

# 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.

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## Asia Research Center at Fudan University

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## 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.<sup>1</sup> 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].<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> 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, 10.7x4.5cm, 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.

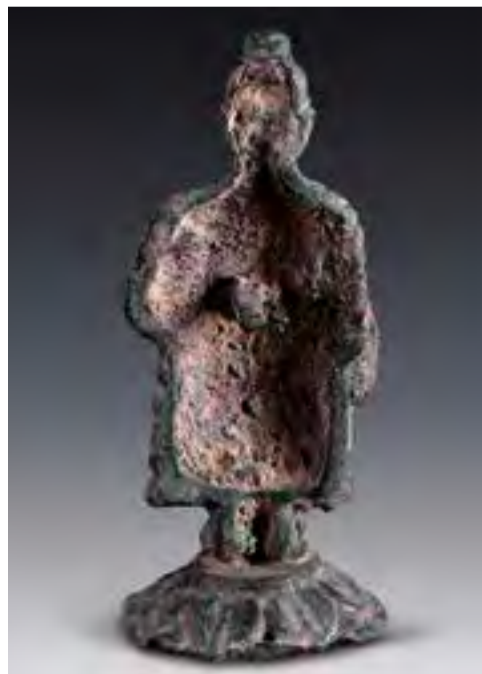


Fig. 2: Back view of the standing Buddha from Chengren tomb M3015, anonymous, gold gilded bronze, 10.7x4.5cm, disputed date between Eastern Han (25-220CE) and the Sixteen States period (AD 304-439), Shaanxi. Source: Shaanxisheng kaogu yanjiuyuan, "Shaanxi xianyang chengren mudi donghan jiazumu fajue jianbao, Kaogu yu wenwu 2022 (1): Cover 2.



Fig. 3: Frontal view of five seated Buddhas from Chengren tomb M3015, anonymous, gold gilded bronze, 15.8x6.4cm, 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, 15.8x6.4cm, 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.

path, there is an early robbing hole. The hole is 3.4 meters away from where the Buddha statues were discovered. The distance between the robbing hole and the placement of the Buddha statues is considered far enough to assert that the Buddha statues were not brought in later by tomb robbers. In addition, there is little motivation for the tomb robbers to bring the Buddha statues and leave them in the tomb.<sup>7</sup> As a result, the author of the archaeological report regards the gold gilded bronze Buddha statues as funeral objects of the tomb M3015, and they were made no later than late Han dynasty. Scholars who hold the same opinion are Ran Wanli, Li Ming, and Zhao Zhanrui. In their article, they argue that the purpose of tomb robbers is to take objects instead of bringing the Buddha statues into the tomb.<sup>8</sup>

Yao Chongxin argues that it is possible the gold gilded bronze Buddha statues were brought into the tomb later by tomb robbers and that the statues are dated to the Sixteen States period.<sup>9</sup> The surface of both of the statues is worn and shiny, which suggests that they were often carried by their owners. Yao proposes that it is possible that the statues were belongings of the tomb robbers that were left accidentally in the tomb. The statues, which could be carried, may have functioned as amulets of the tomb robbers. More importantly, the style and material of the statues resemble those dated to the period of the Sixteen States. The standing Buddha statue discovered in Chengren is highly similar to a standing Buddha statue held in a private collection in Japan and another statue held in Kyoto National Museum, both of which are dated to the Sixteen States period. Most of the gold gilded bronze Buddha statues from the Sixteen States period are made of bronze, tin, and lead, which is also the main composition of the statues from the Chengren tomb.<sup>10</sup> Chengren tomb M3015 is not the only Eastern Han tomb where bronze Buddha statues were left by later tomb robbers from the Sixteen States period. A seated bronze Buddha statue and a seated gold gilded bronze Buddha statue were discovered in a late Eastern Han tomb in Shijiazhuang, Hebei.<sup>11</sup>

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## Notes

- 1 Shaanxisheng kaogu yanjiuyuan 陕西省考古研究院, "Shaanxi xianyang chengren mudi donghan jiazumu fajue jianbao 陕西咸陽成任墓地東漢家族墓發掘簡報", *Kaogu yu wenwu* 考古與文物, 2022 (1): 3-27.
- 2 Ran Wanli 冉万里, Li Ming 李明, and Zhao Zhanrui 趙占銳, "Xianyang Chengren mudi chutu donghan jintong foxiang yanjiu 咸陽成任墓地出土東漢金銅佛像研究", *Kaogu yu wenwu* 考古與文物, 2022 (1): 83.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p.9.
- 4 Ran Wanli 冉万里, Li Ming 李明, and Zhao Zhanrui 趙占銳, "Xianyang Chengren mudi chutu donghan jintong foxiang yanjiu 咸陽成任墓地出土東漢金銅佛像研究", *Kaogu yu wenwu* 考古與文物, 2022 (1): 83.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p.83.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p.27.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p.27.
- 8 Ran Wanli 冉万里, Li Ming 李明, and Zhao Zhanrui 趙占銳, "Xianyang Chengren mudi chutu donghan jintong foxiang yanjiu 咸陽成任墓地出土東漢金銅佛像研究", *Kaogu yu wenwu* 考古與文物, 2022 (1): 83.
- 9 Yao Chongxin 姚崇新, "Guanyu Xianyang Chengren Donghanmu chutu jintong foxiang de jige wenti 關於咸陽成任東漢墓出土金銅佛像的幾個問題", *Wenbo xuekan* 文博學刊, 2022(2): 17-29.
- 10 Li Jianxi 李建西, Shao Anding 邵安定, Song Junrong 宋俊榮, Li Ming 李明, and Zhao Zhanrui 趙占銳, "Xianyang Chengren mudi chutu Donghan jintong foxiang kexue fenxi 咸陽成任墓地出土東漢金銅佛像科學分析", *Kaogu yu wenwu* 考古與文物, 2022(1): 123-128.
- 11 Hebeisheng wenwu guanli weiyuanhui 河北省文物管理委員會, "Shijiazhuangshi Beisongcun qinglile liangzuo hanmu 石家莊市北宋村清理了兩座漢墓", *Wenwu* 文物, 1959 (1): 53-55.

## Reconsidering the Notion of Sacrality for Chinese Buddhist Statues from the Second to the Sixth Century

WU Hong 吳虹

It has long been understood that image worship was an intrinsic property and a distinctive practice of Buddhism. Consequently, it is widely believed that the arrival of Buddhism in China in the first century brought about the practice of worshipping Buddha images, which inaugurated the tradition of image worship in China. Recent research, however, challenges this belief. Studies by Kurt Behrendt (2004) and Minku Kim (2019) on India and Gandhāra suggest that the worship of Buddha images was not widely established until after 200 CE, so later than the first appearance of Buddha images in China. This raises doubt about whether Buddha images were viewed as legitimate icons of worship since their introduction in China, and whether their worship played a central role in the earliest stage of Chinese Buddhism.

Studies of Buddhist literature provide crucial insights for this investigation. The earliest Buddhist narratives foregrounded sutras in the transmission of Buddhism, while Buddha figures only became a crucial element in such narratives after the fourth century. Similarly, Eric Greene's survey of anti- and pro-Buddhist apologetics demonstrates that image worship became represented as a prominent Buddhist practice only after the fifth century.<sup>1</sup> While Greene suggests that the newly developed attention to Buddhist image worship in polemical writings after the fifth century was entirely the result of historiographical construction, a review of archaeological evidence indicates this shift in Buddhist writings may not be altogether independent of changes in actual Buddhist practice.

Indeed, the archaeological evidence points to a turning point around the fifth century, after which the activity of making and worshipping Buddha images suddenly flourished. Before then, only a modest number of Buddha images were found in a limited geographical range within China, and these were typically keyed to funerary or daily-use objects as decoration rather than used as independent icons of worship, as several scholars have pointed out. For instance, the majority of Han-period Buddha images were discovered in the southwestern region centered on Sichuan province, most of which were found on money-trees unearthed from funerary contexts [Fig. 1]. Buddha images are typically located on the trunk of the money-trees, while traditional Chinese auspicious motifs such as copper coins, the Queen Mother of the West, Taoist priests, dancers, divine beasts, and phoenixes adorn the branches and bases of the tree. Given the placement of the Buddha images, being visually obstructed by densely decorated branches spreading out horizontally, it can be inferred that the Buddha statues were not intended as objects of worship, but rather as one of the many decorative elements that enhance the money tree's symbolism of ascending to immortality or bringing good fortune.

In addition to their use on funerary objects, Buddha images have been found in the Yangtze region in the third and fourth centuries, but these were on objects used in ordinary life, such as mirrors, incense burners, wine and food vessels. Taking the example of the vessel [Fig. 2], which is a pan-shaped jar: it is decorated with three molded small Buddha figures at the widest part of the body. Moreover, the small Buddha figures are visibly slanted as they have been applied to the jar's curved surface. The casual manner in which the Buddha statues are attached, along with their inevitable exposure to contaminants during the vessel's daily use, strongly suggests that these statues were considered merely auspicious decorative patterns rather than inviolable sacred images, as they were used to adorn secular utensils.

However, the situation changed drastically after the fifth century. A sudden surge in the production of Buddha images swept across the Chinese territories. It was during this time that the Hexi region saw the beginning of the construction work of the earliest grottoes in China. The earliest cave of the Binglin-si Grottoes was excavated in the year 420 during the Western Qin, while excavations of other grottoes like Dunhuang, Jinta-si, and Tiantishan also commenced around similar periods.

In 460 CE, under the auspices of the Northern Wei regime, construction of the Yungang Grottoes began in Pingcheng. Alongside these official projects, private sculptural making and patronage activities by common people also flourished.

Whereas only about 10 individual Buddhist statues dating back to the fourth century are known, over 120 statues from the fifth century alone have been identified. The number of statues dated between 500-580 CE on epigraphic ground exceeds 1500, and there are countless more Buddha statues without a precise date from the fifth and sixth centuries. Notably, during this prolific fifth-century period, Buddhist images no longer appeared as decorative images on secular objects. Whether it is sculptural steles, individual Buddha statues, or grotto sculptures, Buddhist statues only existed within sacred religious spaces, no longer mixed with secular life scenes depicted on objects like bronze mirrors, wine jars, or utilitarian jars.

The archaeological evidence therefore suggests a marked shift in attitudes towards making of Buddha images in *actual practice* around the fifth century. This change in practice most likely corresponded to, and was precipitated by, concurrent changes in the conception of Buddha images. While the early sutras maintain a utilitarian view of Buddha images – denying the presence of the spirit of the Buddha in the image (*Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, T224) – surveying donative inscriptions on Buddhist images allows us to observe how, beginning around the fourth and fifth centuries, Buddha images became identified with the Buddha himself. It is my contention that the heated discussion on the concept of *dharmakāya* in the intellectual milieu of Dark Learning (*Xuanxue* 玄學) of the Wei and Jin periods (220-420 CE) led to the understanding that Buddha images were worldly materializations of the abstruse body of the dharma. This homology between *dharmakāya* and Buddha images thus invested the latter with a divine character, which provided the crucial basis for the institutionalized practice of image worship in China.

Due to the limited length, this article cannot fully evaluate the influence of the discussion on *dharmakāya* on sculptural practices in China. However, it aims to propound a dynamic understanding of early Chinese perceptions of Buddha images. Worshipping Buddhist statuary was not necessarily central to the Buddhist praxis from the religion's initial phase in China. Nor was the establishment of Buddhist image worship in China necessarily the victory of foreign ideas, as commonly believed. Rather, it may have been based on the indigenous cultural understandings and interpretations of *dharmakāya*. Reconsidering these issues may contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the early spread of Buddhism in China, the influence of Buddhism on Chinese culture, and the interaction and blending of local and foreign cultures. This article serves as a starting point and looks forward to further discussions in this regard.<sup>2</sup>

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## Notes

- 1 Eric Greene, "The 'Religion of Images'? Buddhist Image Worship in the Early Medieval Chinese Imagination", *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 138.3 (2018), 455-84.
- 2 This article is adapted from "Handi er zhi liu shiji foxiang shengsheng guannian xintan" (*Fudan Journal* [Social Sciences] 2021, no. 5, 64-74) of the same author.

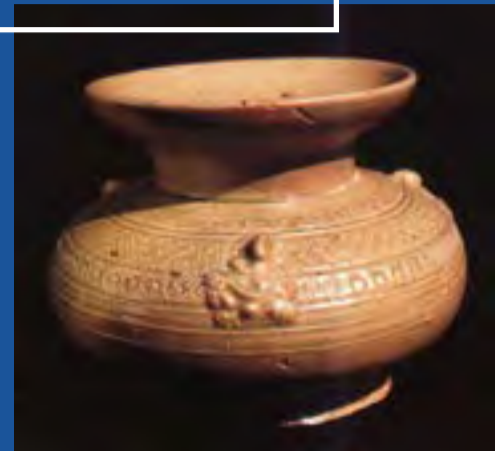


Fig. 2 (above). Celadon jar. He Yunao et al. eds, *Fojiao chuchuan nanfang zhi lu*, Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1993, Pl. 39.



Fig. 1 (left). Money tree, Chongqing Guoyou Museum. From He Zhiguo, *Yaoqianshu chubu yanjiu*, Beijing: Kexue Chubanshe, 2007, p. 37.