

Buddhist Imageries of China Proper during the Han–Jin Period

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Buddhism was introduced to China from India. After a long process of diffusion and development, Buddhism in China evolved into a religion bearing distinctive Chinese characteristics. Scholars have been debating about the dates when Buddhism was first introduced to China for years, but consensus has not been reached. Furthermore, questions about the route of diffusion and the occurrence and evolution of the early Buddhist imageries are important unresolved issues in the contemporary study of early Buddhist imageries in China; but these issues have not yet been thoroughly discussed by the academic circle of Buddhist study. In spite of the fact that written texts document the introduction of Buddhism to China, Buddhist imageries of the Han recovered from archaeological digs are meager, or they have been discovered but their significance has been overlooked. The scarcity of visual information until recently is the main reason pertains to the lack of discussion.

The wealth of visual imageries had dramatically increased in recent years. A large number of early Buddhist remains had been recovered from the southern provinces of Sichuan 四川, Hubei 湖北, Anhui 安徽, Jiangsu 江苏, and Zhejiang 浙江. These findings prompt a proposition that the diffusion of Buddhism and Buddhist imagery followed a route started in the south, then advanced to the eastern and northern territories. I think this proposition needs to be critically examined.

The discoveries of Buddhist imageries of the Han–Jin era in China Proper (“China Proper” is a geographic notion in the study of Chinese history. It generally means the land east of the Yumenguan 玉门关 and the Yangguan 阳关. To the west of China Proper is the land of the “Western Territories.”) concentrate in northern Jiangsu, southern Shandong 山东, Sichuan, and area south of the Yangzi 长江. It is not an exaggeration to say that the Han–Jin Buddhist imageries were the pro-

totypes of the religious imageries of China. During the times of Eastern Jin and the Sixteen States, Buddhism blended with the metaphysics sect and the Buddhist imageries gradually separated from Daoism imageries. The symbolic meanings entailed in Buddhist imageries became increasingly distinctive.

I. Investigation on the Written Texts

Before analyzing the Han–Jin Buddhist imageries of China Proper, we need to systematically review the written records about the early diffusion of Buddhism. Such a study will throw light on the historical processes of the diffusion of Buddhism from its motherland in the Indian sub-continent into its neighboring regions and eventually into China Proper. Because of religious and historical biases, the written texts are infested with exaggerations and even worse, falsifications. In pursuit of the right answers, it is crucial to critically examine the texts and seek verifications from material culture remains of archaeology.

According to the written texts, introduction of Buddhism to China occurred no later than the times between the end of Western Han and the beginning of Eastern Han (approximately the first century BC to the first century AD). They also point out that early Buddhism had a close relationship with Daoism. Examples like Ying 英, the Duke of Chu, fasted for and sacrificed to Buddha and Emperor Huan (AD 147–167) of Eastern Han erected canopy to worship Buddha and Laozi 老子 vividly depict the attitude of the elite of the Royal court toward the exotic religion of Buddhism. The diffusion of Buddhism had reached a considerable scale during the reign of Emperor Xian 献帝 (AD 189–220) of Eastern Han. The written texts delineate Ze Rong 笮融, then the commissioner of the canal transportation between Guangling 广陵 and Pengcheng 彭城 at Xuzhou 徐州,

erected Buddhist temples and worshipped gold-painted bronze Buddha statues. The translation of sutra was instrumental for the diffusion of Buddhism. During the Yongping 永平 reign (AD 58–75), Emperor Ming 明帝 of Eastern Han sent an envoy to acquire the *Sishier Zhang Jing* 四十二章经 (Forty-two Chapters of Sutra) and placed it in the Lantai 兰台 (Stone Chamber), the Royal Library.

The written texts indicate that although the existence of Buddhism was depended on early Daoism during the some one century spanning from Ying, the Duke of Chu to the years of Yanxi 延熹 of Emperor Huan 桓帝 of the Eastern Han, its status had changed through time. The change was suggested by two developments. First, the order when the two religions were mentioned simultaneously changed from “*hunag lao fu tu* 黄老浮屠” (“*huang lao*,” the acronyms of Huangdi 黄帝 and Laozi, was how early Daoism addressed; “*fu tu*” is the Buddhist stupa, was how early Buddhism was addressed) to “*fu tu lao zi*.” The reversal of order perhaps was a reflection that Buddhism was gaining influence over Daoism. Second, “*huang lao*” was changed into Laozi.

II. Buddhist Imageries of Eastern Han and Shu Han

Acquisition of the Han–Jin Buddhist imageries in archaeology is non-systematic. It will be dishonest to claim that we can reconstruct a complete picture of the early Buddhist imageries based on the presently available archaeological data. Yet, scientific archaeology directs us to systematically unravel the pattern of change based on objective observations of the typology of imageries and the seriation of development of the various features. Although the extant information on early Buddhist imagery is still sketchy, we can derive working generalizations that guide our future study.

The early Buddhist texts of China document the appearance of Buddhist imagery; however, no visual information is provided. On the contrary, artifacts bearing images of Buddha often turn up in the tombs in archaeology. These are invaluable information for the present study. In the study of Buddhist

imagery, observation on the regional stylistic change is particularly revealing. For example, the observation and identification of the “hand sign” and “nimbus” of the images of Buddha offer special insight into the origins and developments of certain artistic styles.

The Buddhist imageries appear on the archaeological features and artifacts of Eastern Han and Shu Han 蜀汉 include decorative relief, murals, carved stones, relief bricks of the tomb chambers, images of Buddha on the coin trees and other grave offerings, cliff stone carvings, gold and bronze Buddhist statues, etc. (Fig. 1). They distribute in a vast territory within the bounds of Gansu 甘肃, Sichuan and Shaanxi 陕西 in the west, Shandong in the east, Inner Mongolia in the north, and Anhui 安徽 in the south. It is worth mentioning that the recent excavation of an Eastern Han tomb in Caofanggou 槽房沟, Fengdu 丰都, Chongqing 重庆 yielded fragments of a copper coin tree revealing the casting remains of the upper body of a Buddha. A large nimbus appears on the back of the Buddha’s head, which has a flame-style hairdo tied in a tall bun, no facial hair, round collar, the right hand is holding the sign of assurance from fear (abhaya), the left hand is holding the robe’s corner. On the side of the pottery seat’s bottom of this coin tree bears the inscriptions “made in the tenth day of the fourth month of the fourth year of Yanguang 延光” (AD 125). Presently, this is the earliest exactly dated Buddhist imagery ever found (Fig. 2).

The development of Buddhist imageries of the Eastern Han and Shu Han can be demonstrated by the stylistic analyses of the Buddhist imageries recovered from Mahao 麻浩, Shiziwan 柿子湾, Mianyang 绵阳 and

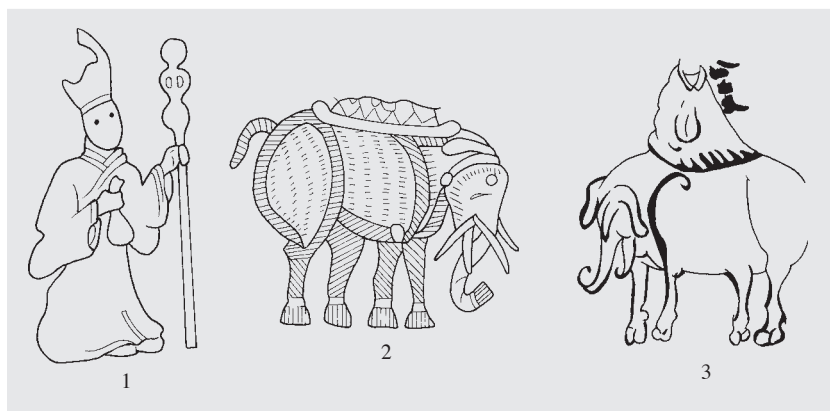


Fig. 1 The Buddhist imageries

1. Buddhist image in the northern gate pillar of tomb No. 1 in the shrine of Maohao, Leshan
2. White elephant with six tusks from stone relief of Tengxian, Shandong
3. Fairy riding white elephant from the mural of tomb in Helingeer 和林格尔, Inner Mongolia

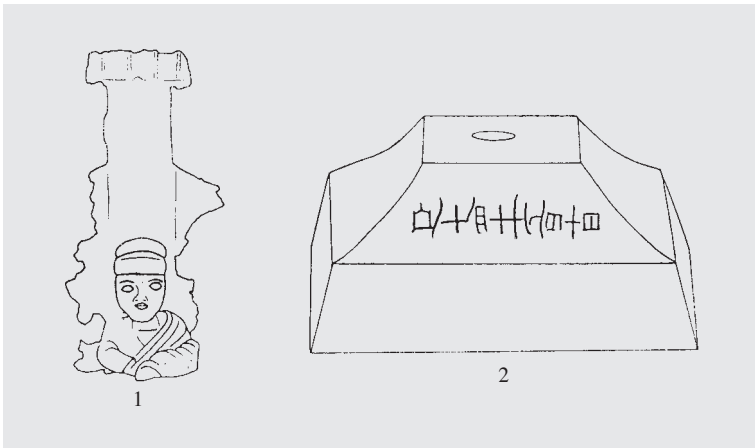


Fig. 2 The Buddhist imageries from an Eastern Han tomb in Fengdu, Chongqing
1. fragment of a copper coin tree 2. bottom of a copper coin tree

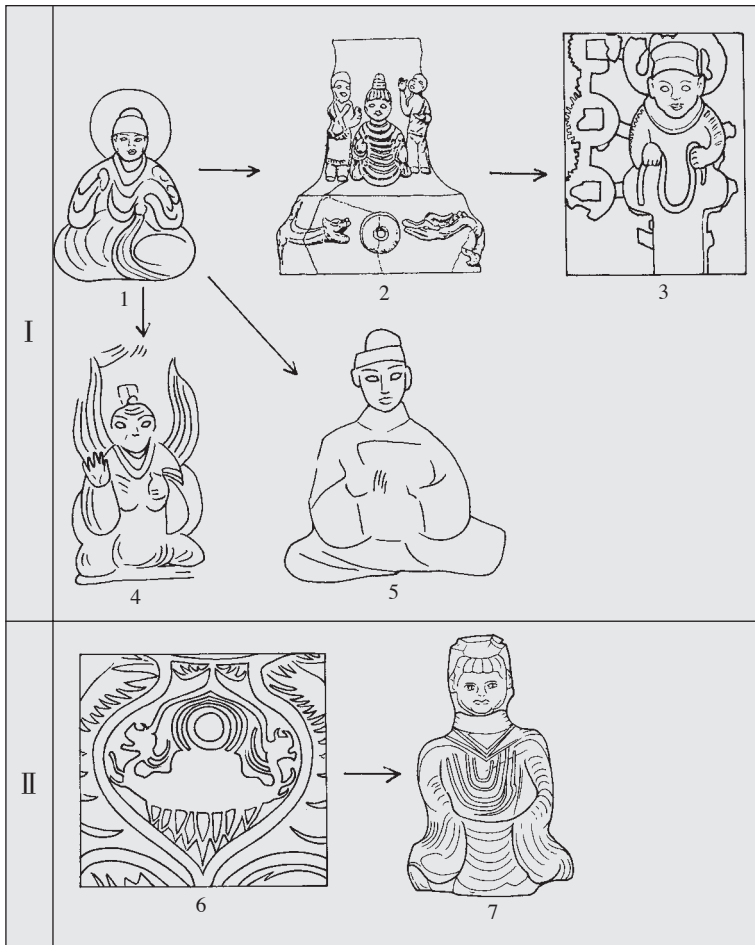


Fig. 3 Region and phase chart of the Han-Jin period Buddhist images

1. stone image from Leshan 乐山, Sichuan
2. ceramic base from Pengshan, Sichuan
3. branch of a bronze coin tree from Hejiashan 何家山, Mianyang, Sichuan
4. image on a pillar from Beizhai 北寨 Village, Yanan 沂南, Shandong
5. Buddha image from Kongwangshan 孔望山, Lianyungang 连云港, Jiangsu
6. image on a base of a bronze mirror from Wulidun 五里墩, Ezhou, Hubei
7. glazed ceramic Buddha image from Tangjiaotou, Ezhou, Hubei

Zhongxian 忠县. Their stylistic development can be partitioned into two phases. The diagnostic features of the early phase, represented by the imageries of the former two sites, include incised curve clothes lines on the neck and shoulder and the absence of U-shaped clothes line between the knees. Overall, the images of this phase are similar to those of the early Gandhara style, which emphasizes realistic expression. The diagnostic features of the late phase, represented by the imageries of the latter two sites, include elaborated hairdo like a tall hat, incised collar under the chin, and U-shaped clothes lines between the knees are standardized. It is the stylistic equivalent of a great number of images common in Madhura and many other places.

The development of Buddhist imagery followed a specific pattern. In the beginning, it was the direct transplant of foreign motifs and style. The foreign style then interacted and blended with the artistic tradition of indigenous culture, giving rise to imageries of exotic subjects that bore strong local cultural elements. It was then followed by the maturation phase that the foreign style was completely integrated with the indigenous artistic tradition and the imageries showed high artistic expression. The final phase was the formation of different local artistic styles or decline.

The Buddhist imageries of Eastern Han and Shu Han obviously had reached the phase of infusion of the exotic style and the indigenous tradition. The relative chronology of the cliff burials of Mahao and Shiziwan are dated to the Shu Han era standardized by the Mianyang and Tujing 涂井 imageries. To be more specific, the style of Buddha image of Mahao was the most mature style of its kind in the developmental sequence of Buddhist imagery. The image recovered from Hejiashan, Mianyang and the image cast on the coin tree of Tujing, Zhongxian are of the same kind. They are similar in size, posture and casting technology. However, they are different in that the Zhongxian image does not

have nimbus but have a pair of cicada-shaped apparel decorations. Among the two, the Mianyang image preserves more elements of the original Buddhist model; conversely, the Zhongxian image is more indigenized. The relative chronology of the Eastern Han and Shu Han Buddhist imageries in descending order, therefore, is: Mahao and Shiziwan, followed by Mianyang, and finally Zhongxian.

In addition, the Buddha image of Pengshan indicates the introduction of a new motif. The Buddha has an assistant on each side of its upper body. This image also reflects the blending of Buddhist and Daoist arts. For example, it bears the characteristics of the imagery of the Queen Mother of the West, such as feminist features, no nimbus, and dragon and tiger are carved on the throne, etc. The date of Pengshan image was very likely later than those of Mahao and Shiziwan, but earlier than those of Mianyang and Zhongxian, when the

Queen Mother of the West had been completely replaced (Fig. 3). The Mianyang and Zhongxian imageries were therefore another new imagery model.

III. Buddhist Imageries of the Wu State and Western Jin Period

After the partial unification and competition among the states of the Three Kingdoms, the territories occupied by Wu state yielded considerable amount of material remains of Buddhist imageries. In the Western Jin era, the territories of the former Wu state yielded the largest inventory of Buddhist imageries. Buddhist remains of the Wu region include Buddha statues made of green porcelain, and Buddha images on spirit vases, bronzes, tomb murals, and relief bricks (Fig. 4). The distribution of cultural relics bearing Buddhist imageries concentrates in the provinces of Hubei, Jiangsu and Zhejiang 浙江. The earliest discovery of the post-Han era is the object

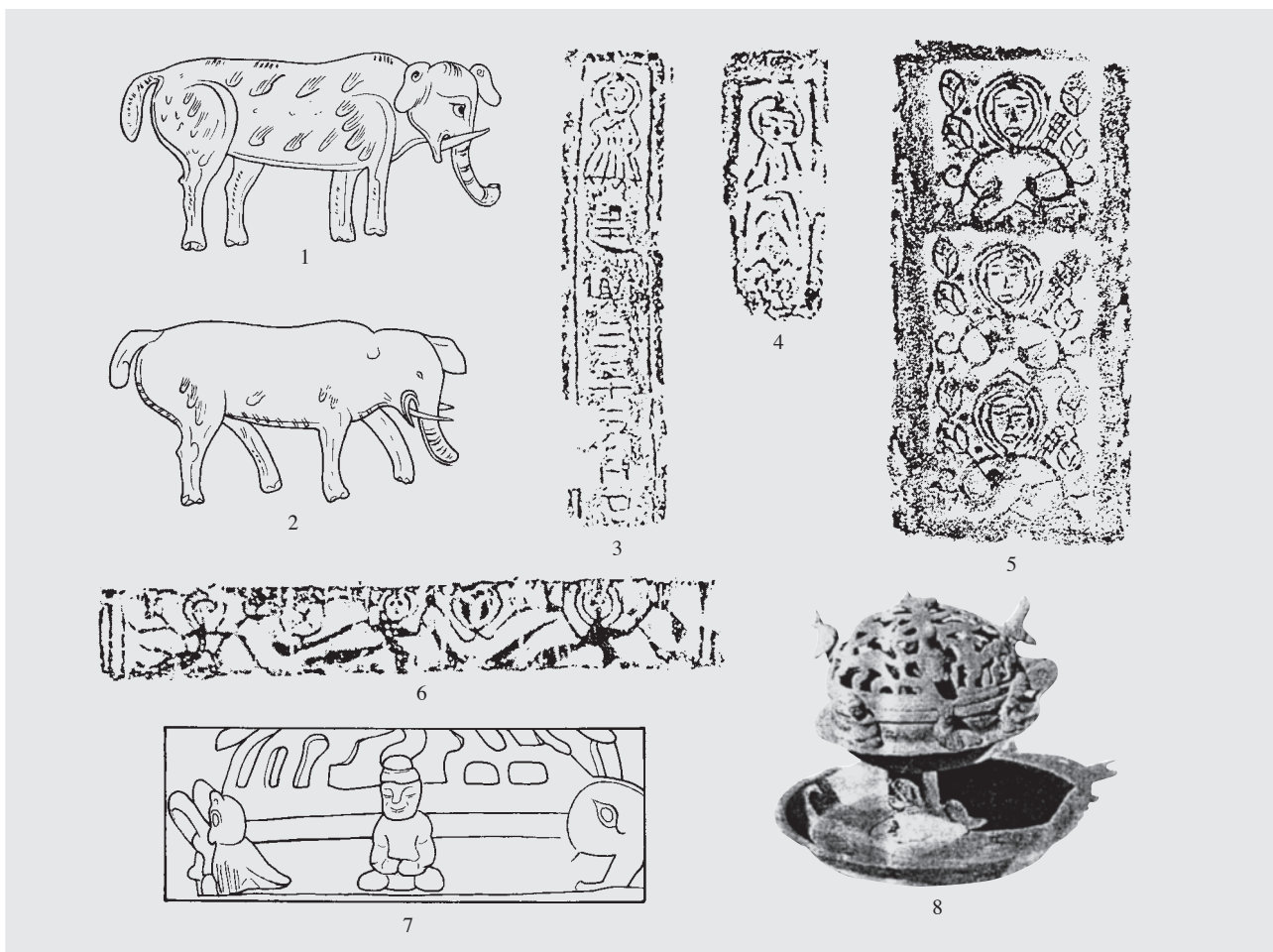


Fig. 4 Buddhist images of the Sun-Wu and Western Jin periods

1, 2. brick reliefs of the Western Jin period from Foyemiaowan 佛爷庙湾, Dunhuang 3, 4. brick reliefs of the Sun-Wu period from Shaoxing 绍兴, Zhejiang 5, 6. brick relief of the Sun-Wu period from Xuyi 盱眙, Jiangsu 7. fragment of an incense burner from Zhenjiang 镇江 Museum, Jiangsu 8. an incense burner from Zhenjiang Museum, Jiangsu

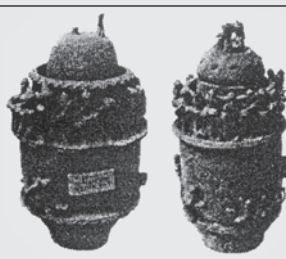






location stage	Hubei	Jiangsu	Zhejiang
I	 1 2		
II		 3	
III	 4	 5 6	 7
IV		 8	 9

Fig. 5 The diffusion and evolution of Buddha spirit vases

1, 2. Buddha spirit vases from Jingzhou Museum, Hubei 3. red ceramic Buddha spirit vase from Jiangning 江宁, Jiangsu 4. celadon incense burner from Ezhou, Hubei 5. Buddha spirit vase from Zhaoshigang, Nanjing, Jiangsu 6. Buddha spirit vase from Jiangning, Jiangsu 7. three-footed cosmetic container from Shengxian 嵯县, Zhejiang 8. Buddha spirit vase from Yizheng 仪征, Jiangsu 9. Buddha spirit vase from Xiaoshan 萧山, Zhejiang

of veneration recovered from tomb M4 at Tangjiaotou 塘角头 Village, Shishan 石山 Town in the outskirts of the walled city of Wuchang 武昌 of the Wu state (modern Ezhou 鄂州 of Hubei 湖北; AD 261). Moreover, a standing Bodhisattva image on a gilt bronze plate was yielded from the brick tomb of Colonel Peng Lu 彭卢 in Lianxi Temple 莲溪寺, Wuchang 武昌. The tomb is dated to the fifth year of the Yong'an reign 永安 (AD 262). These findings suggest that by the mid-third century, Buddhism in Ezhou 鄂州 had some highly matured elements.

The diffusion of Buddhism during the Three Kingdoms era can be monitored by studying the evolution of the images on Buddha spirit vases and Buddha-phoenix mirror (Fig. 5). Their dispersal and stylistic development were closely related to the developmental processes of Buddhist imagery. The Buddha-phoenix mirror was first appeared and became popular in the Hubei region. Latter in the mid-third century, the Buddha spirit vase became fashionable in the Jiangsu and Zhejiang region. The typical image of Buddha on spirit vases was apparently originated from the Buddha image sitting on the dragon-and-tiger throne of the Hubei bronze mirrors. The dragon-and-tiger throne originated in Sichuan. This is the material evidence reflecting the early diffusion of Buddhism in China Proper beginning in the Han era.

In sum, the Buddhist imageries from the Three Kingdoms to the Western Jin can be partitioned into two major traditions. The first tradition involved the meditating Buddha sitting on a double-lion lotus throne, which was related to the tradition of depicting Queen Mother of the West sitting on a dragon-and-lion throne. The second tradition involved the Buddha in veneration posture. Both traditions were first appeared in Hubei. The former appeared in an earlier time; wherein the latter started to replaced the former in the beginning of the fourth century. It is worth mentioning that the spirit vase had strong southern characteristics, wherein the phoenix mirror was popular in Luoyang 洛阳 and North China since the Eastern Han. When Buddha's image was added to the decorative motifs of the vase and mirror in the Wu region, they used images of the Buddha derived from different traditions. The Buddha images on the vase were based on one single model: Buddha sitting on the double-lion lotus throne. The Buddha images on the mirrors, on the other hand, were based on several models that the figure of Buddha was decorated with an array of motifs. The difference in the images of Buddha is indicative that the indigenous southern group who used the spirit vases was conservative toward Buddhism. In

contrast, the group using the Buddha-and-phoenix mirror was adaptive, innovative and resilient. Perhaps this is a reflection of the migration process of the northern people to South China by the end of the Eastern Han and the contents of Buddhism diffused into the south.

IV. Characteristics of the Buddhist Imageries during the Han–Jin Era

The study of Buddhist imageries of the Han–Jin era indicates that the postures of the Buddha images can be partitioned into two phases. In the early phase Buddha was depicted in the disposition posture, its right hand was making the sign of assurance from fear, wherein its left hand was holding the corner of the robe. In the latter phase, the Buddha was depicted in the meditation posture. In reference to the written texts, how Buddhism was addressed changed in these two phases, from “*huang lao fu tu*” to “*fu tu lao zi*”. This change was consistent with the fact that Daoism was still in its infancy at this time. The early phase, that is the phase of “*huang lao fu tu*”, coincided with the time shortly before the founding of the Five-peck Rice Sect by Zhang Ling 张陵 in the Western Sichuan Plains, to the times when warlord Zhang Lu 张鲁 occupied the Ba 巴 prefecture and Hanzhong 汉中 area. Its main distribution stretched from Sichuan to Shandong. The “*fu tu lao zi*” phase began after the quelling of Rebellion of the Yellow Turban and continued to the Three Kingdoms period. Its distribution centered at Hubei 湖北 to Jiangsu and Zhejiang.

The rise of the Five-peck Rice Sect in Sichuan attributed to various social and cultural factors. First, Sichuan had close ethnic and cultural ties with the Western Territories through time. The archaeological data indicate that Sichuan yielded evidences of the early diffusion of Buddhism prior to the Eastern Han, such as Buddhist architectures and stone carvings before the appearance of Buddhist imageries. The styles of architectures and stone carvings maintained the exotic artistic style diagnostic of the first phase of Buddhist diffusion. Although Sichuan was contagious to the political and cultural center of the Central Plains, topographically it was sheltered by towering mountains and difficult terrains. On the one hand, it could have easy access to the culture of Central Plains. On the other hand, it could have isolated and developed uninterruptedly from outside forces in the relatively enclosed environment. Moreover, the upper reaches of the Han River 汉江 was where the Zhou–Qin culture, Jingchu 荆楚 culture and Ba–Shu cul-

ture met and interacted. The sect of Huanglao popular in the land of Qin could have easily blended with the belief of witchcraft popular in Chu and Shu. Because of that, most of the Buddhist imageries of the Han times were found in Sichuan. This is not to deny the fact that early Buddhist imageries were also found in the Central Plains. Nevertheless, the understanding of Buddhism and the degree of acceptance and identification by the people of the time was stronger in Sichuan. The contents, styles and the means of dispersal of the Buddhist imageries of Sichuan are crucial for the study of the beginning of early Buddhism and Buddhist imageries.

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Notes: The original paper, published in *Kaogu Xuebao* 考古学报 2005.4: 411–447, with 13 illustrations and two tables, is written by Lee Jung Hyo 李正晓. This summary is prepared by the original author and English-translated by Lee Yun-Kuen 李润权.

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