

Archaeologists Unearth China's Earliest Bronze Buddha Statues

RAYMOND LAM

Archaeologists have discovered two of China's oldest gold-plated, bronze sculptures of Buddhas to date in northwestern Shaanxi Province. *Xinhua* reported that the antiquities were excavated in Chengren Village, in modern Xianyang City.

Researchers with the Shaanxi Academy of Archaeology believe that the statues date back to the Eastern Han Dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE), and were found in a clan cemetery with six tombs.

These sculptures date back two centuries earlier than previous discoveries of Buddhist sculptures, and experts once thought that they had not appeared until the era of

the Sixteen Kingdoms (304–439 CE).

One of the statues is made in the apparent mould of Shakyamuni Buddha, while the other is of five Buddhas.

According to *CGTN*, the total height of the Shakyamuni statue is 10.5 centimetres, the diameter of the base it sits on is 4.7 centimetres, and the total height of the Five Buddhas is 15.8 centimetres and the width is 6.4 centimetres.

Strikingly, they seem to have been made locally by Chinese artisans in the Gandharan style. Gandhara was a Central Asian region that pioneered one of the earliest styles of Buddhist art under the rule of the Indo-Greeks, Indo-Scythians, Indo-Parthians, and Kushans. According to *CGTN*, this conclu-



sion of their provenance was based on, "preliminary results of the modelling characteristics, manufacturing process analysis and metal composition detection of the Buddhas." This means that the statues, already priceless in their heritage, hold critical research value for the introduction and Sinicisation of Buddhist culture.

"The findings show that Buddhism spread to China from South Asia via the ancient Silk Road during the boom time, of this cultural exchange route—that is, the Han Dynasty," a representative for the Shaanxi Academy of Archaeology told *Deutsche Welle*.

From June 2020 to November 2021, the Shaanxi Academy of Archaeology has excavated 3,648 tombs and 16,000 sets of artefacts in Xianyang. Its teams are working on the Hongduyuan cemetery site, which is to the north of Xi'an, once known as Chang'an, the capital of the Tang Dynasty (618–907).

The tombs and artefacts discovered at Hongduyuan span a history of 2,200 years, from the Warring

States period (475 BC–221 BC) to the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911).

Hongduyuan's large number of tombs, the high quality of the items found at the site, and the extensive duration of these items' dynastic provenances are unprecedented in the country. Li Ming, a researcher with the Shaanxi Academy of Archaeology, said: "The owner of the graveyard was possibly a county official or landlord, who had certain family influence and economic might," *Xinhua* reported.

According to *CGTN*, most of those buried in the tombs are found

to be royal relatives, senior officials and dignitaries, all recorded in historical books. It is highly likely that these sculptures were part of the owner's funerary and religious paraphernalia, indicating that he was aware of the Buddhist religion and perhaps its teachings.

The Buddha images formed part of a lay devotee's collection that, along with his large family tomb, boasted to posterity his wealth and status, fine taste, and spiritual piety.

The excavation continues.

(*Buddhist Door*)