



IMAGES OF INFANT BUDDHA IN THE NÁPRSTEK MUSEUM COLLECTIONS

Petra Müllerová*

ABSTRACT: Sculptures of Infant Buddha in Indochina region are influenced by Hinayana or Mahayana interpretations of Buddhist sutras. In the area with strong Mahayana impact, the influence of local social rules on art is quite obvious: the role of vigorous social principals and customs (for example not touching anybody's head, not rising the hand above other person head) of the society influenced strongly the style of Infant Buddha sculptures in Northern Vietnam. On the other hand, in regions with historically strong impact of Hinayana Buddhism, in part of Central Vietnam, in South Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, the influence of strict interpretation of sutras very probably impacts on sculptures depicting the historical Buddha as child. Sculptures in Cambodia and Laos region are very high, almost like adult persons, and only thanks to the gesture of arms one can determine that they are "Infant Buddha".

KEY WORDS: Vietnamese art – Infant Buddha – Asian sculpture – gestures – sutras – Mahayana Buddhism.

In former French Indochina (e.g. present-day Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia) Mahayana as well as Hinayana Buddhism has been practised for more than a millennium. These main branches of Buddhism are practised in buildings called pagodas.¹ The difference between interior of pagodas where Hinayana Buddhism is practised and where Mahayana Buddhism is practised is quite obvious: in Hinayana Buddhism pagodas various images of Buddha statues are placed on altars, whereas in Mahayana Buddhism pagodas the images of Buddha are placed on the central altar. Also Taoists and locally revered deities are positioned in the sacred buildings, very often close to the significant altar. Orienting oneself among these deities can therefore be quite complicated, if one is familiar with "only" Mahayana Buddhism. One has to understand the complicated system of local myths and legends, which may vary from province to province, and even region to region.

* Contact: mullerova.petra@volny.cz

¹ In this essay I do not pay attention to the differences between the types of pagoda's buildings (sometimes called in English temples) in Indochina. I put stress on the very specific images of Buddha statues in the mentioned region.

In pagodas of Northern Vietnam and Laos we can see noteworthy sculptures representing the Infant Buddha. The Buddha, frequently freestanding, is dressed usually in a loin cloth; one hand is extended towards the sky, while the other hand stretches towards the earth. This gesture symbolizes the connection between the Heavens and the Earth. Legend has it that when Sakyamuni, the Buddha was born, nine dragons spewing water descended from the Heavens, and the Buddha then bathed in this water. In the rest of Indochina region can be found a number of these Infant Buddha statues with right hand above the head and pointing towards the sky. In these examples the other, left, hand is proportionally long in the other direction, towards earth. The intention of artists seems to me quite clear: put the stress on the knowledge of Buddhist sutras, on the gesture "the Buddha is unifying the world".

The next historical document mentions more details concerning Buddha that are later on depicted in art. "The birth occurred on the eighth day of April. The newly-born Sakyamuni took seven steps unaided, raised his right arm and majestically intoned: I alone am honoured in heaven and on earth. This triple world is full of sufferings; I will be the saviour from these sufferings." Seven lotus blossoms then appeared in the seven footprints he had made Catvaro maharajikah (Four Heavenly Kings), Sakro devanam indrah (Taishakuten)/Indra, king of gods/ and Brahma-deva (Bonten) /the god Brahma/ then appeared on either side of him, celebrating his birth, and the Two Dragon Kings showered pure water of two kinds, warm and cool, down from the sky over his body. The eight kings of beings played music, burned incense, scattered flowers, and let fall heavenly garments and jewelled necklaces."²

Jean Boisselier, very well known 20th century expert in South-East Asia art, also put stress on Buddha's right rising hand when describing the statue of Buddha as child.³

It seems to me that the gesture "right hand rising up to sky and left hand pointing to earth" is essential for the moment depicting the second of Buddha's births. The next remark is that the right arm usually rising above the Buddha's head, and is, quite logically, far longer (and disproportional towards the rest of the body) than the body; the left arm is in this case also very long and pointing towards earth. It seems to me that authors of the sculptures put stress usually and on purpose on the important Buddhist gesture rather than on creating proportionally immaculate figure; the artists indicate to viewers the total meaning of the presented religious piece of work.

In Vietnam and in some parts of Indochina the situation dealing with these types of statues is slightly different. Almost 80% of sculptures of Infant Buddha from Indochina region I have seen in the Náprstek museum in Prague are created with the left hand pointing the sky. The left hand is, and that is very important, raised to the level of the Buddha's shoulders or, no more than to the level of the Buddha's ear. In my personal view the influence of the local society rules, and specifically the social custom that any person should not raise the hand above the other person's head, prevailed and is reflected in the sculptures of Infant Buddha emphasizing very long hands, and the right one rising quite high above the head. In this custom prevailed even on those sculptures having the right hand (e.g. Inv. No. 16178, Inv. No. A19345) pointing up to the sky.

In the National Gallery in Prague is a sculpture of Infant Buddha (Inv. No. Vp 2888) that very probably originates from North Vietnam. The figure is 51.5 cm high, standing on

² See Light of Asia, Buddha Sakyamuni in Asian Art, 1984, p. 83.

³ See BOISSELIER, 1994, 45.

⁴ See <http://www.quangduc.com/English/vnbuddhism/015patrone.html>. (on the date: 29th December 2008)

red pedestal of red colour. Buddha's left arm is pointing to the sky, but the hand rises only as far as the middle of his head, right arm is pointing to the earth. Buddha is dressed in a loin cloth; the character of the statue corresponds to the description of the Infant Buddha according to Tran Van Giap.⁴

In some pagodas in Northern Vietnam could be found sculptures of Infant Buddha covered up with garb, and the statue is usually surrounded with rich carved wooden decoration. Various figures of Buddha as a Child are for example in Tran Quoc Pagoda (photo, p. 161), Kien So Pagoda (photo, p. 166, figure covered up in red and white cloth robe), Lang Pagoda (photo, p. 199), Pho Minh Pagoda (photo, p. 203), Boi Khe Pagoda (photo, p. 224, figure covered up in red cloth robe), Thai Lac Pagoda (photo p. 229, figure of Infant Buddha covered up in red cloth robe), Mia Pagoda (photo, p. 267, figure of Infant Buddha covered up in red cloth robe), Kien So Pagoda (photo, p. 166, figure of Infant Buddha in red cloth robe), Thay Pagoda (photo p. 191, figure of Infant Buddha covered up in red cloth robe), Thai Lac Pagoda (photo p. 229, figure of Infant Buddha covered up in red cloth robe).⁵

In Vietnam small sculptures representing Sakyamuni surrounded by nine dragons are called "Tuong Cuu Long" (Statue of Nine Dragons) or "Tuong Ca so sinh" (Statue of new-born Sakyamuni). The story connected with the newly born Buddha is very similar to the above mentioned document: "During the birth of Sakyamuni, nine dragons came down from the sky, spitting water to bathe him while Bodhisattvas and celestial gods started singing and praying to feast him among melodious sounds of celestial music in a great procession of parasols and multi-coloured banners. Sakyamuni then made seven steps forward, the left hand raised to the sky and the right hand pointing to the earth while pronouncing these words: In the sky and on the earth "ME" along is "THE VERY HIGH."⁶

And after this legend the historic Buddha sculpture is made in the shape of a standing new-born, the left hand raised to the sky and right hand pointing to the earth, statue surrounded by nine dragons circling among the clouds and Bodhisattvas, gods and celestial musicians.⁷

In the Náprstek Museum – National Museum, in Vietnamese and Laos's collection, several pieces of sculptures of Infant Buddha are kept; five of the sculptures are wooden (Inv. Nos. A19 345, A17 310, A26 678, A 19345, 16 178), and another three are made from bronze (Inv. Nos. A 9785, 13 787, 13 788). Three pieces of the sculptures (Inv. Nos. 13788, A19345, 16178) have right hand pointing to the sky, but the only one (Inv. No. 13788) has the hand slightly above the head. Five pieces of sculptures (Inv. Nos. A9785, 13787, A13343, A17310, A26678) are depicted with left arm pointing the sky, and only two of these sculptures (Inv. Nos. A9785, 13787) have the left arm above the Buddha's head.

I believe the most precious wooden sculpture of Buddha as a child is the figure decorated with elaborate wood-carving with dragon's-head motifs (inv. No. 16178). This piece was bought by the museum from the great Czech traveller and collector of non-European art Joe Hloucha (1881–1957). The comparatively small figure depicts Buddha – child surrounded by nine dragons. He is dressed only in a loin cloth, pointing his right hand, forefinger and middle finger, towards the sky and his left arm, forefinger and middle finger, towards

⁵ See HA Van Tan, NGUYEN Van Ku, PHAM Ngoc Long, 1993, pp. 161, 166, 191, 199, 203, 224, 229, 267.

⁶ See <http://www.quangduc.com/English/vnbuddhism/015patrone.html>. (on the date: 29th December 2008)

⁷ *ibid*



Inv. No. 16178. Infant Buddha. Tonkin, 19th century. Lacquered wood. Height of the sculpture – 20 cm; height of the lotus pedestal – 6.5 cm; height of the dragon arch – 49.5 cm; height of the woodcut behind statue of Buddha – 41 cm (clouds, dragon tail); height of the octagonal pedestal – 10.5 cm; total height of the sculpture – 60.5 cm. Joe Hloucha collection (bought from Hloucha in 1943). Photo by Jiří Vaněk, the Náprstek Museum, Prague.



Inv. No. A17310. Infant Buddha. Lacquered wood, North Vietnam, 19th century. Height of the sculpture – 48 cm; height of the lotus pedestal, dark red colour – 8.5 cm; height of the Buddha – 39.5 cm. Photo by Jiří Vaněk, the Náprstek Museum, Prague.

the earth. This gesture symbolises the unity of heaven and earth and corresponds to the descriptions of the Infant Buddha sculptures in most publications I have studied.

Now I would like to draw your attention to the fact, that the vast majority of these sculptures kept in the museum depository as well as in pagodas of present day Vietnam, have a disproportionately long body when compared with the arms and legs, even though these statues are placed at the lowest step of the altar, i.e. as close as possible to the congregation.

Other interesting fact is that on some Infant Buddha figures the hands are interchanged: left is pointing to the sky and the right one to the earth. Reasons of interchanging the gestures could be several: the artists were not familiar with the original statement in sutra or previous legend, and logically did not realize they are changing the content of the legend (although faintly). In some cases the artist probably thought that the hand gestures do not have distinctive character and they interchange the gestures freely in a way that the sculpture corresponds symmetrically with the other sculpture on the altar.

But what is in my opinion of most significance on Infant Buddha hand gestures, is that very rarely Buddha raises the hand (doesn't matter the right or left hand) above his head. And this is quite unique when comparing the sculptures of Infant Buddha in Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, and even Japan and Korea, where in nearly every case Buddha raises the right hand high above his head. Usually both arms are disproportional longer than the rest of the body – very probably because the artists put stress on the gesture “the arms connecting the heaven and the earth”. Today, one can find a much wider range of sculptures of Buddha in the pagodas, including simple figures depicting only Buddha as a child, without dragons.

Conclusion

Sculptures of Infant Buddha in Indochina region are influenced by Hinayana or Mahayana interpretations of Buddhist sutras. In the area with strong Mahayana impact, the influence of local social rules on art is quite obvious: the role of vigorous social principals and customs (for example not touching anybody's head, not rising the hand above other person head) of the society influenced strongly the style of Infant Buddha figures in Northern Vietnam.

On the other hand, in regions with historically strong impact of Hinayana Buddhism, in part of Central Vietnam, in South Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, the influence of strict interpretation of sutras very probably impacts on sculptures depicting the historical Buddha as child. Sculptures in Cambodia and Laos region are very high, almost like adult persons, and only thanks to the gesture of arms one can determine that they are “Infant Buddha”. Examples of such, completely different style sculptures can be found in Pagoda Chu Dam in Hue (photo p. 325, orange cloth robe, right arm pointing with fore finger to sky) and in Pagoda Trung Tam in Ho Chi Ming City (photo p. 365, orange cloth robe, right arm pointing with fore finger to sky, Buddha has swastika symbol on his chest).⁸

⁸ See HA Van Tan, NGUYEN Van Ku, PHAM Ngoc Long, 1993, pp. 325, 370.

Literature:

- BOISSELIER, Jean. *The Wisdom of the Buddha*. London: Thames and Hudson 1994.
- FAJCSÁK, Györgyi, RENNER, Zsuzsanna. *Southeast Asian Buddhist Art*. Budapest: Ferenc Hopp Museum of Eastern Asiatic Arts, 1997.
- FAHR-BECKER, Gabriele (APPEL, Michael, DUNN, Michael, HESEMANN, Sabine, KUHNT-SAPTODEWO Sri). *Ostasiatische Kunst*. Koenemann 2006.
- HA Van Tan, NGUYEN Van Ku, PHAM Ngoc Long. *Chua Viet Nam (Buddhist Temples in Vietnam)*. NXB My thuat 1993.
- HARZOVÁ, Paula R. *Taoismus*. [Taoism.] Praha, Lidové Noviny 1996.
- HUARD, Pierre, DURAD, Maurice. *Vietnam – Civilization and the Culture*. Hanoi, Ecole Francaise d'extreme Orient 1998.
- Light of Asia. Buddha Sakyamuni in Asian Art*. Los Angeles County Museum of Art 1984, 331 pp.
- KRAEMEROVÁ, Alice, ŠEJBL, Jan. *Japonsko, má láska. Český cestovatel a sběratel Joe Hloucha. - Japan, My Love. The Czech Traveller and Collector Joe Hloucha*. Praha, Národní muzeum, 2007.
- L'Art a Hué*. Le Rédacteur – Gérant: L.Cadiér. Hué 1915.
- Lexikon východní moudrosti (Buddhismus, Hinduismus, Taoismus, Zen)*. [Wisdom of East – Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, Zen.] Olomouc, Votobia 1996.
- MÜLLEROVÁ, Petra. *Czech Collectors and Traditional Vietnamese Art. – Čeští sběratelé a tradiční vietnamské umění*. Praha, Národní muzeum 2009.
- MÜLLEROVÁ, Petra. *Příběh tonkinského dřevorezu. – The Story of the Tonkin Prints*. Praha, Dauphin 2008. Czech-English monography.
- NGUYEN Phi Hoanh. *Luoc su my thuat Viet Nam*. [An Outline of Vietnamese Art.] NXB khoa hoc xa hoi, Ha Noi 1970.
- TRAN Van Giap. *The Buddhist Pantheon in Vietnam*. <http://www.quangduc.com> (on 29th October 2008)