

Orthodox and Secular Buddhist Beliefs in the Eastern Han Dynasty

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Abstract: The practice of Buddhism in China and its interaction with native Chinese culture from the 2nd to the 3rd centuries AD. has been the focus of scholarly attention. By analyzing literature and archaeological data from the Eastern Han dynasty, scholars have concluded that 1) Buddhism was attached to Daoism and 2) orthodox Buddha statues date back to the 4th century AD. In fact, during the Eastern Han period, the interaction between Buddhism and the diverse native cultures of different regions of China took on different characteristics. Based on the newly discovered 、 bronze Buddha statues in Shaanxi indicates that there was orthodox Buddha statue worship and that Buddhist beliefs existed in the Chang'an area during the Eastern Han period in the mid-2nd century AD. In addition, the interaction of Buddhism with indigenous Chinese culture, beliefs and practices presents the following three aspects: 1) different understandings of Buddhism among different classes; 2) strong interaction with the beliefs and worship of Xiwangmu; and 3) inclusion in the Yin-Yang system. We find that they not only express the different understandings held by Chinese people on Buddhism in different regions and at different times, but also reflect a secularized form of belief in Buddhism in China. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to attempt to add to and revise the existing research.

Keywords: Bronze Buddha statues, orthodox Buddhism, secular Buddhism.

INTRODUCTION:

The state and form in which Buddhism existed after it was introduced to China in the Eastern Han dynasty is a major topic in academia. According to the traditional narrative, scholars generally believe that Buddhism was accepted by the Chinese because it was associated with Chinese traditional Taoism or alchemy. Tang Yongtong 湯用彤 concluded that “Han dynasty Buddhism was affiliated with alchemy” 漢代佛教, 附庸方術.¹ Zenryu Tsukamoto believed that when Buddhism was first introduced into China, it was combined with existing beliefs in the Yellow Emperor 黃帝 and Laozi 老子 and was regarded as “Taoist Buddhism”.² Stephen F. Teiser also thought that some of the earliest surviving written evidence concerning Buddhism in China suggests that devotees conducted sacrifices jointly to Laozi and the Buddha. Therefore, the general situation of Chinese religious practice is clear: Buddhism and Taoism were often conflated.³ During the hundred years from the time of Prince Ying to Emperor Huan the two systems were

¹ Tang Yongtong 湯用彤, *Hanwei liangjin nanbeichao fojiao shi* 漢魏兩晉南北朝佛教史 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1963), 57.

² Tsukamoto, Z. *A history of early Chinese Buddhism: from its introduction to the death of Hui-yüan*. (Vols. 1-2), tr. Leon. Hurvitz (Tokyo, New York, San Francisco: Kodansha, 1985), 248.

³ Stephen Teiser and Franciscus Verellen, *Buddhism, Daoism, and Chinese Religion* (Paris: Cahiers d'Extrême-Asie, Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient, 2011), 20 (1), 2.

intermingled to a considerable extent, with the newly introduced Buddhist faith being accepted as part of the Taoist system. This might be the reason why Buddhism was not mentioned separately in the dynastic history during those years.⁴

The question of how and why Buddhism was accepted by the Chinese people has been resolved by scholars arriving at essentially the same position from various points of discussion. In fact, these research findings originate from the previous century. In recent years, new archaeological evidence has gradually challenged and eroded traditional cognitive frameworks and perspectives. Yet, in addition to textual documents, the discovery in recent decades of numerous cultural artifacts with Buddhist themes has provided new ways of thinking about Buddhism in the Eastern Han dynasty.

The Buddhist artworks dating from the Eastern Han dynasty are mainly concentrated in two regions. The first region is Pengcheng 彭城 (present-day Xuzhou 徐州) and its surrounding areas, with finds including the Buddhist cliff images at Kong Wangshan 孔望山, Buddhist images in the Han tombs at Yinan 沂南, and the six-tusked white elephant at Tengxian 滕縣.⁵ The second area is the other Southwest region of China, i.e., Shu prefecture 蜀郡 and Qianwei prefecture 犍為郡, with artworks including the seated Buddha image at Ma Hao 麻浩 cave IX, the Shiziwan 柿子灣 Buddha image, the image of “one Buddha with two attendants” (一佛兩侍) at Pengshan 彭山, and the Buddha images featured on “Money Trees” 錢樹. As for the significance and characteristics of Buddhist art in the Han dynasty, Wu Hung summarized that although the key elements came from Indian Buddhist art, in the examples referenced above these elements have neither an inherently Buddhist content, nor a Buddhist religious function. Rather, as novel forms, they served to enrich the representations of Chinese indigenous cults and traditional ideas. It would be misleading to identify these works as early Chinese Buddhist art and take them as the true embodiment of the original Buddhist meaning. In fact, these works cannot even be seen as reflecting a fusion of Buddhism and the Chinese tradition. They only reflect a random borrowing of Buddhist elements by Han popular art. In my opinion, this was the dominant situation when Buddhist art was first introduced into China. In this tenuous way, nevertheless, Buddhist art gradually gained a foothold in a vast and unfamiliar land.⁶ Indeed, early Buddhist artworks tend to be highly dependent on and influenced by their new environment in China, especially as they are often surrounded by traditional Chinese elements, and more importantly, the space and place in which the Buddha appears is different from that in India. Therefore, in form and function, they were considered to be quite different from artworks designed for Buddha worship in India. However, the

⁴ Kenneth K.S. Ch'en. *Buddhism in China, a historical survey* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1964), 48.

⁵ Yu Weichao 俞偉超, “Donghan fojiao tuxiang kao” 東漢佛教圖像考 *Wenwu*, 1980(5):68-77.

⁶ Wu Hung, “Buddhist Elements in Early Chinese Art (2nd and 3rd Centuries A.D.),” *Artibus Asiae*, vol. 47.3-4 (1986): 273.

discovery of the “Yan Xi” 延熹 Buddha statues strongly challenges these traditional conclusions.

In May 2021, the excavation of the family cemetery of the Eastern Han period at the Chengren cemetery in Xianyang, conducted by the Shaanxi Academy of Archaeology, has yielded two bronze Buddha statues in M3015. The typological characteristics, manufacturing techniques, and chemical compositions demonstrate that the statues bore Gandhāra and Mathura styles but were manufactured locally. It is important that on the earthenware pitcher recovered from tomb M3019, there is a legible inscription dating back to the first year of the Yan Xi (AD158). Researchers at the Shaanxi Academy of Archaeology claim that these two bronze statues represent the earliest examples of individually patronized Buddhist statues found in China.

1 The characteristics of the “Yan Xi” Buddha statues and orthodox Buddhist worship

1.1 Scientific analysis of the “Yan Xi” Buddha statues

It has even been suggested that these sculptures, because of what has been perceived as a strong Gandhāra appearance, could be foreign images imported into China. However, the result of ingredient analysis shows that they are clearly of Chinese origin. Table 1 presents the analytical results from the Chengren statues, table 2 present results for statues from Gandhāra region. The analysis employs macroscopic visual observation, ultra depth of field microscopy, x-ray photographs, scanning electron microscopy and energy dispersive x-ray spectroscopy microscopy, and metallographic analysis. Results show that the two bronze statues were made of leaded tin bronze through mold-casting. In addition, a plug-in structure for assembling, polishing and drilling was employed. The compositional characteristics and casting methods show distinctive differences from the manufacturing techniques of bronze statues in the Gandhāra region. Instead, the similarity with the techniques used for the Shang-Zhou bronzes suggests that these Gandhāra-style objects were probably locally made.⁷

| Object | Position | Compositional Characteristics (wt%) | | |
|----------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------|-------|
| | | Cu | Sn | Pb |
| Sitting Buddha | On the right side of back (1) | 55.60 | 29.02 | 15.39 |
| | On the right side of back (2) | 51.36 | 30.41 | 18.23 |
| | On the left side of back edge | 44.25 | 32.79 | 22.96 |
| Standing | The front of the left | 49.10 | 32.46 | 18.44 |

⁷ Li Jianxi 李建西, “Xianyang Chengrenmu chutu donghan jintong foxiang kexue fenxi” 咸陽成仁墓出土東漢金銅佛像科學分析, *Kaogu yu wenwu* 2022.1:123-28.

| | | | | |
|--------|----------------------|-------|-------|-------|
| Buddha | arm | | | |
| | Nose | 76.10 | 17.58 | 19.56 |
| | Left ear | 76.10 | 8.47 | 15.43 |
| | Backside | 69.10 | 11.77 | 19.13 |
| | The edge of the base | 73.71 | 12.02 | 14.26 |

Table 1 The compositional characteristics of Yan Xi Buddha Statues
(Table adapted from Li Jianxi (2022))

| Number | Name (Buddha Statue) | Era | Style | Compositional Characteristics | | | |
|--------|----------------------|--|----------------|-------------------------------|-------|------|------|
| | | | | Cu | Zn | Sn | Pb |
| 1 | Bodhisattva Statue | 3 rd -4 th centuries | Gandhāra style | 96.81 | 1.74 | 0.70 | 0.25 |
| 2 | Sattva Statue | 5 th -6 th centuries | Gandhāra style | 79.55 | 16.2 | 0.4 | 2.6 |
| 3 | Sakyamuni Statue | 6 th century | Gandhāra style | 67.5 | 13.9 | 1.4 | 11.5 |
| 4 | Sakyamuni Statue | 7 th century | Swat style | 78.10 | 19.09 | 0.26 | 1.42 |

Table 2 The compositional characteristics of Central Asia Buddha Statues
(Table adapted from Li Jianxi (2022))

1.2 The shape of Buddha Statues

1.2.1 Standing Buddha

The sculpture of the Standing Buddha has a flat *uṣṇīṣa* and the figure is positioned on a lotus pedestal (Fig.1). The Buddha is dressed in a monk's robe of a shoulder-covering style with visible folds and displays a sturdy and solid aspect. The drapery of the Standing Buddha's robes is complex and varied in terms of the subtle textural qualities, and the multiple folds are clear and natural. Over the shoulders, the Buddha's robe forms a plain, smooth area. The layout and style of the robe is similar to that of the Harvard Buddha⁸.

⁸ Harvard Buddha is known as the Seated Buddha Shakyamuni in Meditation with Flaming Shoulders. It is

As Marilyn M. Rhie pointed out, this method of depiction is especially used in the Swat sculpture form for rendering the effects of the robe pulling tightly over muscular shoulders. It seems to be a pattern in Swat sculpture extending through the third to the fourth century.⁹ From the left shoulder to the right shoulder, the garment lines are radially spread, and a large U-shaped drape covers the chest and knees. The robe on either side of the thigh has a thick rim fold, with riblike creases in the center. To demonstrate quiet meditation, the head is gently cocked to the right. The head itself is powerfully and realistically portrayed with characteristics of clean, sharp features. Although the section of the right hand is quite damaged it would seem that it is positioned in the *abhaya mudra*, while the left hand is holding the hem of the robe.

Bombay Museum houses a Buddha statue unearthed from Sanhao, and its overall appearance and upper body shape are similar to that of the Yan Xi Standing Buddha.¹⁰ A nirvana Buddha statue in Lahore Museum, Pakistan, has almost the same facial features and expressions as the Yan Xi Buddha.¹¹ This period in which these objects were created, covered by the four or five decades of Kushan rule, is in some ways the most fascinating in the history of the Gandhāra art school, when it was in a formative, adolescent stage.¹² On the subject of drapery and monk robes, John Marshall has admitted the workmanship from this period is rough and perfunctory, and the standard is incomparably below that of the Partho-Hellenistic work of an older generation, but the artist does not content. He models them boldly and not ungracefully, in such a way as to bring out their substance and depth or, in technical phraseology, their tridimensional effect.¹³ The shape and technical rendering of the robe of the Yan Xi Standing Buddha statue are consistent with the characteristics of Gandhāra's "adolescence" era in Buddhist art.

1.2.1 *Sitting Buddha*

This unusual, 15.8cm high gilded bronze of five seated Buddhas was also unearthed in the Chengren's tomb (Fig.2). The front face consists of three levels, with two seated Buddhas carved in the middle and lower levels, while a seated Buddha is engraved on the center axis of the top level. The five seated Buddha figures were carved in relief together, with the hands of each Buddha placed flat in the lap in the meditation mudra. Despite the worn-out and partially damaged state of the Buddha statue, the *uṣṇiṣa* on the head and the oval-shaped aureole behind it are still clearly discernible. Its overall shape resembles a miniature shrine, and it is now part of the collection of the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco.¹⁴ As Rhie described that "this unusual, 3-inch-high gilded bronze object is fashioned with a number of sculptures and panels to form what appears to be a miniature opened shrine. An irregular, triangular shape, it is cleverly made with one side, presumably the front with

collected Harvard University, Chinese, Six Dynasties period, 3rd–early 4th century Gilt bronze. The resources originate from: <https://eaa.fas.harvard.edu/media-gallery/detail/753336/3236506>.

⁹ Marilyn M. Rhie, *Early Buddhist Art of China and Central Asia, vol. 1: Later Han, Three Kingdoms and Western Chin in China and Bactria to Shan in Central Asia* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 77.

¹⁰ John Marshall, *The Buddhist Art of Gandhāra: The Story of the Early School, its Birth, Growth and Decline* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960), 45, fig.69.

¹¹ Ibid., 48, fig.72.

¹² Ibid., 40.

¹³ Emile Durkheim. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. tr. Karen E. Fields (New York: Free Press, 1995), 52.

¹⁴ Marilyn M. Rhie, *Early Buddhist Art of China and Central Asia, vol. 1: Later Han, Three Kingdoms and Western Chin in China and Bactria to Shan in Central Asia* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 68.

a standing Buddha, in the form of a shrine with curved top.”¹⁵ The front of this Buddhist shrine is divided into three levels. The top level features a seated Buddha, the middle level houses a standing Buddha, and the bottom level contains two seated Buddha figures placed side by side. Taken as a whole, the front portion of the shrine possesses a resemblance to the overall composition of the Yan Xi seated Buddha, in very simplified form.

The Buddhist images we have mentioned that appear on other Buddhist artworks from Northern China are different to the Chengren examples, because here we have an example of a Buddha image with strong “Gandhāran” characteristics. Because of the lack of holes for suspending these Buddhas by a cord or chain, they do not appear to be intended for use as objects hung on the body, and since they seem to be self-contained and portable, they were probably not part of a large grouping or configuration.¹⁶

The dating of these two Buddha figures to AD158 endows them with a special stature and significance as being the oldest examples, especially the Standing Buddha, of a standard Gandhāra style. Therefore, with respect to the other Eastern Han Buddhist images, the Standing Buddha represents a full-fledged and mature, orthodox Buddha image. Its emergence signaled the Buddha’s separation from the Han dynasty’s intricate system of gods. Indeed, the Buddha was worshipped as an independent idol which represents the assimilation of Buddhist beliefs into the popular customs and culture of China. As Rhie summed up, the significance and status of the Harvard Buddha is as follows:

While the Kong Wangshan Buddhist images are mixed with images of popular belief, and the works from the tombs of Sichuan have their varied functions as a supernatural spirit within the tomb environment, the Harvard Buddha represents yet another function—that of the serious practitioner of the Buddhist religion and its sutras. This image represents a faith beyond that of mere worship of a supernatural being, but one linked to the deepest practices carried out by Buddhist monks.¹⁷

In fact, there is no known inscription on the Harvard Buddha, and some scholars believe it was created in the 3rd or 4th century.¹⁸ In contrast, the Standing Buddha from the Chengren’s tomb is a more credible example of early Buddhist practice.

From the middle of the 2nd century to the first decade of the 3rd century AD, a number of Buddhist teachers and translators, who were foreigners of diverse origin, were active at Luoyang 洛陽. As Rhie pointed out, we should remember that in China during the Eastern Han period Parthian communities were thriving, particularly in the capital of Luoyang but probably also in Chang’an 長安 (the traditional name of present-day Xi’an 西安). Furthermore, along with the Yuezhi and Sogdians, Parthians apparently comprised the

¹⁵ Ibid. 68.

¹⁶ Ran Wanli 冉萬里, “Xianyang Chengrenmu chutu donghan jintong foxiang yanjiu”咸陽成仁墓出土東漢金銅佛像研究, *Kaogu yu wenwu* 2022.1:83.

¹⁷ Marilyn M. Rhie, *Early Buddhist Art of China and Central Asia, vol. 1: Later Han, Three Kingdoms and Western Chin in China and Bactria to Shan in Central Asia* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 92.

¹⁸ Kristin A. Mortimer and William G. Klingelhofer, *Harvard University Art Museums: A Guide to the Collections Arthur M. Sackler Museum William Hayes Fogg Art Museum Busch Reisinger Museum* (Cambridge and New York: Harvard University Art Museums and Abbeville Press, 1986), 24; Stephan Wolohojian and Alvin L. Clark, Jr., *Harvard Art Museum/ Handbook*, ed. Stephan Wolohojian (Cambridge: Harvard Art Museum, 2008), 30; Christoph Baumer, *The History of Central Asia: The Age of the Silk Roads* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2014), 48, fig.30; Leopold Swergold, *Thoughts on Chinese Buddhist Gilt Bronzes* (Leopold Swergold, 2014), 16-17.

majority of merchants engaged in the trade between China and the West along the Silk Road at that time.¹⁹ The arrival in 148AD of a Parthian missionary, An Shigao, at Luoyang marked the beginning of a period of intense activity.²⁰ Unfortunately, our knowledge about the Buddhism in Chang'an in the second century is extremely scarce: official texts do not even mention the existence of Buddhism. However, the discovery of the two Buddhas has provided sufficient evidence of Buddhism in Chang'an. In addition, another piece of evidence comes from the works of Han literature, in the *Xijing fu* 西京賦, where Zhang Heng (張衡, 78–139AD) states: “Even (the virtuous) Zhan Ji or a *śramaṇa* – who could not be captivated by them?”²¹ 展季桑門, 誰能不營? In this passage, Zhang Heng is describing the seductive beauty of the women in the imperial harem, applying emphasis to their seductive powers through the use of contrasting literary phrases. Zhan Ji, commonly known as Liu Xiaohui 柳下惠, was from the state of Lu 魯 and lived during the 7th and 6th centuries BC. He was famous for his high moral standards and virtuous conduct. Obviously, Zhang Heng is using a rhetorical device to demonstrate, by analogy, that the Buddha (*śramaṇa*) has the same qualities as Zhan Ji. Indeed, *Hou Hanshu* also records a story about the Buddha rejecting the beautiful girls offered by a heavenly spirit.²² In other words, the evidence suggests there should be quite a few believers familiar with Buddhist precepts in Chang'an.²³ *Xijing fu* was written by Zhang Heng in the early 2nd century AD, indicating that Buddhism in Chang'an had already developed by that time. As Rhie concluded, both the popularized and the orthodox expressions of Buddhism appear concomitantly according to the responses of different members of the Chinese society at that time. As is fully confirmed by the written records, both secular expressions responding to the needs of the populace and the religiously serious work of the translators in Luoyang for the advanced pursuit of the dharma communities were part of the early movement of Buddhism in China at the end of the Han dynasty. The Buddhas of the M3015 tomb were not only largely symbolic, but also held a strong religious meaning. One should remember that in India for several centuries after the Buddha's Parinirvana, Buddhist art was largely aniconic and symbolic. The more human stage, with the portrayal of a super-human-like Buddha, only emerged around the 1st to 3rd century AD. Therefore, these Buddha images inherit the realistic and naturalistic feel of Gandhara's early Buddhas. In their plastic and ethnic character, the M3015 tomb's Buddha figures are products of the age and place in which they are found; their descent

¹⁹ Marilyn M. Rhie, *Early Buddhist Art of China and Central Asia, vol. 1: Later Han, Three Kingdoms and Western Chin in China and Bactria to Shan in Central Asia* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 90.

²⁰ Zürcher, E., *The Buddhist conquest of China. The spread and adaptation of Buddhism in early Medieval China* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 32.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 29.

²² Margarita Angelica Delgado Creamer, *The Funerary Buddha: Material Culture and Religious Change in “The” Introduction of Buddhism to China*, (Doctor Dissertation) (2016), 53.

²³ See: Thanh, Minh. *The Brahma Net Sutra* (New York: Sutra Translation Committee of the United States and Canada, 2011). According to the sutra, of the ten major bodhisattva precepts, the fourth is as follows: 4. Not to engage in licentious acts or encourage others to do so. A monk is expected to abstain from sexual conduct entirely.

from Indian culture is evident, and they reflect a considerable level of religiosity and patronage. The fact that the Buddha figures could be permitted in the tomb implies that the tomb's owner believed in Buddhism and wished to maintain his faith after his death. These artifacts reflect the authentic usage of Buddhist icons in the Indian tradition of serious Buddhist practice and worship. The Buddha figures are not just a selective absorption of Buddhist elements, but instead they demonstrate that genuine religious images of Buddhism had occupied a dominant position in the minds of some people. The mainstream of early Buddhist art in China did not develop from or emerge out of the art with Buddhist elements that is observed mostly in funerary contexts. Both types are important expressions of early Buddhism in China, each of a different character and function, with the Buddha figures of the M3105 tomb providing the best evidence that there was orthodox Buddha statue worship and Buddhist beliefs existed in the Chang'an area during the Eastern Han period in the mid-2nd century AD.

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|  |  |
| <p>Fig.1 Standing Buddha Source: Shaanxi Academy of Archaeology</p> | <p>Fig.2 Five Seated Buddhas Source: Shaanxi Academy of Archaeology</p> |

1.3 Futu Slip of Xuanquan and Early Dunhuang Buddhism

A Han bamboo Slip numbered VI91DXF13C② : 30 was unearthed in Xuanquan ruins.

Since there is a term “Futu (浮屠)” in the text of this Han slip, this Han slip was named “Futu Slip of Xuanquan”. The Futu Slip recorded some information about the early Dunhuang Buddhism, and it was the only Han slip that records Chinese Buddhism (i.e., Dunhuang Buddhism) up till the present moment. The text of “Futu slip” was as follows.

(Main body) “Less alcohol and slight entertainment. A disciple Tantang invited again.” (少酒薄樂，弟子譚堂再拜請)

(Small text of left) “Appointment at 23rd of this month, small Futu Village seventh door

enter from the west.” (會月廿三日，小浮屠裡七門西入)²⁴

The discovery of this “Futu slip” provides a new research field for researching Dunhuang Buddhism and Chinese Buddhism. “Futu slip” helps us to understand the time and the route of introducing Buddhism into Dunhuang from the perspective of archaeology. This section first introduces the previous related studies about “Futu Slip”, and then puts forward to our standpoints.

1.3.1 The nature of “Futu Slip”

This “Futu slip” was first quoted by Defang Zhang in 2009. Defang Zhang interpreted “Less alcohol and slight entertainment” (*shaojiubaole* 少酒薄樂) as “Tantang expostulated with himself and others that they should drink less alcohol and not indulge in entertainment.” As for “A disciple Tantang invited again” (*dizitantangzai baiqing* 弟子譚堂再拜請), “disciple” (*dizi* 弟子) was regarded as a self-deprecating language; “Invited again” (*zai baiqing* 再拜請) was a common language in Chinese letters; “Appointment at 23rd of this month” (*huiyue23ri* 會月廿三日) was the appointment time. There were four interpretations in the dictionary for “Futu”: 1) Buddha; 2) Buddhism; 3) Monk; 4) Pagoda. Since a term “small (xiao 小)” was in front of the term “Futu”, the interpretation was monk or pagoda here. Meanwhile, there was a “Village”(Li 裡) behind the “Futu”, so “small Futu Village” (*xiaofutuli* 小浮屠裡) was the basic administrative organization of Han Dynasty. As for “seventh door enter from the west” “(*Qimenxiru* 七門西入)”, Defang Zhang thought that this sentence was incomplete, so he did not analyze it.²⁵ Summarizing, since there were Buddhist terminologies in the text of this “Futu slip”, such as “disciple” and “Futu”, Defang Zhang thought that this “Futu slip” was a letter or an invitation between monks and disciples. However, some scholars present different opinions. Firstly, the interpretation of “less alcohol and slight entertainment” was different, they thought that it was polite expression when inviting others. Secondly, the interpretation of “*Huiyue* (會月)” was supplemented as “make an appointment on one day of the current moth”. Moreover, “seventh door enter from the west” should be interpreted as the location and the orientation of the appointment place. “Seventh door” was the serial number of the rooms in “Futu Village”, or it maybe the number of a room. And “enter from the west” should be the orientation of the room.²⁶

²⁴ *XuanQaunHanJianYanJiu*, 185.

²⁵ Shusheng Hao & Defang Zhang. 懸泉漢簡研究 *XuanQaunHanJianYanJiu* (Lanzhou:Gansu wenhua chubanshe, 2008), 191.

²⁶ Chongliang Zhao, Xuanquan futujian bian zheng (“懸泉浮屠簡”辨正), *Nanfang wenwu* 南方文物, no.4(2011):33-36; Yongping Li, Dunhuang xuanquanzhi yu yizhi F13chutu bufen jiandu wenshu xing zhi ji 71

Together these above studies provide important insights into the “Futu slip”, and these studies contribute in several ways to our understanding of “Futu slip” as follows.

“Small Futu Village” is a basic administration organization in the Han Dynasty. “Seventh door enter from the west” is the location and the orientation of Tantang’s room in the “Futu Village”. Based on the above conclusions, we further analyze the nature of “Futu slip”.

1.3.2 The religion significance of “Futu Slip”

“Futu Slip of Xuanquan” was unearthed from F13 at ruins of Xuanquan. There were also 13 bamboo slips unearthed from F13, which have specific temporal information. The earliest one was dated in 51AD, and the latest one was dated in 108AD. Therefore, the period of “Futu slip of Xuanquan” should belong between 51AD and 108AD. After confirming the period and nature of “Futu Slip of Xuanquan”, we analyze the source of early Dunhuang Buddhism according to the text of the “Futu slip”.

The name of “Li” (裡) was inextricably linked to the social activities and education function in the Han Dynasty. Some names have the function of Confucian edification, such as “Zunde Li” (尊德里), “Rende Li” (仁德里); Some names contain Taoist culture, such as “Dushu Li” (都術裡); And some names contain the custom and location information.

Obviously, a village was named “Xiao Futu Li”(小浮屠裡), which not only reflected the evidence of the Buddhism existence, but also highlighted the social influence of Buddhism. There is a similar record in Chinese historical book.

Sun Quan gasped in admiration and consequently had a stupa built for the śarīra. Because this was the first monastery, they named it Jianchu [Establishing the beginning] monastery 建初寺. They also named that place “Fotuoli”(佛陀裡) [Buddha village]. Following this incident, the Great Teaching flourished in the region to the left of the Yangzi.²⁷

Throughout the Han Dynasty, there were about 70-100 families in a big “Li”; In a medium “Li”, there were about 35-50 families; In a small “Li”, there were about 23-30 families; In the smallest “Li”, there were about 10 families. Statistics show that there were 7748 families and 29170 people at Dunhuang county in 140AD. Because of data’s insufficiency, it is not easy to draw a conclusion that how many peoples there are in each “Li” at Dunhuang. Dunhuang county was near Zhangye county. There were 7748 families and 29170 people at Zhangye county, almost 30 families every “Li”. It can be observed that the average number of people in each family is about 4, and the average number of people per “Li” is about 120. Similarly, we infer that there is a Buddhist faith group with the number of about 100 in “Xiao Futu Li” of Dunhuang.

2 Secularized Buddhist belief in the Eastern Han Dynasty

In recent years, Buddhist researchers, historians, and artists have worked tirelessly to study

fanying de donghan zao qi li shi, 敦煌懸泉置於遺址 F13 出土部分簡牘文書性質及反映的東漢早期歷史, The nature of a wooden slips with inscription unearthed from F13 at the ruins of Xuanquanzhi Dunhuang and the reflected historic factor of the Eastern Han Dynasty, *Dunhuang yanjiu*, 敦煌研究, no.5(2010):105.

²⁷ Hui Jiao. *Gaosengzhuan* (Biographies of Eminent Monks 高僧傳), (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1992), 16.

and analyze Chinese early Buddhist art. These scholars have attempted to address a conundrum: In what form did Buddhism exist when it was introduced into China during the Han dynasty, given that China was quite different from India in terms of cultural traditions, religious beliefs and social organization structure?

The lack of literature is the biggest obstacle to understanding how Buddhist images were used in the Eastern Han dynasty, despite the fact that Buddhist art, inscriptions, coins, and other cultural artifacts related to Buddhism give us useful information for seeking the “historical truth” of the spread of Buddhism. Generally speaking, if the evidence of the cultural relics is in conflict with the text data or there is a contradiction between them, the cultural relics evidence is often treated as a local feature or anomaly to be solved. As a result, we now generally believe that the original worship function of Buddhist art images was lost after they entered Chinese tombs. To put it another way, the consensus belief is that there is no religious meaning to these Buddhist-influenced Han dynasty works of art. In fact, when we look again at these Buddhist artworks, several of them actually represent other then-currently-popular interpretations of Buddhism that had secular connotations. In the 1st and 2nd centuries AD, the Chinese people’s knowledge of Buddha mostly takes the following forms.

2.1 Buddha and Laozi

The Buddha and Laozi were both worshipped and sacrificed together, according to the literature. For example, “The King of Chu recites the subtle words of Huanglao, and respectfully performs the gentle sacrifices to the Buddha” 誦黃老之微言, 尚浮屠之仁

祠.²⁸ Xiang Kai 襄楷(?-?) comes to speak about the emperor’s addiction to sensual pleasures: “Moreover, I have heard that in the palace sacrifices have been performed to Huanglao 黃老 and the Buddha” 宮中立黃老, 浮屠之祠.²⁹ Judging from the literature, the phenomenon of worshipping Buddha and Laozi together appears only among the ruling class. Although Laozi appeared frequently in Han paintings, the worship phenomenon in which Buddha and Laozi coexist is not depicted, implying that different classes have different understandings of Buddha’s function. *Yongpingqiufa* 永平求法是 the

symbolic event of Buddhism’s introduction into China, and it has an official nature in a sense. According to this viewpoint, the ruling class was the first to come into contact with the essence of Buddhism, which is perhaps the ruling class did not bring the Buddha statue into the tomb because of this.

2.2 Buddha and Xiwangmu

2.2.1 Buddha and the Money Tree

The Buddha and the Xiwangmu 西王母 were the most common cultural phenomena in the Eastern Han dynasty, which was centered primarily in the Southwest. By comparing the positions of the Xiwangmu and the Buddha statue in the money tree, He Zhiguo 何志

²⁸ Translated by Zürcher. E. see, Zürcher. E, *The Buddhist conquest of China. The spread and adaptation of Buddhism in early Medieval China* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 27.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 37.

國 concluded that the Buddha statue, like the Xiwangmu, was regarded as the main god and occupied the same position. Wu Hung believes that the Buddha statue and the Xiwangmu not only correspond but can also be interchanged.³⁰

The majority of academics have compared Buddha sculptures to the Xiwangmu, frequently neglecting the contrasts between them. Whether it is in the money tree branch, the top, or the base, the image of the Xiwangmu is at the center of the iconography. In contrast, Buddha statues are sometimes arranged in the middle of the trunk, such as in the money trees found in Hanzhong 漢中, Mianyang 綿陽 and other places (Fig.3, Fig.4). Obviously, the different positions adopted by the Buddha and the Xiwangmu indicate different functions.



Fig.3 Seated Buddha.

Source: He Zhiguo 何志國, *Hanwei yaoqianshu chubu yanjiu* 漢魏搖錢樹初步研究 (Beijing: Zhongguo kexue chubanshe, 2007), 44, pl.2–44.



Fig.4 Seated Buddha

Source: He Zhiguo 何志國, *Hanwei yaoqianshu chubu yanjiu* 漢魏搖錢樹初步研究 (Beijing: Zhongguo kexue chubanshe, 2007), 139, pl.6–37.

Susan N. Erickson has concluded that the money tree is an *axis mundus* 天梯, a world axis, which may require a guardian figure to ward off inauspicious elements. She concludes: The types of motifs chosen to adorn the tree are directly related to auspicious and apotropaic imagery popular during the Han dynasty period. The pervasive theme involving the quest for immortality includes references to ingredients for elixirs, to those who make or have taken the drug of immortality, and to the deity most closely associated with the elixir – Xiwangmu. Other motifs refer to the notion of traveling to the heavens in carriages or on the backs of real or fantastic creatures. There is a great deal of conformity in the selection of motifs which express the common desire for an abundant and happy afterlife. The unique aspect of the money tree is the melding of this theme to the structure of a tree.³¹

³⁰ Wu Hung, “Buddhist Elements in Early Chinese Art (2nd and 3rd Centuries A.D.),” *Artibus Asiae*, vol. 47.3-4 (1986), 297.

³¹ Susan N. Erickson, “Money Trees of the Eastern Han Dynasty,” *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities*, 66 (1994): 21-27.

The Buddha became enlightened under a tree; therefore, it is not a contradiction to combine the Buddha and the money tree. In other words, it should be a routine and intentional act, not a random borrowing of Buddhist elements by Han popular art.

In terms of the combination of the Buddha and the money tree, we find two types that are well-developed and quite explicitly represent a form of popular iconography. These money trees coalesce to produce an image which makes tangible one Han dynasty conception of the way to gods' realm, thus the idea of reincarnation (*samsara*), or cyclic existence, could be symbolized by the Buddha's repetition in the trunk. The Buddhist concept of reincarnation differs from others in that there is no eternal "soul," "spirit" or "self" but only a "stream of consciousness" that links life with life. The actual process of change from one life to the next is called *punarbhava* (Sanskrit) or *punabbhava* (Pāli), literally "becoming again," or more briefly *bhava*, "becoming."³² A well-preserved money tree is held by Chongqing Guoyou Museum³³, in which six Buddhas are set at intervals on the trunk. Buddhist cosmology typically identifies six realms of rebirth and existence: gods, demi-gods, humans, animals, hungry ghosts and hells.³⁴ The six Buddhas are symbolic of these six states.

In fact, the more noteworthy examples are shown in Figures 3 and 4; in both of these cases, the money trees are adorned with six Buddha figurines. The gods' realm is represented by the treetops, and the main Buddha is positioned on top of the money tree, indicating that he is the monarch of the gods' realm. The other five realms are represented by the remaining five buddhas. Besides Buddha, the large cicadas are symbols of longevity and rebirth. These money trees are obviously not just *mingqi* 冥器 symbolic objects, but are closely tied to the themes of transcendence and transformation which are essential to the notion of rebirth and reincarnation.

In conclusion, trees are also important elements in legends that concern death and renewal.³⁵ Furthermore, when associated with Buddha, the money tree represents the never-ending repetitive cycle of birth and death. Indeed, this suggests that the introduction of Buddhist concepts into Southwest China has influenced Chinese people's perceptions of the hereafter. However, given our present state of knowledge, this idea remains hypothetical: the function of the Buddha images is not as straightforward as it would seem. Scholars have highlighted the fact that the use to which the Buddha image was first put did not fulfill a Buddhist religious function, in the sense that they were not used as an item of worship.³⁶ Furthermore, as Wu Hung argues, the Buddha figure was interchangeable with the figure of Xiwangmu. In my view, this interchangeability is only a hypothesis. Despite the fact that Xiwangmu entered the Chinese spiritual and religious realm at an early time, she and the Buddha both appeared in the money tree around the same period. There are some noticeable differences: while Xiwangmu is frequently placed in the center of the treetop and the branches, the Buddha has been found on the trunk and on top of the tree.

³² Nagaraj, A. K., Nanjagowda, R. B. and Purushothama, S. M., "The mystery of reincarnation," *Indian Journal of Psychiatry*, 55 (Suppl 2) (2013), 440.

³³ The majority of the money trees gathered are broken and incomplete. See, He Zhiguo 何志國, *Hanwei yaoqianshu chubu yanjiu* 漢魏搖錢樹初步研究 (Beijing: Zhongguo kexue chubanshe, 2007), 200–01.

³⁴ Patrul Rinpoche and Dalai Lama, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher: A Complete Translation of a Classic Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism* (Lanham: Rowman Altamira, 1991), 61–99.

³⁵ Susan N. Erickson (1994), p.21.

³⁶ Margarita Angelica Delgado Creamer, *The Funerary Buddha: Material Culture and Religious Change in "The Introduction of Buddhism to China"*, (Doctor Dissertation) (2016), 111–12.

This implies that the Buddha serves a purpose and has a religious significance that the Xiwangmu lacks.

Furthermore, Pengshan County is 77km south of Chengdu, Sichuan Province (known as Bashu 巴蜀 in ancient times). In 1946, a Buddha pedestal was unearthed from Tomb M166.

A Buddha with two attendants were carved on a circular pedestal (Fig.5), with the three figures represented with mudras. The Buddha is sitting cross-legged, apparently there is an *uṣṇiṣa*, and his right hand is in the *abhaya* mudra and the left hand is holding the hem of the robe. A dragon and a tiger are carved on the left and right sides of the circular pedestal, respectively, with a coin etched in the middle. The Pengshan pedestal Buddha statue also indicates that the Xiwangmu and the Buddha have completed the replacement, expressing the functional similarity between the two.³⁷ The Dragon and Tiger flanking throne 龍虎座

is one typical image of the Xiwangmu in Southwest China in the Eastern Han dynasty. The throne is a mythical animal with two heads at each side. One is that of the dragon and the other of a tiger, with the heads of the two mythical beasts facing in opposite directions.³⁸ However, the two fabled animals, a dragon and a tiger, are facing each other in the Pengshan Buddha statue flanking throne, and between the dragon and the tiger there is suspected to be a jade. There should be more to the connection between the Xiwangmu and the Buddha statue at Pengshan than just an image exchange. Although it is hard to arrive straightaway at the deep and truly explanatory features of their religious significance, it is both necessary and possible to point out a certain number of readily visible outward features. From the visual and material point of view, the “exotic” characteristics of the Buddha have been deliberately emphasized and described. What’s more, this “exotic” characteristic shows a guiding role at the level of meaning and belief.

As mentioned above, in the discussion of Buddhist art in Southwest China, there was no uniform representation of the Buddhist elements, nor was there one single function. In the case of Figure7, the Buddha image appears in the most prominent location in the center of the antechamber above the entrance to the unfinished middle tomb shaft, at the location to receive offerings, one of the important functions in a tomb or mausoleum according to Chinese custom.³⁹




The Shifang Pagoda (Fig.6) gives us reason to believe that there were probably some Buddhist communities in the area or, to put it another way, the Pagoda had become an object of worship for some of the local inhabitants. This is evident as guardians, attendants, and worshippers in early Buddhist art are represented with a flower, or as cauri-bearers, or with folded hands. These types appear as members of a triad in art long before the central figure is anthropomorphically represented. As a result, Buddha and Xiwangmu appear to coexist as gods with different functions and religious meanings, at least in Southwest China. Likewise, each Buddhist artwork has a definite meaning, sometimes secular, sometimes

³⁷ He Zhiguo 何志國, “Changjiang liuyu hanjin xiwangmu tuxiang dao foxiang de zhuanbian—jiantan hanjin xiwangmu yu foxiang de gongneng” 長江流域漢晉西王母圖像到佛像的轉變—兼談漢晉西王母與佛像的功能, *Yishu kaogu* 2007.1:97-98.

³⁸ Tong Tao 全濤 and Zou Fudu 鄒芙都, “Xiwangmu longhuzuo zaoxing yuanyu xifang kao” 西王母龍虎座造型源於西方考, *Xinan shifan daxue xuebao (renwen shehui kexue ban)* 2006.3: 35.

³⁹ Marilyn M. Rhie, *Early Buddhist Art of China and Central Asia, vol. 1: Later Han, Three Kingdoms and Western Chin in China and Bactria to Shan in Central Asia* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 49.

sectarian.

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| Fig.5 Buddha pedestal, Pengshan County, Sichuan Province | Fig.6 Pagoda, Shifang County, Sichuan Province | Fig.7 Seated Buddha, Mahao Cliff Tomb (IM1), Sichuan province |

2.2.2 The syncretism of Buddha and the Yin-Yang system

Another early Buddha image was found in the tomb at Yinan, Shandong province. Yinan belongs to the Langya district 琅琊, and it is contiguous to Pengcheng. The era of the Yinan tomb was the Han Emperor Huan period. In the mid-chamber of the tomb, on four main sides of an octagonal pillar, there are carvings of Dongwanggong 東王公, Xiwangmu and two standing Buddha figures. Dongwanggong wears a flat-topped cap and is located to the east of the octagonal pillar. Xiwangmu wears an elaborate flower hat and is located to the west of the octagonal pillar. Their hands are concealed inside long, wide sleeves, and both are holding flat ceremonial objects in their arms.

The two standing figures with halos above their heads, located to the North and South of the octagonal pillar, are in positions matching those of Dongwanggong and Xiwangmu. The North and South figures are dressed in narrow-sleeved tops and short skirts with tassels. They are clearly dressed in a barbarian's style. A protuberance on the head suggests an attempted *ushnisha*, but on top of it there is a small cap or a ribbon. The two figures stand

with their feet spread to the side. The halo and *ushnisha* are typical symbols of the Buddha.

This Buddha has a dual halo above his head, is dressed in a shoulder-covering robe in a symmetric style, with the robe hanging on the chest in a U shape. The Buddha's hair is tied severely in a bun that appears like a *ushnisha*. Owing to these mixed iconographic features, the two figures in the Yinan tomb are definitely intended to represent Buddha.

In the Han dynasty, the belief system surrounding immortality was formed with Xiwangmu and Dongwanggong at the core, and they are in charge of the Elixir of Immortality. The Han people hoped to attain immortality after death. Meanwhile, the Kunlun Mountains are sacred mountains connecting heaven and earth, and are the central pillar between heaven and earth. The carving of the Xiwangmu and Dongwanggong, who are shown as seated

on the Kunlun Mountains 崑崙山, expresses the tomb owner's wish to become an immortal. These deities were introduced during the Eastern Han Dynasty, uniting the principles of the Yin-Yang scheme with the Xiwangmu as the Yin 陰, and the Dongwanggong acting as the Yang 陽.⁴⁰

In addition, the wall of a tomb antechamber in Heligeer 和林格爾, Inner Mongolia 內蒙古, has been dated to the middle of the Eastern Han period. In a patch of the wall, to the north of the Dongwanggong, there is a painting of a pan 盤 shaped vessel, inside of which there are "four globular items". To its upper right, there is a two-character label reading shēli 猞猁.⁴¹ As Yu Weichao has argued, the shēli is a Buddhist symbol and represents the legend of the conception of the Buddha.

In the funeral world of Chinese people, gods are diverse and multidimensional. They are endowed with extremely powerful functions and can meet some wishes of the world before and after death. But at the same time, the functions of these gods are not only used for funerals. Xiwangmu did not serve funerals at first. Therefore, the appearance of Buddha statues in the funeral space does not mean that it is the only way for Chinese people to understand Buddhism. In other words, Buddha statues should not be directly classified as tomb art.

According to Albert Reville, "Religion is the determination of human life by the sense of a bond joining the human mind with the mysterious mind whose domination of the world and of itself it recognizes, and with which it takes pleasure in feeling joined".⁴² In the first place, there are great religions from which the idea of gods and spirits is absent or in which they play only a secondary and inconspicuous role. This is the case in Buddhism.⁴³ Buddhism, says Burnouf, "takes its place in opposition to Brahmanism as a morality without god and an atheism without Nature".⁴⁴ However, according to Burnouf, "the belief universally accepted in India that great holiness is necessarily accompanied by supernatural faculties, is the sole support that he (Śākyamuni) had to find in spirits."⁴⁵

In addition to the Buddhist artworks mentioned above, some Buddhist elements, such as the six-tusked white elephant ⁴⁶ and lotus, are also incorporated into the Chinese traditional concept of auspiciousness, demonstrating how different people absorb Buddhism and Buddhist elements. To put it another way, "everyone takes what they need". We must know how to reach beneath the symbol to grasp the reality it represents and that which gives the

⁴⁰ Ann Heirman and Stephan Peter Bumbacher, *The spread of Buddhism* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 210.

⁴¹ Yu Weichao 俞偉超, "Donghan fojiao tuxiang kao" 東漢佛教圖像考 *Wenwu*, 1980.5:68-77.

⁴² Albert Reville, *Prolégomènes de l'histoire des religions* (Paris: G. Fischbacher, 1881), 34.

⁴³ Emile Durkheim. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. tr. Karen E. Fields (New York: Free Press, 1995), 28.

⁴⁴ Barth Auguste, *The Religions of India*, tr. Rev. J. Wood (London: Trübner & Co., 1882), 110.

⁴⁵ E. Burnouf. *Introduction à l'histoire du buddhisme indien* (Paris: Imprimerie royale, 1844), 119.

⁴⁶ Kan Lao, "Six-Tusked Elephants on a Han Bas-Relief," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 17, no.3/4 (1954): 366-69.

symbol its true meaning.

Fundamentally, then, there are no religions that are false. All are true after their own fashion: All fulfill given conditions of human existence, though in a different way.⁴⁷ According to the *Hou Hanshu*, in the middle of the 1st century AD, there were already early sangha organizations or settlements in the Pengcheng region. As Emile Durkheim pointed out, the necessities of existence requires all of us, believers and unbelievers, to conceive in some fashion religious things in the midst of which we live, about which we continually make judgements, and of which our conduct must take account.⁴⁸ There is no definitive answer as to when and where the Buddha sculptures first appeared; however, during the Kusana Empire, the Buddha images appeared on gold coins with various other Greek or Indian gods, demonstrating that the Buddha symbols do not only occur in places of worship. Obviously, these early Buddhist symbols carry some human need and convey some aspect of life, whether social or individual. Before it was introduced into China, Buddhism, as a very complex religion, had a rich text, complex ideological system, perfect institutional structure, and unique tradition of artistic expression. Not all Buddhist components and Buddhist ceremonies were accepted and chosen during the early phases of Buddhism's spread. Identifying elements that chimed with elements of one's own religion was a direct way of syncretism. Certainly, religious change triggered by cultural contact used to be described as syncretism without much need of clarification. And we clearly agree with Stewart's claim that "syncretism describes the process by which cultures constitute themselves at any given point in time."⁴⁹ In other words, the early Buddha statues or Buddhist symbols seem to be isolated, but they are the product of Chinese people's selective appropriation of Buddhist elements. Indeed, Herber Spencer makes out religion basically to consist of "the belief in the omnipresence of something that goes beyond the intellect".⁵⁰ Looking back at the evolution of Xiwangmu's image, we can see that she has gradually transformed from an animalized image with a ferocious appearance into a personified deity, whereas Laozi is a historical figure who has been deified. The Buddha shares not only Xiwangmu's supernatural ability, but he is also, like Laozi, a great historical man who was worshipped throughout history for his educational function. This could be one of the reasons why the Buddha was naturally accepted by the Chinese people. The fundamental task of sacred beings has been to maintain the normal course of life by position action. So, Buddha and Buddhism acquired their characteristic status in China. Religious beliefs proper are always shared by a definite group that professes them and that practices the corresponding rites. Not only are they individually accepted by all members of that group, but they also belong to the group and unify it. The individuals who comprise the group feel joined to one another by the fact of common faith. Members of a society are united because they imagine the sacred world and its relations with the profane world in the same way, and because they translate this common representation into identical practices.⁵¹ As a religion, in the initial stage, the spread of Buddhism to China was not purposeful and intentional; instead, it was a religion that was unconsciously accepted and

⁴⁷ Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, tr. Karen E. Fields (New York: Free Press, 1995), 2

⁴⁸ Ibid., 21-22.

⁴⁹ Stewart, C., "Relocating Syncretism in Social Discourse," in *Syncretism in Religion*, ed. A. M. Leopold and J. S. Jensen (New York: Routledge, 2004), 274.

⁵⁰ Herber Spencer, *First principles* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1862), 37.

⁵¹ Otto. Bernd-Christian and Stausberg. M, *Defining magic: A reader* (Sheffield: Equinox Publishing, 2013), 114.

recognized by the Chinese during the process of ethnic interaction. Apparently, the unconscious spread of Buddhism is also not systematic, which explains a phenomenon: why did a variety of Buddhist artworks appear during the Eastern Han dynasty? According to their religious needs, the Chinese selected acceptable parts and elements from the vast Buddhist system. Buddhism's regionalized characteristics indicate that its development in China is a gradual process of construction and integration. Buddhism's spread does not follow a predetermined path, nor does it adhere to a predetermined set of beliefs. For some Chinese Buddhist believers, Buddhism is first and foremost an imaginary tradition. However, the syncretism also has another feature, suggesting a limitation in how the Chinese populace deal with and make sense of Buddhism. Therefore, early Buddhism (before the 3rd century AD) showed different forms and manifestations of syncretism in China at different time points and regions. The notion of syncretism means that there are ways in which things will be transformed such that some aspects of them will change but others will remain the same. Compared with Indian Buddhism, Chinese Buddhism can be described as "creative Buddhism", as it retains some of the characteristics of Indian Buddhism while also incorporating a distinct Chinese way of understanding. This "creativity" accompanied Buddhism until it was fully sinicized in the 7th century.

Conclusion

To summarize, since the introduction of Buddhism into China, people of different classes and regions have had varying attitudes and ways of accepting Buddhism. Early Chinese Buddhist artworks, according to various members of Chinese society, were more than just tomb artworks; they represented the people's belief in a secularized form of Buddhism. At the same time, the Buddha statues discovered in Chang'an have significance as serious and orthodox objects of worship. Indeed, contact between the two religious cultures has been mutual from the start, with each borrowing religious elements from the other. Buddhism in China in the 1st and 2nd century AD displayed traits of orthodoxy and secularization, which was caused by the varying levels of acceptance and comprehension of Buddhism among the Eastern Han dynasty's populace. In other words, the Eastern Han dynasty was a time of free dissemination and diffusion of Buddhism, as well as a period when Buddhism was first "transformed".

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