



Research Article

## Reimagining a Buddhist Cosmopolis: Conveying Marble Buddhist Images from Burma to China, 1890s-1930s

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Discussions about Buddhist connections between China and Southeast Asia in the late Qing and Republican periods often conform to a meta-narrative of Buddhist modernism that emphasizes the trajectories of eminent monks and reformatory initiatives in and beyond China. Drawing on research on archives in China and Myanmar (Burma) and field visits to temples and museums in China, this article investigates the efforts to convey marble Buddhas from Burma to China by a broad spectrum of Chinese Buddhists from the 1890s to 1930s as a strain of Buddhist mobility that has received scant attention in the studies of transregional Buddhist interconnectivities. It examines how the fascination with *marble*, which is vernacularly categorized as *jade/white jade* in Chinese, motivated such endeavors and how these icons shaped the perception of a developing Buddhist cosmopolis among Chinese Buddhists by helping them locate Burma in the Buddhist world in a spiritually and materially meaningful way.

**Keywords:** marble; Buddhist images; Buddhist materiality; transnational Buddhism; Burma/Myanmar; Republican China

IN 1912, *Buddhist Studies Magazine* (Ch. *Foxue congbao* 佛學叢報), one of the earliest Buddhist periodicals in China, published a photo of a Buddha statue (Figure 1). Sitting composedly with his hands tied in the earth-awakening mudra, the Buddha was covered by a thick robe that was full of loose folds. His downcast eyes and tranquil smile conveyed to his beholders a sense of calmness. Chinese Buddhists could immediately tell the foreignness of this statue, as many stylistic features, such as the Buddha's slim body, his oval face, the crown that he wears, and his right shoulder that was intentionally laid bare, were essentially distinctive from traditional Chinese Buddhist icons. The caption beneath proclaimed that “the jade Buddha preserved in Yufo Si (Ch. 玉佛寺) in Jiangwan<sup>1</sup> was conveyed from India-Ceylon” (MFQ 2006: 1: 371). In 1919, a picture of another jade Buddha was included in *Awakening Society Collectanea* (Ch. *Jueshe congshu* 覺社叢書) (Figure 2). The editor only mentioned that it was enshrined in the Lama Temple, or Yonghe Palace, in Beijing, without revealing further information about its provenance (MFQ 2006: 3: 171). Unfortunately, not all the details about these jade Buddhas were accurate. Neither were their trajectories to China clearly recounted to the audience.

The arrival of these two Buddhas in China was the outcome of the reinvigorated exploration of the Buddhist cosmopolis by Chinese Buddhists since the late nineteenth century. The jade Buddha in Yufo Si was conveyed to China in May 1899 by a monk named Huigen 慧根, who was dispatched by Kunbao Henan 坤寶和南, the abbot of Puji Si (Ch. 普濟寺) on Mount Putuo, to search for Buddha statues abroad for his temple renovation

<sup>1</sup> Jiangwan became an administrative district of Shanghai in 1928. Yufo Temple, or Jade Buddha Temple, was relocated to its current location in Putuo District in 1918.



project (*Shenbao* 申報,<sup>2</sup> May 18, 1899).<sup>3</sup> Dr. Joseph Edkins, Huigen's contemporary and a British missionary Sinologist, described him as "an interesting man who had travelled much in Buddhist countries," (Edkins 1896-1897: 203) and in their private conversation, Huigen mentioned that he spent most of his three-year trip in the Oudh State,<sup>4</sup> where marble quarries were located and where those images were carved. Since Oudh was geologically classified as Gangetic alluvium where no rock or stone is found except nodular limestone (Meyer et al. 1908: 277), and the statues that Huigen procured were typical Mandalay-style Buddhas (see below), it is more reasonable to conclude that both the extraction of raw material and the carving were completed in Burma.<sup>5</sup> Later, Huigen established Yufo Si in Jiangwan to enshrine two of the five jade Buddhas, one seated and one reclining, which he had left in Shanghai for exhibition before his departure to Mount Putuo.<sup>6</sup>

Paralleling Huigen's endeavor was Mingkuan's 明寬 submission of two jade Buddhas, including the one mentioned in *Awakening Society Collectanea*, to the Empress Dowager Cixi in 1898. Records of the Qing Imperial Household Department (Ch. *neiwufu* 內務府) show that the seated Buddha was approximately two meters and one and a half tons, and it was fully covered with a monastic robe and ornamented with magnificent jewels (AIHD File No. 05-08-032-000033-0058). A royal edict ordered that the Buddha be installed in Chengguang Palace in Beihai, and it was not until the 1920s that the Republican government converted Beihai into a public park and allowed public access to this jade Buddha (Shi 1998).<sup>7</sup> Although Qing records only briefly noted that Mingkuan was a Chinese monk that had been travelling in foreign lands, the Chinese Buddhist community in Rangoon, Burma, recalled that Mingkuan arrived in Burma in 1897 after his pilgrimage to India. Fascinated with the stone Buddhas produced by local artisans, he purchased a rock from Xinshan (Ch. *Xinshan* 薪山, Mount Sagyin, see below), commissioned two Buddha images, and transported them to China as tributes to the Empress Dowager. He returned to Burma in 1899 with the rewards bestowed by Cixi, including a full set of the *Qianlong tripitaka*, and established Yubo Si (Ch. 玉鉢寺) in Pegu (K. Hu 1961: 33-34).

## Literature Review

The ventures of Huigen and Mingkuan epitomized the endeavors of Chinese Buddhists to convey marble Buddhas, or *yufu* (Ch. 玉佛), from Burma to China between the 1890s and 1930s, an aspect of transnational Buddhist mobility that has received scant attention. Scholarship on Chinese Buddhism during this period has been dominated by a meta-narrative of "modern Chinese Buddhism," which primarily emphasizes its intellectual, reformative, and charitable initiatives, while attention to Buddhist material culture has been limited, if not entirely absent.<sup>8</sup> Resonating with this tendency, studies of Buddhist encounters between China

<sup>2</sup> The newspapers referenced to in this article were found in the *Zhongguo lishi wenxian zongku - jindai baozhi shuju ku* 中國歷史文獻總庫·近代報紙數據庫 (E. *Chinese Historical Literature Library-Modern Chinese Newspaper Database*) (The National Library of China) and the *Quanguo baokan suoyin shuju ku* 全國報刊索引數據庫 (E. *National Newspaper & Journal Databases*) developed by Shanghai Library (Shanghai Library). The names of newspapers and journals and the dates of publication are provided here as they are displayed in the databases.

<sup>3</sup> This was corroborated by a paper by Dr. Joseph Edkins. Although the two different sources documented the same journey and the same exhibition in Shanghai, Dr. Edkins' presentation was two years earlier than Kunbao Henan's advertisement on *Shenbao*, which makes the exact timing of the jade Buddhas' arrival undeterminable.

<sup>4</sup> Oudh was a princely state in the Awadh region of North India before its annexation by the British in 1856, and now it constitutes the northeastern portion of Uttar Pradesh state in India.

<sup>5</sup> The military regime controversially changed the English name of the country from Burma to Myanmar in 1989. Without implications about political standings, I use "Burma" throughout this article due to the historical period under discussion. Accordingly, I use the names of the major cities prior to this change, for instance, Rangoon instead of Yangon, and Pegu instead of Bago. The period under discussion is thus determined because the earliest Burmese marble Buddhas with detailed historical records are the ones mentioned in the introduction, both of which arrived in China during the 1890s. It is also reasonable to assume that transregional flows of Buddhist images gradually dwindled after the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese war in 1937.

<sup>6</sup> The official introduction of Yufo Temple does not mention Kunbao Henan's role in initiating the commission of these Buddhas but emphasizes Huigen's extensive travel experiences, his pilgrimage to India and Southeast Asia, and his efforts to convey five Burmese jade Buddhas with the financial support of Chinese merchants and the special permission from the King of Burma. Since Thibaw, the last king of Burma, was forced to abdicate in 1885, the reliability of this claim is open to question. For more details refer to the history Yufo Si on the temple's website (Yufo Temple 2022).

<sup>7</sup> Consequently, it was not surprising that the editor of *Awakening Society Collectanea* misidentified the statue as preserved in the Lama Temple in 1919.



Figure 1: The Jade Buddha preserved in Yufu Temple, Jiangwan." *Buddhist Studies Magazine*, Issue 3, 1912.



Figure 2: "The Jade Buddha Enshrined in Yonghe Palace." *Awakening Society Collectanea*, Issue 3, 1919.

and South and Southeast Asia during this period also focus on the trajectories of prominent Buddhist clergy and their transmission of Humanistic Buddhism to overseas Chinese communities (e.g., Chia 2020a; Dy 2015; Kan 2020). Recent analyses also explore monastic exchange programs between China and Theravada Buddhist societies (Ritzinger 2016) or highlight the role of temple networks in channeling monks, Buddhist knowledge, and financial resources between China and Southeast Asia from the early to mid-twentieth century (Chia 2020b).

Although Buddhist reforms and social activism were integral to the construction of a form of Buddhism that conformed to the modernity envisioned by an emerging Chinese state during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Ashiwa and Wank 2009; Goossaert and Palmer 2010), image commission and veneration, which tend to be brushed off as “traditional” Buddhist practices and fall out of the scope of scholarly inquiries, have never been abandoned by Chinese Buddhists. Echoing Richard Jaffe’s argument that Buddhist connections between Japan and South and Southeast Asia in the same period were forged “interpersonally, scholastically, spiritually, and artistically” (2019: 6), I propose that the perception and experience of the Buddhist cosmopolis by Chinese Buddhists at that time was *multifaceted* in nature, and the transnational Buddhist material circulations that they participated in should not be precipitously dismissed. The “Buddhist cosmopolis” that I engage here is predicated on the pervasive practices of Buddhist image making and the pious search for the Buddha’s presence across the Buddhist world. It aligns with the “Buddhist cosmopolis” that Tansen Sen (2019: 183) portrays, which highlights the role of circulating sacred objects in helping followers associate with the broader Buddhist world and facilitating transregional integration despite cultural differences, thus providing a more inclusive framework for discussions about practices and material circulations that transcend conventional academic boundaries, such as that between South/Southeast and East Asian Buddhism. Moreover, in investigating the efforts to procure Buddhist images from Burma to China by a broad spectrum of Buddhist agents as a long-neglected strain of Buddhist mobility between the 1890s and 1930s, my article shows that these endeavors distinguish from the historical transregional, transnational flows of Buddhist images to China, especially during the medieval period: Whereas previous efforts exemplified by Xuanzang and his contemporaries focused on authenticity derived from the lineages of images or their association with Buddhist legends (Wong 2018: 26–27), the Buddhist image transactions examined here were mainly motivated by the desire for magnificence (Ch. *zhuangyan* 莊嚴) that is closely associated with the *material* of images. In other words, my focus is on the religious value of Buddhist materials rather than the dissemination and evolution of iconography, styles, and motifs, which has already been rigorously analyzed by Sen and other scholars.

Chinese scholars have long been aware of the presence of these marble Buddhas in China. Nonetheless, the dearth of Chinese scholarship on post-Bagan Buddhist art in Burma has led to their failure to accurately identify the material and provenance or specify the production period of these icons. Some take for granted that the material is jadeite (Ch. *feicui* 翡翠) (Chen 1987: 26), thus misconnect their arrival in China to the influential jadeite trade, an important facet of China-Burma interactions. It is also not uncommon that museum staff misidentify these images as products of the Tang or Song dynasty. For instance, a jade Buddha from Burma preserved at Shaanxi History Museum was identified as being made during Song, while another on display at Henan Museum was categorized as a Tang craft (personal communications with Wang Xinyu in May 2021 and June 2022). Hu Mengting’s article (2013) is the only scholarly work that locates twelve Burmese jade Buddhas across China and systematically analyzes their stylistic attributes. However, the historical

<sup>8</sup> Exceptional scholarly works include Tarocco’s (2011) investigation into the Buddhist appropriation of photography and other new forms of media and technologies and Gregory Scott’s research on modern Buddhist publishing (2016) and monastery reconstruction (2020) during the late Qing and Republican periods.

factors that stimulated the movements of these images and the responses that they provoked among Chinese Buddhists was beyond Hu's scope.

This article complicates the representation of Buddhist connections between China and Southeast Asia during the late Qing and Republican periods by highlighting the material dimensions that remain understudied by historians and scholars of Buddhism. It reverses the traditional itinerary that traces the flows of eminent and intellectual Buddhists from China to Southeast Asia to dissect the dissemination of marble Buddhas from Burma to China, and it moves beyond the restrictive art-historical approach by shifting the focus from iconographic and stylistic attributes of Buddhist icons to the role that these images played as agents of knowledge production among Chinese Buddhists. To support my analysis, I draw on Qing archives, local newspapers and Buddhist periodicals published during the late Qing and Republican periods, official temple websites and temple gazettes, monastic (auto)biographies, and my visits to Buddhist temples and museum in China where Burmese jade Buddhas commissioned by Chinese Buddhists are still enshrined between September and October 2021. This article first introduces the Mandalay-style Buddha images produced in Burma since the Konbaung Dynasty (1752–1885), with a particular focus on their material, marble, which is vernacularly categorized as jade/white jade in Chinese. Secondly, it delineates the spectrum of Buddhist participants to illuminate an expanding market for these images in China by the late 1930s. Finally, it analyzes the popular responses to these jade Buddhas, proposing a new perspective to capture an imagination of a Buddhist cosmopolis among Chinese Buddhists during the Republican era. In the end, it reveals a modern turn in the circulation of Buddhist images to China, which emphasizes the desirability of the material rather than simply the authentic style of images.

### **The Mandalay-Style Marble Buddhas**

The jade Buddhas that this article investigates are in fact Mandalay-style marble Buddhas that have been produced in Burma since the Konbaung Dynasty (1752–1885). Despite the forced abdication of King Thibaw and the collapse of traditional Burmese monarchy in 1885, artisans in Burma have carried on the production of Mandalay-style marble Buddhas to date without making substantial changes to their physiognomic or iconographic features. Nowadays, travelers visiting Burma can easily find marble Buddhas enshrined in private homes, temples, monasteries, pilgrimage sites, and even secluded mountains. The ubiquity of marble statues, while reflecting their popularity among Buddhists, also reveals the essential role of marble in the preservation of Buddhism and the expansion of the Buddhist landscape in Burma.

Historically, the changes in the mainstream Buddhist sculpturing materials generally inflected the transition of political centers in Burma. Gordon Luce's analysis reveals that the use of marble for inscriptions began after the shift of power center from Pagan (Bagan) back to Kyaukse, and this trend further developed in Kyaukse towards the end of the Pagan dynasty (849–1297) and later spread to Pinya, where marble could also be quarried (Luce 1959: 93–94; Tha Hla 1959: 118). Silvia Fraser-Lu further points out that sandstone was the primary material for stele inscriptions, reliefs, and sculptures throughout the Pagan and Ava periods, whereas the use of marble specifically for Buddhist sculptures only began to develop during the Ava period (1287–1752) (Fraser-Lu 1994: 65).<sup>9</sup> Accordingly, as powerful Buddhist kingdoms were consecutively established in Ava, Amarapura, and Mandalay, Sagyin, a village located thirty-five miles north of today's Mandalay and where the finest specimens of marble could be obtained, gradually became the center of marble extraction.

Along with the ascending significance of marble in the Buddhist material culture in Burma was the emergence of the Mandalay style for Buddhist image-making since the late eighteenth century. A typical Mandalay-style

<sup>9</sup> Fraser-Lu generally divides the history of Burmese Buddhist art since the Bagan Dynasty into three periods, which do not closely align with the history of kingdoms: the Bagan Period (1044–1287), the Ava Period (1287–1752), and the Konbaung Period (1752–1885) (Fraser-Lu 1994: 22–28).

Buddha (Figure 3) has an oval face, naturally arched and narrow eyebrows, a slender nose, a straight nose bridge, and a gentle smile. The *urna*, or the curly hair that grows between the two eyebrows of the Buddha, is usually painted or supplanted with jewels. Moreover, robes of the Mandalay-style Buddhas tend to be thick and full of elaborate folds. Drooping from the Buddha's left shoulder, the robe covering the Buddha's upper body often ends in a sprightly manner.

Besides all these attributes, two most distinctive features of the Mandalay-style Buddhas include the downcast and slanted eyes in the shape of *kye min ye thauk*, which literally means “the bird king drinking water” and vividly captures the tapering effect of the eyes as they come to the tips on both sides, and *thin kyit*, the wide band on the Buddha's forehead that is usually painted in gold and separates the Buddha's hair from his face as a sign of the Buddha's enlightenment (U Maung Maung Tin and U Win Maung (Tambawaddy) 1982: 87). *Thin kyit* was integrated into Buddhist image carving as a thin line during the Ava period but became increasingly wider as time went on. Wealthy patrons used to adorn it with elaborate floral patterns and precious gems, such as rubies from Burma, to enhance the splendor of the Buddha and express their devotion.



Figure 3: The Jade Buddha procured by Huigen in the 1890s and still enshrined at the Jade Buddha Temple to date, Shanghai. Photo: Author.

Although Konbaung kings were renowned patrons of colossal marble Buddhas, the extraction and use of marble for Buddhist icons was not exclusively a royal privilege. Colonial officials' observation of the everyday life in Burma revealed that local craftspeople and merchants had already become important players in the Buddhist image carving economy during the mid-nineteenth century. Henry Yule and Thomas Oldham, in the memoir of their mission to the Kingdom of Ava in 1855, noted that marble workers could pay a tax to the king for the privilege of quarrying and carrying away white marble boulders extracted from Mount Sagyin during the dry season (Yule 1858: 175). These marble boulders would then be sent to the marble-cutting quarters and villages near the Kaung Hmu Daw Paya in Sagaing and the west of the Mahamuni Pagoda in Amarapura by boats and converted into innumerable Buddhas in different attitudes for sale (Yule 1858: 64, 162). The profit that sculptors and sellers could obtain was far from meager, although the process of extraction and production could be lengthy due to the lack of mechanical appliances and advanced methods back then. While a marble block for a three-and-a-half-foot sitting Buddha normally cost six rupees, the price of the finished icon could be as high as 180 rupees (Oldham 1858: 328), which was equal to four hundred baskets of paddy sold

at the wholesale price in Rangoon in the same year.<sup>10</sup> Prices dropped drastically as images became smaller, and an eighteen-inches high standing Buddha with gold lining could cost only nine rupees (Yule 1858: 64). Moreover, Oldham (Oldham 1858: 327) provided brief descriptions of the local marble extraction during the mid-nineteenth century. He noticed that “[t]he largest blocks they now obtain do not average more than four to five feet long, by two to three feet thick, and even these are not frequently obtained, and are therefore expensive. For smaller blocks there is a constant demand.” Although he emphasized that the scale of marble excavation in Sagyin was not as massive as that in western societies, it was reasonable to speculate that the practice of extracting blocks for images of small and medium sizes was already common.

Unfortunately, there have been no records about how this Buddhist carving economy spread beyond the Ava-Amarapura area to the other parts of Burma. Neither did Huigen or Mingkuan leave any documentations about their experiences of commissioning Buddha statues in Rangoon or Mandalay. By the time when Qingfu, a Chinese monk from Sichuan, visited Rangoon in 1905, workshops selling marble Buddhist icons were already established there so that he could compare images of different qualities to find the most satisfying ones (Qingfu 清福 2015: 187).<sup>11</sup> The existence of a thriving market of marble Buddhist icons in Rangoon, one of the most popular pilgrimage destinations for Chinese Buddhists during the late Qing and Republican periods, was a critical premise for the circulation of these images to China.

### Agents of Image Transactions

The dissemination of marble Buddhas from Burma to China was deeply entangled with the growing mobility of Chinese Buddhists within the Buddhist cosmopolis at the turn of the century. Although Holmes Welch (1968: 179–80, 191–93) writes that Chinese and Theravada Buddhists had suspended contact for many hundreds of years before the 1890s until Anagarika Dharmapala’s visit to Shanghai in 1893, adventures into South and Southeast Asia for pilgrimage, dharma preaching, and fundraising had been increasingly common for Chinese Buddhists since the 1890s, or even earlier. Buddhists taking advantage of the thriving maritime transportation and trade networks could depart from coastal ports in China, such as Guangzhou, Shanghai, and Ningbo, and follow the ship routes that connected Hong Kong, Bangkok, Singapore, Malacca, Penang, Rangoon and trade hubs in British India and Ceylon. Consequently, Chinese Buddhist temples founded by either overseas Chinese communities or pioneer Buddhist masters along this route, such as Kek Lok Si (Ch. 極樂寺) in Penang, gradually became crucial nodes where information about transportation, pilgrimage sites, and local contacts was exchanged. Those traveling overland could take the Chengdu-Tibet-India-Burma route or, alternatively, the Kunming-Dali-Tengchong (Tengyue)-Burma-India route, both involving branches of the “historical Southwest Silk Road” (Yang 2008) through which material circulations between Burma and China took place.<sup>12</sup> Due to the reputation of the Shwedagon Pagoda, Rangoon had become a popular destination for Chinese Buddhists before or after their pilgrimage to India and Ceylon by the end of the nineteenth century. The establishment of Longhua Si (Ch. 龍華寺) in Rangoon in 1897 by Xingyuan 性源 to

<sup>10</sup> According to the data provided by Cheng Siok-Hwa (2012: 73), the wholesale price per hundred baskets (equal to four thousand pounds) of paddy in Rangoon in 1855 was 45 rupees.

<sup>11</sup> *Yuanyin lueji* (Qingfu 清福 2015) is an autobiography written by Qingfu more than thirty years after his two journeys to South and Southeast Asia. Although it provided abundant details about his pilgrimages to Thailand, Burma, India, and Sri Lanka, his narrative was often inaccurate due to various reasons, such as language barriers and the lack of knowledge about local geography. Moreover, his recollections are often mixed with traditional Buddhist accounts of India and Sri Lanka, excerpts from contemporary Buddhist periodicals, and earlier works of descriptive geography by Chinese authors, such as Xu Jiyu’s 徐繼畲 *Yinghuan zhiyue* (Ch. 瀛寰志略). Many of his interactions with prominent Buddhist figures, such as Yang Wenhui and Anagarika Dharmapala, require further verification. However, his efforts to convey marble Buddhas from Burma to China can be validated by the preservation of these images in the Museum of Pengzhou, Baoguang Si (Ch. 寶光寺) in Chengdu, and Guangde Si (Ch. 廣德寺) in Suining, Sichuan, China.

<sup>12</sup> Scholars have conducted extensive research on the caravan trade networks and the material circulations between Burma and China. See, for example, Sun Laichen’s (2011) analysis of the evolution of the jadeite trade from the Ming dynasty to the early twentieth century and Chang Wen-Chin’s insightful studies (2004, 2009; 2014) of the jadeite trade networks between Burma, Northern Thailand, and Chinese societies across Asia.

provide temporary accommodation and convenient access to the Shwedagon Pagoda for Chinese monastics attested to their continuous flow into Rangoon (Wu 2006: 19).<sup>13</sup> Although these earlier journeys to Burma for pilgrimage did not necessarily lead to productive intellectual exchanges between Buddhists across different sectarian affiliations, it was the in-person encounters with marble Buddhas by Chinese Buddhists in and beyond the Shwedagon Pagoda and, for some of them, their interactions with the Chinese community in Burma that significantly motivated the China-bound flows of these icons.

The most substantial records of journeys to Burma during the late Qing and Republican periods are those associated with eminent monks such as Xuyun 虛雲, Baojing 寶靜, Huixing 慧性, Beiguan 悲觀, and Cihang 慈航, many of whom published their observations about the pilgrimage sites and local religious practices in Burma in Buddhist periodicals. For many of them, transporting Burmese marble Buddhas to China was a crucial part of their experiences abroad. Xuyun, one of the most prominent Buddhist masters who paid the earliest visits to Burma, received a reclining marble Buddha from a wealthy Chinese merchant and pious lay Buddhist in Rangoon named Gao Wanbang 高萬邦 during his dharma preaching tour to Southeast Asia in 1909 (Jinghui 2009: 5: Chronicle:49). Since the statue was too heavy for horses to carry, it was not until 1917 that Xuyun managed to hire eight people to transport it from Upper Burma to Mount Jizu, which was a strenuous overland journey (Jinghui 2009: 5: Chronicle:68–69).<sup>14</sup> Another instance is Cihang, who dedicated himself to the propagation of Humanistic Buddhism and established the Chinese Buddhist Study Association (Ch. *Zhongguo foxuehui* 中國佛學會) in Rangoon in the 1930s.<sup>15</sup> Besides escorting a five-*chi* (approximately 1.6-meter) marble Buddha that Chinese Buddhists in Rangoon donated to the World Buddhist Academy (Ch. *Shijie foxueyuan* 世界佛學院) in China, Cihang also entrusted several marble Buddhas to a transportation company for an overseas delivery to Shanghai when he went back to China in 1936 (MFQ 2006: 62: 268–269; XMFQ 2008: 1: 860). Beiguan, who was among the four monks in the Monastic Exchange Program to Siam (Thailand)<sup>16</sup> but later diverted his research focus to Buddhism in Burma, also conveyed a marble Buddha to Shanghai when he temporarily returned to China in 1937. Again, it was a donation from the Chinese merchants in Rangoon and was later enshrined at the Chinese Buddhist Study Association (Ch. *Zhongguo foxuehui* 中國佛學會) in Nanjing, where Master Taixu 太虛 planned to solicit funds to construct a Jade Buddha Hall to celebrate its arrival (XMFQ 2008: 5: 250).

These accounts exemplify the experiences of many distinguished Chinese monks journeying to Burma between the 1890s and 1930s, a period when many Chinese immigrants in Burma had become or were becoming economically prominent through commercial activities and when the massive influx of Chinese labor, especially from coastal China and other Southeast Asian trade hubs, further boosted the growth of the local Chinese community (Y. Li 2017: 1–4, 111–13).<sup>17</sup> Due to personal charisma, Buddhist masters from China always attracted the patronage of local Chinese merchants who were also pious Buddhists. Although the major purpose of their journeys was usually not to commission sacred icons, these eminent

<sup>13</sup> Although Longhua Temple was the first Chinese Buddhist temple founded in Rangoon, there were also other temples founded by the Chinese across Burma before its establishment. For a detailed introduction of Chinese temples across Burma, see the Preparatory Committee for the Centennial Celebration of Kheng Hock Keong (1961) and Wu (2006: 18–51).

<sup>14</sup> Xuyun first arrived in Burma and conducted pilgrimage to Shwedagon Pagoda in Rangoon and the Golden Rock in Moumein in 1889. He performed another three trips to Southeast Asia for dharma preaching, fundraising, and pilgrimage, with Mandalay and Rangoon as two of his stops, in 1905, 1909, and 1917 (Jinghui 2009: 5: Chronicle:22, 42, 49, 68).

<sup>15</sup> For a more comprehensive analysis of Cihang's reformatory initiatives to disseminate Humanistic Buddhism among the Chinese in Burma, see Kan Cheng-Tsung (2020).

<sup>16</sup> Monks participated in the Monastic Exchange Group to Siam in 1935 included Beiguan 悲觀, Dengci 等慈, Xingjiao 性教, and Jueyuan 覺圓. Beiguan stayed in Burma for fifteen years for scripture studies after leaving Siam in 1936. For details of this monastic exchange program to Siam, see XMFQ (2008: 5: 250).

<sup>17</sup> The steady increase in the Chinese population in Burma only took place since the late nineteenth century. For a detailed examination of the historical development of the Chinese community in Burma and the inter-ethnic interactions between the Chinese and the Burmese under colonial rule, see Li (2017). Jayde Lin Roberts's research (2016) also offers a fascinating account of the construction of meaningful spaces, such as the Hokkien Guanyin Temple, by the Chinese in colonial and post-colonial Rangoon.

monks always received the donation of marble Buddhas from the local Chinese community as an expression of their devotion and eagerness to strengthen connections with Buddhist leaders and organizations in China. However, overwhelming attention to prestigious monks will obscure the exploration of the Buddhist cosmopolis by other less prominent monastics and laity and the role they played in the historical transmission of Burmese marble Buddhas to China. Even though most of them did not leave any information that can help us reconstruct their experiences, the scattered, brief, yet abundant, records of the marble Buddhas that they conveyed back to China in local newspapers, magazines, temple gazetteers, Buddhist periodicals, and even scholarly publications provide precious testimonies to their meritorious undertakings.

My in-depth, albeit far from exhaustive, survey has revealed that other monks, although less prominent and having received little attention from scholars, delivered no less than forty-eight marble Buddhas from Burma to China between the 1890s and 1930s (Table 1), and many of them were approximately one meter high and as heavy as one ton. The sheer quantity, sizes, and weight of these icons entailed arduous long-distance overseas or overland deliveries, and their arrival in China were usually interpreted as powerful attestations to their patrons' virtuous personality. Qingfu was among the only few who were perseverant enough to perform two journeys to South and Southeast Asia. Although his first trip (1903–1905) was primarily for pilgrimage, he managed to commission three marble Buddhas with the financial assistance from local Chinese merchants in Rangoon (Qingfu 清福 2015: 186–87). Shortly after sending these icons to Yunju Si (Ch. 雲居寺) in Jinling (now Nanjing), Wannian Si (Ch. 萬年寺) at Mount E'mei, and Baoguang Si (Ch. 寶光寺) in Chengdu (Figure 4), he raised funds from his fellows and lay patrons and launched another trip specifically to fetch marble Buddhas in Burma in 1906. He spent a year searching for supreme stones and supervising the carving and eventually brought back twenty-four marble Buddhas in 1908 (Qingfu 清福 2015: 208–14). The destinations of these Buddhas included but were not limited to Pantuo Shi (Ch. 盤陀石) in Mount Putuo, Baoguang Si in Chengdu, Guangde Si (Ch. 廣德寺) in Suining, and Xianfeng Si (Ch. 仙峰寺) in Mount E'mei, and Longxing Si (Ch. 龍興寺) in Pengzhou. Dengyun 登雲, a monk from Anhui, also escorted two marble Buddhas to China in 1938. He visited India, Rangoon, and Yunnan before arriving in Sichuan, where he donated one image to Mount E'mei and the other to Wenshu Yuan (Ch. 文殊院) in Chengdu. The editor of *Sichuan Buddhist Monthly* (Ch. *Sichuan Fojiao yuekan* 四川佛教月刊) emphasized that Dengyun had already conveyed two marble Buddhas respectively to Mount Jiuhua and Mount Wutai in 1932. The editor's following acclaim underscored Dengyun's exceptional resolution to complete these two demanding journeys: "How many people among the bhikkhus possess equal power of vows as he does?"<sup>18</sup> (MFQ 2006: 60: 79).

As donating marble Buddhas became an important way to foster connections between Chinese Buddhist communities in Burma and China and fetching marble Buddhas from Burma a viable option for ordinary Chinese Buddhists, the circulation of these icons to China also became increasingly commercialized when other agents got involved. In 1934, Liu Renhang 劉仁航, a lay Buddhist intellectual based in Shanghai, announced a sale of sacred Buddhist objects, including two Buddha's relics procured from India in 1932 and tens of marble Buddhas of various sizes he had recently commissioned from "the country in the west" (Ch. *Xiguo* 西國) (*Shenbao*, Feb 19, 1934). In the advertisements, he emphasized the rarity of these marble Buddhas in China and explained that his goal was to raise funds for the establishment of Cihang Buddhist Film Studio and his next trip abroad to propagate Buddhism and to alleviate the sufferings resulting from warfare. The quantity of marble Buddhas seemed to be around thirty, and the prices ranged from two hundred to six hundred yuan (*Shenbao*, Feb 19, 1934; MFQB 2008: 65: 248).

While Liu's image sale tended to a one-time event, the Shanghai Buddhist Books (Ch. *Shanghai Foxue shuju* 上海佛學書局), one of the leading players in modern Buddhist printing, also consistently participated in

<sup>18</sup> In the original text: "如斯人之願力，比丘中有幾人哉？"



Figure 4: The marble Buddha conveyed from Burma to Baoguang Si in Xindu District, Chengdu, Sichuan, by Qingfu, in 1905. Photo: Author.

disseminating Burmese marble Buddhas. It first raised a significant amount of funds to commission four statues from Burma to Shanghai for sale in 1933 (*Shenbao*, Oct 31, 1933). Journalists from *Shenbao* were invited to visit the bookstore and composed a news report, notifying their audience about the arrival of these images and highlighting the preciousness of the material, the delicacy of the carving, and the desirability of these magnificent Buddhas. Another advertisement formulated with similar discourses also appeared in *Haichaoyin* (Ch. 海潮音), one of the most influential Buddhist journals at that time, to reach out to the Buddhist circle across China (MFQ 2006: 185: 155). After this first attempt, the Shanghai Buddhist Books arranged for at least another two deliveries, and these efforts seemed to continue up to 1941, when the bookstore decided to sell the last five marble Buddhas at discounted prices, possibly due to the deteriorating wartime market (MFQB 2008: 65: 248). Based on its advertisements in *Buddhism Semimonthly* (Ch. *Foxue banyuekan* 佛學半月刊), each delivery usually involved ten to thirty Buddhas, ranging from miniatures of ten centimeters to colossal statues as high as one meter, to meet the different demands of temples, lay associations, and families. Prices were set accordingly from six to five hundred and fifty yuan (MFQ 2006: 49: 162, 201; 51: 408; 52: 213, 324). The popularity of these Buddhas was reflected by an announcement, in which the bookstore stressed that all the Burmese marble Buddhas arrived in Shanghai in October 1933 and March 1934 had been sold out shortly after their arrival and apologized that clients would have to wait for several months until the next delivery (MFQ 2006: 50: 16). Both Liu's image sale and the continuous shipments of images ordered by the Shanghai Buddhist Books indicated a burgeoning market for marble Buddhist icons from Burma during the 1930s.

In his seminal analysis of the modern Buddhist revival in China based on extensive interviews of monastics, Holmes Welch left fleeting notes mentioning that obtaining Buddha images was "another common motive for trips abroad" (1968: 192) and that "[w]hite marble images from Burma and Thailand, termed in Chinese 'jade buddhas' (*yu-fo*), have been popular in China over the past century" (1968: 341). Welch's generalizing

comments are less than helpful for us to fully gauge the admiration of marble Buddhist icons among Chinese Buddhists back then. My analysis thus provides a more granular picture of the agents and the scale of these Buddhist material circulations. Moreover, the quantity of statues involved could be much larger, as travel magazines and travelogues in local newspapers during the Republican period also documented many other Burmese marble Buddhas, although no further details can be identified except for their locations of enshrinement. During the past few decades, marble Buddhist icons from Burma have also been unearthed from various places and preserved in different museums across China (M. Hu 2013: 272). While the actual quantity of Buddhist agents and images involved in these Burma-China material circulations is difficult to estimate, for Chinese Buddhists who traveled to Burma, the encounters with marble Buddhas and the journeys to convey them to China consisted crucial aspects of their exploration of the Buddhist world. Moreover, as the following discussion shows, in at least some parts of China during the late Qing and Republican periods, the arrival and presence of Burmese marble Buddhist icons not only provided fresh visual experiences for worshippers who had never visited Burma but also alluded to new ways of imagining and exploring an evolving Buddhist cosmopolis.

*Table 1: List of Buddhists who conveyed marble Buddhas to China, 1890s-1930s.*

| Year  | Name of Patron                                    | Quantity of Image | Size of Image       |
|-------|---|-------------------|---------------------|
| 1896  | Mingkuan 明寬                                       | 2 (or more)       | Max. 2 meters       |
| 1899  | Huigen 慧根   | 5                 | Max. 1.95 meters    |
| 1905  | Qingfu 清福   | 3                 | Max. 1 meter        |
| 1908  | Qingfu 清福   | 24                | Max. 1.2 meters     |
| 1923  | Two anonymous monks from Mount E'mei 峨眉僧          | 1                 | –                   |
| 1924  | Yongzeng 永增                                       | 1                 | Approx. 1.20 meters |
| 1924  | Jinjia 進嘉   | 2                 | Max. 0.5 meters     |
| 1926  | Guangtong 廣通                                      | 1                 | –                   |
| 1929  | Xu Yuru 徐玉如                                       | 1                 | Approx. 1.5 meters  |
| 1932  | Xinglin 性麟  | 1                 | –                   |
| 1932  | Dengyun 登雲  | 2                 | –                   |
| 1933  | Xuezui 雪罪   | 1                 | –                   |
| 1933  | Miaojun 妙俊  | 1                 | Approx. 0.5 meters  |
| 1933  | Haishan 海山, with the help of Zeng He Shuping 曾何淑屏 | 1                 | –                   |
| 1938  | Dengyun 登雲  | 2                 | –                   |
| Total |   | 48                |                     |

### The Buddhist Marble and the Pious Gaze

The late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries were a period when the revolutionary power of print media profoundly shaped modern Chinese Buddhist publishing and facilitated the development of a nation-wide Buddhist network in China (Scott 2016). As Buddhist printing rapidly advanced, editors also actively integrated images into Buddhist periodicals to enrich their content. Photographic portraits of prominent Buddhist figures and group pictures that commemorated significant events in the Buddhist circle were constantly published in the “Photo” section (Tarocco 2011: 85–87), while photos of Buddhist pilgrimage sites, architecture, rituals, and festivals also became important windows for Buddhist readers to get a

leisurely glimpse of the diverse Buddhist material cultural practices in and beyond China. While the efforts of eminent monks and lay Buddhists to escort marble Buddhas to China were widely reported in local news, these images were also introduced to the Buddhist public beyond their immediate locations of enshrinement through advertisements, news, photographs, and travelogues on Buddhist periodicals, newspapers, and leisure magazines. Exhibitions of marble Buddhas were often held by temples and Buddhist associations for public veneration upon their arrival in China so that even Buddhists who did not live near the host temples or institutions of these images could pay homage (*Shenbao*, May 18, 1899, and Apr 7, 1936; MFQ 2006 160: 54; MFQB 2008 8: 301; *The China Times*,<sup>19</sup> Apr 10, 1936).

For Chinese Buddhists who visited and venerated these icons in person, their attention was primarily drawn to the extra-ordinary material, which they commonly identified as “white jade” or “jade.” Almost all the descriptions highlighted the magnificence of these images that was associated with their crystal and white appearance (Ch. *yingbai*, 瑩白), and religious meanings were attributed to the purity, hardness, and reflexive and lustrous surface of these images. For instance, besides publishing the picture of Huigen’s marble Buddha and introducing it as “a jade Buddha from the West,” the editor of *Buddhist Monthly* (Ch. *Fojiao yuebao* 佛教月報) added a couplet to underscore the symbolic meanings of its material (Figure 5): “The Buddha’s enlightenment appearance is carved out from white jade, while his nirvana body is forged out of illusionary matters”<sup>20</sup> (MFQ 2006: 5: 22). The marble Buddha that Miaojun 妙俊 conveyed to Sichuan in 1934 was also eulogized by Master Zhenpu 真璞: “The Buddha’s face and heart, the external and the internal, are both pure and white. His outer and inner are the same, and there exists no duality or difference”<sup>21</sup> (MFQ 2006: 58: 130). The following excerpt, which was composed by Zhou Guanren 周觀仁 about his encounter with the marble Buddha escorted to the Wuchang Buddhist Academy (Ch. *Wuchang foxueyuan* 武昌佛學院) by Cihang in 1936, properly captured people’s fascination at that time:

During the over two thousand years after the creation of the sandalwood Buddha by King Udayana, temples have gradually begun to enshrine Buddha images, which are immensely magnificent. However, this kind of images are all sculptured from plaster, and (I) have never heard of using extremely large jade stones to make Buddha images for the purpose of permanence. This jade image was produced in Rangoon in the South Sea, and it is a Buddha image that is exquisitely carved and of utmost preciousness. ... The jade stone is of shiny and lustrous qualities. It is delicately carved, and its height is more than one *zhang*<sup>22</sup> ... Today I went to the Academy (and found that) visitors, finding this image aesthetically pleasing and awe-inspiring, all knelt down to venerate and admired its rare magnificence.<sup>23</sup> (MFQ 2006: 62: 490).

The vernacular identification of white marble as jade or white jade and its use for Buddhist sacred icons was not unprecedented in China. Dedicative inscriptions on the six- and seventh-century white marble Buddhist icons excavated from the Xiude Si (Ch. 修德寺) remains in Quyang (Ch. 曲陽), Hebei, constantly mentioned that devout patrons reverently commissioned “jade/white jade images” for the benefits of the royal family, the state, and family members (Li and Tian 2019). In his analysis of material preferences for Buddhist images during early medieval China, Lin Wei-Cheng also refers to the votive inscriptions on stone images produced in similar periods that explicitly categorized limestone (Ch. *qingshi*, 青石) as *moyu* (ink jade, Ch. 墨玉) and marble (Ch. *baishi* 白石) as *baiyu* (white jade, Ch. 白玉). Lin (2021: 38) points out that “[m]aking Buddhist

<sup>19</sup> Ch. *Shishi xinbao* 時事新報.

<sup>20</sup> The original text states: “白玉雕成圓滿相，幻塵煉出涅槃身。”

<sup>21</sup> The original text states: “佛面佛心，內外潔白。表裏一如，無二無別。”

<sup>22</sup> The height of this marble Buddha should be around five *chis* (approximately 1.7 meters) (MFQ 2006: 62: 268–269).

<sup>23</sup> The original text states: “自優填王創造旃檀佛像以來，垂二千餘年，各寺觀廟宇遂相率供奉佛像，備極莊嚴。然類皆泥水塑成，從未聞以極大玉石完成佛像以垂久遠者。此玉像系南洋仰光所產，為極名貴之佛像玉琢品。...玉質光潤，雕琢精巧，高大丈餘。...今日常川前往該院，參觀者無不美感油然而生，肅然起敬，投地頂禮，讚嘆莊嚴希有。”



Figure 5: "The Jade Buddha from the West." *Buddhist Monthly*, Issue 1, 1913.

images is about more than collecting spiritual benefits, since they are also indispensable to both representing the divine's 'true presence' and reviving the true doctrine. The material of which a Buddha image was made, it appears, was chosen deliberately to ensure that the true presence can be physically and visually represented and transmitted in its very materiality." Lin (2021: 55) thus argues that "jade" is evoked not only to mediate the desire for the endurance of the dharma but also to emphasize the numinous quality of the Buddha that can be animatedly materialized through marble, which has more refined texture and glossy appearance that can appropriately manifest the Buddha's "true presence." Therefore, despite the long interval and different social settings between early medieval and Republican China, there have been a persisting fascination that permeates the gaze of Chinese Buddhists in their encounters with marble Buddhist icons. As David Morgan (2005: 3) suggests, this gaze is not merely a simple and straightforward act of seeing but "an operation that relies on an apparatus of assumptions and inclinations, habits and routines, historical associations and cultural practice" and "the manner in which a way of seeing invests an image, a viewer, or an act of viewing with spiritual significance." The gaze of Chinese Buddhists, in this case, was shaped by a widely shared piety that tends to associate the outstanding attributes of polished white marble, that is, its purity, luster, and reflexivity, with the virtuous essence of the Buddha.

Meanwhile, Lin (Lin 2021: 34) raises the question about whether the categorization of the local limestone as "ink jade" and white marble as "white jade" might be a "material trick" that donors intentionally played to "maximize the devotionism," implying that they might have clearly understood the essential distinctions between white marble and authentic jade but still consciously "fake it." Lin's speculation is not implausible. But the reception of Burmese marble Buddhas among Chinese Buddhists and their common identification of the material as white jade, a move also taken by their early-medieval counterparts, alludes to a vernacular

Chinese jade culture, in which the term *yu* denotes to a hierarchy of materials, with nephrite (Ch. *ruanyu* 軟玉, such as *Hetian yu* 和田玉) remaining at the top while other jade-like materials being conceptually placed on the same horizontal scale yet practically graded lower. Instead of drawing a definite line between “authentic” and “fake” jade, *yu* encompasses any stone that possesses observable properties like nephrite, displays high aesthetic value, and is suitable for carving (Walker 1995: 22). It is based on this nomenclature rationale that many stone materials are traditionally categorized as *yu*, such as *xiuyan yu* (Ch. 岫巖玉), *lantian yu* (Ch. 藍田玉), *huanglong yu* (Ch. 黃龍玉), and *dushan yu* (Ch. 獨山玉), although none of them is acknowledged by gemmologists, mineralogists, and archaeologists as “authentic jade.” Following this rationale, the Chinese vernacular category of white jade can be applied to any white stone of which the visual qualities are similar to, if not identical with white nephrite. This categorization is not about “faking” because these materials are *yu* based on optical evaluation from the vernacular perspective. Consequently, the ambiguity of the Chinese term *yu* makes it a critical part of the cultural repertoire that accounts for Chinese Buddhists’ classification of Sagyin marble as “white jade,” which significantly enhanced the preciousness of these Buddhist icons from Burma.

Moreover, Zhou Guanren’s visual experience and apprehension of Burmese marble Buddhas as “rare magnificence,” a sentiment shared by many Buddhists in China, was also embedded within a historical period when the use of white marble to produce Buddhist images had diminished. Historically, the most famous white marble quarries were located in You Prefecture (Ch. *Youzhou* 幽州, with its prefectural capital in present-day Beijing) and Quyang,<sup>24</sup> and it was in these places that white marble of extra fine quality were extracted and where generations of stone carving artisans were trained. While the large quantity of white marble Buddhist icons excavated from the Xiude Temple remains in Quyang and other sites in and around Dingzhou (Ch. 定州) can be attributed to the immediate availability of materials for local Buddhists, extant devotional inscriptions illuminate that Buddhist donors used to commission long-distance deliveries of completed white marble statues or raw materials to places as far as Xi’an and Mount Wutai for religious purposes (Jin 2016: 131–32, 135). Li and Tian’s systematic analysis also reveal that white marble Buddhist icons from Quyang used to be extensively disseminated across the North China Plain and the Taihang Mountains (J. Li and Jun 2019: 27). Youzhou and Quyang remained important centers to produce white marble Buddhist icons in North China at least until Tang (Jin 2016: 132, 135; J. Li and Jun 2019: 25), yet such practices seemed no longer the mainstream after the Yuan dynasty. Since the establishment of Khanbaliq (now Beijing) as the capital by Kublai Khan, royal courts had enlisted stone carving artisans and exploited marble boulders from Quyang for the construction of palaces.<sup>25</sup> The excavation of marble from Fangshan (Ch. 房山) for palace projects also became increasingly common during Ming and Qing dynasties (M. Yu 1983: 4:2092–93), and emperors constantly conscripted tens of thousands of craftsmen from these two places for stone extraction, transportation, and sculpturing (Campbell 2020: 34). Although the production of religious icons continued at the local level, which was confirmed by the Buddhist images preserved at the Quyang Museum (Figure 6), the primary focus had gradually switched to architecture, ornaments, and sculptures of auspicious animals, while the popularity of white marble for religious image making had been significantly dampened, if not completely withered away, by the late Qing and Republican periods. Consequently, for most Buddhists in Republican China, their limited exposure to exquisite white marble Buddhist icons was also an indispensable factor in stimulating their enchantment in their encounters with marble Buddhas from Burma.

<sup>24</sup> There are other white marble quarries in Leiyang (Hunan), Baoxing (Sichuan), and many other places across China, and the history of marble extraction in these places has not been systematically investigated. Local religious communities might have used white marble to produce sacred religious icons, but the scale of such production and their influence remains unclear.

<sup>25</sup> Yang Qiong 楊瓊, a marble carving master from Quyang, was an example. For his biographic details and experiences, see: *Dayuanchao liedafu qiduwei hongnongbo Yanggong shendao beiming* 大元朝列大夫騎都尉尉弘農伯楊公神道碑銘 (The National Library of China)

Enchantment, as David Morgan argues, is “located *both* in the mind *and* in the world [the author’s own emphasis],” (2018: 20) and it becomes possible when the extensive network that fosters a focal object of religious practices, such as a sacred image, is cloaked to present the latter independently as the embodied presence of sacrality (2018: 78, 85). An investigation of enchantment, Morgan (2018: 90–92) suggests, should look beyond the focal object to explore this network, or “the ecology of an image,” that supports sacred objects while also informing people’s gaze on, understanding of, and interactions with them. The pious gaze on and fascination with Burmese marble Buddhas among Chinese Buddhists thus provides us an opportunity to move beyond their artistic attributes to probe Buddhist sentiments that were associated with the physical qualities of materials, in this case, the “Buddhist white marble,” and were shaped not only by the Chinese jade culture but also by the situations of the broader Buddhist image market in the late Qing and Republican periods.



Figure 6: Ming and Qing marble statues of arhat and bodhisattva produced in Quyang. Photo: Author.

### Locating Burma in the Buddhist Cosmopolis

Tansen Sen (2019: 182, 201), when examining the itineraries of images across the Buddhist cosmopolis, emphasizes that circulating Buddhist objects can motivate the migration of people, influence material cultures along the routes these objects traversed, generate knowledge and trigger imagination while also fostering linkages across different Buddhist societies. Similarly, the flows of jade Buddhas from Burma to China shaped the perception of the Buddhist cosmopolis among Chinese Buddhists by helping them locate Burma on their mental map of the Buddhist world in a spiritually and materially meaningful way. For people who encountered these Buddhas in different settings, these images not only made the Buddha affectively present but also served as indices that illuminated their patrons’ journeys abroad. These encounters

stimulated not only people's appreciation of the material but also their awareness of the foreign provenance of these images and their developing knowledge of "Burma" as "the land of jade Buddhist icons."

We should bear in mind that the fact that Burma was the provenance of these jade Buddhas was *not* self-evident to Buddhists back in China. When the *Buddhist Studies Magazines* published the first photograph of the jade Buddha at Yufo Temple in 1912, the origin was identified as "India-Ceylon." This misidentification should be attributed to Huigen's narrative, the credibility of which was buttressed by his pioneer role in procuring marble Buddhas to China in the late 1890s. The provenance of "jade Buddhas" only became clear as time proceeded, especially when their arrival became frequently and explicitly associated with "Burma" (Ch. *miandian* 緬甸) or "Rangoon" (Ch. *yangguang* 仰光) on local newspapers and Buddhist periodicals in the 1920s and 1930s and when journeys to South and Southeast Asia became increasingly popular. Although the familiarity with Burma among ordinary Chinese Buddhists was difficult to determine, it was indirectly reflected in two pieces of news that documented the voyage or plan to convey jade Buddhas from Burma by two Chinese Buddhists from East China in the 1930s.

In 1934, *Central Daily News* (Ch. *Zhongyang ribao* 中央日報) reported a journey to India undertaken by Yuanjue 圓覺, the abbot of Huguo Si (Ch. 護國寺) in Xinghua County, Yangzhou, Jiangsu Province, with the goal to commission five hundred jade Buddhas (*Central Daily News*, April 15, 1934). Yuanjue received the approval stamp on his passport for his departure from the governor of Jiangdu County (now Jiangdu District in Yangzhou) and eventually launched his southern-bound journey on April 13. Even though the news mentioned India as Yuanjue's destination, we may still infer that it was Burma instead based on the object of his voyage.<sup>26</sup> Whether Yuanjue eventually achieved his goal remains unclear. Neither the purpose of commissioning such a large group of Buddha statues nor their intended sizes were revealed in the news. The number of statues, "five hundred," however, alludes to Yuanjue's plan to use them for construction or renovation projects or to enshrine them in a place like the "Hall of A Thousand Buddhas" (Ch. *qianfo tang* 千佛堂), whereby Buddhists could accumulate merit by sponsoring Buddha images while temples could solicit funds for different purposes. Accordingly, these Buddha images were more likely to be miniatures rather than massive statues. Either way, a commission of five hundred jade Buddhas was undoubtably ambitious if we consider the expenses for raw materials, sculpturing labor, and long-distance transportation.

Two years later, another endeavor was initiated by a lay Buddhist named Gu Xiangsheng 顧祥生 from Datong Township, Liuqiao District in Nantong, Jiangsu Province (*New Northern Yangtze Daily*,<sup>27</sup> Aug 25, 1936). As a pious Buddhist, Gu managed to fundraise three thousand yuan for the construction of the Hall of Ten Thousand Vows (Ch. *wanyuan lou* 萬願樓) and the purchase of Buddhist canons, both of which had already been accomplished when the news was released. However, his plan to commission a magnificent jade (marble) Buddha for this project was more complicated. Due to the rarity of raw material in China, Gu first ordered carving artisans to make a smaller jade Buddha, which was about one *chi* and three *cun*s (approximately forty centimeters) high, as a makeshift for the impending installation. Unwilling to give up his plan, he eventually ordered a jade boulder, which was more than three *chis* (one meter) long, through Chen Fu Ji (Ch. 陳福記), a workshop in Shanghai that was said to have connections with quarries in Burma. The workshop would immediately begin carving once the boulder arrived in Shanghai, and it was estimated that the statue would be ready by the next year. Unfortunately, no further updates about the progress of Gu's project were published afterwards.

While these meritorious ventures reflected the fascination with and desire for jade Buddhas among Chinese Buddhists that strongly drew the protagonists towards Burma during the Republican period, the premises

<sup>26</sup> At least, Burma would be one of the stops on his way to India. Moreover, Burma remained a province of British India until it was administered separately in 1937. This might have been part of the reason why the destination was mentioned as "India" at the official level.

<sup>27</sup> Ch. *Xinjiangbei ribao* 新江北日報.

on which such efforts were predicated are even more illuminating. Yuanjue's plan, although grandiose and impractical at first glance, should not be dismissed as an adventure out of sheer optimism but one that developed from an awareness, if not a comprehensive understanding, of the on-ground conditions in Burma, where desirable materials and skilled labor were available. He might have inquired his fellows or lay followers about their or their friends' previous experiences there so that he had an achievable plan in his mind before departure. Similarly, although Gu Xiangsheng might have never visited Burma in person before, his logistical arrangements suggest not only his familiarity with Burmese jade Buddhas but also his knowledge of the accessibility of raw materials in Burma through workshops in Shanghai, which were already involved in much broader trans-Asian commercial networks. Moreover, Yuanjue and Gu were both from small townships or counties in East China, where Buddhism was most enthusiastically practiced and where transnational Buddhist networks were actively cultivated through prominent monastic leaders and Buddhist institutions during the Republican period. Although their experiences may not be representative for all Buddhists across China, it is still reasonable to infer that for many ordinary Buddhists like Yuanjue and Gu, Burma had been integrated into their perception of an evolving Buddhist cosmopolis as an important place where one could procure Buddhist images made of jade stones, a precious material that is widely treasured by the Chinese, by the late 1930s.

The late Qing and Republican periods saw the revitalized interactions between Chinese Buddhists and other Buddhist communities across Asia. Besides the continuous flows of pilgrims to South and Southeast Asia and the surge of dharma preaching tours by eminent monks to overseas Chinese communities, there were also monastic exchange programs intermittently launched to facilitate exchanges between China and Theravada ("Hinayana") Buddhist societies in the 1930s due to the perceived decadence of Chinese monasticism and the acknowledged importance of Theravada Buddhist texts among Chinese Buddhist intellectuals, a change that was prompted by the Orientalist construction of Theravada Buddhism as "Original Buddhism" (Ritzinger 2016: 151–53, 156–57).<sup>28</sup> The idea that having a better knowledge of Theravada Buddhism in Burma was desirable seemed to gradually develop among some Chinese monastics as time proceeded. For instance, in his interview with the *Buddhist Daily* (Ch. *Fojiao ribao* 佛教日報) in 1937, Beiguan attributed his shift of interest from Siamese to Burmese Buddhism to his recognition that Burma, where Theravada Buddhism also prevailed, was geographically closer (than Siam) to India, the birthplace of Buddhism (XMFV 2008: 5: 250). Again, the extent to which Beiguan's motivation was shared among his contemporaries is far from clear, but from the late 1920s to 1940s, Burma became the destination for a small group of Chinese monastics whose primary goals were to learn Pali and Sanskrit and to study Theravada literature.<sup>29</sup> Overall, lauded as reformative and progressive, the overseas intellectual and missionary ventures of Chinese Buddhist clergy were more likely to attract coverage in mainstream Buddhist periodicals during Republican China, and it was against these modernist endeavors that the persisting efforts to import Burmese marble Buddhas to China and the emerging understanding of Burma as "the land of jade Buddhas" usually became obscured and remained an undercurrent. However, as I argue through this article, these transnational Buddhist material

<sup>28</sup> Ritzinger (2016) notes that the Orientalist construction of "Original Buddhism" had already displaced the denigrating category "Hinayana" by the departure of the first exchange group to Ceylon in 1936. Such a replacement did not mean that Theravada Buddhism was crowned as the only authentic Buddhism but that Buddhist intellectuals in China came to recognize the importance of Theravada Buddhist texts and the need to study them (Ritzinger 2016: 151–53). The further emphasis on the "purity" of the Buddhist sangha in Ceylon as an antidote to the corruption of Chinese monasticism and the representation of Ceylon as "the repository of original Buddhism," which turned out to be influential in the Buddhist circle in China, was related to the efforts of Ceylonese missionary monks, such as Narada (Ritzinger 2016: 154–56).

<sup>29</sup> According to Dongchu (2003: 998, 1002–3), these monastics include Shangui 善歸, Beiguan 悲觀, Daju 達居, Jingshan 淨善, Huiyu 慧如, Changhai 昌海, and Chengru 誠如. Additionally, Wanhui 萬慧 was also a prestigious Chinese monastic scholar who migrated to Burma in the 1920s and dedicated himself to Pali and Sanskrit study and literature translation afterwards. For a short biography of Wanhui, see Yu Lingbo (2004: 5:50–52). The motivations and experiences of these Chinese monastics in Burma deserve a study of its own.

circulations from Burma to China are equally intriguing, as they shed light on a lesser-known aspect of the remarkably diverse experiences and perceptions of an evolving Buddhist cosmopolis at that time.

## Conclusion

Historically, the transmission of Buddhism has been long entwined with the circulation of sacred objects through the networks of merchants, missionaries, and monastics. On the one hand, endeavors to convey Buddhist images from foreign lands, especially India, was already common during medieval China. Wang Xuanze's diplomatic missions and Xuanzang and Yijing's pilgrimages to South Asia resulted in detailed descriptions of and the transportation of drawings and copies of Buddhist images that were originally venerated in India back to Tang China for display and further replication (Sen 2019: 188). The strong connection with India, the holy land of Buddhism, contributed to the popular reception of these images as the authentic prototypes among the faithful and the subsequent commitment to precise replication to guarantee the efficacy of copies (Lin 2021: 54). On the other hand, Liu Xinru's analysis of commercial and religious exchanges between India and China from the second to the seventh century reveals that the interactions between the theological development in Buddhism and the expansion of transregional trade networks also facilitated the evolution of the concept of "seven treasures" (Ch. *qibao* 七寶) and the search for precious materials to ornament Buddhist objects and architecture as means of veneration (Liu 1995: 93–102).

However, the motivation behind the transmission of marble Buddhist images from Burma to China during the late Qing and Republican periods was the enchantment with marble, or jade from a vernacular perspective, among Chinese Buddhists. These material circulations were essentially distinctive from the previous efforts to procure and replicate images from India during the medieval period, which were prompted by people's concerns about authenticity associated with lineage and Buddhist legends. They also diverged from the earlier search for precious materials, as their focus was no longer external ornamentation but instead the material that Buddha images were made of. These transnational practices were no less modern than the flourishing Buddhist reformist initiatives taking place in and beyond China during the same period, as they were similarly shaped by a series of factors, such as transregional commercial networks, modern transportation technology, and the increase in contacts between domestic and overseas Chinese Buddhist communities.

Moreover, although the long-entrenched boundary between Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism indeed existed, the pervasive practice of image production and veneration became the foundation for a broader Buddhist ethnoscape (Kemper 2005: 23), in which people's search for sacred magnificence did not neatly conform to national and sectarian boundaries.<sup>30</sup> The impetus underlying the transregional pursuit of marble Buddhas from Burma, which derived from the desire for the Buddha's presence, coexisted with, yet remained distinctive from, the pilgrimage, missionary, and intellectual interests that motivated the exploration of South and Southeast Asia by Chinese Buddhists. Ultimately, I argue that the knowledge and experience of the Buddhist cosmopolis by Chinese Buddhists during the late Qing and Republican periods were multifaceted in nature. Therefore, for different Buddhist individuals, Burma could be an embodiment of Theravada Buddhism, thus a place worth visiting for Buddhist scripture studies; it could be the host country of a growing overseas Chinese community, thus a fertile land for the propagation of Mahayana Buddhism; it could be a realm of numinous Buddhist sites, thus an attractive destination to perform pilgrimage to. More importantly, it could

<sup>30</sup> Borrowing Arjun Appadurai's concept of ethnoscape, Kemper's idea of "Buddhist ethnoscape" emphasizes the importance of the movement of Buddhist individuals (thus, "*ethno*-") in forging networks across boundaries. His analysis also delineates "the Sinhala Buddhist ethnoscape" that emerged from the migration and endeavors of Sinhala missionaries (Kemper 2005: 37–41). There are also other coexisting and sometimes broader Buddhist ethnoscapings that transcend different identity vectors (Kemper 2005: 41–44). Therefore, Kemper's interpretation allows for various modes of interactions, including clashes and conflicts, between Buddhist ethnoscapings of different scales.

also be the land of jade Buddhas, thus an appealing place to obtain materials and commission icons that can properly manifest the magnificence of Buddhist deities.

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