ETERNITY IN LIGHT

光中回首

慈山寺

TSZ SHAN
MONASTERY

Hands of Chinese Buddhist Deities: Gestures and Objects Held

Variations, Interpretations, and Restoration

Katherine Renhe Tsiang
蔣人和

Introduction

Hands, hand gestures, and the objects held are associated with types of divinities and they are an integral and meaningful part of Buddhist figural representations. They are carefully modelled with fingers shaped to detail significant postures such as grasping or supporting symbolic attributes.

However, in many cases the hands are now damaged or completely missing from Chinese Buddhist sculptures, such as those in cave shrines, so that the information they once conveyed is missing. At the same time, missing hands forcibly detached from sculptures are now in museum collections around the world, separated from the original images and figural groups. As such their meaning cannot be fully understood.

It is common that damaged sculptures and fragments are isolated from their original locations and they have been the subject of multiple studies in the past. Heads of Buddhist divinities removed from their sculptural contexts are frequently displayed in museums, and this author and other researchers have conducted research aimed at identifying them or relating them to figural types to which they belong. But missing hands have received less scholarly attention. This chapter offers a survey of the severed hands of several divinities, focusing on Chinese stone sculptures from the early medieval period as they relate to sculptures in the Tsz Shan Monastery Buddhist Art Museum.

Inspired by the projects at our Center for the Art of East Asia at the University of Chicago, that has identified the large pair of hands now in the Tsz Shan Monastery Museum as being from the Buddhist cave site of Xiangtangshan, this study situates the mentioned severed hands of several divinities within the broader context of historical Buddhist image-making variations and worship.

The symbolic gestures expressed by the hands of Buddhist images from the early medieval period in China derive from those of early Indian Buddhist figures. These gestures, known in Sanskrit as mudrā (shouyin 手印), are based on southern Asian cultural customs, poses, implements, and vessels used. As elements of images made for worship and ritual observances, they have been a source for transmission of religious beliefs and practices to China. Focusing on hands can introduce new perspectives on reconsidering the former meanings attributed Buddhist images of China's medieval period. Our discussion will be organized by types of Buddhist divinities and their associated hand gestures and attributes.

Hands of a Disciple | China Tianbao reign, Northern Qi Dynasty (550-559 CE) | Tsz Shan Monastery Buddhist Art Museum

Buddha

Historically, Buddha also known as Shakyamuni is recorded to have been Siddhārtha Gautama, a man who attained a state of spiritual awakening and understanding of the world as he sat in profound meditation beneath a pipal tree. In Buddhist literature, that tree came to be known as the Bodhi tree. Followers of Buddha and his teachings aspired to achieve a similar awakening through meditative and disciplinary practices. Many of the earliest known Buddhist sculptures in India depict Buddha seated in a posture of meditation. In this posture, the hands are commonly depicted resting on the lap with palms facing upward, a form called dhyāna mudrā (chandingyin 禪定印).

A variation of this pose, showing the hands in front of the lower torso with the palms facing inward, can be seen on early medieval Chinese sculptures, as on the gilt bronze Buddha image in the Asian Art Museum, San Francisco [fig. 1]. This Buddha, the earliest known dated Chinese Buddhist sculpture, is remarkably well-preserved, though it is missing parts that were formerly attached to the base and the back of his head. The inscription on the reverse side of the base is only partly legible, but it informs us that the work was dedicated by a monk in the year 338 of the Later Zhao kingdom.

Figure 1. Buddha Seated in Meditation | China 4th year of the Jianwu Reign, Later Zhao Dynasty (338 CE) | Asian Art Museum of San Francisco

Early images of Buddha Shakyamuni in India depicted him wearing a robe consisting of a cloth wrapped around the body with a corner of the robe frequently held in his left hand. The hand holding the robe is seen on many Gandharan images including those in the Tsz Shan Monastery collection (Lee, 2019, 22, catalogue numbers 01, 03, 04). Of these, the relief carving known as "Supplication of Brahma" has a central seated Buddha whose right hand is raised with palm facing outward in the well-known gesture of fearlessness, the abaya mudrā (shiwuwei yin 施無畏印), a gesture granting protection and reassurance. The Buddha's left hand is raised, holding the end of his robe [fig. 2]. Though this gesture is no longer clearly visible, it can be confirmed by comparison with other Gandharan sculptures. The scene depicts the Buddha seated under the Bodhi tree after his enlightenment and receiving the gods Brahma and Indra into his presence.

It is associated with texts recording the period immediately following Buddha's enlightenment. Knowing of this supreme achievement, Brahma came to Shakyamuni to request that he spread his teachings among people who greatly needed their benefits, even though they would find it difficult to overcome the common ignorance, greed, and hatred. The abhaya mudrā gesture is significant in its context here marking his first response to appeals for his teachings and guidance.

Figure 2. Relief of Supplication of Brahmā | Gandhāra Kushan Dynasty (3rd century CE) | Tsz Shan Monastery Buddhist Art Museum

Figure 3. Seated Buddha | China Northern Wei Dynasty (386-534 CE) | Harvard Art Museums

A Chinese seated gilt bronze Buddha, dated to the year 484 in the Northern Wei period, displays clearly these hand gestures, the left hand holding the end of the robe and the right hand raised in abhaya mudrā. This example is in the Harvard Art Museums [fig. 3].

Just prior to Buddha's enlightenment, biographies of Shakyamuni describe him seated in meditation under the Bodhi tree when the god Māra, ruler of the realm of desire, accompanied by his seductive daughters and demonic followers, attempted to distract him. Shakyamuni fended them off by reaching down to touch the earth, calling the earth goddess to witness his worthiness. The earth-touching hand gesture, reaching forward with fingers pointing downward is called bhūmiśparsha mudrā (chudiyin 觸地印). It is associated with the attainment of enlightenment and the subduing of demons. Like the abhaya mudrā, this gesture can be seen in Gandharan sculpture and throughout much of the history of Buddhist art. It is most frequently performed by a seated Buddha image with the palm facing inward resting on the leg and all fingers pointing downward. A possible variation of this in China has the hand facing outward with the index finger pointing downward. This version can be seen on Northern Wei sculptures of the Buddha in the grand Binyang Central Cave at Longmen. The three Buddhas in this cave, the principal Buddha seated and the other two standing, all have the right hand raised in abhaya mudra and the left hand with the index finger pointing downward, palm facing outward [fig. 4].

The imperially sponsored Binyang Central Cave was a triple-cave project begun at Longmen under the reign of Northern Wei dynasty emperor Xuanwu (r. 499-515) with the intent of dedicating it to his parents, emperor Xiaowen and empress Wenzhao. Only one of the large-scale limestone caves, the central cave, was completed in 523 at tremendous expense before the project was discontinued (McNair, 2007, 31-50).

Figure 4. Seated Buddha | China Northern Wei Dynasty (386-534 CE) | Longmen Binyang Central Cave |
Photograph by the Author

Figure 5. Buddha Hand Raised in Abhaya-mudra | China Northern Qi Dynasty (550–577 CE) | Metropolitan Museum of Art | Photograph by the Author

Figure 6. Hand of Buddha Holding End of Cloth | China Northern Qi Dynasty (550–577 CE) | Asian Art Museum of San Francisco

Colossal stone carvings of Buddhas were also produced by rulers of the Northern Qi dynasty (550-577) at the Northern Xiangtangshan cave site (Tsiang et al, 2010). The earliest photographs taken of the magnificent North Cave at Northern Xiangtangshan in the early 1900s show that the looting of many of the sculptures had already begun (Tokiwa, v. 3, 89-91). Colossal seated Buddhas, each with two standing bodhisattva attendants, occupied altars on three sides of the North Cave central pillar. The early photographs indicate that Maitreya Buddha on the southern side of the central pillar had his right hand raised in the abhaya mudra, with his left hand holding up the end of his robe. These two hands are now located on opposite coasts of the continental U.S.—the right hand in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York [fig. 5], and the left hand in the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco [fig. 6].

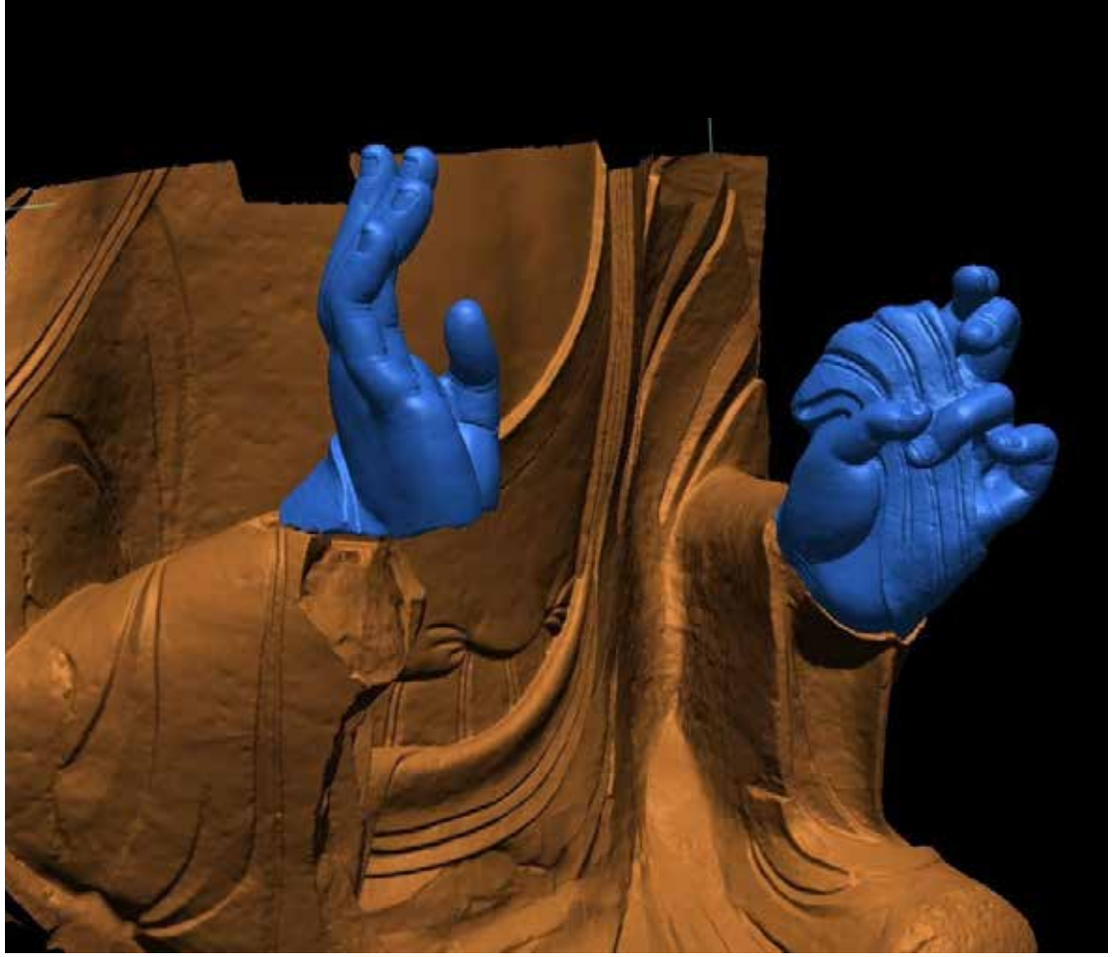

Figure 7. Digital Restoration of Hands of Buddha Maitreya in the North Cave Central Pillar on the South Side | Xiangtangshan Caves Project | Center for the Art of East Asia, University of Chicago

In spite of their extremely large size, these sculptures were carved from the hard limestone with great attention to the soft modeling of the curving fingers including details of fingernails and cuticles, as seen on left hand with the thumb, fourth and fifth fingers curled around the looped end of the robe with the other two fingers raised. The original positions of the hands of the Buddha are shown in a digital rendering made by the Center for the Art of East Asia for its Xiangtangshan Caves Project [fig. 7]. The Center for Chinese Art at the University of Chicago is working to achieve virtual restoration by using digital technologies at the cultural heritage sites, such as the Buddhist grotto shrines of Xiangtangshan and the Binyang Central Cave at Longmen.

Figure 8. Main Altar of the Middle Cave at Northern Xiangtangshan | China Tianbao reign, Northern Qi Dynasty (550-559 CE) | Middle Cave, Northern Xiangtangshan | Photograph by the Author

Another large Buddha sculpture at the Northern Xiangtangshan caves site is the main Buddha image in the central pillar of the Middle Cave. It has the right hand raised in the abhaya mudrā with the left hand performing the gesture of generosity, or the varada mudrā (shiyuan yin 施與願印). In this gesture, the palm faces outward and the fingers point downward. [fig. 8] These gestures of granting absence of fear and wish-fulfillment frequently appear together on Buddha images created for worship in the medieval period. The Buddha sits on a lotus throne at the back of the altar niche flanked by two standing disciples. The Bodhisattvas, tall and royally garbed, appear to dominate the group but have been heavily damaged and restored.

Disciple

Behind the Bodhisattvas on the altar in the Middle Cave are two disciple (dizi 弟子) figures dressed in monks' robes, one on either side of the seated Buddha. Both are now headless. The figure at the Buddha's right side, most likely the disciple Ananda, has hands held in front of the chest, palms together, in anjali mudrā, a gesture of salutation still in use today. It is a sign of homage to others, and of adoration in the presence of divinity [fig. 9].

Figure 9. Standing Disciple Ananda | China Tianbao reign, Northern Qi Dynasty (550-559 CE) | Middle Cave, Northern Xiangtangshan | Photograph by the Author

Figure 10. Standing Disciple Mahākāśyapa | China Tianbao reign, Northern Qi Dynasty (550-559 CE) | Middle Cave, Northern Xiangtangshan | Photograph by the Author

Attendant figures in the company of the Buddha frequently hold their hands in this pose. The disciple figure at the Buddha's left-hand side can be identified as Mahākāśyapa, the source of the pair of large hands in the Tsz Shan Monastery collection [fig. 10]. Ananda and Mahākāśyapa, one youthful and the other elderly, together represent the disciples of the Buddha.

The large hands in the Tsz Shan Monastery Museum hold a cylindrical box with the left hand supporting the base, and the right hand at the opposite side with fingers over the top. Like the Buddha's massive hands from the North Cave seen above, these hands are also finely carved with the fingers rounded and the folds of the monk's robe extending to the wrists, clearly defined [fig. 11].

Figure 11. Hands of a Disciple | China Tianbao reign, Northern Qi Dynasty (550-559 CE) | Tsz Shan Monastery Buddhist Art Museum

The cylindrical box can be identified as a reliquary holding ashes of the Buddha. Other standing sculptures of disciples holding reliquaries are known at the Xiangtangshan caves, including one in the Cleveland Museum of Art that is believed to be from Southern Xiangtangshan. It depicts a disciple holding a cylindrical box, his brow wrinkled in a frown [fig. 12]. He can be identified as Mahākāśyapa, who is represented as an older monk, while Ananda has smooth and youthful features.

Mahākāśyapa was one of the most revered of the Buddha's disciples, known for his strict ascetic practices and his teaching of the doctrine. After the Buddha passed into Parinirvana, Mahākāśyapa is recorded to have presided over the First Buddhist Council when the disciples gathered to begin compiling the Buddha's teachings. The young Ananda, who had a formidable memory, could recite the Buddha's teachings by heart.

According to textual sources, Mahākāśyapa was concerned that the Buddha's relics, or cremated remains, would become too widely dispersed and lost. After the Buddha's death, the relics were divided and shared among eight kingdoms. In order to preserve the relics, Mahākāśyapa is recorded to have gathered portions together from the various sources. For these reasons, he can be identified as the disciple depicted holding a box of relics. However, he was not always depicted this way. Sculptors might show either or neither of the two accompanying disciple figures holding reliquaries.

Figure 12. Standing Disciple Mahākāśyapa Holding a Cylindrical Reliquary | China Northern Qi Dynasty (550–577 CE) | Cleveland Museum of Art

Bodhisattva

The hands of Bodhisattvas as well as Buddhas in the Chinese early medieval period can display both the abhaya and varada mudrā. However, bodhisattvas are more frequently depicted holding objects in their hands. A commonly seen object is the lotus, one of the oldest Buddhist symbols, a sign of purity and rebirth. Growing from the mud at the bottom of ponds, its leaves and flowers emerge from the water immaculate.

The lotus blossom is ubiquitous in Buddhist art and frequently appears as a pedestal or throne supporting divine images. In the Binyang Central Cave at Longmen, the large sculptures stand on lotus pedestals, and the floor of the cave is carved with lotus flowers among rippling wave patterns.

Figure 13. Bodhisattvas Sculptures Holding Lotus Buds | China Northern Wei Dynasty (386-534 CE) | Longmen Binyang Central Cave | Photograph from Friedrich Perzynsk, Von Chinas Göttern: Reisen in China

Bodhisattvas often hold a lotus bud or the stem of a fully blooming lotus in one hand. The lotus bud appears in the hands of many early standing Bodhisattva figures depicted as attendants to the Buddhas in figure groups in Northern Wei caves.

Historical photographs taken in the early twentieth century show now-damaged sculptures in the Binyang Central Cave with their hands still intact [fig. 13]. A finely sculpted large hand of a Bodhisattva holding a lotus bud in the Cincinnati Art Museum is of the scale that could have come from such a large cave [fig. 14]. Our Center research team has conducted 3D scanning of the hand and will attempt to find its former location.

The lotus bud signifies the promise of rebirth in a Buddhist paradise. In Chinese depictions of the Western Paradise of Amitabha Buddha, small figures appear sitting inside lotus buds on the surface of a pond. These reborn souls emerge from the lotus flowers as they bloom. Among the earliest known artistic representations of this phenomenon of rebirth in the Western Paradise is the stone sculptural relief created for Cave 2 at the Southern Xiangtangshan caves in the Northern Qi dynasty. The sixth century relief carving is now in the National Museum of Asian Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C.

Lotus flower became a particular attribute of the Bodhisattva Guanyin, who is one of the principal Bodhisattva attendants of Amitabha Buddha. A marble sculpture of the Bodhisattva Guanyin in the Tsz Shan Monastery Museum commissioned in the year 543 of the Eastern Wei dynasty holds the stem of a large lotus blossom in his right hand (Lee, 2019, catalogue number 041). Lotus flowers, as symbols of purity and rebirth, could be given as offerings. Popular illustrations of a jataka, or story of a previous life of Sakyamuni Buddha, show Megha (Sumedha) offering lotus flowers as a gift to Dipankara, a Buddha from a past age. Megha spread his hair and body on the muddy road for Dipankara and his retinue of disciples to walk upon, and in performing this sacrifice, he received Dipankara's prediction of his future rebirth as Sakyamuni Buddha.

Figure 14. Hand of a Bodhisattva Holding a Lotus Bud | China Northern Wei Dynasty (386-534 CE) | Cincinnati Art Museum | Photograph by the Author

Another object seen in the hands of many Bodhisattva images from the time of early Indian Buddhist art is the water bottle or kalasha, (ping 瓶). It is frequently a vessel with slender neck that could be held between the fingers, as seen in a finely-carved Kushan period seated Bodhisattva Maitreya in the Tsz Shan Monastery Museum [fig. 15]. The sculpture is damaged, and the bottle and part of the left hand are broken off. However, the silhouetted form of the bottle remains. Maitreya, the future Buddha, was principally represented as a Bodhisattva in Gandharan art, a noble figure dressed in long scarves and fine jewelry. With the growth of the cult of Maitreya and the spread of sutras that detail different aspects of Maitreya and his worship, images of Maitreya as both Bodhisattva and Buddha became common in China.

Figure 15. Seated Bodhisattva Maitreya | Gandhāra Kushan Dynasty (3rd century CE) | Tsz Shan Monastery Buddhist Art Museum

Figure 16. Detail of Standing Bodhisattva Sculpture Holding a Water Bottle | China Northern Wei Dynasty (386-534 CE) | Longmen Binyang Central Cave | Photograph by the Author

Bodhisattva images in China were frequently depicted holding bottles in their hands, usually standing figures with the hand lowered along the side of the body, as seen in the right hand of a standing Bodhisattva in the Binyang Central Cave, Longmen [fig. 16]. Several Tang dynasty gilt bronze bodhisattvas in the Tsz Shan Monastery Museum also hold such water bottles (Lee, 2019, catalog numbers 051, 053, 054, 055). The bottle was regarded as a container for pure, life-giving water and was an auspicious sign used for ceremonial offering rituals. It may be associated with the Bodhisattva Guanyin in particular.

Figure 17. Bodhisattva Guanyin Holding Willow Branch and Bottle | China Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127 CE) | Hangzhou Yanxia Cave | Photograph by the Author

A standing Bodhisattva Guanyin carved in stone in the Northern Song dynasty at the entrance to the Yanxia cave (煙霞洞) at Nangaofeng (南高峰)near Hangzhou holds a bottle in the left hand that is positioned so that the water is pouring out. The right hand is raised, holding a willow branch [fig. 17].

Figure 18. Large Hand of a Bodhisattva from North Cave at Northern Xiangtangshan | China Northern Qi Dynasty (550–577 CE) | Osaka Municipal Museum of Art

Another object held by Bodhisattva figures has been somewhat mystifying and not satisfactorily identified. In large Northern Dynasty caves at Longmen and Xiangtangshan, it is held beside the body suspended from the fingers like a small purse, rounded in shape and pointed at the bottom. The form is similar to and may derive from the depiction of aureoles around sacred figures and objects; so it may be assumed that it is an object with sacred significance. The large hand in the Osaka City Museum of Art illustrated here holds such an object with the middle fingers that support it inserted into the upper part [fig. 18]. The hand appears to have come from a Bodhisattva in the North Cave at Northern Xiangtangshan. A historic photograph of the north side of the central pillar shows the Bodhisattva also standing at the left side of the seated Buddha middle holding a similar object in precisely the same way [fig. 19].

Figure 19. Seated Buddha and Bodhisattvas in the North Cave Central Pillar at Northern Xiangtangshan | China Northern Qi Dynasty (550–577 CE) | Photo from Tokiwa Daijo, Shina Bukkyō Shiseki: Hyōkai

Figure 20. Bodhisattva in Lianhua Cave at Longmen | China Northern Wei Dynasty (386-534 CE) | Longmen Lianhua Cave | Photograph by the Author

A large standing Bodhisattva of the early sixth century in the Lotus Cave at Longmen holds a very similar object in the left hand. The same figure has the right hand raised holding a globular object with an aureole pointed upward at the top, a luminous jewel or pearl [fig. 20].

Figure 21. Flaming Jewels in Relief Carvings on Upper Level Wall | China Northern Qi Dynasty (550–577 CE) | North Cave, Northern Xiangtangshan | Photograph by the Author

Bodhisattvas are divinities that have acquired the jewels of Buddhist wisdom and remain in this world for the benefit of other beings. This symbolism can be seen in the pervasive imagery of flaming jewels carved in relief on the upper level walls of the North Cave at Northern Xiangtangshan [fig. 21]. The divinities as well as visitors to the cave are surrounded by these precious jewels that crown the tops of pillars and rest on lotuses springing from vases at the tops of stupas. Formerly painted, their radiance would have been enhanced by the light streaming into the cave through the upper-level windows.

The towering Guanyin statue at the Tsz Shan Monastery holds in its hands both the jewel of Buddhist wisdom and the water bottle.

Pensive Bodhisattva

A distinctive hand gesture performed by Bodhisattvas seated in the iconic pose of contemplation is that of the hand raised with the index finger touching the face. The figure sits with one foot on the ground and the other foot crossed over the knee, usually with the right ankle resting on the left knee. The Bodhisattva's torso leans slightly forward so that the right elbow rests on the right knee with the hand raised and the index finger of the right hand touches the face as though in thought.

The pose can be seen to derive from illustrations of the biography of Shakyamuni Buddha. Shakyamuni, named Siddhārtha Gautama, had an aristocratic upbringing and lived his early life protected from suffering, deliberately shielded from painful realities of life and death. Growing awareness caused the youth to enter into an extended state of contemplation while sitting under a tree. During this time, according to one account, the tree branches kept him shaded from the heat of the sun as it moved across the sky.

Following further shocking encounters with old age, sickness, and death, Sakyamuni resolved to leave his palatial home in order to seek the cause of suffering. Depictions of the youthful princely Bodhisattva seated in the pensive pose were especially popular in sixth-century China during the Eastern Wei and Northern Qi dynasties.

Figure 22. Pensive Bodhisattva with Four Attendants | China Northern Qi Dynasty (550-577 CE) | Tokyo National Museum

Many examples were carved from the fine white marble called baiyu (白玉) found in the area of Dingzhou, Hebei province, not far from the capital at Yecheng. In the dedicatory inscriptions, the seated figure is described variously as pensive prince image (taizi siwei 太子思惟像 , siwei wangxiang 思惟王像), white marble contemplative image (baiyu siweixiang 白玉思惟像), or simply prince (taizi 太子).

The Tsz Shan Monastery Museum has two pensive Bodhisattva images carved of marble, one of which is a simple figure seated in the contemplative pose with the index finger of the right hand touching the cheek and a large circular halo attached at the back of the shoulders. Two small disciple figures stand at his side on the rectangular base. The engraved inscription dates the sculpture to the year 571 in the Northern Qi period and identifies it as a marble image dedicated by a monk to his deceased parents (Lee, catalogue number 043).

More frequently the pensive Bodhisattva is depicted seated under trees, as in an example in the Tokyo National Museum whose lower right arm and hand with the finger touching the face are missing. The tree branches are carved in openwork above the figure's circular halo. Flying heavenly divinities with long scarves fluttering above the branches support the small figure of an infant at the top.

The Bodhisattva is accompanied by four attendant figures, two disciples standing in front of the tree trunks, and two Bodhisattvas at the sides.

Of the two disciples, the older-looking figure of Mahākāśyapa holds a cylindrical reliquary in his two hands [fig. 22]. The figures are set on a rectangular base on the front of which are two lishi guardian figures and two lions flanking an incense burner supported by a small squatting figure.

A similar marble sculpture, in the Asian Art Museum, San Francisco, has a seated princely figure with two Bodhisattva attendants standing at his sides beside the trunks of the trees around which dragons are entwined. Flying divinities among openwork tree branches above support a stupa at the top. The front of the rectangular base is similarly carved with two guardian figures and two lions flanking an incense burner supported by small seated figures. An inscription engraved on the back and extending to one side records the creation of the white marble pensive image in the year 551, crafted with the wish that all living beings might become enlightened. The surfaces of the Asian Art Museum sculpture have the remains of painted ornamental patterns and human figures. The figures are likely to be those of the donor-worshipper and his family.

Figure 23a. Pensive Bodhisattva | China Northern Qi Dynasty (550-577 CE) | Tsz Shan Monastery Buddhist Art Museum

The second sculpture of the pensive prince in the Tsz Shan Monastery Museum collection is a highly detailed rendering of the pensive prince as the central figure of a complex composition also worked in marble. Six divine attendants stand on lotus flowers at his sides—pairs of Bodhisattvas, disciples, and Pratyekabuddhas (yuanjue 緣覺). Two small figures of donor-worshippers stand below them on the rectangular base. Six flying heavenly divinities appear among the openwork branches above, holding trailing garlands and supporting a seated Buddha figure at the top. The leaves at the tops of the branches were individually carved and, because of their fragility, many along the upper part of the sculpture have broken off [fig. 23].

Figure 23b. Reverse Side of Pensive Bodhisattva | China Northern Qi Dynasty (550-577 CE) | Tsz Shan Monastery Buddhist Art Museum

As in other examples, the front of the base has two guardian figures and two lions flanking an incense burner in the middle. The carvings of additional figures on the sides and back of the base are done in unusually high relief. Traces of pigments and gilding remain on the surface of the figures, and a painted geometric border pattern appears along the bottom. The reverse of the sculpture is also carved in detail, showing the back of the Bodhisattva and his halo, along with multiple layers of leaves on the trees, all bearing traces of paint. Many marble sculptures of the pensive prince were made as principal images. These are often mentioned in inscriptions on the sculptures.

The variety of carving and detailed records of surviving dedicatory inscriptions indicate that Buddhist devotees commissioned the sculptures in large numbers, along with many other sculptures of the period identified as Bodhisattva Guanyin, Maitreya, Sakyamuni Buddha and others. One can find still more variations in the rendering of the pensive among the large corpus of sculptures of the period.

The fine sculptures excavated in recent years in the vicinity of the former capital of the Eastern Wei and Northern Qi at Yecheng, and kept in the Linzhang Buddhist Sculpture Museum (Linzhang fozaoxiang bowuguan 臨漳佛造像博物館), Linzhangxian, Hebei, include examples that also should be mentioned here. Among these is a marble sculpture of elaborate design carved on both sides with images seated under openwork trees. A Buddha is the main image, seated in lotus pose in front of a large leaf-shaped aureole [fig. 24]. His hands are held in the positions of abhaya mudrā and varada mudrā. Four attendants that once stood on lotus blossoms at his sides; two disciples and one Bodhisattva still remain intact. In front of his throne are two small figures, partially broken, that appear to be worshippers, one of them holding up an offering. The rectangular base of the sculpture is carved on the front side with two lions, two donor figures and a central incense burner supported by a small seated figure. Flying divinities in front of the tree branches above the Buddha's aureole support a stupa at the top.

Figure 24. Buddha Sculpture Group | China Northern Qi Dynasty (550-577 CE) | Linzhang Buddhist Sculpture Museum | Photograph by the Author

Figure 25. Pensive Bodhisattva on Reverse Side of Buddha Sculpture Group | China Northern Qi Dynasty (550-577 CE) | Linzhang Buddhist Sculpture Museum | Photograph by the Author

The reverse of the sculpture is unusual for a sculpted figure of the pensive prince image at the back of the Buddha's aureole below many layers of individually carved leaves [fig. 25]. He is accompanied by two standing attendants that appear to be Pratyekabuddhas. Numerous other examples of the pensive prince appear on the reverse of Buddha sculptures carved in low relief, but this one is sculpted in the round and has features similar to the Tzs Shan Monastery Museum example above.

Figure 26. Pensive Prince Relief Carving on Broken Sculpture Base | China Northern Qi Dynasty (550-577 CE) | Linzhang Buddhist Sculpture Museum | Photograph by the Author

In addition, the pensive prince's image is associated with a second episode in the life of prince Siddhārtha. After his decision to renounce his princely status to seek the truth about suffering in life, Siddhārtha secretly left the palace in the middle of the night. The gods accompanied him, silencing the sounds of his horse's hoofs so that he wouldn't awaken others. Outside of the palace, the prince bade farewell to his horse and removed his crown and finery. This scene was uncommon in previously known illustrations of the life of Buddha, but it is touchingly depicted on sculptures recently found in excavations around Yecheng.

The scene shows Siddhartha sitting in contemplation of his new life's destiny shortly after his departure from the palace. His horse Kanthaka bows to him and in some cases appears to lick his foot. The figures at the left side of the scene dressed in official-looking robes on this example may be early representations of the Five Destinies in Chinese art. [fig. 26]

Figure 27. A Pair of Pensive Bodhisattvas | China Northern Qi Dynasty (550-577 CE) | Linzhang Buddhist Sculpture Museum | Photograph by the Author

In this period, the pensive prince image could also call to mind the resolve of devotees to seek the truth of Buddhism along with their aspirations to become enlightened. The dedicatory inscriptions of many Buddhist sculptures in the Northern Dynasties, when this image type proliferated, frequently mention the wish to become enlightened and even to become a Buddha. The image of the prince who would become Buddha Shakyamuni was linked to this ideal. Examples depicting a pair of pensive Bodhisattvas seated side by side could refer to devotees together with family or other members of their community who aspired to Buddhist enlightenment.

A marble sculpture discovered near Yecheng shows a pair of contemplative Bodhisattvas seated side by side under trees. The pensive figures are mirror images, one with the right hand raised touching the cheek and the other with the left hand raised [fig. 27]. They are accompanied by two small standing Bodhisattvas. The tree branches above them are painstakingly crafted with two seated figures above the halos of the pensive figures and flying divinities among the branches. Two dragons support a stupa at the top of the composition. Comparison with the Tsz Shan Monastery pensive Bodhisattva group shows significant similarities. On both works, the flying divinities hold long trailing floral garlands that were formerly gilded. The openwork carving is particularly extensive with the leaves along the upper edges carved individually.

A marble sculpture of paired contemplative Bodhisattvas seated under trees with two small Buddhas above them is preserved in the National Museum of Asian Art (accession number F1913.27). Its inscription dated the fourth year of Heqing (565) is dedicated by a Buddhist society in Liu Village, Quyang County "a white marble sculpture for teaching monks, parents, Your Imperial Majesty, and seven generations of the previously deceased, that all beings in our peripheral realm may become Buddhas at the same time." (Tsiang, 2008, 156). In its association with future Buddhahood, the pensive prince sculpture also came to be linked with Maitreya, and the pensive image type was specifically identified as Maitreya bodhisattva in Korea and Japan.

Conclusion

In the end, I would like to thank the Tsz Shan Monastery Buddhist Art Museum for inviting me to contribute to this volume in honor of Mr. Li Ka-shing to share the discovery of great artistic achievements in the historical study of Chinese Buddhist sculpture. At the same time, research in this field requires dealing with the painful reality of loss and destruction of magnificent art works of great historical importance.

As scholars at the Center for the Art of East Asia, we attempt to approach damaged and fragmentary works of art from different perspectives and methodologies. Extensive research and digital recording of scattered and broken artworks as well as of historical sites have enabled our Center to restore virtually Buddhist sculptures and architectural elements, to recontextualize them geographically, spatially, and within religious cultures of practice and devotion. Our earlier grant-supported projects on the Xiangtangshan and Tianlongshan Buddhist cave temple complexes have led to a larger initiative, the Dispersed Chinese Art Digitization Project. In this initiative, our Center is expanding the collaborative scope of its endeavors to build bridges between cultural sites in China and museums around the world. As part of this international collaborative effort, our Center is pleased to include the Tsz Shan Monastery Museum along with many other institutions that have collections of artworks from important Chinese cultural and religious sites, and we look forward to further cooperation in the future.