

# 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.

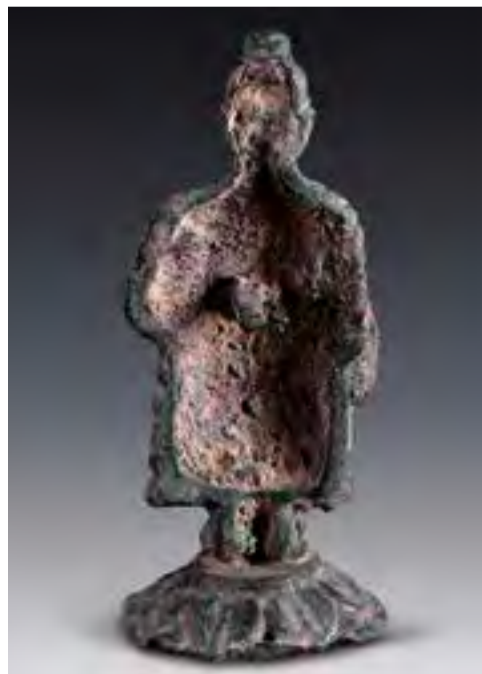


Fig. 2: Back view of the standing Buddha from Chengren tomb M3015, anonymous, gold gilded bronze, 10.7x4.5cm, disputed date between Eastern Han (25-220CE) and the Sixteen States period (AD 304-439), Shaanxi. Source: Shaanxisheng kaogu yanjiuyuan, "Shaanxi xianyang chengren mudi donghan jiazumu fajue 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 陕西咸阳成任墓地东汉家族墓发掘简报", *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.

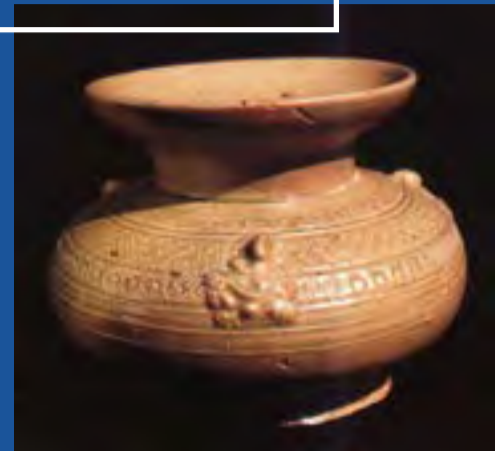


Fig. 2 (above). Celadon jar. He Yunao et al. eds, *Fojiao chuchuan nanfang zhi lu*, Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1993, Pl. 39.



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

## Appropriation and Misrepresentation of the “Indian Buddha Image” in Early Tang Buddhist Art

YANG Xiao 杨筱

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)



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 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.<sup>1</sup> 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 Changshī and Putong of Great Tang.” Hida Romi has convincingly dated these tablets between 650 and 670 CE based on the activities of the commissioners.<sup>2</sup> 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.”

The cushion placed behind the Buddha, known in Chinese as *yinnang* 隱囊, 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.<sup>3</sup> 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



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

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 canon, 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.

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Notes

- 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 西安出土磚佛の制作事情と意義,” 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 zhuānfó 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 丹枕與宛綖,” 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

WANG Ruilei 王瑞雷

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.

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



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)

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.<sup>1</sup>

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Notes

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

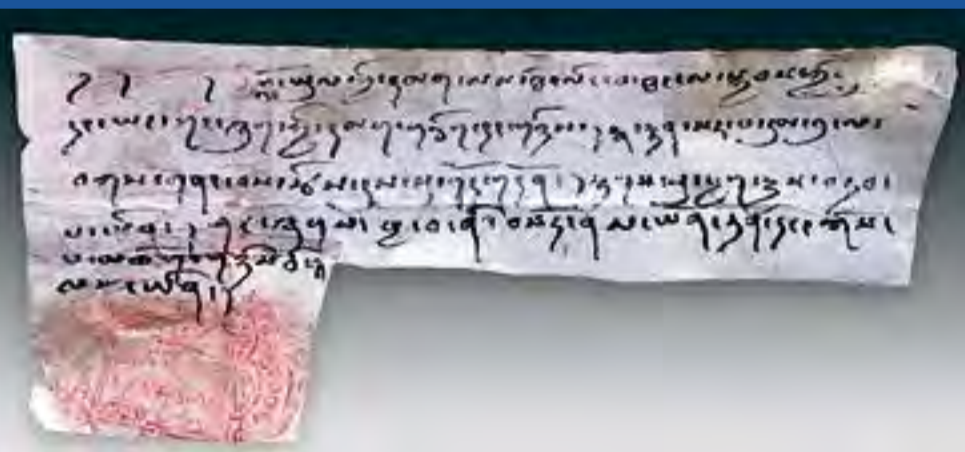


Fig. 1 (above). Military paper with seals. Official divination remarks prior to a war. (Photo courtesy of the author’s research team)



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