

## Colossal Buddha Statues along the Silk Road

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Beginning in the northwestern region of India, and spreading through Central Asia and the rest of Asia along the Silk Road, the making of colossal Buddha statues has been a major theme in Buddhist art. The colossal Buddha statues predominantly feature Śākyamuni (the Historical Buddha), Maitreya (the Future Buddha), and Vairocana (the Transcendent Buddha), and they were fashioned out of religious devotion and frequently in conjunction with notions of Buddhist kingship. This paper examines the religious, social and political circumstances under which these colossal statues were made, focusing on examples from Central and East Asia made during the first millennium CE. Beginning in the 1990s, there was a revival of making colossal Buddha statues across China and elsewhere. The paper also briefly compares the current wave of building colossal Buddha statues with historical examples.

**Key words:** Colossal Buddha statues, Maitreya, Vairocana, Buddhist kingship, Wu Zetian

## Introduction

Coinciding with the spread of Buddhism through Central and East Asia along the Silk Road, the making of colossal Buddha statues (Chinese *daxiang* 大像, or *dafo* 大佛; Korean *daebul*; Japanese *daibutsu* 大仏) is an important phenomenon in Buddhist art. Although there are engravings and painted and embroidered images, most colossal images are rendered in three-dimensional form. In this paper, I examine the religious, social and political circumstances under which these colossal statues were made, focusing on examples from Central and East Asia made during the first millennium CE. Examples of large Buddha statues from later periods in Southeast Asia and elsewhere are not considered in this context.

From the historic period, perhaps the most famous colossal Buddha statues were the two colossi from Bamiyan, in present-day Afghanistan, which were destroyed by the Taliban in 2001 (Figs. 1, 2). At 53 meters and 38 meters tall, respectively, they towered over most other large images. However, in modern times, there has been a revival of making colossal Buddha statues all across China beginning in the 1990s. There also seems to be a competition to build the tallest statue, with some examples standing well above 100 meters. This paper ends with a brief comparison of historical examples of colossal Buddha images with those made within the last few decades.



Fig. 1) Taller Buddha of Bamiyan;  
Afghanistan, 7th century; stone; H. 53 m



Fig. 2) Shorter Buddha of Bamiyan;  
Afghanistan, 8th century; stone; H. 38 m

## Colossal Buddha Statues of the First Millennium CE

The making of large Buddha statues was closely related to the concept of Buddhist kingship. At an early stage of the religion's development, Buddhism incorporated the ancient Indian concept of the *cakravartin* (universal monarch; Chinese *zhuānlúnwáng* 轉輪王), with the notion that an ideal Buddhist king is one who rules with righteousness and is a devout Buddhist who supports the organized Buddhist institution. In turn, the country will receive both blessing and protection from the religion. The legendary Indian King Aśoka (third century BCE) of the Maurya Empire (ca. 321–185 BCE), who converted to Buddhism after a bloody battle, became the model of a Buddhist king throughout the Buddhist world.<sup>1</sup> As Buddhism spread from India to neighboring regions, the concept was adopted by many polities along the Silk Road, with local rulers aspiring to be Buddhist sovereigns. Concomitant with the exaltation of the Buddha as a supramundane, a supreme being that developed in Buddhist doctrine, making Buddha statues of enormous size became a metaphor for the cosmic, universal dimension of the Buddha or Buddhahood.<sup>2</sup> When spiritual kingship synthesized with temporal kingship, the immense scale of Buddha statues also came to symbolize the authority and stature of rulers and emperors across Asia, with well-known examples from Bamiyan to Yungang and Longmen in China, Nara and Kamakura in Japan, and to some extent at Seokguram in South Korea.

What do we mean by a “large statue”? According to descriptions in Buddhist texts, the Buddha had a height of 16 *chi* 尺, or 1 *zhang* 丈 6 *chi* (1 *zhang* is 10 *chi*). *Chi* is usually translated as a foot in English, and 3 feet in Tang times was about 1 meter. 16 feet is approximately 4.8 meters, and this measurement became the standard for making a “full-size” Buddha statue in East Asia, referred to as a *zhangliu* 丈六 (Korean *jangyuk*; Japanese *jōroku*) image. A seated Buddha image would be about half of that height. Scholars consider that any Buddha statue taller than the *zhangliu* designation can be called a large statue or “Great Buddha.”<sup>3</sup>

Among the colossal Buddha statues made during the first millennium CE, the most

<sup>1</sup> For discussions of Buddhist kingship, see Balkrishna G. Gokhale, “Early Buddhist Kingship,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 26, no. 1 (1966): 15–22; Stanley J. Tambiah, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976); John S. Strong, *The Legend of King Aśoka* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983); Antonello Palumbo, “Models of Buddhist Kingship in Early Medieval China,” in *Zhongguo Shidai de Lishi, Zongjiao yu Zhidu*, ed. Yu Xin (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 2012), 287–338.

<sup>2</sup> The supramundane character of the Buddha developed over centuries in early Buddhism, leading to the conception of the transcendence and cosmic character of the Buddha. See discussion in André Bareau, “The Superhuman Personality of Buddha and Its Symbolism in the *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra* of the Dharmaguptaka,” in *Myths and Symbols: Studies in Honor of Mircea Eliade*, eds. Joseph M. Kitagawa and Charles H. Long (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 9–21.

<sup>3</sup> See Toshifumi Konno, “Tōdaiji’s Great Buddha: Its Foundation in Buddhist Doctrine and Its Chinese and Korean Precedents,” in *Transmitting the Forms of Divinity: Early Buddhist Art from Korea to Japan*, eds. Washizuka Hiromitsu, Youngbok Park, and Woo-bang Kang (New York: Japan Society, 2003), 116–7; Akira Miyaji, “Daibutsu no Shutsugen—Dareru to Bāmiyāno Daibutsu wo Chushin ni,” *Bukkyō Geijutsu* 295 (2007): 17.

frequently represented was Maitreya (Chinese *Mile* 彌勒; Korean *Mireuk*; Japanese *Miroku*) the Future Buddha, although colossal images were also made of Śākyamuni (Chinese *Shijiamouni* 釋迦牟尼; Korean *Seokgamoni*; Japanese *Shaka*) the Historical Buddha, and Dipaṃkara (Chinese *Dingguangfo* 定光佛, a Buddha of the past; also known as *Randengfo* 燃燈佛; Korean *Yeondeungbul*; Japanese *Nentobutsu*), and Vairocana (Chinese *Lushena* 盧舍那 or *Piluzhena* 毗盧遮那; Korean *Nosana/Birojana*; Japanese *Roshana/Birushana*), the transcendent form of Śākyamuni.

Before the Yungang or Bamiyan Buddhas were carved, a colossal image of Maitreya Buddha in sandalwood at Darel had long been known to Buddhist pilgrim-monks. Located in the upper reaches of the Indus River on the border of the Himalaya, Darel was a gateway into India that many Buddhist missionaries and pilgrims passed through. Famous Chinese pilgrim-monks, including Faxian 法顯 (337–ca. 422), Xuanzang 玄奘 (ca. 600–664) and many others, reported seeing the image in records of their journeys to India.<sup>4</sup> The wooden statue was said to have been about 80 *chi* or 24 meters tall, and Faxian further recorded the legend that through the religious concentration of an arhat,<sup>5</sup> a craftsman was sent up to Tuṣṭita Heaven, the abode of Maitreya, three times to observe Maitreya's appearance before carving the image, thus providing a divine origin for the statue.<sup>6</sup>

The Japanese scholar Akira Miyaji observes that the impetus for making colossal images was related to devotional faith to Maitreya.<sup>7</sup> Maitreya is also known as Ajita (Chinese *Cishi* 慈士), or “The Compassionate One.” In Buddhist legends, Maitreya is a bodhisattva destined to succeed the Historical Buddha Śākyamuni as the Buddha of the Future Age. Maitreya's emergence as a cult figure in India around the time of the Common Era coincided with important changes within the Buddhist tradition – namely, the developments of the bodhisattva cult and the Mahāyāna movement, which became the predominant form of Buddhism in East Asia. From India, the Maitreya faith spread to the Buddhist kingdoms in the Tarim Basin. By the time it reached China in the fourth century, the Maitreya faith was already quite developed and had gathered, along its way, a variety of cultic beliefs and practices.<sup>8</sup>

Maitreya belief consists of two main motifs: the ascent (*shangsheng* 上生) motif and the descent (*xiasheng* 下生) motif, and it is the latter that contributed to the making of colossal

<sup>4</sup> See Akira Miyaji, “Miroku to Daibutsu,” *Bulletin of the Society for Near Eastern Studies in Japan* 31, no. 2 (1988): 117–23. Pilgrims also recorded that the region was associated with the Sarvāstivādin school of Buddhism that flourished in the Kashmiri and Kushan territory in northwestern India in the early centuries of the Common Era.

<sup>5</sup> An arhat is a perfected being, one who has advanced on the spiritual path to gain full enlightenment.

<sup>6</sup> Faxian, *Faxian Gaoseng Zhuan*, in *Taishō Shinshū Daijōkyō*, vol. 51, no. 2085, eds. Takakusu Juniro et al. (Tokyo: Taishō issaikyō kankōkai, 1924–35), 858a1–3.

<sup>7</sup> Miyaji, “Miroku to Daibutsu”; Miyaji, “Daibutsu no Shutsugen”; and Akira Miyaji, *Niepan he Mile de Tuxiangxue*, trans. Ping Li and Qingtao Zhang (Beijing: Wenwu Chubanshe, 2009), 327–45.

<sup>8</sup> Major studies on the Maitreya faith include Bunzaburō Matsumoto, *Miroku Jōdō Ron* (Tokyo: Heigo Chuppansha, 1912); Étienne Lamotte, *History of Indian Buddhism from the Origins to the Śaka Era*, trans. Sara Webb-Boin (Louvain-la-Neuve: Université Catholique de Louvain, Institut Orientaliste, 1988), 699–710; Alan Sponberg and Helen Hardacre, eds. *Maitreya, the Future Buddha* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988); Miyaji, *Niepan he Mile de Tuxiangxue*.

images. The ascent motif centers on Maitreya's role as a bodhisattva, modeled after the career of Śākyamuni as a bodhisattva. Maitreya lives in Tuṣita Heaven (Chinese *Doushuaitian* 兜率天), which means "contentment" or "satisfaction," and which is designated as the fourth of the six heavens in the "realm of form" (*kāmadhātu*) in Indian cosmology. He resides in the inner quarters of a splendid seven-story palace, where he practices virtues and preaches to *devas* (heavenly beings) while waiting to be reborn on Earth, or Jambudvīpa. *Shangsheng*, literally "reborn above," refers to devotees' wishes to ascend to Tuṣita Heaven to encounter Maitreya or be reborn there upon death.

The descent motif focuses on Maitreya's role as the Future Buddha who will succeed Śākyamuni. Buddhists believe that the world degenerates and rejuvenates in a cyclical manner. In a state of moral decline, society is chaotic and people have a short lifespan. But when morality is restored, then the world becomes prosperous and peaceful, and people live to a ripe old age. During one of these morally healthy eras, Maitreya will descend from Tuṣita and be reborn in the kingdom of Ketumatī (Chinese *Chitoumocheng* 翅頭末城), which is ruled by a *cakravartin*, a militarily powerful and morally superior king. Ketumatī is described as a utopia that is peaceful and prosperous. The king rules by law; there is no crime, no evil, and people are free of sickness. The land is fertile and yields an abundant harvest. Embellished with luxurious vegetation and treasures everywhere, coins and clothes hang from trees for people's convenience. People live to the ripe old age of 84,000 years, and women marry at the age of 500. Maitreya is born into a Brahmin family as a human. When he grows up he joins the *saṅgha* (a monastic community) and gains full enlightenment. The Future Buddha then holds three assemblies under the *nāgaṇḍapūṣpa* or the dragon-flower tree (Chinese *longhuashu* 龍華樹). Beings who attend any of these three assemblies will gain salvation.<sup>9</sup> *Xiasheng*, or "reborn below," refers to devotees who are already in Tuṣita Heaven accompanying Maitreya to be reborn in Ketumatī, where they will gain final liberation by attending one of Maitreya's three assemblies under the dragon-flower tree.

Because of the messianic element and the promise of an ideal kingdom on earth that synthesized Buddhist and political kingship, devotion to Maitreya was prominent in the Buddhist kingdoms in Central Asia, in China during the Northern Wei 北魏 dynasty (386–534) and again in the Tang 唐 dynasty (618–907), and in Japan and Korea in the sixth and seventh centuries. In textual descriptions of the utopian Ketumatī, humans live to 84,000 years old and grow to a height of 160 *chi*, while Maitreya was twice as tall, at 320 *chi*, or 106.5 meters.<sup>10</sup> Such descriptions in Maitreya sūtras, Akira Miyaji argues, inspired the making of colossal Maitreya statues such as the one at Darel, as a testament to the realization of the ideal kingdom on earth.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> The description can be found in one of the principal texts on Maitreya Buddha, the *Foshuo Mile Dachengfo Jing* (佛說彌勒大成佛經), *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō*, no. 456.

<sup>10</sup> *Foshuo Mile Dachengfo Jing*, *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō* 14.456.430b5.

<sup>11</sup> Miyaji, "Miroku to Daibutsu," 107–16.



Once the tradition of making colossal statues had begun, it became popular to sponsor large images in polities that had adopted Buddhism as a state-protecting religion, and representations were not limited to Maitreya. Most notable would be the five colossal Buddha statues at the Yungang cave-temples at Pingcheng 平城 (present-day Datong 大同), capital of the Northern Wei dynasty (386–534), founded by a semi-nomadic tribe called the Tuoba 拓跋. Shortly after a wave of Buddhist persecution in 446, Buddhism was reinstated as the state religion, accompanied by the excavation of the cave temples at Yungang beginning in the 450s. Monk Tanyao 曇曜, chief of monks and advisor to the emperor, promoted Buddhist ideals of kingship. The carving of the five colossal Buddha images in caves 16 to 20 are said to commemorate the five founding rulers of the Northern Wei. Shown seated or standing, the Yungang Buddha statues range in height from 13.5 to 16.5 meters tall (Fig. 3).<sup>12</sup> By equating the rulers with Buddhas and by rendering the statues in immense size, the rulers were thus given deified status. Although there is no scholarly consensus regarding the identity of the five colossi, the image of the bodhisattva seated with legs crossed at the ankles in Cave 17 undoubtedly represents Maitreya Bodhisattva (Fig. 4), for the seated posture is unique to images of Maitreya as a bodhisattva in Northern Wei Buddhist art (Fig. 5).<sup>13</sup> Korean and Japanese images of Maitreya Bodhisattva from the sixth and seventh centuries, however, primarily show the bodhisattva seated in the contemplative pose (Fig. 6).



Fig. 3) Seated Buddha;  
Yungang Cave 20; Chinese,  
Northern Wei dynasty,  
mid-5th century; H. 14 m



Fig. 4) Seated Bodhisattva, possibly  
Maitreya; Yungang Cave 17;  
Chinese, Northern Wei dynasty,  
second half 5th century; H. 15.6 m

<sup>12</sup> A recent study of the Yungang cave-temples in English is Lidu Yi, *Yungang: Art, History, Archaeology, Liturgy* (London: Routledge, 2017); see discussion of the five colossi in chapter 3.

<sup>13</sup> See Dorothy Wong, *Chinese Steles: Pre-Buddhist and Buddhist Use of a Symbolic Form* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004), 93–96.



Fig. 5) Seated Maitreya Bodhisattva in niche; Guyang Cave, Longmen; Chinese, Northern Wei dynasty, early 6th century; limestone; archival photograph taken around 1910; from Wong, *Chinese Steles*, Fig. 6.3



Fig. 6) Maitreya Bodhisattva seated in contemplative posture; Korean, Three Kingdoms period, late 6th century; gilt bronze; H. 83.2 cm; National Museum of Korea

The Bamiyan site in the Hindu Kush dates later than Yungang, to the seventh to eighth centuries. The larger of the two colossi, at 53 meters tall, is the earlier of the two, dating to the seventh century (see Fig. 1). The shorter one, at 38 meters tall, probably dates to the eighth century (see Fig. 2).<sup>14</sup> From records of Buddhist pilgrims who passed through the region, the Bamiyan site was supported by local kingdoms whose rulers were pious Buddhists. Xuanzang, who passed through the area in the early seventh century, noted the flourishing of the Lokottaravādin school, a school that contributed to the exaltation of the supramundane character of the Buddha, and thus the rationale to portray the Buddha in a larger-than-life scale. While the two colossi at Bamiyan most likely represent a transcendent form of Śākyamuni, themes associated with the Buddha-to-be are very prominent at the site – both Maitreya and Śākyamuni undergo the career of a bodhisattva before becoming a buddha.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Benjamin Rowland, Jr., "The Bejewelled Buddha in Afghanistan," *Artibus Asiae* 24, no. 1 (1961): 20–24; Deborah Klimburg-Salter, *The Kingdom of Bamiyan: Buddhist Art and Culture of the Hindu Kush* (Naples: Istituto Universitario Orientale, 1989), 87–90; Miyaji, *Niepan be Mile de Tuxiangxue*.

<sup>15</sup> Klimburg-Salter, *The Kingdom of Bamiyan*, 98–111.

In addition, both Faxian and Xuanzang observed the royal ritual called Assembly without Hindrance at Bamiyan and elsewhere. Known as *pañcavāṣika* in Sanskrit (Chinese *wuzhehui* 無遮會 or *wuzhe dahui* 無遮大會; Korean *muchadae*; Japanese *mushadai-e*), these festivals were associated with Buddhist notions of giving and kingship, during which the ruler gave away all his/her possessions, only to have them ransomed by his/her ministers. Thus, the sponsoring of colossal statues by local rulers, accompanied with royal rituals, attests to the practice of Buddhist kingship in the region. Later the *pañcavāṣika* ritual was also prominent in East Asian politics that supported Buddhism (see below).<sup>16</sup>

During the Tang dynasty in China, while most emperors supported Buddhism to various extents, it was Wu Zhao 武曩 (a.k.a. Wu Zetian 武則天, 624–705) who implemented Buddhist kingship as state ideology. Founding the Zhou 周 dynasty (690–705) as a Buddhist state, she ascended to the throne as a Buddhist sovereign and reigned as the only female ruler in Chinese history.<sup>17</sup> Wu Zhao's reign gave rise to a series of colossal Buddha statues constructed between the seventh and ninth century; some were directly sponsored by Wu while others attest to the resurgence of the popular devotion to Maitreya, who promised protection as well as the arrival of a utopian world.

In addition to the paradigm of the *cakravartin*, the state Buddhism of Wu Zhao's reign was informed by the Avatamsaka doctrine (translated as Flower Ornament; Chinese *Huayuan* 華嚴; Korean *Hwaeom*; Japanese *Kegon*). Based on the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*, or *Flower Ornament Sūtra*, an advanced treatise in Mahāyāna Buddhism, the doctrine's vision of an ordered cosmos with a supreme, omniscient Buddha (Vairocana, Buddha of Great Illumination, the transcendent form of Śākyamuni) presiding over innumerable universes, each of which is overseen by its own Buddha, was likened to that of a temporal ruler governing a centralized, hierarchical state. Spiritual and temporal rulers became identified as one. The cosmic Vairocana Buddha literally and figuratively towered over all the other buddhas, in the same way that a ruler exercised power over his or her subjects.<sup>18</sup>

Before Wu Zhao founded the Zhou dynasty, a colossal statue of Vairocana Buddha had already been carved at the Longmen cave-temple site, south of Luoyang, attesting to the

<sup>16</sup> Jinhua Chen, "Pañcavāṣika Assemblies in Liang Wudi's Buddhist Palace Chapel," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 66, no. 1 (2006): 43–103; Antonello Palumbo, "From Constantine the Great to Emperor Wu of the Liang: The Rhetoric of Imperial Conversion and the Divisive Emergence of Religious Identities in Late Antique Eurasia," in *Conversion in Late Antiquity: Christianity, Islam, and Beyond: Papers from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Sawyer Seminar, University of Oxford, 2009–2010*, eds. Arietta Papaconstantinou, Neil McLynn, and Daniel Schwartz (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015), 95–122.

<sup>17</sup> See Antonio Forte, *Political Propaganda and Ideology in China at the End of the Seventh Century*, 2nd ed. (Kyoto: Scuola Italiana di Studi sull'Asia Orientale, 2005).

<sup>18</sup> For Wu Zhao's support of Avatamsaka Buddhism, see Stanley Weinstein, "Imperial Patronage in the Formation of T'ang Buddhism," in *Perspectives on the T'ang*, eds. Arthur F. Wright and Denis Twitchett (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), 300–5; for Buddhist art associated with Wu Zhao's reign, see Dorothy Wong, *Buddhist Pilgrim-Monks as Agents of Cultural and Artistic Transmission: The International Buddhist Art Style in East Asia, ca. 645–770* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2018), chapter 5.



increasing importance of this doctrine (Fig. 7).<sup>19</sup> A stele inscription near the site recorded that the project was undertaken during the reign of Emperor Gaozong 高宗 (r. 649–83).<sup>20</sup> His consort, then known as Empress Wu 武后, contributed 20,000 strings of cash from her cosmetic money in 672, and the project was completed at the end of 675. The total height of the statue is 17.14 meters, and about 20 meters including the mandorla. Vairocana is shown as a colossal statue sitting atop a giant lotus, with each petal encompassing a world and a multitude of buddhas (Fig. 8). Although the concept is based on the Avataṃsaka cosmology, the description of this specific iconography comes from the *Brahmajāla Sūtra* (Sūtra of Brahmā's net; Chinese *Fanwang jing* 梵網經). The text was composed in China and incorporated both Avataṃsaka teachings and rules (*vinaya*) for monks as well as lay Buddhists, including rulers.<sup>21</sup>



Fig. 7) Fengxian Monastery with Vairocana in center; Longmen; Chinese, completed in 675; limestone; H. of Vairocana 17.14 m; from Wong, *Buddhist Pilgrim-Monks*, Fig. 5.2

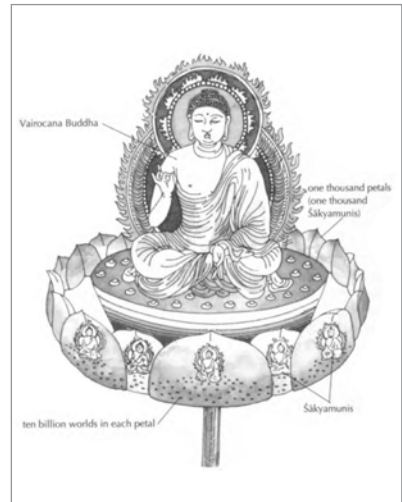


Fig. 8) Diagram of the Avataṃsaka cosmology based on the *Fanwang jing*; from Sadakata, *Buddhist Cosmology*, Fig. 29

<sup>19</sup> Longmen Wenwu Baoguan suo and Beijing Daxue Kaoguxi, *Longmen Shiku*, vol. 2 (Beijing: Wenwuchubanshe, 1992), pl. 114. An overview of the site is found in Hiroshi Sofukawa, "Ryūmon Sekkutsu ni Okeru Tōdai Sōzō no Kenkyū," *Tōbō Gakuhō* 60 (1988): 273–87; Amy McNair, *Donors of Longmen: Faith, Politics, and Patronage in Medieval Chinese Buddhist Sculpture* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007), 111–22.

<sup>20</sup> An English translation of the stele inscription is in McNair, *Donors of Longmen*, 177.

<sup>21</sup> See Serge Elisséeff, "Bommōkyō and the Great Buddha of the Tōdaiji," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 1, no. 1 (1936): 84–95; Wong, *Buddhist Pilgrim-Monks*, 175–77.

In 684, the year after Emperor Gaozong died, Wu declared Luoyang the Divine Metropolis (Shendu 神都), which then became the principal capital when she founded the Zhou dynasty in 690 (Fig. 9). Within the imperial palace in the northwest section of the capital, she built a large, five-story building called the Celestial Hall (*tiantang* 天堂) that housed a colossal Buddha statue in dry lacquer, accompanied by a so-called Great Regulator (*dayi* 大儀) in bronze. Some scholars thought this was a bronze bell while the Italian scholar Antonino Forte thought it was a mechanical clock.<sup>22</sup> Beside this was the Bright Hall complex, or *mingtang* 明堂, reviving a ceremonial, symbolic building based on ancient Chinese ritual traditions (Fig. 10).<sup>23</sup> The complex of religio-political monuments was intended to harmonize both Buddhist and traditional Chinese notions of kingship invested with cosmic symbolism. Wu thus laid claim to her rightful place as both a Buddhist and a Chinese sovereign. In addition, there was a column called Axis of the Sky located south of the imperial city.



Fig. 9) Reconstructed Map of Luoyang at the time of Wu Zhao's reign; from Wong, *Buddhist Pilgrim-Monks*, Map 5.1



Fig. 10) Reconstruction of *tiantang* (left) and *mingtang* (right); Chinese, Luoyang, Henan; contemporary

<sup>22</sup> Antonino Forte, *Mingtang and Buddhist Utopias in the History of the Astronomical Clock: The Tower, Statue, and Armillary Sphere Constructed by Empress Wu* (Rome: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1988).

<sup>23</sup> In Chinese ritual texts, the *mingtang* is described as a building with a base as square as the earth and a roof as round as the sky, surrounded by a round moat. The *mingtang* has five rooms, associated with the theory of the five elements. The king performs ceremonial circumambulations connected to the rhythm of the seasons and the twelve months to harness cosmic energy. The *mingtang* is viewed as architecture symbolic of traditional Chinese kingship because the king, as pivot of the center, achieves harmony between the world and the universe through his ritual actions in space and time. See discussions in Forte, *Mingtang and Buddhist Utopias*; Piero Corradini, "Ancient China's 'Ming Tang' between Reality and Legend," *Rivista Degli Studi Orientali* 69, no. 1/2 (1995): 173–206.

Some scholars conjecture that the Celestial Hall, also called Fotang 佛堂 (Buddha Hall), was probably a pagoda, or a multi-story wooden structure. At about 100 *chi* (approx. 30 meters) tall, it was built to house a colossal statue in dry lacquer. Apparently, the hollow of its finger could hold dozens of people. In 694, at the suggestion of the controversial monk adviser Xue Huaiyi 薛懷義, Wu Zhao added Cishi to her reign title and proclaimed herself the Maitreya Incarnate.<sup>24</sup> The monk also planned a three-day extravagant Dharma Assembly without Hindrance in the first month of 695, but during the festivities a fire broke out and destroyed the whole complex.<sup>25</sup> After that, Xue fell out of favor and Wu dropped the Cishi/Maitreya reign title. Since the making of the colossal dry lacquer statue was associated with Xue, it most likely represented Maitreya Buddha. Subsequently, a smaller statue was made and was placed in another monastery in Luoyang, but it was destroyed during the An Lushan Rebellion in 762. In 700, Wu Zhao commissioned the making of another colossal statue. It was to be cast in bronze and to be placed in the Buddha Shrine (Foci 佛祠) on the slope of Baisima 白司馬, at Mangshan 邙山 to the northwest of Luoyang. The plan faced much opposition and was never carried out, though it likely inspired the Japanese ruler Shōmu to cast the colossal bronze Buddha at Tōdaiji (see below).

Because of the association of Wu Zhao with Maitreya Buddha Incarnate, dedication of Maitreya Buddha images was prominent at Longmen, including the statue dedicated in 673 by Huijian 惠簡, one of two monk-supervisors who oversaw the great Buddha project at Longmen (Fig. 11). Unlike the cross-ankled seated position for images of Maitreya Bodhisattva in Northern Wei Buddhist art (see Figs. 4, 5), by Tang times Maitreya Buddha was usually shown seated with both legs pendant.



Fig. 11) Seated Maitreya Buddha; Huijian Cave, Longmen; Chinese, Tang dynasty, 673; stone; H. over 3 m; from Wong, *Buddhist Pilgrim-Monks*, Fig. 4.8

<sup>24</sup> Wu adopted the following reign title from 694 to 695: Cishi yuegu jinlun shengshen huangdi 慈氏越古金輪聖神皇帝 (Saintly and Divine August Emperor of the Golden Wheel, Maitreya the Peerless).

<sup>25</sup> Wong, *Buddhist Pilgrim-Monks*, 177–79.

Apart from political and religious centers in Northern Wei and Tang capitals, a number of colossal Buddha statues were made in China between the fifth and ninth centuries, as shown in Table 1.

Subject	Location	Period	Height	Materials
5 colossal statues both seated and standing	Yungang Caves 16–20, Datong, Shanxi	Northern Wei, 450s–460s	13.5–15.5 m	sandstone
Śākyamuni, standing	Maijishan Cave 98, Gansu	Northern Wei, early 6 <sup>th</sup> century	13.9 m	stone
Śākyamuni, seated	Meng Shan, Taiyuan, Shanxi	551	61 m	Stone, rock cliff
Seated Buddha triad	Lashaosi, Shuilindong, Tianshui, Gansu	Northern Zhou (557–581)	42.3 m	stone, clay, pigments
Maitreya, seated	Maijishan Cave 13, Gansu	Sui (581–618)	15 m	stone
Vairocana, seated	Longmen	completed 675	17 m; 20 m with mandorla	limestone
Buddha (probably Maitreya)	Luoyang	around 695, burnt	building 30 m	dry lacquer
Maitreya, seated	Tiantishan Cave 13, Gansu	Tang, repaired later	26 m	stone
Buddha, seated	Dafosi, Fenshan, Shaanxi	Tang	25 m	stone
Maitreya, seated	Xumishan Cave 5, Guyuan, Ningxia	Tang	20 m	stone
Maitreya, seated	Dunhuang Cave 96	695	33 m	clay, pigments
Maitreya, seated	Dunhuang Cave 130	713–41	26 m	clay, pigments
Maitreya, seated	Binglingsi Cave 171, Gansu	1 <sup>st</sup> half 8 <sup>th</sup> century	27 m	stone, clay
Maitreya, seated	Leshan, Sichuan	713–803	71 m	stone

Table 1) Colossal Buddha statues made in China between the fifth and ninth centuries

A significant number of colossal statues were concentrated in cave-temples in Gansu, marking the traces of the transmission of Buddhism along the Silk Road from the northwest into China proper. Maitreya statues in other regions, such as Sichuan in the southwest, attest to the spread of the Maitreya faith to peripheral regions later in the Tang.

During the Tang, Pure Land Buddhism prospered, focusing on devotion to Amitābha Buddha, who presides over the Western Pure Land as a destination for rebirth. Nevertheless, Maitreya promises the realization of a utopia in the human world, in the here and now rather than in some remote region at a distant time. Technically, Ketumatī is still located in the realm of desire and thus impure, but in competition with the popular Pure Land worship, the abodes of Maitreya – Tuṣita Heaven and Ketumatī – were increasingly cast as “pure lands” in Tang times.<sup>26</sup> Below are some notable colossal Maitreya statues of the Tang period.

Two colossal statues were carved at the Xumishan 須彌山 cave-temple site, located in Guyuan, Ningxia Province. The seated Maitreya image in Cave 5 is 20.6 meters tall. Together with another colossal statue in Cave 1, both were carved in the mid-seventh century, dating to the time of Gaozong and Wu Zhao.

Dunhuang 敦煌 Cave 96 was built in 695 by the monk Lingyin 靈隱 and the layman Yin Zu 陰祖. The 35.5-meter tall Maitreya is made of clay over a sandstone frame and then painted (Fig. 12). The Maitreya statue in Cave 130 dates to the first half of the eighth century, with a height of 26 meters (Fig. 13).<sup>27</sup>



Fig. 12) Seated Maitreya Buddha;  
Dunhuang Cave 96; Chinese,  
Tang dynasty, 695;  
clay with pigment; H. 33 m



Fig. 13) Seated Maitreya Buddha;  
Dunhuang Cave 130;  
Chinese, Tang dynasty, 713–41;  
clay with pigments; H. 26 m

<sup>26</sup> Dozens of murals from the Tang dynasty at Dunhuang depict the pure lands of various Buddhas such as Amitābha or the Medicine Buddha; depictions of Maitreya’s Tuṣita Heaven and Ketumatī are also called Maitreya’s pure lands. Eighth-century examples are in Cave 445, north wall (in Dunhuang Wenwu Yanjiusuo, *Dunhuang Mogao ku*, vol. 3 [Beijing: Wenwu Chubanshe, 1987]), pl. 175), and Cave 148, upper part of south wall (Dunhuang Wenwu Yanjiusuo, *Dunhuang Mogao ku*, vol. 4, pl. 28).

<sup>27</sup> Discussion of the historical background of Dunhuang caves 96 and 130 is in De Ma, *Dunhuang Mogao ku shi Yanjiu* (Lanzhou: Gansu Jiaoyu Chubanshe, 1996), 143–49.



The cave-temples at Binglingsi 炳靈寺 were carved on a cliff in a canyon along the Yellow River beginning in the fourth century. At 27 meters tall, the colossal Maitreya image in Cave 171 was made in the first half of the eighth century and restored several times in later periods (Fig. 14). The upper part of the statue is carved into the rock cliff and then molded with clay on the surface, while the lower part is sculpted from clay. Binglingsi in Gansu lies along the path of the Silk Road, which was important for the transmission of Buddhism. During the Tang, it was also a key route between the Tang and the Tibetan Empire, which was then expanding along Tang's western borders. Through a study of inscriptional evidence, the Chinese scholar Zhang Baoxi concluded that the statue began to be made in 731, on the occasion of the return mission of the Tang official Cui Lin 崔林 and his entourage from Tibet after seeking a peace treaty. The dedication of a colossal Maitreya statue thus commemorated an aversion to warfare and expressed the desire for peace for the country. Unfortunately, by 762, the region had fallen under the control of the Tibetan Empire, which also took over the Dunhuang region by 781.<sup>28</sup>



Fig. 14) Seated Maitreya Buddha;  
Binglingsi Cave 171; Chinese,  
Tang dynasty, ca. 730s, restored  
later; stone and clay; H. 27 m



Fig. 15) Seated Maitreya Buddha;  
Leshan, Sichuan;  
Chinese, Tang dynasty, 713–803;  
stone with pigments; H. 71m

<sup>28</sup> Jingsong Shi and Lingxiu Wang, "Binglingsi di 171 kan Tangdai Dafo Shishi Gouchen," *Dunhuang Yanjiu* 4 (2012): 55–60.

The largest Maitreya image, in fact the largest of all colossi in pre-modern times, is in Leshan 樂山, Sichuan (Fig. 15). Carved out of red sandstone on Mount Lingyun 凌雲山, the statue is located to the east of Leshan City and sits at the junction of the Min River 岷江, Qingyi River 青衣江, and Dadu River 大渡河, facing Mount E'mei 峨嵋山, a sacred Buddhist mountain, across the rivers. The seated statue is 71 meters tall and 28 meters wide across the shoulders. Initiated by the monk Haitong 海通, the project began in 713, but it took two additional phases to finally complete the statue in 803. The latter phases were supported by local officials, Zhangchou Jianqiong 章仇兼琼 (d. 750) and Wei Gao 韋皋 (746–805); they both deployed substantial official funds for the project. Upon completion, Wei also composed a dedicatory inscription, recording that Haitong had a Maitreya statue carved with the hope that the Buddha would calm the turbulent waters that plagued the shipping vessels traveling down the river.<sup>29</sup>

Turning to Japan and Korea, we have noted that at the height of Wu Zhao's reign, Avatamsaka Buddhism was the principle form of Buddhist ideology informing the Buddhist state. Inspired by her example, the Japanese ruler Shōmu tennō 聖武天皇 (r. 720–49) and his daughter, who ruled as Kōken-Shōtoku tennō 孝謙 - 称徳天皇 (r. 749–58, 765–70) also adopted Buddhism as the state religion. To a lesser extent, the notion of Buddhist kingship was also experimented with in Korea.

I have argued elsewhere that the Buddhist art and culture associated with Wu Zhao played a major role in shaping the development of Buddhism and Buddhist art in Japan during the first half of the eighth century.<sup>30</sup> The rise in the status of Buddhism in Japan led to Shōmu's declaration of Buddhism as a state religion, similar to Wu Zhao's founding of the Zhou dynasty as a Buddhist state. Following Wu's establishment of the Dayunsi 大雲寺 state monastery system in 690, Shōmu tennō also founded a network of state Buddhist monasteries and nunneries, known as *kokubunji* 国分寺 and *kokubunniji* 国分尼寺, respectively.<sup>31</sup>

In 743, Shōmu issued an edict to cast a colossal Buddha statue of Vairocana. As in the case of Wu Zetian, the transcendent Buddha overseeing a centralized, hierarchical state church was likened to a temporal sovereign overseeing her/his earthly empire. The colossal image was housed in the Great Buddha Hall (Daibutsuden 大仏殿) of the Tōdaiji, or Great Eastern Temple, that he built (Fig. 16).

The iconography of the Tōdaiji Vairocana image is similar to that of the Longmen statue, showing a giant Buddha sitting atop a lotus, with each petal engraved with a Buddha presiding over numerous Buddhas and their sumeru worlds (Figs. 17, 18; see also Fig. 7). When completed in 752, the Tōdaiji Vairocana statue measured about 16 meters tall, and

<sup>29</sup> Zhen Ouyang, "Mile Xinyang ji Leshan Dafo Sanlun," *Fojiao Yanjiu* 2 (2012): 172–76. A discussion of the dedicatory inscription is also in Dabin Wu, "Jiazhou Lingyunsi Da Mile Shixiang ji Lunlüe," *Zhonghua Wenhua Luntan* 3 (2017): 140–44.

<sup>30</sup> See Wong, *Buddhist Pilgrim-Monks*, chapter 5.

<sup>31</sup> See Joan Piggott, *The Emergence of Japanese Kingship* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), chapter 7.

close to 39 meters from the base to the top of the mandorla. The bronze statue and the Great Buddha Hall that housed it were both destroyed in later times; the current statue, at 14.7 meters tall, and the building are both smaller than the eighth-century originals.



Fig. 16) Tōdaiji (Great Eastern Temple) built by Shōmu tennō as head of state monasteries; Japanese, Nara; dedicated in 752, rebuilt in 1709



Fig. 17) Vairocana Buddha; Japanese, Tōdaiji, Nara, late Nara period, ca. 752 (recast in 1185, repaired in the sixteenth century, and the head recast in 1692); gilt bronze; H. 14.73 m above pedestal; from Wong, *Buddhist Pilgrim-Monks*, Fig. 5.6



Fig. 18) Drawing of engraving on petal of Vairocana's lotus pedestal in Tōdaiji; from Inamoto, "Tōdaiji Nigatsudō honzon kōhai no 'Senju Kannon gojūni butsu zū,'" Pl. 6

When the colossal Vairocana statue at Tōdaiji was completed, an elaborate, eye-opening ceremony was held in 752, officiated by the Indian monk Bodhisena, who first came to China and was then invited to travel to Japan.<sup>32</sup> Spectacular rituals and performances accompanied the ceremony. In bringing together all his subjects to make obeisance to the Great Buddha and to enjoy the performances, Shōmu invoked the power of the Buddha and the ritual not only to protect his country but to bring about harmony for his subjects.<sup>33</sup>

In Korea, the emergence of Unified Silla in 668 saw a close alliance with Tang China. The Avatamsaka doctrine was also the predominant school of Buddhism in Korea and received royal and aristocratic patronage, but it did not have the close ties with the central government that it did in China and Japan. For example, there were no networks of state Buddhist institutions. Nevertheless, the Seokguram 石窟庵 cave-chapel built in the mid-eighth century is considered the ultimate expression of the Avatamsaka doctrine, both architecturally and programmatically. This cave-chapel and its art attest to the extension of the international Buddhist art idiom that originated in Tang China to the far reaches of Korea.<sup>34</sup>

Located on Mount Toham 吐含山 on the eastern outskirts of Gyeongju, the Seokguram cave-temple was dedicated by Kim Daeseong 金大城 (d. 774), a chief minister for King Gyeongdeok 景德王 (r. 742–65), for his parents of former and present lives. He also commissioned the building of Bulguksa 佛國寺 (Monastery of the Buddhist State, or Monastery of the Buddha Realm) at the foot of Mount Toham. Work on both sites began in 751 and was completed after Kim's death in 774, when the government took over the project. The Seokguram cave-temple suffered damage in later times, and major restorations were undertaken in the early twentieth century, which has led to disputes among scholars about the cave-temple's original plan.<sup>35</sup>

In its current reconstruction, the cave-temple consists of three components: a rectangular entrance hall, a connecting corridor, and a rear circular chamber with a dome ceiling. In the center of the circular chamber, or rotunda, is a granite statue of the seated Buddha with his right hand in the earth-touching gesture (Fig. 19). Directly above the statue in the center of the ceiling is a relief carving of a large lotus. Resting on an octagonal pedestal, the statue is 3.26 meters tall and the pedestal is 1.58 meters tall, for a total height of close to 5 meters. The size of the Seokguram seated Buddha image is larger than the 16-foot criteria and would qualify it as a large Buddha, though it is relatively small compared with the examples that we have examined.

<sup>32</sup> John M. Rosenfield, "Tōdai-ji in Japanese History and Art," in *The Great Eastern Temple: Treasures of Japanese Buddhist Art from Tōdai-ji*, eds. John M. Rosenfield et al. (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 1986), 17–31; Towao Sakachara, "Daibutsu Kaigen-e no Kōzō to Sono Seijiteki Yigi," *Tosbi Bunkakenkyū* 2 (2003): 14–27.

<sup>33</sup> Sakachara, "Daibutsu Kaigen-e no Kōzō to Sono Seijiteki Yigi."

<sup>34</sup> A review of the site is in Wong, *Buddhist Pilgrim-Monks*, 210–18.

<sup>35</sup> See Henry H. Em, *The Great Enterprise: Sovereignty and Historiography in Modern Korea* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).

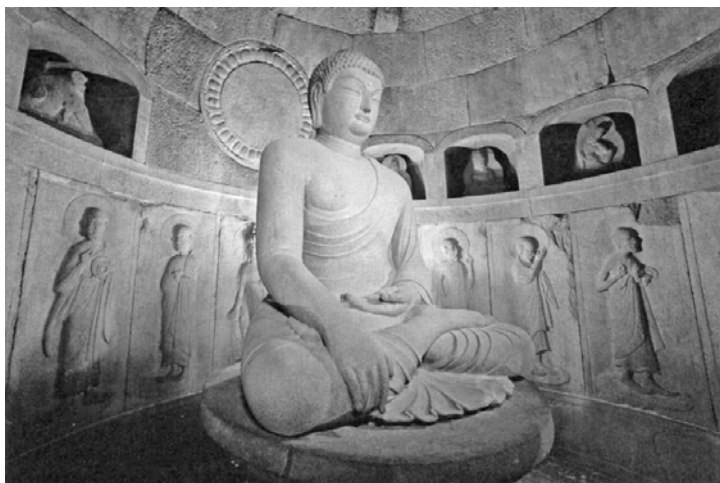


Fig. 19) Statue of seated Buddha in earth-touching gesture;  
Korean, Seokguram cave-chapel, Silla Kingdom, ca. 751; granite;  
H. 3.6 m; National Treasure; From postcard sold at Seokguram

This discussion of colossal Buddha images thus far indicates that they were created for a number of reasons: by rulers who implemented Buddhist kingship, as expressions of hope for the advent or realization of a utopia on earth promised by Maitreya, as invocations of Maitreya's compassion and protection, and to commemorate the achievement of peace through aversion to warfare. The projects were initiated by Buddhist monks who raised funds or secured the support of rulers and local officials to fund the expensive projects. Sometimes the construction of statues took several generations to complete. Last but not least, we cannot ignore the religious economy associated with travels and pilgrimages to view and worship colossal Buddha images and other religious sites.

### **Colossal Buddha Statues of Modern Times**

In the last few decades, there has been a wave of making colossal Buddha statues all across China, although it is not an exclusively Chinese phenomenon. Most notably, after the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas, there were attempts to make replicas of the Bamiyan Buddhas across the globe, in material form or in digital reconstructions (Fig. 20). Replicas were even included in the so-called “Oriental Buddha Park” 東方佛都 near Leshan, where over 3,000 replicas of well-known Buddha images were installed as a kind of Buddhist theme park or Disneyland (Fig. 21).





Fig. 20) Hologram reconstruction of taller Bamiyan Buddha;  
Afghanistan, ca. 2015

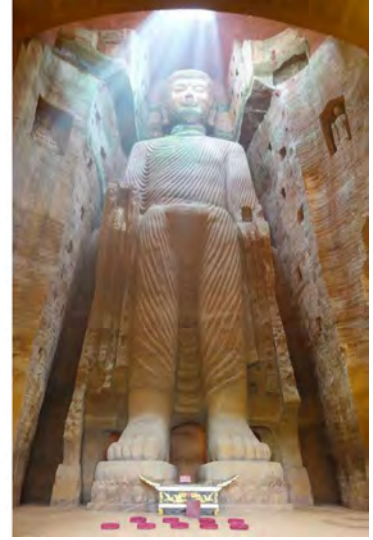


Fig. 21) Replica of Taller Bamiyan Buddha;  
Oriental Buddha Park, Leshan, Sichuan; contemporary

Subject	Site	Years of Creation	Height	Materials
Śākyamuni, seated	Baolinsi, Lantau Island, Hong Kong	1993	26.4 m	bronze
Amitābha, standing	Lingshan, Wuxi, Jiangsu	1996	88 m	bronze
Śākyamuni, seated	Nanshan, Yantai, Shandong	2004	38.66 m	bronze
Avalokiteśvara, standing	South China Sea, Sanya, Hainan Island	1999–2005	108 m	steel & concrete
Samantabhadra, seated, four-faced	Mt. E'mei, Sichuan	2005	48 m	gilt bronze
Vairocana, standing	Yaoshan, Lushan County, Pingdingshan City, Henan	1997–2008	108 m; total height 208 m	gilt bronze, steel
Maitreya, laughing seated Buddha	Xuedou Monastery, Ningbo, Zhejiang	2008	56.74 m	bronze
Kṣitigarbha, standing	Mt. Jiuhua, Anhui	2003–09	99 m	bronze
Śākyamuni, seated	Liuding Shan, Dunhua, Jilin; behind Zhengjue Monastery	2009–11	48 m	gilt bronze
Avalokiteśvara, standing	Tsz Shan (Chishan) Monastery, Taipo, Hong Kong	2009–2015	76 m	bronze covered in white fluoro-carbon paint

Table 2) Some Chinese examples of modern colossal Buddha images

The trend began with the giant Buddha image at Baolinsi on Lantau Island, Hong Kong, installed in 1993 (Fig. 22). It was cast in bronze and has a height of 26.4 meters. Located at the top of a small hill accessed by a long stairway, the seated Buddha statue is on a three-level terrace, reminding one of the terraces of grand Chinese imperial architecture such as those inside the Forbidden Palace or the Temple of Heaven in Beijing. The visual symbolism thus harmonizes traditional Chinese kingship, which rests on the principle of the Mandate of Heaven, and the Buddha as a cosmic ruler with a commanding vista over the landscape. This symbolism is copied in some later examples in China, such as the seated Buddha statue in Liudingshan, Dunhua, Jilin, completed in 2011 (Fig. 23). At 48 meters tall, it is 20 meters taller than the Hong Kong example and is the world's tallest seated Buddha statue. It was funded by the Nanjing-based Chenguang Group, which began in 1865 as a machinery manufacturer founded by Li Hongzhang 李鴻章 (1823–1901) – a politician, general, and diplomat of the late Qing dynasty (1644–1911).



Fig. 22) Seated Buddha on a lotus pedestal atop a 3-level terrace; Baolinsi, Lantau Island, Hong Kong, 1993; bronze; H. 26.4 m



Fig. 23) Seated Buddha; Chinese, Dunhua, Jilin, 2011; gilt bronze; H. 48 m

Currently, the largest standing Buddha statue is the Vairocana image in the foothills of Yaoshan 尧山 in Lushan County 鲁山县, Pingdingshan City, Henan (Fig. 24). Completed in 2008, the statue is 108 meters tall and has a total height of 208 meters. It is called Great Buddha of the Central Plain (*Zhongyuan dafo* 中原大佛). The Buddha statue and several scenic

areas nearby received state and provincial funding to develop them as a tourist attraction, including the construction of roads and other infrastructure; it was ranked a five-star tourist destination in 2011.



Fig. 24) Standing Vairocana Buddha; Chinese, Pingdingshan, Lushan, Henan, 1997–2008; gilt bronze and steel; 108 m (total 208 m)



Fig. 25) Multi-headed Samantabhadra Bodhisattva; Chinese, Mt. E'mei, Sichuan, 2005; gilt bronze; H. 48 m

Since the introduction of Buddhism into China in the early centuries of the Common Era, several mountains have been identified as abodes of bodhisattvas, and there have also been attempts to install colossal bodhisattva images at these sites, including Avalokiteśvara (Bodhisattva of Compassion; Chinese *Guanyin* 觀音; Korean *Gwaneum*; Japanese *Kannon*) at Mt. Putuo 普陀山, Samantabhadra (Chinese *Puxian* 普賢; Korean *Bobyeon*; Japanese *Fuben*) at Mt. E'mei (Fig. 25), and Kṣitigarbha (Chinese *Dizang* 地藏; Korean *Jijang*; Japanese *Jizō*) at Mt. Jiuhua 九華山 (Fig. 26). Because Avalokiteśvara has been one of the most important devotional deities throughout the history of Buddhism in China, and in fact throughout all of Buddhist Asia, the bodhisattva is most often represented in colossal scale. Devotion to Avalokiteśvara is prominent in coastal regions since one of the bodhisattva's powers is to protect believers from all kind of perils, including shipwrecks. Currently, the largest standing image of Avalokiteśvara, at 108 meters tall, is located in the South China Sea in Sanya, Hainan Island (Fig. 27). Made of steel and concrete, it was jointly funded by the State Council of Religious Affairs Office and the Hainan provincial government, spending the extravagant sum of 800,000,000 RMB.

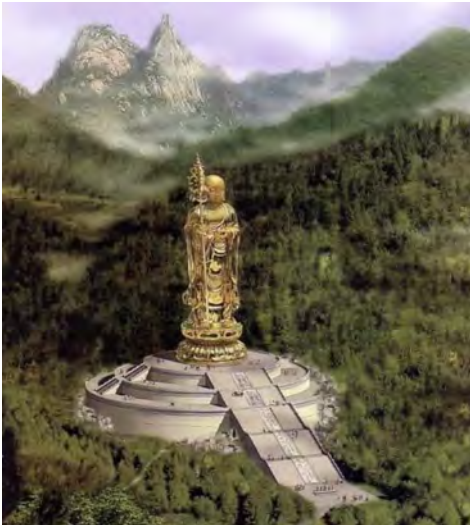


Fig. 26) Plan to Standing Kṣitigarbha Bodhisattva; Chinese, Mt. Jiuhua, Anhui, 2003; bronze; H. 99 m



Fig. 27) Standing Avalokiteśvara; Chinese, South China Sea, Sanya, Hainan Island, 1999–2005; steel and concrete; H. 108 m

In 2015, a standing Avalokiteśvara statue was dedicated at the Tsz Shan Monastery (Chishansi) in Taipo, Hong Kong (Fig. 28). At 76 meters tall, it was cast in bronze and covered in white fluorocarbon paint that has weather resistance properties. The statue overlooks a large monastery complex on top of a hill. It was funded by the Li Ka-shing 李嘉誠 Foundation, founded by Li, a real estate tycoon and the wealthiest person in Hong Kong. The whole complex cost HK\$3,000,000,000. As a devout Buddhist, Li's goal was to invoke Guanyin's mercy and to promote Buddhist teachings.

Avalokiteśvara worship has also been prominent in Japan. Since medieval times, it has been popular to visit thirty-three temples dedicated to the worship of Kannon on designated pilgrimage routes.<sup>36</sup> In both historical and modern times, there have also been a number of colossal Kannon images created in Japan, including the 100-meter tall statue of Nyoirin Kannon 如意輪観音 (Avalokiteśvara with the Wish-fulfilling Gem) within the Dai Kanmitsuji 大観密寺 complex in Sendai 仙台. Completed in 1990 for the centennial celebration of the city and to pray for its prosperity in the twentieth-first century, the statue was built as a twelve-story structure in steel and concrete and covered in fluorocarbon white paint; it is a precursor to the modern colossi in Hong Kong and China (Fig. 29).

From this brief overview, what is new in the modern phenomenon of making colossal Buddha images in China? First, we do not see the implementation of "Buddhist kingship." After all, the People's Republic of China is founded on communist ideology. Nevertheless,

<sup>36</sup> See Sherry Fowler, *Accounts and Images of Six Kannon in Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2016).



state and local governments are involved in these large and expensive projects. While religious institutions provide guidance and partnership, governmental support focuses on the conservation and development of cultural/religious sites as part of the country's cultural heritage and to promote tourism.<sup>37</sup> Also of note is the significant role of the business sector, whether corporations or individuals, in funding these extravagant projects. Although the religious intents in making these colossal statues are not in doubt, what seems more prominent are interests in promoting cultural heritage and tourism, which in turn can generate monetary gains for localities. The controversy over the appropriation of Buddhism for commercial gain has attracted no small degree of criticism. China's announcement of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013 revives the paradigm of the historical Silk Road, but it is an economic and geopolitical enterprise to extend China's rise in power by investing in building infrastructure and other projects along the so-called "Silk Road." The making of colossal Buddha statues and the construction of roads and infrastructure to access those sites for promotion of tourism can be seen as part of China's religious Belt and Road Initiative carried out within China itself. It would be interesting to further investigate whether this initiative might also disseminate a wave of making colossal statues abroad.<sup>38</sup>



Fig. 28) Standing Avalokitesvara; Cishan Monastery, Taipo, Hong Kong, 2009–15; bronze with fluorocarbon paint; H. 76 m



Fig. 29) Standing Nyoirin Kannon (Avalokiteśvara with the Wish-fulfilling Gem); Japanese, Sendai, Japan, 1991; steel and concrete, covered in fluorocarbon paint; H. 100 m

<sup>37</sup> For discussion of recent developments in Asian tourism, see Tim Winter, "Rethinking Tourism in Asia," *Annals of Tourism Research* 34, no. 1 (2006): 27–44. The topic of world or cultural heritage is also increasingly becoming an important topic of academic inquiry. See Luke James and Tim Winter, "Expertise and the Making of World Heritage Policy," *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 23, no. 1 (2017): 36–51; Tim Winter, *Geocultural Power: China's Quest to Revive the Silk Roads for the Twenty-First Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).

<sup>38</sup> In recent months, there have been reports that religious monuments such as mosques or Buddha statues in the open have been vandalized or covered up in an effort by state or local governments to curb religions.



## Conclusion

This preliminary study of the phenomenon of colossal Buddha statues has demonstrated that the inspiration and impetus for making images of immense size came from several factors: Maitreya faith and textual descriptions of the enormous height of Maitreya, development of the transcendental character of the Buddha as a cosmic being, and implementation of Buddhist kingship that linked temporal with spiritual rulership. From the Bamiyan kingdoms in Central Asian to the Northern Wei and the Tang in China, and Nara in Japan, the state's sponsorship of colossal Buddha statues was part of a visual program of a Buddhist state. In that sense, Śākyamuni or his transcendent form, Vairocana, in immense physical size advocated the protection of the Buddha as well as the authority of the ruler. In Tang China, in part due to Wu Zetian's claim to be the Maitreya Incarnate, a number of colossal Maitreya statues were made in outlying regions, invoking Maitreya for the peace and protection that the Future Buddha promises. While clerics and Buddhist institutions initiated and took part in these projects, the extravagant sums required for making the colossal statues often relied on official support, be that of central or local governments. In comparison, the trend of making colossal Buddha statues in recent decades in China no longer makes claims to the implementation of Buddhist kingship. Tied to a renewal of Buddhist faith, sponsorship comes from wealthy individuals and industrial corporations. However, often such projects, conceived as efforts to develop cultural heritage and tourist sites, receive funds from local and state governments. Thus, while Buddhism as a state ideology is no longer viable in modern China, official endorsement and financial support prove to be essential in making today's colossal Buddha statues as in the past. What this paper has not accounted for are the large numbers of colossal Parinirvāṇa images, showing the Buddha after death and lying horizontally, both in China and elsewhere, a topic that awaits investigations at another occasion.

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