

# Discussion on the Sinicization of the Art of Buddhist Sutra Illustration

## Taking the "Prince Showered by Nine Dragons" as an Example

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### ABSTRACT

As the only foreign religion among the three traditional religions in China, Buddhism has a history of more than 2,500 years. Buddhism was founded by the ancient Indian Prince Siddhartha Gautama and was introduced to China during the Eastern Han Dynasty, along with the art of sutra illustration to represent the Buddhist classics. At the beginning of its introduction, the art of Buddhist sutra illustration quickly merged with traditional Chinese culture and its sinicization step by step was especially reflected in the different art forms of various periods. Therefore, this article will take the "Prince Showered by Nine Dragons" in the subject matter of Buddhist sutra illustration as an example, and set forth how the art of Buddhist sutra illustration is sinicized by explaining the change process of its art forms, hoping to give some reference to the research methods and research ideas of the sinicization of the art of Buddhist sutra illustration.

**Keywords:** *Prince Showered by Nine Dragons, Buddhist art, Sinicization.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

As a foreign religion, Buddhism was accepted and promoted by the rulers not long after it was introduced to China. This kind of top-down popular belief in Buddhism led to the construction of temples and the opening of Sramana in China to recruit monks. For thousands of years, Buddhism has penetrated into all aspects of people's life and thought and has gradually become an inseparable part of Chinese cultural civilization. With the changes and development of the times, the art of Buddhist sutra illustration in China has continuously improved its own characteristics, writing magnificent chapters in the history of national art on the land of China. But to this day, some people still have insufficient and misunderstandings about the art of Buddhist sutra illustration. Therefore, a correct understanding of the art of Buddhist sutra illustration is an indispensable part of promoting national art, comprehending national spirit and cultivating national self-confidence [1].

## 2. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE ART OF BUDDHIST SUTRA ILLUSTRATION

Chinese people are used to seeing everything around them from the perspective of "land under heaven". In Chinese history, Han people often referred to foreign nations as 夷, and Chinese thought was also called Hua-Yi thought [2]. It specifically refers to the ideological model that traditionally recognizes and inherits Chinese traditional culture within China, or is an ideology that supports Chinese culture. It also includes attitudes and thoughts toward different races or nations and foreign countries, believing that China (or 中华, zhōng huá, the ancient name of China) is the center of the world, Chinese culture and thought have the highest value, and the value of the sole culture of foreign races other than the Han nationality is not recognized. "The people beyond civilization" are the objects of enlightenment. In history, there are often titles of "Eastern Yi, Western Rong, Southern Man, and Northern Di". As early as the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period, according to the "The

Commentary of Zuo · The 4th Year of Zhao Gong" (《左传·昭公四年》), the King Zhou of Shang sent an army to conquer Eastern Yi. In modern times, Wei Yuan in his book "Records and Maps of the World" (《海国图志》) proposed that "to learn from foreigners to compete with them". The ideology and thinking trait, which have been inherited from ancient times to the present, have also become the national label of the Chinese. Therefore, in this over-all situation, although there were not a few foreign religions introduced into China in history, in addition to Buddhism introduced in the late Eastern Han Dynasty, the Zoroastrianism, Islam and Nestorianism were also introduced in the Tang Dynasty, but most of them perished halfway through. Or because their religious doctrines couldn't be effectively disseminated and promoted, it was difficult for them to have a place in Chinese society based on blood ties and clans. Only Buddhism, however, not only spread widely among the lower-class civilians, but also gained the support of the upper-class rulers and scholar-official class. This is related to the fact that since its introduction into China, it has continued to absorb and integrate local Chinese cultural ideas and its religious doctrines and ritual procedures have continued to be adjusted accordingly to the needs of the times. The traces of these changes can all be confirmed in the form and content of the art of Buddhist sutra illustration. The following will use the sutra illustration subject matter of "Prince Showered by Nine Dragons" to explain the art form and content of different eras, and by citing this example, try to show the process of the sinicization of the art of Buddhist sutra illustration [3].

### 3. CHANGES IN THE SUTRA ILLUSTRATION ART OF "PRINCE SHOWERED BY NINE DRAGONS"

#### 3.1 *The Origin of the Sutra Illustration Art of "Prince Showered by Nine Dragons" — Before the 3rd Century AD*

According to the ancient Indian "The Scripture of Karma Past and Now" (《过去现在因果经》) volume 1, when Mrs. Mahamaya was pregnant and approached to the expected date of confinement, she passed through the Lumbini Park, walked under the Saraca dives Pierre (also known as the Sal Tree or the Boluochoa tree) and gave birth to Prince Siddhartha. At this time, Dragon King Brothers

Wiksananda and Upananda-tthera spit out clean water to bathe the Prince's body. The little Prince walked seven steps in each of the four directions of north, south, east and west, and the lotus blossomed step by step. At this time, one of his hands pointed to the sky and the other to the ground and he said, "Heaven and earth, exalt only my own self". According to Buddhist statue monuments unearthed in Gandhara and other places in ancient India, many sculptures corresponding to the stories recorded in the scriptures have been discovered ("Figure 1"). In the relief of Gandhara, there is no image of two dragons spitting water to bathe Prince Siddhartha as described in the Buddhist scriptures. Instead, the two dragons are replaced by humanoid gods. (It is necessary to point out that when Buddhism first appeared, idolatry was not promoted. When the ancient Greek Alexander the Great went on a punitive expedition eastward to ancient India, Buddhists there began to use ancient Greek carving techniques to express their idols in their religious culture. Therefore, when using foreign art forms to express one's own religious thoughts, it was inevitable that the use of elements in specific creations would be affected by the unfamiliarity with new techniques, and the traces of imitation would be heavier. The image of the characters, the dynamics, the clothes patterns of the attendants and the "column type" of the building could all be traced back to the style of ancient Greek sculpture). And in Nepal, Tibet, Kizil in Xinjiang and other places, the "two dragons spraying water over Siddhartha" was found, and even "one dragon spraying water over Siddhartha" was found in the Dunhuang Grottoes. (According to the age of the sculpture, it can be judged that the "nine dragons spraying water over Siddhartha" was developed after the appearance of the "two dragons spraying water over Siddhartha", but the image of the "one dragon spraying water over Siddhartha" in Dunhuang appeared in the later Song Dynasty. The emergence of the "one dragon spraying water over Siddhartha" needs further research). In the Chinese translation of the Buddhist scriptures, it is mostly recorded that the Dragon King Brothers bathed the Prince Siddhartha. Luhui's "Ye Zhong Ji" (《邕中记》) of the Jin Dynasty records that Shi Hu (295-349 AD) held the ritual of nine dragons spraying water over Siddhartha, "On April 8th, the statue of the Prince was showered by nine dragons". In the Western Jin Dynasty, in the Volume 2 of Dharmaraksa's translation of "Lalitavistara" (《普曜经》), it described: "The nine dragons collected water from top to bottom, to bathe the Holy Venerable". Therefore, at least around the 3rd

century, the theme of "nine dragons spraying water over Siddhartha" appeared in China. Indian Buddhism regarded the snake god "Naga" as the dharma protector of its own religion, and after the "Naga" in Hindu scriptures was translated into "dragon" in Chinese, the number "nine" could be more or less connected at the same time [4].



Figure 1 The "Bathe" stone sculpture in the collection of Peshawar Museum — Gandhara.

### 3.2 The Development in the Sutra Illustration Art of "Prince Showered by Nine Dragons" — Southern and Northern Dynasties

#### 3.2.1 Northern Wei Dynasty

The Southern and Northern Dynasties were the first peak of the development of the art of Buddhist sutra illustration. Due to the admiration of the royal family, both Buddhist architecture and sculpture murals achieved rapid development and considerable progress during this period. The figures of Sanpu in the Northern Wei Dynasty ("Figure 2") ("Figure 3") ("Figure 4") reflect the sutra illustration art style of the "Prince Showered by Nine Dragons" from 386 to 534 AD. It can be seen from the figure that certain rules and templates were formed during this period. The main body of the pattern is composed of three figures, namely, the little Prince Sakyamuni standing on the base of the platform, and two attendants who put their palms together devoutly, kneel on one knee, and face the Prince. Above the three figures, there are nine dragons surrounding the Prince spitting water, and behind the Prince there is the backlight symbolizing the Buddha. Different from Gandhara's "bathe" picture, the pictures of the Northern Wei Dynasty initially showed the characteristics of "sinicization". For example, the attendants next to the Prince wore the Han Chinese costume, and the feather ribbons on their shoulders were flexible and

elegant. The dragon above the Prince was even more slender and fierce, which was clearly distinguished from the snake god "Naga". The whole composition coincides with the "one Buddha and two Bodhisattvas" style in the statues of later generations in China [5].



Figure 2 The statue of Song Dexing, the 3rd year of Tai'an in the Northern Wei Dynasty (457).



Figure 3 The unearthed from the Lique Temple site of the Tang Dynasty in Lianhu District, Xi'an City in 1987, stupa, Northern Wei Dynasty.



Figure 4 The stone sculpture of "Prince Showered by Nine Dragons" in the Cave 6 of Yungang Grottoes, Northern Wei Dynasty.

### 3.2.2 Western Wei Dynasty

If the images of the Northern Wei Dynasty established the expression style of the theme of China's "Prince Showered by Nine Dragons", then the subsequent Western Wei Dynasty and Northern Zhou Dynasty ("Figure 5") ("Figure 6") continued to incorporate many Chinese elements to enrich the style and content of this theme: the "Prince Showered by Nine Dragons" carved in Cave 4 of the Dafo Temple in Ansai abandoned the one Buddha and two Bodhisattvas commonly used in the Northern Wei Dynasty in the composition, and emphasized the expression of the dragons. Only the dragons and the Prince constituted the main message of the picture. Different from the previous practice of only showing the dragons' heads, this image of the Western Wei Dynasty completely carved out the first dragons on both sides, with their feet covering lotus and auspicious clouds, swaggering out. The will and spirit of the dragons were vividly demonstrated, and it also reflected the unquestionable orthodox status of Sakyamuni as The One. Except for the head dragons on both sides, the other seven dragons were cleverly handled with the principle of perspective to hide their bodies behind the head dragons. Some showed only the neck and head, and some showed only the head. This control of the overall rhythm is fabulous. Even some traces can be found in the processing of the

rhythm of the picture and the postures of the dragons in the "Nine Dragons" (《九龙图》) of the Southern Song Dynasty painter Chen Rong in China.

### 3.2.3 Northern Zhou Dynasty

A large number of paper paintings and painting theories appeared in the Southern and Northern Dynasties. It was the era when Chinese painting formed its own veins and summarized its own temperament, and it was also the era when independent artists emerged. Different from ordinary commercial painters and artisan-painters, a group of painters with the purpose of creation appeared at this time. It is true that most of the murals in Mogao Grottoes are still painted by commercial painters, but the specific depiction has been affected by the times, consciously or unconsciously, giving the picture the characteristics of the times. Many clues of the sinicization of this theme can be seen from the "Prince Showered by Nine Dragons" ("Figure 6") from the Northern Zhou Dynasty in Cave 290 of Mogao Grottoes from the perspective of painting, and clues can also be found in the changes of later generations. What is different from the previous examples is that this mural of the Northern Zhou Dynasty has not been subtracted, but has become an epitome of previous art styles. It summarized the styles and forms of all stone carvings in the past and drew a picture of the "Prince Showered by Nine Dragons" with its own characteristics. In the composition, a standard layout of Chinese Buddhist idols of one Buddha, two Bodhisattvas and two Hercules was formed. In the sculptures of later generations, such as the group statues of Vairocana Buddha in the Fengxian Temple of the Tang Dynasty in Longmen Grottoes, and the idol layout of Shanhua Temple and Huayan Temple in Datong during the Liao and Jin Dynasties, the above shapes and structures were adopted to form the standard layout: the main Buddha — Ananda and Mahakashyapa — serving the Bodhisattva. In the performance of the characters, the feather ribbons of the Bodhisattva, the boat neck custom of the waiter, and the konghou in his hands are all full of the characteristics of the times and the nationality. In the depiction of the dragon, in addition to the expression of the complete posture of the dragon and the use of perspective, even a frontal dragon image is drawn above the Prince, which strengthens the spatial depth and three-dimensionality of the entire picture, enriches the expression of the dragon image, and highlights the nobility and magic of the



Prince's bath. During the Southern and Northern Dynasties, the performance of the sutra illustration art of the "Prince Showered by Nine Dragons" reached its peak, which was a model of harmony and unity expressed by the integration of religious ideas, religious themes and traditional Chinese culture and art.



Figure 5 The relief of "Prince Showered by Nine Dragons" carved in Cave 4 of the Dafo Temple in Ansai, Western Wei Dynasty.



Figure 6 The mural of "Prince Showered by Nine Dragons" in Cave 290 of Mogao Grottoes, Northern Zhou Dynasty.

### 3.3 The Fusion of the Sutra Illustration Art of "Prince Showered by Nine Dragons" — Tang and Song Dynasties

#### 3.3.1 Tang Dynasty

The Tang Dynasty was a high-yield period for the emergence of sinicized works of the art of Buddhist sutra illustration. It reached a high degree of maturity and consciousness in the ritualization of Buddhist art content, the nationalization of Buddhist art figures, and the sinicization of Buddhist art techniques. It was an era of

outstanding achievements. Due to the stable economic foundation, art could flourish. In the murals of Mogao Grottoes and the silk paintings of the Tang Dynasty in the cave for preserving Buddhist sutra ("Figure 7") ("Figure 8"), paintings related to the sutra illustration theme of "Prince Showered by Nine Dragons" were discovered. The composition of this period also formed its own style and characteristics, distinguishing from the layout of the statues and clay sculptures in the composition, and the painting language began its self-awakening. The biggest difference in sculpt from the previous generations was the performance of the dragon. In the two images of the Tang Dynasty, one could see the dragons' heads but not their tails, and these dragons' bodies were hidden in a cluster of cloud and mist, leaving viewers with endless imagination. Under the cloud cluster stood the deity of the Prince. The silk paintings found in the cave for preserving Buddhist sutra also depicted five attendants, all dressed in the standard dress of women in the Tang Dynasty. They surrounded the Prince in the middle, some were handing clothes and some were talking in pairs. The whole picture was harmonious, peaceful, and expressive of secularism. When the art of Buddhist sutra illustration was associated with paper painting or silk painting, the free creation and the universality of media material made these images within reach. People no longer needed to travel long distances to visit grottoes or temples to learn about the Vessantara Jataka of the Buddha. These stories entered the families of ordinary scholar-officials from top to bottom and had a closer intersection with their daily life. Silk painting also had the opportunity to appear in any place due to the nature of its own material and it had the possibility of being viewed by viewers of any identity. Therefore, further secularization or popularization of the subject matter performance was required. It was precisely because the art of Buddhist sutra illustration had made adjustments to adapt to the times, the picture in the silk painting of the cave for preserving Buddhist sutra where a woman took the place of a Bodhisattva to meet and guide the Prince appeared [6].



Figure 7 "Prince Showered by Nine Dragons" mural at Mogao Grottoes, Tang Dynasty.



Figure 8 "Prince Showered by Nine Dragons" silk painting at Mogao Grottoes, Tang Dynasty.

### 3.3.2 Song Dynasty

In the Song Dynasty, new requirements for further secularization and popularization came along with the development of the commodity economy. Years of wars and chaos made the people eager to find a bit of comfort in their hearts. The stone carvings hidden in Dazu reflected the seemingly contradictory mentality of retreat and engagement of the people in the Southern Song Dynasty ("Figure 9"). In the stone carving of the "Prince Showered by Nine Dragons" at Baoding Mountain, Sakyamuni sat naked in a bathtub, with nine dragons hovering above his head, and the divine dragon in the middle spouted spring water [7]. The craftsmen skillfully borrowed the water from the weir pond to make the water in the dragon's mouth flow continuously throughout the year, and the trickling clear spring spouted from the dragon's mouth endlessly all the year round, bathing the whole body of the Prince. The Prince put his palms together devoutly and looked

peaceful, with half of his body appearing on the rectangular platform. Each end of the platform had a heavenly king who wore helmets and armors, each carrying one side of the platform. The heavenly king on the left was pointing to the sky, and the other on the right was pointing to the ground, implying the Prince's self-assumed will of "Heaven and earth, exalt only my own self". There was a semi-circular pool under the platform, and the bottom of the pool was connected to a drainage ditch. This vivid sculpture of the "Prince Showered by Nine Dragons" also solved the problem of perennial water in the Big Buddha Bay, and could be called a classic in the history of art and arts and craft. The garden art of the Song Dynasty, Neo-Confucianism, the elegant, introverted and secular cultural attitude, and the values of studying the nature of things were also reflected in this sculpture. At this stage, the art of Buddhist sutra illustration was completely sinicized and became an important part of Chinese art heritage, beginning to influence other art forms in later generations, such as literati painting. Next to the statue of "Prince Showered by Nine Dragons" is the statue of Buddha Nirvana. The intimate relationship between the two may reflect the inner demands of the people in the Southern Song Dynasty: Living in troubled times and having an uncertain future, they hoped to find the final answer in Big Buddha Bay — as the Buddhist scriptures explain about Nirvana, the Buddha didn't die, he just went to another realm.



Figure 9 The stone carving of "Prince Showered by Nine Dragons" in the Niche 12 of Big Buddha Bay, Baoding Mountain, Southern Song Dynasty.



### 3.4 The Nirvana of the Sutra Illustration Art of "Prince Showered by Nine Dragons" — Ming and Qing Dynasties to Present

Just like the Renaissance and Baroque as well as the classicism and Rococo, the development of any art has similar laws, and the same is true for the art of Buddhist sutra illustration. The statue of the "Prince Showered by Nine Dragons" of the Ming Dynasty located in Yuchan Mountain of Luzhou was completely sinicized, even secularized in China. ("Figure 10") The image of the Buddha was transformed into the appearance of a traditional Chinese novice monk, and the surrounding dragons were like complicated window grilles. It was not difficult to get a glimpse of the aesthetic interest and spirituality of that era. In modern times, the development of national capitalism and the impact of the world economy and the industrial revolution caused the Chinese art in this period to fall into a slow development stage. The art of the era essentially unconsciously reflects the temperament of that era. What is gratifying is that after more than two thousand years, the sutra illustration art subject matter of "Prince Showered by Nine Dragons" is still blooming vigorously in contemporary China. ("Figure 11") ("Figure 12"). Situated on the shores of Taihu Lake and surrounded by the Lingjiu Mountain, Lingshan is a great Buddhist scenic spot, fully taking advantage of the fine weather and favorable geographical position in the south of the Yangtze River, which is the home to "countless temples of the Southern Dynasty". After the reform and opening up, the vigorous development of the Suzhou-Wuxi-Changzhou Economic Zone attracted a large number of inland people to Wuxi, and the Buddhists that followed brought vigorous propaganda of Buddhist culture and the construction of Buddhist scenic spots. When the Buddhist sutra illustration art theme "Prince Showered by Nine Dragons" in Lingshan scenic spot once again appears in front of people, it becomes a crystallization of art and cutting-edge technology, and once again shocks the pious hearts of visitors. With its endless and powerful vitality, the art of Buddhist sutra illustration constantly absorbs the essence in the changes of the times, allowing itself to appear in front of the world with brand-new appearances. The sinicization of the art of Buddhist sutra illustration is undoubtedly a valuable asset in Chinese art. With the passage of time, it is still glowing with new appearances, and while absorbing the spirit of the times, it has given new shocks and reflections.



Figure 10 Bas-reliefs on precipices of "Prince Showered by Nine Dragons" in Yuchan Mountain, Lu County, Ming Dynasty.



Figure 11 The fountain of "Prince Showered by Nine Dragons" in Lingshan, Wuxi, contemporary era.



Figure 12 The fountain of "Prince Showered by Nine Dragons" in Lingshan, Wuxi, contemporary era.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The art of Buddhist sutra illustration is fundamentally a symbolic art, which uses perceptual and intuitive visual forms to concretize esoteric and abstract religious doctrines and uses artistic images to better promote Buddhist doctrines. Certain subject content and combination styles essentially reflect specific religious thoughts, while subject matter combinations and their styles are constantly changing with the change of dynasties. It is essentially the art of Buddhist sutra illustration adapting to the constant changes in social life and adjusting accordingly to national policies and the needs of believers. This kind of conscious or unconscious adjustment has become a unique branch with the development of Chinese art, thought, culture, and economy. From the beginning of its introduction, the art of Buddhist sutra illustration has been making internal adjustments and reflections based on the spirit and characteristics of the times, and regional culture and civilization, and has continuously given the world new art forms and even space for innovation. From the changes and development of the art of Buddhist sutra illustration, people not only feel its strong adaptability, vitality and self-adjustment ability, but also reflect and summarize its laws and characteristics, and feed the current artistic creation and theoretical research on the basis of promotion. Therefore, it is necessary to explore the development and change process of the art of Buddhist sutra illustration, which can better help people understand and absorb Chinese art civilization, better inherit and promote the connotation of Chinese art, and faster promote the exchange and dissemination of world culture and art.

#### AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

This paper is independently completed by Jiahao Li.

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