

Stele of a buddha and two bodhisattvas

Each element of this stele has a particular meaning and contributes to the overall content of the piece. The main image is of a buddha attended by two bodhisattvas. The mandorla (body halo) behind them is divided into five different sections. The section nearest the buddha's head contains lotus petals. The next section outward shows seven buddhas of the past. The top portion of the third section shows a dwarflike earth spirit supporting an incense burner. Each of the two flying heavenly beings hovering above and flanking the incense burner holds an oversized lotus bud. Below them are two heavenly beings playing musical instruments. Lotus pedestals support two more heavenly beings below—the right figure holds an incense burner and a dish of offerings, while the other holds an oversized lotus bud and an incense burner. The scarves of the heavenly beings billow among flowers and tendrils.

The pointed portion above this band of heavenly beings contains a meditating buddha on a lotus throne. He is flanked by two more heavenly beings. The outermost section of the mandorla is incised with a close-knit pattern of flames. The base of the stele is incised with images of six donors under canopies wearing elaborate clothing showing their high positions. They stand facing the middle, which is ornamented with a figure bearing an incense burner. The donors' names are inscribed, most of them from the Zhao family. The back contains fifty-six donor figures, their names—again, mostly members of the Zhao family as well as other devotees and members of the Buddhist hierarchy—and a long inscription giving the date of 533.

The legible portions of the inscription read:

[In 533] four lay devotees, Zhao Jianxi, Zhao [??], Zhao Wenyin, and Zhao Hongxian, because of their illustrious merit-making activities from their birth to their death, heaven's blessings are bestowed on them. For many years their grandfather [?]ying has been well known. He was the leader across the four seas, his influence spread widely, and he was renowned. Therefore, he was able to overcome the three ignorance.... All members of Buddhist societies know the three treasures are the best path [to pursuing and] achieving a state of purity.... Therefore, if one is donating one's own funds to make an image, then the merit from the image will be great and [one will] become true Buddhist believers.... Bodhisattvas flank the sides, heavenly beings touch the sky, and newborns emerge from lotus flowers in paradise... [wish that] all sentient beings will attain [buddhahood] simultaneously.



Front of stele.



Back of stele.

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The Empress Wu

Wu Zhao (Wu Zetian) was the only woman in Chinese history to claim the imperial title and to establish her own dynasty and a hereditary matriarchy.

A beautiful, brilliant, and, when necessary, ruthless woman, Wu Zhao began her career at court around 640 as a low-ranking concubine. By the early 650s she had enchanted the Emperor Gaozong (reigned 649–683) and assumed the power behind the throne. She became supreme ruler upon Gaozong's death in 683 and immediately moved the capital from Chang'an (now known as Xi'an) to Luoyang, where it remained until 701. One of the reported motivations for this move was the empress's desire to escape the ghosts of the many members of court in Chang'an whom she had caused to die during her rise to power. She declared herself empress of a new dynasty in 690.

Confucianism, the governing philosophy at court, forbade women any role in government. And Wu Zhao had many powerful enemies. According to one of them, an official named Luo Binwang, she "killed her own children, butchered her elder brothers, murdered the ruler, poisoned her mother. She is hated by the gods and by men alike; neither heaven nor earth can bear her. Yet she still harbors disastrous intentions and plans to steal the sacred regalia of the ruler." (*Cambridge History of China*, vol. 5, p. 295).

Wu Zhao found the perfect vehicle for legitimizing her rule in the Great Cloud Sutra (Dayunjing), a minor text that prophesied the coming of a female deity and monarch of the world named Maitreya. Wu Zhao therefore declared herself the incarnation of Maitreya. She and her supporters founded Great Cloud temples in every prefecture in the country, and images of Maitreya were commissioned in great numbers from the 680s until the empress's death in 705.



Statues of foreign envoys to the Tang court, aboveground at the Qianling Mausoleum, site of the tombs of Emperor Gaozong (buried 684) and Empress Wu (buried 706), Shaanxi province. 猫猫的日记本, *Wikimedia Commons*.



Empress Wu Zetian, from an eighteenth-century Chinese album featuring portraits of eighty-six emperors of China. *British Library*.



Head of the Buddha Maitreya, Tang dynasty (618–907).

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About Buddhism

The Buddha Shakyamuni (the Buddha of our age) lived in northern India some twenty-five hundred years ago.

Buddhist teachings recommend a life of kindness and charity in order to achieve a happy rebirth, as well as striving, through meditation, toward liberation from rebirth.

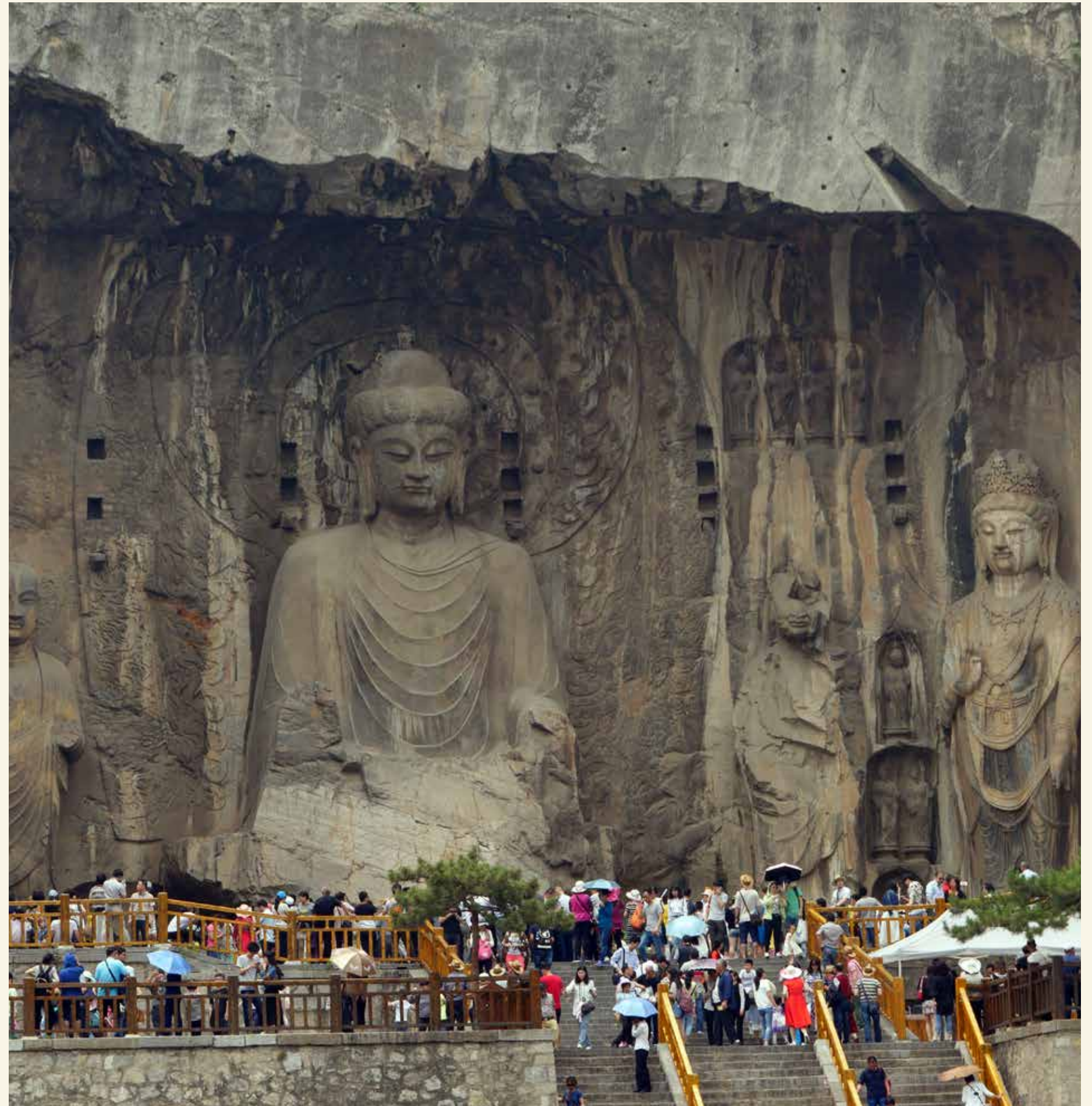
A thousand years ago Buddhism was prevalent throughout much of Asia. Pilgrims and monks traveled from region to region, often carrying religious text and small images.

Some schools of Buddhism focus primarily on the Buddha Shakyamuni. Others pay homage to other buddhas, to savior-like bodhisattvas, and to other deities.

There is no set of ceremonies common to all schools of Buddhism. Everyday Buddhist practice differs greatly from culture to culture.

Images of buddhas are usually recognizable by their monk's robes and a bump on the top of the head. Bodhisattvas often have their upper torso unclothed but wear draped scarves and elaborate jewelry.

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Longmen Grottoes in Luoyang, Henan province, site of tens of thousands of Buddha statues. *Anagoria, Wikimedia Commons.*

Movers and Shakers

The transmission of Buddhism from India to China was no small feat. One route between these early civilizations required crossing large tracts of desert, the world's tallest mountain range, and the hostile steppes of Central Asia; another required sailing immense distances in often treacherous waters. Differences between the languages of China and those of the homeland of Buddhism also presented formidable challenges to the translators of sacred texts. The small number of intrepid travelers and translators who rose to these challenges had a profound influence on the early development of Buddhism in China.

Faxian: One of the earliest recorded Chinese travelers to India was Faxian. He was born in Shanxi province and became a Buddhist disciple at the age of three. As he reached maturity, he was increasingly dismayed by the lack of Buddhist texts in China. In 399 he sought to improve his knowledge of the Buddha's teachings, and he set out in pursuit of these texts. He traveled for fourteen years, following a route that took him from Xi'an to Dunhuang, across the southern Silk Road, on to what is now Afghanistan, through India, and finally to Sri Lanka. He returned to China by ship through Southeast Asia. Blown off course by a fierce storm, his ship finally landed in

northeastern China's Shandong province. Faxian spent the remainder of his life translating the texts he had collected abroad. He died at the age of eighty-six. The journal he kept provides fascinating insights into the geography and cultures of the areas through which he traveled.

Xuanzang: Better known than Faxian's are the travels of the Buddhist pilgrim Xuanzang. Born in 603 in Qinliu, Henan province, he was taken at an early age to Luoyang, where he studied Buddhism and was ordained as a monk at thirteen. Inspired by Faxian's example, Xuanzang was dissatisfied with the paucity of authentic Buddhist texts in China and critical of many of the existing translations. During the early Tang dynasty he moved to the capital, Chang'an (now known as Xi'an). In 629, although forbidden to do so by the Tang emperor, he began his epic journey to the West. In 633 he reached India, where he remained until 645, studying Buddhist texts and visiting sites and institutions. He returned to Chang'an with hundreds of texts, images, and relics. His teachings and texts exerted a strong influence on the development of Esoteric Buddhism, and his *Records of the Western Regions* remains the most detailed Chinese account of travel during that era through Central Asia and India; it inspired the colorful novel *Journey to the West (Monkey)*.



Monk accompanied by a tiger with a fan in his left hand, 10th century. Painting from Cave 17 at Mogao Caves, Dunhuang, Gansau province. *Photographer unknown, Wikimedia Commons.*



Head of a Buddhist deity, a relic from the Silk Road, Tang dynasty (618–907).

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