

By Chen Yu

Translated by Li Guishan



FASCINATING MURAL STORIES FROM DUNHUANG GROTTOES

Vol. 2



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Building Khotan Kingdom

South Wall, Cave 154, Mid-Tang Dynasty, 618-907

Within Khotan (Hetian) in the Xinjiang region was the Khotan Kingdom which was also called Kustana Kingdom in ancient times. The Silk Road to Khotan ran through the south of Yangguan Pass. Therefore, the Khotan Kingdom had a very consanguineous cultural and economic relationship with Dunhuang. In Cave 98 of the Mogao Grottoes is a large portrait of King Khotan, his wife, and his family, and the painting on the southern wall of Cave 154 of mid-Tang Dynasty represents the fairytale of how the kingdom was built.

Once upon a time, Asoka of Sindhu in ancient India was an outrageous and ambitious king before he believed in the power of Buddha. He often guided his military to invade other kingdoms and rob their fortunes. One day, Asoka led his massive military and his favorite imperial concubine north. He had two goals in mind: expand his northern territory and enjoy the mountains and rivers. When they climbed over the snowy mountains and arrived in Khotan Kingdom, they found a mild climate, prosperous grass and water, and a small population there. They also found some families living by the seaside, all of whom were originally the offsprings of King Asoka's residents. Their ancestors were against the king so they were driven out of the kingdom and had to climb over the snowy mountains and start living here. There were all kinds of people including ministers, generals, Brahman, physiognomists and common people.

At that time, the imperial concubine, who had been pregnant for nine months, delivered a little prince. Although King Asoka had his wife and concubines, he had never had a son yet. Therefore, he was quite happy and invited a local physiognomist to anticipate the future of the little prince in half a month. The physiognomist's dead father had been also banished from there due to offending King Asoka so the physiognomist hated Asoka and wanted



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Asoka to die without sons. He knew Asoka had a bad temper so he had to watch what he said or else he could be sentenced to death by the king. Therefore, the physiognomist looked at the prince cautiously for quite some time and finally said with his head shaking, "The little prince appears to be a king and a promising prince when he grows up. But..."

"But what? Say it quickly!"

"If the little prince grows up, his feat will be better than yours and he will manage the kingdom more strongly, kill people more venomously, expand more territory, have more power and lordliness..."

"Silence!" King Asoka asked angrily, "Will he usurp my kingship?"

"It's hard to say. It surely happened in ancient times that the sons killed their fathers in order to usurp the scepter."

The overbearing Asoka believed in the physiognomist's words without any doubt. He was jealous of the little prince and hated the prospect that he would seize the scepter in the future. He ordered the little prince to be banished





from the kingdom. Although the little prince's mother pleaded and burst into tears, King Asoka refused to console her and forced her to go back to his kingdom.

The little prince who was thrown into the grassland cried due to hunger but there was no one around and nobody could hear him. Even if someone could, he or she wouldn't care about him because they hated Asoka deeply. The next morning the land in front of the little prince hunched suddenly and its shape was like a woman's breast, bursting with fragrant and sweet milk which trickled into the little prince's mouth so that he could stay alive. People called him Land Latex.

At that time, there was a Handi Kingdom in the eastern land. The king had 999 sons and needed one more to make 1,000. The guardian king, Vaishravana, who was in charge of the north, found Land Latex. By this time the boy was five or six years old and nobody had taught him martial arts so he offered Land Latex to the Handi Kingdom and asked the king to adopt him as a son. The king saw Land Latex and was pleased so he was very happy to adopt him and finally accomplished his wish to feed a thousand sons.

Land Latex studied and practiced martial arts together with the other princes. The king doted on him very much and regarded him as his own son and this made the other sons very jealous.

One spring festival, the whole Handi Kingdom celebrated the holiday together and the subjects were all very happy. While all the princes were playing a game, Land Latex accidentally offended another prince.

"You are a wild kid without a mother! How dare you beat me?" the prince screamed.

The other princes joined in to harass Land Latex, shouting, "You were not delivered by our queen mother but were picked up somewhere!"

"You are a fake prince!"

"You are not a subject of the Handi kingdom!"

"You are from another kingdom!"

Land Latex who had never been abused before was dumbfounded and burst into tears. He ran back to the palace and asked the king, "Father King, did you pick me up somewhere?"

"No."



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“Am I from the Handi Kingdom?”

“Who told you that you were not?”

“My brothers said I was not your son. They said I was a wild kid, a fake prince from another kingdom!”

“Don’t listen to their nonsense.”

“Father King, my brothers must have evidence to say so. Please tell me the truth!”

The king was perplexed whether to tell him or not.

“If Father King doesn’t tell me the truth, I’ll fast!”

Land Latex ate nothing from then on and starved himself. Seeing his favorite son not eating, the king couldn’t help but tell Land Latex the truth.

“Father King, although you are my foster father, you regard me as your own son so I thank you for your adoption. I am determined to leave you and go back to where I was born.”

“Why? Why do you want to leave me? I can’t let you go!”

“You have so many princes who will contend for power and profit with each other. I don’t want to join them so I want to go back to where I was born in Khotan to build my kingdom. Please give me permission.”

The king thought it over carefully. Land Latex’s words were quite reasonable so the king satisfied his request.

Prince Land Latex left the Handi Kingdom with ideal men, generals, military, servants, carriages, and properties equipped by his father and he headed west until he arrived in Khotan.

It had been more than a decade since Land Latex left Khotan. During those years, outrageous Asoka continued to banish many guilty subjects from Khotan. The banished people settled in barren land, sowed its soil, built the kingdom of Kustana and elected their king. They certainly couldn’t allow Land Latex to invade their territory so the two sides stood facing each other ready to fight. When a fierce fight was about to start, the northern Vaishravana guardian king and Lakshmi came to the battle and persuaded them not to use their weapons by describing Land Latex’s life experiences and the enemy king’s encounter in detail. The two sides put their feuding aside and united as a kingdom. They appreciated Vaishravana and Lakshmi for their intervention and enshrined



them from generation to generation.

Because Land Latex had a powerful army, he was elected the king of Kustana. Land Latex planned to build his capital but he was uncertain about a good location. He sent out an announcement and invited people who were familiar with the geography to make suggestions. At that time, Misery Taoist heard the announcement and went to see the king saying that he knew the best place to build the capital.

Land Latex ordered him to select a place. Misery Taoist took a huge cucurbit on his back full of water. He came to a piece of flat grassland and said, "This is a land with dramatic beauty. If the capital is built here, the kingdom would be strong and peaceful. I shall pour water to make an outline where the city wall will be built." After pouring the water, he ran far away and disappeared.

King Land Latex thought that a supernatural being was giving directions so he ordered the city wall to be built based on the watermark left by the Taoist. Then the palace, temple, streets, mansion and residential areas were built within the city walls. Afterwards, the kings of every dynasty set their own capital there. The city walls were not tall, but since ancient time, the kingdom has never been invaded by enemies.

The Treasure-granting Statue

Cave 154, Mid-Tang Dynasty, 781-847

Long ago, the emperor of Sinhala worshiped Buddha and built an exquisite palace several hundred meters tall that housed a tooth of the Buddha. The grand and gorgeous palace's walls were adorned in gold and decorated with carnelian, pearl, and crystal. A large post stood at the top of the palace that was covered with various types of prism stones and had a great Moraga set on top. The iridescent stones and exquisite palace formed an extraordinary sight day and night that was comparable to the brilliance of the stars in the sky.

The emperor showed such great respect to the Buddha tooth housed in his exquisite palace that he washed it with perfume three times, praised it with sandalwood three times and wrapped it in spice for worship every day.

There was another small palace made of glittering jade and decorated with jewels and gold. In the small palace, there was a gold Buddha statue molded according to the size of the previous emperor of the nation. The bun of the statue was set with precious jewels. In the middle, there was a valuable diamond that shined all day and night. The emperor ordered that a lock be placed on the doors and windows for protection and also dispatched soldiers to patrol the grounds continuously.

In the city there was an expert thief who was able to steal anything. He lost interest in small jobs and pined for the diamond on the head of the gold Buddha.

The thief thought to himself, "If I could get the diamond, I would become a very rich man. With my wealth, I could buy the territory of half the country. I would become the emperor and welcome people to worship at my



feet!"

In order to realize his dream, the thief often staked out the small palace and thought considerably several ways to steal the golden Buddha. However, given its rigorous protection, his dream would be difficult to bring to fruition.

One afternoon, the thief returned home from the palace but was still without any good ideas on how to pull off his heist. Anxious, he sighed to himself in his rundown house, "Ah, when can I get the diamond?"

At that time, several mice were scurrying into the house. Annoyed by the mice, the thief threw something at them. The frightened mice ran into the hole in the corner. The thief was inspired by this and thought, "If I dug a hole under the palace like the mice, I could get the diamond!"

The thief began to implement his plan by renting a house close to the exquisite palace and immediately he began to measure its size and distance from the palace to begin his digging. The thief slept during the day and dug his tunnel at night. Several months later, a hole leading to the palace was finished. The thief came into the palace through the tunnel at night. The multicolored jewels made him dizzy. He went directly to the gold statue of the previous emperor and anxiously stretched out his hands to pick the shining diamond at the bun. However, the gold statue began to grow and the thief could hardly reach it. He stood on a stool, then on a table, but he was still unable to reach the diamond. At last he climbed up on the gold statue but he still failed to get the diamond.

The thief had to give up. He sat on the ground and thought, "Months of my hard work has proved useless." He then said to the statue in a sardonic tone, "The Buddha took an oath swearing he would sacrifice himself to people who are in need. Everything includes all his personal belongings, daughter, son and





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even his own life. Although you are a statue, you are the statue of Buddha. You should follow Buddha's oath and donate everything to the public. How could you be so close with your diamond and breach your oath?" Suddenly, the gold Buddha statue returned to his original size and even lowered his head by a miracle. The thief snatched the diamond easily and went home in great delight.

The second day, the thief took the diamond to the market and tried to sell it. Many people recognized the famous diamond, thus the thief was caught by onlookers and was brought to the king.

The king interrogated the thief himself immediately. "Where did you steal this diamond from? Tell the truth."

"I didn't steal it, it was granted to me by that gold Buddha statue," the thief answered.

"What indeed do you mean by saying that?" the king doubtfully answered.

"That gold Buddha statue felt pity on me and lowered his head to offer this diamond. Please send the guards to the small palace to check whether the gold Buddha statue is still lowering his head or not," the thief insisted.

The king went to the palace himself and saw the scene exactly as it was described by the thief. The king worshiped the statue and released the thief. Moreover, the king gave the thief money to take the diamond and return it to the statue. Interestingly, the statue has never raised his head again since then.

Translated by Fan Juan

A Beggar Turned into a Rich Man

South Wall, Cave 156 Mid-Tang Dynasty, 781-847

In March of early spring red flowers and green grass were blooming, orioles were singing, and swallows were darting about. An eight-year-old child was playing happily during the lovely spring season. He followed butterflies and wandered throughout the land. However, he got lost after dark and couldn't find his way home. The child became homeless, traveled everywhere, and became a beggar.

The child was the only son of a rich man in ancient India. The man had been at low spirits since he lost his only son that spring and was listless while looking at his piles of treasure. He wondered who would inherit his possessions after he passed away.

More than ten years had passed and the little beggar became an adult. One day, the beggar unintentionally went back to the city where he had lived when he was a child and begged for food at the rich man's house. The rich man looked at the beggar carefully and thought he looked familiar. The beggar's looks were very similar to his lost son's and he was also around the same age as the man's son. The rich man was exultant. He asked the beggar to come into his house and ordered his servants to bring him food.

The rich man decided to make some cautious inquiries about the beggar's real identity. He asked the beggar while he was eating, "Young man, where is your home and why do you make a living by begging?"

"I can't remember where my home is," answered the beggar. "I remember when I was a child my house had a very big yard with silos of grains and herds of sheep and cows. I lost myself one spring and became a beggar. I don't even know if my old father is still alive."



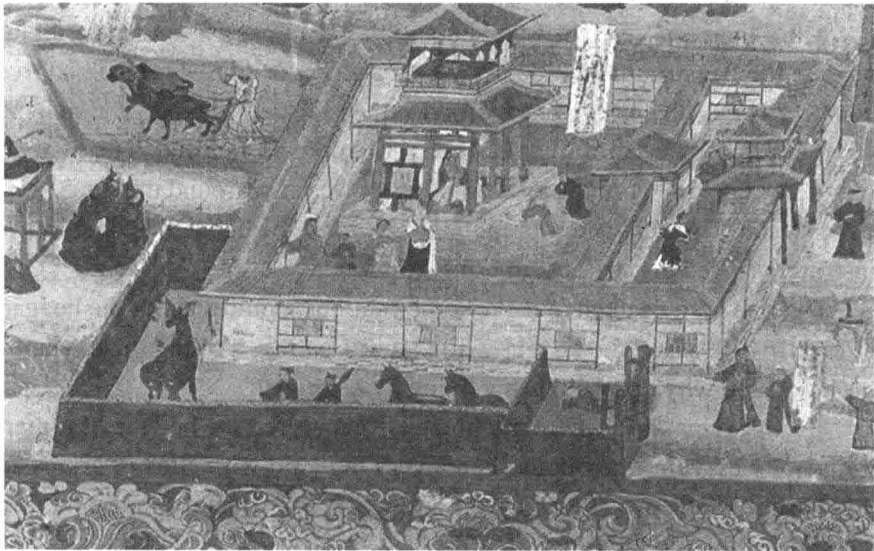
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The story described by the beggar was exactly the same as his son's! The rich man was convinced that the beggar was his own son! He asked the beggar to have some more delicious food. The beggar usually ate what others had thrown away, and hadn't tasted delicious food for a long time. The beggar drank and ate as much as he could. In fact, he drank a bit too much and got drunk at the table. The beggar woke several hours later and compared the rich man's silk clothes with his own tattered ones. He looked around and saw a beautiful yard and cloister, and thought it was a magnificent house. His mind raced quickly, "I begged for many years and all the rich men I met were merciless. What kind of lusions does this rich man have in his mind? This is not the right place for a beggar like me and I should leave immediately."

The beggar ran off.

When the rich man woke he intended to explain the truth to the beggar, but the beggar could not be found. The rich man immediately asked his servants to take off and catch up with the beggar.

The beggar saw someone running after him and doubted even more the rich man's intentions and thus continued to run desperately. Unfortunately, he





didn't eat well all the time and was weak. The beggar was finally seized by the servants and brought to the rich man. The beggar believed that it would be impossible for him to escape death since he had offended the rich man. He was so scared that he fainted. His father asked his servants to wake him up by pouring cold water on his face and said to him smiling, "Young boy, don't be afraid of me. I feel compassion for you and nothing more. How about you work for me and I will cover your living expenses?"

The beggar experienced many cases of poor people being cruelly killed by rich men and didn't believe the man at all. The only thought in the beggar's mind was to escape from the house. He pleaded, "Thank you for your food. I don't know how to work, so please let me go as a beggar."

The rich man heard the words and understood that his son was wary of him. He decided not to force his son to stay and let him go.

The rich man was very sad seeing his son leave him again and thought of an idea. He sent one of his servants to pretend to be a beggar and beg together with his son. When the servant became familiar with the beggar, he tried to persuade the son to return.

"I am going to become a servant in a rich man's house," the disguised servant said. "The master needs another person to work for him and do some cleaning. You will be paid a small amount of money daily and your food and living place will be covered as well."

On hearing this, the beggar followed the servant to the rich man's house. He cleaned the toilet and dealt with other sundries every day and the boy was able to stop begging.

The beggar got along with the rich man for a while and found he was a good-tempered old man who never maltreated his long-term workers. The beggar's doubts faded and he worked even harder. The father saw everything and was distressed that his son worked so much. He kept searching for an opportunity to tell him the truth.

One day the rich man saw his own son covered in sweat and wearing filthy clothes. A sense of fatherly love rose from his heart. The rich man took off his silk clothes and put on coarse clothing. He came to where his son was working and told him, "I am a lonely old man and you are a homeless and