Archaeological Discovery and Examination of the Money Trees Picture and Buddhist Images in Southwestern China

Huo Wei*

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The so-called “money tree”, is a kind of special burial article popular during the Han Dynasty to the Three-Kingdoms Period in Southwest China centered by Sichuan Basin. Its name is given because it is cast with bronze imitating a tree and coins with square hole are cast on trunk and branches in addition to mythological figures and animals, and the academic accepted this name. During the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression (1937–1945), a money tree was found from a cliff tomb in Pengshan County, Sichuan, and on the base of the tree a Buddha image was seen; this might be the first “Money Tree Buddha Image” found archaeologically. Having similar date to another one on the door lintel of the sacrifice-offering shrine of a cliff tomb at Mahao, Leshan City, Sichuan Province, this Buddha image is considered to be one of the earliest Buddhist images in China. After the year 1949, especially through the archaeological excavations and surveys in recent years, many new cases of “Money tree Buddha image” have been discovered and invaluable data accumulated for our researches on this issue.

The Discoveries of “Money Tree Buddha Image” and Their Typical Features

So far, the “money tree Buddha images” have been mainly discovered by archaeological fieldwork; some accidentally unearthed ones were scattered and collected abroad. However, only the ones scientifically unearthed are as many as almost 40 cases, mainly unearthed or gathered in Sichuan and neighboring Guizhou Provinces (Figure 1); the “money tree” unearthed in Chenggu County, Shaanxi Province could be seen as the product of “Han Kulturkreis” centered by Sichuan Basin (Figure 2). As for the positions of Buddha images on the trees, we find roughly three types: the first is cast on the tree base, which is represented by the money tree unearthed from Pengshan Cliff Tombs; the second is cast on the tree trunk, the cases of which took the bulk of all three types and can be represented by the money trees unearthed at Hejiashan, Mianyang City and Tujing, Zhongxian County; the third type, which showed only one case from the money tree unearthed in Chenggu County, Shaanxi Province, is set on the top of the tree. The Buddha images of all three types are not very large (generally 6–7 centimeters tall) but showing special shaping characteristics.

First, these Buddha images showed common features: 1. all of them have high usnisa atop the head; some of them have urna on the forehead and upward furling mustache; 2. all of the Buddha images are in parvanka posture (“lotus position”, sitting cross-legged) with right hand in abhaya-mudra (fear-not gesture) and left hand grabbing lower hem of his robe and 3. all of the Buddha images are wearing robe covering both shoulders with pleats on the chest sagging into a U-shape. All of these features recall us the characteristics of Buddhist imaging of Gandhâra Art.

Second, the money tree Buddha images have similar shaping styles to other types of early Buddha images appeared in Sichuan region. For example, a relief Buddha image found on the door lintel of the sacrifice-offering shrine of Cliff Tomb No. 1 at Mahao, Leshan City in 1940 had almost identical features with the money tree Buddha images. Meanwhile, two other Buddha images found on door lintel of Cliff Tomb No. 1 at Shiziwan, Leshan City in 1940 also have the same shapes

* Department of Archaeology, Sichuan University, Chengdu, 610064, China
and styles with the one found at Mahao. These common features proved that the money tree Buddha images and early Buddha images of other types had the same origin and external influences.

Third, the money tree Buddha images, although have had relatively formalized postures and details, still have some obvious non-Buddhist traces. For example, a money tree Buddha image in a Japanese private collection has observable wing-shaped protrusions stretching sideways on shoulders (lost already), which was feature of Chinese traditional immortals such as Xiwangmu (Queen Mother of the West) and like. Therefore, these Buddha images were still in the Chinese traditional immortal worshipping system if we see them in their complete context.

The Chronology of the Money Tree Buddha Images and the Comparative Observation of Them and the Early Buddha Images in Neighboring Areas

Almost all of the archaeologically discovered money tree Buddha images are found in burials. In 2001, a money tree base made of fine clay pottery was unearthed from Tomb M9 in Caofanggou, Fengdu County, Chongqing; a date inscription “Made on the tenth day, the fifth month, the fourth year of Yanguang Era (125 CE)” was found on this pottery base and fragments of bronze sitting Buddha cast on the tree trunk with similar details to that of the above-mentioned ones of the second type are found together with this base. The intact and restorable “money tree Buddha images” do not have precise chronological marks but their believable dates could be inferred by comparing the remains accompanied with them and their burial context to those ones with exact dates. Roughly, this kind of money tree Buddha images earliest appeared in the later period of the Eastern Han Dynasty, became popular in the Shu-Han area of the Three-Kingdoms Period and vanished gradually since the end of Shu-Han Kingdom; in other words, they existed in the period between the later 2nd century CE and the middle 3rd century CE. However, recently some researchers pointed out that the Buddha images in the Mahao and Shizhiwan Cliff Tombs, which have been once dated as in the Eastern Han Dynasty, might have been carved as late as in the Jian’an Era of the Eastern Han (196–220 CE) through the end of Shu-Han Kingdom (234–265 CE); no matter it is correct or not, the early
Buddha images in Sichuan region including the money tree Buddha images would be mainly popularized in the later period of the Eastern Han Dynasty through the end of Shu-Han Kingdom.

In North China and the Central Plains, images reflecting Buddhist influences might have emerged in the Eastern Han Dynasty, such as the figures of “Immortal riding a White Elephant” and “Sheli (lit. lynx; here might mean Sarīra)” in Horinger Han Mural Tomb and the figure of “Six-tusked Elephant” in the scene of the stone relief tomb in Tengzhou (former Tengxian County) City, Shandong Province, which was attributed by Professor Yu Weichao into “Eastern Han Buddhist Images” but disagreements are still in academic field. Even these images were indeed showing Buddhist influences, they did not directly show Buddha’s figure itself. The only case which is similar to the “money tree Buddha images” found in Sichuan and could be called “early Buddha image” is a Buddha image in a stone relief tomb excavated at Yinan County, Shandong Province in 1953. About the date of the Yinan stone relief tomb, there had been sharp controversies, some of which believed that it was built in the Eastern Han Dynasty while some announced that it would have been built in the Three Kingdoms Period to the Eastern Jin Dynasty. However, along with the confirmation of the date of another relief stone tomb in Cangshan County, Shandong Province, the common understanding is tending to date it as in the later period of the Eastern Han Dynasty.

Up to now, no archaeological data of early Buddha images have been found within the realm of the Wei Kingdom of the Three-Kingdoms Period, which covered North China and the Central Plains. The earliest examples of Buddhist images found in this area so far are some gilt bronze Buddha statues in Gandhara art style. These gilt bronze Buddha statues, which have formalized shapes and styles and some have precise date inscriptions, are clearly product of idolatry. From these gilt bronze Buddha statues, some features similar to that of “money tree Buddha images” found in Sichuan. For Example, the gilt bronze Buddha statue with the date inscription “the Fourth Year of Jianwu Era (of the Later Zhao State, 338 CE)” collected in Asian Art Museum of San Francisco and another one cast in the later half of the 4th century CE (now collected in Tokyo National Museum, Japan), both have high usnīsa atop the head and wear robes covering both shoulders with pleats on the chest sagging into U-shape. These features resemble those of the early Buddha images in Sichuan region. In addition to these features, a gilt bronze sitting Buddha statue made at the end of the 3rd century CE, which is collected in Fogg Museum of Harvard University, has several wing-shaped protrusions stretching upward on both shoulders: this reminds us some features of the earlier money tree Buddha images. However, a chronological gap did exist between the end of the Eastern Han Dynasty and the Sixteen States Period; with the evidence mentioned above, we can only assume that the gilt bronze Buddha statues of the Sixteen States Period might have absorbed and applied some skills and styles of the early Buddha images in Sichuan area but cannot do direct comparative studies between them.

In the territory of the Wu Kingdom, which was coexisting with Wei and Shu-Han Kingdoms and located in the middle and lower reaches of Yangtze River, some archaeological data about early Buddha images are also discovered. Two of the main categories of early Buddha images are: 1. the Buddha images cast on bronze mirrors; 2. Buddha images attached to celadon “soul jar” as decoration like other attached or embossed human or animal designs. There are two types of bronze mirrors decorated with Buddha images, one of which is so-called “Huawen Dai Fo Shou Jing (Wide Image-Band Buddha and Beast Mirror)” and the other more popular one is the “Foxiang Kui Feng Jing (Buddha and Dragon and Phoenix Mirror)”. The archaeological cases of “Buddha and Dragon and Phoenix Mirror” are mainly found in Zhejiang, Jiangsu, Hubei, Hunan and Jiangxi provinces, which were mostly in the domain of Wu Kingdom; mirrors of this type flourished in the middle and later periods of Wu Kingdom (around 240–280 CE) and were still popular in the Western Jin Dynasty, the remnants of which could occasionally be seen in remains of the Eastern Jin Dynasty. The Buddha images on these mirrors or celadon wares were mostly in the following shapes: one shape is sitting Buddha images, including sitting in “lotus position” or in “half-lotus position (sitting with one leg pendant and the other’s ankle resting upon the pendant one’s knee)”, both in “meditation” mudra; the other shape is Buddhist-related images such as apsaras and so on.

The comparison of the early Buddha images (or Buddhist-related images) in the two regions showed us that the Buddha images on mirror of the Wu system and those on money trees of the Shu-Han system have some differences: 1. the Buddha image sitting in “half-lotus position” and apraras of the former system are not seen
in the latter system, while the Buddha images of the posture with right hand in abhaya-mudra and left hand grabbing lower hem of robe are not seen in the former either; 2. the more than one Buddha images appearing on one object of the former system are in various postures; for example, the four sets of Buddha images on a Buddha and Beast mirror unearthed from Ezhou City, Hubei Province are shown as front view in paryanka posture on dragon-and-tiger throne and profile in “half-lotus position” on lotus throne; on the contrary, the Buddha images appearing on a single object of the latter system are just monotonous repeating of a stereotyped model; 3. the Buddha images of the former system are made mainly for emphasizing the shape and outline but the details are less cared about; however, the details of Buddha images of the latter system, such as usnisa, urna, mustache, dresses, etc. are strongly emphasized and exquisitely processed; this meant that the religious functions of the Buddha images of Shu-Han system are superior to decorative functions.

The fashion of attaching Buddha (or Buddhist-related) images as decoration on celadon wares, especially jars, mainly existed in the lower reach of Yangtze River during the 3rd to 4th centuries CE (Wu of the Three-Kingdoms Period to the Western Jin Dynasty). On the upper part of this type of celadon wares, sculptures such as architecture, human, beast and bird figures were usually attached or embossed as decorations, among which Buddha images were also set near the rims or bellies of these jars. The clearest distinction of these attached celadon Buddhist images from the “money tree Buddha images” of Shu-Han system was that almost all of them are in dhyana-mudra (meditation gesture) without exception found so far; the posture of right hand in abhaya-mudra and left hand grabbing lower hem of robe is never seen.

Chronologically, the early Buddha images in Sichuan region including the “money tree Buddha images” emerged earlier than the ones in the middle and lower reaches of Yangtze River, but they had a period of parallel development in the Three-Kingdoms Period. After the downfall of the Shu-Han Kingdom, the early Buddha images were getting vanished, but in the middle and lower reaches of Yangtze River, this kind of early Buddha images was still popular in the Western Jin Dynasty.

Through the above comparisons, we can draw a conclusion as the following: in the developing period from the 2nd to 3rd centuries CE, the early Buddha images in the upper reach and those in the middle and lower reaches of Yangtze River had many more differences than common features, therefore they would have been introduced into these two areas separately rather than from one to the other, and these two areas might have become two centers of receiving Buddhist influences. Observed typologically, the “Money Tree Buddha Images” in Sichuan region seemed to have more unified making rules or norms and understandings to the Buddha images. However, this does not naturally mean that the acceptance and development of Buddhism in this area were better than in other areas, but might be because of the environmental features of Sichuan basin, which was a relatively isolated region compared to the middle and lower reaches of Yangtze River. In some meanings, the more similarities between the early Buddha images in the upper reach of Yangtze River and those in North China and Central Plains might imply the common origins of Buddhist culture of these two areas.

**The Replacement of the Money Tree’s Central Figure – from Xiwangmu to Buddha**

As the carrier of “Money tree Buddha image”, the attributions and connotations of “money tree” are very rich. My opinion is that the money tree had tight relationships with Xiwangmu (Queen Mother of the West) worshipping. The positions on the money trees where Buddha images were seen, which was generally the most significant places, had once been taken by Xiwangmu. The figure of Xiwangmu on the money trees had similar styles and features to those on the stone relief or bricks with molded designs of the Eastern Han Dynasty in Sichuan region. From the later period of the Eastern Han Dynasty to the reign of Shu-Han Kingdom of the Three-Kingdoms Period, an extraordinary change took place on some money trees: the central figures of the money trees were changed from Xiwangmu to Buddha. The fact that this “Central Figure Replacement” occurred exclusively in Sichuan without similar cases in other areas could be considered as the reflection of a unique religious phenomenon occurred in Sichuan region in the 2nd to 3rd centuries CE from archaeological material.

The explanation of this religious phenomenon should be done with reference to the indigenous religious features of each region in the end of the Eastern Han Dynasty through the Three-Kingdoms Period. From the clues given in historic literatures, we can infer that the introducers of Buddhist imageries into Sichuan Basin might have been the “Barbarian people” or “Barbarian
monks” coming from the Northwestern Frontiers, or the Buddhist monks or lay believers from the Central Plains. However, the Buddhist imageries appearing on “money trees” did not confirm the appearance of Buddhist believing and worshipping. Firstly, the “money tree” as burial article was not idol of Buddhist worshipping but product of Chinese traditional immortality pursuit and deities and immortal worshipping. Secondly, because money trees had tight relations to Xiwangmu, I tend to explain it as or was related to the “Tianzhu (“Heavenly Pillar” something like Axis mundi)” in Kunlun Mountains Mythology System. Third, even though bearing Buddha images, the other images or designs on money trees still had clear features of immortal worshipping disagreeing with Buddhist culture but meeting Taoist motifs.

It is recorded in a Taoist scripture named Xuanda Luwen Zhang Biao Lu (the Rules of Memorial in the Mystical Capital Rules) that “the Rules said, that the Heavenly Master Jing traveled from Luoyang to Chicheng of the Shu Prefecture, the people (there) were corrupted but not honest, and the social manners were not upright; so (he) climbed the heavenly pillar and settled down in the heavenly gate, and issued a new rule.” This piece of historic record was created as late as in the Tang Dynasty, but it recalled the history that in the Heavenly Master Sect (or Five Pecks of Rice Sect) of Taoism, which flourished and transferred into Sichuan region in the later period of the Eastern Han Dynasty, had absorbed the concepts of Tianzhu and Tianmen (“Heavenly Gate”) in traditional deities and immortals worshipping system. Referred to the date and area of the emerging and distribution in Sichuan region, “money trees” might have some kind of relationships with the early types of Heavenly Master Sect (or Five Pecks of Rice Sect) of Taoism.

If we analyze this relationship between the early Heavenly Master Sect and money tree in the context of social condition since the end of the Eastern Han Dynasty in Sichuan, a deeper cause of this “Central Figure Replacement” might be found from religious background. The religious background is the legends of “Laozi’s Conversion of the Western Barbarians” popular at that time. It is written in the Tang Po Xie Lun (the Commentary on the Defeating of Heresy in the Tang Dynasty) in Vol. 11 of Guang Hong Ming Ji (Expanded Collection on Propagating the Light) that “the Canon says, the Spirit dispatched Zhang Ling, a Taoist priest, to the East to ask for Dharma from Buddha. It is also said in Zhang Ling’s anecdotal biography that Zhang Ling offered sacrifices to Gold Idol and changed to read Buddhist scriptures to Gold Idol and changed to read Buddhist scriptures in Heming Mountain.” Clearly, this is another version of the legend of “Laozi’s Conversion of the Western Barbarians” or “Taoism transformed into Buddhism”. In the context, the so-called “Gold Idol” would be explained as Buddha image, or “Taoist-adapted Buddha image”.

References


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