



Chinese Buddhist Art and Architecture

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

Buddhism played a major role in dynastic China and influenced Chinese art. This lesson explores Chinese Buddhist art and architecture by looking at examples of both. Specifically, you will learn about:

1. Time Period and Location: Chinese Buddhist Art
2. Tang Dynasty
3. Longmen Caves
4. Pure Land Buddhism
5. Chinese Pagodas



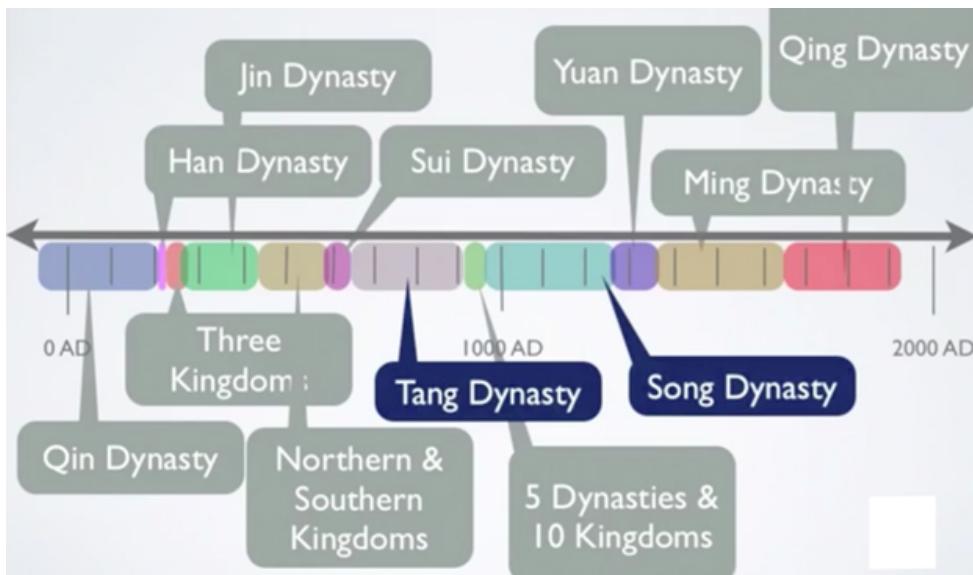
BIG IDEA

The Buddhist religion was very influential on the art and architecture of dynastic China.

1. Time Period and Location: Chinese Buddhist Art

During the Common Era, China was ruled by a succession of dynasties. This period of time stretched from after 0 CE to the early 20th century.

Below is a timeline highlighting a partial list of some of the ruling dynasties during this period.



Note that this is not a definitive list by any stretch, but rather an outline. Some of the dynasties on this list may stand out to you, such as the Qin dynasty, which is where the word “China” derives from. It’s the first one on the left. The Ming dynasty is known for the production of the white and blue porcelain vases that are named after it.

In this lesson, you will explore the art and architecture from two periods shown on the above timeline in blue: the Tang dynasty and the Song dynasty. The Song dynasty itself is actually broken up into two parts, the North and South.

China is a country that, along with Russia to the north and India to the south, comprises the majority of the Asian continent. Two locations covered today are Luoyang, China, and Foguang Pagoda, just a bit northeast. The **Silk Road**, which was named after one of the primary goods traded via this route, is shown on the map below. It was one of the most important means of cultural exchange throughout Asia as well as between Eastern and Western cultures. It actually passes right by the city of Luoyang.



TERM TO KNOW

Silk Road

A modern term that refers to the trade routes that linked Asia with the Mediterranean.

2. Tang Dynasty

The Tang dynasty succeeded the Sui dynasty and successfully reunited a broken China. The Tang dynasty subsequently became one of the most important periods of Chinese cultural development. It was also a time when Buddhism was the primary religion throughout China, and there was a proliferation of art with Buddhism as its theme.

3. Longmen Caves

The Longmen Caves are located in Luoyang, China, and feature sculptural relief that spans almost 1,000 years. In this lesson, you will explore some examples of monumental sculptural relief, specifically the Vairocana Buddha.

The Longmen Caves include approximately 2,300 niches and caves, 100,000 sculptures of the Buddha, 60 stupas, and 2,800 inscriptions. The Vairocana Buddha, included in a grouping of nine sculptures at the Fengxian Temple at Longmen, was very important to Buddhism in China. Vairocana was thought to be a universal buddha, with the historical buddha (Gautama/Shakamuni) being an emanation, or avatar-like version of him.

The Vairocana Buddha is one of the largest, if not the largest, sculptures of the Buddha, and it resides within an even larger, complex assortment of Buddhist iconography in these caves. “Vairocana” means “illuminator.” The Vairocana Buddha is the embodiment of wisdom and depicts the large figure of the Buddha in a lotus, or meditative, position. In this sculpture, the Buddha has a soft, serene smile, inspiring the nickname “Mona Lisa of the East.” This sculptural grouping was commissioned by Emperor Gaozong and is thought to be a portrait of his consort, who became the Empress Wu Zetian, the only female emperor in Chinese history, after his death.

Below is an image of the Vairocana Buddha, created during the Tang Dynasty, 618 CE to 907 CE.



Vairocana Buddha and Longmen Caves

Luoyang, China

618–907 CE (Tang Dynasty)



Panoramic photo of the Vairocana sculptural grouping

In the image that shows the **triad**, the Buddha is in the center. He is flanked on either side by disciples, who can be identified by their shaved heads, then **bodhisattvas**, then heavenly kings and guardians, with a number of clues indicating his identity. While his head lines up with the other figures in the grouping, he would be much larger if he stood up.



DID YOU KNOW

One way to tell the bodhisattvas and the Buddha apart, aside from their size and position, is in their depiction. The Buddha is shown wearing a topknot (how he wears his hair) and is in the meditative lotus position with his hands in mudras, which are symbolic hand gestures. The bodhisattvas look almost identical and stand on either side of the Buddha. While the devotees, bodhisattvas, and the Buddha all have serene facial expressions, the heavenly king and celestial guardian have muscular physiques, animated poses, and dramatic facial expressions, as seen in the image below:



Heavenly king (left) and celestial guardian (right) at the Fengxian Temple

Longmen Grottoes, China



TERMS TO KNOW

Triad

In Buddhism, an artistic grouping of three characters, usually Buddha in the center flanked by two bodhisattvas, but there could be some variation.

Bodhisattva

Someone who is capable of achieving enlightenment, but who is motivated by great compassion to assist others in their spiritual development.

4. Pure Land Buddhism

Buddhism is a religion that is composed of many different branches, all of which share a similar foundation and ancestry. Zen and Pure Land Buddhism are two of these branches. Unlike Zen Buddhism, adherents to Pure Land Buddhism believe that **enlightenment** cannot be achieved on your own but only through faith in a form of Buddha called **Amida Buddha**. Pure Land Buddhism is a version of Buddhism that had spread to China via Korea. The faithful could achieve enlightenment merely by chanting “Namu Amida Butsu,” or “Hail the Buddha Amida.” They would then be reborn into the Western Pure Land paradise over which the Amida Buddha presided.

Pure Land predates Zen Buddhism by about 350 years and arose during the Tang dynasty, quickly gaining a strong following.



DID YOU KNOW

There are two ways of referring to the same Buddha, Amida and Amitabha. Amida is more common in Japan, while Amitabha is more common in China.

→ EXAMPLE Below is an image of the Paradise of Amitabha:



Western Pure Land

Mogao Cave, north wall

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Paradise of Amitabha

Dunhuang, China

9th century CE

The above image is a 9th-century painting at the Mogao Grottoes in Dunhuang, China, a major stop on the Silk Road that consequently became a major site of Buddhist art. This is just one of many cave paintings at this particular site. Although the subject matter of these paintings is the Pure Land paradise, it also accurately depicts Tang dynasty architecture, which was made of wood. Because of frequent fires, almost none of this architecture has survived to the present day, so these paintings are important historical documents.



TERMS TO KNOW

Enlightenment

Also known as nirvana, the highest state of spiritual being in Buddhism, characterized primarily by a complete lack of worldly desire.

Amida Buddha

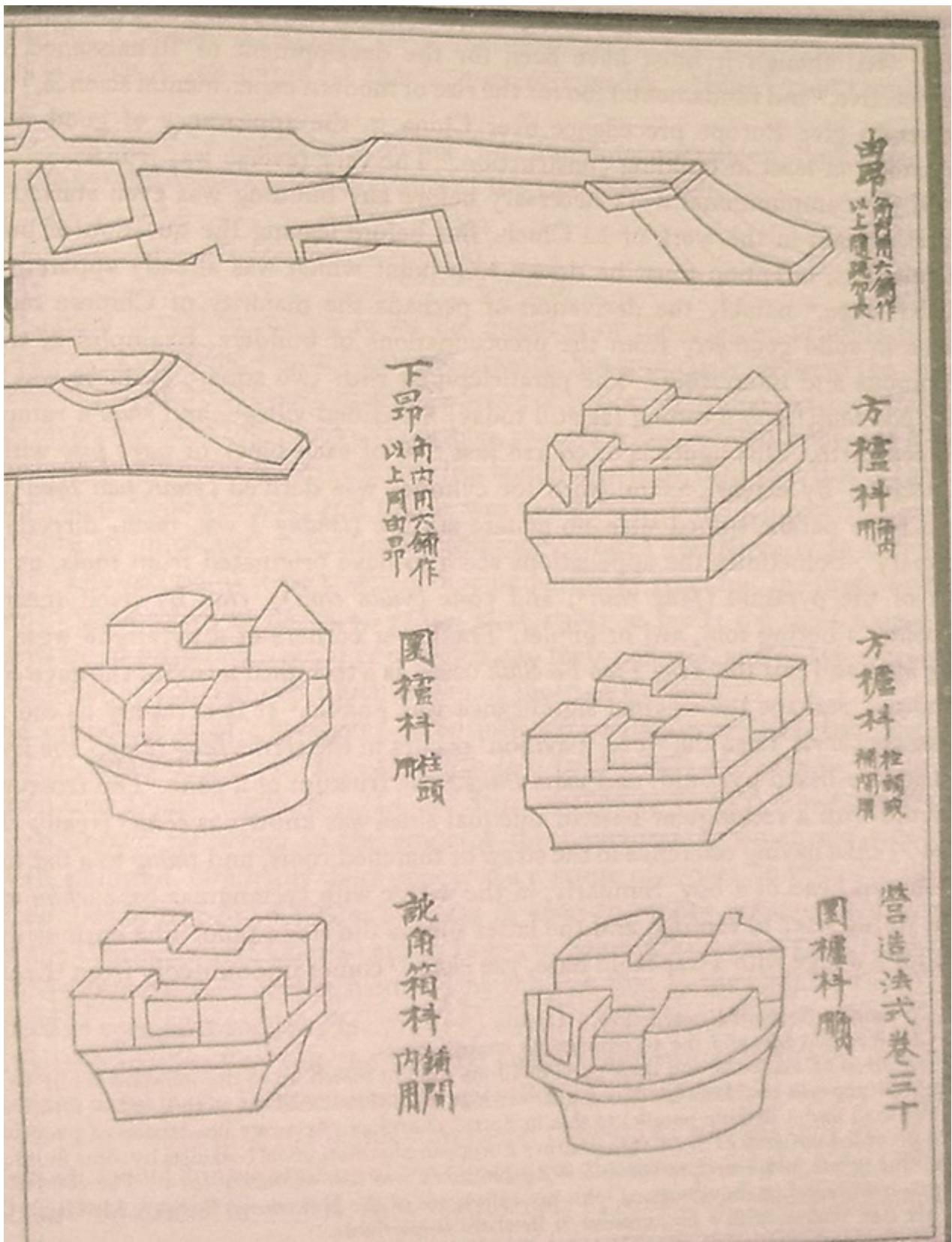
Principal Buddha in the Pure Land sect, practiced primarily in East Asia and known for longevity and possessing unlimited merits from good works over many past lives.

5. Chinese Pagodas

Remember that the veneration of sacred relics is an important part of Buddhism, as seen in the tutorial on the Great Stupa at Sanchi. The Chinese **pagoda** is a type of shrine that was developed, like the Indian stupa structures that preceded it, to house sacred Buddhist relics. The relics were housed under the foundation floor of the pagoda in many cases, sealed off from the rest of the structure, which also functioned as a Buddhist temple that could be entered, unlike the Indian stupa.

The pagodas were wooden structures and featured many innovative design elements, such as the post-and-lintel variant called dougong, which is a form of Chinese roof bracketing. Chinese wooden buildings featured curtain walls that were not load bearing. Instead, long pieces of wood supported their weight and tended to split over time. The dougong, made of intricately interlocking brackets, were far less prone to splitting. Lacking any sort of nails or glue to hold them together, dougong are like three-dimensional interlocking puzzle pieces. They allow for some shifting and movement, making them more earthquake-proof than other building techniques. They also made it possible to construct taller buildings, as seen with Chinese pagodas, which had multiple levels.

→ EXAMPLE Here's an example of dougong from the Foguang Temple, built during the Tang dynasty:



Roof brackets, or dougong, from the Foguang Temple, built in 857 CE

The Foguang Si Pagoda in Shanxi Province in China is a Buddhist temple and shrine. At about 216 feet tall, it is the tallest wooden structure ever made. It was constructed in 1056 during the Northern Song dynasty, and it is

an octagonal design with column supports in the corners of that octagon. This structure is symmetrically balanced and supported by the use of 60 giant, four-tiered brackets that hold the structure together.

→ EXAMPLE Here is an image of the Foguang Si Pagoda in Shanxi Province in China:



Foguang Si Pagoda

Shanxi Province, China

1056 CE

If you look at the walls or the sides of the octagon, you will see that these were not load bearing. Actually, all the weight is channeled into the columns that you can't see, that are in the corners of the octagon.



TERM TO KNOW

Pagoda

A Chinese tower with multiple tiers and a bracketed wooden roof; it is based loosely on the idea of an Indian stupa.



SUMMARY

Buddhism had a significant role in dynastic China, influencing the artwork from this area and period. In this lesson, you began by looking at the **time period and location of Chinese Buddhist art**. The **Tang dynasty** became one of the most important periods of Chinese cultural development when it reunited a broken China.

You learned about the **Longmen Caves**, home to the Vairocana Buddha, one of the largest examples of sculpture of the Buddha within an even larger, complex assortment of Buddhist iconography. You also learned that Buddhism is a religion that is composed of different branches, Zen and **Pure Land Buddhism** being two of these branches.

Finally, you explored the **Chinese pagodas**, a type of shrine that was developed, like the Indian stupa structures that preceded it, to house sacred Buddhist relics.



TERMS TO KNOW

Amida Buddha

Principal Buddha in the Pure Land sect, practiced primarily in East Asia and known for longevity and possessing unlimited merits from good works over many past lives.

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