

Kumārajīva and the Sandalwood Image (Tib. Tsan dan jo bo)

When he was thirty-eight years old, The Buddha Śākyamuni is said to have ascended to Trayastriṃśa Heaven in order to pay his respects to his deceased mother Māyādevī and he spent the three-month summer retreat there instructing Indra, his mother, and the gods in the Dharma. Deeply missing Śākyamuni during his absence, King Udayana of Kosambī (Skt. Kauśāmbī) had made a sandalwood image of Śākyamuni, and this is believed to have been the first image of the Buddha. It became known as the sandalwood image, on account of its material and as King Udayana's image of yearning on account of its origins, and it is known from Xuanzang's *Da Tang xiyuji* and other works to have been long and widely revered in India.

In China there evolved a belief that this sandalwood image had been brought to China by the translator Kumārajīva and his father, Kumārāyana, and a cult centred on it began to flourish during the period of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms (10th cent.). The Japanese monk Chōnen worshipped it at Kaifeng, the capital of the Northern Song, and brought a copy back with him to Japan, which was then enshrined at Seiryōji Temple and became known as the Seiryōji Śākyamuni image.

Meanwhile, after the fall of the Northern Song the original sandalwood image was installed in the capital cities of successive dynasties and continued to be widely worshipped. During the Qing dynasty a temple called Zhantansi (Sandalwood Temple) was built in Beijing to house this image, resulting in an upsurge of devotion, and the emperor Kangxi, for example, sent a special message of felicitation to the temple. Throughout the Qing dynasty Zhantansi was under the supervision of the dGe-lugs-pas, with many pilgrims from Tibet and Mongolia also coming to worship here. So, this type of standing image of Śākyamuni is known as the “venerable sandalwood image” (tsan dan jo bo) in Tibet and was the object of special devotion.

The sandalwood image remained in Beijing until the final years of the Qing dynasty, but during the Boxer Rebellion in 1900 Zhantansi suffered shelling by foreign forces and was destroyed by fire, and the sandalwood image is said either to have shared the temple's fate or to have been carried off to Russia as booty. Today there is a sandalwood image in Ulan-Ude in the Buryat Republic, and some local Buddhists maintain that this is the original sandalwood image, which was presented to them by the Russian czar.

Although being not a historical fact, the sandalwood image exerted great influence not only on Chinese but also on Japanese, Tibetan and Mongolian Buddhist art. In this paper, after briefly introducing the preceeding studies on the sandalwood image in Japan, China and Europe, I will present my own study on it.