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The Afterlives of Jātaka Deer’s Compassion – In memory of our dog Baibai

Abstract: This essay evaluates how exhibitions of prehistoric sites and cave art engage a world-wide public to address the issue of animal compassion, consciousness, and pain. The essay also analyzes the significance of representing archaeological discoveries in the global context of human-caused endangerment and the mass extinction of animals, flora, and fauna, including the eventual prospect of the mass extinction of homo sapiens proper. Today, in the midst of what some scientists call a sixth mass extinction event, the daily loss of species has produced desperate efforts to conserve habitats and preserve relics of extinct animals for a posterity increasingly defined by the scarcity of creation, with the acceleration of the representation of absence the only sustainable growth. Originally found in the Jātaka tradition, the story of Jātaka Deer crystallized Buddhist compassion. However, through decades of national preservation and propagandistic utilization, it met the fate of destruction in the process. For whatever *poiesis* of earth ethics Jātaka Deer had intended to convey, it remains an aesthetic ruin in the twenty-first century. With the help of holographic virtual-reality and augmented-reality technology, the latest form is a 3D replica with worldwide currency. Such a rendering reeks of our human species’ self-congratulatory sense of optimism and triumphalism about its civilization despite the coming mass extinction.

Keywords: Jātaka Deer; Mogao Grottoes; aesthetic ruins; digital Dunhuang; VR museum; compassion; human-animal relations; mass extinction; Earth ethics.

The Story

Readers of *Jātakat-thavaṇṇanā*, a collection of around 550 stories in the Pāli language preserved by the Theravāda school of Buddhism,¹ quickly discovered that the image of the omniscient and celestial Buddha appealed by its state of oblivion – its ability to negate time and to transcend the imperfection of secular deeds and the condition of mortality. Yet, just as the emotional satisfaction of watching Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannus* lies in King Oedipus’ grandiosity and hamartia and not in his acting

¹ Naomi Appleton, *Jātaka Stories in Theravāda Buddhism: Narrating the Bodhisatta Path* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), 8.

at all times “better than we are”;² the Jātaka stories hinge on readers’ devilish desire for the excellence of the Buddha’s kingdom *on earth*. As the stories center on the previous births of Gautama (or Sakyamuni, meaning Sage of Shakyas) Buddha spreading six perfections in both human and animal forms, they are instances of the Buddha’s secular love. They account for the process of the Buddha’s enlightenment, at a time before religiosity tied the sufferings of love to the love of suffering before the bodhisattva’s historical humanism wreaked havoc with divine sacrifice. Collectively, the Jātaka tales portray the Buddha, like all sentient bodies made of dust and water, as inscribed by the human condition, and thus tied to a traceable history of what it has borne: beauty, emotions, virtues, and frailty.

The following tale, titled *Rurujātaka* (Deer Jātaka), represents the historical Buddha’s engagement with the struggles, ambiguities, and failures that are related to the Buddha’s animalistic condition:

Tadā M. rurumigayoniyam nibbattivā parivāram chaḍḍetvā ekako va Gaṅganivattane ramaṇīye sālamissake supupphitambavane vasati, tassa sarīracchavi sumajjitakañcanapaṭṭavaṇṇo ahoṣi, hatthapādalākhā parikkammakatā viya, naṅguṭṭhaṃ camarinaṅguṭṭhaṃ viya, siṅgāni rajatadāmavaṇṇāni, akkhīni sumajjitamaṅgulikā viya, mukhaṃ odahitvā ṭhapitarattakambalabheṇḍukā viya. So aḍḍharattasamaye tassa karuṇasaddam sutvā ‘manussasaddo sūyati, mā mayi dharante maratu, jīvitam assa das-sāmīti’ cintetvā sayanagumbā uṭṭhāya nadītiraṃ gantvā ‘ambho purisa, mā bhāyi, jīvitam te dassāmīti’ assasetvā sotaṃ chindanto gantvā taṃ piṭṭhiyaṃ āropetvā tīraṃ pāpetvā attano vasanaṭṭhānaṃ netvā palāphalāni datvā dvīhatīhaccayena ‘bho purisa, ahaṃ taṃ ito araṇṇā nīharitvā Bārāṇasimage ṭhappessāmi, tvaṃ sotthinā gamissasi, api kho pana ‘asukatṭhāne nāma kañcanamigo vasatīti’; dhanakāraṇā maṃ raṇṇo vā rājamahāmatassa vā mā ācikkhā’ ti āha. So ‘sādhu sāmīti’ sampatīcchi. M. tassa paṭiññaṃ gahetvā taṃ attano piṭṭhe āropetvā Bārāṇasimage otāretvā nivatti.³

Readers without the ability to read texts in Sanskrit or Pāli can now access the *suttas in modern English, with the original text from the Pāli Canon embedded*, in a six-volume collection that Edward B. Cowell edited and that Cambridge University Press published between 1895 and 1907.⁴ Cowell translated the Pāli in the excerpt

² Aristotle, *The Poetics*, Project Gutenberg, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/6763/6763-h/6763-h.htm>, acc. on March 15, 2021.

³ V. Fausbøll, ed., “Rurujātaka”, in Vol. IV of *The Jātaka Together with Its Commentary Being Tales of the Anterior Births of Gotama Buddha*, 6 vols. (London: Trübner and Co., 1877–1896), 256.

⁴ Between the first half of the first century, during which the Fourth Buddhist Council pioneered the project to preserve and record the Buddha’s teachings in writing, and the significant year of 1987, when Wisdom Publications published Maurice Walshe’s translation of the *Dīgha Nikāya* (the long discourses of the Buddha), Buddhist inscriptions and sermons inspired and directed one of the most complex cases of metamorphosis in comparative philology. For Max Müller, the discovery of Sanskrit saved the historical legacy of the German poet Frederic Schlegel. “[N]ot a great scholar” often defamed by “erroneous” scholarship, Schlegel rose to be-

above as follows:

Now at that time the Great Being had been born as a Deer, and having abandoned the herd, was dwelling near a bend of the river all by himself [...]: the skin of his body was of the color of a gold plate well burnished, forefeet and hindfeet seemed as it were covered with lac, his tail like the tail of a wild ox, the horns of him were as spirals of silver, eyes had he like bright polished gems, when he turned his mouth in any direction it seemed like a ball of red cloth. About midnight he heard this sad outcry, and thought, ‘I hear the voice of a man. While I live let him not die! I will save his life for him.’ Arising from off his resting place in the bush, he went down to the river bank, and called out in a comfortable voice, ‘Ho man! have no fear, I will save you alive.’ Then he cleft the current, and swam to him, and placed him upon his back, and bore him to the bank and to his own dwelling-place; where for two or three days he fed him with wild fruits. After this he said to the man, ‘O man, I will now convey you out of this wood, and set you in the road to Benares, and you shall go in peace. But I pray you, be not led away by greed of gain to tell the king or some great man, that in such a place is a golden deer to be found.’ The man promised to observe his words; and the Great Being, having received his promise, took him upon his back and carried him to the road to Benares, and went his way.⁵

As the story develops, readers familiar with the salvation story associate the drowned man with Judas Iscariot, the classic porotype of treachery and treason in world literature and religion.⁶ A close comparison between the two stories draws read-

come “a man of genius” thanks to the creation of comparative philology as a new science, for the new discipline valued “the imagination of the poet” over “the accuracy of the scholar.” See Max Müller, “Lecture IV: The Classificatory Stage,” in *Lectures on the Science of Language* (New York: All Souls College, Oxford, 1862), 165.

⁵ E. B. Cowell, ed., “No. 482 Ruru-Jātaka,” in Vol. IV of *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā* (*The Jātaka, or Stories of the Buddha’s Former Births*) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1901), 162. Another version of the same fable, recorded in poetic Sanskrit, can be found in *Jātakamālā* (*Garland of Jātakas*), a masterpiece of 34 classical stories of the Buddha’s former birth as a bodhisattva by the fourth-century poet Āryaśūra. See Vaidya’s 1959 edition for short English summaries of each story. See also Āryaśūra, “Rurujātakam,” in Chapter 26 of *Jātakamālā* (*Garland of Birth Stories*), ed. P. L. Vaidya (Darbhanga: The Mithila Institute of Post-Graduate Studies and Research in Sanskrit Learning, 1959), 174; Āryaśūra, “The Antelope,” in *Once the Buddha Was a Monkey: Ārya Śūra’s Jātakamālā*, trans. Peter Khoroch (Chicago, IL; London: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 178.

⁶ For the rest of the story, see the Chinese Buddhist Encyclopedia online, which in turn quotes from the online resources of the United States-based “Chung Tai Zen Center of Sunnysvale”: “The king at the time named ‘Moyin Light’ was a simple, sincere and gentle ruler... One day his queen dreamed of a nine-colored deer, and she threatened to die in the king’s presence if she couldn’t possess this rare creature... When the man who was saved by the Deer King saw the [imperial] notice, he ... told the king about his encounter. Strangely, by the time he finished his words, his face was filled with scabies, and his mouth with strong, bad breath. The king led the troops over the river and found the Deer King after a relentless search. The Deer King inquired, ‘Your highness, how did you find such a small beast like me ...?’ The king ..., ‘He, the scabie-faced one, told me.’ The Deer King then related their story to the king, and commented, ‘One would rather bring floating, rotting woods to the

ers' attention to the different representations of the image of the mortal, earthly God—Jesus the Savior and Jātaka Deer. There are no concrete descriptions of Jesus's face in the four Gospels, permitting a broad scope of interpretations, especially during the Italian High Renaissance, of the face of the man who was God. On the contrary, Jātaka Deer's beauty is illuminative and is described down to the smallest details – from the skin “the color of a gold plate well burnished” and silverish spiral-like horns to eyes as “bright” as “polished gems.”⁷ Unlike the Christian God, such beauty is remarkably non-relational to humans. Jātaka Deer is an aesthetically unnatural make-believe unity of elements drawn from the earth and its inhabitants. Challenging and ravishingly beautiful to look at, the image of Jātaka Deer presents the attractiveness of the sublime and that of animal compassion for aesthetic contemplation. This image of Jātaka Deer, I believe, presents a moral challenge to the characters in the story and, by extension, to readers and audiences then and now, regarding their “judgment of taste.”⁸

The Mural

In accounting for the grandiosity and facets of the Buddha's beauty in the religious and cultural imagination, no calligraphic depictions have achieved the effect offered by cave murals. Whether they are the inscriptional mandates ordered by the Mauryan Emperor Aśoka (269–232 BC), the Pāli language used by the Theravāda school, or the Sanskrit language that has, since the first century, treated, refined, systematized, and governed the literary style of Buddhist literature, none surpasses the aurality of the Mogao Grottoes, a World Heritage Site. Stepping into Cave No. 257 of the Mogao Caves in Dunhuang, on the edge of the Gobi Desert, one can experience the narrative paintings depicting Jātaka Deer (368–534 AD) that artists in the Northern Wei Dynasty (368–534 AD) painted on the west wall of the main chamber.⁹ These mural paintings, measuring 96 cm high and 385 cm wide, are located in the top half of the lowest part of the west wall, divided into three registers from top to bottom. Below the Jātaka Deer mural is a decorative border separating it from a row of *yaksha* images. The second register immediately above the paintings of Jātaka Deer, occupying

bank than rescuing such a capricious person. The sins of robbing and killing are excusable in certain instances. As for those who reciprocate kindness with cruelty, their sins are truly unspeakable.' [T]he human king was astonished, 'What kind of a beast would possess such great compassion, putting himself in great danger to save a human being?' [...] After the queen heard that the king had released the Deer King, she was so overcome by wanting and resentment she eventually died." qtd. in the Chinese Buddhist Encyclopedia online (2016).

⁷ Cowell, “No. 482 Ruru-Jātaka,” 162.

⁸ Kant presumed that all human beings possessed the same kind of cognitive faculties – imagination and understanding – to make judgments about beauty. He explained the operation of these cognitive faculties under the categorical term “judgments of taste.” Immanuel Kant, section 56 of *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*, trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1911).

⁹ The story of Bodhisattva's birth as a deer, often regarded as sacred and innocent in the Buddhist tradition, is a repeated one in the Jātakas story collection, two of which are also illustrated in the Ajanta Caves in India (Cave No. 17): The Nyagrodha-Mriga and Sarabha-Mriga Jātaka. In the Indian version, the deer-king is a golden deer. Moreover, while the Chinese version of the story ends with the treacherous man being punished, this ending is not mentioned in the Indian Ruru Jātaka.

around half of the wall space, depicts a large sitting Buddha surrounded by a thousand small ones. At the top, similar in height but double the length of that of the Jātaka Deer mural are images of a row of sixteen heavenly musicians.¹⁰



Illustration 1: Cave No. 257 of the Mogao Caves in Dunhuang

Source: Dunhuang Academy, “Mogao Grottoes Cave 257”, Digital Dunhuang, acc. on March 10, 2021, <https://www.e-dunhuang.com/cave/10.0001/0001.0001.0257>.

Painted according to the Sutra,¹¹ the story of a nine-colored deer saving a

¹⁰ A reproduction of this Dunhuang mural was exhibited in New Delhi at the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA) in 1991. The reproduction was executed by Chang Shuhong, the Founder-Director of the Dunhuang Academy. See Tan Chung, *Across the Himalayan Gap: An Indian Quest for Understanding China* (New Delhi: IGNC, 1998), 178.

¹¹ Along with the earliest surviving sources of early Chinese history, after the oracle bones, the bronzes inscriptions, and *Shujing* (*Classic of Documents*) that date back to the second century BC, one archaeological event stood out to provide Chinese historiography with a wealth of new materials: the discovery and opening of the Library Cave (Cave 17) in the Mogao Grottoes in 1900. The Library Cave, built by Buddhist monks in the Tang and Song Dynasties during the ninth and tenth centuries, houses a collection of around 50,000 manuscripts, scrolls, booklets, and paintings on silk hemp and paper. These materials differ sharply from the grand histories of China in that they were neither consolidated records of imperial incidents and policies following successive dynastic stages nor compositions by ministers of the state bureaucracy whose purpose of writing was necessarily teleological, presentist, and court-serving. The Dunhuang manuscripts add to the oeuvre of Chinese and Eurasian historical writings not only new materials but also a new methodology. See Ronit Yoeli-Tlalim, “The Silk Roads as a Model for Exploring Eurasian Transmissions of Medical Knowledge: Views from the Tibetan Medical Manuscripts of Dunhuang,” in *Entangled Itineraries of Materials, Practices, and Knowledge: Eurasian Nodes of Convergence and Transformation*, ed. Pamela Smith (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019), 47–62. As the situation, intention, and geographical perspective of writing these materials were local-based and not state-centered, they made possible a philological, archival approach to national historical writings. These materials required scholars to innovate methodologically, establish links to relate local histories to the context of that greater world history of the Silk Road, and remit the received grand histories of data that they obtained from certain localities.

man from drowning only to be betrayed is presented in eight episodes in the mural. Looking at it from two ends, the ending of the story is located in the middle. The episodes are, from left: Ep. 1. a man falls into the river; Ep. 2. a nine-colored deer saves the drowned man; Ep. 3. the drowned man kneels to thank the deer; from right: Ep. 4. the queen of the kingdom wants to capture the deer; Ep. 5. the rescued man reveals the deer's hideout to the king; Ep. 6. the man begins to grow scabies as he directs the king and the imperial army toward the deer, and at the center: Ep. 7. a crow awakens the deer; Ep. 8. Jātaka Deer stands and reacts to the perceived threat by wagging its tail—a deer's body language that signals the end of the hunt and speaks of the man's betrayal.



Illustration 2: Jātaka Deer presented in eight episodes in the mural in Cave 257

Source: Blogger, “A Thousand Years of Spiritual Undertaking; Sublime Dunhuang 神游千年，大美敦煌”，Zhihu, July 28, 2019, acc. on March 10, 2021, <https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/74143943>.

Unlike the printed “Rurujātaka”, which reveals events in a chain of linear causality, the left and right sides of the Jātaka Deer mural facilitate a synchronous development of a double plot. Two storylines, sometimes paralleling, sometimes crisscrossing each other, converge in the revelation of the nature of Jātaka Deer's being. In other words, its visual presentation connects two storylines to dramatize the scenes in the middle. In so doing, the mural avoids the Aristotelian unity of action and achieves the Kuleshov effect of make-believe. The Kuleshov effect, like a montage, relies on the human mind as media to process and construct meanings. It works through a series of detained images juxtaposed with context-based impressions, inviting viewers to become explorers and achievers of meanings and to take part in the cognitive adventure of following, in this case like pilgrims, the acts of Jātaka Deer in its various situations. The image of the standing Jātaka Deer appears in a series of three, from left to right, with each appearance slightly larger than the one before it.



Illustration 3a: Episode 1

Source: Blogger, “A Thousand Years of Spiritual Undertaking”, Zhihu, July 28, 2019, acc. on March 10, 2021, <https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/74143943>.

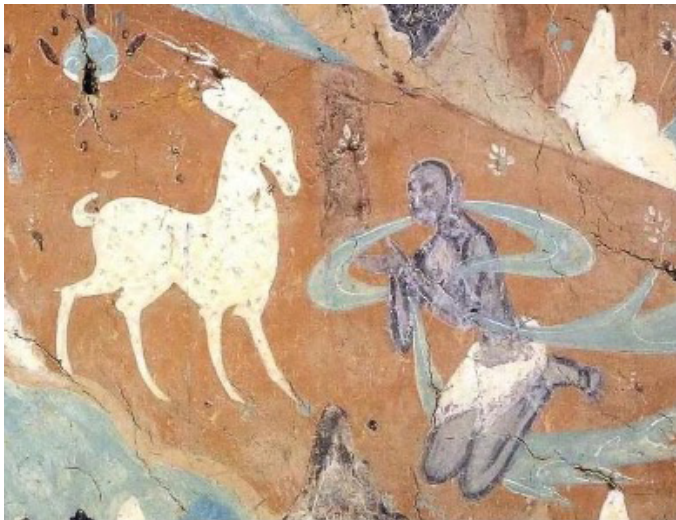


Illustration 3b: Episode 2

Source: Blogger, “A Thousand Years of Spiritual Undertaking”, Zhihu, July 28, 2019, acc. on



Illustration 3c: Episodes 7 and 8

Source: Blogger, “A Thousand Years of Spiritual Undertaking”, Zhihu, July 28, 2019, acc. on March 10, 2021, <https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/74143943>.

Joseph Campbell, citing Shakespeare, said, “[A]rt is a mirror held up to nature [...] The nature is your nature, and [...] these wonderful poetic images of mythology are referring to something in you.”¹² Episode 2 vividly depicts the drowned man’s encounter with the Buddha. Considering the joined bodies here and the halo around his head in Episode 6, the man is a key participant in the Buddha’s incarnation. In Episode 3, the Buddha’s compassion shines on the darkness of the drowned-rescued-traitorous man’s human condition – failure of thought and word, breach of confidence, and moral degradation – all of which are displayed in Episodes 5 and 6 and are spelled out in Episode 8. Collectively, the events on the left are chronic and account for a perspective of spatial time. While it is true that one episode leads to another, the first three (Episodes 1, 2, and 3) culminate in the last. Episodes 7 and 8, much more than the summation of Episodes 2 and 3, depict their synthesis captured in frozen time – Jātaka Deer, performing as the pre-existent Buddha, is arrested in an image of compassion in words and deeds at once. Episodes 7 and 8, the central pieces, reveal the universe of Buddhist compassion as it is temporally contextualized and firmly embodied in and by an animal. The Buddha’s compassion, displayed as a living force with its own time and space, manifests itself in certain ethical choices and thoughts set in place in the ever-expanding universe. It is simultaneously the compassion of an animal taking center stage, the exclusiveness of a deer’s body laid in the open, and a mortal Buddha neither impassive nor divine and as such, full of fear and suffering.

¹² Joseph Campbell and Bill Moyers, *The Power of Myth* (Hamburg: Anchor Academic Publishing, 1991), 57.

The Cosmos

After these explorations of Jātaka Deer as an embodiment of compassion practiced and perfected in a temporal universe, one would inevitably want to step back for a view of the bigger picture. Indeed, any meaningful sense of Jātaka Deer’s future reverberations, as a religious tale and as a world heritage, should be deduced in relation to the entire west wall, on which sits the Buddha, now reincarnated, as a structural frame and scriptural center of the Jātaka story, as shown in Illustration 4.



Illustration 4: Jātaka Deer takes center stage.

Source: Dunhuang Academy, “Mogao Grottoes Cave 257”, Digital Dunhuang, acc. on March 10, 2021, <https://www.e-dunhuang.com/cave/10.0001/0001.0001.0257>.

The reincarnated Buddha, in an enlightened, complete form, looms large in the center of the wall. The same point is iterated in *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā*, which begins the story with a prologue that names the drowned man – Devadatta – and frames the story of Ruru-Jātaka pedagogically from the vantage point of the eternal divine. Cowell translated the prologue as follows: “It is not now the first time [...] that Devadatta is ungrateful but ungrateful he was before; and in days long gone by his life was saved by me, yet he knew not the greatness of my merit.’ So saying, he [the Master] told a story of the past.”¹³ The bigger picture that this epilogue narrates sheds light on the bridge over which the mural extends beyond the Anthropocene.¹⁴ The Jātaka mural as a cultural monument is not a relic *per se*. It is not static but an active embodiment of

¹³ Cowell, “No. 482 Ruru-Jātaka,” 162.

¹⁴ Scientists have divided the earth’s geological history into eras, periods, and epochs according to the way great events fundamentally changed the planet. From the Jurassic period in which dinosaurs roamed the earth to the two-million-year-old Gelasian age, the Earth leapt another 12,000 calibrated years forward to arrive at the Anthropocene, the present epoch in which human habitation, with potentially catastrophic results, is the dominant influence on the earth, and its impact can only be assessed at the geological level.

(Buddhist) ethical and intellectual ideals that are ever-developing and growing from humanity's present needs. The post-Jātaka framework of the story depicting Jātaka Deer offers a way to define our humanity and our relations to beings outside of ourselves. Jātaka Deer, as a religious and cultural idea flowing from man's conception of the world, embodies the very humans who conceive it and preserve it as a tradition and a means of identity and survival.

The Buddha at the center overseeing the happenings of Jātaka Deer asks that we contemplate humanity's temporal limits and set them against the Buddhist diurnal course. Jātaka Deer, non-human through and through, is a sentient being making choices and perfecting the humanity of generosity, morality, and patience. To marvel at its aesthetics is to appreciate and approximate the way of its being in the world. The story is moving because it moves us to explore the circumstances of its conception: a border zone that unites humanity and the definition of "human" and that draws from their juncture new knowledge about procreation in a post-Anthropocentric world. Part of our fears about imaginary human extinction, or what in Buddhist cosmology might be called a species' collective failure to be reborn as humans, stem from human's limited temporal vision. While extinction is a frequent occurrence in the world, the imminent extinction event of the present epoch, as geologists have come to characterize it, is specifically Anthropocenic. Evidence of human existence, ranging from carbon emission to radioactivity, from hunting to specicide, from making clothes to building the fur trade as a worldwide industry, has been stamped onto the world. At a certain point in eonic time, some spirits will look back and see the impact of our civilization. More significantly, our environmental imagination and response to extinction arouse in the self a range of emotional reactions – guilt, fear, shame, anger, nostalgia, and empathy. These emotions, which have become increasingly vehement of late, at once give structure to what being a human has meant so far and entrap us within a cycle of disabling despair.

Humans' imaginary extinction has led to apocalyptic anxieties that are primarily a byproduct of the species' narcissism. For the human living in and imagining from within the Anthropocene, that the world can continue to survive beyond the end of itself as the single most important inhabitant is unfathomable. Modern humans, as paleontologists call us, have been around as a species for a temporal range of 250,000 years. Comparatively, contemporary elephants are at least ten times older. Tuataras, a species of reptiles endemic to New Zealand, have been around for 240 million years since before the earth's supercontinent of Pangea began to break apart, and it is over a thousand times older than humans, as are polar bears, blue whales, camels, and coyotes, each in their own way. One of the most powerful images from the history of space exploration is notable, not because it captured the immensity of the great and far but because it made a spectacle of humans' inconsequentiality. In the words of Carl Sagan, "on the scale of worlds – to say nothing of stars or galaxies-humans are [...] a thin film of life on an obscure and solitary lump of rock and metal."¹⁵ This image is the

¹⁵ Carl Sagan, *Pale Blue Dot: A Vision of the Human Future in Space* (New York: Random House, 1994), 16; see also 46.

famous *Pale Blue Dot* – a photograph of Earth taken by Voyager 1 on February 14, 1990, when Voyager 1 was about 6.4 billion kilometers away from the Sun. The image of the planet is a humbling peek of our world from the vantage point of the universe beyond. To call it a dot is generous. It is at most “a mote of dust suspended in a sun-beam”¹⁶ that barely stands out from noise or a passing shadow. Humanity’s end times end neither the world nor life in the world.

The Digital

I have said that one needs to step into Cave No. 257 of the Mogao Grottoes in Dunhuang, on the edge of the Gobi Desert, to experience the aural of Jātaka Deer. Lately, this option has changed from being unwelcomed to being restricted and, finally, unnecessary. Since 2006, to curb the damage to the caves by global tourism and environmental changes on the one hand and to provide off-site travelers with opportunities for a heritage experience on the other, the Dunhuang Academy – the state-managed institute and one custodian of the Mogao Grottoes¹⁷ – has collaborated with other partners, notably the tech giant Tencent,¹⁸ to build a “Digital Dunhuang.” Geopolitics and frontier policies notwithstanding, this effort has culminated in productive endeavors that have paved the way for off-site heritage interpretation and representation.

Among the earlier collaborative endeavors, the 2012 exhibition titled *Pure Land: Inside the Mogao Grottoes at Dunhuang* stands out as a precursor in Asia and, indeed, globally. Notably an academic and research-driven project, the exhibition was curated by professors Sarah Kenderdine and Jeffrey Shaw in the Applied Laboratory for Interactive Visualization and Embodiment (ALiVE) at the City University of Hong Kong (CityU) in partnership with the Dunhuang Academy. It followed logically that it took place at Gallery 360 in the Run Run Shaw Creative Media Center at CityU. As an academic initiative, the exhibition mixed technological, pedagogical, scale, and financial considerations that alternately made possible the initiative to digitally reproduce history and heritage. *Pure Land* offered a virtual 1:1 scale, ultra-high resolution, and 3D visualization of not multiple but, modestly, only one wall of one Mogao cave: the north wall of Cave 220.

¹⁶ Sagan, *Pale Blue Dot*, 17.

¹⁷ See Dunhuang Institute of Cultural Relics, ed., *Dunhuang, Mogaoku*, Vols. 1–5 (Beijing: Wenwu Press, 1981–1987).

¹⁸ Tencent, allegedly the world’s second-largest economic and technology firm, provider of the WeChat mobile messaging and payment “super app”, is a multinational conglomerate that offers digital-related services worldwide, most profitable among which is video-gaming.



Illustration 5: A viewer looking at the digital Cave 220 at the *Pure Land* exhibition
Source: Jeffrey Shaw, “Pure Land 360”, in Jeffrey Shaw Compendium, 2012, acc. on July 6, 2021, <https://www.jeffreyshawcompendium.com>.

Characterized by multilayered, multimedia augmented reality features,¹⁹ *Pure Land* invited viewers to behold the mural paintings and sculptures of the north wall of Cave 220, an immersive, embodied experience that brought sensuality and tactility to historical-cultural heritage. As for the other three walls of the cave and the truncated pyramid ceiling that, in the original Dunhuang site (see Illustration 6), is also filled with mural decorations, *Pure Land* re-presented the former with medium resolution photographs, though not altogether.

¹⁹ The new technical rendering of the installation *Pure Land* AR was developed by Professor Sarah Kenderdine, Director of the Laboratory for Innovation in Galleries, Libraries, Archives and Museums (iGLAM) at the University of New South Wales.

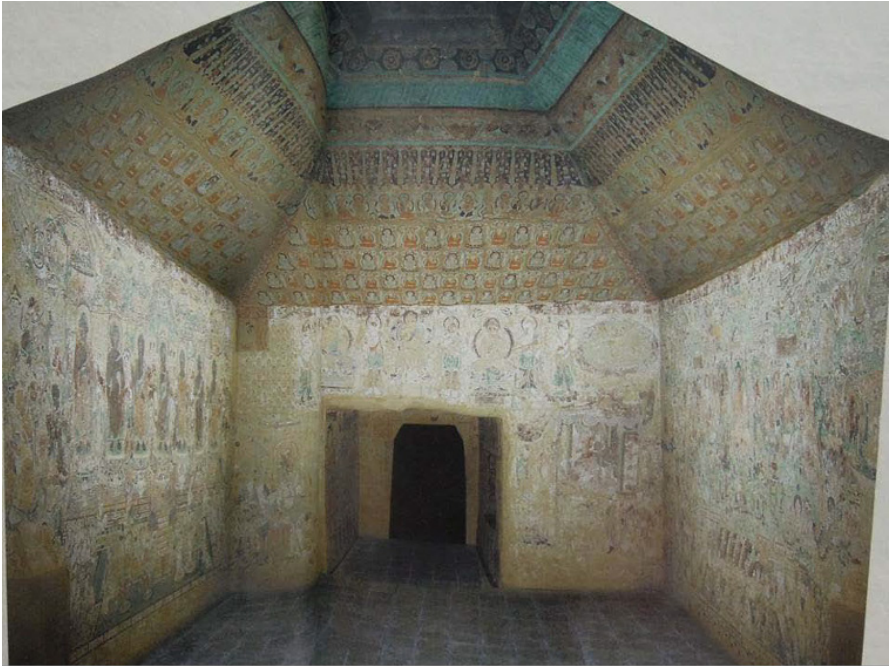


Illustration 6: The original Cave 220 at Mogao.

Source: Chan Fung Lin, “Digital Dunhuang: The Use of New Technology for Off-site Interpretation of a Fragile Heritage Site” (diss., University of Hong Kong), 33.

The effect was an exhibition that sought to straddle, without removing, the line between the aurality of the historical-cultural and the reproducibility of the virtual. *Pure Land* endorsed a double experience: cultural heritage was transformed by a deep, immersive application of state-of-the-art technologies, but its authenticity was conditioned upon a full acknowledgment that mimesis is fundamentally a medium of representation –creative destruction in the wake of each extinction event. Indeed, notwithstanding the half-million in seed funding it enjoyed, *Pure Land* was especially notable in its regard to the tenuousness of the project’s sustainability. Each second of 2D animation required the creation of 25 hand-painted pictures, with each of these paintings demanding, in turn, the skill and effort “to imitate the brush strokes of the original murals as well as its recoloring”, as recalled by Lee Mei-yin, Representative of the Friends of Dunhuang Hong Kong and Special Researcher at the Dunhuang Academy.²⁰

Pedagogically and methodologically groundbreaking as *Pure Land* was in its effort to invigorate Silk Road studies and visualize research-rich humanities work, its

²⁰ Christina Wu, “Ancient Buddhist Art Reproduced in Virtual Reality at CityU,” City University of Hong Kong, March 16, 2012, <https://www.cityu.edu.hk/media/news/2012/03/16/ancient-buddhist-art-reproduced-virtual-reality-cityu>, acc. on July 6, 2021. For an academic study on using advanced technology in the preservation and the interpretation of the grotto art using the Dunhuang exhibition in Hong Kong, see Chan Fung-lin, “Digital Dunhuang: The Use of New Technology for Off-site Interpretation of a Fragile Heritage Site” (thesis, University of Hong Kong, 2012).

champion, the 2018 *Digital Dunhuang—Tales of Heaven and Earth* exhibition at the Hong Kong Heritage Museum,²¹ combined Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR) to digitize it and in the process surpassed Dunhuang’s grotto culture. Built with the intention to “spread and share [...] virtual exhibits more broadly through App stores on the internet”²² it allowed its visitor-participants to conquer an on-site cultural heritage experience with a cultural consumer experience. (Compare Illustrations 5 and 6 with Illustration 7, which shows *Digital Dunhuang* making a spectacle of Cave 220).



Illustration 7: Digital Cave 220 at the Hong Kong Heritage Museum

Source: Laruse Junior, “Heritage Museum Mogao Cave 220,” Flickr, March 21, 2015, acc. on July 6, 2021, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/larusejunior/16257051393>.

Technology has now succeeded in not only liberating cultural heritage otherwise closed to the public from its magical, cultic, and religious context, it has also become an ever addictive and mechanical vehicle in the grand theater of humans’ mimetic desire. The grandiosity of the exhibition displayed a triumphalism that staked Dunhuang art and culture to the mercy of the “post-taste” museums of the twenty-first century and on humans as global consumers of flattened tastes.²³ The exhibition also posed questions about the boundary of the digitalization of conservation and restoration. What kinds of epistemological paradigms will we privilege when seeking to commemorate and preserve the memory of a culture, a people, and a species that

²¹ For a detailed reportage of the exhibition, see “How 3D Imagery of Dunhuang Silk Road Cave Paintings Helps Preserve UNESCO Site and Shows Murals in New Light,” *South China Morning Post*, August 29, 2018.

²² Lijun Ma and Xiaobo Lu, “The VR Museum for Dunhuang Cultural Heritage Digitization Research,” in Conference Proceedings of Conference on Cultural Heritage and New Technologies in ICOMOS, Austria, November 2–4, 2021, 1.

²³ For a study on the notion of “post-taste,” see Paul Goodwin, “Confessions of a Recalcitrant Curator: Or How to Re-Programme the Global Museum,” in Chapter 11 of *The Persistence of Taste: Art, Museums and Everyday Life After Bourdieu*, ed. Malcolm Quinn, Dave Beech, Michael Lehnert, Carol Tulloch, and Stephen Wilson (London: Routledge, 2018).

the contemporary era has contributed to its demise? As Elizabeth Barrett Browning reminds us, “Deep-hearted man, express / Grief for thy dead in silence like to death [...] / Most like a monumental statue set / In everlasting watch and moveless woe / Till itself crumble to the dust beneath.”²⁴

Coda

Technology has embraced the living reality of our century into which this civilization deposits and in and for which technology operates. Galloping along quickly is the digital Nine-colored Deer. Since its inception, it has transited from being defenseless against the environmental crisis and global tourists to being stimulative and inventive in the process of fostering the latest technological developments. While visitors to the 2018 exhibition had fun playing the Gautama Buddha in an interactive game that fought demons, players of the Tencent-owned online game *Honor of Kings*²⁵ can now get a Nine-colored Deer skin for Yao, the game’s deer hero. Kristine Tuting called the prized skin “another high fashion collab you don’t want to miss,”²⁶ no doubt the best example of consumer kitsch to be bought and sold, desired and fetishized.



Illustration 8: The digital Nine-colored Deer

Source: “How to Win the Nine-Colored Deer Skin in *Honor of Kings* 王者荣耀瑶九色鹿怎么获得 新皮肤入手方法”, 87G.com, April 10, 2020, acc. on March 20, 2021, <http://www.87gcom/wzry/116284.html>.

²⁴ Elizabeth Barrett Browning, “Grief,” Poetry Foundation, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47646/grief-56d2283e927df>, acc. on July 6, 2021.

²⁵ *Honor of Kings* 王者荣耀 is a multiplayer online battle arena developed by TiMi Studios and published by Tencent Games for iOS and Android mobile platforms for the Chinese market. “By 2017, *Honor of Kings* had over 80 million daily active players and 200 million monthly active players, and was among the world’s most popular and one of the highest-grossing games of all time as well as the most downloaded app globally. As of November 2020, the game has over 100 million daily active players.” Wikipedia, “Honor of Kings,” April 4, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Honor_of_Kings, acc. on April 20, 2021.

²⁶ Kristine Tuting, “*Honor of Kings* Drops New Skins Inspired by Real Burberry Pieces,” One Esports, March 22, 2021, <https://www.google.com/search?client=safari&rls=en&q=Honor+of+Kings%2Bdeer&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8>, acc. March 31, 2021.

The irony is beyond tragic. These examples do not show that the technological reproducibility of Jātaka Deer has been optimized out of the need for conservation. The digital Jātaka deer have been produced without any originals at all, without a single site to scan or copy or reproduce. They are “originals” – found arts in their own right, with a revealing power to certify this age of the new media that produced them and brought them into being, as with photography and film in the 1930s, and with VR tourism, VR Dunhuang, and VR games in our epoch. Their “aura” is contingent on our era’s indifference to aura, on a way of seeing, discovering, and consuming art unprecedented and unsuspected by Buddhist monks 1,700 years ago. In the epigraph to Walter Benjamin’s essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, Paul Valéry subjects the changes in the nature of art to those in the technique of the beautiful.²⁷ After Benjamin, along with the Frankfurt critics György Lukács and Herbert Marcuse,²⁸ who spoke especially of technology’s deterministic effect on the human spirit, it is self-evident that evolving technologies have transformed artwork both functionally and in terms of reception. “Reception in a state of distraction [...] The public is an examiner, but an absent-minded one”,²⁹ Benjamin wrote, prognosticating art’s revolutionary potential in the wake of cultic art’s demise. Digital deer and deer skins, examples par excellence of present-day technologically reproducible art’s exhibition value and liberational power, dismantle any possible grounds for optimism about the reader-critic-consumer’s “examination” capability.

In *Poetics*, Aristotle spoke of the moment of anagnorisis as the pivotal turning point of classical tragedy. In the history of our relationship with the earth and along with it all the non-human beings inhabiting the planet, we are at such a turning point. Reincarnation (of Jātaka Deer) is an eternal fact of the cosmos; the place in and through which humanity and the cosmos intersect is the historical beings on earth and their unfolding presence in a world that will survive us. Jātaka Deer is *not* an animal who acts like humans, nor is the Jātaka story a morality fable using anthropomorphism. It is a geological tale that puts on stage the moral choices each sentient animal, human and non-human, makes in life. It sheds light on these choices and speaks of them as the many voyages into the existential possibilities of beings and consequently links them closely to exploring each being’s nature. The inevitability of man’s fall will reach its captivating height in the exploration of the division between the agency of the deer and that of the drowned man, the actual situation of all experimental life forms on the point of consciousness. Buddhist cosmology considers that animals, born “in a time with no Buddha”, are “impulsive” and “ignorant”.³⁰ This

²⁷ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1959), 19.

²⁸ Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Society* (Boston: Beacon, 1964).

²⁹ Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” 19.

³⁰ Damien Keown, *Buddhism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 36; see also 32–47. See also Reiko Ohnuma’s new book *Unfortunate Destiny: Animals in the Indian Buddhist Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017) for a study on Indian Buddhist literature’s treatment of animals to illuminate what it means to be a human being.

state thus subjects them to a lifetime of constant killing and heedless consumption, of “pain” and “fear.”³¹ It is probably on this spectrum of Buddhist telos that the story of Jātaka Deer is most disturbing. In so far as consciousness manifests in the act of compassion, it becomes the privileged site of critique of our human-centric poetics and our astonishing lack of humanity.

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³¹ Keown, *Buddhism*, 36.

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