

# LEGITIMIZING BUDDHISM THROUGH THE BODY: THE POWER OF EVERYDAY GESTURES IN MEDIEVAL CHINA

As Buddhist ordinations rose exponentially across Six Dynasties China (220–589), a coherent set of reprimands against the Buddhist monastic community emerged from secular factions. Chinese society had never before encountered a foreign religious movement that operated independently from state ceremonies. Whereas the development of anti-clerical discourses encompassed several political and doctrinal aspects, Buddhist apologetic sources reveal harsh discussions on monastic bodily gestures, particularly those related to etiquette rules, such as baring the right shoulder, adopting informal sitting positions, and trimming hair. Against this background, this project aims to highlight the significance of the body in the intercultural process of Buddhism entering China.

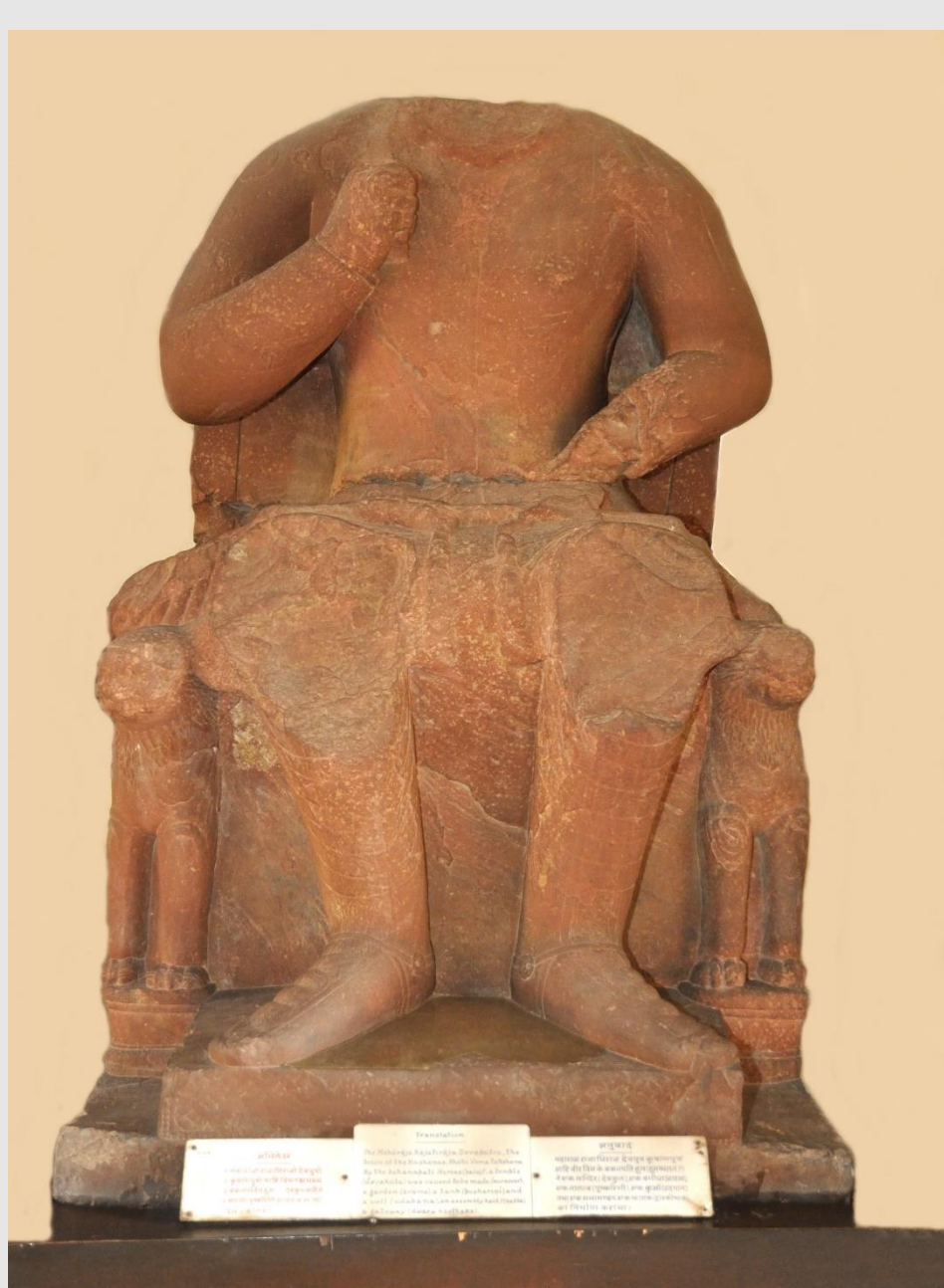


Details of Mogao caves 285/9/236 dating from the Western Wei (535-557) to the late Tang period (618-907).

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- *Why did these specific bodily gestures (dress, posture and hairstyle) provoke such a strong reaction from the Chinese audience while others did not?*
- *On what grounds these Indian costumes were defended by Chinese Buddhists? And what is a Buddhist apologetic text?*
- *What is the role of the body in these controversies and to what degree did Buddhist body customs go through modifications during the journey from India to China?*

## A Focus on Visual and Material Culture



On the left: Kushan Emperor Vima Kadphises on Throne, 1<sup>st</sup> Century CE, Government Museum, Mathura. On the right: figurine of a Woman Kneeling on her Knees. Western Han Dynasty (206 B.C.- 25 C.E.). Xuzhou Museum.

Integrating textual sources with archaeological findings from Central Asia and pre-Buddhist China is essential to this project, as objects introduced to China by the Buddhist community had a profound impact on both daily life and intellectual discourse. A prime example is the introduction of new seating devices.

## A TEXTUAL APPROACH:

- ANALYSIS OF PRIMARY SOURCES: *HONGMING JI* 弘明集, I.E. THE OLDEST BUDDHIST APOLOGETIC COLLECTION PRESERVED IN THE CHINESE CANON.
- ANALYSIS OF PARALLEL CHINESE INDIGENOUS SOURCES (HISTORICAL, HAGIOGRAPHICAL, PHILOSOPHICAL, LITERARY, MIRACLE TALES) TO GRASP THE SOCIAL PERCEPTIONS ON THESE TOPICS.

## A SOCIO-ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPROACH:

- THE ROLE OF THE BODY AS A SIGNIFICANT IDENTITY MARKER.
- CONTEXTUALIZING BODY MODIFICATIONS IN THE LARGER SYMBOLIC GRAMMAR OF MEDIEVAL CHINESE SOCIETY.
- BODY AS A MEDIATOR OF MEANINGS BETWEEN SECULAR AND RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES, BETWEEN THEORY AND PRAXIS.

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