which two are doppelgangers.

According to the statistic data, there are two kinds of image configuration: one is the Apsara scattered blossoms with hands towards outside. Some Apsara tend to carry clothes and shake flowers. Those images can be seen in 220th wat, 332th wat, 103th wat and so on. The images in the early stage of Tang Dynasty were characterized by their features. The scattering blossoms Apsara and shaking flowers Sariputta were the original figures. The other two were turned by Apsara.

Second is that the postures and positions of some Apsara and Sariputta are similar. Such as the 159th wat, 9th wat in Tang Dynasty and 100th in Wudai. The possibility of being phantom were very strong. In the 159th wat, on the one side of Vimalakirti, there stood Apsara and Sariputta, whose postures and gestures are same. On the one side of Manjusri, the Apsara was scattering blossoms and the Sariputta was shaking flowers.

In Duanghuang Mogao Grottoes, there were more and more richer connotation in the images of Apsara and Sariputta. And it had the characteristic of succession.

IV. PRELIMINARY SUMMARY

Apsara and Sariputta are the common theme in images of Vimalakirti Sutra, the presentation form is simple and clear. With the above analysis we can know that the images had periodical characteristic and regional features. The presentation of Apsara and Sariputta in central China of Sui Dynasty was quite vague, and at the same time, they acted as the attendants. Apsara and Sariputta in Dunhuang area had their own main development line. The images of Apsara were relative less in Sui Dynasty and the postures were not fixed at that time. In the early period of Tang Dynasty, the images often presented that Apsara and Sariputta were standing in front of Vimalakirti and Manjusri separately and those images began to show these characteristics of scatting and shaking

flowers gradually. After this period, there were a couple of Apsara and Sariputta standing on both sides of Vimalakirti and Manjusri. This case increased the expression of their identity shifts. Here are two situations in this case: the first is that adding two incarnations on the basis of original figures. The second situation is that on one side there standing the two incarnations, on the other side the real Apsara was making fun of Sariputta.

REFERENCES

- [1] Kumarajiva. Vimalakirti Sutra volume 2. Tibetan Tripitaka 14 volumes.
- [2] 2.Chinese Grottoes--Yungang Grottoes.Yungang Grottoes Cultural Relics Preservation. Beijing. Publishing House of Cultural Relics. 1994.
- [3] 3.Lu Shaoshan.The Images Analysis and Expression Forms of Vimalakirti Sutra in North Sui Dynasty [J] Bejing.2003.01
- [4] 4.Liu Jinglong.The 1443th Wat of Longmen Grottoes in Guyang Cavern. Beijing. Press of Science.2001.
- [5] 5.Liu Jinglong. The 712th Wat of Lianhua Grottoes in Guyang Cavern. Beijing. Press of Science.2002
- [6] 6.The postures and gestures of Apsara and Sariputta were similar with the images of the 206th wat and the 232th wat of Mogao Grottoes.
- [7] 7.Overseas Collections--Buddha.The Palace Museum.Taipei .1986.
- [8] 8.Chinese Grottoes--Dunhuang Mogao Grottoes. Dunhuang Cultural Relics Research Institute.Beijing. Publishing House of Cultural Relics.1987.