

TWO DATED WOOD SCULPTURES OF THE MING DYNASTY

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Most orientalist who write about Chinese sculpture terminate their serious study with the Sung dynasty and dispose of the three successive dynasties in a few paragraphs or pages at best. As far as we know it, it is true that under the impetus of Buddhism Chinese sculpture reached its zenith in the sixth and seventh centuries; and after its full flowering, it seems to have completed a cycle and faded away by the end of the Sung dynasty. However, while we may not put it on such a high level, there is an enormous mass of material all the way down to the present day, and, until the Japanese invasion, you might see old temples being repaired and new temples under work with balustrades and incense burners and deities being fashioned out of the same white Chihli marble that was used by the top sculptors of the Sui period in the Ting Chou area.

Though in some ways it is a thankless job, nevertheless, it seems to me that we ought to analyze and define and record the monuments of the Ming and Ch'ing dynasties before they are all destroyed before our eyes.

In the study of almost everything Chinese we fall back on the idea that tradition was so strong and the old styles copied so much that there is very little use in trying to disentangle the forces at work in these later periods. While it is true that old styles persisted, there is a very definite style which is characteristic of Ming and which had never been used before. It is to be established, I think, on the basis of the great temples which grew up under imperial patronage in and about the capital of Peking. Here are a long series of temples and a few stone grottoes which can be dated with a good deal of security. The temples have been recorded and tabulated in guidebooks and such, and there is a remarkable series of monographs on individual temples by G. Bouillard, all too little known.

On the basis of these it is a comparatively

simple task to analyze a Ming style and a Ch'ing style which are not throwbacks but which are styles, however inferior, in their own right. It is almost always true that as quantity grows quality falls off, and the demand of the Ming dynasty for bigger and better temples seems to bear this out. In general the sculpture of Ming and Ch'ing Peking is pretentious, grandiose, and individually dull, but the total effect of the great monastery temples in the environs of Peking (particularly when softened by time) is impressive, and even majestic.

In individual works of sculpture, and particularly in the smaller ones, there are real sweetness and quality. We are lucky in finding two little wood figures which we can date exactly and which give the key to whole groups of sculpture, large and small, which are rightly called Ming.¹

One is a small seated figure of a Buddha in the earth-touching, or preaching, attitude, with one finger of his right hand touching the ground over his right knee and his left hand raised in the *abhaya* mudra. An instant's comparison between this figure and the great seated Buddhas of Yün Kang and Lung Mên, made some nine and eight hundred years earlier, show both the change and the persistence of a tradition. At long last and at this late date the essential qualities of an ideal deity hold good and still shine through what has so often been called "the formula." In this case the figure is dated. The transliteration of the inscription found in this figure follows: *Ta Ming Yung Lo chü nien ssü yueh shih ch'i jih*. "Great Ming, Yung Lo, ninth year, fourth month, seventeenth day"—a date in concordance with May 9, 1411.

The rest of the inscription, which implies imperial patronage, is an appreciation of the Tathagata sutras printed in Chinese and

¹ Han Shou-hsuan has helped with the Chinese inscriptions, as usual.



SEATED BUDDHA OF LACQUERED AND GILDED WOOD DATED 1411



SEATED KUAN YIN OF LACQUERED WOOD DATED 1624



INSCRIPTION ON PAPER FROM THE BUDDHA

Tibetan and may be paraphrased as follows:

The sutras of Tathagata are too wonderful to imagine, too high to be equaled, too wide to have limits, too oceanic to have boundaries, too deep to fathom. Their greatness can cover heaven and earth. Their splendor penetrates the impenetrable. Their merit and virtue are measureless – boundless beyond imagination. Their purpose is to further peace in the three realms and to help the people attain happiness. If we can increase our virtue by following the sutras we shall repay the great beneficence

of Tathagata and save all people from disaster.

If all people decide to be enlightened they should follow, read, speak of, think of, the sutras. Then will they be in harmony with the principles, achieve merit, enjoy happiness. They will come to full understanding of the various teachings and the meaning of reality. They will have the wisdom of Buddha and become good disciples.

The inscription found in the second figure, a Kuan Yin, is quite a different thing. It reads:

“T’ien Chi, *chia tzü* year, the third month, before the fifteenth day, made and decorated a Kuan Yin bodhisattva—one gilt image—by the disciples Wang Shih-ch’un, age sixty-seven years, born in the tenth month, the seventeenth day at noon, together with his wife, (the former) Miss Li, aged fifty-three years, born in the first month, the twenty-ninth day at noon.”

The date, in concordance with the western calendar, is before the second day of May, 1624. “Made and decorated” does not mean that this was the work of the Wangs but rather that it was ordered by them. Probably many of our small figures were so ordered, but it is unusual to find such an inscription, and it



INSCRIPTION ON SILK FROM THE KUAN YIN

gives the small Kuan Yin an appealing personal quality which is rare. Wang Shih-ch’un and his wife of the Li family attained a certain majesty of years, took pleasure, and caused to be made a small image of the bodhisattva. Three hundred years and more later we cherish it for them.