Between One and Many: 
Interpreting Large Numbers in the Buddhist Art of China

Abstract
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The book project I am currently working on is about the art of China during the Tang-Song transitional period, in the long tenth century. One chapter of my book deals with multiples and multiplication in the Buddhist art. Why is a particular object duplicated in large numbers? How can we possibly derive meaning from those duplicates or multiples? Lothar Ledderose has explored the technological aspect of replication and mass-production in Chinese art. I will focus, instead, on the metaphorical and metaphysical meanings of certain numbers, while also look into the ways in which visual devices were used in combination with words to create the illusion of countlessness or infinity. I will argue for the cases where multiples were necessary means to give form to the otherwise formless concept of infinity. The usual opposition of originality and replication will be reconsidered in this context, too.

Both examples to be examined today come from Southeast China, which was ruled for the most part of the tenth century by the Wuyue Kingdom (907-978).

I. Eighty-four thousand scrolls and pagoda miniatures

In September 1924, the Thunder-Peak Pagoda located by the West Lake in present-day Hangzhou collapsed, revealing multiple copies of the so-called Reliquary-Sealing Sutra. The printed scrolls bear dedicatory inscriptions referring to Qian Chu (929-988, r. 947-978), the last king of Wuyue, and state: “Qian Chu, Generalissimo of the Army of the World, King of Wuyue, has made 84,000 copies of this sutra, and interred them into the brick pagoda at the West Gate as an enduring offering. Noted on a day of the eighth month of the year of yihai [equivalent to 975].”

We do not know if precisely 84,000 prints were actually produced during Qian Chu’s reign. Yet study of surviving examples shows that, at least three printings of the same text were commissioned by the king within a relatively short period of time.
between 956 and 965; and at least 357 pagoda miniatures were made under the blessing of King Qian Chu to enshrine those sutra texts.

I wonder if there is ever going to be a way to find out how many scrolls/pagodas were actually made. It is very likely that, except for those who participated in the reproduction process, no one of Qian Chu’s time would know, let alone modern scholars like us. Besides, according to the Reliquary-Sealing Sutra, the actual number of pagodas or scrolls made by Qian Chu is irrelevant, because the sacred text multiplies itself in incredibly large numbers as long as, and as soon as there is faith in it. If the actual number does not really count, then why making such a big statement in writing? First and foremost, the number “84,000” was commonly used in Buddhist texts to denote numerosity, countlessness, or infinity. But most relevant to the case in concern, I would argue, is its reference to King Asoka (r. ca. 269 BC – 232 BC) of India, who commissioned the construction of 84,000 stupas, contributing to the spread of Buddhism all over the known world. By introducing the same numerical figure, an analogy was built, and a lineage was assumed between the sage king of India and king Qian Chu of Wuyue. A chart is provided below to illustrate my point.

\[
\begin{array}{cccc}
\infty & \leftarrow & 84,000 & \leftarrow \text{several hundred} \leftarrow \text{one} \\
\text{[connotation]} & \text{[historical reference]} & \text{[actually reproduced]} & \text{["The one"]}
\end{array}
\]

According to the Buddhist doctrines (Huayan metaphysics, in particular), the Buddhist cosmos is indeed “an infinity of similarly structured universes.” It illustrates a world, in which the relationship between the parts and the whole is essential. In articulating such an abstract notion, concrete numbers like “84,000” became useful, for it helps one imagine the incredible and formless infinity. It also opens up the possibility to depict infinity in physical forms (and in particular numbers). (Comparable examples have come from Japan, Korea, and Liao.) Although not quite there yet, the number “eighty-four-thousand” is undeniably a big step towards infinity, compared to “dozens,” or “hundreds.” Theoretically, one can make precisely 84,000 copies of something to create an image of infinity. Yet, cognitive scientists have shown that people do not necessarily
count all the way toward large numbers. Beyond a certain point, one can no longer count, but would enter a realm of approximation. This then creates room for manipulation, as exemplified by Qian Chu’s “84,000 scrolls/pagodas” project.

II. Multiples of Buddha Śākyamuni

The second half of my paper discusses a particular (type of) Buddha statue, namely the Buddha Śākyamuni sculpture now enshrined in the Seiryō-ji Temple, Kyoto. The Buddha statue was commissioned in 985 by a Japanese Monk named Chōnen (938 - 1016), who came to China in 983 to learn the ‘true Buddhism.’ During his visit to the Qishengchanyuan Monastery in the Song capital, Bianjing (modern Kaifeng), Chōnen saw a Śākyamuni image modeled after the Buddha’s “first image,” a wooden image that was believed to have been commissioned by King Udāyana in India during Buddha’s lifetime. Upon his return to Taizhou in 985, a duplicate of the “Udāyana (version of Buddha) image” was commissioned, and subsequently transported to Japan in 986.

A number of devices were implemented to assume likeness of the image to Śākyamuni Buddha, including relics and organ models deposited inside the Buddha body. Besides, ink-written documents detailing the story about Chōnen’s visit to Bianjing and his encounter with the “Udāyana image” there also went into the consecratory deposit. The Seiryō-ji Buddha, therefore, did not only capture the features of a general living being, but also referred specifically back to Buddha Śākyamuni (via resemblance to the Udāyana image). Such emphasis on specificity or uniqueness contributed to the presence of Buddha Śākyamuni, and consequently Chōnen’s claim of authority in interpreting the Buddhist teachings to his peers in Japan.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Buddha Śākyamuni</th>
<th>Udāyana image</th>
<th>Seiryō-ji image</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>[The “one” (historical Buddha)]</td>
<td>[his “double”]</td>
<td>[(duplicate of) the double]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

No later than the middle of the thirteenth century, the Seiryō-ji Buddha image became a prime object for replication. Numerous copies of the single Buddha statue were
generated over time, forming a clearly and precisely defined lineage of iconography and replication.

The process whereby the sacred image was duplicated and worshipped in Japan is beyond the scope of this talk. But the image itself does raise a number of fascinating issues, including its implicit redefinition of the concept of mimesis, and the dichotomy between the copies and the original. If one accepts that mimesis is not merely the visual imitation of a prototype, but an exact replication of it, then the numerous copies of the Seiryō-ji Buddha are all the Seiryō-ji Buddha, which is itself linked to the first image of the Buddha, which was created in the historical Buddha’s presence. This chain of Buddhist sculptures not only refers back to the living Buddha, but through this chain are the Buddha. In a way, this chain of Buddhist sculptures can be thought of as a “set” or a “collection,” with a single ontological identity. This view undoubtedly destabilizes any strict distinction between the original and its copies.