Advances in Social Behavior Research (2024) Volume 12 EWA Publishing
Published online: 31 October 2024 DOI: 10.54254/2753-7102/12/2024117

The Chan Buddhist Monastery: History and Modern-day Evolution

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Abstract. In 477 C.E., a temple was commissioned by the Northern Wei dynasty on Shaoshi Mountain, Henan Province, China. This temple, under the leadership of the foreign monk Bodhidharma (known as Fuuo in China), became the birthplace of Chan (Zen) Buddhism and developed into the globally renowned Shaolin Monastery. Bodhidharma's influence in Chinese Buddhism sparked the growth of the faith, attracting millions of followers and establishing Chan Buddhism as a major cultural and religious movement in East Asia.

Keywords: Bodhidharma, Chan Buddhism, Shaolin Monastery, Northern Wei Dynasty

1. Introduction

In 477 C.E., a temple was commissioned by the reigning emperor of the Northern Wei dynasty to be constructed on a mountain called Shaoshi in Henan province of China. The temple, under the guidance and support of the foreign monk Bodhidharma, known as Futuo in China, would become the birthplace of Chan[1] Buddhism and an international monument known as the Shaolin Monastery would be built. With Bodhidharma at the helm, Chinese Buddhism would flourish and attract millions of devout followers, encouraging the spread of Buddhism in Japan, Korea, and other East Asian countries. After twenty-five hundred years of Buddhist history, two thousand years of Buddhist influence in China, and nearly fifteen hundred years since the construction of the Shaolin Monastery, a modern-day Chan Monastery is being built in Jinhua, Zhejiang, near modern day Hangzhou. Once constructed, it will be the largest Buddhist monastery in Jinhua prefecture. After countless designs and extensive planning to determine how it should be raised, the Goucheng Chan Monastery will be built on the original site of its predecessor, the Goujian Monastery on Goucheng Mountain, the ancient capital of the Yue state during the Spring and Autumn Period of the first millennium B.C. It will follow the traditional three-fold structure that persisted throughout the dynasties yet adding modern day conveniences to suit its time and demonstrate how one should construct a Chan Buddhist monastery in 2024.

2. Buddhism Prior to China

To trace the path that connects to the deeply thoughtful and logical design of Goucheng, we should start at the origin of Buddhism, in India. Buddhism credits its origins to the famous story of Siddhartha Gautama, who gained awakening under the Bodhi tree and became the Buddha. However, no image of the Buddha was passed down due to the emphasis on spiritual heritage rather than imagery worship. In theory, the Buddha has already escaped the bonds of the physical world after achieving Nirvana. Thus, no monuments existed until the Mauryan Emperor Ashoka, a devout follower of Buddhism, built countless stone columns to spread the generosity and peacefulness of Buddhist teachings. These columns had patterned engravings, notably: the Tree of Enlightenment (the Bodhi tree under which the Buddha gained awakening), the Wheel of the Doctrine (which the Buddha spun after entering Nirvana), pillars encircled by flames (to portray the Buddha's brilliant presence and sacrifice), footprints (where the Buddha left his footprint to monument the places he taught) and the stupa (a sign of the Buddha's passing). These symbols would later on become essential parts of Buddhist iconography. Without a direct image of the Buddha, Buddhism remained aniconic for a long period of time, with the Buddha's presence marked by these symbols.

There have been numerous debates surrounding the Greco-Roman influence on the sculptural emergence of the Buddha. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy [2] wrote in an article in 1927, straightforwardly titled "The Origin of the Buddha Image", stating that images of divinities already existed in India in from 300-200 B.C., which was prior to the spread of the official, generally accepted

Buddha image. Nearly a century later, Junhyung Rhi [3]commented that despite Coomaraswamy's profound impact on the research of the Buddha's imagery history, Coomaraswamy was also influenced by his nationalistic ideals and the limited knowledge of Buddhist history of his time. Nonetheless, Rhi concludes that by venturing away from European arrogance, Coomaraswamy opened a fresh path towards finding the origin of the Buddha image.

However, starting around 1 A.D., closely following the appearance of the Mahayana school of Buddhism, a need appeared for a direct physical image of the Buddha. Mahayana, or "the Great Vehicle," is a school of Buddhism that altered the role of the Buddha and the Bodhisattvas to not be spiritual deities that should be worshiped, but rather attainable teachers to learn from. Regardless of originality, it was clear that by the time Buddhism made its way to China, the Buddha had symbols to indicate its presence.

Mahayana's influence did not end with Buddha imagery; it also laid the foundation for the development of Buddhist monasteries for spiritual practice. Prior to Mahayana, monks mainly resided in caves or dens, before they eventually came together to perform spiritual worship as part of the Mahayana doctrine. The Great Stupa in Sanchi, one of the first Buddhist buildings from the second-first century B.C., bears a circular base, a hemispherical dome, and square stone railings that supports the chatra (a mast resembling upside-down umbrellas). Leaving the cave structure behind, India would develop two additional architecture forms: the vihara and the chaitya. The vihara took inspiration from the individual quarters the monks had while residing in caves to conclude a large open court where the monks would gather and would later be the blueprint for monks' living quarters. Following the original design of rock-carved halls, chaityas evolved from a simplistic cave worship space, sometimes with a stupa in the middle, to freestanding Buddha halls.

Despite developing their own style, the traces of the original Indian cave-like structure still remained in East Asian Buddhist temples, with traces reaching as far as Japan and Korea. Key features such as the central stupa, lantern roof, living quarters, hall for rituals, and decorative images can be traced back to the Indian structures. Even the large dome was present regardless of having shrunken to be barely visible. The exact evolution path of Chinese temples from India is relatively unclear. Though there are theories that China was influenced by its native architecture style, certain details such as the Chinese choice for wood over the Indian stone and dirt, and the distinguishing Chinese-style roof remain unknown. [4]

3. Buddhism Comes to China

This part includes three major points In the first millennia B.C., groups of nomads who resided east of Tibet came together in Bactria and formed the Kushan Empire. Over time, the Kushan empire would grow extremely prosperous, in part due to their central location between China's Han Dynasty and the Roman Empire. The Kushans were mainly Mahayana Buddhists, and through them, Buddhism made its way to China in the first century A.D..

Emperor Ming of Han had a dream which prompted him to invite two Indian monks to the capital Luoyang via the Silk Road. They resided in the White Horse Temple, and the temple became a hub for the translation and spreading of Buddhist texts. The temple buildings were made of wood and boasted a pagoda, which was already prevalent in Han China.

Though the White Horse Temple holds significant religious and historical meaning by being the spiritual starter of Indian Buddhism in China, there are no obvious traces of early Indian architectural influence. It is believed that around this time the round-domed stupa from India evolved to eventually become a pagoda, a tall, tower-like structure similar to the ones we see in China, Japan, and other East Asian countries. It was not until the fifth-century cave-temples in Yungang, which were closer to Central Asia than White Horse Temple, that we began to see more Indian Buddhist elements. The cave-temples began to include stupas and central pillars, and cave elements were also incorporated into their temple buildings in monasteries above the caves.

Gradually, as Buddhism became more incorporated in China, specific schools started to develop. In 402, Huiyang created the White Lotus Society, the forerunner of Pure Land Buddhism, which gained widespread popularity among laypeople due to its accessibility, as it did not require long hours of meditation, and because of its positive message of an afterlife. Although it was an offshoot of Mahayana Buddhism, with both celebrating the existence of an afterlife, Mahayana Buddhism focused on escaping ties from the physical world to reach spiritual salvation while Pure Land Buddhism promised the extension of one's previous life on earth. To the Chinese, it was an extension of the fascination of reaching the afterlife. Therefore, the Buddha's image was not regarded as a spiritual guide when it first entered China, but placed alongside the Yellow Emperor as a sign of immortality, with the earliest evidence of the Buddha statue worshiped in a temple appearing in 65 A.D. Along with this belief was also the Confucian idea of 'xiao', "filial piety", owing the blessing of the afterlife to one's ancestors. To represent this ideology, even though Pure Land Buddhism does not appear to have had a distinct monastery design of its own, it shared ideology with the tombs designed for the afterlife in China. There also are early traces of Pure Land Buddhism in Yungang.

As long as the Northern Wei capital was in Yungang, the cave-temple site received generous imperial patronage. When the Northern Wei moved their capital to Luoyang in 493, that city was the focus of imperial attention. Yungang should be seen as the place where a tremendous leap in the intertwining of Mahayana Buddhism and already presented Chinese architecture techniques through the vast and lavish grottos took place. Imperial patronage remained deep as structures were built in Longmen, near Luoyang. Cave-temple were dedicated by emperors, just as lavish tombs had been built by the imperial family in the past. To fashion their preference to display the murals and decorations, the central pillar was removed to open up for a broader, more open space to take in all the ceiling, which included a large lotus in the center.

Through turbulent times, Buddhism managed to flourish and even gain significant influence in northern China due to a missionary called Fotudeng. With his reputation as a seer, Fotudeng managed to become the oracle and spiritual advisor of the tyrants Shi Le and Shi Hu of the fourth-century state of Later Zhao. Under Fotudeng's influence, both rulers became major patrons of Buddhism, erecting hundreds of temples and monasteries during their rule. After Fotudeng's passing, his disciples, particularly Dao'an, helped spread the Buddhist monastery design of pagodas and monk living quarters across China. Though the specific designs of these monasteries remain to be found, tombs built during this era are believed to share architectural features with Buddhist temples built in the fifth and sixth century, with features such as the truss and ceiling beams. [5]

4. The Emergence of Chan Buddhism

Conclusion answers the research hypothesis or purposes. In fifth-century Guangzhou, a boat arrived from Southern India carrying the monk Bodhidharma, who was believed to be 150 years old. Though accounts of Bodhidharma's past and even existence are still debated, Chan Buddhists, known in the West by the Japanese name of the Buddhist sect, 'Zen', [6] trace their lineage to him and regard him as 'the first patriot'. Chan would gain significant influence in China and would become the mainstream Buddhism in Japan and Korea.

Chan's teachings refined the essence of early Mahayana teachings and Pure Land's Chinese adaptations. It emphasized the idea of enlightenment, and shifted the focus to meditation as the exclusive way to attain enlightenment. It also abandoned the stress on scripture reading and dismissed the heavy authority of early teachings by stating that enlightenment was particular to everyone, and can only be attained through personal understanding. As a result of Chan's focus on 'self' and 'individual enlightenment', the only-ink artworks that are associated with Chan Buddhism hold more value as they portray the evolution of enlightenment understanding over time. Taking note from the transcendental nature of Tang, the Song dynasty's ink paintings are directly influenced by the artists' own feelings and emotions of enlightenment. The paintings are known for quick, decisive brush strokes that are inspired by the fact that enlightenment comes in a flash, as fast and a single stroke of a calligrapher's brush. Examples of these works are Liang Kai's "The Sixth Patriot Cutting the Bamboo", and Muqi's "Six Persimmons". These artworks' simple ink-only style encourages a viewer to think hard about the meaning behind the painting. Thus, these painting can invoke flashing enlightenments. Similarly, Japanese Zen Buddhist paintings use the same style. An example is a painting by Josetsu called "How to Catch a Catfish with a Gourd." In the painting, the fisher is trying to catch the catfish, a fish believed to hold supernatural powers, by using a gourd, a circular bottle whose opening is way too small to fit it. This painting reflects on the Zen philosophy of concentrating more on feelings compared to logic, otherwise one may never reach enlightenment, or catch the catfish.

In 618, the Sui dynasty ended and gave way to the vibrant dawn of the Tang dynasty. The Fourth Patriot, Dayi Daoxin, established his temple on the twin peaks of Shuangfeng, in modern day Hubei. Named 'Yuchu', meaning 'peaceful reserve', the temple greatly influenced the location choice of all monasteries built after Daoxin's time. Instead of urban settings, many monks preferred a secluded residence in mountains, which also contributed to the longevity of Chan in China. It is believed that the remoteness of their location would benefit the meditations and their connections with earthy surroundings.

Following the disastrous abolition of thousands of temples and artworks after the Arabs invaded in late Tang, Buddhism, and mostly Chan, tried to reestablish itself in the Southern Song dynasty, when the capital was moved to Lin'an, present day Hangzhou. It was also around this time that Chinese Buddhism started incorporating various deities into its religion from Daoism and Confucianism, with new statues of different figures appearing in the monasteries as protectors, such as Wenchang and Wenqu. These interconnections of religions would continue to modern times.

The Buddhist architectures also started to hold deeper meaning and structural importance in comparison to the prior, relatively superficial yet lavish, monasteries. Chan Buddhist monasteries similarly take on their own features. But first, it is important to look at the Chinese Buddhist monastery more generally.

5. Buddhist Monasteries in China

By the Tang dynasty, the Buddhist monasteries had already established their function and design logic. It was to serve five purposes: eat, sleep, administrate, work, and worship. [7] To examine the similarities and the general structures now associated with monasteries, we will look at three representatives: Horyuji in Nara, Japan, Baoguosi in Ningbo, and Longxingsi in Zhengding, Hebei.

Due to the termination of numerous temples in China during the Late Tang, Horyuji in Japan is a great look at the development of Buddhist monasteries before Chan-style temples are built. Built in 607 C.E. as a gift to Empress Suiko from Prince Shotoku, Horyuji is the oldest surviving temple in Japan that remains relatively intact, retaining its original design and artworks. Uniquely built completely out of wood, it's imperial standing and later role as a worship place allowed it to survive to modern times while differentiating it from the early wooden monasteries that are only present in rural China. Not only sporting cultural significance, Horyuji boasts three significant structural features that are original from the eighth century: the inverted V-shaped braces, the bracket arms with cloudlike patterns, and the elongated bracket arms. [8] Later monasteries in East Asia built after Horyuji would incorporate these elements into their buildings and would become regular elements in temple design.

While Horuyji displays the fresh innovation of temple design, Longxingsi and Baoguosi represent their respective North and South school of Chinese Buddhism. The dispute over authentic lineage of the sixth patriot during the early Tang dynasty, between Shenxiu and Huineng, resulted in their disciplines created two opposing schools: the North and the South. Both tried to establish monastery structures that were unique to their geographical location, yet both did not give up the Tang architecture style.

Longxingsi in Shijiazhuang, Hebei, was originally constructed in 586 A.D.., during the Sui dynasty, then reconstructed in the Song dynasty. Thus, despite its original construction time, the buildings and structural designs there are demonstrations of Song architecture. Longxingsi is arranged to resemble a Chinese palace, with five buildings behind the main entrance arranged along strong straight axis. [9] Longxingsi is famous for not only being the largest surviving Song architecture group, but also for boasting a building called Moni Hall with a portico on each side. [10]

Built 1013 in Ningbo, Zhejiang, Baoguosi is a prominent representation of the South school with bracket sets with strong vertical thrusts. The main Buddha Hall of Baoguo Monastery is one of the earliest dated findings that have three domes in a row, an I-shaped floor plan, and a connecting corridor. Baoguosi's location on Mount Baohua is far more secluded than Longxingsi, which is on flat found and closer to the urban settings. Baoguo Monastery also has a building facility not found in early monasteries: residential quarters for the abbots. These unusual features comprise to be the representative elements of Chan monasteries.

6. Conclusion: The Chan Buddhist Monastery

Chan is officially a school of Mahayana Buddhism. It incorporates Confucianism, Daoism and Pre-Buddhist Chinese beliefs evolved into the largest religious culture in East Asia. Coming from the Southern School of Buddhism, Chan and their monasteries are more common in the Southeastern part of China, significantly in Hangzhou. Despite the Mongol invasion in the 13th century that destroyed a catastrophic amount of Chan monasteries, we are lucky that there are major monasteries still surviving in Zhejiang today. Most are remnants from the Song dynasty.

As we can observe, there are eight basic components of Chan monasteries: front gate, Buddha hall, hall for preaching the Buddhist Law, kitchens, bath and bathrooms, library, bell tower, and abbot's residences. As we have seen in Baoguosi, Chan monasteries are built on uneven rural landscapes, and have buildings beyond the main axis. Comparing it with the earlier Horyuji and the northern Longxingsi, Baoguosi and its' Chan monastery counterparts also rarely have pagodas. Instead there is a resting place for chief abbots and there are gardens.

Gardens are perhaps one of most important features that Chan monasteries have. There are three main components of a Chan Garden: stone, water, plant. [11] Among them, stone holds the foremost significance due to its historical attributes, making them into stelae to engrave calligraphy or drawings. [12] Water is seen in the form of ponds, which is usually in the front. These ponds named "fengshui chi" allow comers to release fish, as an act of Buddhist compassion to all living beings, into these ponds to gain merits. Among plants, most monasteries have an extremely old tree. The sacred tree worship in Chan can be traced all the way back to India, when the Buddha gained enlightenment under the Bodhi Tree and in Chan gardens it is given the new meaning as a guardian. [13]

The garden in Chan is specifically oriented to meet the meditation functions of sitting, walking and standing. Early on, gardens were usually backgrounds. It was only until 612 A.D. that Roshino Takumi started using objects to represent different ideological landscapes, such as rocks to represent mountains and ponds to suggest oceans. Due to Esoteric Buddhism being the dominant form of Buddhism in Japan before the arrival of Chan or Daoism, the gardens were initially designed for their ideologies. Esoteric Buddhism's dominance however, helped to greatly spread the idea of Buddhist gardens. Thus, during the Nara period when Tang China greatly influenced Japan and later in the Kamakura period when Chan came and evolved to Japanese Zen, Japan also used gardens to represent their ideological lessons. The main Zen practice Zazen, which focuses on sitting and meditating, found resonance in the teaching of Daoism, thus in this way Japan also incorporated Daoism gardens to assist with practice. Key ideas such as balance of elements (earth, water, fire, wind) unusual ways of eliciting an enlightenment experience, can be found in gardens in Japan. For example in Saihoji, in Kyoto, Japan, all the landscape is moss. The continuous exchanging of Chan learning between Japan and China helped bring the garden design from China to Japan.

Understanding the buildings and general layout of gardens, we can take an overlook at three Chan monasteries that survive in Zhejiang from the Yuan dynasty: Yanfu Monastery, Zhenru Monastery, and Tianning Monastery. These three monasteries are representative of Yuan architecture, which is an extension of the previous Song, except for their use of curved beams, more complex bracket sets, and specific measurements. [14] Some monasteries, such as Yanfu, also have their own innovative characteristics. These architecture influences will continue post-Yuan monasteries.

Among these three, Tianning Monastery, built around 1314 to 1320 and located in Jinhua, Zhejiang is especially interesting to take a look at, because later there will be a new monastery built in Jinhua that will surpass it in size and quantity.

The new monastery, name Gouchengchansi, will be located in the place of the Goujiansi, which has been abandoned for many years. Similar to many monasteries, it will be characterized by the thousand-year Bonsai tree, which will serve as its natural guardian. The monastery's geographical location will be on the rocky slopes of Goucheng Mountain, in the northmost of Zhuji. This mountain also holds the enormous historical significance as the capital of Yue during the Spring and Autumn Period, and the happening place of the famous Chinese historical tale "Yuewang Goujian".

The structure will take the classical "threefold" structure: top, middle, bottom, or left, middle, right. The left will be the living quarters for the residential abbots and visiting monks, middle the foremost important ritual hall, and the right for administration. The design is largely following the Song dynasty Chan design, which includes using wood as the main material, a central axis, and Chan gardens. Moreover, there will be Chan paintings that show teachings and religious worship, which include the famous "Evolution of the Buddha" (Fozuyuanliu Tu), "The Reflection of the Buddha" (Fozu Daoying), and "Ten Bulls of Chan" (Chanmen Shiniu Tu).

One always asks how much of the past really is preserved in modern China following its rapid industrial and technological growth? How much of their history and culture is worth preserving? The Grouching Monastery is proof not only that the ideals of China's Buddhist past as represented by Chan are alive today, but it also holds a legacy of Buddhist architecture that has been preserved since the beginning of human civilization.

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