

Religious Art and Culture in 2019: Thousand Faces of the Buddha

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1 Introduction

The Art College of Sichuan University, China (Zhōngguó in old Chinese¹), organized an international symposium on “Religious Art and Culture in 2019” during October 26–27, 2019. Scholars on religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, and Christianity from different Eurasian countries were invited to present papers that were discussed for a better understanding of the recent trends in these religions. Majority of the scholars were from mainland China (sixty-three) and twelve from India, Russia, Cambodia, Israel, Japan, South Korea and Pakistan. Y. S. Alone (JNU), R. K. K. Rajarajan (Gandhigram), Kavitha Pai and Suraj A. Pandit (Somaiya) represented the Indian team. The symposium was sponsored by the Sichuan University and hosted at its Art College in Chengdu. The themes discussed during the symposium covered the major religions of the globe focusing on their comparative analysis. The participants after academic sessions were invited to visit some major centers of Buddhist art around the conference venue in the lowland region in southwestern China, also known as the ‘Red Basin’.² The region is fully surrounded by mountains and covered by Yangtze River and its tributaries.³ This brief report focuses on the issues raised during the conference, and wonders of Buddhist art in China, of which we have no idea in Indian

textbooks dealing with Asian art. It deserves a key-place because China is the land of ‘Many [*sahasra*]-Buddhas’, from Gautama, Śākyamuni to the yet to come Maitreya.⁴

The present report is a fitting contribution to Chinese President’s visit to India during 11–12 October 2019. The Prime Ministers of India and President of People’s Republic of China paid a historic visit to Māmallapuram, emporium of the Pallavas from where ships laden with Chinese silk and precious commodities of the Spice Islands were making their sojourn to west. Nākapattinam was another port of the flourishing Cūḍāmaṇi-vihāra during the time of Rājārāja I (10th–11th centuries). However, Kāñcīpuram was the nodal place for philosophers and traders. Bodhidharma or Aravaṇa-aṭikaḷ, considered as a Prince of the Pallava Royal house (sometime in the 5th–6th century CE) migrated to China via Malaya (modern Singapore) and Jāvā (Cāvakam in the Tamil epic, *Maṇimēkalai*) to propagate the Indian philosophies and martial arts (Rajarajan 2019, pp. 4–17). Ch’ang and Zen Buddhism are the outcome of the South Indian interaction with the extreme East or what we today call Southeast Asia. Cultural exchanges between immortal Bhārata and Southeast Asia, China and Japan is intertwined in the histories through the ages. An earlier generation of patriotic scholars called the East ‘Greater India’, [cf. Arnold J. Toynbee’s ‘Hindu Civilization’ (India)], ‘Mahāyāna Buddhist Civilization’ (Far East, cf. Zabarskaite 2017, pp. 259–88) understood in narrow sense today. The rulers of ancient Malaya, Bali in Indonesia and the Spice Islands claim In-

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¹The ancient name of Russia is Россия/Rossiia, Tibet/Bhoṭa, Asam/Kāmarūpa, Bengal/Gauḍa and so on.

²Debenham (n.d.) plate 25. My concern is plate 25. I am not the authority to comment on plate 24. It is the concern of South Asian governments.

³The Mount Emei Buddha colossus is located at the confluence of three rivers: Minjiang, Dadu and Qinqyi. See World Heritage Nomination summary submitted by the Government of People’s Republic of China in 1996.

⁴Gadebusch 2000, pp. 17–33. Museums in Germany, Switzerland and other countries in Europe are abodes of Buddhist imageries collected from all over Asia, particularly Gandhāra. My German friends told me Gandhāran art pieces could be bought for 5–10 dollars in Kabul roadside markets. Open trade is impossible in India and China even if gangs skilled in smuggling are active with the cooperation of inland anti-nationals.

dian origin for their ancestry. At one point of time, when the Pallava ruling dynasty became extinct, Hiraṇyavarman from the eastern islands was invited to be the king (Meenakshi, 1941). He was given the sovereign name of Nandivarman II Pallavamalla (731–796 CE). The secular sculptures of the Vaikuṇṭha Perumāḷ temple, Kāñci depict this story of migration and immigration. Besides, Kāñci was a famous center of learning, [*Ghaṭika* (Annual Epigraphical Reports, ARE 1888, no. 8)], which the Chinese pilgrim, Xuánzàng visited from Badāmī. Pallavamalla (*mallan* > Māmallapuram) took the hand of the Rāṣṭrakūṭa princess, Reva. Karnāṭaka, Āndhradeśa (the Eastern Cālukyas of the Polakeśi line, later in matrimonial alliance with the house of Rājarāja Cōḷa) and Tamilnāḍu are intimately twisted in wedlock diplomacies of polity and religion. Even if fighting, they belong to the same stock, the Dravidian family of origins clouded in mythic annals.

The world community is under the wrong notion that China is communist, which one understands in non-religious context.⁵ In fact, it is not true. The papers presented by Indian and Chinese scholars included wide range of subjects dealing with Vaiṣṇavism, Buddhism of Gandhāra, Dunhuang, Ladakh, Angkor; Byzantine Church, Mongolia; Sinicization of Buddhist Art, Sichuan; Taoism, Ch'an, Zen, apart from Hīnayāna, Mahāyāna, and Vajrāyāna.

After eventful academic sessions, the scholars went on a field trip to the Leshan river zone in the Red Basin (Figure 1). It was indeed a mesmerizing experience to view Buddhist art in Chinese cultural landscape. The scenic aesthetics was enchanting set amidst the vast river on one side and the high hilly peaks on the other side. The venue immediately took (*mānasa-yātra*) us to Ellora (the Ēlgaṅgā river close to Ḍumārleṇa and the monolithic Kailāsa, cave xvi of Rāṣṭrakūṭa Kṛṣṇa II); Badāmī (the vast Bhūtanātha lake, the red sand-stone hill of Hindu and Jain caves) and Uṇḍavalli (four-tier caves [cf. *tīntal* in Ellora] and the nearby river Kṛṣṇā to its north).⁶ The quest for aesthetics finds no difference between the Kṛṣṇā and the Leshan flowing full during the monsoon. The wind

that blows there is lashing here.

I have not done any exclusive work of Buddhist art but it is tempting to say something on the unknown (Chinese Buddhist art) and the known (its Indian precedents). Nothing is contemplated on philosophical contents, texts and sources. The focus is on intra-continental exchange of religious arts. As a specialist in visual art, the concordances in design, material and iconography is the main attraction, fostered in iconographic researches today. In fact, we do not detect any major deviations in Buddhist and Hindu iconographic formulae rooted in ancient Indian lore and folk traditions (Parthiban 2019, pp. 57–94). The three basic modes of iconography, viz., *āsana*, *sthānaka* and *śayana* (Rajarajan et al. 2017 '*Samāpti-Suprabhādam*' Figure 8) are common to Buddhist and Hindu, including Roman Christian (Rajarajan 2019a & Kalidos 2019). Certain universal designs in iconographic modeling will have to be recognized in comparative religious studies, getting beyond the shackles of theology if we are to discover the archaic roots.

2 Leshan Buddha Colossus

Mountain looks like the Buddha, and the Buddha is in the shape of the mountain.

The seated Buddha colossus facing the river Leshan, is a masterpiece. The image is scooped out of a living rock about 500 meters long and 71 meters high, to which art historians name "grotto" (Figure 2).⁷ It may be pointed out that the monolithic Kailāsa in Ellora was excavated by the Rāṣṭrakūṭas.⁸ From design and material point of

⁵I have heard a Russian friend telling me the Christian churches work underground in her land (cf. the two millennia old Catacombs in Rome). I am not an eyewitness but this piece of information is based on hearsay from the BTI, Cottbus in Germany.

⁶Kalidos 2006, vol. iv, pls. x.1, xii.2, xvi.1, cf. Buddhist *tīntal* in Ellora pl. xiv.1 (vol. I, Viṣṇu).

⁷Stella Kramrisch employs the term, "grotto" vis-à-vis the rock-cut art of India. We have the earliest examples of the Hīnayāna phase in Bhāja, Beḍsa and Karle (for ample illustrations see Alone 2016 & 2019). These early rock-cut temples (dated in the early centuries BCE) stand in comparison with the art of Leshan. For a better understanding of Cross-Cultural aspects and tourism interpretation of the literal meaning of Leshan Buddha, see Wenwen, 2016.

⁸Some say the entire 'Kailāsa' consisting of the monolithic temple, rock-cut caves (e.g. the Lañkeśvara) and bas-relief was completed within twenty years (Kṛṣṇa II 880–915 CE, the Rāṣṭrakūṭas c. 752–973 - Sastri 1971, p. 210). Others say the mega-project was extending over a century. Yet, part of the rock-cut phase is incomplete (e.g., some dark chambers adjoining the Sapta Mātṛkas enclave, closed for visitors). For a detailed account of the temple complex see Kalidos 2006, vol. I, pp. 103–105.



Figure 1 Confluence of the rivers: Minjiang, Dadu and Qingyi.

view (rock used⁹) both (Ellora, folk Elūra and Leshan) are analogous. The difference is that the Rāṣṭrakūṭas cut out a box-like square trench from top to bottom¹⁰ to bring out the monolithic *ālaya*, the Kailāsa (Ranade 1988, p. 112).¹¹ The Leshan imagery is that of a seated Buddha in similar pattern.¹² From the Indian *śāstra* point of view, they make no difference because the vertically moving up temple is *vāstupuruṣa*, cf. the Chinese parable (cited above). Architecture, *vāstu*, and sculpture, *puruṣa*, are inseparable. The temple chariot, called *vimāna* (celestial chariot), is an abstraction of the Lord (Ganananda 2002, p. 89). The Buddha colossus is supposed to sit facing the River that merges with the eastern ocean, suggestive of arrival of the Lord through the oceanic trade route. The Indian oceanic

passage was easily accessible for the south, whereas for those behind the Vindhya the land route through Nepal, Tibet and Bhutan was much more felicitous. The architecture in the hilly regions, including Kerala, gets closer to the Chinese exemplar. However, Chinese iconography is of its own genre, reflecting the anatomical features and cultures of the indigenous elements. The image under study finds Buddha seated in *pralambapāda* mode, both hands rested on thighs (Figure 3). In Hindu iconography, normally *sukhāsana* is the prescribed order (cf. images of Vaikuṇṭhamūrti in Badāmī caves ii & iii, Soundararajan, 1981; Kalidos 2006, vol. i, pl. xxxviii, 2) for *sukhapriya* masculine (*lalitāsana* for *lalita* feminine), one leg suspended and the other rested on the knee of the dangling leg, cf. image of Umāsaḥitamūrti and Somāskandamūrti (Kalidos 2006, vol. ii, pls. lxxvi. 1–2, xc. 1). The Buddha is not a *sukhapriya* (in Buddhism *duḥkha* is the root cause of all human afflictions), and so takes the *pralambapāda* mode, *daṇḍanāyaka* to chase away *māra* (symbol of evil). Normally, the hands are four, the *pūrvahastas* in *abhaya* and *varada mudrās*. The Buddha in *pralambapāda* mode is to be found in the earlier cellae of the Ajaṇṭā caves.¹³ Devoid of any ornamentation, the Lord is fitted with a Chinese type of long gown. The eyes

⁹The rock in Ellora is volcanic supple basalt and seems to be red sandstone in Leshan. The Western Cālukyās had exploited red sandstone in Badāmī for their rock-cut and structural temples.

¹⁰Built on the leafy tamarind vase/ First was the tower and the last was the base— a Marāṭhī rhyme, (Ranade 1988, p.108).

¹¹An eyewitness for the top-to-bottom rock-cut technology may be found in the Jain Choṭā-Kailāsa of Ellora and the Vettuvāṅkōyil in Kaḷukumalai. From top to bottom, the work was completed phase by phase, including plastering and painting. Historians of Leshan say the Buddha colossus was covered in gold and decorated with jade intricate carvings. The rock-cut and monolithic temples in India were plastered and painted as one may find remnants in the Ajaṇṭā caves.

¹²The rock-cut technology is much more advanced in case of Ellora because the front is not open (Figure 3). The frontal section in Ellora is closed with a row of bas-relief and miniature of *gopura* at the center. The entry is not thrown open but narrow, falling exactly below the *gopura* (Kalidos 1996, pp. 371–413, Figure 3). Professor Raju Kalidos says he has visited the Ellora caves more than twenty times, besides attending a conference in the Ellora caves 1986 (Parimoo et al. ed. 1988).

¹³Parimoo 1991, pls. 50–57. Prof. Parimoo says this ‘Seminar Proceedings’ is to be reprinted. The other book on the Art on the Ellora Caves (New Delhi 1988) is already reprinted. Eminent scholars of the yester generation professors, K. V. Soundararajan, Carmel Berkson, Walter Spink (passed away recently), T. V. Pathy, S. Settar et al. took part in these conferences.



Figure 2 The Buddha colossus, Leshan River view (photo: Prof. Li Yuan).

are half closed in meditation. The head is in curly locks knit to form a *yoga-maṇḍala* (*mukūṭa*) topped by *uṣṇīṣa* (Figures 4, 5 and 6).¹⁴ This is the idealized picture of a great teacher and philosopher... the Enlightened One here too wears his hair in a knot and bears the symbol of wisdom, a whorl of hair between his eyebrows (Gadebusch 2000, p. 23). After the Great Renunciation, the Lord had discarded jewels and donned in a monk's robes, he was free to roam the world of the homeless, the *vānaprasthāśrama* during his *grhasthāśrama*. At times, the head is a mere skull decked with the *yoga-makūṭa* (Gadebusch 2000, p. 19). Some authorities say the *āsana* mode is symbolic of authority.

Chinese annals say that the Ji uqu Plank Road was named by Cen Shan during the T'ang dynasty (7–10th centuries). Su Shi (1037–1101CE), a scholar lived here and contributed several canonical works on the Buddhist philosophies. He was based in the place where the Buddha colossus sits today. Historians say that Confucianism was encouraged during T'ang period (Hutchinson's *History of the Nations*, vol. i, pp. 65–66). The Buddha, Heraclitus, Isaiah, Confucius, Lao Tse and Zoroaster historically belong to the same period, the "Age of Adolescence" (6th century BCE) without knowing or influencing one another.

¹⁴Images of the Buddha (Gadebusch, 2000, pp. 20–23). The yogic motifs reflect the traditions of Gandhāra art, rooted in the Indic culture.

¹⁵The voyage of discovery is not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes – Marcel Proust.

Nations may take different names (Afghanistan–historical Gandhāra, India (Bhārata) Nepal, Bhutan, Śrī Laṅkā, Myanmar (Burma), Thailand, Cambodia, Indonesia, China (Peking/Beijing?), Korea, Vietnam, Japan and so on but the Buddha is the same who attained wisdom under the Bodhi tree in Buddha Gayā, close to Kāśī. The wisdom taught by the Master disseminated over the entire continent, so Sir Edwin Arnold¹⁶ calls the Buddha, the Light of Asia. Nay, He is the Light of the World, the message India fosters today. Buddhism may be a defunct religion in India but the breath-spell that pervades through the vein of each Indian is *ahimsa*, the *sāsvata* message handed down from generation to generation from the immortal *ṛṣis* of yore to Mahatma Gandhi.

It is blissful to view an unearthly image of the seated Buddha in China, really a cosmic *viśvarūpa* in its verbal sense; *viśvarūpa* images sit and stand. It may not conform to any of the iconometric regulations prescribed in Indian canons, the *śilpa* or *vāstuśāstras*. The *uttamadaśatāla* image is supposed to be 120 *aṅgulas* (about two meters, circa 6–7 feet high) for *sthānaka viṣṇu*, e.g. the Nārttāmalai images in Mosteller (1987, pp. 55–69), Gopalakrishnan (2005, chap. iv) and Jeyapriya (2015, Figures 2–5). The old saying is "*eṇ cāṇ uṭampukku ciracē piratānam* i.e. for eight span¹⁷ image, the head is pivotal". If the Leshan Bud-

¹⁶A pioneering Principal of the Deccan College, Pune, he was author of *The Light of Asia* and the *Indian Song of Songs, the Gīta Govinda*.

¹⁷In folk measurement, span (*cāṇ*) means the distance between the



Figure 3 The Buddha colossus, āsana, dvibhuja, hands rested on pralambapāda or pīṭhāsana symbolizing authority. The technology from top to bottom is beyond the imagination of contemporary experts.

dha colossus is 71 meters (233 ft) tall that means the head is (14.7 meters) circa nine meters high, may be more because the image is seated. If standing, the image may be circa 90 meters tall, cf. Neṭiyōn (the ‘Tall One’) in Tamil *vaiṣṇava* tradition.

In Indian Buddhist, Jain and Hindu iconography, the seated (relax or meditation), standing (about to act or bless) and reclining (rest or *yoga*) postures are common, and they denote some religious philosophy. Nothing comparable to the Leshan Buddha colossus is known in other

nations of Asia cf. the *sthānaka* Buddha of Bamiyan torpedoed twice (Rajaraman 2016, pl. viii). Normally scholars compare the Leshan Buddha with the Egyptian pyramids.¹⁸ I may take a different turn to find out the parallel in the imagery of the American presidents (George Washington to Abraham Lincoln) in Mount Rushmore, the United States. I only wonder whether the Gandhāran and Chinese Buddha colossuses served model for the American sculptor! In India, if we search for an analogous sculpture, it could only be the *sthānaka* Gommaṭa (c. 980 CE)

tips of the thumb and little finger if the palm is extended longitudinally. This is the vertical measurement of the face for any human being. Eight such measures (*eṇ cāṇ*) make up the total height of the concerned person.

¹⁸No, the burial monuments accommodated the mummies of Pharaohs. Seated Buddha is a teacher par excellence. Reclining images of the Buddha denote *parinirvāṇa*, the final blowing out. The laid-up Jesus is devoid of the ghost or spirit. The *Vaiṣṇava Śeṣaśāyī* is *yogaśayana*.



Figure 4 The eyes of Buddha colossus.¹⁵



Figure 5 Head of the Buddha colossus (lateral view).



Figure 6 Padmapāda of Lokeśvara-Buddha (see the human Lilliput).

on Vindhyaḡiri in Śravaṇabelḡoḡa (Settar 1989, pl. xxxiii). We have colossal rock-cut temples in Bhāja, Beḡsa and Karle (the Kailāsa of Ellora ‘vāstupuruṣa’) dating from the 2nd century BCE (Alone 2016), and images of the reclining *parinirvāṇa* Buddha in the Ajaṇṭā caves of the Mahāyāna phase.

The Leshan Buddha is full of life¹⁹, preaching *ahiṃsa* and *dharma* to free this terror-bound world. “Man is born free but everywhere he is in chains.” When we are proud of monuments; let us emulate the exemplary ways of life set by these great religious philosophers.²⁰

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¹⁹The burial custom among the prehistoric artifacts may serve to find out the parallel ideologies. Egyptian pyramids show mummies in *pretāsana* mode, which the Buddhists followed. They do not seem to have cremated the corpses. It seems in some Hindu sects and the Jains the images were in seated mode, called *samādhi*. Corpses were not standing (Rajaraman 2019b, pp. 17–29).

²⁰The Mount Emei Buddha colossus sits clam facing the turbulent waters of the triple rivers, Minjiang, Dadu and Qingyi. The image was built on the natural hill lock to stop the flooding currents that was causing huge destruction to the land and people. To unveil the other side of the grasp, see Luo & Zeng, 2008.

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