



# The Evolution of Early Chinese Buddha Figures

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## Abstract

The Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha compose the Triple Gem in all Buddhist traditions (Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana), and the Buddha figure, image or statue usually represent the Lord Buddha after his *Mahaparinirvana*. However, Buddha figures evolved in different cultures and developed in various styles influenced by the Buddhism that was introduced into and practiced in those different cultures.

The aim of this article is to study the evolution of early Chinese Buddha figures that were produced over the period of the Eastern Han Dynasty (25 B.C. – 220 A.D.) and though to end of the Tang Dynasty (618 A.D. – 907 A.D.). This period was important because it was during this time that Buddhism developed and transformed from being a cultural import into something more uniquely Chinese in style. This adaptation into a real Chinese form of Buddhism can be seen in the areas of sutra translation, Buddhist teachings and Buddha figures. This article is mainly focused on the characteristics of Chinese Buddha figures, such as robe style, facial features, and hair styles during this early time of evolution. The article also examines the factors that influenced the evolution of early Chinese Buddha figures; these factors caused the Buddha figures to gradually change in appearance.

**Keywords:** Evolution, Early Chinese Buddha Figures

## Introduction

The Buddha figure originated in ancient India, became more developed in the Gandharan and Mathuran fine Buddhist arts cultures and later spread throughout Central Asia, Asian countries, evolving as it appeared in different cultures.

According to the Ekottaragama Sutra, the earliest Buddha figures were made in the Buddha's time by the King Udayana of Vatsa and King Prasenajit of Kausala. But, from Buddhist art historical perspective, which can trace back to the 3<sup>rd</sup> B.C. of the Mauryan Empire, the earliest aniconic phase of Buddhist art had no statues of human figures of the Buddha. Instead, the Buddha was symbolized by Bodhi trees, empty seats, footprints, Dharma wheels and stupas. By the first or second centuries B.C., Buddha figure in human form had been created and adopted, and the Mathuran and Gandharan styles of Buddha figures gradually became popular. These were followed by the appearance of the Guptan style of Buddha figure in India.

The Indian style of Buddhist art had very significant influence on the development of Chinese Buddha figures, and the Gandharan art styles in particular affected the early creation of Chinese Buddha figures. Buddha figures were introduced into China along the Silk Road through Western Central Asia, Eastern Central Asia (present Xinjiang province), and Dunhuang, and figures appeared further east in Chang An by about the 1st first century B.C. or A.D., and later were also spread by the Maritime Silk Road.

There is much literary evidence of the existence of early Buddha figures made in bronze or gilt in the Eastern Han period, but most were destroyed. Modern Chinese and Japanese scholars seem to agree that the earliest Buddha figures to have survived in China can be dated to the second and third centuries A.D. (Gray Williams, Jr. Anne Preuss & Katharine H.B. Stoddert, 1965). After Buddhism was introduced into China, Buddha figures were involved in Chinese culture from the beginning of the Eastern Han period. In later periods, Buddha figures further evolved into different appearances, and the characteristics of the figures changed through the Three Kingdoms (220-280 A.D.), Jin Dynasties (265-420 A.D.), Sixteen Kingdoms Period (304-349 A.D.), Southern Dynasty (420-589 A.D.), Northern Dynasty (386-581 A.D.), and Sui Dynasty (581-618 A.D.). By the Tang Dynasty, the Buddha figure had completed the transformation and evolution into its typical Chinese style. The process of the development of Chinese Buddha figures, painting, and aesthetics in this early period continues to influence the creation of Buddha figures even up to the modern period.

After all these years, it is quite interesting and challenging to research the characteristics of early Chinese Buddha figures and what factors led to their evolution over the time from the Eastern Han Dynasty through to the Tang Dynasty.

## **The Characteristics of Chinese Buddha Figures in the Early Period of Evolution**

The evolution of Chinese Buddha figures refers to gradual development or change in appearance of Buddha figures. This process consisted in or coincided with the transformation from an external-to-China style into what came to be recognized as unique Chinese style, and the process involved gradual change in facial features, robes, and hair. The evolution of Buddha figures was part of a bigger transformation of Buddhism within China that occurred as it adapted to local conditions. This adaptation of Buddhism was an important part of its survival and propagation within China.

## **Clues for Buddha Figures in the Eastern Han to Jin dynasties**

The period including the Eastern Han and Jin Dynasties were the earliest periods in which Buddhism spread to China. Although scholars agree that the earliest Buddha figures which survive can be dated to the second and third centuries in China, their characteristics are quite hard to describe due to the fact that most of those figures have been totally or partially destroyed. However, there is literary evidence that offers clues about the characteristics of early Buddha figures in the Eastern Han to Jin Dynasties. For instance, the imperial edict issued to Liu Ying, the state king of Chu, by Emperor Ming (汉明帝) in 65 A.D. mentions that Liu Ying worshipped the Fo Tu (浮屠 Buddha) shrine (History of Later Han Vol.42). Other literary evidence can be found in the *History Chronicles for Buddha*. The Chronicles inform us that Can An and a mission group was officially sent to the west to obtain Buddhism. They met Kāśyapamātanga (迦摄摩腾) and Dharmaratna (竺法兰) in Da Yue Zhi (大月氏, the region of Kushan) in the Tenth Year of Yong Ping (67A.D.). They obtained a standing foreign Buddha figure and Sanskrit sutras carried by a white horse, and together with Kāśyapamātanga and Dharmaratna returned to Luo Yang (Taisho Tripitaka, Vol. 49, P0129).

The source contains no direct description of the characteristics of the Buddha figure, but it indicates that the Buddha figure was from Da Yuezhi, which was in the region of Kushan. Around 67 A.D., ancient India and Central Asia were under the rule of the powerful Kushan empire as the Kushans had conquered Bactria and adopted elements of Greek culture

in their life and religion. The Kushans further developed Buddhist art by fusing it with elements of Hellenistic culture. Therefore, the standing Buddha figure that was obtained by the mission group and carried to China was probably of Gandharan style.

Archaeological discoveries of Buddha figures from tombs provided further evidence that the characteristics of Eastern Han Buddha figures were of Gandharan style. In 1942, archaeologists found a pottery Buddha figure from the Peng Shan tomb in Si Chuang province, which had once been part of territory controlled by the Eastern Han Dynasty. The figure formed the base of a Money Tree. The Buddha is in seated posture, with robe covering both shoulders. The U shaped lines suggest the folds of a *saṅghāṭi*, with right hand in protection posture (*Abhaya mudra*) and left hand holding the robe. The Buddha's ushnisha and hair are indicated by several lines. This information indicated a strong Gandharan influence. Another damaged bronze Buddha figure was discovered in the Cao Fang Gou tomb. It was part of the main trunk of a Money Tree and also showed characteristics of the Gandharan style. This figure was inscribed with the date of Fourth Year of Yan Guang (延光四年 125 A.D.) on its base, and is considered to be the earliest Buddha figure found with an inscribed date in China (Liu Bin, 2002).

The *Hunping* vessel or the soul vase, which is a kind of ceramic container decorated with Taoist gods and Buddha figures, has often been found in the tombs of Three Kingdoms and the Jin Dynasty. In 1983, archaeologists found a *Hunping* vessel in a tomb that dated to the Wu kingdom in Nanjing region. Two small Buddha figures and figures of birds, flowers, and a Taoist bird-man adorned the vessel. The Buddha figures were seated in the lotus posture and had robes covering both shoulders. The hair of the Buddha figures was curled and the figures had flaming haloes in the Gandharan tradition. Other examples of *Hunping* vessels from the Western Jin Dynasty (265-316 A.D.) can be seen in the Metropolitan Museum (accession no.1992.165.21). These are richly decorated according to Taoist philosophy, and the heavenly palatial structure serves as an eternal dwelling place for the afterlife. However, about 20 seated Buddha figures on lotus petals also adorn the vessel. All the small Buddha figures, influenced by Gandharan art, are found in the same posture, with hands in meditation posture and with closed eyes. Furthermore, their other facial features and robe presentation are consistent with Gandharan styles.

As Jin Dynasty Chinese artisans assimilated Buddhism into their culture, they specialized in making or painting Buddha figures. Included in this group of accomplished workers were Wei Xie and Zhang Mo of the Western Jin period, and Gu Kaizhi, Dai Kui, and Dai Yong of the Eastern Jin period. Their paintings and sculptures of the Buddha incorporated elements of Chinese culture, aesthetics and philosophy. Moreover, the literary

evidence states that Dai Yong (Hui Jiao, Vol.13) portrayed the face of the Buddha with a long and narrow shape. Such facial features probably had a strong influence on the creation of Buddha figures in later periods, and it is highly likely that the styles in the Southern dynasties and the Northern Wei Dynasty were influenced in this way.

These characteristics found on the Buddha figures that formed part of the Money Trees or on *Hunping* vessels indicate that there had been a merge of Buddhism and local Chinese culture because the Money Trees and the *Hunping* vessels were objects that the Taoists used to support the deceased in their afterlives. The Chinese people at the time illustrated objects that were important in their daily lives even though the images they included were foreign looking and in the Gandharan style of the Eastern Han to Jin Dynasties.

### **The Evolving Characteristics of Buddha Figures in the Sixteen Kingdoms Period**

The Sixteen Kingdoms period (304-439 A.D.) consisted of sixteen short-lived kingdoms which were founded by the Xingu, Xianbei, Di, Jie and Qiang peoples, who were five groups of minorities in northern China that replaced the Western Jin. The minority groups did not have their own strong culture, but they adopted the Han culture and also absorbed non-Han or foreign cultures. The rulers of these groups promoted Buddhism and sponsored the creation of many stunning Buddhist sites such as the Dunhuang grottoes and the Bing Ling cave temples. The Buddha figure began a new stage of evolution in this period.

The study of preserved Buddha figures from the Sixteen Kingdoms period revealed that the figures contained various characteristics influenced by Gandharan, Guptan, Xi Yu styles and the Chinese tradition. A notable Buddha figure in cave no. 169 at the Bing Ling cave temple was clearly influenced by the Gupta tradition, wearing a large and thin robe that covered both shoulders and went down to the ankles. The folds formed a U shape like the ripples of a water pattern, and the inscription suggested that the figure was constructed in the First Year of Jian Hong (420 A.D.) of the Xiqin Kingdom.

Some Buddha figures with inscriptions indicating they were made in the Fourth Year of Jian Wu (338 A.D.) are in a collection at the Asian Museum, USA, and other figures with inscription dating them to the Second Year of Sheng Guang (429 A.D.) are in the Osaka Museum of History, Japan. These figures have characteristics that reflect influences from Gandharan art and Chinese culture. The depiction of the folds in these figures' robes is U shaped but more square like '└┐' shape and some are of 'V' shape. The hair topknots suggest ushnishas but they are neither seashell-like nor curly in nature; instead the hair presents

in straight lines and is separated to left and right from the middle of forehead. Long and opened eyes and board-like forehead facial characteristics have now replaced the Roman and Indian features. The Buddha inscribed with Second Year of Sheng Guang is seated on a four legged squared seat which is a typical Chinese chair, and the chair's decorations of flowers and cloud are typically Chinese.

### **The Evolving Characteristics of Buddha Figures in the Northern Wei Dynasty**

The Northern Wei (386-534 A.D.) was one dynasty among the Northern dynasties that made many contributions to the development of Buddhism and the evolution of Buddha figures. The ongoing excavation of the Dunhuang grottoes, the Yungang grottoes and Maijishan grottoes have revealed a lot about the evolution of Buddha figures and how the figures relate to Chinese culture, philosophy and aesthetics. A new robe style and facial features present in the Buddha figures of the Northern Wei Dynasty.

Buddha figures from the Northern Wei period have been described as being graceful and Taoist sage-like (仙风道骨), and have long, narrow facial features and are thin and elegantly slender in manner (秀骨清像). This was an influence of the painting styles of the Jin dynasties. During this period, the characteristics of the Buddha figures were representative of typical Chinese styles from the Taihe Years (477-499 A.D.) or the period of Emperor Xiao Wen, and usually involved unique robe styles, facial features, and hair styles and flaming mandorlas.

**a. Robe style:** The evolution of the Buddha's robe featured the adoption of the main stream Chinese dress from Eastern Jin Period. The robe was a loose gown tied with wide girdle (褒衣博带) in the case of standing figures, and robe's bottom was draped over the front of the throne (裳悬座) in seated figures. The robe's bottom always split into stiff edges on either side in a pattern that resembled a fish tail, and the *samakaksik* worn inside was tied with a girdle and kept in long tails. The wrapping of the *saṅghāṭi* and *uttarāsaṅga* was categorized into two main styles: the *saṅghāṭi* covering (上衣外覆) and display *uttarāsaṅga* layer (中衣外露), which further subdivided into nine types (Chen Yuxin, 2014).

**b. Facial features:** Two kinds of facial features for the Buddha figures in the Northern Wei Dynasty were found. One type that involved round features was called "full moon" and was commonly found in the early Yungang grottoes that were constructed before the Taihe Years. The second kind of facial features that were popular from the Tai Years in the period of the Northern Wei were narrow and lightly fleshed with angular features. Furthermore, with a flatter head and opened almond - eyes staring right, the lips and eyes suggested the Buddha was smiling.

**c. Hair style:** There were several hair styles adopted for Buddha figures in the Northern Wei Dynasty: the wavy hair style, the snail shell style and the spiral pattern style. The wavy hair, which is seen frequently in Gandharan Buddha figures, was an effect of the Greek art in the northern part of ancient India that gradually influenced Buddhist art in the Xi Yu regions and China. The snail shell style features hair that is dense and thick, and as the name suggests, like a shell. The style originated in Mathuran art. The spiral patterns on wavy hair were quite popular for Buddha figures in the Northern Wei period. The figures often had one or more spiral patterns or wheel-like patterns on the hair or ushnisha, and this too was probably an influence of Gandharan art.

**d. Flaming mandorlas:** The flaming mandorla or halo evolved with rich decoration in the Northern Wei Dynasty Buddha figures, and the large flaming mandorlas commonly had internal haloes decorated with many small Buddha figures and circular flaming fires behind the heads of the Buddhas. The large external flaming mandorla was often decorated with flying apsaras or sometimes with small Buddha figures or flower patterns behind the whole body from above the head down to the ankle.

The evolution of Buddha figures in Northern Wei was a change from foreign appearance to Chinese appearance, and consisted in a change to new and highly stylized facial features, robe styles and hair styles and the inclusion of flaming mandorlas. It was in this period that the Chinese style of Buddha figure reached to the first peak for its evolution, and these changes were to have significant effects on the development of Buddha figures in later periods, especially in the Western Wei and Eastern Wei Dynasties.

### **Characteristics of Buddha Figures in the Northern Qi and Northern Zhou Dynasties**

The Northern Qi (550-577 A.D.) and Northern Zhou (557-581 A.D.) Dynasties replaced the Western Wei and Eastern Wei Dynasties which came after the Northern Wei Dynasty, but the characteristics of Buddha figures were not the same as those of Northern Wei. Instead, Northern Qi Dynasty, which was short lived, had very unique styles of Buddha figures that were influenced by Sarnath Buddhist art and the spread of Buddhism by the Maritime Silk Road from India to the coastal state Qing Zhou.

The Buddha figures in the Northern Qi period did not have loose gowns tied with wide girdles; instead the robes were generally diaphanous with water drop patterns that were suggested by a few raised thin lines interspersed with flat areas of drapery that formed the folds of the *saṅghāṭi*. The *saṅghāṭi* was always thin and as soft as gauze, reflecting the shape of the under-robe and the body shape. This style was known as the Cao style

(曹家样、曹衣出水). The Buddha faces of the Northern Qi figures were round, with eyes nearly closed or squinting in a serene manner. The hair was usually dense, and shell like, but the ushnisha was quite low and short, and not the same as the high ushnisha in the Northern Wei period figures.

Meanwhile, the Northern Zhou Dynasty saw the development of different Buddha figures in the northwest regions. The style was neither slim like in the Northern Qi figures, nor was it like the figures of the Northern Wei. The Northern Zhou Dynasty figures were generally tall, and of strong body shape with broad shoulders and square facial features. However, there were still some characteristics remaining from previous periods. For example, the *samakaksika* tied with a girdle to secure the inner robe came from the Northern Wei figures, and the thin, simple carved lines that suggested the folds of the *saṅghāṭi* which were significant in the evolution of Buddha figures in Sui and Tang periods were examples of characteristics that were retained from earlier times.

### **The Buddha Figures in the Southern Dynasties**

The Southern Dynasties (420-589 A.D.) controlled the southern part of China at the same time as the Northern Dynasties. The Song (420-479 A.D.), Qi (479-502 A.D.), Liang (502-557 A.D.), and Chen (557-589 A.D.) Dynasties were the four Southern Dynasties that came one after the other. The Buddha figures showed major influence from the culture, philosophy and aesthetics of the Eastern Jin. They had long and narrow facial features. For example, the Buddha figures discovered in the Qixia Shan grottoes, which were excavated in the fifth century A.D., had loose gown robes tied with wide girdles (褒衣博带). The Buddha figures found in the Si Chuan region in First Year of Yong Ming of the Qi Dynasty (齐永明元年483 A.D.) and the Third Year of Da Tong, in Liang Dynasty (梁大同三年537 A.D.) were dressed in loose gowns. Furthermore, the robe bottoms always split into stiff edges at either side in a pattern that resembled a fish tail, and the inside wear included a *samakaksik* tied with a girdle which kept the long tails.

However, there was an evolution in Buddha figure faces across the transition of the four dynasties. Due to the influence of Eastern Jin period, the Buddha figures of the Song and Qi still had long and narrow facial features, but by the time of the Liang Dynasty, the figures had rounder faces with full cheeks (Chen Yuexin, 2014). Therefore, the facial features were not long and narrow as they had been during the Northern Wei period. From the similar characteristics of Buddha figures in the Southern Dynasties and the Northern Wei dynasty, we can see hints of the aesthetics and philosophy of the Han culture that was influenced from the Eastern Jin period.



### The Buddha Figures in the Sui and Tang Dynasties

It was during the Sui Dynasty that ancient China underwent a time of unification. The country that had been split for several hundred years from the time of the Sixteen Kingdoms period became unified, and this promoted communication and cultural exchange between northern and southern regions and influenced the evolution of Buddha figures. The characteristics of Buddhas from various regions merged, and this can be seen clearly on a number of important Buddha figures such as the Buddha figure donated by Xun Guochou in the Second Year of Kaihuang (荀国丑开皇二年582 AD), Sui Dynasty, which is in a collection at the Henan Museum. The Buddha has round facial features and a strong body, and simple carved lines suggest the folds of the thin and soft robes commonly adopted in Northern Qi. The *saṅghāṭi* covers both shoulders, and the right corner of the robe goes across the abdomen and gracefully falls over left arm. It is tied with a girdle to secure the *samakaksika*, and the robe's bottom being draped and covering the front of the throne is a legacy from the Southern and Northern Wei Dynastic styles. Although the Buddha robe shows the influence of earlier dynasties, the figure's facial features are characteristic of Sui Dynasty. The elements that were incorporated into the figures of the Sui period paved the way for further evolution in the succeeding era of the Tang Dynasty.

After centuries of evolution, Buddha figures became more delicate and graceful in the Tang period. The formation of different Buddhist schools led to the promotion of different Buddhist thoughts, philosophies and Buddha figures. The characteristics of the Tang Buddha figures were derived from the earlier Sui figures, but showed new and regional aesthetics, particularly in the features of the Buddha's face and robes.

The Buddha figure robes from Yungang, Longmen, Gongxian and Xiangtangshan grottoes were obviously the product of the evolution from a foreign style that took place over the period of the 5<sup>th</sup> - 8<sup>th</sup> centuries, and their development process was completed in the Tang Dynasty (Chen Yuexin, 2014). This evolution resulted in four major robe types that became popular in the Tang era: 1. *Saṅghāṭi* covering both shoulders (通肩式). 2. *Saṅghāṭi* covering left shoulder with right shoulder bared (袒右肩). 3. *Saṅghāṭi* covering both shoulders, with bared half of right chest and arm (半披式). 4. *Saṅghāṭi* covering both shoulders with bared chest (露胸通肩式). Moreover, the type with the *saṅghāṭi* covering both shoulders with bared chest became the major form that influences the creation of modern Buddha figures.

In general, the Tang Buddhas had round and plump faces like full moons, and presented with a rich fleshy fullness of facial and body shape. In particular, the notable facial features of Buddha figures from the Tianlongshan grottoes (found in caves excavated in the Tang period), looked plumper than those of any other period. They had small mouths on

the plump faces, and the half closed eyes were set under high carved arc-shaped eyebrows that created a broad space for the eyelids. However, from about the mid Tang period, the Buddha figures retained their fullness of face, but they were no longer as plump as the Tianlongshan grotto figures.

There were two main hair styles adopted for the Buddha figures in Tang era, the snail-shell like hair and wavy hair, and between the two of them, the wavy hair style was more widely used. There was normally one or a small number of spiral patterns on the hair. Sometimes, one spiral decorated the ushnisha with another spiral on the front of the hair, and another pattern found was two on the ushnisha and two on the front of the hair. There were also some particular patterns, such as layers of oval-shaped patterns on the hair. Moreover, in the later Tang period, the symbol of the light of wisdom, a pearl-like jewel, appeared on the front of the Buddha's hair, and this was a unique special characteristic that had never presented in previous periods.

By the end of the Tang Dynasty, the Buddha figure had completed its evolutionary process and the transformation from foreign looking figure to Chinese style figure, rich in local characteristics, was done. Some of these had never been seen in Indian or Gandharan Buddhist figures. The late Tang figures also showed another noteworthy trend in the development of Buddha figures, and that was the movement towards graceful and life-like Buddha images.

## **The Stages of Evolution of Early Chinese Buddha Figures**

The study of the characteristics of early Chinese Buddha figures from the Eastern Han Dynasty to the Tang Dynasty can be divided into three main periods: the period including the Eastern Han Dynasty, the Three Kingdoms and the Jin dynasty, which can be considered as the evolutionary period of Buddha figures that were essentially foreign styles; the period of the Sixteen Kingdoms period, which saw the evolution of a mixture of foreign and Chinese styles of Buddha figures; and finally the period of the Northern Wei to Tang Dynasties, in which the evolution to truly Chinese styles took place.

### **The Period of Foreign Style**

The researcher considers the period including the Eastern Han Dynasty, the Three Kingdoms and the Jin dynasty as a period for foreign style based on literary evidence and on the discovery of ancient Buddha figures and other items. The Buddha figures of this period were very foreign looking, and many of them are distinctly Gandharan in style.

According to literary studies, the earliest official record of Buddha figures in China indicates they were probably of Gandharan style, which was brought into China by the foreign monks Kāśyapamātanga, Dharmaratna and by a Chinese mission group from Da Yuezhi (Kushan) in the Eastern Han period. The Buddha figures discovered in tombs that date to the Eastern Han, Three Kingdoms and Western Jin periods have been verified as being of Gandharan style. In addition, objects such as the pottery Buddha figure from the base of the Money Tree, the damaged bronze Buddha from the Cao Fang Gou tomb, and the Buddha figures found on Hunping from the Three Kingdoms period and the Western Jin Dynasty are all of Gandharan style. From the study of these cases, we can conclude that although foreign Buddhist styles were already associated with local Chinese themes, the Buddha figures were definitely still predominantly foreign in characteristic.

### **The Period of Mixed Style**

The style of Buddha figures found in China further evolved into a new stage and this was related to broader developments in Buddhist culture. Cultural exchange and cultural mingling supported the evolution of Buddha figures in the Sixteen Kingdoms period. Furthermore, we can see the different styles or characteristics on one particular Buddha figure, particularly in its facial features, clothing, hair and decorations. Despite the multiplicity of cultural influences in this piece, the Buddha figures of the period remained essentially foreign in style.

The Buddha figure from the Sixteen Kingdoms period featured Gandharan, Gupta and Chinese Characteristics, and there were more changes of characteristics visible in the fine detail. For instance, the ‘U’ shaped pattern on the *saṅghāṭi* had become more squared in shape, like ‘⊥’ shaped and some patterns were ‘V’ shaped. In addition, the *saṅghāṭi* which was draped on the Buddha’s forearms and which was indicated by layers and folds made the *saṅghāṭi* appear more like a Chinese traditional Hanfu. The long and opened eyes, the broad forehead, and certain more local facial characteristics instead of the Roma nose and India features placed the figure more in China. Finally, the four legged squared seat upon which the Buddha sat was decorated with flowers and cloud motifs that were typically Chinese in character.

The period of mixed style for Buddha figures with Gandharan, Guptan and Chinese styles was the result of foreign Buddhist art associating with Chinese local art and aesthetics, but it remained at an immature stage. However, it was the first step of Buddha figures evolving into Chinese styles.

## **The Period of Chinese Style**

The period including the Southern and Northern dynasties and stretching through to Tang Dynasty was a period of input from earlier evolution and a new and strong influx of Chinese culture, aesthetics, and philosophy. During these periods, the Buddha figures further became considerably more Chinese in style, and this style presented in the ways of robes, facial features, hair and decorations. Scholars have divided this period of development into Chinese style into an early period and a later one, and it is in this later period that we see a maturity of the Chinese style of Buddha figures.

### **Period of Early Chinese style**

This period of early Chinese style refers to the early evolution stage of figures that were already distinctly of Chinese style. The figures are mainly Chinese in form but not completely, and we can still see some of the foreign characteristics in the Buddha figures.

From the study of Buddha figure in the Southern and Northern dynasties though to the Tang Dynasty, the early Chinese style period occurred mostly in the early years of the Northern Wei Dynasty, especially before the Taihe Years (477-499 A.D.) or early in the Taihe period. Over this period, the Buddha's facial feature or robe style evolved into Chinese style, but some details in the characteristics still remained in foreign style. Examples include the caves no. 5, no.6, no. 7, no. 8, no. 9, and no. 10 of the Yungang grottoes, which date from 8<sup>th</sup> year of Taihe (484 AD) to 13<sup>th</sup> year of Taihe (489 AD). The two standing Buddha figures on the upper parts of the eastern wall of cave No. 6 present robes that were totally of Chinese style. The robes were loose gowns and the *samkaksika* were tied with girdles that had long tails. In addition, the bottom parts of the robes split into stiff edges at either side in a pattern that resembled fish tails, which made the robes look like Chinese Hanfu. However, on both figures, the Buddha's hair and facial features including noses with high bridges still remained in the Gandharan style.

Then, we can see in this early period of Chinese style that the Buddha figures had mixed Chinese and foreign features, but by this time Buddha figures had undergone considerable transformation towards a genuine Chinese form.

### **Period of Mature Chinese style:**

In the later Taihe years, under the policies of Sinicization ordered by Emperor Xiaowen (孝文帝) that aimed to promote the Han culture, the movement towards a native Chinese Buddha style was given impetus. The creators of the Buddha figures incorporated distinctly Chinese elements into their work, and the figures they constructed were of a mature

Chinese style in the aspects of facial feature, robe style, and hair styles that originated in the Northern Wei Dynasty.

The characteristics such as the robe being like a loose gown, the robe having a bottom draped and covering the front of the throne, the *samakaksik* being tied with girdle and with a long tail, the robe having a bottom split into stiff edges at either side like fish tail pattern and the robe resembling the Chinese traditional Hanfu were vital parts of the completely and uniquely Chinese style of the Northern Wei Dynasty. The long, narrow facial features, elegant slender manner, and the likeness to the graceful full figures of Taoist sages completed the mature Chinese style, which greatly influenced the Buddha figures in the Yungang grottoes, Longmen grottoes, Dunhuang grottoes and Majishan grottoes in the later Northern Wei Dynasty, Western Wei Dynasty, and Eastern Wei Dynasty.

The Buddha figures in the Tang period were heavily influenced by social aesthetics and the concept of plump as beautiful. As the result, Buddha figures were formed in fullness of style that displayed full and fleshy bodies, faces round like the full moon, characteristics that were very different to the slender forms of the Northern Wei period. Then, the two styles of mature Chinese Buddha figures which were influenced by different aesthetic standards of society, marked the complete transformation of Buddha figures from the original foreign styles to Chinese styles.

In summary, from the three periods of evolution of early Chinese Buddha figures, we can see that the gradual growth and change of Buddha figures from foreign looking to completely Chinese style in China, and we note how their development was associated with Chinese cultural factors.

## **The Main Factors that Influenced the Evolution of Early Chinese Buddha Figures**

During the long term of their evolution, Chinese Buddha figures were influenced by many factors. Some of these factors meant that it was necessary for the creators of the figures to change or adjust their work to local conditions in order for Buddhism to survive in the land of China, where Buddhism faced intense competition from Taoism, Confucianism or other factors. In the process of evolution, the factors that influence the forms of the figures can be categorized into two groups, external and internal.

### **The External Factors**

The term ‘external factors’ refers to influences that came from outside of Buddhism that had direct or indirect effects on characteristics of the Buddha figures. Common external factors were attitudes of emperors, local aesthetics and clothing styles.

From the earliest times of Buddhism’s introduction into China, it always had close connections with Chinese emperors, such as the emperor Ming in Eastern Han, and Shi Le and Shi Hu, who were the rulers of Later Zhao kingdom who supported the foreign monk Fo Tusheng and his promotion of Buddhism. In fact, there were many emperors who were devout Buddhists, and their attitude and support was crucial to Buddhist development.

The Sinicization policy decrees of the Emperor Xiaowen had much influence on the Buddha figures in Northern Wei. His policies forced the Xianbei people to adoption Han culture, speak Han language, and wear Han dress and he encouraged intermarriage between the Xianbei clans and the Han peoples. The widely adopted Han culture then influenced the construction of Buddhist grottoes and the creation of Buddha figures. The Chinese style of the Buddha’s robe in cave no.6 in the Yungang grottoes is a direct result of Xiaowen’s Sinicization policies. The robe we see on the Buddha there is very similar to an item of clothing used by emperors called the Mianfu. (Chen Yuexin, 2014).

Later emperors and royal clans were the main powers behind the excavation and production of the Yungang, Dunhuang, Maijishan, Longmen, and Tianlongshan grottoes. Emperor Yang Jian of the Sui Dynasty strongly supported the recovery of Buddhism and donated 106,580 new Buddha figures, supported the repair of 1,508,000 damaged Buddha figures and his son emperor Yang Guang donated 3,850 new Buddha figures, and supported the repair of 101,000 damaged Buddha figures (Fang Litian & Hua Fangtian, 2001). Therefore, the attitudes, decisions and personal interests of emperors were some of the main factors that influenced the making of Buddha figures.

Buddhist art is a way to express faith for Buddhists, and the figures and events we see in Buddhist art can present a miniaturized symbolic version of people individual lives and their social lives. In other words, Buddhist art may reflect what goes on in society. In other words, what happens in society, the way people think and act and their sense of aesthetics can influence Buddhist art, and this has been clearly seen in the development of early Buddhist figures. Fashions and special styles that reflected people’s aesthetic values had effects on Buddhism in China. During the evolution of Chinese Buddha figures, local aesthetics were another major factor that had impact on Buddha figure characteristics.

In this way, another external factor that influenced Buddhist figure development was the religious or philosophical tradition of Taoism, and it was to have an impact on Buddhism over the period covering Eastern Jin, Southern and Northern dynasties. The Tao philosophy and metaphysics suggested a graceful way of being that was reflected in social aesthetics. The metaphysics included a theory of nature that afforded nature a high value; and it prescribed for people a free and easy yet elegant way of being. The model of the Taoist sage, living gracefully at both the personal and social levels, defined social aesthetics that were attractive and influential. Artists used thin-faced and slender-bodied models to express this Taoist ideal; the beauty of balance, movement with nature, and grace. When Buddhist artists became involved with Taoism-influenced Chinese culture, their work inevitably began to reflect Taoist influence, and this can be seen in Buddhist art in the paintings and figures that adorned the Buddhist grottoes. The Buddha figures of the Southern and Northern dynasties had long, thin and narrow faces with angular features. The unique style of Buddha figures that radiated solemn and tranquil beauty embodied the absorption of Chinese aesthetics into Buddhist tradition that was common in 5<sup>th</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> Centuries in China.

However, it was during the Tang period that another kind of aesthetic was to influence the styles of the Buddha figures. The care-free and luxurious lives of the rich, who flourished in the background of society, changed people's aesthetic standards. Those who had a lot and ate a lot became plump, and in turn plumpness became synonymous with beauty, fashion and social standing. This was reflected in the Buddhist sculptural art of the time, which featured Buddha figures of full and fleshy (full moon-like) facial features and plump body shapes. The plump styles of Buddha figures in the Tang period were totally different to the slender and graceful figures of the Southern and Northern dynasties. Then we can see that two styles of Buddha figures were produced under the influence of different types of societal aesthetics.

The style of Buddha robe was heavily influenced by local Chinese clothing during the Southern and Northern Dynasties. The robe became a kind of loose gown that was tied with a wide girdle, and this style was originally a kind of traditional Chinese outfit called the *hanfu*. (Wang Chenlin, 2014). The characteristics of Buddha robes were influenced by the *hanfu* in three ways. First, the robe was an adaptation of the *hanfu*'s overcoat style with loose gown and two large sleeves, and a *samakaksika* tied with girdle. Second, the wrapping of robe style evolved from a simple traditional Indian style into various types of wrapping that had never been seen in the Indian or Gangharan styles. Third, the design of decorative patterns on the Buddha robe and other design points changed under the influence of the *hanfu*. In particular, new styles of collar, hem, neckline and *samakaksika* were made

under influence of the designs of the Chinese *hanfu*. Examples included here are the fact that *saṅghāṭi* that covered both shoulders was always designed with a lapel collar, and was decorated with folds, or flower patterns.

People sometimes make the mistake of assuming that Chinese Buddha figures from the Southern and Northern periods are simply dressed in traditional Chinese outfits, but this is not the case. The figures are dressed in robes that are consistent with the Buddhist tradition and wear all the required parts of the outfit: the *tricivara*, *saṅghāṭi*, *uttarāsaṅga*, *antarvasa* and *samkaksika*.

### **The Internal Factors**

The term ‘internal factors’ refers to factors that were part of Buddhism that influenced the evolution of early Chinese Buddha figures. Included here are factors such as the Buddhist teachings, faith in different Buddhas and the *Tricivara* in Mahayana.

As Buddhism and its teachings developed, new schools formed and some of these new schools focused on particular sutras and worshipped different Buddhas. This range of traditions that had developed stimulated the creation of new forms of Buddhist art including new styles of Buddha figures. Many new Buddhist grottoes were created and new Buddha figures and Buddhist painting appeared in the grottoes. Shakyamuni Buddha, Maitreya Buddha, Maha-Vairocana Buddha, Bodhisattvas and a multitude of other Buddha forms, all of which in some way expressed the Chinese Mahayana thought and Mahayana Buddha system presented. Eight major schools of Buddhism emerged, and each of these had a primary doctrine that needed to be expressed.

Furthermore, a large number of sutras had been translated into Chinese, and this stimulated the further development of Buddhist thought, teaching, and schools. Some of these new schools focused on specific sutras and followers supported the production of unique Buddha figures for worship and the merit making of others. In a different but related way, people made merit for themselves or for their relatives by donating or financing the creation of Buddha figures. They believed such actions could help them and their relatives avoid trouble and danger and dilute the effects of bad karma that they or their relatives had made in past lives. The fact that people developed faith in different Buddhas increased the demand for Buddha figures and influenced the evolution of Buddha figures. From the time of the Eastern Han to the Tang dynasties, people in China expressed their faith in a range of Buddha and Bodhisattvas including Maitreya Buddha, Amitābha Buddha, the Medicine Buddha (Bhaishajyaguru), and Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva.



Maitreya, actually a Bodhisattva, was introduced into China following the translation of sutras including the Enlightenment of Maitreya Sutra (《弥勒成佛经》) by Dharmarakṣa in the Western Jin period; The Maitreya Descending from Tushita Heaven Sutra (《弥勒下生经》) by Kumārajīva; The Maitreya Ascending into the Tushita Heaven Sutra (《弥勒上生经》) by Ju Qu Jing Sheng (沮渠京声); and the Dao Xing Parinirvāṇa Sutra (《道行般若经》) translated in the Eastern Han Period. The Pancavimsatisahasrika-prajnaparamita Sutra (《放光般若经》), the Mahāparinirvāṇa Sutra, and the Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa Sutra translated during Southern and Northern Dynasties all contain the story of Maitreya.

According to the sutras, Maitreya was destined to become a Buddha, in fact the successor of the Shakyamuni Buddha. Therefore, he was traditionally referred to as Maitreya Buddha and became a much adored figure. The core thought of faith in Maitreya was (and still is) that Maitreya resided in Tushita heaven and was waiting to descend to the human realm to preach Dhamma to his followers with the third turning of the Dharma Wheel and would attain full enlightenment and thus become the fifth Buddha in the Bhadrakalpa (贤劫). His followers therefore tried to make enough merit to get reborn in Tushita heaven or Earth at the time that Maitreya would descend from Tushita heaven to the human realm. The faith in Maitreya Buddha encouraged the people to pursue a better future life, so it was accepted readily by Chinese Buddhists, and gained promotion by great teachers including Master Dao An and Xuan Zang.

The Northern Wei Dynasty (386-534 AD) was a time of great flourish for all connected with the Maitreya faith, and large numbers of Maitreya Buddha figures that date to the Northern Wei Dynasty have been found. According to incomplete statistics from research conducted on the Northern Wei to Southern Dynasties, the numbers of pieces of interest in the Yungang grottoes and Longmen grottoes were 112 pieces for Shakyamuni Buddha, 115 pieces for Maitreya Buddha, 29 pieces for Amitābha Buddha, and 82 pieces for Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva figure (Yang Huinan, 1987).

The Amitābha or Pure Land is other important Buddhist faith. Belief in Amitābha flourished during the Sui and Tang periods and surpassed belief in Maitreya Buddha. People who believed in Amitābha formally formed the Pure Land school in the Tang Dynasty. The translation of Pure Land sutras and more accessible practice techniques sped up the spread of faith in Amitābha. The followers just needed to recite the name of Amitābha and take 48 vows to secure rebirth in the Pure land, which was a perfect land of Amitābha without any suffering. There were four simple ways of practice for the followers of Pure Land: 1) reciting the name of Amitābha; 2) contemplating the figure of Amitābha; 3) observing the

beauty of Amitābha; and 4) contemplating the Dhammakaya of Buddha in Samadhi (Fang Litian & Hua Fangtian, 2001). These techniques of practice became factors that promoted the propagation of faith in Amitābha and increased the demand for Buddha figures.

As noted, according to the incomplete statistics concerned with the period from the Northern Wei to the Southern Dynasty, the numbers of Buddha figures in the Yungang grottoes and Longmen grottoes were 112 pieces for Shakyamuni Buddha, 115 pieces for Maitreya Buddha, 29 pieces for Amitābha Buddha, and 82 pieces for Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva. However, the numbers changed in the Tang Dynasty as follows: 40 pieces for Shakyamuni Buddha, 60 pieces for Maitreya Buddha, 280 pieces for Amitābha, and 9 pieces for Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva. (Yang Huinan, 1987). From these statistics concerned with the numbers of Buddha figures in the Yungang grottoes and Longmen grottoes, we can infer that there probably developed a stronger belief in Amitābha.

People in China during this time also believed in Buddhas and Bodhisattvas other than Shakyamuni Buddha, Maitreya Buddha and Amitābha. Many put their faith into the Medicine Buddha and Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva. Monks and the followers of these faiths produced large numbers of figures illustrations (经变图) to describe the content and stories of their much loved sutras. This further development of different faiths within what was now a distinctly Chinese form of Buddhism was concomitant with the appearance of new Buddhist art and Buddha figures.

The third important factor that influenced the evolution of Buddha figures was the *Tricīvara* or *Ticīvara* sometimes referred to as the *kāṣāya*, which is the monastic robe worn daily. It is usually composed of three parts, the *sangati*, *uttarāsaṅga* and the *antaravāsaka*. The *tricīvara* was well described in the Vinaya Pitaka, but the forms of it differ today according to Buddhist tradition. These days, Mahayana, Theravada and Vajrayana Buddhist monks wear different monastic robes, and these differences in monastic wear are reflected in the clothes of the Buddha figures.

The *tricīvara* was described in four pieces of Vinaya literature: in the Chinese Mahayana Pitaka called the Dharmagupta-Vinaya (《四分律》), in the Sarvāstivāda-Vinaya (《十诵律》), in the Mahasangha-Vinaya (《摩诃僧祇律》), and in the Mahīśāsaka-Vinaya (《弥沙塞部和酏五分律》). The *tricīvara* was not made from a single piece of cloth, but from several pieces of cloth. The Sarvāstivāda-Vinaya prescribed that the *sangati* must be made of 9 pieces, the *uttarāsaṅga* made of 7 pieces and the *antaravāsaka* made from 5 pieces (Taisho Tripitaka, vol.23). Moreover, the Dharmagupta-Vinaya prescribed that the *saṅghāṭi* could be 9, 11, 13, 15, 17, 19, 21, 23 or 25 pieces (Chen Yuxin, 2014).

There is an order for wearing the *tricīvara*. The *antaravāsaka* is put on first as an inner robe to cover the lower body, and then the *uttarāsaṅga* is put on and it covers the left shoulder but leaves the right shoulder bare, Finally the *saṅghāṭi* is put on over on the *uttarāsaṅga* and the *antaravāsaka*. According to the way the *tricīvara* is put on, the Buddha robe can be categorized into two types: the total *saṅghāṭi* covering in which the *saṅghāṭi* covers all the parts and another type in which the *uttarāsaṅga* is visible (Chen Yuexin, 2014). Furthermore, each type can be further subdivided into several different styles.

Apart from *tricīvara*, the Mahasangha-Vinaya also mentions there is an additional robe for bhikkhus which is the *samakaksika* (僧祇支) (Taisho Tripitaka, vol.22). The *samakaksika* is using for covering the upper body, and worn inside of the *uttarāsaṅga*. It was often seen on the Chinese Buddha figures, and became one of the unique characteristics of Chinese Buddha figures. The *samakaksika* is usually barely visible beneath the *saṅghāṭi* or the *uttarāsaṅga*, and there are several ways it is worn: 1) It is usually wrapped around the entire left shoulder and tied with a girdle, the right shoulder being left bare; 2) It can be worn as a shirt covering the left shoulder but leaving the right shoulder bare; and 3) It can be worn with crossed collar, which is not main stream, but can be found in Chinese Buddha figures (Fei Tong, 2008). These three ways of wearing of the *samakaksika* are commonly seen in the Buddha figures of the period from the Northern Dynasty to the Tang Dynasty, which produced some of the best and most mature examples of the evolution of Chinese Buddha figures. Concluding, the ways of wearing the *tricīvara* and the *samakaksika* that we see in the Mahayana Vinaya and the various ways of wrapping the robe enable us to understand how these clothing items affected the creation of Buddha figures and their evolution.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, according to literary evidence, Buddha figures in China can found as early as the 1st Century, and extant figures that date to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century A.D. that were discovered in archaeological digs are decidedly foreign looking. However, Buddhist art and in particular Buddha forms that were created after that time had clearly evolved into styles that became increasingly Chinese in nature.

In summary, Chinese Buddha figures were at first much influenced by Indian Buddha figure forms, but they gradually evolved into Chinese styles with unique dress styles. This process was, however, a gradual one that took place across the different dynasties, and a range of factors drove the evolution. This article summarizes the major factors that influenced

the evolution of early Chinese Buddha figures and divides them into two groups: external factors and internal factors; the attitude of emperors, Chinese aesthetics and regional dress style were external factors and the development of Buddhist teachings, the various types of Buddhist faiths, and the variations of the *tricīvara* in Mahayana were the internal factors. The evolution of the Buddha figure in China went through three stages, the period of foreign style, the period of mixed style and the period of unique Chinese style.

After thousands of years of development, the Chinese Buddha figures that evolved in that early time of change continue to influence the creation of Buddha figures today. The study helps to understand the characteristics of early Chinese Buddha figures and how Buddha figures evolved in China. Moreover, it offers us clues to better understand how Buddha figures we see today in China relate to the Chinese historical Buddha figures.

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