



The Influence of Indian and Buddhist Elements in Medieval China: A Study of Buddha's Birthday Celebrations In Luoyang during the Northern Wei dynasty

Poh Yee WONG (aka Jue Wei SHI)

Director, Nan Tien Institute Humanistic Buddhism Centre

The Buddha's birthday festival reached an unprecedented level of grandeur during the rule of Northern Wei when its capital was at Luoyang (495 to 534 CE). Buddhism¹ was indigenous to neither the rulers nor the native Han Chinese. Yet, the Buddha's birthday celebration on the eighth day of the fourth lunar month became a popular ritual in which the entire city participated. This paper studies a particular phenomenon in this public ritual, the use of carriages in image processions, tracing the heritage of these carriages back to the religion's land of origin, India, and their literary sources. The intention of this paper is to study the reasons for such phenomenal success, in particular as they relate to the functional role of a religious festival and how the tenets of a religion can enable itself to be popular and sustainable. The Buddha's birthday is a relevant case study because over 1,500 years later, countries such as Cambodia, Hong Kong, Macau, Malaysia, Myanmar, Nepal, Singapore, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Thailand and Vietnam continue to celebrate it as their public holiday.

BACKGROUND TO NORTHERN WEI AND BUDDHISM

Disunity and discord accompanied warfare during the turbulent Northern

1. Dorothy Wong stated that Buddhism became a state religion under the Northern Wei in Dorothy C. Wong, *Chinese Steles: Pre-Buddhist and Buddhist Use of a Symbolic Form* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004), 46.

*The Influence of Indian and Buddhist Elements in Medieval China:
A Study of Buddha's Birthday Celebrations In Luoyang during the Northern Wei dynasty*

and Southern dynasties in China². From 386 to 534 CE, inhabitants of the north experienced a period of unity under the rule of the Tuoba Wei. In 495, Emperor Xiaowen (r. 471-499) moved his capital to Luoyang from Pingcheng, as part of a sinification program. This move brought skilled artisans, aristocrats, military personnel and agriculturalists from many parts of the conquered lands to Luoyang. Luoyang became a big cosmopolitan city, built up within ten years³. Books on the Northern Wei rule often refer to the prevalence of Buddhist temples, grotto art and ardent devotion. Scholars have postulated that Buddhism became popular because it filled a void left behind by the inability of indigenous Confucianism and Daoism to explain to the Han Chinese the reasons for their woes and it appealed to a ruling class that wanted to establish a distinct cultural identity⁴. Most studies referred to saṅgha property, steles, statues and monasteries, but few studies have focused on the Buddha's birthday celebration as a pivotal event in the acceptance of Buddhism in China.

This particularly interesting period from 495 (move of capital city to Luoyang) to 534 (breakup of the Northern Wei empire) bears witness to Durkheim's theory that religion could stabilize society when rituals and beliefs were celebrated and common morality standards acknowledged, thereby enabling societal order⁵. Religion and politics interacted heavily with each other: adapting to the needs of the people they served and mutually affecting each other⁶. Luoyang during the Northern Wei rule provided an excellent

2. Starting from 316 CE, rulers from at least five major nomadic tribes invaded northern China, forcing migrations and bringing in new cultures. These tribes formed at least sixteen kingdoms in the fourth and fifth centuries.

3. Jenner estimated that Luoyang's population started with half a million in William John Francis Jenner, *Memories of Lo-yang: Yang Hsuan-chih and the Lost Capital (493-534)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 104.

4. For example, Dorothy C. Wong, *Chinese Steles: Pre-Buddhist and Buddhist Use of a Symbolic Form* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004), 3.

5. Durk H. Hak, "Social Science and Religion," *Encyclopedia of Religion and Society*, ed. William H. Swatos, Jr. (Walnut Creek, CA : AltaMira Press, 1998), <http://hrr.hartsem.edu/ency/SocialSR.htm> (accessed Jan 26, 2011)

6. Malefijit also highlighted how secular institutions such as politics, economics and technology could affect religious forms in Annemarie de Waal Malefijit, *Religion and Culture: An Introduction to Anthropology of Religion* (Prospect, Illinois: Waveland Press, 1989), 10.

example of the crosscurrents of cultures and religions, as well as marks an intersection of the studies of History, Religion, Sociology and Politics.

THE NORTHERN WEI USE OF CARRIAGES IN IMAGE PROCESSIONS

The ritual of the Buddha's birthday reached its height during the reigns of Emperors Xuanwu (r. 500-515) and Xiaoming (r. 516-528)⁷. According to *A Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Lo-yang* (hereafter referred to as Record), the well-organized image processions involved more than 1,000 Buddha images⁸. I have opted to study carriages used in these image processions because their evolution in China and use across Central Asia and India for the same purpose highlight the crosscurrents of culture, politics and technology. Furthermore, the carriage turns out to be an excellent metaphor for the religious adaptation that happened during this period.

The *Record* contains two vivid descriptions of carriages used in image processions. The Nunnery of Happy View of the inner city had a carriage with "deft carving" that was the best of the times⁹. The gold carriage in Flourishing Prospect Nunnery of the eastern suburb had superb artisanship, with gold bells and beads made out of seven precious materials¹⁰ hung on the four sides of a jeweled canopy; images of heavenly musical entertainers adorned this carriage¹¹. Given that the royal family and government officials (including eunuchs) sponsored at least twenty-nine (29) of the fifty-two (52) temples described in the *Record*, carriages from these temples were likely to be of exquisite design

7. Ming-chiu Lai, "On the Image Procession in China from the Second to the Sixth Centuries A.D.: An Interpretation of an Elephant Sculpture at the Kongwangshan Site" in *Politics and Religion in Ancient and Medieval Europe and China*, ed. Frederick Cheung et al. (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1999), 60.

8. Xuanzhi Yang, *A Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Lo-yang*, trans. Yi-tung Wang (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 126.

9. *Ibid.*, 51. Original: 「有佛殿一所，像輦在焉，雕刻巧妙，冠絕一時」 from Xiangyong Fan, *Luoyang Qielan Ji Jiaozhu* (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Publications, 1978), 52.

10. The seven precious materials were gold, silver, glazed material, glass, coral, agate, and seashells.

11. *Ibid.*, 77. Original: 「有金像輦，去地三尺，施寶蓋，四面垂金鈴七寶珠，飛天伎樂，望之雲表。作工甚精，難可揚推。像出之日，常詔羽林一百人舉此像」 from Xiangyong Fan, *Luoyang Qielan Ji Jiaozhu* (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Publications, 1978), 88.

*The Influence of Indian and Buddhist Elements in Medieval China:
A Study of Buddha's Birthday Celebrations In Luoyang during the Northern Wei dynasty*

befitting the stature of their patrons.

Prior to the parade, over a thousand images gathered at the Temple of Jing Ming in the southern suburb on the eve of the Buddha's birthday. On the day itself (that is, eighth day of the fourth lunar month), and the emperor offered flowers to each image as the images entered the city gate one by one. The *Record* stated that one hundred plumed guards carried the image of Flourishing Prospect Nunnery, under the emperor's decree¹². As an illustration of the crowds on the streets, Yang described how carriages with their bejeweled canopies and horses "choked traffic."¹³

The scene in Luoyang extended a Northern Wei Buddhist tradition into a much grander display of wealth and power. The *Book of Wei* recorded that carriages paraded Buddha statues on the main streets of Pingcheng under the



Buddha's birthday image processions in Northern Wei, LUOYANG, 503–528 CE. Over 1000 carriages of Buddha statues paraded the street in the city of Luoyang Northern Wei, China. This is the oldest known international celebration of a historical figure. For further details of this magnificent display refer to *Parading the Buddha* by Venerable Dr Juewei. Painted by Nancy Cowardin.

12. Since the image sat on the carriage, I assume that guards pulled the carriage.

13. *Ibid*, 126-127. Original: 「四月七日，京師諸像皆來此寺。尚書祠有一千餘驅。至八日，以次入宣揚門，向閭闔宮前受皇帝散花。于時金花映日，寶蓋浮雲 ... 車騎填咽」 from Xiangyong Fan, *Luoyang Qielan Ji Jiaozhu* (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Publications, 1978), 132-133.

rules of Emperors Taizu (r. 386-409) and Taizong (r. 409-424), the first two emperors of the Northern Wei dynasty.

USE OF CARRIAGES IN IMAGE PROCESSIONS BY OTHER CULTURES

The Chinese had seen image processions before the arrival of the Tuoba Wei. Ming-chiu Lai has convincingly argued that Buddhist image processions started as early as the Eastern (later) Han dynasty (25-220) and reached its peak during the Northern Wei dynasty¹⁴. From a study of archaeological and mountain carvings, Lai showed that the earliest “carriages” of Buddha images were elephants, Indian symbols of auspiciousness, strength, and protection. Being rare and expensive to upkeep in China, elephants soon gave way to palanquins, floats and carriages¹⁵.

The earliest Chinese literary records of actual Buddha’s birthday celebrations dated to the Later Zhao dynasty (319-350). *Record from Inside Ye* mentioned that ruler Shihu (r. 334-349) commissioned an animated float, a flat four-wheeled cart (20 feet by 10 feet) on which moving figures re-enacted Buddha’s birth scene. When the float moved along the streets of the capital city (Xiangguo), nine dragons spewed water on a golden Buddha image, a center wooden monk rubbed the Buddha statue and ten other wooden monks circumambulated the Buddha¹⁶. This description revealed that image processions used wheeled carts since the fourth century and the carriages were quite a display of artisanship and creativity.

During his journey through Khotan¹⁷, Faxian (339-420)¹⁸ saw monasteries

14. Ming-chiu Lai, “On the Image Procession in China from the Second to the Sixth Centuries A.D.: An Interpretation of an Elephant Sculpture at the Kongwangshan Site” in *Politics and Religion in Ancient and Medieval Europe and China*, ed. Frederick Cheung et al. (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1999), 64.

15. *Ibid*, 64.

16. *Ibid*, 57.

17. Faxian, and James Legge, *A Record of Buddhistic Kingdoms: being an account by the Chinese monk Fa-hien of travels in India and Ceylon, A.D. 399-414, in search of the Buddhist books of discipline* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1991), 18-19.

18. Faxian was one of the earlier Chinese monks who went west to India and Sri Lanka in search of the Vinaya.

*The Influence of Indian and Buddhist Elements in Medieval China:
A Study of Buddha's Birthday Celebrations In Luoyang during the Northern Wei dynasty*

making four-wheeled image cars, more than 30 cubits high, decorated with seven precious materials, silken streamers and canopies. These carriages had gold and silver devas carved on them. Between the first and fourteenth day of the fourth lunar month, these carriages took turns to parade in the clean city streets each day. Faxian's vivid account of this fortnight-long, well-organized Buddha's birthday parade in a Buddhist country in Central Asia during the early fifth century could explain the source of inspiration of similar carriages in Luoyang for the same celebration.

In India, Faxian saw an image procession in the capital city, Pataliputra, of Magadha kingdom¹⁹. A four-wheeled car carried a five-storied high bamboo *stūpa* structure wrapped in white and silk-like cloth of cashmere; on the cloths were painted various colors as well as figures of *devas*, decorated with gold, silver and lapis lazuli. Silk streamers and canopies hung over the structure. On four sides were niches of Buddha and bodhisattva images. The image procession that Faxian witnessed on the eighth day of the fourth lunar month in Pataliputra included twenty different and grand cars on parade. In south India, Waghorne noted that bamboo chariots paraded Hindu and Christian images up to at least 1766²⁰. Image procession remained a popular part of Indian culture; the British invented the word "juggernaut" after Jagannath, lord of the universe, the presiding deity of the great temple at Puri well known for its major chariot festival²¹. We also see the Indian motif of carnival-like parades, huge carriages and tall images in Greece with the celebration of the triumphal return of Dionysus from India²².

The grand carriages used in image processions in Luoyang during the late fifth and early sixth century came a long way from India through Central Asia. Let us now turn our attention to the origin of image processions, as it relates to the birth story of the Buddha.

19. *Ibid*, 79.

20. Joanne Punzo Waghorne, "Chariots of the God/s: Riding the Line between Hindu and Christian," *History of Religions* 39, 2 (Nov 1999): 101.

21. *Ibid*, 103.

22. Jordi Pàmias, "Dionysus and Donkeys on the Streets of Alexandria: Eratosthenes' Criticism of Ptolemaic Ideology" in *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 102, (2004): 191-198.

LITERARY REFERENCES TO CARRIAGES IN BIRTHDAY PROCESSIONS

Aśvaghōṣa's *Buddhacarita* (first century CE) contained the earliest literary description of a procession related to the birth of the Buddha-to-be. Ten days after the birth of his son, King Suddhodana ordered a procession of the queen and her baby on a palanquin made of elephant tusks, "filled with all kinds of white flowers, and blazing with gems."²³ In the *Original Arising of Practice Sūtra* (197 CE) translated by Kang Mengxiang during the Eastern Han dynasty, the queen and her baby paraded the city on a carriage that had intertwining dragons and canopies²⁴. Although later *sūtras* focused more on the magnificence surrounding the birth of the Buddha-to-be and rarely mentioned the procession of the baby in the city streets, these early references highlighted one origin of Buddha's birthday processions. The splendor and motif of the carriage and palanquin also stressed the royal status of the event.

FUNCTION OF RITUAL RE-ENACTMENT

Of the many events that had taken place in the eighty years of Buddha's life, some agent(s) in history selected the baby procession as the main theme for annual ritual re-enactment. Here, an image of the Buddha traveled the city streets on a carriage, with the emperor making the first offerings, followed by the royal family, and with opportunities for every devotee to seek merits as actor or audience, in a highly intense meeting point of the sacred and profane²⁵. Such a public display of devotion could take place only under the sanction of the emperor or ruler of the city during the first six hundred years of the

23. E. B. Cowell ed. and trans., *The Buddha-Carita or The Life of Buddha by Aśvaghōṣa* (New Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 1977; electronic 2005), 21. <http://www.ancient-buddhist-texts.net/Texts-and-Translations/Buddhacarita/index.htm> (accessed Feb 17, 2011).

24. Original: 「夫人抱太子，乘交龍車，幢幡伎樂，導從還宮」 from (CBETA, T03, no. 184, p. 463, b11).

25. Stanley Tambiah postulated a performance theory in which a "performative" ritual (1) involves action (2) uses stage sets and objects to give audience an intensive experience and (3) validates social hierarchy and refers to the cosmos. This theory was referred to in Dorothy C. Wong, *Chinese Steles: Pre-Buddhist and Buddhist Use of a Symbolic Form* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004), 23.

*The Influence of Indian and Buddhist Elements in Medieval China:
A Study of Buddha's Birthday Celebrations In Luoyang during the Northern Wei dynasty*

Common Era in India, Central Asia and China. The city was likely to be part of a Buddhist state or in a state that was tolerant towards Buddhism. The festival could have started with elephant(s), followed by easy to (dis)assemble carriages, and later evolved into permanent carriages that could even have been part of an altar (as in the Nunnery of Happy View and Flowering Prospect Nunnery). The parade could have started with one carriage and then involved a carriage per monastery, possibly under the decree of the ruler. Depending on the tradition of the region, the city might organize the event in an orderly manner, whether for a day or up to a fortnight. The Buddha's birthday festival had to be royally sanctioned, sponsored and organized in those years when power resided mainly with the king or emperor.

Carriages did not travel alone on long city routes in festivals; many people must have supported and/or pulled the carriages. In Luoyang, the emperor assigned one hundred plumed guards to at least one carriage (from the Flowering Prospect Nunnery). The inscriptions of Northern Wei steles that contained patron titles such as "carrier of images"²⁶ meant that lay devotional societies could have participated directly in executing the Buddha's birthday processions. Lay devotees could demonstrate their piety and accumulate merits for a better future through participation in this event²⁷. The numbers involved could also create a sense of community and identity, outside of ethnic boundaries, cultural heritage and occupations²⁸.

With over 1,000 images on procession in Luoyang during the Northern Wei dynasty, this had to be the grandest Buddha's birthday celebration in history. Yang estimated 1,367 temples in Luoyang before the collapse of the Northern

26. Dorothy C. Wong, *Chinese Steles: Pre-Buddhist and Buddhist Use of a Symbolic Form* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004), 83.

27. Refer to Ming-chiu Lai, "On the Image Procession in China from the Second to the Sixth Centuries A.D.: An Interpretation of an Elephant Sculpture at the Kongwangshan Site" in *Politics and Religion in Ancient and Medieval Europe and China*, ed. Frederick Cheung et al. (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1999), 63.

28. Inscriptions on steles revealed that a devotional society had membership from a wide variety of ethnic and occupational backgrounds in Dorothy C. Wong, *Chinese Steles: Pre-Buddhist and Buddhist Use of a Symbolic Form* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004), 82-83.



Peter designed these architectural pieces based on a literary account of an altar carriage commissioned to celebrate the Buddha's birthday found in the *Records from the Region of Ye*. This automated carriage was designed between 334 and 349 CE. Designed by Peter Martin, 2012.

Wei Empire,²⁹ and if most of these temples participated in the Buddha's Day festival, it was plausible for over 1,000 images to be on the city streets that day. If most of Luoyang's population, estimated between 600,000³⁰ and 320 million people at its peak³¹, were on the streets participating in the procession in one way or another, this festival would be an overwhelming sight. Such an event would take careful planning, preparation and policing. This festival was not only a display of wealth and power, but also the superb organizational and coordination skills of government officials, lay devotional societies and

29. Xuanzhi Yang, *A Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Lo-yang*, trans. Yi-tung Wang (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 246.

30. Using Yang's declaration that there were 109,000 households, Jenner estimated a conservative 600,000 population size in William John Francis Jenner, *Memories of Lo-yang: Yang Hsuan-chih and the Lost Capital (493-534)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 117.

31. *Ibid*, 123.

*The Influence of Indian and Buddhist Elements in Medieval China:
A Study of Buddha's Birthday Celebrations In Luoyang during the Northern Wei dynasty*

monastics.

Why would Luoyang or its emperor ascribe so much resources and attention to a Buddhist festival? Emile Durkheim pointed out that forces (such as an emperor) could make things (in this case, a religious event) sacred³². By bringing people together, the Buddha's birthday parades strengthened social cohesion, reinforced common religious morals and underscored the power of the Northern Wei Empire. Given the ambivalence of many in the royal court towards Emperor Xiaowen's sinification movement and the move of the capital from Pingcheng to Luoyang, this subsequent display of cohesiveness, power and wealth could provide a platform of unity for the new capital.

THE ADAPTATION OF BUDDHISM DURING THE NORTHERN WEI

Many scholars have noted the blend of Indian, Tuoba Wei and Chinese influence in the grotto art of Yungang and Longmen³³. The carriage, another symbol of heritage, demonstrated the acculturation³⁴ process that had been taking place for hundreds of years. Both India and China had used carts, carriages and chariots³⁵. As a vehicle for image processions, the carriage adopted this usage from the Indians. Image processions probably started as a relatively isolated phenomenon in the Eastern Han dynasty and gradually grew to the grand scale in Luoyang.

32. Donald A. Nielson, "Transformations of Society and the Sacred in Durkheim's Religious Sociology," in *The Blackwell Companion to Sociology of Religion*, ed. Richard K. Fenn, 120-132 (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 121.

33. For example, the presence of Indian Buddhist guardian gods in the eastern Yungang caves has been noted by Changjian Guo, Jianzhi Song, and Lingyu Feng, *World Heritage Sites in China* (Beijing: China Intercontinental Press, 2003), 235-236.

34. Stein defined acculturation as a process whereby societies borrowed traits from one another over time. From Rebecca L. Stein and Philip L. Stein, *The Anthropology of Religion, Magic, and Witchcraft* (Boston: Pearson, 2008), 242-243.

35. In China, the earliest archaeological evidence of wheeled carts dated as far back as the Shang dynasty (16th-11th century BCE), as can be seen in K.C. Chang, *Art, Myth, and Ritual: The Path to Political Authority in Ancient China* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1983), 39. The earliest use of chariots (chiefly for the purpose of war) occurred in the 3rd millennium in Mesopotamia according to Nic Fields and Brian Delf. *Bronze Age War Chariots* (Oxford: Osprey), 2006.

The carriage evolved into an interesting symbol of Mahāyāna Buddhism in Luoyang. First, the “*mahā*” aspect seen through the sheer size, splendor and numbers in Luoyang reminded me of descriptions in Mahāyāna *sūtras*³⁶. Second, the carriage could not be a better metaphor for “*yāna*.” While symbolically carrying the Buddha or Buddha-to-be, the carriage also transported its devotees and participants to liberation or a better life. The *Lotus Sūtra*’s parable of the three carts spoke of the father’s promise of deer, goat and bullock carts of toys in order to lure his children out of a burning house. The father demonstrated the use of skillful means (*upāya*). Therefore, we could consider the Buddha’s birthday parade as *upāya* used by generations of Buddhists from India through Central Asia to China to express their faith and devotion. Especially in Luoyang, the religious festival took on the grand scale in order to syncretize diverse populations, answer to the needs of those seeking a better life and provide a communal identity to the faithful.

CONCLUSION

Image processions have become a part of Chinese Buddhist birthday celebrations. By tracing the evolution of carriages used in image processions from its literary sources to Luoyang during its heyday as a Buddhist capital,³⁷ I have shown that the Buddha’s birthday festival played a pivotal role during the Northern Wei dynasty for two major reasons. First, it helped the ruler maintain social solidarity, residents create a communal identity and devotees earn merit in troubling times. Second, the religion adapted itself to the needs of the time through the Mahāyāna concept of *upāya*. While the Northern Wei rulers had borrowed the motif from other cultures, the Buddha’s birthday celebration had special significance at this point in history because it marked the place of Buddhism in the lives of the people.

36. Take for example, Chapter 17: The Variety of Blessings spoke of “innumerable hundreds of thousands of billions of buddhas” and of bodhisattvas holding “canopies over each buddha, one above another, right up to the Brahma heaven” from Gene Reeves, *The Lotus Sutra: A Contemporary Translation of a Buddhist Classic* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2008), 302.

37. Steinhardt stated that Luoyang was more of a Buddhist capital than any other imperial cities in China in Nancy Shatzman Steinhardt, *Chinese Imperial City Planning* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990), 85.

*The Influence of Indian and Buddhist Elements in Medieval China:
A Study of Buddha's Birthday Celebrations In Luoyang during the Northern Wei dynasty*

This historical study of a religion in terms of what really happened often allows for the analysis of socio-political and cultural confluences. This piece of research into Buddha's birthday festival in Luoyang highlights cultural adaptations, political maneuvers, technological innovations and doctrinal interpretations that allow meeting points to flourish and a religion to sustain and strengthen.

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Glossary (English-Chinese)

<i>A Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Lo-yang</i>	洛陽伽藍記
<i>Book of Wei</i>	魏書
Buddha's birthday / Vesak	佛誕
Carrier of images	扶像主
Devotional society	社
Emperor Xiaoming	孝明帝
Emperor Xiaowen	孝文帝
Emperor Xuanwu	宣武帝
Faxian	法顯
Flourishing Prospect Nunnery	景興尼寺
Image procession	行像
Kang Mengxiang	康孟詳
Later Zhao	後趙
Luoyang / Loyang	洛陽
Northern Wei	北魏
Nunnery of Happy View	景明寺
<i>Original Arising of Practice Sūtra</i>	修行本起經
Pingcheng	平城
Plumed guards	羽林士兵
<i>Record from Inside Ye</i>	鄴中記
Temple of Jing Ming	景明寺
Xiangguo	襄國