A Tentative Study of Buddhist Statues from the Southern Dynasties Unearthed in the Chengdu Region

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Buddhist statues from the Southern Dynasties are very rare. Since the last days of the Qing dynasty, a number of Buddhist statues have been gradually retrieved at the sites of Wanfosi 万佛寺, Shangyejie 商业街, and Xi’an Zhonglu 西安中路 in Chengdu 成都, and at Maowen 茂汶 county, Sichuan 四川 province. According to published inscriptions on the dated statues, these statues were carved during the Southern Dynasties, before the second year of the Yuanjia reign period of the Liu Song dynasty and the Liang dynasty. Dated sculptures include two figures from the Qi, 10 pieces from the Liang, two pieces from the Zhou of the Northern Dynasties, and a collection of undated statues that are identified as Liang. These statues may be grouped into three categories: single engravings in the round, engravings in high relief with pointed haloes, and stele-statues. Adopting methods of archaeological typology in comparing these dated statues, we acquired a rough picture of the rules governing the typological and stylistic changes from the Qi to the Liang. The statues are hence attributed to three stages.

Stage I lasted roughly from the first year of the Yongming reign period of Qi (AD 483) to the Putong reign period of Liang (520–526). During this transitional period not many statues were carved. Statues sculpted during the Yongming period are models of delicacy. They include the Buddha wearing an ample-gowned and loose-girdled kasaya and a tripartite skirt, and a meager-faced Bodhisattva wearing a three-pronged crown and a shawl crossed in the abdomen. Few of these statues reveal signs of a robust body. As for the combination of statues, usually three figures share one plinth. Most statues represent the Buddha of Infinite Life and Maitreya, while some represent Guanyin. There are two types of statues belonging to this stage: the old type of “delicate figures” and the newly emerged “type of the Zhang family” associated with Zhang Sengyao of the Liang. All these statues fully represent characteristics of the transitional period.

Stage II lasted approximately from the Putong reign period of Liang (520–526) to the year in which the Western Wei dynasty took Yizhou 益州 from the Liang (553). This stage is the maturity period for the Liang statues. Once again, statues may be divided into two categories: one is stout Buddha with ample-gowned and loose-girdled kasaya—the statue dedicated by Hou Lang is an example; the other is Buddha Mathura type which had been newly introduced from central India and was now very popular. A typical model of the second type is the figure dedicated by the Heir of the Prince of Poyang: a tight kasaya up to his shoulders covers his stout body, and his drooping frill falls on his right side forming a trough. The statue of Aśoka is another example. Like the just mentioned image, Aśoka also wears a kasaya up to his shoulders, the folding frill tightly wraps his body, and the veins of his clothes form bar-like sharp ridges. There is an obvious increase in the number of figures on the same plinth—including, among others, one Budha, four Bodhisattvas, two disciples, and two attendants. The majority of statues represent Sakyamuni Buddha, followed by Guanyin and Aśoka. Another characteristic of this stage is the emergence and prevalence of twin figures such as the twin standing Buddhas, and twin figures of Guanyin.

Stage III lasted from the Western Wei to the Northern Zhou (553–581). This stage saw further
development of the Liang statue types and assimilation of northern statue types. The statue of Asoka carved upon the order of Yuwen Zhao of the Northern Zhou is just like a duplicate of one from the Liang period, and it looks as if the two were works of the same master. This indicates that, the typology and iconography of the Northern Zhou statues mainly inherited the Liang features.

The main source of statues of Chengdu was the Buddhist center Jiankang 建康 (present-day Nanjing 南京) in the lower reaches of the Yangzi River. For instance, the combination of the Buddha of Infinite Life and Maitreya is the result of the equal worship of these two Buddhas in the regions south of the Yangzi River. Worship of the Buddha of Infinite Life and Guanyin were also one feature of Buddhism in those regions. “Delicate statues” and stout statues belonging to “type of the Zhang family” prevailed successively in the areas south of the Yangzi River. Emperor Wudi of the Liang dynasty invited Buddhist from Gupta India, resulting the emergence of the type of Buddha Mathura. During the Southern Dynasties, when the princes left the capital to reside in their dependencies, they usually invited learned monks to accompany them there to popularize Buddhism. During the Liang dynasty, Xiao Yuanzao, Xiao Hui, the Poyang Prince and his son and Xiao Ji, as well as the Prince of Wuling all invited learned monks to accompany them when they went to Yizhou (present-day Chengdu) as provincial governor. They also had many temples built and Buddha images carved. From this one may infer that the various types of statues from Sichuan, whether they belong to the old type of “delicate statues,” “type of the Zhang family,” or to new types from Gupta India, are likely to be introduced by the Buddhist provincial governors and learned monks have been come from Jiankang.

We also noted cross-legged Maitreya images from the Qi and Liang periods. One example is a statue carved in the 8th year of the Yongming reign period of the Qi. This statue sits in a room-like niche; on the front is Maitreya while on the back is cross-legged Maitreya. In other words, two Maitreyaas appear in the same statue. No such statues were discovered in regions south of the Yangzi River, but such statues were very popular in the Central Plains from the Sixteen Kingdoms to the Northern Dynasties. The earliest appearance of the cross-legged Maitreya is in the western regions of China, and this image type prevailed over a wide region in northern China. Since Yizhou is relatively close to Chang’an 长安 and was a transfer station from regions south of the Yangzi River to the western frontiers of China, many missionaries and monks passed through this city. For this reason it is likely that such statues were introduced to Chengdu from the western regions.

Since the origin of cause of the Chengdu statues is in the regions south of the Yangzi River, they ought to be representatives of statue types of the Southern Dynasties. So we may explore connections between statues of the Southern Dynasties and those of the Northern Dynasties from the costumes and subject matter of the Chengdu statues. One instance is the tripartite skirt, which occurs on statues from the Northern Dynasties found in Chang’an and the regions west of Chang’an. It was an imitation of the tripartite skirt seen on the Chengdu statues from the Yongming reign period of the Qi. Prototypes of other features may also be found in these statues: the prevailing crown decoration of Bodhisattvas in the Longmen 龙门 Cave temples and the Gongxian 巩县 Cave temples, the double-pointed circular shawl in the back heads of flying Apsaras and the lions raising one paw. Another example is the collection unearthed at Xiude Temple 修德寺 at Qi-yang 曲阳 in the 1950s. Among them are large quantities of twin standing Buddhas and twin standing Bodhisattvas and twin Meditation Buddhas from the Northern Qi and Sui dynasties, which rewards of the prevalence of twin statues in Chengdu. The newly emerged combination of one Buddha, two disciples, and four Bodhisattvas may also have found inspiration in the Liang statues such as those found in Chengdu. Hence we may come to the conclusion that Buddhist statues such as those in Chengdu exerted considerable influence on statues from the Northern Dynasties.

Yizhou was an important political, economical and cultural center in the upper reaches of the Yangzi River. During the Six Dynasties, the route from the regions south of the Yangzi River to the western frontiers of China went upstream from Yizhou westward (this section was called the Henan Route). Traveling monks mostly followed this route and played an important role in the development of Buddhism in Yizhou. After the central government of Jin moved to the south of the Yangzi River, the
Central Plains suffered frequent wars and learned monks from the Central Plains, the Hexi Region, and Chang'an also moved to the south of the Yangzi River and to Sichuan. This background contributed greatly to the flourishing of Buddhism in Sichuan. In spite of this, Yizhou was only a transfer station in the spread of Buddhist culture and the development of Buddhism was much farther backward than in Jiankang. Consequently, the subject matter and types of Buddhist statues were mainly introduced from Jiankang, and less influenced by western regions.

References Cited


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