Research Square

Preprints are preliminary reports that have not undergone peer review.
They should not be considered conclusive, used to inform clinical practice,
or referenced by the media as validated information.

Revisiting the Dating of the Bronze Buddha Statues from the Chengren Han Tomb in Chang'an—With Reflections on Misconceptions in the Study of Early Chinese Gilt Bronze Buddhas

Wenjun Hu
Zhejiang Sci-Tech University
Lifan Yang
yanglifan@zstu.edu.cn
Zhejiang Sci-Tech University

Article

Keywords:

Posted Date: November 24th, 2026

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-10659934/v1

License: This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.
Read Full License

Additional Declarations: No competing interests reported.

Revisiting the Dating of the Bronze Buddha Statues from the Chengren Han Tomb in Chang'an—With Reflections on Misconceptions in the Study of Early Chinese Gilt Bronze Buddhas

Wenjun Hu [1], Lifan Yang [2]*

[1] Zhejiang Sci-Tech University, Hangzhou, China;583529583@qq.com;huwenjun@zstu.edu.cn
[2] Zhejiang Sci-Tech University, Hangzhou, China;
* Correspondence: .yanglifan@zstu.edu.cn

Abstract

In 2021, two small bronze Buddha statues were unearthed from the Eastern Han tomb complex at Chengren 成任 Village, Xianyang City, Shaanxi Province. The excavators dated them to the late Eastern Han period. They are considered the earliest independent gilt bronze Buddha statues ever discovered in China through archaeological means. This discovery is so significant that it may rewrite the history of Chinese Buddhist art. However, because the tomb had been looted in the past, many scholars argue that these statues are not Han products but were likely left behind by later robbers during the Sixteen Kingdoms (304–439) or Northern Wei (386–534) period. By reflecting on misconceptions in the study of early Chinese gilt bronze Buddhas, this paper re-examines previously under-discussed Han-period Buddhist materials and relevant texts—especially historical evidence concerning contacts between the Han court and Buddhist regions such as Tianzhu (India) around the first year of Emperor Huan's Yanxi 延熹 era (158 CE), as well as the emperor's personal acceptance of Buddhism and its subsequent spread among the people. It argues that the Chengren Buddha statues should be dated to the first year of the Yanxi era or earlier, and analyzes the historical basis and significance of their emergence during Emperor Huan's reign.

Keywords: Chengren Han Tomb, Dating of Buddhist Statues, Emperor Huan of Han, Xiang Kai, Gandhāra, Zerong.

1. Introduction

In 2021, two gilt bronze Buddha statues were unearthed from Tomb M3015 of the Eastern Han cemetery at Chengren Village, Xianyang. One is a standing Buddha, and the other is a flat plaque with five seated Buddhas in relief (Fig. 1). The excavation report, together with scientific studies on casting techniques and materials, has been published. The excavators believe these statues are independent Buddha images made locally in China during the late Eastern Han for idol worship. This discovery pushes back the appearance of independent devotional Buddha statues in China from the Three Kingdoms to Eastern Jin–Sixteen Kingdoms period (3rd to early 5th century) to the late Eastern Han (2nd to 3rd century), advancing the timeline by more than a hundred years (Shaanxi Kaogu Yanjiuyuan 2022, p. 27; Li Jianxi et al. 2022, pp. 123–128).



Figure 1. Two bronze Buddha statues unearthed from the Chengren tomb (heights: 10.5 cm and 15.8 cm respectively). After Shaanxi Kaogu Yanjiuyuan 2022, pls. 1–2.This figure is not covered by the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. copyright © Shaanxi Provincial Institute of Archaeology, all rights reserved.

However, since their publication, the dating of these two statues has sparked considerable debate. The tomb had a looters' hole (about 3.4 meters from the findspot), and the stratigraphic context was disturbed. Although the excavators believe that later intrusion can be ruled out, many scholars still argue that the statues may date to the Sixteen Kingdoms or Northern Wei period. Thus two main views have emerged: the "Han Dynasty theory" and the "Sixteen Kingdoms–Northern Wei theory."

Since neither archaeological stratigraphy nor scientific material analysis can definitively determine the date, both sides have focused on comparing the craftsmanship, form, and style of the Chengren statues with early Buddhas from India, Central Asia, and early China (Han to Sixteen Kingdoms). The former group, drawing on the tomb context, known Han examples, and comparisons with early Kushan Gandharan styles, argues that the Chengren statues follow the Kushan style and should be dated to the late Eastern Han. The latter group, while acknowledging similarities with Western styles, emphasizes that their form and technique are highly similar to later gilt bronzes of the Sixteen Kingdoms, Northern Wei, and even Gupta India, yet differ markedly from known Han examples. They therefore regard the statues as later intrusions from the Sixteen Kingdoms or Northern Wei.

In addition, the author observes that another important cause of the disagreement lies in differing views on the dating of Sixteen Kingdoms gilt bronze Buddhas. Scholars who advocate the "Sixteen Kingdoms theory" tend to assign a whole group of Buddha statues—whose dates are themselves disputed—to the Sixteen Kingdoms without careful distinction. Because the Chengren statues share strong similarities with this group, they are also dated to that period. In contrast, scholars who favor the "Han theory" challenge this broad classification. Thus, the dating of Sixteen Kingdoms Buddhas has become a key issue that cannot be avoided. To some extent, how one understands the Sixteen Kingdoms Buddhas forms a critical basis for dating the Chengren statues. Furthermore, both sides have not paid enough attention to Han-period textual sources on Buddhist history and art. In

particular, the unique historical background of Emperor Huan's reign—when the Chengren statues likely appeared—has not been fully explored, even by supporters of the Han theory.

This paper aims to revisit the debate. By reflecting on misconceptions in dating early "Sixteen Kingdoms" gilt bronze Buddhas, it places the Chengren statues within the stylistic sequence of early Buddhas from China, India, and Central Asia. It re-examines the origins of independent bronze Buddha images in the Han, and analyzes the particular historical conditions and opportunities that allowed such images to emerge during Emperor Huan's reign. This paper argues that from the reign of Emperor An 安 (with the Yan'guang 4th year, 125 CE, as a marker) onward, the Han already had the historical possibility of producing independent gilt bronze Buddhas. Yet the emergence of independent Gandharan-style bronze Buddhas in Emperor Huan's period was especially significant: it was driven by both external and internal factors—externally, by multiple embassies from Tianzhu, Parthia, and the Kushan Empire; internally, by Emperor Huan's personal acceptance of Buddhism and his role in its spread among the common people. The Chengren Buddha statues should be seen as representative works made by local artisans in or before the first year of the Yanxi era. Their appearance provides a new landmark for understanding the spread of Buddhist civilization and the history of Chinese Buddhist art.

2.The Dating of the Chengren Buddha Statues and Misconceptions in the Study of Early Gilded Bronze Buddhas

Based on published conference proceedings and articles, the current academic discussion on the Chengren Buddha statues centers primarily on the issue of dating. The arguments are mainly built upon three types of evidence: the tomb's depositional context, the stylistic features of the statues, and relevant Buddhist texts.

Scholars supporting the "Han Dynasty theory" include Ran Wanli, Li Ming, Huang Chunhe, Cui Mengze, as well as Western scholars such as Robert L. Brown, Wannaporn Rienjan, Wu Hung, Joe Cribb, and Juhyung Rhi.1 The view of Ran Wanli's team is particularly representative. They argue: "The bronze Buddha statues were found on the floor at the northwest corner of the main burial chamber of M3015, while the early looters' pit that disturbed the tomb is located at the western end of the tomb passage, 3.4 meters away from the findspot. Based on a comprehensive analysis of their relative positions and the likely motives for looting, the possibility that they entered the tomb through the looters' pit can be ruled out." At the same time, drawing on textual records of Han dynasty Buddhist history, they situate the Chengren statues within the broader historical context of Buddhist transmission during the Han, discussing the historical plausibility of the statues (Ran Wanli, Li Ming, et al. 2022). At the symposium "Discovering the Earliest Gilt Bronze Buddhist Statues in China," jointly organized by the Shaanxi Provincial Institute of Archaeology and UCLA, this view received support from scholars such as Robert L. Brown and Wannaporn Rienjan (Lei 2022a). Wu Hung, through a more detailed comparative stylistic analysis, re-examined the stylistic sequence of a representative group of early Chinese gilded bronze Buddhas and argued that the Chengren statues do not conform to Sixteen Kingdoms styles but rather belong to an earlier Han period (Wu Hung 2024, pp. 90–97). In 2025, at the "Gandharan Art and Silk Road Civilizations International Academic Conference" held at Zhejiang University, Joe Cribb and Juhyung Rhi also presented views supporting the "Han theory" from the perspectives of iconography and numismatics.

While the above scholars have provided valuable comparative analyses of forms and styles, their discussion of relevant texts remains insufficient. In particular, there is a lack of in-depth exploration of Buddhist transmission during Emperor Huan's reign—specifically around the first year of Yanxi (158 CE). Key questions remain unanswered: Why did gilded bronze Buddha statues appear precisely during Emperor Huan's reign rather than under other emperors? What were the specific conditions and opportunities that enabled the emergence of the Chengren statues?

On the other hand, scholars represented by Yang Xin, Yao Chongxin, Li Wenwen, Zhu Hu, and He Zhiguo advocate the "Sixteen Kingdoms theory."2 These researchers primarily conduct comparative studies of the Chengren statues with gilded bronze Buddhas from the Sixteen Kingdoms period, focusing on formal style, manufacturing techniques, and decorative details. They argue that features such as posture, facial appearance, hand gestures (mudrās), garments, and lotus pedestals closely match those of Sixteen Kingdoms bronze Buddhas, while differing significantly from Eastern Han Buddha images. They also identify clear influences from Gandhāra, Indian Mathurā, and even Gupta-period art. Additionally, they cite the precedent of a looted Han tomb in Shijiazhuang, Hebei, where Sixteen Kingdoms Buddha statues had been mixed in, to suggest that the Chengren tomb represents a similar case (Sun Dehai et al. 1959, p. 55).

For instance, Yao Chongxin has contributed two articles to this debate. He argues that the overall form of the Chengren statues clearly does not match the known formal characteristics of Han dynasty Buddha images, but closely resembles the well-known "Sixteen Kingdoms" bronze Buddhas (such as the example in a Japanese private collection, Fig. 2b). Furthermore, he points out that the earliest independent gilded bronze Buddhas in China can be traced to the Jin dynasty, as represented by the Harvard University Buddha statue (Fig. 8c), which exhibits clear and strong Gandhāran features. By contrast, the flattened and rounded facial features of the Chengren statues already display later "Sinicized" characteristics. Therefore, he concludes that the Chengren statues cannot be dated as early as the Han or Jin, but belong to the later Sixteen Kingdoms period (Yao Chongxin 2022, pp. 17–29; 2025, pp. 88–101). Yang Xin, He Zhiguo, Li Wenwen, and Zhu Hu focus on localized features such as lotus petal motifs, hair bun grooves, garment folds, and hand mudrās. They conduct detailed comparative analyses with Han money-tree Buddhas, Sixteen Kingdoms Buddhas, Northern Wei Buddhas, and even 3rd–5th century Gandhāran and Mathurān Buddha images, concluding that the Chengren statues exhibit non-Han elements in these details and are more consistent with the later Sixteen Kingdoms characteristics (Yang Xin 2022; Li Wenwen and Zhu Hu 2022, pp. 183–191; He Zhiguo 2023, pp. 123–131).

Dr. Zhang Liming offers an alternative perspective. He notes that although the two statues were excavated from the same tomb, they differ significantly in subject matter, sculptural features, artistic style, and alloy composition, suggesting they may have been made in different periods. Through comparative study with Sixteen Kingdoms and Northern Wei Buddha statues, he proposes a third view: the standing Buddha dates to the late Sixteen Kingdoms, while the five-Buddha relief plaque may be a Northern Wei work (Liming Zhang 2024, pp. 1–20). This observation draws more attention to the similarities between the five-Buddha plaque and Northern Wei multi-Buddha images.

To be sure, conducting stylistic comparisons between the Chengren statues and "Sixteen Kingdoms style" Buddhas, 3rd–5th century Gandhāran and Mathurān Buddhas, and even Northern Wei Buddhas is entirely legitimate and has yielded insightful results. However, the "Sixteen Kingdoms" materials selected by proponents of that theory—represented by two bronze Buddha statues in a Japanese private collection and the Shenzhen Jinshi Art Museum (Figs. 2b, c)—have uncertain dates. As Wu Hung has pointed out, most of the "Sixteen Kingdoms Buddhas" used for comparison lack clear inscriptions, and their dates are themselves questionable. They also span different materials (bronze, stone, pottery) and technical categories, so the loose designation "Sixteen Kingdoms" is not rigorous (Wu Hung 2025, p. 91). Lothar von Falkenhausen has raised a similar concern: past dating and classification of these so-called "Sixteen Kingdoms" small gilded bronze Buddhas may have been biased and should be re-examined (Lei 2022a). Therefore, comparative studies based on such chronologically uncertain cases require particular caution.



Figure 2. Early gilded bronze Buddha statues compared with the Chengren examples (Wu Hung 2024, p. 92). (a). Excavated from the Chengren tomb; (b). Japanese private collection; (c). Shenzhen Jinshi Art Museum collection.This figure is not covered by the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. copyright © Shaanxi Provincial Institute of Archaeology, Shenzhen Jinshi Art Museum,and Japanese private , all rights reserved.

Objectively speaking, Lothar von Falkenhausen and Wu Hung have very precisely identified a certain cognitive bias or misconception in the study of early Chinese Buddha images. This "cognitive bias" is closely related to a bronze Buddha statue with a clear dated inscription from the fourth year of Jianwu (338 CE) of the Later Zhao dynasty 後趙 (one of the "Sixteen Kingdoms" in Chinese history) (Fig. 3). This statue is the earliest known Chinese bronze Buddha with a clear date and is therefore well-known in the field, often serving as a

chronological reference point for early Chinese bronze Buddhas. For the sake of caution, previous scholars have tended to assign a whole group of early Chinese undated bronze Buddhas—regardless of stylistic differences—to the Sixteen Kingdoms period. Although this practice is not scientifically sound, this "undifferentiated dating" has indeed created a certain "cognitive bias" in practice: that the earliest independent bronze Buddha images in China appeared in the Sixteen Kingdoms or Jin dynasty.



Figure 3. Bronze Buddha with inscription on its base, dated to the fourth year of Jianwu (338 CE), Asian Art Museum of San Francisco. https://collections.aamstage.org/collection/seated-buddha-dated-338/ (accessed Ougust 19, 2026). This figure is not covered by the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. copyright © Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, all rights reserved.

However, according to reliable historical sources such as the Hou Hanshu (Book of the Later Han) and the Sanguozhi·Wuzhi (Records of the Three Kingdoms·Wu Annals), the historical record of Ze Rong 笮融 casting bronze Buddha statues at the end of the Han (192–193 CE) indicates that the actual starting point of independent bronze Buddha images in early China can be traced back to the late Han (Chen Shou 1982, p. 1185). Unfortunately, this crucial historical fact has not yet received sufficient attention in the academic community (see further discussion below). The upper and lower limits of early Chinese independent bronze Buddhas are thus relatively clear: from the late Han to the fourth year of Jianwu of the Later Zhao. Theoretically, for any bronze Buddha image whose date is uncertain—especially those that clearly retain early Gandhāran stylistic features—the "Sixteen Kingdoms" can at most serve as the terminus post quem (lower limit), while its upper limit could potentially be pushed back to the Han dynasty. This possibility should be taken into account in dating considerations.



a. b.

Figure 4. Gilt bronze Buddha statues with clear Sixteen Kingdoms dates. (a). Bronze Buddha dated to the fifth year of Taichang 泰常 (420 CE), provided by Hebei Museum; (b). Bronze Buddha dated to the second year of Shengguang 聖光 (429 CE), Osaka City Museum, Japan. After Jin 1994. This figure is not covered by the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. copyright © Hebei Museum and Osaka City Museum, all rights reserved.

Apart from the Jianwu fourth-year bronze Buddha statue in the collection of the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, there are a few other examples of gilded bronze Buddhas with clear Sixteen Kingdoms dates, such as the Taichang fifth-year (420 CE) bronze Buddha in the Hebei Museum (Fig. 4a), the Daxia Shengguang 勝光 second-year (429 CE) bronze Buddha in the Osaka City Museum (Fig. 4b), and the Northern Wei Zhengguang 正光 second-year (521 CE) bronze Buddha in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. These images have flat faces and East Asian facial features, with U-shaped robe folds on the chest that are flat and linear, with little sense of volume, displaying a high degree of Sinicization. A group of undated bronze Buddhas found in various museums across northern China (Figs. 5a–f), which are stylistically similar or identical to these dated examples, are also generally regarded by scholars as Sixteen Kingdoms works. These works differ markedly from the Chengren Buddha statues, which are relatively mature and exhibit early Gandhāran naturalistic style with three-dimensional realism. They are clearly not products of the same period. Therefore, the possibility that the Chengren statues belong to the Sixteen Kingdoms can be ruled out. Wu Hung has already provided detailed comparisons and discussions on this point, which I will not repeat here (Wu Hung 2024, pp. 90–97).



Figure 5. Undated "Sixteen Kingdoms" gilt bronze Buddha statues. (a). Bronze Buddha unearthed from Beisong Village, Shijiazhuang, Hebei, Hebei Museum; (b). Bronze Buddha from the Tianshui region, Gansu, Tianshui Municipal Museum; (c). Gilt bronze Buddha, National Palace Museum, Taipei, https://catalog.digitalarchives.tw/item/00/10/b4/d8.html (accessed Ougust 19, 2026); (d). Excavated from Yi County, Hebei, Hebei Provincial Institute of Cultural Relics; (e). Excavated from Baoding region, Hebei, Hebei Provincial Institute of Cultural Relics; f. Bronze Buddha from Jingchuan, Gansu; (a, b, d, e provided by Zhang Zhigang, f provided by Gansu Provincial Museum).This figure is not covered by the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. copyright © Zhang Zhigang, National Palace Museum, Taipeiand and Hebei Provincial Institute of Cultural Relics, all rights reserved.

Even if we grant for the sake of argument that the comparative examples are indeed Sixteen Kingdoms works (Figs. 2b–c), a simple conclusion still cannot be drawn. For the Chengren Buddha statues, when the tomb's stratigraphy cannot provide a definitive chronological relationship (a problem that is hardly resolvable and scarcely worthy of prolonged discussion), the "Sixteen Kingdoms" can certainly serve as an important chronological reference, but it must be clear that this can only serve as a terminus post quem (lower limit), not a terminus ante quem (upper limit). Considering that these are small mold-cast images, they were designed from the outset to be portable, mass-produced, and capable of circulating across time and space. Moreover, the durability of bronze material allows them to be passed down almost intact through generations (much like Han wuzhu 五銖 coins continued to be used into the Tang dynasty; Buddha images could have a similar effect). An important question arises from this: do Sixteen Kingdoms-style works constitute the only chronological yardstick for the Chengren Buddha statues? Furthermore, Sixteen Kingdoms Buddha images did not emerge out of nowhere; they must have had their own prototypes. Could the Chengren bronze Buddhas themselves have been such a prototype? Could Sixteen Kingdoms Buddhas have imitated the form of Han bronze Buddha images? All these questions require further investigation.

3. The Origin and Spread of Independent Gilded Bronze Buddha Statues around the First Year of Yanxi (158 CE)

Another major argument of scholars who advocate the "Sixteen Kingdoms theory" is that the style of the Chengren Buddha statues differs significantly from known Han-period Buddha images, and they contend that such mature independent gilded bronze images could not have appeared during Emperor Huan's reign (Yao Chongxin 2022, p. 24; He Zhiguo 2023, p. 126). Admittedly, the Chengren statues differ from Buddha images found on Han stone reliefs, pottery, and money trees. Yet these differences are not difficult to understand; they are the inevitable result of regional adaptation in the process of cross-cultural transmission, and such variations have long been observed among various types of Han-period Buddha images. It is precisely these differences that indicate Han Buddha images were not confined to a single fixed type, and they further highlight the need for more nuanced classification in the study of Han Buddhist iconography. To dismiss the Chengren statues as non-Han simply because of stylistic differences, while ignoring their fundamental iconographic commonalities with Han-period Buddhas, would be unjust.

First, existing archaeological evidence shows that gilded bronze Buddha images had already appeared in the Han period prior to the Chengren statues. A money-tree base inscribed with the date "made on the tenth day of the fifth month of the fourth year of Yan'guang 延光" (125 CE), together with its bronze Buddha figure, was unearthed from a Han tomb in Fengdu 豐都 County, Chongqing (Fig. 6). This confirms that by no later than the reign of Emperor An (106–125 CE), gilded bronze Buddhas in Gandhāran style were already circulating in the southwestern region. A group of similar money-tree Buddha images has been found across a wide area, including Mianyang, Guizhou, Yunnan, Hanzhong (Shaanxi), Baoji (Shaanxi), and Fang 房 County (Hubei).3 The "Yan'guang fourth year" inscription provides a chronological reference for this group of money-tree Buddhas, which are likely contemporary or close in date. Although they are cast as attachments on money-tree trunks and thus not independent Buddha images in the sense of religious worship, their iconographic features and forms strictly follow the main norms of Gandhāran Buddha style. The money-tree Buddha from Hejiashan Tomb No. 1 in Mianyang, which is the best preserved and most clearly defined, serves as a representative example (Fig. 7a): its face shows Aryan features, with large wide-open eyes, a high uṣṇīṣa, a curled mustache on the upper lip, and a U-neck robe. These features are highly consistent with early Gandhāran bronze Buddhas (Figs. 7b, c). This indicates that by 125 CE at the latest, the Chinese had already come into contact with—through foreigners—and mastered the iconographic knowledge of foreign Buddha images, and when making money trees, they strove to faithfully reproduce their original appearance.



Fig 6. (a). Inscribed pottery base with "fourth year of Yan'guang" (125 CE) from a Han tomb in Fengdu County, Chongqing; (b). Bronze Buddha on a money tree. From He Zhiguo, 2017, pp. 129, 58.This figure is not covered by the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.



Fig 7. (a). Money-tree Buddha from Hejiashan Tomb No. 1, Mianyang, provided by Yue Long; (b). Bronze Buddha on top of the reliquary from the Kanishka Stupa, Peshawar Museum, provided by the WeChat public account “ Zhengguanshang ” . https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/tRWoYBzn9tNakecQ4RX7Zw (accessed Ougust 19, 2026); (c). Early Gandhāran bronze Buddha (1st–mid-2nd century CE), Metropolitan Museum of Art, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/72381 (accessed May 10, 2026). This figure is not covered by the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. copyright © Yue Long, Peshawar Museum, and Metropolitan Museum of Art, all rights reserved.

Because Han-period Buddha images are often combined with the Queen Mother of the West (Xiwangmu), immortals, and auspicious symbols—clearly bearing connotations of pursuit of immortality—appearing on money trees, stone reliefs, murals, pottery bases, and bronze mirrors in Han tombs, scholars have almost universally agreed that these images do not function as independent objects of Buddhist worship. They have thus been labeled

"Chinese traditional deities resembling Buddhas," "Immortal-Buddhas," or even merely "images with Buddhist elements," and are not considered true Buddha images in the strict sense.4 In terms of functional attributes, this qualitative analysis has some validity, but its limitations are also apparent. The combination of the money tree and the Buddha is only a static result; the process and manner of their combination, however, were dynamic. If we re-examine this phenomenon from a dynamic historical perspective—especially those cases that clearly preserve early Gandhāran artistic language and features—we cannot help but ask: what was the historical context of these images before they were combined with money trees? The money tree and the Buddha image were products of different civilizations: the money tree embodied the native Chinese aspiration for wealth and immortality, while the Buddha image was a foreign religious idol carried by foreign Buddhists for worship. When an artist who was both a Buddhist and fond of money trees sought to combine the two to create a new form—the "money-tree Buddha"—what conditions were necessary for success? This must have depended on his latest knowledge and exposure. It was precisely the prior existence of foreign bronze Buddha images in the local area that made such a fusion of native and foreign elements possible. Therefore, independent Gandhāran-style Buddha images had already appeared in the southwestern region by the fourth year of Yan'guang (125 CE), or even earlier —perhaps circulating only among a very small minority (such as foreigners).5This predates both the Chengren statues (158 CE) and Ze Rong's Buddha images (182–183 CE).

If we separate the Hejiashan money-tree Buddha from its tree and study it individually, we can identify several similar bronze Buddhas: the bronze Buddha on the Kanishka reliquary (ca. 128 CE, Fig. 8b);6 the Gandhāran bronze Buddha in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Fig. 5c); the bronze Buddha in the Harvard Fogg Museum (Fig. 8c); a bronze Buddha formerly in the collection of Masakichi Fujiki (Fig. 8d); and two bronze Buddhas discovered by Ōtani Kōzui at the Yotkan site in Khotan, Xinjiang (Fig. 9). All these images are mature and standard Gandhāran-style bronze Buddhas, sharing early Gandhāran features such as Aryan facial features, crossed-leg posture, large eyes, a mustache, and layered robe folds. In comparison, the money-tree Buddhas, due to their small size (about 5 cm), are less detailed and vivid, but they still retain the strongest Indian and Central Asian characteristics, representing high-quality imitations of early Gandhāran style. Previous scholarship generally dated the latter three groups to the Jin–Sixteen Kingdoms period (3rd–4th century), but without detailed and robust argumentation.7 Only the late scholar Marylin M. Rhie provided the most thorough study, integrating portrait data from 1st–2nd century Kushan coins, sculptures, and paintings of aristocratic warriors and princes/kings, and subjecting the Harvard Buddha to a very detailed and persuasive analysis, dating it to the mid-to-late 2nd century (ca. 160 CE) (Marylin M. Rhie 1999–2010, pp. 71-94).8 Although the exact dating remains open to discussion, the prototypes of such imitations undoubtedly originated from Gandhāra, the birthplace of the Buddha image, and were carried by Buddhists to Xinjiang and then into the interior of China (perhaps then copied and reproduced by Chinese artisans using molds), ultimately achieving cross-regional and cross-temporal transmission.



Fig. 8 (a). Money-tree Buddha from Hejiashan Tomb No. 1, Mianyang Musemn, (photo by Yue Long); (b). Bronze Buddha on top of the reliquary from the Kanishka Stupa, Peshawar Museum, provided by the WeChat public account “Zhengguanshang 正觀賞”. https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/tRWoYBzn9tNakecQ4RX7Zw (accessed Ougust 19, 2026); (c). Bronze Buddha in the Harvard Fogg Museum (height 31.8 cm), https://harvardartmuseums.org/collections/object/204074?position=3 (d). Gilded bronze Buddha included in Matsubara Saburō's collection, from Matsubara, Saburō 1995. This figure is not covered by the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. copyright © Yue Long, Peshawar Museum, Harvard Fogg Museum,and Saburō's, all rights reserved.



Fig. 9 Two gilded bronze Buddha statues unearthed from the Yotkan site in Khotan, Xinjiang: a. height 17 cm, Tokyo National Museum, https://webarchives.tnm.jp/imgsearch/show/C0018087 (accessed August 19, 2026); b. height 13 cm, Hirayama Ikuo Silk Road Museum, Japan, https://silkroad-museum-collection.jp/仏陀像頭部/ (accessed August 19, 2026). This figure is not covered by the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. copyright © Tokyo National Museum and Hirayama Ikuo Silk Road Museum, Japan, all rights reserved.

The Chengren standing Buddha, in terms of form, style, and sculptural technique, also continues the early traditions of Indian and Central Asian Gandhāran art. Its core features—such as appearance, robe folds, posture, and uṣṇīṣa—clearly derive from the Gandhāran

tradition. The three-dimensionality of the sculpture, the diagonal drapery arrangement, and the sense of relief preserve the original Hellenistic artistic elements, making it a very standard and mature Buddha image. Even scholars who advocate the "Sixteen Kingdoms theory" agree on this point (Yao 2025, pp. 89–90, 92–94).9 It has a clear affinity with the Harvard Buddha and early Kushan (ca. 1st–2nd century) Buddhas. However, there are some subtle changes in the facial features—for example, the absence of a mustache, and the forehead and cheeks being of equal width, giving the face a very rounded and full appearance (Fig. 10). These reflect local adjustments made by Chinese artisans to the prototype, rather than indicating a later date.10 This feature of a broad forehead and wide face is similar to the Xinjiang bronze Buddhas, suggesting that the original models may have had some connection with those from Xinjiang.



Fig 10. Comparison of the head and face of the Chengren Buddha statue with other Gandhāran-style Buddha images

(a). Chengren standing Buddha; (b). Early Gandhāran Buddha, collected in Nanjing Grand Baoen Temple Museum, after Hubei musemn 2017, p. 14; (c). Hejiashan money-tree Buddha; (d). Xinjiang Buddha.This figure is not covered by the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. copyright © Shaanxi Provincial Institute of Archaeology, Nanjing Grand Baoen Temple Museum, Yue Long, and Tokyo National Museum, all rights reserved.

Second, in terms of form and style, the most essential features of the Chengren standing Buddha include: a standing posture, the left hand holding the robe hem, the right hand raised in Abhaya Mudrā (damaged),11 heavy Greek-style diagonal drapery, and a lotus pedestal beneath the feet. These elements are not entirely absent from Han-period Buddha images known through archaeology. In fact, they are almost directly connected to the standing Buddha images of the "Xuzhou style" from the Han dynasty, and have a deep genealogical relationship with the bronze Buddha images cast by Ze Rong in Xuzhou.

Although Han-period Buddha images exhibit regional variations due to local cultural influences, thanks to the scholarly community's in-depth studies of excavated Han Buddhist images,12 we can identify their most basic iconographic features based on shared elements: the Abhaya Mudrā gesture, a topknot (uṣṇīṣa), a halo behind the head, and a U-neck robe with folds. On this basis, we can further divide Han-period Buddha images into two clear categories. The first category consists of seated Buddha images, which are widely distributed and made of diverse materials. Examples include: the seated foreigner Buddha on a bronze mirror from the fifth year of Yongyuan 永元 (93 CE) excavated at Zhangyangcun, Luoyang,

Henan (Luoyang Museum 1988, pl. 4); money-tree Buddhas from the Yunnan-Guizhou-Sichuan-Shaanxi region; pottery-seated Buddhas; seated Buddhas from cliff tombs in Sichuan (Leshan Shizhiwan and Mahao); the seated Buddha X77 at the Kongwangshan cliff carvings in Lianyungang, Jiangsu (Fig. 11); and the seated immortal Buddha mural from the Helinge'er tomb in Inner Mongolia. The second category consists of standing Buddha images, which are fewer in number but distinct in character, concentrated in southern Shandong and northern Jiangsu. Examples include: the standing Buddhas X2, X50, and X81 at Kongwangshan; the "Buddha-like" figure on the central column of the front chamber of Tomb No. 1 at the Changli Reservoir in Donghai; and the Buddha image on a stone relief from a Han tomb in Yinan 沂南, Shandong (Figs. 12a–e). Since this group of images is concentrated within the area administered by the Xuzhou Inspectorate during the Han period, we may tentatively refer to it as the "Xuzhou style."

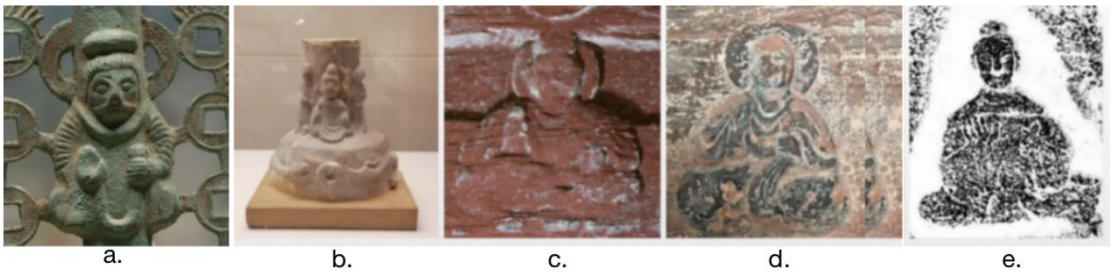

Fig 11. Seated Buddha images of the Han dynasty

(a). Money-tree Buddha from Eastern Han Tomb No. 1 at Hejiashan, Mianyang (photo by Yue Long); (b). Pottery-seated Buddha from a Han tomb at Pengshan, Meishan, Sichuan, Nanjing Museum collection (photo by the author); (c). Buddha on the lintel of Tomb M1, Zone B, Shizhiwan, Leshan, Sichuan (photo by Chen Jiji); (d). Buddha at Mahao cliff tomb, Leshan, Sichuan (photo by Chen Jiji); (e). Kongwangshan cliff Buddha X77, Lianyungang, Jiangsu (provided by Lianyungang Municipal Cultural Relics Administration).This figure is not covered by the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. copyright © Yue Long, Nanjing Museum, Chen Jiji, and Lianyungang Municipal Cultural Relics Administration, all rights reserved.

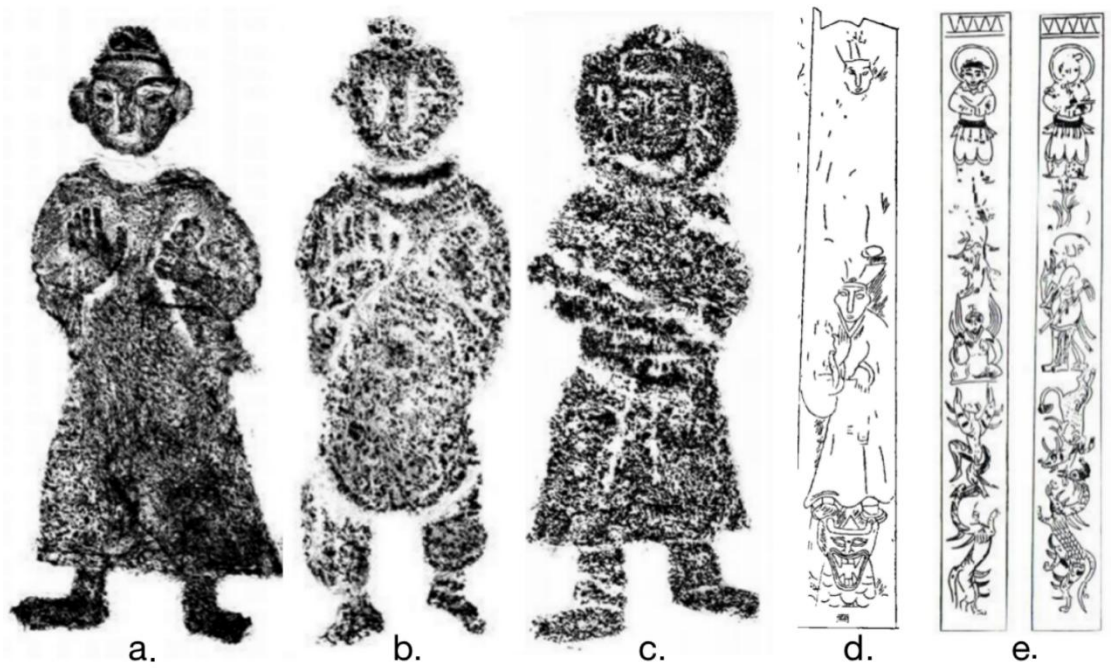

Fig 12. Standing Buddha images from southern Shandong and northern Jiangsu

(a)–(c). Standing Buddhas X2, X50, and X81 at Kongwangshan cliff carvings, Lianyungang (provided by Lianyungang Municipal Cultural Relics Administration); (d). "Buddha-like" figure from Tomb No. 1 at Changli Reservoir, Donghai, Lianyungang (Nanjing Bowuyuan 1957, pp. 29–43); (e). Buddha image from a Han tomb in Yinan, Shandong (Zeng Zhaoyu et al. 1956, pls. 65–68).This figure is not covered by the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. copyright © Lianyungang Municipal Cultural Relics Administration, Nanjing Museum, Chen Jiji, and Zeng Zhaoyu et al. all rights reserved.

When placed within the context of Han-period Buddha images, the Chengren standing Buddha clearly belongs to the "Xuzhou style" of standing Buddhas (Figs. 13a–b). In addition to the basic iconographic elements—left hand holding the robe, right hand in Abhaya Mudrā, a topknot, and Greek-style robe—its most important feature is the upright standing posture. As noted above, standing Buddha images from the Han period are found only in the Xuzhou region. The close correspondence between the Chengren standing Buddha and these examples cannot be mere coincidence. They clearly share a common prototype: the early standing Buddha images found in Kushan art and on coins (Figs. 13c–d). Therefore, it is difficult to argue that the Chengren Buddha statues are completely unrelated to Han-period Buddha images.



Fig 13. Chengren Buddha, "Xuzhou style" Buddha, and early Kushan standing Buddha images

(a).Chengren standing Buddha; (b). Kongwangshan cliff Buddha X2; (c). Buddha on the Bimaran Reliquary, British Museum, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/A_1900-0209-1?selectedImageId=30089001 (accessed Ougust 19, 2026); (d). Gold coin with Buddha image, British Museum, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/C_IOC-289?selectedImageId=650324001 (accessed Ougust 19, 2026). This figure is not covered by the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. copyright © Shaanxi Provincial Institute of Archaeology, Lianyungang Municipal Cultural Relics Administration, British Museum, and Hirayama Ikuo Silk Road Museum. all rights reserved.

Third, apart from stylistic considerations, the close relationship between the Chengren Buddha statues and the "Xuzhou style" can be further illustrated by another well-known case: the bronze Buddha statues cast by Ze Rong in Xuzhou slightly later (192–193 CE).13 Both belong to the earliest group of independent gilded bronze Buddha images in China.

According to the Sanguozhi • Wu Zhi • Liu Yao zhuan (Records of the Three Kingdoms • Wu Annals • Biography of Liu Yao), Ze Rong in Xuzhou "built a large Buddhist shrine, made figures out of bronze, gilded them with gold, and clothed them in colorful brocades. He hung nine tiers of bronze bells, and below built multiple-storied towers and corridors that could accommodate over three thousand people. He required everyone to recite the Buddhist scriptures … As a result, people came from near and far, and in total more than five thousand households gathered there. Every time the bathing of the Buddha was held …(大起浮屠祠，以銅為人，黃金塗身，衣以錦彩。垂銅磐九重，下為重樓閣道，可容三千餘人。悉課讀佛經……由此遠近前後至者五千餘人戶。每浴佛……)" (Chen Shou 1982, p. 1185). From this textual description, we can identify three significant features of the bronze Buddhas cast by Ze Rong:

First, the setting in which the bronze images were placed was a special Buddha shrine (Futu ci) of considerable scale, indicating that these images were for the first time separated from the context of Han funerary art. Second, the ritual function of the bronze images was "bathing the Buddha" (yufo), clearly for idol worship, which was fundamentally different from the earlier "Immortal-Buddhas" that were attached to immortalist arts. Third, the site of casting was Xuzhou. As noted above, the most prominent feature of Buddha images in the

Xuzhou region is the standing posture. It is thus highly probable that Ze Rong's gilded bronze Buddhas were also standing figures.In short, Ze Rong's public act of casting bronze Buddha images signified a major historical development: the Buddha image had acquired the meaning of independent idol worship.

Also based on dynamic historical logic, it is worth considering that Ze Rong's independent Buddhist activities may have been "predicated on a pre-existing social trend of separation between Buddhism and Daoism. This trend likely emerged after the suppression of the Taiping Dao movement in Sichuan and the eastern regions in the first year of Zhongping 中平 (184 CE) under Emperor Ling, which allowed Buddhism to break away and become independent. Since independent Buddhist images arose following the independence of Buddhism itself, the starting point of independent Buddhism and Buddhist images at the end of the Han must have begun no earlier than the reign of Emperor Ling, and no later than Ze Rong's bronze Buddha images" (Hu Wenjun and Zhang Haiping 2019, p. 136). The discovery of the Chengren bronze Buddhas pushes the history of independent gilded bronze Buddha images in the Han back to the first year of Yanxi (158 CE) under Emperor Huan, 34 to 35 years earlier than Ze Rong's bronze Buddhas. Since both belong to the period of independent gilded bronze Buddhas at the end of the Han and are close in date, it is hard to imagine that there was no genealogical relationship between them. At the very least, in terms of artistic form and independent significance, the two are mutually resonant.

4. The Impact and Significance of the Religious Turn in Emperor Huan's Court on the Bronze Buddha Statues of the First Year of Yanxi (158 CE)

From the reign of Emperor An (with the fourth year of Yan'guang, 125 CE, as a marker) onward, independent gilded bronze Buddha images had already been introduced to the southwestern regions of the Han dynasty. However, the emergence of the Chengren Buddha statues in the first year of Yanxi (158 CE) occurred at a particularly specific point in time. What, then, were the specific conditions and opportunities that enabled their appearance? Why did Buddha images appear precisely during Emperor Huan's reign rather than under any other emperor? This question is crucial for understanding the historical origins of the Chengren bronze Buddha statues. The author believes that the emergence of independent gilded bronze Buddha images during Emperor Huan's reign was not accidental, but resulted from the combined effect of diplomatic events and an internal religious turn at court: the frequent embassies from Tianzhu 天竺 (India) and Parthia were the primary external driving forces; while Emperor Huan's own interest in immortalism in his later years, and his worship of Laozi and the Buddha, led to the spread of Buddhism from the court to the populace, providing powerful internal momentum.

From the textual records, the entry of Buddhism into China has traditionally been marked by Emperor Ming's "dream of the golden man" and the Prince of Chu Liu Ying's worship of the Buddha in the eighth year of Yongping 永平 (65 CE). By the first year of Yanxi (158 CE) under Emperor Huan, nearly a century had passed.14 During this period, the spread of Buddhism in China was almost stagnant, confined largely to the court. Nevertheless, the Chinese understanding of Buddhism underwent some subtle changes. Previous scholarship has particularly emphasized the contributions of Emperor Ming and Liu Ying to the early spread of Buddhism in China, while often overlooking the role of another group—the foreign

envoys from Tianzhu, Parthia, and the Kushan Empire who came to China on multiple missions.

The story of Emperor Ming's dream, the dispatch of envoys to seek the Dharma, and the Buddha images originated from late Han Buddhist texts (found in the Sishier zhang jing 四十二章經 [Sutra of Forty-two Chapters] and the Mouzi Lihuo lun 牟子理惑論[Mouzi on the Settling of Doubts]). It has not been clearly acknowledged by historians and, as a legend, has long been a subject of scholarly debate. In recent years, most scholars have taken a skeptical or negative view, considering it a later fabrication (Wu Zhuo 2004, p. 373; Hu & Zhang 2019, pp. 122–139; Liu Yi 2025, pp. 76–93). Although Liu Ying worshipped the Buddha and supported Buddhist monks and lay followers, there is no record of his contact with Buddha images (Fan Ye 2007, p. 418). Zhang Heng 張衡 (78–139), active during the reigns of Emperors He and An, in his Xijing Fu 西京賦(Rhapsody on the Western Capital) composed during the reign of Emperor An (ca. 107–113 CE), compared the foreign Buddhists in Chang'an at that time with the Warring States figure Liu Xiahui, saying that neither was moved by female beauty: "With glances so alluring, with looks that sway the town, Liu Xiahui himself, the Buddhist monk as well—who could resist the spell 睒藐流眄，一顧傾城，展季桑門，誰能不營（Xiao Tong, p.34）?" Ban Yong 班勇 (?–127 CE), a contemporary, is recorded in Fan Ye's Hou Hanshu • Xiyu zhuan (Book of the Later Han • Biography of the Western Regions) as follows: "As for the supernatural power of the Buddha-Dharma, which originated from Sindhu 身毒 (India), the regional records of the Western and Eastern Han dynasties make no mention of it. Zhang Qian only recorded that the land was hot and humid, and that its people fought from elephants. While Ban Yong noted their worship of Futu (Buddha) and the principle of non-killing, the profound merits of its doctrinal tenets and skillful means of guidance were never transmitted or recorded 至於佛道神化，興自身毒，而二漢方志，莫有稱焉。張騫但著地多暑濕，乘象而戰，班勇雖列其奉浮圖，不殺伐，而精文善法導達之功靡所傳述" (Fan Ye 2007, p. 871). Ban Yong mentioned that the Indians "worship Futu and do not kill 奉浮圖，不殺伐," but he did not provide further details about what Futu was. This likely reflects the limited understanding of Buddhism among the official class at the time.15 It was not until the ninth year of Yanxi 延熹(166 CE), when a learned man named Xiang Kai 襄楷 used his knowledge of Buddhist doctrine to submit a memorial advising Emperor Huan, that the Chinese began to articulate Buddhist teachings (see below).

Where, then, did Xiang Kai acquire his Buddhist knowledge? Before answering this question, it is necessary to review the important diplomatic events between the Han court and Buddhist countries of the Western Regions during Emperor Huan's reign:

1. In the second year of his reign (Jianhe 建和 2, 148 CE), the eminent Western Regions monk An Shigao 安世高, a Parthian prince, arrived in China. Soon after, he "became fluent in Chinese and began translating scriptures, changing [the script] from foreign to Chinese 通習華言、改胡為漢" (Hui Jiao 慧皎 1992, pp. 4, 7).

2. In the twelfth month of the second year of Yanxi (159 CE), an embassy from Tianzhu（india） presented tribute.

3. In the winter of the fourth year (161 CE), in the tenth month, Tianzhu again sent envoys with tribute (Fan Ye 2007, p. 89).

According to the Hou Hanshu •Xiyu zhuan, as early as the reign of Emperor He 和 (88–106 CE), India had sent envoys to Luoyang via the overland northwestern route on several

occasions (no fewer than three times). After the rebellion in the Western Regions, this route was cut off, and India had to seek access to China via the Southeast Asian maritime route. It was finally successful during Emperor Huan's reign, with envoys coming "frequently from beyond the southern frontier of Rinan [present-day Vietnam]頻從日南徼外" (Fan Ye 2007, p. 866). This fully demonstrates that the enthusiasm of Indian envoys for exchange and missionary work in China was not diminished in the least by the obstruction of land routes.

In 1991, a Han bamboo slip inscribed with the characters "Xiao Futu Li 小浮屠裏" ("Small Futu Village") was unearthed at Xuanquanzhi 懸泉置 in Dunhuang (Fig. 14), dating roughly from the reign of Emperor Ming to Emperor He (58–108 CE). It was likely a relay station where envoys from Buddhist countries (represented by Tianzhu) would stop when passing through Dunhuang, confirming the existence of early overland contacts (Hao & Zhang 2008, pp. 185–193).16 In addition, a Kharoṣṭhī-inscribed stone block (broken into three pieces, this being one of them) was excavated at the site of the Han-Wei capital in Luoyang (Fig. 15). J. Brough was the first to decipher it (J. Brough 1961) and provide a dating. Later, Lin Meicun further investigated it and argued that the content of the inscription was closely related to the Kushan monastic community that moved from the Gandhāra region to Luoyang during the reign of Emperor Ling 靈 (168–189 CE). He identified it as part of a Buddhist temple structure at the time, providing strong evidence of Kushan monks' direct activities in China (Lin Meicun 1995, pp. 38–44).17 However, Lin seems not to have fully taken into account that envoys from Tianzhu speaking the same language had already come to China on several occasions during the reigns of Emperors He and Huan. Therefore, the date of this stone inscription might be pushed back to the time of those Tianzhu monks during the He-Huan period.



Fig 14. The "Xiao Futu Li" Han bamboo slip from Xuanquanzhi, Dunhuang, Gansu Jiandu Museum (photo by Zhang Liming).This figure is not covered by the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. copyright © Zhang Liming. all rights reserved.



Fig 15. Fragment of a Kharoṣṭhī-inscribed stone well curb from the Eastern Han Luoyang, collected National Museum of China, https://www.chnmuseum.cn/zp/zpml/kgfjp/202110/t20211029_252005.shtml (accessed Ougust 19, 2026) . This figure is not covered by the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. copyright © National Museum of China. all rights reserved.

Thus, following the Tianzhu embassy in the fourth year of Yanxi, five years later (in the spring of the ninth year of Yanxi, 166 CE), Xiang Kai took advantage of Buddhist doctrine and the story of the Buddha's rejection of women to admonish Emperor Huan, and also mentioned that the emperor had established shrines to Huang-Lao and the Buddha within the palace:

"I have also heard that shrines to Huang-Lao and the Buddha have been established within the palace. These teachings value purity and emptiness, honor non-action, cherish life and abhor killing, and urge the reduction of desires and extravagance. Yet Your Majesty has not restrained your own desires, and your punishments exceed what is reasonable. Since you act contrary to these ways, how can you expect to receive their blessings? It is said that Laozi went among the western tribes and became the Buddha. The Buddha would not sleep three nights under the same mulberry tree, lest he develop attachment. Such was his single-minded devotion. When a heavenly spirit offered him beautiful women, he said, 'These are but leather bags filled with blood,' and would not even glance at them. Only through such unwavering discipline did he attain the Way. But you, Your Majesty, fill your chambers with the most beautiful women in the world and indulge in the richest foods and drinks all lands can offer. How then can you seek to follow the path of Huang-Lao?" 18(Fan Ye 2007, p. 320).

According to the Annals of Emperor Huan (in both the Hou Hanshu and the Hou Hanji), only three instances of Emperor Huan's sacrifices to Laozi and the Yellow Emperor are recorded, with no mention of the Buddha. The first two occasions were in the first and twelfth months of the eighth year of Yanxi (165 CE), when only Laozi was sacrificed to; the last was in the sixth month of the ninth year of Yanxi (166 CE), when the Yellow Emperor was added. Since Emperor Huan's sacrifices preceded Xiang Kai's memorial (spring of 166 CE), the precise time of the emperor's worship of the Buddha must have been in the eighth year of Yanxi (165 CE).

According to the Hou Hanji • Annals of Emperor Huan: "In the spring of the eighth year (165), in the first month, the Emperor sent the Palace Attendant Zuo Guan to offer sacrifices earnestly to Laozi. It was from this time that the Emperor began to take interest in the ways of immortals 八年（165）春正月，使中常侍左悺之苦祠老子。上始好神仙之事" (the emperor was thirty-three years old that year; Yuan Hong 2017, p. 427). Before this, Emperor Huan was in the prime of his life and had shown no interest in Huang-Lao immortalism. However, due to

prolonged indulgence in sensual pleasures, his health deteriorated, and in the last three years of his life (165–168), he turned to immortalism and Buddhism—with their emphasis on "purity, emptiness, non-action, and the reduction of desires and extravagance 清虛無為，省欲去奢"—in search of longevity. Yet, judging from Xiang Kai's merciless criticism, Emperor Huan's dissolute lifestyle clearly violated the principles of both Huang-Lao and Buddhism. Thus, the emperor's worship of Huang-Lao and the Buddha was merely superficial and half-hearted. In contrast, Xiang Kai was able to admonish the emperor by elaborating on the Buddha's life stories and Buddhist doctrines, indicating that his understanding of Indian Buddhism was much deeper and more serious. His knowledge of Buddhism likely came from the earlier Tianzhu embassies and from foreign monks such as An Shigao.

Although Emperor Huan himself was not a devout Buddhist, the enormous impact of his public acts of worship should not be overlooked. The Hou Hanshu • Xiyu zhuan explicitly states: "Later, Emperor Huan became fond of spiritual matters. He repeatedly offered sacrifices to the Buddha and Laozi. Among the common people, there began to be a few who venerated them; later, this practice gradually flourished 後桓帝好神。數祀浮屠、老子，百姓稍有奉者，後遂轉盛" (Fan Ye 2007, p. 866). As the sovereign of a feudal autocratic empire, any of his actions—especially public pronouncements of his intellectual and spiritual interests—could easily trigger a imitative effect, whereby "what the superior likes, the inferiors will carry to excess," and even a "herd effect" among the populace, leading to the "gradual flourishing" of such practices.

Xiang Kai's ability to skillfully employ Buddhist knowledge in his admonition was precisely because he had studied it in advance, having observed the emperor's devotion to Buddhism—this shows his sincerity. And "among the common people, there began to be a few who venerated them; later, this practice gradually flourished" is precisely a manifestation of this herd effect. The rapid spread of Buddhism during Emperor Huan's reign was partly due to oral transmission of scriptures, but its effectiveness was limited. To achieve such "flourishing," the impetus of visual media was essential, and various types of Buddha images—including bronze ones—emerged accordingly.

Archaeology has already confirmed this: from the imperial heartlands of Luoyang and Chang'an to Xuzhou, and further to the southwestern regions and the middle and lower Yangtze River area, Buddhism and Buddhist art flourished among the populace at the end of the Han. This was primarily due to the effective dissemination of Buddha images. In terms of audience reach and accessibility, the communicative power of images (Buddha images) was far superior to that of texts (sutras); relying solely on the dissemination and understanding—or even misinterpretation—of limited scriptural passages would always have limited effect. Although during the reign of Emperor Ming he "inquired about the Buddhist doctrine and had Buddhist images painted 問佛道法，並圖佛像" (Yuan Hong 2017, p. 187; Fan Ye 1965, p. 2933), and Prince Liu Ying of Chu also worshipped the Buddha and supported foreign monks, Buddhism still failed to spread widely over the course of a century for this very reason. As with the propagation of Christianity in the 6th century, it was precisely due to Pope Gregory the Great's famous dictum—"Painting can do for the illiterate what writing does for those who can read"—that Christianity successfully broke the taboo on image-making and, with the aid of icon painting and sculpture, rapidly spread throughout Europe. During the reign of Emperor An (with the fourth year of Yan'guang, 125 CE, as a marker), the appearance of

numerous money-tree Buddhas in the southwestern region was an early sign of the "gradual flourishing" of Buddhist images among the people. Similarly, during Emperor Huan's reign, the demand for Buddha images was stimulated from the court down to the common people, leading to the emergence of a "flourishing" situation among the populace. The Chengren Buddha statues in Chang'an are precisely a microcosm of this flourishing development of Buddhist art during Emperor Huan's reign. They provide a new key chronological reference point for dating Buddha images from various regions of the Han dynasty.

In summary, from the Yongping era (58–75 CE) onward, through the reigns of Liu Ying, Ban Yong, Emperor He, and Emperor Huan, against the backdrop of multiple cultural exchanges with Tianzhu, Parthia, and the Kushan Empire, we see "Emperor Huan worshipping the Buddha" at court, "Xiang Kai understanding Buddhism" among the elite intellectual class, and "Ze Rong casting Buddha status" among local military magnates. Buddhist thought, with the aid of Buddhist art, established an influence across different social groups that exceeded our imagination. From this perspective, the appearance of Gandhāran-style bronze Buddha images in the Chengren tomb at Chang'an, Xianyang, during Emperor Huan's reign was not only entirely natural but also a historical product of a particular era.

5. On the Five-Buddha Image from the Same Tomb

The preceding discussion has focused primarily on the standing Buddha from Chengren, but the same methods and arguments apply equally to the other image—the five-Buddha plaque. To determine the date of the five-Buddha image, it must likewise be placed within the spatial-temporal context of Sino-Western exchange, and classified, compared, and positioned according to its form and style, tracing both its possible terminus post quem and its possible terminus ante quem. Scholars who advocate the "Sixteen Kingdoms–Northern Wei theory" have devoted considerable effort to demonstrating the similarities between the Chengren Buddha images and multi-Buddha images from the Sixteen Kingdoms, Northern Wei, and even the Indian Gupta period. However, this does not prove that the Chengren images must belong to the Sixteen Kingdoms, nor can it rule out the possibility that they are Han works. To exclude a Han date, a more reliable approach would be to look backward—that is, to investigate whether five-Buddha or multi-Buddha beliefs and artistic examples existed in Central Asia, Gandhāra, or India during the Han period. Only by proving that no such works existed in Gandhāra or India during the Yanxi era could one conclude that the Han lacked the conditions for producing five-Buddha imagery. Yet scholars advocating the "Sixteen Kingdoms theory" have almost entirely failed to provide such a demonstration. Li Wenwen and Zhu Hu, in this regard, provided detailed examples of early five- and seven-Buddha artistic cases from Central Asia and India, but they focused on comparing robe folds and halos without analyzing their dates (Li and Zhu 2022, pp. 183–191). In fact, examples of multi-Buddha artistic expressions in early Gandhāran stone sculptures of the Kushan period are not uncommon. Diego Loukota of UCLA, citing the seven-Buddha carvings at the Sanchi Stupa, the past thirteen Buddhas recorded in Pali texts dating to around the beginning of the Common Era, the past Buddha Śākyamuni and the future Buddha Maitreya (held in the U.S. Library of Congress), and the thousand Buddhas of the Bhadrakalpika-sūtra from Bamiyan (1st–2nd century CE), has argued that the concept of the five Buddhas of the Bhadrakalpa had already emerged in Gandhāra around the first century CE (Lei 2022b).

Eastern Han Buddhism and Buddha-image art were contemporary with Gandhāra, Central Asia, and India in the 1st–2nd centuries, and the connections were most direct and intimate. The foreign Buddha images that the Chinese encountered were precisely the most original and freshest prototypes. This favorable historical condition was beyond the reach of later periods such as the Wu-Jin and the Sixteen Kingdoms, due to the temporal distance. If one asks what the earliest Buddha images looked like, apart from the foreigners residing in China, the Chinese themselves were undoubtedly the most qualified to answer. Moreover, unlike subjects that had to strictly adhere to Confucian ideological and moral norms (such as the "Illustrious Emperors through the Ages," "The Duke of Zhou Aiding King Cheng," and "Confucius Meets Laozi"), the production of Buddha images was subject to far less collective ideological constraint and belonged largely to the sphere of individual agency (Miao 2021).19 In terms of accepting and adapting foreign Buddha images, there were thus numerous possibilities available to Han artisans.

When confronted with the earliest Indian and Gandhāran Buddha images, Han artisans generally had two choices. First, they could accept them completely, directly appropriating or imitating them. This is the case with the so-called pure, standard, and mature Buddha images, such as the Hejiashan Buddha, the Chengren standing and five-Buddha images, and the Harvard Buddha. Second, they could accept them partially and adapt them. This accounts for the majority of the more ambiguous Han-period Buddha images (figures with the Abhaya Mudrā) and fragmentary Buddhist motifs (six-tusked white elephants, lotuses, foreigners, winged boys, etc.). 20There may also have been a third possibility: complete transformation beyond recognition. Such cases, of course, leave no trace in history or archaeology.

It is especially important to emphasize that the later the period, the more difficult it became to reproduce the early standard and mature Gandhāran Buddha images; the deeper the localization, the further they deviated from the "standard" or "mature." This is because even in their place of origin, the number of original Buddha images gradually decreased over time, and their forms continuously changed (for example, Gandhāran Buddhas of the 3rd–5th centuries became increasingly stylized; the early wide-open eyes that directly confronted the viewer disappeared, replaced by slightly closed eyes with a compassionate downward gaze and a faint smile; the strongly Hellenistic volumetric drapery also became simplified,see Marshall, John.1960). How much more so in China, thousands of miles away. Therefore, when Yao Chongxin repeatedly emphasizes the "immaturity," "non-standard" nature, or the "visibly Sinicized" degree of Buddha images from the Three Kingdoms to Sixteen Kingdoms period (Yao Chongxin 2025, pp. 94-95), this actually provides counter-evidence that the Chengren Buddha (Fig. 1), the Harvard Buddha (Fig. 8c), the Japanese standing Buddha (Fig. 2b), and other similarly highly mature standard Buddha images should be dated earlier than the Three Kingdoms and Sixteen Kingdoms periods—not later.

6. Conclusion and Further Discussion

To some extent, the "Sixteen Kingdoms theory" is built upon the existing cognitive misconception that "China's earliest independent Buddha images date from the Sixteen Kingdoms or Jin," which has thereby precluded the possibility that the Chengren Buddha statues belong to the Eastern Han. In fact, this same misconception once long influenced scholarly judgments on the dating of money-tree Buddha images. Before the discovery of the

inscribed Yan'guang fourth-year (125 CE) Buddha from Fengdu, Chongqing, multiple money-tree Buddha images with deep-set eyes and high noses—clearly foreign in appearance—had already been excavated in the Southwest and Shaanxi, yet many scholars believed they should be dated to the Three Kingdoms period, arguing that Buddha images could not have appeared in China as early as the 2nd century(He 2002, p. 7). Today, the dating controversy surrounding the Chengren Buddha statues seems to be following a similar trajectory.

By reflecting on the "cognitive bias" or "misconception" in the study of early Chinese bronze Buddhas, we believe that for the dating of undated bronze Buddha images, in addition to considering the stratigraphic information from their excavated contexts, scholars should also follow the simple logic of the "comprehensive upper-lower-limit dating method." A group of previously known undated bronze Buddha images that display distinct early Gandhāran exotic styles could thus be assessed more scientifically and accurately, rather than being indiscriminately assigned to the lower limit of the Jin–Sixteen Kingdoms. Their upper limit—the Han—should also be brought into reasonable consideration. As for the Chengren Buddha statues, the author believes they are not products of the Sixteen Kingdoms, but rather works from the late Eastern Han, dating to the first year of the Yanxi era (158 CE) or earlier.

The emergence of this work during Emperor Huan's reign was not accidental, but rather the result of both external and internal factors at court. Externally, it was closely related to the multiple embassies from Tianzhu, Parthia, and the Kushan Empire; Xiang Kai's knowledge of Indian Buddhist stories and doctrines derived from these groups. Internally, it was connected to Emperor Huan's personal acceptance of Buddhism as a consolation in his final years and his role in its spread among the populace. As an efficient visual medium, Buddha images met the needs of the age and successfully broke through the transmission bottleneck that had persisted since the time of Emperor Ming and Prince Liu Ying. The Chengren Buddha statues are both a material embodiment of Buddhism's spread from the court to the populace and an important symbol of Buddhism's subsequent flourishing among the Chinese people.

This paper provides a systematic discussion of the dating of the Chengren Buddha statues, but it still has some shortcomings. First, since Tomb M3015 was looted early, the stratigraphic relationship between the statues and the tomb is incomplete. Our view that the statues were not later intrusions is mostly based on inference and needs more archaeological evidence for confirmation. Second, for the same reason, we have not explored in detail when, why, or how the statues entered the tomb. Our observations on the five-Buddha plaque—its style, meaning, and relationship with the standing Buddha—are also preliminary. In addition, some early Buddha images used for comparison are themselves uncertain in date, so stylistic comparisons must be made with caution. In the future, more scientifically excavated early Buddhist sculptures from Guanzhong, Hexi, or Central Asia may provide better evidence for dating the Chengren statues. Techniques such as lead isotope analysis can also help trace their origin and production. We hope that our dating framework and historical background will be useful for future research.

Notes

1. Ran Wanli, Li Ming, et al.1, 2022, p. 82-94; Huang Chunhe, 2022, p. 47-56; Cui Mengze, 2024, pp. 73-76；Li, Longjun 李龍俊 and Liu, Zhen 劉振, 2026, pp. 133-142. At the symposium "Discovering the Earliest Gilt Bronze Buddhist Statues in China," jointly organized by the Shaanxi Provincial

Institute of Archaeology and UCLA on February 25-26, 2022, related scholars presented their views. See Lei Jie (2022a), "Discovering the Earliest Gilt Bronze Buddhist Statues in China: Archaeological Inferences," The Paper: Private History, March 6, 2022, https://m.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_16973851; and Lei Jie (2022b), "Discovering the Earliest Gilt Bronze Buddhist Statues in China: Issues in Buddhist History," The Paper: Private History, March 26, 2022, https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_17295519. Additionally, on May 11, 2025, at the "Gandharan Art and Silk Road Civilizations International Academic Conference 犍陀羅藝術與絲路文明國際學術會議" held at Zhejiang University, Joe Cribb and Juhyung Rhi respectively presented "The Buddhist Figures found in the Chengren Cemetery at Xianyang and Their Gandharan Connections" and "An Eastern Han Bronze Buddha from the Chengren Cemetery in Xianyang and its Gandharan Parallels."

2. For related studies, see Yang Xin, "Guanyu Xianyang Donghan mu chutu tongfo de niandai fenxi" [An Analysis of the Date of the Bronze Buddha Statues from the Eastern Han Tomb in Xianyang], https://www.sohu.com/a/528200435_772510; Yao Chongxin 2022, pp. 17-29; 2025, pp. 88-101; Li Wenwen and Zhu Hu 2022, pp. 183-191; He Zhiguo 2023, pp. 123-131. Liming Zhang argues that the two statues are not contemporaneous: the standing Buddha is from the Sixteen Kingdoms, while the five-Buddha plaque is from the Northern Wei. See Liming Zhang, 2024, pp. 1-20.
3. For statistics and studies on money trees, see He Zhiguo, 2007.
4. On "Chinese traditional deities resembling Buddhas," "Immortal-Buddhas," and "Buddha-spirits," see Zeng Zhaoyu et al. 1956, pp. 65–67; Irizawa, 1992, p. 65; Wen Yucheng, 2000, p. 43; He Zhiguo, 2017, pp. 295–331; Wu Hung, 1986, pp. 263-352.
5. The concept of "independent" here refers to foreign Buddha images used within the circle of foreigners residing in China. This does not conflict with the later sense of independent images used by Chinese for worship (such as the Chengren and Ze Rong Buddhas); the difference lies only in the users. On this point, see Su Bai, 2004: 68; Ye Derong, 2010, pp. 35–47.
6. On the dating of the Kanishka reliquary and the Bimaran reliquary and coins, see Robert Bracey, 2017, p. 48.
7. On the Harvard Buddha, the Fujiki Buddha, and the Xinjiang Buddhas, Japanese scholars' research has been influential. They generally date them to around or slightly earlier than the 338 CE Later Zhao Buddha. The two Xinjiang Buddhas are more vaguely dated: Murata Yasuko suggests the 4th century or 3rd–5th century. See Mizuno 1968; Matsubara 1966; Murata Yasuko 1995.
8. Marylin M. Rhie argued that the profile, cheeks, eyes, and beard shape of the Harvard Buddha bear a "remarkable similarity" to the warrior from Khalchayan, the prince/king head from Termez, and the silver coin portraits of Heraios. Yao Chongxin disagrees, arguing that Rhie's comparative examples span too great a chronological and geographical range and lack comparability. The author of this paper believes that the Harvard Buddha clearly depicts a Central Asian Aryan type, and comparing it with Kushan artistic representations is entirely appropriate. As for whether the similarity is "remarkable," this involves subjective visual judgment and cannot be quantified; readers may judge for themselves. See Yao Chongxin, 2025, pp. 91-92, 100; Marylin M. Rhie, 1999-2010, pp. 71-94.
9. For example, Yao Chongxin acknowledges that the Chengren Buddha is a completely standard and highly mature image. However, his argument is sometimes ambiguous or even contradictory. On one hand, he considers the Chengren Buddha very standard and mature, inconsistent with the "immature" features of late Han–Three Kingdoms Buddhas; on the other hand, he states that the Chengren Buddha has a "Sinicized" face—if so, how can it still be standard and mature? Similarly, when discussing the Harvard Buddha, Yao begins by saying it is "recognized as one of China's earliest gilded bronze Buddhas due to its Gandhāran facial features and robe style, especially the shoulder-flame motif directly derived from Kushan Buddhist art." Yet he then presupposes it as a Sixteen Kingdoms work and adds that "the Sinicization process of Sixteen Kingdoms Buddhas is very evident." This is self-contradictory: does the Harvard Buddha preserve strong Gandhāran features, or does it show visible "Sinicization"? See Yao Chongxin, 2025, pp. 89-90, 92-94.
10. For examples of Han-period Buddha images without mustaches, see the Eastern Han pottery lamp-base Buddha from Changshunpo cliff tomb in Yibin, Sichuan, and the pottery Buddha from a cliff tomb at Wuguishivan in Zhaotong, Yunnan. See He Zhiguo, 2020, p. 162; 2017, p. 46.
11. Li Wenwen, Zhu Hu, and He Zhiguo have pointed out that the original archaeological report's description of the Chengren standing Buddha as "right hand raised in Abhaya Mudrā (hand damaged)" is incorrect. The right hand is actually positioned at the waist, naturally hanging down to hold the robe hem. See Li Wenwen and Zhu Hu, 2022, p. 184; He Zhiguo, 2023, p. 123.
12. For related studies, see Edward H. Schafer, 1954, pp. 103-125; Yu Weichao, 1980, pp. 68-77; Wu Hung, 1986, pp. 263-352; Wu Zhuo, 1992, p. 12; Ruan Rongchun, 1990, pp.33-45; Marylin M. Rhie,

Buddhist Art of China and Central Asia, vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 1999–2010); Su Bai, 2004, pp. 61-71; He Zhiguo, 2017, pp. 295-331.

13. For the specific date of Ze Rong's Buddha casting, He Zhiguo has proposed 192–193 CE. See He Zhiguo, 2013, p. 189.

14. Some scholars also support the theory of the "Yicun transmission of the sutras 伊存授經" at the end of the Western Han (2nd century BCE). See Tang Yongtong, 2017, p. 43; Qiu Mingzhou,1986; Liu Yi, 2025, pp. 76–93.

15. Zhang Heng and Ban Yong were both prominent figures active during the reigns of Emperors He and An (88–125 CE). Ban Yong grew up in the Western Regions from childhood and, accompanying his father Ban Chao, managed affairs there for many years, making him the most authoritative figure of the Eastern Han in terms of knowledge about the customs and geography of the Western Regions. However, he himself never visited India. The Han envoy who actually traveled to India was Gan Ying, who was dispatched as Ban Chao's deputy envoy to Parthia (Persia) and the Roman Empire. Therefore, Zhang Heng's and Ban Yong's descriptions of Indian Buddhism may have derived from Gan Ying's geographical reports. See Fan Ye, 2007, pp. 865, 871.

16. "Xiao Futu Li 小浮屠裏" may refer to a stupa or a place name, similar to "Buddha Village" (Fotuoli) where the Western Regions eminent monk Kang Senghui built the Jianchu Temple in Eastern Wu. See Hao Shusheng and Zhang Defang, 2008, pp. 185–193.

17. This stone block was discovered in 1924 by the French Lazarist missionary G. Prévost, who initially mistook it for Hebrew script (G. Prévost 1926). Later, the linguist W. B. Henning corrected this misidentification and informed J. Brough, a Kharoṣṭhī expert at the University of London. Brough dated it to the late 2nd to early 3rd century and published a preliminary decipherment of the inscription based on the fragment (J. Brough 1961). Subsequently, Lin Meicun pieced the fragments together and provided a clearer reading: "A(b) saṃvatsara'e…/// B dasa 10 4 1 iyo vahara…/// C…caduradisa saghaṃ mi /// A(a) sarvaṣa puya'e bhavatu" (Translated as: "… On the fifteenth day of (certain) month (certain) year … may all monks of the saṅgha of the four directions receive respect.") See Lin Meicun, 1995, pp. 38–44.

18. “又聞宮中立黃老、浮屠之祠。此道清虛，貴尚無為，好生惡殺，省欲去奢。今陛下嗜欲不去，殺罰過理，既乖其道，豈獲其祚哉！或言老子入夷狄為浮屠。浮屠不三宿桑下，不欲久生恩愛，精之至也。天神遺以好女，浮屠曰：“此但革囊盛血。”遂不眄之。其守一如此，乃能成道。今陛下婬女豔婦，極天下之麗，甘肥飲美，單天下之味，奈何欲如黃老乎？”

19. Miao Zhe has drawn attention to the distinction between collective will and individual will in Han dynasty art. The former was strictly constrained and regulated by imperial ideology, family concepts, and social customs; the production of the related image forms and content allowed little room for individual expression. The latter was much freer, and the author believes that Buddha images belong to this category. For a detailed discussion of this topic, see Miao Zhe 2021.

20. For the latest research by Hu Wenjun, Zhu Hu, and others, see: Hu Wenjun, Zhu Xuguang, Zhu Hu 2026.

References

Bracey, Robert. 2017. The Date of Kanishka since 1960. *Indian Historical Review* 44 (1): 48.

Brough, J. 1961. A Kharoṣṭhī Inscription from China. *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 24: 1–15.

Chen, Shou (晉) 陳壽撰, Pei, Songzhi (南朝宋) 裴松之注. 1982. *Sanguozhi 三國志* [Records of the Three Kingdoms]. Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, p. 1185.

Cui, Mengze 崔夢澤. 2024. Xinchu Xi'an Xianyang Chengren mu Donghan jintong foxiang yanjiu 新出西安咸陽成任墓東漢金銅佛像研究 [A Study of the Newly Excavated Eastern Han Gilt Bronze Buddha Statues from the Chengren Tomb in Xianyang, Xi'an]. *Zongjiao xue yanjiu 宗教學研究* 2: 73–76.

Edward. 1954. The Cave Reliefs at Ma Hao. *Artibus Asiae* 17 (1): 103–125.

Fan, Ye (南朝宋) 範曄. 2007. *Hou Hanshu·Xiyu zhuan 後漢書·西域傳* [Book of the Later Han·Biography of the Western Regions]. Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, p. 871.

Hao, Shusheng 郝樹聲 and Zhang, Defang 張德芳. 2008. *Xuanquan Hanjian yanjiu 懸泉漢簡研究* [A Study of the Xuanquan Han Bamboo Slips]. Lanzhou: Gansu Wenhua Chubanshe, pp. 185–193.

He, Zhiguo 何志國. 2002. Fengdu Donghan jinian mu chutu foxiang de zhongyao yiyi 豐都東漢紀年墓出土佛像的重要意義 [The Significance of the Buddha Image from the Eastern Han Dated Tomb at Fengdu]. *Zhongguo Wenwubao 中國文物報*, May 3, p. 7.

He, Zhiguo 何志國. 2007. *Han Wei yaoqianshu chubu yanjiu 漢魏搖錢樹初步研究* [A Preliminary Study of Han-Wei Money Trees]. Beijing: Kexue Chubanshe.

He, Zhiguo 何志國. 2013. *Zaoqi foxiang yanjiu 早期佛像研究* [A Study of Early Buddha Images]. Shanghai: East China Normal University Press, p. 189.

He, Zhiguo 何志國. 2017. *Han Jin foxiang zonghe yanjiu 漢晉佛像綜合研究* [A Comprehensive Study of Han-Jin Buddha Images]. Shanghai: Shanghai Renmin Chubanshe.

He, Zhiguo 何志國. 2020. *Xinan sichou zhi lu zaoqi foxiang yanjiu 西南絲綢之路早期佛像研究* [A Study of Early Buddha Images on the Southwest Silk Road]. Shanghai: East China Normal University Press, p. 162.

He, Zhiguo 何志國. 2023. Xianyang chutu "Donghan qingtong foxiang" xianyi 咸陽出土"東漢青銅佛像"獻疑 [Questioning the Bronze Buddha Statue of the Eastern Han Dynasty from Xianyang]. *Zhongyuan wenwu 中原文物* 6: 123–131.

Hu, Wenjun 胡文峻 and Zhang, Haiping 張海平. 2019. Shilun Handai Fojiao yishu de san ge fenqi huo leixing ji qi genben chayi xing 試論漢代佛教藝術的三個分期或類型及其根本差異性 [On the Three Periods or Types of Han Buddhist Art and Their Fundamental Differences]. *Xingxiang shixue 形象史學* (second half of 2019). Beijing: Shehui Kexue Wenxian Chubanshe, p. 136.

Hu, Wenjun, Zhu, Xuguang, and Zhu Hu. From India to China: The Origin and Transmission of the Han Dynasty's Column–Arch–Buddha Motif from a Pan-Asian Perspective. Religions 2026, 17, 119. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel17010119

Huang, Chunhe 黃春和. 2022. Xianyang Chengren mu chutu foxiang de niandai chandi ji xiangguan wenti chutan 咸陽成任墓出土佛像的年代產地及相關問題初探 [Preliminary Exploration of the Date, Origin, and Related Issues of the Buddha Images Unearthed from the Chengren Tomb in Xianyang]. *Shoucangjia 收藏家* 11: 47–56.

Hubei Provincial Museum, ed. 2017. Fotuo de guxiang: Jiantuoluo Fojiao yishu 佛像的故鄉-犍陀羅佛教藝術 [The Hometown of Buddha Images: Gandharan Buddhist Art]. Beijing: Cultural Relics Press, p. 47.

Hui, Jiao (南朝梁) 慧皎撰, Tang, Yongtong 湯用彤校注, Tang, Yixuan 湯一玄整理. 1992. *Gaoseng zhuan 高僧傳* [Biographies of Eminent Monks]. Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, pp. 4, 7.

Irisawa, Takashi 入澤崇. 1992. Shenxian fotuo 神仙佛陀 [Immortal-Buddhas]. *Dongnan wenhua 東南文化* 3–4: 65.

Jin, Shen. 1994. Zhongguo lidai jinian foxiang tudian 中國歷代紀年佛像圖典 [An Illustrated Catalogue of Dated Buddhist Statues through Chinese History]. Beijing: Cultural Relics Press.

Lei, Jie 雷潔. 2022a. Discovering the Earliest Gilt Bronze Buddhist Statues in China: Archaeological Inferences. The Paper: *Private History 澎湃新聞·私家歷史*, March 6. https://m.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_16973851.

Lei, Jie 雷潔. 2022b. Discovering the Earliest Gilt Bronze Buddhist Statues in China: Issues in Buddhist History. The Paper: *Private History 澎湃新聞·私家歷史*, March 26. https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_17295519.

Li, Jianxi 李建西, Shao, Anding 邵安定, Song, Junrong 宋俊榮, Li, Ming 李明, and Zhao, Zhanrui 趙占銳. 2022. Xianyang Chengren mudi chutu Donghan jintong foxiang kexue fenxi 咸陽成任墓地出土東漢金銅佛像科學分析 [The Scientific Analysis of the Gilt Bronze Buddha Statues from the Eastern Han Tomb at the Chengren Cemetery, Xianyang]. *Kaogu yu wenwu 考古與文物* 1: 123–128.

Li, Longjun 李龍俊 and Liu, Zhen 劉振. 2026. Shaanxi Xianyang Chengren Hanmu chutu jintong foxiang de niandai yu xingzhi 陝西咸陽成任漢墓出土金銅佛像的年代與性質 [The Date and Nature of the Gilt Bronze Buddha Statues from the Chengren Han Tomb in Xianyang, Shaanxi]. *Zhongyuan wenwu 中原文物* 2: 133–142.

Li, Wenwen 李雯雯 and Zhu, Hu 朱澍. 2022. Xianyang Chengren mudi chutu jintong foxiang fengge yanjiu 咸陽成任墓地出土金銅佛像風格研究 [Study on the Style of the Gilt Bronze Buddha Statues Unearthed from the Chengren Cemetery in Xianyang]. *Zhongguo meishu yanjiu 中國美術研究* 3: 183–191.

Liming Zhang. 2024. Re-Study of the Gilt Bronze Buddha Statuettes Unearthed from the Eastern Han Dynasty Tomb in Chengren Village, Xianyang City, China. *Religions* 15: 1476, pp. 1–20.

Lin, Meicun 林梅村. 1995. Luoyang suo chu Kharoṣṭhī wen jinglan tiji 洛陽所出佉盧文井欄題記 [The Kharoṣṭhī Inscription on a Well Curb from Luoyang]. *In Xiyu wenming: Kaogu, minzu, yuyan he zongjiao xinlun 西域文明——考古、民族、語言和宗教新論* [Civilizations of the Western Regions: New Essays on Archaeology, Ethnicity, Language, and Religion]. Beijing: Dongfang Chubanshe, pp. 38–44.

Liu, Yi 劉屹. 2025. Donghan shiqi de foxiang yu Fojiao tuxiang 東漢時期的佛像與佛教圖像 [Buddha Images and Buddhist Iconography in the Eastern Han Period]. *Zhongguo shi yanjiu 中國史研究* 3: 76–93.

Luoyang Bowuguan 洛陽博物館. 1988. *Luoyang chutu tongjing 洛陽出土銅鏡* [Bronze Mirrors Excavated in Luoyang]. Beijing: Wenwu Chubanshe, pl. 4.

Marshall, John. 1960. *The Buddhist Art of Gandhāra: The Story of the Early School, Its Birth, Growth, and Decline*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Matsubara, Saburō. 1995. *Chūgoku bukkyō chōkoku shiron 中國仏教彫刻史論* [A Historical Study of Chinese Buddhist Sculpture]. Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kōbunkan.

Miao, Zhe 繆哲. 2021. *Cong Lingguang dian dao Wuliang ci: Liang Han zhi jiao diguo yishu de yiying 從靈光殿到武梁祠 兩漢之交帝國藝術的遺影* [From Lingguang Hall to Wu Liang Shrine: The Afterimage of Imperial Art at the Turn of the Two Hans]. Beijing: Sanlian Shudian.

Murata, Yasuko. 1995. *Butsuzō no keifu: Gandāra kara Nihon made—gaohyō hyōgen to karei na mōkakeza no rekishi 仏像の系譜 ガンダーラから日本まで—顔貌表現と華麗な裳懸座の歴史* [The Genealogy of Buddha Images: From Gandhāra to Japan—A History of Facial Expressions and Magnificent Hanging Skirt Seats]. Tokyo: Dai Nippon Kaiga.

Nanjing Bowuyuan 南京博物院. 1957. Changli shuiku Hanmuqun fajue jianbao 昌梨水庫漢墓群發掘簡報 [Preliminary Report on the Excavation of the Han Tombs at Changli Reservoir]. *Wenwu cankao ziliao 文物參考資料* 12: 29–43.

Prévost, G. 1926. *Les inscriptions sémitiques de Loyang conservées au Musée Gouvernemental de Pékin: contribution à l'étude de la question juive en Chine*. Pékin: Imprimerie des Lazaristes.

Qiu, Mingzhou 邱明粥. 1986. *Zhongguo Fojiao shi lüe 中國佛教史略* [A Brief History of Chinese Buddhism]. Chengdu: Sichuan Shehui Kexueyuan Chubanshe.

Ran, Wanli 冉萬裏, Li, Ming 李明, and Zhao, Zhanrui 趙占鋭. 2022. Xianyang Chengren mudi chutu Donghan jintong foxiang yanjiu 咸陽成任墓地出土東漢金銅佛像研究 [Research on the Gilt Bronze Buddha Statues from the Eastern Han Tomb at the Chengren Cemetery in Xianyang]. *Kaogu yu wenwu 考古與文物* 1: 82–94.

Rhie, Marylin M. 1999–2010. *Buddhist Art of China and Central Asia, vol. 1.* Leiden, Boston, and Köln: Brill.

Ruan, Rongchun 阮榮春. 1990. Zaoqi Fojiao zaoxiang de nanchuan xitong 早期佛教造像的南傳系統 [The Southern Transmission System of Early Buddhist Sculpture]. *Dongnan wenhua 東南文化* 1: 33–45.

Shaanxi Kaogu Yanjiuyuan 陝西省考古研究院. 2022. Shaanxi Xianyang Chengren mudi Donghan jiazu mu fajue jianbao 陝西咸陽成任墓地東漢家族墓發掘簡報 [Preliminary Report on the Excavation of the Eastern Han Family Tombs at the Chengren Cemetery in Xianyang, Shaanxi]. *Kaogu yu wenwu 考古與文物* 1: 3–27.

Su, Bai 宿白. 2004. Sichuan qianshu he Changjiang zhongxiayou bufen qiwu shang de foxiang 四川錢樹和長江中下游部分器物上的佛像——中國南方發現的早期佛像劄記 [Buddha Images on Sichuan

Money Trees and Some Objects in the Middle and Lower Yangtze Region: Notes on Early Buddha Images Discovered in Southern China]. *Wenwu 文物* 10: 61–71.

Tang, Yongtong 湯用彤. 2017. *Han Wei Liang Jin Nanbeichao Fojiao shi 漢魏兩晉南北朝佛教史* [A History of Buddhism in the Han, Wei, Western and Eastern Jin, and Northern and Southern Dynasties]. Beijing: Shangwu Yinshuguan, p. 60.

Wen, Yucheng 溫玉成. 2000. "Zaoqi Fojiao chuchuan Zhongguo nanfang zhi lu" zhiyi "早期佛教初傳中國南方之路"質疑 [Questioning the "Early Southern Route of Buddhism's Introduction to China"]. *Sichuan wenwu 四川文物* 2: 43.

Wu, Hung 巫鴻. 2024. Zai tan Chengren mudi chutu lifo xiang de shidai yu zaoqi jintong foxiang de duandai yanjiu 再談成任墓地出土立佛像的時代與早期金銅佛像的斷代研究 [Revisiting the Date of the Standing Buddha from the Chengren Cemetery and the Chronology of Early Gilt Bronze Buddha Images]. *Kaogu yu wenwu 考古與文物* 10: 90–97.

Wu Hung. 1986. Buddhist Elements in Early Chinese Art (2nd and 3rd Centuries A.D.). *Artibus Asiae* 47 (3/4): 263–352. doi:10.2307/3249974.

Wu, Zhuo 吳焯. 1992. Sichuan zaoqi Fojiao yiwu ji qi niandai yu chuanbo tujing de kaocha 四川早期佛教遺物及其年代與傳播途徑的考察 [An Examination of Early Buddhist Relics in Sichuan and Their Date and Transmission Routes]. *Wenwu 文物* 11: 12.

Yang, Xin 陽新. 2021. Guanyu Xianyang Donghan mu chutu tongfo de niandai fenxi 關於咸陽東漢墓出土銅佛的年代分析 [An Analysis of the Date of the Bronze Buddha Statues from the Eastern Han Tomb in Xianyang]. https://www.sohu.com/a/528200435_772510.

Yao, Chongxin 姚崇新. 2022. Guanyu Xianyang Chengren Donghan mu chutu jintong foxiang de jige wenti 關於咸陽成任東漢墓出土金銅佛像的幾個問題 [Several Questions about the Gilt Bronze Buddha Statues Unearthed from the Eastern Han Tomb at Chengren in Xianyang]. *Wenbo xuekan 文博學刊* 2: 17–29.

Yao, Chongxin 姚崇新. 2025. Xianyang Chengren Donghan mu chutu jintong foxiang niandai zai yanjiu 咸陽成任東漢墓出土金銅佛像年代再研究 [A Re-study of the Date of the Gilt Bronze Buddha Statues from the Eastern Han Tomb at Chengren in Xianyang]. *Wenbo xuekan 文博學刊* 2: 88–101.

Ye, Derong 葉德榮. 2010. Duyi de "shi", Huren juluo yu Fojiao: Yi Donghan Wei Xi Jin shiqi ducheng Luoyang wei shili 都邑的"市"、胡人聚落與佛教——以東漢魏西晉時期都城洛陽為實例 ["Markets" in Capitals, Foreigner Settlements, and Buddhism: A Case Study of Luoyang as the Capital during the Eastern Han, Wei, and Western Jin Periods]. *Shijie zongjiao yanjiu 世界宗教研究* 6: 35–47.

Yu, Weichao 俞偉超. 1980. Donghan Fojiao tuxiang kao 東漢佛教圖像考 [A Study of Eastern Han Buddhist Images]. *Wenwu 文物* 5: 68–77.

Yuan, Hong (東晉) 袁宏撰, Zhang, Lie 張烈點校. 2017. *Hou Hanji·Xiao Huan Huangdi ji 後漢紀·孝桓皇帝紀* [Annals of the Later Han·Annals of Emperor Xiaohuan]. Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, p. 427.

Zeng, Zhaoyu 曾昭燏 et al. 1956. *Yinan gu huaxiangshi mu fajue baogao 沂南古畫像石墓發掘報告* [Excavation Report of the Ancient Pictorial Stone Tomb at Yinan]. Beijing: Wenhuabu Wenwu Guanliju, pp. 65–67.

founding: This paper is a phased outcome of the Youth Project of the Ministry of Education Humanities and Social Sciences Fund: "A Study of the Northern Dynasties Stone Carved Stupa Pagodas in Nan' nie Shui, Qin County, Shanxi" (Grant No. 24YJC760133).

Acknowledgments: we wish to thank Dr. Zhang Liming, Professor Dong Bo, Mr. Chen Jiji, Mr. Yue Long, Mr. Zhang Zhigang, and the Lianyungang Municipal Cultural Relics Administration Office for their generosity in providing relevant materials.

Competing interests: The author declares no competing interests.

Ethical approval: This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

Informed consent: This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

Data Availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.