

Vimalakīrtinirdeśa

The *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* (Teaching of Vimalakīrti) is a mid-length Mahāyāna text composed conceivably by around 100 CE, certainly by the early 3rd century. Its central protagonist is Vimalakīrti, a bodhisattva from the world Abhirati (lit. delight; the joyous buddha field of Buddha Akṣobhya), who has made himself present in our Sahā world (the painful buddha field of Buddha Śākyamuni) in the city of Vaiśālī as a wealthy householder in order to teach beings such themes as nonduality (*advaya*), non-arising of dharmas (*anutpāda*), emptiness (*śūnyatā*), and the inconceivable (*acintya*). He delivers his teaching through brilliant dialogue, displays of supernatural powers, and apophatic silence. The *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* had limited impact on the Buddhisms of India and Tibet but exerted profound influence on Sinitic religious, artistic, and literary culture. It has also been enthusiastically received in modernist Buddhism and appreciated for its literary quality, its antinomian tendencies, and its perceived embrace of lay Buddhism and gender equality.

Translations and Studies

The most specialized scholarly translation is É. Lamotte's (1962), which is based on the Tibetan version with references to Xuanzang's (玄奘) Chinese version (T. 476) – it comes with an extensive introduction that remains the most comprehensive study of the text in a Western language. R. Thurman (1976) likewise represents the Tibetan version. B. Watson (1997) renders the Chinese version of Kumārajīva (T. 474), as does J. McRae (2004). A comparative study of the main English translations is found in J. Nattier (2000). Other English translations include those by H. Idzumi (1923–1928), Ōhara (1898), Robinson (n.d.), C. Luk (1972), Sangharakshita (1995), and T. Cleary (2013). J. Fischer and T. Yokota (1944) translated the Chinese into German. Translations into modern Japanese include those by S. Mushanokōji (1934), M. Ishida (1966), J. Takasaki and K. Kawamura (1993), G. Nagao (1983), and – from the Sanskrit – M. Nishino and H. Takahashi (2011) and M. Ueki (2011).

Important studies have come from P. Demiéville (1962), G. Fussman (2009), É. Lamotte (1962), R. Mather (1968), J. Ōshika (1970a; 1988), G. Shi (1998), J.A. Silk (2014), and J.D. Whitehead (1976).

Text and Versions

Sanskrit

A complete Sanskrit manuscript of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, dated to the 12th century, was discovered at Potala Palace in Lhasa in 1999. Facsimiles of the manuscript, which also includes the *Jñānālokāṃkāra*, a sūtra associated with Tathāgatagarbha literature, were published in 2004 by the Taishō University Study Group on Buddhist Sanskrit Literature, along with a synoptic presentation (Sanskrit-Tibetan-Chinese), followed by an edition of the Sanskrit by the same group in 2006. The colophons indicate that the manuscript was produced at the request of the Tibetan monk Śiladhvaja, who had traveled to Vikramaśīla around 1150 (Fussman, 2009, 644). With the exception of verse passages in chapters 1 and 7 (the Sanskrit meter of which is explored in Iwamatsu, 2007; see also Iwamatsu, 2009), the text is entirely in prose. G. Fussman (2009, 646) sees in the sūtra the work of three editorial hands and speculates, agreeing with É. Lamotte's earlier opinion, that the Sanskrit *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* must have reached a more or less complete form by about 100 CE. The terminus ad quem is the Zhi Qian (支謙) translation (see below; for information about the manuscript and its discovery, see K. Tada, 2004). The availability of this Sanskrit manuscript has led to a resurgence of scholarly interest in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, with several English translations of the text currently in progress.

Tibetan

A complete Tibetan translation by Dharmatāśīla (Chos nyid tshul khriṃs) from the early 9th century is preserved in the Kanjur under the title *'Phags pa Dri ma med par grags pas bstan pa* (D 176/P 843). J. Ōshika (1970a) edited a romanized transcription

of the Kanjur version, taking account only of the editions of Derge, Peking, and Narthang. He also published an index of the Tibetan translation, with corresponding Chinese equivalents and hypothetical Sanskrit terms (Ōshika, 1975).

On the basis of a study of Tibetan fragments from Dunhuang in the Fond Pelliot chinois in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, É. Lamotte (1976, xlii) concluded that the Tibetan tradition produced two other translations of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* slightly earlier than Dharmatāśīla's, separated in time from each other by the compilation of the Tibetan-Sanskrit dictionary *Mahāvyutpatti*, some time in the 9th century. J. Nattier (2000, 236) speaks of only one such translation.

Chinese

Chinese sources list seven translations. Three are extant, two are not, while two are spurious – the titles given below follow the Taishō edition.

Extant Chinese translations:

1. *Weimojie jing* (維摩詰經; T. 474; two fascicles; trans. Zhi Qian; dated 222–229 CE by the late 6th-century CE catalogue *Zhongjing mulu* [眾經目錄; T. 2146 [LV] 119a9]). É. Lamotte (1976, xxviii) opines that the *Weimojie jing* represents the oldest stratum of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*; by contrast G. Fussman (2009, 644) thinks that Zhi Qian worked from a more or less fully developed Sanskrit text. S. Karashima (2014) argues, on phonological grounds, that *Weimojie jing* was likely based on an original in Gandhari, or at least one with Gandhari elements. Some passages found elsewhere are absent, including most of the verse section in chapter 1 and Vimalakīrti's silence at the end of chapter 8 (for a full list, see Lamotte, 1976, xxviii). Sengyou's (僧祐) catalogue lists this translation as lost (T. 2145 [LV] 6c14), which has led to speculation that *Weimojie jing* may actually be the work of Dharmarakṣa, hitherto regarded as not extant (Shi, 1998; however, Nattier [2008, 140n78] and Tu [2013] disagree).

2. *Weimojie suoshuo jing* (維摩詰所說經; T. 475; three fascicles; trans. Kumārajīva in 406 CE). É. Lamotte (1976, xxxiii) opines that it was based on a more extensive "Sanskrit" original than the *Weimojie jing*. Some information about that original, and the procedures that Kumārajīva used in producing the *Weimojie suoshuo jing*, can be gleaned from the commentary *Zhu Weimojie jing* (注維摩詰經; T. 1775; see below). It is concise in style, and philosophically central passages are rendered without abridgment. The translation borrows heavily from the *Weimojie jing*, while revising its technical vocabulary (Har-

ison, 2008). In the Sinitic context, this translation was by far the most influential, inspiring most of the commentarial literature. It is also the basis of most modern translations.

3. *Shuo wugoucheng jing* (說無垢稱經; T. 476; six fascicles; trans. Xuanzang [玄奘] in 650 CE). It shows many cases of verbatim correspondence with the *Weimojie suoshuo jing* but is greatly enlarged. According to É. Lamotte (1976, xxxv), Xuanzang likely worked from an original much more developed than those used by his predecessors; G. Fussman (2009, 645) observes that the *Shuo wugoucheng jing* stays very close to the surviving Sanskrit. It is the basis for only one commentary, by Kuiji (窺基; *Shuo wugoucheng jing shu* [說無垢稱經疏]; T. 1782).

Nonextant Chinese translations:

1. *Yi Weimojie jing* (異維摩詰經) or *Yi Pimoluojie jing* (異毘摩羅詰經; trans. in 291 or 296 CE by Zhu Shulan (竺叔蘭; earliest mention in T. 2145 [LV] 9c12–15]).

2. *Weimojie jing* (維摩詰經), *Weimojie mingjie* (維摩詰名解), or *Weimojie suoshuo famen jing* (維摩詰所說法門經; trans. in 303 CE by Dharmarakṣa; earliest mention in T. 2145 [LV] 7c1). An abridged version (*shan* [刪]) is also attributed to Dharmarakṣa (T. 2145 [LV] 8c16).

Spurious translations include those attributed to Yan Fotiao (嚴佛調; earliest mention in T. 2034 [XLIX] 54a14; see Lamotte, 1976, lxxxix–xci) and to Gītamitra (Qiduomi [祇多密]; earliest mention in T. 2034 [XLIX] 71c1).

Other Translations

A fragment in the Stein collection represents a Sogdian translation, no longer extant *in extenso*, based on Kumārajīva's Chinese version (see Weller, 1937). The late Khotanese text known as *Book of Vimalakīrti* may contain a number of free quotations from the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* in Khotanese, as argued by M. Maggi (2007), among others.

Vimalakīrtinirdeśa in Context

The textual sources of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* remain a topic of debate. The lack in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* of the ten-*bhūmis* (stages of spiritual progress of a bodhisattva) concept is taken by É. Lamotte (1976, xcvi) as an indication that the text belongs to the oldest stratum of Mahāyāna *sūtras*, while its philosophic orientation indicates links with the earliest *Prajñāpāramitā* texts. É. Lamotte also considers a possible connection to the *Buddhāvataṃsaka*, which

shares with the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* the subtitle *Acintyavimokṣa*, to some texts in the Mahāsaṃnipāta collection that feature a character by the name of Vimalakīrti (see also Hashimoto, 1983), and to two texts in the Mahāratnakūṭa collection, including – in view of the role in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* of the buddha Akṣobhya – the *Akṣobhyatathāgatasyavyūha* (Lamotte, 1976, lxxx ff.; for a critical overview of Lamotte’s method and findings, see J.A. Silk, 2014, 165ff.). Some scholars (Lamotte, 1976; Fussman, 2009) highlight the emptiness angle of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* and speculate on a possible link between the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* and Nāgārjuna, although the question of relative chronology poses problems.

Some of the most acclaimed scenes of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* have parallels in other texts, mainly those in the Mahāratnakūṭa collection (Silk, 2014, 168n41). The scene of the protagonist defeating in debate a number of *śrāvakas* and bodhisattvas and reducing them to silence (ch. 3) and the episode of miraculous gender change (ch. 6, §15) are both present, with slight variation, in the *Vimaladattāparipṛcchā*, the *Sumatidārikāparipṛcchā*, and the *Aśokadattavyākaraṇa*. The *Gaṅgotarāparipṛcchā* and *Strīvivartavyākaraṇa* also belong in this category. These parallels are perhaps best seen as cases not of influence but of drawing on a common pool of tropes and images.

In the context of mainstream Buddhist literature, the possibility that the character Vimalakīrti is textually related to the *nikāya* character Citra was first explored by B. Watanabe (1956) and later by J.A. Silk (2014, 181–182; two other possible models are Dharmodgata and Ugra [see Takī, 2007]).

Two texts of Indian origin may be considered “sequels” to the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* (for a discussion, see Silk, 2014, 166ff.): the *Candrottarādārikāvya-karaṇa*, which focuses on Vimalakīrti’s daughter (see also Ōshika, 1970b), and the **Mahāvaiṣṭyāyāmurdhārāja*, which centers on Vimalakīrti’s son.

A handful of Sanskrit quotations from the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* are preserved in Candrakīrti’s *Prasannapadā* and *Madhyamakavṛtti* (7th cent. CE), Śāntideva’s *Śikṣāsamuccaya* (7th cent. CE; Mochizuki, 1962), and Kamalaśīla’s *Bhāvanākrama* (8th cent. CE), whence they make their way to Tsong kha pa’s *Lamrim chenmo* (Langelaar, 2011). R. Soeda (1978) sees a quotation in the *Sarvatathāgatattva-saṃgrahasūtra*. A listing of quotations is in B. Watanabe (1956, 134–136, n3).

Synopsis of Chapters

The Sanskrit and Tibetan versions divide the text into 12 chapters. The extant Chinese translations split chapters 3 and 12 in two, resulting in a total of 14. A handy synoptic table of the Sanskrit, Tibetan, and Chinese is published by Study Group on Buddhist Sanskrit Literature (2004, iv).

Chapter 1

The scene is set in Āmrāpālī’s garden in the outskirts of Vaiśālī. The Buddha is addressing a vast assembly. A group of five hundred youths from the Licchavi clan, led by Ratnākara, offer to the Buddha adorned parasols, which he transforms into one enormous canopy that covers and reflects the entire universe. The youths ask the Buddha how to purify the buddha field (*buddhakṣetra*); the Buddha responds that when the bodhisattva’s mind is pure, the buddha field is pure. Śāriputra is unable to see the purity of Śākyamuni’s world. The Buddha performs a miracle, displaying this purity briefly.

Chapter 2

The scene shifts to Vimalakīrti’s house in the center of Vaiśālī. There is a lengthy description of Vimalakīrti: a merchant, eloquent and wealthy, a husband, and a father, for the sake of maturing beings, he enters the most mundane of places – gambling venues, houses of pleasure, schools of heterodox teachers – while fully retaining his *tathāgata*-like qualities. He pretends to be sick, so that the citizens of Vaiśālī will be moved to call on him and thus give him an opportunity to teach. When a large group of them arrives, Vimalakīrti speaks to them about the impermanent material body and then about the body of a *tathāgata*.

Chapter 3

The Buddha tries unsuccessfully to convince ten *śrāvakas*, three bodhisattvas, and one householder to visit the “ailing” Vimalakīrti. One by one, they excuse themselves of the task, as they ruefully recall prior encounters with Vimalakīrti in which he trumped them in their own particular areas of expertise.

Chapter 4

Mañjuśrī reluctantly agrees to call on Vimalakīrti. The latter miraculously empties his small house (the image of which later becomes iconic as a term for a Chan master’s dwelling [Chn. *fangzhang*; Jpn. *hōjō* (方丈)]) to make room for Mañjuśrī and his

entourage. Vimalakīrti explains that he is ill because beings are ill due to ignorance (*avidyā*) and thirst for existence (*bhavatṛṣṇā*). There follows a swift exchange on the nature of emptiness and on the “emancipation of buddhas.” Vimalakīrti explains that illness is best cured by a discarding of “me” (*aḥaṅkāra*) and “mine” (*mamakāra*), and other forms of dualism.

Chapter 5

Vimalakīrti fetches from the distant buddha field Merudhvajā into his sickroom 32,000 giant thrones for Mañjuśrī and his entourage, without leaving his bed, and without enlarging the room or shrinking the thrones. He explains to the stunned Śāriputra that actions like these are possible for bodhisattvas who practice *acintyavimokṣa* (inconceivable liberation). Mahākāśyapa declares that *śrāvakas*, being like “scorched seeds,” are incapable of understanding this profound liberation.

Chapter 6

Beings are to be viewed as empty, proclaims Vimalakīrti, and this enables compassion toward them. A goddess (*devatā*) appears in the room. She scatters flowers, which slide off the bodies of the bodhisattvas but stick to the bodies of the *śrāvakas*. Śāriputra tries to shake off the flowers but fails: the goddess explains that this is because he clings to a discriminating perception (*vikalpana*). Her own eloquence (*pratibhāna*) is due to her not having attained (*prāpta*) anything. Śāriputra asks her why she will not change out of her female body. The goddess uses her powers to exchange gender with Śāriputra and explains that the distinction between male and female, like all dharmas, is unreal (*apariniṣpanna*) and like an illusion (*māyānirmitasvabhāva*).

Chapter 7

Mañjuśrī asks Vimalakīrti what path (*gati*) the bodhisattva must follow in order to attain the qualities of the Buddha (*buddhadharmāḥ*); Vimalakīrti responds that the path to follow is the non-path or wrong path (*agatigamaṇagacchati*). Mañjuśrī says that the family (*gotra*) of the tathāgatas consists of 62 erroneous views, from which Mahākāśyapa infers that *śrāvakas*, who have eliminated erroneous views, cannot join the family of the tathāgatas. Vimalakīrti gives an allegorical account of the true nature of his “family,” identifying its members with various virtues, attainments, and points of doctrine.

Chapter 8

Vimalakīrti asks the bodhisattvas in Mañjuśrī’s retinue how to enter the gate of nonduality (*advaya-dharma*). They reply in a series of some 30 ways, in each case erasing a pair of dualities (e.g. arising-passing, me-mine, and affliction-purification). Mañjuśrī turns to Vimalakīrti for an answer, and he responds with silence, generally understood to signify that truth is in some sense beyond language.

Chapter 9

The buddha Gandhottamakūṭa, presiding over that world, gives to the conjured bodhisattva one vessel of food. On his way back, the bodhisattva is joined by 90 thousand bodhisattvas from that world, eager to see Buddha Śākyamuni teach those of inferior resolve (*hīnādhimuktikāḥ*). A large group from Vaiśālī joins the gathering. The one vessel miraculously feeds all in attendance without its contents being depleted. Vimalakīrti describes to the visiting bodhisattvas Śākyamuni Buddha’s methods of teaching: since beings in the Sahā world are undisciplined, they must be restrained by means of teachings on all kinds of suffering (*sarvaduḥkḥaparibhāṣaṇakathāḥ*).

Chapter 10

Vimalakīrti picks up the entire assembly in his hand and takes it to Āmrapālī’s garden, where the Buddha is staying. Ānanda is perplexed by the aroma. He is told that it emanates from the food from Sarvagandhasugandhā and that this food accomplishes the Buddha’s work (*buddhakṛtya*), that is, helps beings progress toward buddhahood. The Buddha lists many other ways in which the buddhas, endowed with inconceivable (*acintya*) wisdom and eloquence, can accomplish their work. Impressed, Ānanda concedes the inferiority of *śrāvakas*. Before returning to Sarvagandhasugandhā, the visiting bodhisattvas ask Vimalakīrti for a teaching, and he speaks of a liberation (*vimokṣa*) of bodhisattvas that consists in not destroying (*kṣaya*) the conditioned and not preserving (*akṣaya*) the unconditioned.

Chapter 11

In a series of negations, Vimalakīrti describes how he views the Tathāgata. The Buddha tells Śāriputra that Vimalakīrti came from the world Abhirati of Buddha Akṣobhya. The assembly wants to see that world, and Vimalakīrti, without getting up from his seat, miraculously brings the entire Abhirati into Āmrapālī’s gardens. The assembly sees Abhirati, and Śākyamuni gives to all present a prediction that they

will be reborn in that world. Abhirati returns to its original location. The chapter closes with an exhortation to protect and propagate this teaching.

Chapter 12

Finally come the customary exhortations to protect and propagate the dharma. The Buddha entrusts this teaching to Maitreya.

Titles

The main title in the Sanskrit version – *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* – does not include the term *sūtra*, nor is its equivalent *mdo* found in the Tibetan version. All Chinese translations use the term *jing* (經).

A secondary title is *Acintyavimokṣa* (*dharmaparyāya*); among the various Chinese translations, it appears in up to seven variants. It may have been inspired by the title and content of chapter 5, a large part of which deals with the inconceivable (*acintya*) liberations (*vimokṣa*) of the bodhisattva, and which, in a move reminiscent of the *Buddhāvataṃsaka*, contains an indication that the teaching presented therein is a summary of an “unthinkably” larger teaching. Further, the 6th-century CE Chinese catalogue *Lidai sanbao ji* (歷代三寶記) introduces for Zhi Qian’s translation the title *Fofa puru daomen jing* (佛法普入道門經; T. 2034, 57a21), which likely reflects the Sanskrit *Sarvabuddhadharmapaveśa* from chapter 10, § 11.

Yet another title – unattested in the Chinese tradition – is mentioned in the Sanskrit version (ch. 12, § 23): *Yamakapuṭavyatyastanirhāra*. M. Ueki renders this as “presentation of paired phrases and paradoxical expressions” (see Ueki, 2011, 619–620n75). The corresponding Tibetan is *Phrugs su sbyar ba snrel zhir mngon par bsgrubs pa*, which É. Lamotte reconstructs as *Yamakavyatyastābhinirhāra* and translates as “production of paired and inverted sounds” (Lamotte, 1976, lvi–lvii, 272–273; comp. Thurman, 1976, 42: “reconciliation of dichotomies”), suggesting that the paired inversion refers to the contradictory or paradoxical way in which the text portrays the bodhisattva.

Commentarial Traditions

No evidence exists of any Indian or Tibetan commentary on the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*. By contrast,

Sinitic Buddhism produced an extensive commentarial literature on the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* (for an overview, see J. Ōshika, 1982).

The earliest surviving quasi-commentarial work in Chinese is the 4th-century CE Zhi Mindu’s (支敏度) preface (T. 2145, 58b21) to his synoptic edition (*heben* [合本]; being a kind of exegetical work; see Zürcher, 2007, 99–100), no longer extant, of the three early translations: those by Zhi Qian, Dharmarakṣa, and Zhu Shulan.

Roughly from the same time is a commentary of unclear authorship partially preserved in the Fonds Pelliot chinois (P. 3006) from Dunhuang, which G. Shi (1998) suggests may be the only available work of this sort targeting the Zhi Qian translation. Another important early commentary is the *Zhu Weimojie jing*, traditionally considered a work of Sengzhao but compiled likely in the early 6th century CE (Hanazuka, 1982). It collects glosses and longer interpretive passages attributed by name to Kumārajīva, Sengzhao, Daosheng (道生), and Daorong (道融; for studies on *Zhu Weimojie jing*, see Usuda, 1977; Kimura, 1987; for translations, see Carré, 2004; Institute for Comprehensive Studies of Buddhism of Taishō University, 2000). A modified version of this group commentary, the *Jingming jing jijie Guanzhong shu* (淨名經集解 關中疏; T. 2777) compiled in 760 CE by Daoye (道液), containing also sections of an otherwise lost commentary by Sengruī (僧叡), and a manuscript with Sengzhao’s commentary edited independently (Kudara, 2002), are among the many *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*-related textual finds from Dunhuang. The Dunhuang site yielded about 770 scrolls (*juan* [卷]) of the Chinese *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* (mainly *Weimojie suoshuo jing*) as well as over 150 scrolls of related material – commentaries and popular texts in prose and verse (for overviews of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* commentaries from Dunhuang, see Fang & Xu, 1994; Shi, 1998, 53ff.).

Other commentaries from the early period up to the Tang dynasty include those by Jingying Huiyuan (淨影慧遠; T. 1776), Zhiyi (智顛; T. 1777), Jizang (吉藏; T. 1780; T. 1781), Zhanran (湛然; T. 1778), Kuiji (窺基; T. 1782), and Daoye (道液; T. 2778). In addition, two commentaries were written in the Song, five in the Ming, and three in the Qing dynasties; the dates of three others have not been determined. The Japanese tradition preserves the *Yuimagyō gisho* (維摩經義疏), a work attributed to Prince Shōtoku but one whose authorship remains contested (Hubbard, 2012).

Exegetical works aside, the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* in China exerted considerable impact on secular literature and visual culture. Its influence on literature has been sketched out admirably by P. Demiéville (1962).

Vimalakīrtinirdeśa in Visual Culture

The earliest known visual representation of Vimalakīrti was a mural by Gu Kaizhi (顧愷之), produced, for public display, between 363 and 365 CE in the Wagan Temple (瓦官寺) in Jiankang (建康), the capital of the Eastern Jin Kingdom (Soper, 1959, 36). Lost at an early date, this acclaimed painting is reported to have inspired the production in southern China of many others on the same topic through the 5th and 6th centuries CE, but none has survived. The earliest surviving painting comes from the north: dated to 420 CE, it is preserved in cave 169 in the Bingling temple (炳靈寺) complex in modern-day Gansu province and depicts Vimalakīrti reclining on a bed-like structure, with a halo behind his head and shoulders, accompanied only by an attendant (He, 1982, 63). In the north in the 5th and early 6th centuries CE, themes from the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* were represented mainly in stone sculpture, first at the Yungang (雲崗) complex (mid-5th cent. CE) and then at Longmen (龍門; from the late 5th cent. CE). Over 70 related works from this period have been identified (Bunker, 1968, 30). The most common motifs are that of the encounter between Vimalakīrti and Mañjuśrī: the two are often shown facing each other, with a buddha in between as a judge-like figure. Vimalakīrti's robes come in a variety of styles (from a Persian fur coat to free-flowing Han-style attire), as do his accoutrements: the bed or armrest and the fan (for details, see Bunker, 1968 and Ning, 2004, 50ff.). Starting with the Sui period (589–618 CE), illustrations of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* appear in the Mogao (莫高) cave complex at Dunhuang, which preserves some 68 works of this type (He, 1982). The composition in cave 220 (mid-7th cent. CE) stands out on account of its large size (two panels 2 m wide and 3.42 m high) and of its inclusion of the Tang emperor and his officials among the witnesses of the Vimalakīrti-Mañjuśrī exchange. Three miracles are also represented: the giant-thrones scene from chapter 5, the Sarvagandhasugandhā scene from chapter 9, and the Abhirati scene from chapter 11 (for cave 220, see Ning, 2004, 55ff.). Models established by the Tang remained influential in later epochs throughout East Asia. For an overview of the

earliest wooden statues of Vimalakīrti from Japan, see J.M. Rosenfield (1966). No visual representation of *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* themes has been found in India.

Themes in Scholarship

It has been argued that the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* stands out among other Mahāyāna *sūtras* on account of its merit as a work of literature. E. Zürcher (2007, 131) highlights the “dramatic” features of the text. J.A. Silk (2014) applies a theory of narrativity to propose that the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* is not only a story or a number of stories strung together but also a plot on the level of the text as a whole, a feature very uncommon in Buddhist *sūtra* literature. The narrative aspects of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* were earlier explored in E. Hamlin (1988).

J.G. Williams (1990) sees the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* as accomplishing its serious religious goals through a humor of incongruity, to which the real or apparent paradoxicality of Vimalakīrti's teaching lends itself especially well. Other scholars (Kontler, 1988; Fiordalis, 2012) attempt to make sense of the rhetoric of the magical in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*; a question arises about the relation between the magical and the doctrinal. A. Cole (2005, 236ff.) sees the narrative strategy of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* as one of rhetorical “humiliation” that displaces “old-style” Buddhism with Vimalakīrti as embodiment of the new authoritative tradition.

The scene of gender change from chapter 6 (§ 15) has been pointed to as evidence of a liberal attitude in some Mahāyāna circles toward gender equality (e.g. Gross, 2004; Paul, 1985). P. Demiéville (1962, 180) opines that, in its original context, this episode was meant to “scandalize the orthodox.” Such distinctly modern interpretations notwithstanding, in premodern contexts the gender-change scene may have functioned as yet another expression of *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*'s central teaching that while ultimately dualities are “empty,” conventionally they remain very real: emptiness does not obliterate dualities but is their defining nature. J.A. Silk (2014, 176n68) speculates that, in the monastic context defined by Vinaya regulations, Śāriputra's transformation into a woman would likely be read as an indication of his karmic inferiority.

Much scholarship on the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* attempts to account for the text's great popularity, in relative terms, in Sinitic Buddhism. According to a common argument, *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*'s treatment

of subtle metaphysics through the medium of lively dialogue, paradox, and brief enigmatic statements, as well as its sensitivity to the problem of the limits of language, was a key factor in its success among the southern elites in China in the 3rd and 4th centuries CE, steeped in the practices of *qingtan* (清談; pure conversation) and *xuanxue* (玄學; dark learning; Zürcher, 2007, 132; Mather, 1968, 67). The early reception of the text in the north has not been studied in equal depth.

On a related topic, R. Mather (1968, 66–67) suggests that *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*'s integration into the Sinitic literary patrimony was facilitated by “the flexibility of the *sūtra*'s outlook,” established through its description of the Buddha as teaching the dharma with a single voice (ch. 1, §§ 10–11). However, at least early on, the single-voice passage could not have played any role as it is missing from the Zhi Qian translation. Moreover, its frequent assertions of the superiority of the bodhisattva path over the *śrāvakayāna* (*śrāvaka* path) prompted some Chinese exegetes to see the text as anything but conciliatory: for instance, in the earliest system of doctrinal classification (*panjiao* [判教]), Huiguan (慧觀) in the 5th century CE classified the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* as *yiyang jiao* (抑揚教: “teaching that disparages [the *śrāvakayāna*] and extols [the *bodhisattvayāna* (bodhisattva path)]”); see e.g. T. 1736 [XXXVI] 43a5–8), an evaluation that was taken up later in Tiantai (天台) dogmatics.

Another factor in the success of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* in East Asia is often said to have been its embrace of the ideal of the householder bodhisattva (see esp. Whitehead, 1976; 1978; Nakamura, 1962). On this reading, the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* endorses a mode of withdrawal from the world enacted not through retreat into the monastery but through the cultivation of a special frame of mind. In this connection, scholars note Zhi Qian's and Kumārajīva's translation of *aranyavāsa* (ascetic wilderness-dwelling) as *xianju* (閑居; leisure-dwelling) and *kongxianchu* (空閑處; empty leisurely place), respectively, both terms that likely appealed to the cultivated gentry (comp. Nattier, 2008, 245–246). However, any reading of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* must account for the robustly pro-monastic thrust of the text as a whole. Furthermore, to view Vimalakīrti simply as a householder is problematic (see Silk, 2014, 173ff.). As a corrective to this view, some scholars insist that “really” Vimalakīrti is an advanced bodhisattva from Abhirati (Sangharakshita, 1995, 57) or even a tathāgata (Fussman, 2009, 647–648), his identity as

a layman from Vaiśālī being nothing but a display of *upāya*, the extraordinary teaching skill of bodhisattvas that allows them to manifest in any form that they deem best suited to the needs and capacities of beings. J.A. Silk (2014) opines that even this does not go far enough: instead of trying to explain away the tension between Vimalakīrti's two identities, we should take it seriously as a concretization of the paradoxical philosophy of emptiness that defines the text in both its doctrinal and its magical dimensions.

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