

A THE BUDDHIST ART OF CHINA

Zhang Zong



CHINA INTERCONTINENTAL PRESS

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图书在版编目(CIP)数据

中国佛教艺术: 英文 / 张总著; 邵达译. —北京: 五洲传播出版社, 2011.3

ISBN 978-7-5085-2075-9

I. ①中… II. ①张… ②邵… III. ①佛教—宗教艺术—中国—英文 IV. ①J19

中国版本图书馆CIP数据核字(2011)第044769号

主 编: 赵匡为

撰 稿: 张 总

翻 译: 邵 达

图片提供: 蔡 程 张 总 东方IC CFP

责任编辑: 王 莉 蔡 程

出 版 人: 荆孝敏

装帧设计: 殷金花

设计承制: 北京紫航文化艺术有限公司

印 刷: 北京盛天行健印刷有限公司

中国佛教艺术

出版发行: 五洲传播出版社

地 址: 北京市海淀区北三环中路31号生产力大厦7层 邮 编: 100088

发行电话: 010-82001477 网 址: www.cicc.org.cn

开 本: 210×210 1/20 印 张: 10.5

版 次: 2011年5月第1版 2011年5月第1次印刷

书 号: ISBN 978-7-5085-2075-9

定 价: 168.00元

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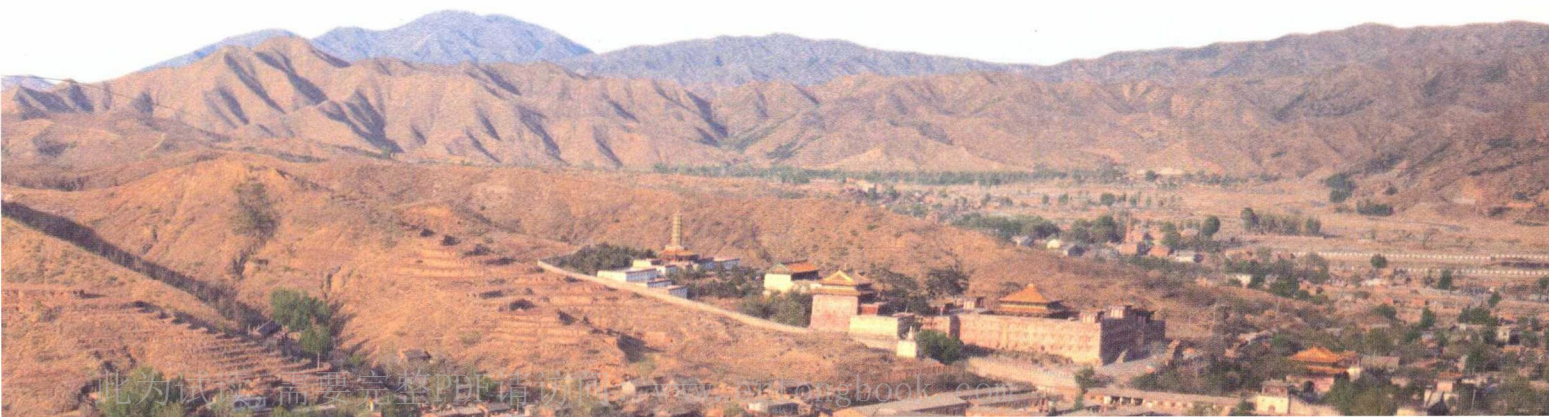
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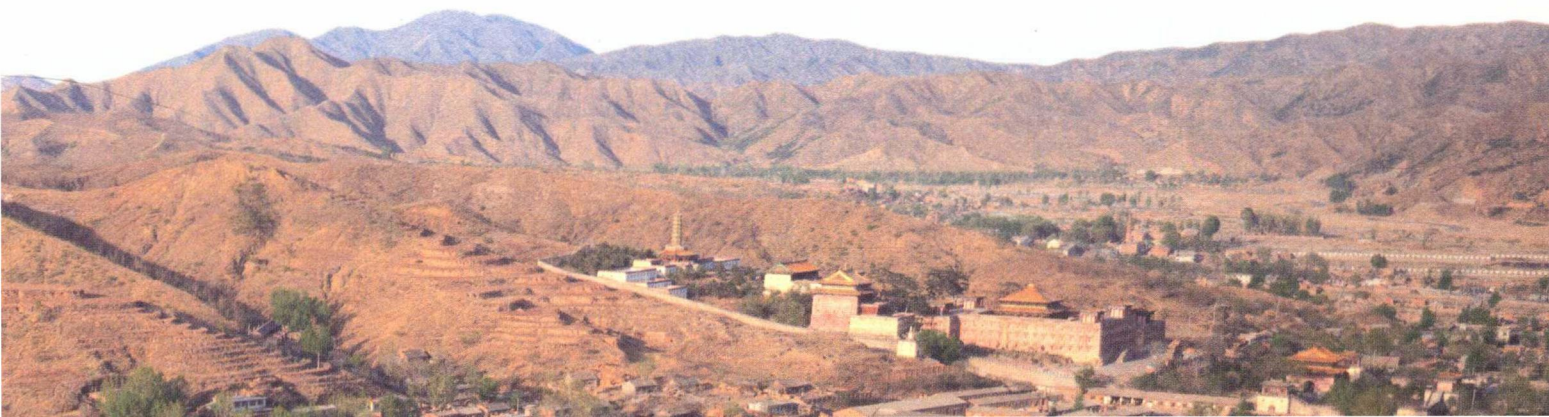
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Introduction

Buddhism originated in ancient India around the sixth-fifth centuries BC. That was a period of social and religious turmoil, roughly coinciding with the time between the Spring and Autumn Period (770–476 BC) and the Warring States Period (475–221 BC) in Chinese history when various schools of thought (like Confucianism, Legalism, Mohism, etc) and their exponents came to the fore. Religiously, Brahmanism had no longer met the needs of the society, and new Shramanic sects emerged. Politically, there were 16 kingdoms contending for hegemony in the Ganges-Yamuna river basin, and in the end Magadha rose to prominence under a number of dynasties, peaking with the Maurya Dynasty that unified most of the Indian subcontinent in the middle of the third century BC.

The history of Indian Buddhism may be divided into four phases: Primeval Buddhism, Sectarian (Theravada or “Hinayana”) Buddhism, Mahayana Buddhism, and Tantric Buddhism. After a long time of evolution, it eventually developed into a colossal, all-embracing religious system represented by a vast collection of scrolls of Buddhist scripture, which is fundamentally different from Judaism, Christianity and Islamism all based on one sacred book.

Buddhism began to spread to neighboring countries during the reign of Mauryan King Ashoka in the third century BC. There existed two missions in opposite directions.

Theravada sutras written in Pali language spread southward to Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma and Indonesia. Mahayana sutras spread northward to Central Asia, China, Korea and Japan; these Sanskrit scriptures were first translated into Central Asian languages, and then into Chinese. The Chinese Tripitaka is the most complete collection of extant Buddhist scriptures; its influence reached beyond China to Korea and Japan. During the seventh century AD Buddhism spread from India to Tibet. As sutras were systematically translated into the local language, Tibetan Buddhism came into being gradually.

The relics of Buddhism at different stages (except for Primeval Buddhism) have all been found in China. The Theravada Tripitaka scriptures (from Pali, meaning “three baskets”) spread to the region in southwest China’s Yunnan Province inhabited by the Tai people, and had been translated into the ancient Tai language. The Sarvastivadin school of Theravada Buddhism spread to the northwestern Xinjiang, leading to the cutting of the Kizil Thousand-Buddha Grottoes from the fourth to the tenth century in the ancient state of Kucha (located near present Kuche and Baicheng). The ruins preserved in Yunnan and Xinjiang, though not very notable, reflect the spread of Theravada Buddhism in China.

Mahayana Buddhism spread from India to the vast areas inhabited by the Han people between the Western Han (206 BC–AD 25) and Eastern Han Dynasty (25–220), and won great popularity that has lasted to this very day. The Chinese Tripitaka including Sutras, Vinaya and Abhidharma shastras (the three divisions of the Buddhist canon) was translated between the Eastern Han and the Tang Dynasty (618–907). It was first block-

printed during the Northern Song Dynasty (960–1127), and was then published in and outside China.

Tibetan Buddhism spread from Tibet further to Mongolia and other places. It actually contains both the exoteric and esoteric sects, however, still with Tantric Buddhism as its main body. During the Sui (581–618) and Tang dynasties it developed into one of the eight great cults, standing as equals with the Hua-yen (literally “flower garland”), Tiantai (literally “celestial terrace”), Pure Land, Chan, Vinaya (Lü or Mt Zhongnan) and other schools.

The monastery, stupa, Buddha image and ritual implement are the carriers of the Buddhist art of China which presents a good combination of Chinese and Western elements. The cave temple originated in India, and architecture, sculpture and painting all find their expression in it. China not only boasts the largest number of cave temple remains in the world, but has also invented the timber-structured temple of distinctive style and design in history. The stupa, which originated in India too, had taken different shapes after being introduced into China. The monks were required to chant sutras, practice meditation, and worship the Buddha image and stupas. During the Han-Wei period (25–265), the construction of a monastery usually centers round a stupa. In the Sui-Tang period (581–907) a monastery was composed of several halls connected by a veranda. In the Southern Song Dynasty (1127–1279) the Chan school made the ranks of “five monasteries and ten temples,” and the layout of a Buddhist temple with several rows of buildings was finally fixed, typically including a stupa, the main hall of

Shakyamuni, a preaching hall, a bell tower, a Tripitaka pavilion, monks' dwellings, and a dining hall.

Buddhist sculpture takes the forms of grotto carvings, painted clay figures in temples, and Buddha statues made of bronze, stone, wood and other materials. Buddhist painting ranges from frescos in grottos and temples, *thangkas* (Tibetan painted scrolls), representations of mandala to Buddhism-themed literati pictures in the form of hand or hanging scrolls. Various ritual implements used in Buddhist services display exquisite workmanship, and are fine specimens of Buddhist art as well. What's more, in order to spread the dharma, beginning from the Northern Song well-illustrated Buddhist scriptures had been printed again and again in different dynasties. By the Qing Dynasty the Tripitaka had several editions. Meanwhile, the scriptures also spread in the form of stone engraving and calligraphy. The hand-copied collection of scriptures from the Three Kingdoms period (220–280) to the Tang-Song period (618–1279), preserved in Dunhuang of Gansu Province, have helped us to learn the history of copying sutras in ancient China.

The Chinese Buddhist art covers a wide range of subjects including different Buddha images (Buddhas of the ten directions, Buddhas of the past, present and future, etc) and various divinities such as great bodhisattvas, the eight classes of supernatural beings, numerous guardian gods, deva kings, female devas, and so on. Theravada Buddhism worships the Buddha only, rejecting the Buddhas of the ten directions. Its disciples all pursue the arhat phala -- the highest grade of saintship, and value self-liberation.

Therefore, Theravada art focuses on Buddha Shakyamuni, adventures of his former births, and his disciples and arhats. Mahayana Buddhism holds the philosophy of joining secular life and saving all beings. Naturally, Mahayana art includes the images of the Buddhas of the ten directions, Buddhas of the past, present and future, bodhisattvas and protective divinities. The system of divinities in Tantric Buddhism is more complicated. In Tantric art the images of Buddhas, bodhisattvas, fierce maharajas and their female partners, taras, and dakinis are placed on the mandala -- a round or square altar -- for the attainment of enlightenment.

Legend has it that since King Ashoka was converted to Buddhism, he made it the state religion and held the third Buddhist council (250–253 BC). Ashoka also divided the remains of Buddha into 84,000 shariras, and sent nine missions to transmit Buddhist doctrines abroad. Along with the shariras and dharma, Buddhist art spread into the surrounding countries where stupas and monasteries were built in great numbers.

Roughly from the 15th to the 17th century, Theravada Buddhism became very popular in Yunnan Province. The Tai people residing in that region have professed it until this very day, and stupas and monasteries there constitute a unique school in China's Buddhist art.

Theravada Buddhism spread into Xinjiang as early as the Han Dynasty (206 BC–AD 220); unfortunately, stupas and monasteries there had been destroyed severely in later ages. Stray fragments of sutras written in Gandhara's language during the second-fourth centuries have been found in the ancient states of Kashgar (in present Kashi), Kustana

(in present Hotan) and Kucha, all located on the periphery of the Tarim Basin. Besides, fragments of *Dhammapada* were excavated in Hotan. Unearthed Buddhist relics in Ruqiang (known as Shanshan in ancient times) include fragments of *avadana* (a type of Buddhist literature), *Individual Liberation*, and *Dharmasangraha-mahartha-gatha-sutra*. These archaeological finds prove that Dharmaguptaka first prevailed in Kustana in the second century; after the third century Sarvastivada (literally the “all-things-exist school”) was in vogue along the northern route of the Silk Road; and Dharmaguptaka became popular again during the fifth-seventh centuries in Shanshan. The Kizil Thousand-Buddha Grottoes in Kucha located on the ancient Silk Road have been noted for their splendid frescos, which focus on the stories of Buddha Shakyamuni’s previous lives. Many cave pictures were allegedly painted according to Sarvastivada scriptures.

Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism spread to the interior of China around the same time. However, almost from the right beginning Mahayana occupied a leading position, while Theravada scriptures like *Agamasutra*, *Abhidharma-kosha-shastra*, *Satyasiddhi-shastra*, and *Vibhasha-shastra* all had relatively small influences. During the Han-Tang period (25–907) various schools of Mahayana Buddhism became prevalent in the areas inhabited by the Han people. Sutras were translated into Chinese systematically, and a localized style was created for the Buddhist art (architecture, sculpture and painting). From the Five Dynasties (907–960) to the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), different schools gradually merged into the Chan and Pure Land sects; and as a result of increasing popularity of Buddhism among the people, a fascinating mixture of folk art and

Buddhist art took place.

During the seventh century, India was confronted with the danger of being conquered by Islamic countries. Religiously, many Brahman gods were accepted by Buddhism at that time, thus forming the esoteric or Yoga cult (also known as the Tantric Buddhism), which held the view that the three mystic things -- body, mouth and mind of the Tathagata -- are identical with those of all the living, and the body is to become consciously Buddha by Yoga practices. Early Yogacharya was introduced into China by Shubhakarasiṃha (637–735), Vajrabhodi (663–723) and Amoghavajra (705–774) in the Kaiyuan period (713–741) of the Tang Dynasty, and prevailed for a time. After the Tang its traces could hardly be found in the hinterland, but it has been occupying an important position in Tibetan Buddhism.

The spread of the Buddhist teaching in Tibet can be divided into two periods. In the first period, thanks to the advocacy by Songtsen Gampo (c. 617–650) and his successors, Buddhism became the dominant religion in that region during the seventh-ninth centuries. However, when Lang Darma (803–842) ascended the throne of Tsenpo (the highest leader of Tubo) in 838, he began to suppress Buddhism until he was assassinated by a Buddhist monk named Lhalungpa Pelgyi Dorje in 842. After more than a century of hibernation ever since then, Buddhism revived in the late tenth century, thus entering the second period of its dissemination in Tibet. As numerous sects came into existence, after the 13th century Tibetan Buddhism gradually spread to Mongolia, Northern India, Nepal, Buryatia and Siberia. During the Yuan Dynasty (1279–1368) established by the