

六十

In the grottoes of Mogao
high up on the walls
were angels and fairies
who flew through the halls
the message apsara
had helped us to find
“perfection of wisdom
brings peace to the mind”



Chapter 60 – The Flying Nymphs of Mogao

Sometimes alone, sometimes in pairs or groups, pale and dark, Chinese and foreign, mostly female. They danced, flew, played musical instruments, performed acrobatics with colorful ribbons, rode on horseback, and protected others. Similar but somehow different images from the Buddhist temples in Angkor Wat and Hindu temples in India. They called them “apsara”, but at Mogao, the question emerged whether or not these were apsara at all. I had learned that apsara were “cloud and water” female spirits, nymphs or fairy like figures, whose major role appeared to be that of pleasing men.” What really got me thinking however was an article called “The Case for *Feitian*.” Fēitiān (飛天) is the Chinese name for the figures one finds decorating the walls of many of the caves of Mogao. Fei means “to fly” and “tian” means “sky” or “heaven.” The more I studied the 5,000 feitian from the 700 plus caves at Mogao, the more I began to see that these figures were unique.

They were not all idealized figures of women. Some of these apsaras were male and some of the male and female figures were muscular and most were more modest than those on the walls of temples in India and Cambodia. Had the feitian been influenced by Buddhist or Hindu art? Without a doubt. Were there strong Chinese influences on these figures created over the course of nearly 1,000 years? Definitely.

The Oxford Dictionary defines apsara as “a celestial nymph, typically the wife of a heavenly musician.” Your Dictionary provided an even more interesting definition: “In Hindu and Buddhist tradition, one of a race of beautiful female supernatural beings that inhabit the sky, dance for the entertainment of other celestial beings, and often attempt to seduce mortal men practicing asceticism.”

When the Buddhist monk, 樂尊 Lè Zūn stepped into the Hexi Corridor (河西走廊 Héxī Zǒuláng) in the 4th century C.E. and discovered pure, sweet spring waters near the present city of Dunhuang, he decided that would be a nice place to rest after his arduous journey across the Gobi Desert. In the evening, watching the sun set, images arose out of those mountains. Among the figures he saw in the heavens were thousands of fairy like apparitions dancing and playing music. Le Zun knew he had stumbled onto a sacred spot. A few years later, he was joined by another monk by the name of 法良 Fǎ Liáng who had a similar vision. The word spread among Buddhist pilgrims that this was a sacred spot. During the next millennium, mostly during the Tang Dynasty, over 500 caves were carved into the sandstone and filled with an amazing collection of Buddhist art. According to Karin Dienst’s

article “Bringing ancient Buddhism to light” published by Princeton University, there were “2,000 Buddhist sculptures, 45,000 square meters of murals and more than 60,000 texts.”

Among the 50,000 plus documents which were uncovered at Dunhuang were the Diamond Sutra, said to be the oldest printed book still in existence today. The sixteen foot long by 10’ wide scroll was printed in China in 868 CE and is made up of seven strips of yellow-stained paper printed from carved wooden blocks and pasted together. Its text explains impermanence and the illusory nature of all things. The only existing copy of the Diamond Sutra was purchased by Sir Marc Aurel Stein in 1907 and is currently in the British Library. The Heart Sutra, on the other hand, explains that there is wisdom beyond wisdom (Prajnaparamita), and that one needs to break out of the box of fixed understandings to break the bonds of suffering.

Like so many places in China, one needs to plan a trip to the Mogao caves. As more Chinese enter the middle class and have more expendable income, the first place many Chinese want to see is China, itself. Whether its climbing up stairs to the Great Wall at Mutianyu, or following the trails and stairs cut into the rocks of Huangshan or exploring the Buddhist art on the caves of Mogao, there will be crowds of people – all pilgrims hoping to see the fairy like apparitions seen by Le Zun so many centuries ago.

