

Buddhist Image Processions in Faxian's Record of Buddhistic Kingdoms and Their Transformation in Northern Wei Luoyang

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Abstract: Comparing Faxian's Record of Buddhistic Kingdoms (Khotan) with Yang Xuanzhi's A Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Luoyang, this paper examines the spatial, material, and ritual transformation of Buddhist image processions (xingxiang) in medieval China. Spatially, the circumambulatory perimeter route in Khotan evolved into a linear procession along Luoyang's central axis toward the imperial palace. Materially, the adoption of indigenous dry-lacquer (jiazhu) craftsmanship resolved the mobility constraints of colossal statuary. Culturally, the incorporation of acrobatics (baixi) infused the sacred rite with secular festivity. This evolution highlights the deep integration of Buddhist practice with Chinese capital ritual systems, craftsmanship, and urban culture.

Keywords: Image Procession, Faxian's Record of Buddhistic Kingdoms, Northern Wei Luoyang, dry-lacquer Craftsmanship.

1. Introduction

In the Buddhist belief system of the medieval period, the "image procession" was not merely a religious ritual within monasteries, but also a grand social activity that broke through the monastery walls and entered the public urban space. The image procession refers to the practice of taking Buddha statues out of the temples on specific festivals, such as the Buddha's Birthday, placing them on magnificently decorated image carts, and parading them through the city streets for the veneration of the faithful. This activity originated in India, spread to the Central Plains via the Western Regions, and reached its peak during the Wei-Jin and Northern-and Southern Dynasties. During this transmission, the ritual itself underwent profound morphological changes in order to adapt to different social structures, urban forms, and cultural psychology. According to previous studies, the image procession ritual was not only a means for Buddhists to display images and propagate the doctrine, but also an important way for ordinary believers to accumulate merits by gazing upon the Buddha statues.

Concerning the early forms of the image procession, the Eastern Jin monk Faxian left detailed records in his Record of Buddhistic Kingdoms about the processions in Khotan and in Pāṭaliputra in Central India. More than a hundred years later, in the Northern Wei Luoyang period, Yang Xuanzhi provided a thorough reminiscence of the grand procession scenes in Luoyang in his Annotated Interpretation of the Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Luoyang. These two documents offer a basis for comparative observation. Previous scholarship has conducted many useful explorations of the image procession ritual, providing a solid historical foundation for this paper. On the basis of existing research, this paper further examines three aspects of difference between the image processions seen by Faxian and those in Northern Wei Luoyang: the use of urban space, the manufacturing techniques of statues, and the specific content of the rituals, in order to explore the concrete manifestations of the ritual's indigenisation process.

2. The Relationship between Ritual Routes and Urban Layout

Rituals are human activities in space, and the configuration of city streets directly affects the movement of the processional troupe. A comparison of the Record of Buddhistic Kingdoms and the Annotated Interpretation of the Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Luoyang reveals significant differences in the route planning between Khotan and Northern Wei Luoyang, reflecting the impact of different urban layouts on religious practices.

(1) Circumambulatory Processions in the Western Regions

When Faxian travelled in the kingdom of Khotan in the Western Regions, he attended the local image procession and recorded its process and scene in detail in the Record of Buddhistic Kingdoms: "After travelling for one month and five days, we arrived at Khotan... Faxian and the others wished to observe the image procession, so we stayed for three months. In that country, there were fourteen great monasteries, not counting the smaller ones. From the first day of the fourth month, the streets of the city were swept and cleaned, and the lanes were adorned. Large canopies were set up over the city gates, and everything was splendidly decorated. The king, his consorts, and the palace ladies all stayed there. The Gomati monastery was of the Mahāyāna school, which the king respected greatly, so it was the first to hold the image procession. About three or four li from the city, they made a four-wheeled image cart, more than three zhang high, shaped like a moving hall, decorated with the seven treasures, and hung with silk streamers and canopies. The Buddha stood in the cart, attended by two bodhisattvas, with heavenly attendants all made of gold and silver, suspended in the air. When the image was a hundred paces from the gate, the king took off his celestial crown, changed into new clothes, walked barefoot holding incense and flowers, and came out of the city with his retinue to welcome the image, prostrating himself in full obeisance, scattering flowers and burning incense. As the image entered the city, the ladies and concubines on the gate tower scattered flowers, which fell profusely. Thus the offerings and paraphernalia were different

for each cart. Each monastery held the procession for one day. It started on the first day of the fourth month and ended on the fourteenth day. After the processions were finished, the king and his consorts returned to the palace. [1]"

From this account, we know that the image procession in Khotan lasted for fourteen days, with each of the fourteen great monasteries taking turns to send out its image cart one day at a time. This "one temple, one day" rotating procession meant that the activity continuously occupied the public spaces of the city for half a month. Such processions within or around the city often followed a circuit or city-encircling pattern. Dunhuang liturgical manuscripts also record that image processions in the Western Regions emphasised carrying the Buddha statues out through the four gates and around the city wall. This circumambulatory route had a clear religious symbolism, imitating the stories of Prince Siddhartha's departure from the palace gates or the Buddha's travels through cities to preach. By moving the holy images around the city's perimeter, the four gates were decorated with canopies and streamers, thus sanctifying the entire city as an enclosed sacred precinct under divine protection [2].

This spatial hierarchy in which Buddhist authority reigned supreme was particularly manifested in the welcoming ceremony of the king of Khotan. Faxian recorded that the king, as the supreme secular ruler, removed his celestial crown, changed into plain new clothes, and walked barefoot when he was a hundred paces from the city gate. These bodily actions carried political metaphors: at this religious moment of the image procession, the secular monarch voluntarily degraded himself to a pious donor, submitting to the divine authority in order to pray for the peace of the nation. The king's coming out of the city to welcome the image symbolised the secular power's reverence and acceptance of the sacred power.

(2) The Central-Axis Procession in Luoyang and the Display of Imperial Power

When the image procession ritual entered Northern Wei Luoyang, its relationship with urban space underwent changes, and its spatial logic was clearly influenced by the political order of the Central Plains capitals. The Northern Wei Luoyang city was a grand capital built on the foundation of the Han-Jin old city, featuring a strict ward system and a clear north-south central axis, with urban planning that embodied the Confucian ritual principles and the supremacy of imperial power. Archaeological restoration studies have shown that Luoyang city formed a distinct north-south central axis, namely "Taiji Hall – Changhe Gate – Tongtuo Street – Xuanyang Gate – Circular Mound". This axis was not only the city's main traffic artery but also an important venue for political ceremonies. Tongtuo Street was over forty metres wide, with major government offices such as the Grand Commandant's office and the Minister of Works on both sides, making it the core space for displaying state power [3].

The image procession ritual in Northern Wei Luoyang, especially the grand ceremony of the Buddha's Birthday on the eighth day of the fourth month, was strictly embedded into this political axis. Although the term "image procession" does not explicitly appear in the entire book, Yang Xuanzhi's Annotated Interpretation of the Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Luoyang records several Buddhist processional rituals in Luoyang. For instance, in the entry on Jingming Monastery in fascicle 3: "Jingming Monastery was founded by Emperor Xuanwu. The splendour of the monastery was acclaimed as the foremost. At that time, the custom was to venerate Buddhism. On the seventh day of the

fourth month, all the images of the capital came to this monastery. The imperial secretary of religious affairs registered over a thousand images. On the eighth day, they entered Xuanyang Gate in order and proceeded to Changhe Palace, where they received the emperor's scattered flowers. At that moment, golden flowers shone in the sun, precious canopies floated like clouds, banners were as numerous as a forest, incense smoke resembled mist, Buddhist music and dharma sounds resounded through heaven and earth, acrobatic performances soared and tumbled, and the crowds were dense. Famous monks and virtuous masters carried their staffs in groups, faithful devotees held flowers in multitudes, chariots and horsemen jammed the streets, flowing one after another. When a foreign monk from the Western Regions saw this, he exclaimed, 'This is a Buddha land' [4]"

This route had spatial characteristics distinct from those of the Khotan procession. First, the choice of starting point: in Khotan, the procession started "three or four li from the city" where the four-wheeled cart and images were prepared. In Luoyang, all the images used for the procession on the seventh day were first assembled at Jingming Monastery outside Xuanyang Gate, and on the eighth day they entered the gate in sequence and advanced toward Changhe Palace, where the emperor scattered flowers. Jingming Monastery, located one li east of the imperial avenue outside Xuanyang Gate, was a royal monastery founded by Emperor Xuanwu. As the assembly point before the procession, it brought all the city's Buddha statues under a unified management and sequence. Second, the change of route: the procession did not circle the city, but entered the inner city from the southern Xuanyang Gate and marched northward along the broad, straight imperial avenue of Tongtuo Street. This was a direct path leading to the power centre, contrasting sharply with the circular route of the Western Regions. Finally, the political significance of the terminus: in Luoyang, the procession's destination was not a monastery but the main gate of the imperial palace, Changhe Gate, which symbolised the highest imperial authority(Figure 1).

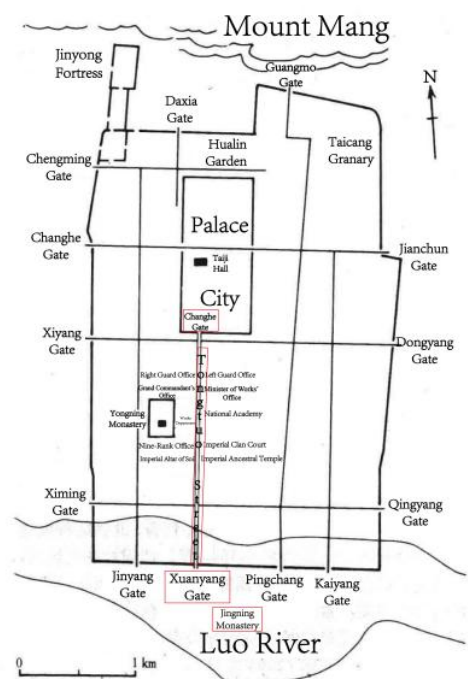


Figure 1. Plan of the Northern Wei Luoyang City

More crucially, the perspective of viewing was transformed. Unlike the king of Khotan who "came out of the city and prostrated himself," the Northern Wei emperor "personally ascended the gate tower and looked down upon the procession, scattering flowers." The emperor stood high above on the palace gate tower, in an absolute elevated position, overlooking the approaching Buddha images and believers. This spatial hierarchy of elevation and subordination, and the relationship between host and guest, implied that the procession was actually "paying homage" to the emperor or undergoing the emperor's "inspection". This change in spatial relationship indicates that the Luoyang image procession, while retaining its religious function of praying for blessings, also became part of the city's public ceremonial activities. The emperor, by ascending the tower to scatter flowers, demonstrated his support for Buddhism while simultaneously establishing, by occupying the central viewing position, a political order in which imperial authority superseded religious authority.

The Annotated Interpretation of the Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Luoyang also documents image processions of other monasteries in Luoyang, which, though varying in dates and grandeur, can be cross-referenced with the central-axis grand ceremony of the eighth day: the Changqiu Monastery procession came out on the fourth day of the fourth month, with a parade featuring lion-exorcists leading, sword-swallowing and fire-breathing, and acrobats on coloured poles, attracting such a dense crowd that "people trampled each other, and there were often deaths" (fascicle 1, Changqiu Monastery entry); the Zhaoyi Nunnery's statues were "exquisitely crafted, unparalleled in the capital", and they often came out on the seventh day to meet the images of Jingming Monastery, and "the splendour of music and dance matched that of Liu Teng" (fascicle 1, Zhaoyi Nunnery); the Zongsheng Monastery's image stood "thirty-eight chi high", and "when this image came out, the markets and alleys were emptied" (fascicle 2, Zongsheng Monastery); the Jingxing Nunnery was famous for its gold-image chariot, "adorned with precious canopies and dangling golden bells and seven-treasure pearls from all four sides", and on the day it was brought out "the emperor always ordered one hundred imperial guards to carry this image" (fascicle 2, Jingxing Nunnery). Although the various monasteries had their own processions on different days, together they present the general features of the Northern Wei Luoyang image procession activities: magnificent and exquisitely crafted statues, grand processions, and a variety of acrobatics, often attracting the entire city's population.

3. Improvements in Material and Manufacturing Techniques of Statues

The essence of the image procession ritual lay in making the Buddha statues move, which involved issues of material and weight. Faxian described in the Record of Buddhist Kingdoms that the image cart in Khotan was "more than three zhang high, shaped like a moving hall... the image stood in the cart". To place a Buddha statue on such a huge vehicle and ensure its frequent movement over a procession lasting more than ten days posed high demands on the manufacturing techniques.

(1) Constraints of Gigantic Image Carts on Materials

If the traditional techniques since the Han dynasty were

followed, large statues were mostly cast in bronze, carved in stone, or solid-wood carved. However, these materials proved inadequate when facing the specific requirements of the image procession. First, the weight problem: if cast in bronze, a statue of three zhang high (about 9 metres) would weigh tens of tons or more. Under the road conditions and vehicle mechanical technology of the time, it was almost impossible to move such a giant statue frequently and pass through city gates. Solid-wood carving, though relatively lighter, required huge logs for giant statues and was prone to cracking, and still remained cumbersome to transport. Second, toughness and durability: during the procession, the cart inevitably jolted; stone was brittle and easily damaged by vibration; while clay sculpture was heavy and fragile, unable to withstand long-distance movement [5].

Although Faxian recorded that the images in Khotan were "all carved and adorned with gold and silver", given the technological level at the time, it is plausible that this referred to surface decoration such as gilding or gem inlaying, and that the internal supporting structure was likely some kind of lightweight construction; otherwise, the weight would have been too great for the vehicle to bear.

(2) The Process and Advantages of dry-lacquer Craftsmanship

To resolve the contradiction between majestic dignity and portability, a native Chinese lacquer technique—the "dry-lacquer" (or dry-lacquer) method—was creatively applied to Buddhist statue making during the Wei-Jin and Northern-Southern Dynasties.

Dry-lacquer craftsmanship, also known as "hollow-core lacquerware," had already matured in the Warring States and Han periods, as evidenced by archaeological finds, but was then mainly used for small daily utensils such as cups, lian boxes, and he boxes, and had not yet been applied to large statues. The application of this technique from small daily objects to large statues began in the Eastern Jin. Historical records state that the Eastern Jin master craftsman Dai Kui spent "ten years of deliberation" to produce five dry-lacquer processional images, precisely in response to the growing demand for image processions in the Jiangnan region at that time. Dai Kui gave up the bronze casting, in which he excelled, and turned to dry lacquer precisely because of its lightweight property.

The manufacturing process of dry-lacquer statues was roughly as follows: first, a clay inner core was sculpted as the form of the Buddha; then hemp cloth was coated with raw lacquer and layered over the clay core; after the lacquer-cloth layers dried and became sufficiently thick, the inner clay core was removed; finally, the hollow lacquer-cloth shell was trimmed and decorated. Statues made by this process possessed two features particularly suitable for processions:

First, they were extremely lightweight. Such statues were light and easy to carry, as contemporaries described: "lifted as lightly as a feather, yet viewed as weighty as a nine-cauldron tripod." After removing the clay core, the hollow lacquer-cloth Buddha statue was very light, easily transported and placed on high image carts, solving the load-bearing problem. Second, they were sturdy and durable. Although the dry-lacquer body was relatively thin, its structure was firm, and raw lacquer had the properties of corrosion resistance and insect-proofing, making it highly suitable for outdoor processions subject to wind, sun, and jolting.

(3) Promotion and Application in the Northern Wei Period

By the Northern Wei Luoyang period, this technique had

been widely popularised and applied. The existence of "dry-lacquer statues" is explicitly recorded in literature. Annotated Interpretation of the Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Luoyang, fascicle 4, records: "... Hui then made one human-sized dry-lacquer statue, with excellent and dignified features, rare in the world.[6]" The Abbreviated History of Monastics Written in the Song of the Song dynasty, when recounting the tradition of image processions, also mentions that monks carried dry-lacquer Buddha statues to parade around the city: "Monks wearing dry-lacquer Buddha images... this is called 'city-circuiting' [7]. In particular, the Zongsheng Monastery mentioned in fascicle 2 of the Annotated Interpretation had a processional image "thirty-eight chi high" and "when this image came out, the markets and alleys were emptied" [8]. For such a gigantic Buddha to be paraded through the city, considering the physical weight limitations and the vehicle's carrying capacity, the use of dry-lacquer craftsmanship is the most reasonable explanation.

4. Enrichment and Entertainment of Ritual Contents

The image procession ritual was not only a solemn display of Buddha statues but was also accompanied by rich music and performances.

The religious psychological origin of the image procession ritual is related to the early practice of "Buddha-contemplation samādhi". In early Buddhist cultivation, visualising the image of the Buddha in meditation was an important method. In scriptures such as the Sutra on the Samādhi of the Ocean of Buddha-contemplation, visualising a walking Buddha was considered an advanced stage of meditation. However, for ordinary believers who could not engage in deep meditation, directly seeing a walking Buddha with their physical eyes was believed to have the same merit as meditative contemplation. Therefore, the image procession that Faxian saw in the Western Regions, although also involving the participation of the whole nation, emphasised more the reverence and offerings, such as the king's worship and the ladies' flower scattering. Even in Pāṭaliputra in the Magadha kingdom of India, Faxian witnessed an all-night lamp offering throughout the city. Faxian recorded in his Record of Buddhistic Kingdoms the procession he saw in Pāṭaliputra, Magadha: "Crossing the river southward for one yojana, we arrived at Pāṭaliputra in the kingdom of Magadha... The people were prosperous and vied in practising benevolence and righteousness. Every year on the eighth day of the second month, they held an image procession. They made four-wheeled carts, bound bamboo into five tiers, with brackets and halberds, more than two zhang high, shaped like a pagoda. They wrapped them with white felt and then painted them with celestial figures. They adorned them with gold, silver, and lapis lazuli, and hung silk streamers and canopies. On the four sides they made niches, each with a seated Buddha and attending bodhisattvas. There were about twenty carts, each different in decoration. On that day, both monastic and lay people from all over the region assembled, performing music and dance, and making offerings of incense and flowers. The Brahmins' sons came to invite the Buddha, and the Buddha entered the city in sequence, staying inside for two nights. They lit lamps all night long and made music and offerings. Every kingdom did the same [9].

However, when the ritual entered Northern Wei Luoyang,

in order to attract more believers to participate and create a lively festive atmosphere, a large number of native Chinese performing arts were incorporated, greatly enhancing its spectacle. This combination of acrobatics and Buddhism had already appeared in the Northern Wei Pingcheng period and became further institutionalised and routinized after the capital moved to Luoyang.

On the base of the niche on the north wall of Cave 38 at the Yungang Grottoes, there is a carving of "Dulu xuntong" (pole-climbing acrobatics), a difficult pole-climbing act in which an artist performs thrilling moves such as hanging upside down on a high pole, accompanied by music and dance (Figure 2). In the Nannieshui stone carvings of Qin County, Shanxi, the sides of the Buddha niches also feature acrobats performing handstands and contortions (Figure 3). These acrobatic performances, commonly seen in Han dynasty tombs or court banquets, were incorporated into the Buddhist iconographic and ritual system during the Northern Wei.



Figure 2. Acrobatic Performance Carving on the Niche Base of Cave 38, Yungang Grottoes



Figure 3. Acrobatic Figures beside a Buddha Niche, Nannieshui Stone Carvings, Shanxi

This combination in iconography was a faithful reflection of the actual image procession rituals. The description of the Changqiu Monastery procession in the Record is extremely vivid: "On the fourth day of the fourth month, this image always came out. Evil-dispelling lions led the way, sword-swallowing and fire-breathing, and various acrobatics, with coloured poles and rope-walking, all extraordinary and unusual. The strange skills and costumes were unparalleled in the city. Wherever the image stopped, onlookers formed a wall, and they trampled each other, often causing deaths."

(Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Luoyang, fascicle 1, Changqiu Monastery entry) [10]. Yang Xuanzhi wrote that evil-dispelling lions led the way, people performed the magic of swallowing swords and breathing fire, and there were high-pole acrobatics and rope-walking — all popular street performances of the time. The "coloured poles and rope-walking" were exactly the Doulu Xunchuang seen in the iconographic materials.

In this description, we can see that the procession had evolved into a huge mobile performance troupe: the vanguard was no longer a purely solemn escort but consisted of lion dancers dressed as "evil-dispelling lions," incorporating elements of Western Regions and native auspicious-beast performances, which enhanced the dynamic beauty of the ritual. The ritual included magic shows of "sword-swallowing and fire-breathing" and high-wire acrobatics on "coloured poles". The "coloured poles" probably referred to tall, decorated poles on which performers staged dangerous acts. These visually striking performances caused such a spectacle that "wherever the image stopped, onlookers formed a wall," and the scene was so crowded that even fatal stampedes occurred.

This change shows that the Luoyang image procession, while maintaining the core of religious faith, became more diverse and open in form. Buddhism adapted itself to the local social aesthetics and cultural habits. By incorporating the popular acrobatic performances beloved by the masses, Buddhism presented its profound teachings in an intuitive and vivid manner, making the image procession not only a religious activity for accumulating merit but also a grand festival in which the entire city participated [11].

5. Conclusion

In summary, from the exotic accounts in Faxian's Record of Buddhistic Kingdoms to the nostalgic memories of the capital in Yang Xuanzhi's Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Luoyang, we can clearly trace the evolution of the image procession ritual from the oasis city-states of the Western Regions to the heartland of the Central Plains.

In terms of processional routes, the ritual changed from the circumambulatory pattern imitating religious sacred sites in the Western Regions to a central-axis procession adapted to the ritual system of the Central Plains capitals, so that the Buddha's parade route overlapped with the city's political axis. In statue manufacturing techniques, in order to move giant Buddha statues through the city, craftsmen popularised the dry-lacquer technique that had existed since the Han dynasty. This lightweight and sturdy statue-making technique successfully resolved the contradiction between size and

weight, supporting the grand procession scenes. In terms of ritual content, the Northern Wei image processions incorporated a large number of native acrobatic performances, transforming a ritual originally focused on contemplative meditation into an urban celebration with powerful visual impact. These changes did not negate the original religious significance, but generated new expressions in the new cultural soil. The image procession ritual in Northern Wei Luoyang retained its original religious core while integrating the demonstrative needs of imperial politics and the entertainment tastes of the urban populace, becoming a vivid epitome of the interaction between religion and society in the medieval period.

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