Appropriation and Misrepresentation of the "Indian Buddha Image" in Early Tang Buddhist Art

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The transregional transmission of Buddhist art and culture has led to significant variations in form and function. However, numerous factors can affect the transmission of religious art and practice, complicating straightforward demonstrations of "inaccurate" transmission. This article highlights a rare and intriguing case from the early Tang Dynasty (618-690 CE): a Kṣitigarbha Bodhisattva statue located in Guangyuan, Sichuan Province, southwestern China. Its upper body closely resembles a seated Buddha in the *bhūmisparśa mudrā* (earth-touching mudra), as seen on several clay tablets inscribed with "Indian Buddha Image" that were excavated in Chang'an (present-day Xi'an), the Tang capital. The prototype for such a Buddha image can be traced back to Bodhgayā, northeastern India. While this appropriation of forms underscores the Tang dynasty's desire to adopt sacred images from Buddhism's Indian homeland, it also reveals that Tang artisans, especially those situated beyond the capital, had considerable freedom to adapt and reinvent the newly introduced exotic artistic canon.

Fig. 1a (above) and 1b (right): *Kṣitigarbha*, Niche 17, Cave 726, Qianfoya, Guangyuan. H. 122cm. 7th century. (Photo and line drawing by the author)

The return of Buddhist monk Xuanzang 玄奘 (602-664 CE) from India to Chang'an (present-day Xi'an), the seat of the Tang court, in 645 CE marked a significant increase in interest in Indian Buddhism and its artistic traditions in the mid-to-late 7th century. A romanticized fascination with the birthplace of Gautama Siddhārtha, the founder of Buddhism, inspired Tang artisans to create Buddhist statues and murals imbued with the various Indian styles that were newly introduced along the Silk Road.[1] An intriguing example of such artistic recreation is Niche 17 of Cave 726 at the Thousand Buddhas Cliff in Guangyuan, Sichuan province, southwestern China [Figs. 1a-b]. In this niche, the artisans skillfully adapted the form features from a Buddha image originally from Bodhgayā, India, to represent a Kṣitigarbha bodhisattva. This appropriation of the Indian image, albeit with some misinterpretations, exemplifies the creative agency exercised by Chinese artisans in deploying their newly acquired exotic artistic language to craft new sacred imagery.

The Kṣitigarbha statue under discussion is depicted with the left hand placed in front of the abdomen and the right hand resting on the knee. This gesture contrasts with other Kṣitigarbha images but resembles contemporary Buddha statues found in Guangyuan, which are depicted in *bhūmisparśa mudrā*. Both the Kṣitigarbha and these Buddha figures are depicted wearing thin monastic robes that reveal the contours of their bodies, closely linking them to the "Indian Buddha Image" clay tablets unearthed in Chang'an. These tablets feature a seated Buddha in *bhūmisparśa mudrā*, flanked by two standing bodhisattvas on the front, and bear a dedicational inscription on the rear that states "Indian Buddha image commissioned by Su Changshi and Putong of Great Tang." Hida Romi has convincingly dated these tablets between 650 and 670 CE based on the activities of the commissioners.[2] Similar plaque discoveries across South and Southeast Asia are all believed to have been inspired, albeit perhaps indirectly, by Buddha statues enshrined in the Mahābodhi Temple in Bodhgayā, depicting the moment when the historical Buddha attained his first enlightenment. The Buddhist statues in *bhūmisparśa mudrā* [Fig. 3] from the 8th century, housed in the Indian Museum, Kolkata, not only retain identical attire and mudras (hand gestures) but also the cushions behind the statues. All of these factors provide valuable insights for tracing the prototypes of the "Indian Buddha Image."

Fig. 2 (below): *"Indian Buddha image", Xi'an, Shaanxi. Mold-pressed clay tablet, 7th century. Collected by National Museum of China. Photo by the author.*

The cushion placed behind the Buddha, known in Chinese as *yinnang* 隐囊, is typically adorned with tied ends encircled by lotus petals on each side. This particular motif is prevalent in Buddhist statues throughout the Indian subcontinent but is rarely found in Chinese Buddhist sculpture. The cushion depicted in the "Indian Buddha Statue" clay tablet from Chang'an represents a rare example, although it has undergone significant simplification, with the tied ends shaped into two semi-circles adorned with a beaded pattern. The Kṣitigarbha statue in Niche 17 of Cave 726 at the Thousand Buddhas Cliff in Guangyuan features a mandorla with two cloud-shaped patterns analogous in placement to the cushion in the "Indian Buddha image" tablet. This

mandorla, resembling the shape of the cushion with protruding tied ends, likely represents a misinterpretation of the original Indian design. Interestingly, a similar error in transregional transmission is also present in the Tangut-era Cave 465 in the Mogao Grottoes in Dunhuang. In Cave 465, the cushion-shaped backscreen painted behind a bodhisattva holding a flower mirrors the "cloud-shaped mandorla" of the Kṣitigarbha statue in Guangyuan.[3] This repeated mistake in artistic replication across thousands of kilometers, in addition to the substantial temporal gap between the two examples, highlights the challenges and complexities inherent in the dissemination and localization of Buddhist art in the Pan-Asian area.

How should we interpret the appropriation and misrepresentation in the Thousand Buddhas Cliff in Guangyuan? Both Buddha and Kṣitigarbha are depicted wearing monastic robes, with cushions or mandorlas placed behind the statues. These formal similarities played a significant role in reinterpreting the "Indian Buddha image" as a Kṣitigarbha image. This is not an isolated case, there are also instances in Guangyuan where Buddha statues are carved with gestures originally used for bodhisattvas. For instance, some statues from the same period are depicted with one hand raised, forming a sharp V-shape with the forearm and upper arm – a gesture typically seen in bodhisattva images in Indian styles, similar to the flanking bodhisattvas on the "Indian Buddha Image" clay tablets. Therefore, the appropriation of the Kṣitigarbha image should not be viewed as a spontaneous act of creativity but in conjunction with how Chinese artisans utilized newly introduced image elements to create Indian-style Buddha statues in the early Tang Dynasty. This appropriation of features with an apparent disregard for the original iconographic cannon, specifically between Buddha and bodhisattvas, suggests that local artisans at that time may have had considerable freedom in the creation of sacred images with the new exotic style.

Fig. 3 (right): *Seated Buddha*, Bihar, India. Stone, H. 74 cm. 8th century. Collected in Indian Museum, Kolkata. (Photo by LI Jingjie)

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1 Sun-ah Choi, "*Zhenrong* to *Ruixiang*: The Medieval Chinese Reception of the Mahābodhi Buddha Statue," *The Art Bulletin*, no. 4 (2015).
2 Hida Romi 肥田路美, "Seian shutsudo senbutsu no seisaku jijō to igi 西安出土磚仏の制作事情と意義," in *Sho-tō bukkyō bijutsu no kenkyū* 初唐仏教美術の研究 (Tōkyō: Chūō Kōron Bijutsu Shuppan, 2011), 55-90. Some illustrations has been updated in the Chinese translation, Hida Romi 肥田路美, "Xi'an chutu zhuanfo de qingkuang yu yiyi 西安出土磚佛的情況與意義," in *Yunxiang ruixiang: Chutang fojiao meishu yanjiu* 雲翔瑞像：初唐佛教美術研究 (National Taiwan University Press, 2019), 49-84.
3 Yangzhishui 揚之水, "Danzheng yu wanyan 丹枕與綩綖," in *Ceng you xifeng bandian xiang* 曾有西風半點香 (Beijing: SDX joint publishing company, 2012), 108-138.

New Discoveries and Research on Murals in Tibetan Buddhist Monasteries

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In recent years, scholars based in China have conducted research on the cultural heritage of Tibetan Buddhism from various perspectives, resulting in a series of archaeological reports as well as case studies on particular traditions and specific monasteries. Included among these studies is a systematic study of Tholing Monastery 托林寺, the royal temple of the Guge 古格 Kingdom in the Ngari 阿里 region of Tibet, through examination of recently discovered materials and surviving murals depicted in the main hall.

Tholing Monastery, founded by Yeshe-Ö (Ye shes 'od, 947-1024), a descendant of the Tubo Dynasty, served as the political and religious center of the Guge Kingdom, which was the historical site of the Zhangzhung civilization. The monastery was not only the place where the Guge royal family conducted political affairs and issued decrees, but also a sacred site marking the beginning of the Later Diffusion of Buddhism in Tibet. Recent archaeological discoveries and research on Tholing Monastery centered on two main aspects.

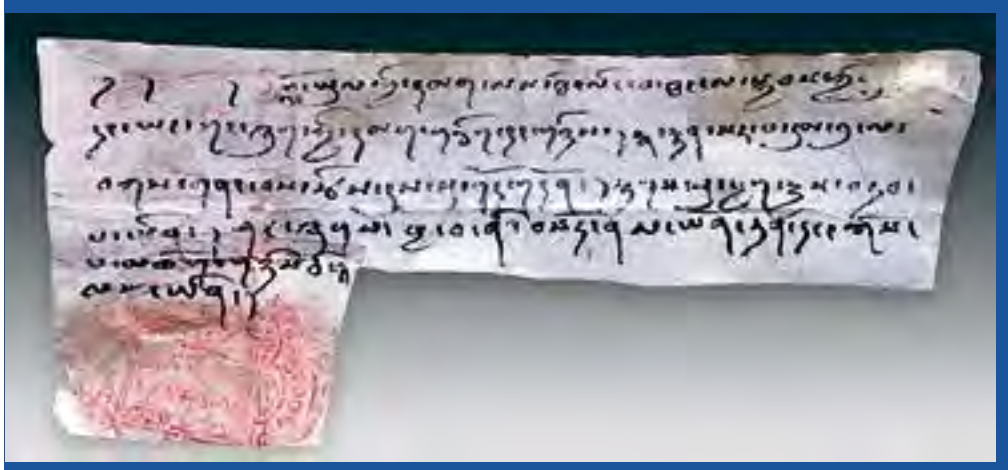

Fig. 1 (above). *Military paper with seals.* Official divination remarks prior to a war. (Photo courtesy of the author's research team)

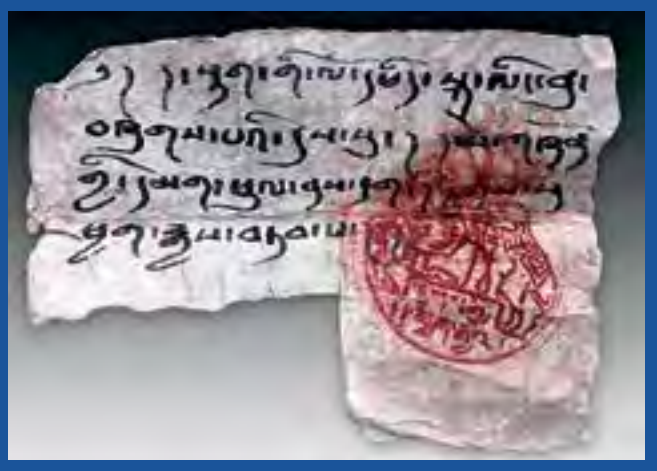

Fig. 2 (right). *Military authorization paper with seals.* (Photo courtesy of the author's research team)

Firstly, in August 2016, the north-side riverbed around Tholing Monastery slipped, resulting in the collapse of some early-stage stupas that had stood on the edge of the riverbed into the Xiangquan River. Therefore, the Institute of Cultural Relics Protection of the Tibet Autonomous Region and some other units relocated the endangered stupas. During this process, a large number of invaluable Buddhist *tsha-tsha* tablets in stupa shape and handwritten manuscripts were unearthed from the six relocated stupas. Notably, pages of a historical document from the 11th-12th century were found in a stupa partially collapsed into the valley [Figs.1-2). The document recorded a range of important information, including wars between Guge and Glo yul 洛域, donation relationships between the Guge royal family and Tholing Monastery, land disputes between pastures and monasteries, as well as royal commendations and warnings to officials and loyal citizens. These documents are the earliest official documents of the Guge Kingdom discovered in western Tibet, providing valuable firsthand materials for scholars to understand the official documentation characteristics of the Guge Kingdom. The format, writing style, seal patterns, and preventive measures such as inked lines on the left margin of the documents are very similar to the official documents issued by the Dunhuang Tubo Dynasty. These findings offer precious materials for further understanding of the relationship between early Guge official documents and Tubo documents, as well as exploring the political and religious relationships and social conditions of the Guge Kingdom around the 11th-12th centuries. As such, these discoveries hold significant historical value.

Another breakthrough lies in the research on the Red Temple of Tholing Monastery. Constructed under the reign of the Guge King Khri nam mkha'i dbang po phun tshogs lde (1409-1481), the Red Temple constitutes the largest surviving Buddha hall from the Buddhist revival period of the Guge Kingdom in the 15th-16th centuries. Serving as an important ceremonial space for the royal family to worship, its murals reveal the early political and religious strategies of the Guge Kingdom, providing invaluable clues to the complex political and religious history of the middle-to-late Guge Kingdom. The mural configurations reflect the complex interactive relationships and religious discourses between sects of western Tibet and Ü-Tsang regions. My recently published book, entitled *A Study on the Murals of the Red Temple of Tholing Monastery: History, Images, and Texts* 托林寺红殿壁画研究：历史、图像与文本, resolves issues regarding the specific builders and the construction period of the Red Temple [Fig. 3]. Through comparative research on murals of similar themes from early and contemporary periods in the Ali and Ü-Tsang regions, and in conjunction with tantric texts and related rituals and practices, I reinterpret the content and teachings depicted in the murals of the Red Temple. This reconstruction elucidates the traditions of early Guge teachings and their interactions with the political and religious spheres of the Ü-Tsang region. Through detailed textual analysis of the murals, the book presents the historical landscape of the revival of Buddhist art and political expression in the Guge Kingdom during the 15th and 16th centuries.[1]

Fig. 2. Cover of *A Study on the Murals of the Red Temple of Tholing Monastery: History, Images, and Texts* by WANG Ruilei. (Zhejiang University Press, 2023)

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1 This article was translated from Chinese into English by guest editor ZHAO Jinchao.