

Chinese Buddhist Art: New Approaches and New Excavations

In recent years, archaeological excavations and new methodological approaches have triggered vivid debates in the field of Chinese Buddhist art. The newly discovered material holds promise for addressing challenges in the field, but it may also introduce additional problems. Likewise, new methodological approaches shed light on existing materials from new perspectives, while also revealing the boundaries of interpretation.

In this issue's 'China Connections' pages, we invite readers to take a closer look at the exciting development in Buddhist art and archaeology through the research and review from four art historians based at Chinese universities.

They examine a wide range of sites and material culture, spanning from the discovery of the earliest gilded bronze Buddha statues in an Eastern Han (25-220 CE) tomb to the reconstruction of a timber-wood structure

attached to the rock-cut grottoes of the Tang Dynasty (618-907 CE); from the shifting ontologies of Buddha images to the 15th-century murals in Tibetan Buddhist monasteries.

ZHAO Jinchao
is an Assistant Professor in Art History at Tongji University and a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Center for Global Asia, NYU Shanghai (2021-2023).
Email: zhaojinchao123@tongji.edu.cn

Gold gilded bronze Buddha statues discovered in Xianyang Chengren tombs

CHEN Ying 陈莹

In 2021, two gold gilded bronze Buddha statues were discovered in a tomb located in the southeast of Chengren village of Xianyang city in Shaanxi Province.¹ The discovery of the statues soon attracted the attention of several scholars, because some claimed the statues belong to the earliest gold gilded bronze Buddha statues, dating all the way back to the Eastern Han dynasty (25-220 CE). Other scholars, however, argue the statues are dated to the period of the Sixteen States (AD 304-439; also known as

the Sixteen Kingdoms). According to them, the statues' style and material better match this period from which most gold gilded bronze Buddha statues are dated.

The tombs are preserved with an aligning pattern, which suggests that the tomb occupants belonged to the same family. Among the two gold gilded bronze Buddha statues discovered in tomb M3015, one is a standing Buddha cast with a single piece of mold [Fig. 1]. It is 10.5 cm in height and the

diameter of its bottom base measures 4.7 cm. The statue has an open hollow back, in the middle of which protrudes a short joint, which is suspected to be connected with the halo of the statue [Fig. 2].² The standing Buddha has a plain *ushnisha* (oval shape on top of the head of the Buddha). Its facial features are rendered coarsely. The Buddha wears a body-length robe, whose pleats are represented by U-shape patterns. The left hand of the Buddha holds a corner of the folded robe, and the right hand of the Buddha is missing. The excavation report says that the right hand is in the mudra of fearlessness.³ The Buddha stands on a base in the shape of a lotus flower. The base was made separately from the standing Buddha. They are joined together through the protruding joint at the bottom of the statue.

The other statue is a piece of single-mold-cast artifact with five Buddha statues in

the front [Figs. 3-4]. It measures 15.8 cm in height and 6.4 cm in width. Its bottom has a protruding joint, which suggests that it might have been plugged into a base.⁴ The piece is slightly damaged, causing three little holes in the middle. The front of the statue depicts five Buddhas in relief. On each side of the shoulders of the Buddha, which is located on the very top, is a small hole, through which the statue might have been attached to a niche.⁵ The five Buddha statues in the front share similar features. They all have a plain *ushnisha* on top of their heads and sit cross-legged on the lotus seat with a meditation mudra.

The gold gilded bronze Buddha statues from Chengren tomb M3015 are considered to be the earliest of their kind in the archaeological report.⁶ The claim would have been beyond doubt if the tomb had not been robbed. At the western end of the tomb's



Fig. 1: Frontal view of the standing Buddha from Chengren tomb M3015, anonymous, gold gilded bronze, 10.7×4.5cm, disputed date between Eastern Han (25-220CE) and the Sixteen States period (AD 304-439), Shaanxi. Source: Shaanxisheng kaogu yanjiuyuan, "Shaanxi xianyang chengren mudi donghan jiazumu fajue jianbao, Kaogu yu wenwu 2022 (1): Cover 2.



Fig. 2: Back view of the standing Buddha from Chengren tomb M3015, anonymous, gold gilded bronze, 10.7×4.5cm, disputed date between Eastern Han (25-220CE) and the Sixteen States period (AD 304-439), Shaanxi. Source: Shaanxisheng kaogu yanjiuyuan, "Shaanxi xianyang chengren mudi donghan jiazumu fajue jianbao, Kaogu yu wenwu 2022 (1): Cover 2.



Fig. 3: Frontal view of five seated Buddhas from Chengren tomb M3015, anonymous, gold gilded bronze, 15.8×6.4cm, disputed date between Eastern Han (25-220CE) and the Sixteen States period (AD 304-439), Shaanxi. Source: Shaanxisheng kaogu yanjiuyuan, "Shaanxi xianyang chengren mudi donghan jiazumu fajue jianbao, Kaogu yu wenwu 2022 (1): Cover 2.



Fig. 4: Back view of five seated Buddhas from Chengren tomb M3015, anonymous, gold gilded bronze, 15.8×6.4cm, disputed date between Eastern Han (25-220CE) and the Sixteen States period (AD 304-439), Shaanxi. Source: Shaanxisheng kaogu yanjiuyuan, "Shaanxi xianyang chengren mudi donghan jiazumu fajue jianbao, Kaogu yu wenwu 2022 (1): Cover 2.



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