

The Arhats and Their Legacy in the Visual Arts of East Asia

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Abstract: In East Asian art we often encounter the representation of arhats (Skt. those who are worthy), a type of Buddhist saintly figure, in groups of sixteen, eighteen or 500. When we look at visual representations of arhats in China, Korea and Japan, we can see some special features that make us consider how the concept, grouping, form and style of their representation has formed and changed in China, Korea and Japan.

Some popular themes in East Asia show a very strong connection with arhat representations, such as representations of Bodhidharma, the first Chan patriarch, and the representation of the ‘lonely saint’ (Toksöng) in Korea’s Buddhist monasteries, which often refers to the arhat Piṇḍola Bharadvāja, one of the disciples of Śākyamuni Buddha.

Iconography: Inspiration from Existing Patterns

Even for those familiar with images of East Asia, it is sometimes very difficult to name depicted figures in cases where the images lack inscriptions, especially in the late phases of the development of certain iconographies. This is due to the tendency to use pre-existing patterns and give them new meanings, as was the case in Western culture during the early middle ages when the pagan Apollo figure was used to represent Jesus Christ. Rather than inventing completely new imagery, it is easier to proceed by combining existing intellectual and religious forms. Therefore, we often find that artists used previous visual models, rather than textual sources, as primary forms of inspiration. In many cases, these textual sources themselves were also inspired by previous visual representations. As the meaning of a depicted figure changed in society and in the mind of the artist, certain forms inevitably merged, and artists produced new pictorial representations. It is very important to identify the earlier forms of images, because they can give us vital clues to the history of certain iconographic types.

When we look at two examples, one of Bodhidharma, the founder of Chan Buddhism, and the depictions of the so called 'Lonely Saint' in Korea's Buddhist monasteries, we can see how these representations are connected to the original ideas and depictions of the arhats. We can see how these representations were cut off from different contexts to form new meanings or give emphasis to certain aspects in their respective societies.

Arhats

The word 'arhat' means worthy for offerings, which is also reflected in the Chinese translations of this name, 應 *yīng* (grant with) + 供 *gōng* (offerings), but we can also find other translations such as 'who won't be reborn' 不生 or 'true man' 真人.¹ The Chinese pronounce

¹ De Visser, *The Arhats*, 6.

their name as *ālúóhàn* or *luóhàn* 阿羅漢, 羅漢. In Japanese it is pronounced as *rakan*, and in Korean *nahan* or *arahan*. Usually arhats are mentioned in groups of 500, sixteen, and eighteen, from which the oldest form is the grouping of 500.

De Visser has collected early Buddhist texts that discuss arhats,² and concluded that this number is just an indicator of their vast number.³

The most important and most cited source is the *Record of the Duration of the Law Explained by the Great Arhat Nandimitra* which was written by Nandimitra (Ch. Qinyou; Jp. Keiyū; Kor. Kyōngu 慶友) in the second century Sri Lanka. It was translated to Chinese by Xuanzang 玄奘 in 654 as *Record of the Abiding Law as Spoken by the Great lohan Nandimitra* (*Da Aluohan Nandimiduoluo Suoshuo Fazhuji* 大阿羅漢難提蜜多羅所說法住記 [Skt. Nandimitrāvadāna], commonly known as *Fazhuji* 法住記).⁴ This source names and introduces a group of sixteen arhats according to their realms. It also explains how Buddha entrusted the arhats with the protection of Buddhist teachings.

There are a great deal of inconsistencies in the naming of arhats. Some say the arhats were originally Buddha's personal disciples. However, only five from the group of Buddha's 100 disciples, and only one of the Buddha's ten personal disciples (Rāhula) is mentioned in the list of the sixteen arhats. When twenty-nine arhats are named in the group of 500, among them only four are in the list of the sixteen arhats (Piṇḍola Bharadvāja, Vakula, Cūdapanthaka and

² De Visser, *The Arhats*, 21–28.

³ At Mahākāśyapa's First General Council, held at Rājagṛha (selecting 500 arhats) in 241 BCE, Ashoka summons 500 arhats and 500 monks. In 100 CE at the Third General Council under King Kanishka's patronage there are also 500 arhats; 500 arhats are mentioned at the Anavatapa Lake (as Buddha's principal disciples), and there is a story about 500 blind beggars who became arhats. These accounts are among the earliest sources. There are 500 arhats living in the caves of Buddhavanagiri at Rājagṛha in the texts at the time of Xuanzang in the seventh century CE.

⁴ Fong, *The Lohans*, 35.

Rāhula).⁵ In the *Lotus sūtra*, from the 500 arhats only eleven are named, but only Vakula is amongst the names of the sixteen. In the Mahāyāna Vātaraka Śāstra, which was translated to Chinese in the Northern Liang dynasty (397–439), only the names of Piṇḍola and Rahula appear.⁶

As arhats are originally Hīnayānistic in their character, Lévi and Chavannes believe that arhats were appropriated by the Mahāyānists, giving the arhats a Mahāyānistic character.⁷

Wen Fong discusses the appearance of the Hīnayānistic arhats in Mahāyāna Buddhism, explaining that the Mahāyānists may have intended to show the hierarchically lower status of arhats compared to the bodhisattvas.⁸ For an example, see the famous parable of the burning house in the *Lotus sūtra*.⁹ The appearance of the Hīnayānistic arhats in the Mahāyāna pantheon can be connected to certain Hīnayānistic sūtras (*Ekottara-āgama sūtra* and the *Sāriputra-paripṛcchā sūtra*) which introduce that how four śrāvakas (arhats who heard Buddha's teachings) who stayed in this world are connected to the

⁵ De Visser, *The Arhats*, 197.

⁶ De Visser, 198.

⁷ Lévi and Chavannes, 'Les seize arhats', 205–75.

⁸ Fong, *The Lohans*, 28.

⁹ 'Supposing a man finds his children trapped in a fire, and ignorant as they are, the children refuse to come out of the burning house. To induce them to escape, the man calls to the children and promises them three desirable toys: one bullock-cart, one goat-cart and one deer-cart. But after the children rushed out of the house for the sake of their desired toys, the man offers them all bullock-carts, which are the most magnificent of all carts.' (Fong, *The Lohans*, 28–29). This is likened to the Tathāgatha (...) in order to attract the creatures from this world which is likened to a burning house showing three vehicles (the vehicle of the disciples, the vehicle of the pratyekabuddhas and the vehicle of the bodhisattvas). 'Those who covet the vehicle of the disciples (arhats) are likened to the boys who desire a cart yoked with deer; similarly the vehicle of the pratyekabuddhas is likened to the cart yoked with goats, and the great vehicle of the bodhisattvas mahāsattvas is likened to the great cart yoked with bullocks' (Fong, *The Lohans*, 29).

coming of Maitreya, the future Buddha. Maitreya, who becomes the future Buddha, who is the only bodhisattva recognized by the Pāli canon, and therefore this link can connect both Hīnayānistic and Mahāyānistic ideas. Maitreya becomes very important in the Mahāyānistic *Lotus sutra* in the second-third centuries CE, and the other bodhisattvas (Avalokiteśvara, Mañjuśrī etc.) become prominent only afterwards.¹⁰

When arhats are in a group of sixteen, we can see this as a multiplication of the four directions to protect Buddhist teachings. The cult of the arhats originated in India, and there we can find a separate cult with the rite 'Inviting Piṇḍola' (offering Piṇḍola, one of Buddha's disciples a bath and a feast). This cult appears in the Chinese translation *Qing Binduluo Fa* 請賓度羅法, and remains for us in a detailed eighteenth century Japanese description.

In Tibet, Mongolia, and Chinese Lamaism the sixteen arhats are sorted in a different order, and sometimes two other individuals are added to their group (Dharmatrāta and the 'Big bellied Buddha').¹¹

In China, the cult of the 500 arhats flourished around Tiantai Shan 天台山, where the 500 arhats in the Buddhavanagiri caves served as a model. From time to time these arhats appeared as monks among ordinary people. The earliest mention of the cult is from the tenth century *Song Gaoseng zhuan* 宋高僧傳 (Life of eminent monks in the Song era).

De Visser mentions the earliest visual representations as being made in the fifth to sixth centuries, where clay sculptures and paintings of arhats in groups were made, but only tenth century copies and textual descriptions remain for our study.¹²

One of the most important representations were made by the monk Guanxiu 貫休 (832–912), who took his inspiration from his dreams when depicting the extraordinary-looking arhats with exaggerated features as sitting under trees or meditation in caves.

The sixteen named arhats and the additional two arhats that form

¹⁰ Fong, *The Lohans*, 31–33.

¹¹ De Visser, *The Arhats*, 62–78.

¹² De Visser, 103.

the group of eighteen are easier to identify, but when representing the 500 arhats, artists could use many different sources and visual patterns. We can trace the appearance of Emperors like Liang Wu, and later the Qing emperors (Kang Xi and Qian Long), and even the famous European traveller Marco Polo, in the sixteenth century onwards in some Chinese monasteries!¹³

Chan Buddhists had a great affinity for arhats. The cult of the 500 arhats was popular among Rinzai and Ōbaku Zen in Japan, while Sōtō Zen preferred the representation of the sixteen arhats.

When they represented their founder, Bodhidharma, they used the models available from arhat representations.

Iconography of Bodhidharma

Bodhidharma, the legendary founder of Chan Buddhism, is believed to have lived around the fifth to sixth centuries, but the earliest surviving images about him can be dated only to the eleventh and twelfth centuries.¹⁴ Two distinct iconographic types appeared in China and later became entangled with each other. One is a beardless figure, and the other, a more popular representation, shows Bodhidharma as a hairy, bearded man with a stocky build and exaggerated foreign features, often wearing a hood. The majority of Bodhidharma images are half-body or bust portraits. The remaining group includes full-body portraits, where we can differentiate between standing and sitting images. Among the standing images, we can find Bodhidharma crossing the Yangzi River on a reed, carrying one shoe or sandal, a combination of the two themes, or sometimes free of any such objects.

Among the sitting images, Bodhidharma can be found in a chair (especially in the earliest periods), sitting in meditation, in a landscape, or entirely removed from time and space, with no background or sense of surroundings. The landscape setting varies. For instance, there

¹³ De Visser, *The Arhats*, 139.

¹⁴ Mecsei, 'Bodhidharma', 178–82.

are examples of Bodhidharma in a cave (a more common version),¹⁵ or sitting under a tree.¹⁶ According to the type of representation, we can differentiate between en-face, three-quarter profile, profile portraits, and representations showing Bodhidharma from behind. Within the simplified profile and back portraits set against a timeless and empty background, a specific iconographic type developed: the 'one-brush-stroke Bodhidharma'. Together with the circle (Jp. *ensō*), this type of image had an interesting religious-spiritual significance in *Chan* Buddhism. Depending on the context, there are single Bodhidharma pictures, as well as pictures that form part of a group. There are some examples which represent him on the middle panel of a triptych. Among these, the oldest type is the group representation.

When we trace the origin of Bodhidharma iconography, it is evident that it has its sources in earlier or contemporaneous arhat paintings, as if one of those figures had been selected and represented separately. There is also a possibility that Bodhidharma was represented in the group of the 500 arhats. This can be seen very clearly on a set of paintings representing the 500 arhats in groups where one of the paintings shows a figure crossing the river on a reed. This representation corresponds very well to separate representations of Bodhidharma (Figure 1). Bodhidharma is believed to be a kind of arhat, so this similarity is unsurprising. Interestingly, the reed as a tool for crossing the river only appeared in the thirteenth century in textual sources, so here we can witness a tendency to include details in legends which previously existed only in the visual media, or possibly in oral traditions.¹⁷

¹⁵ Apart from the fact that cave temples were common in India and China, their symbolism also plays a role in the interpretation of Bodhidharma imagery. See the explanation in the esoteric Sōtō Zen's kirigami tradition as being a womb in the Sangai Isshinki (ca. 1644) by the Zen master Dairyū. (Imaeda, *Zenshū*, 179–80.)

¹⁶ Sitting under a tree is a reference to Shakyamuni Buddha's enlightenment. But the activity is also associated with Buddha's contemporary, Mahavira (599 BCE to 527 BCE), the founder of Jainism (Eliade, *Vallási*, 71).

¹⁷ Mecsi, 'The Power', 218–20.



FIG. 1 Zhou Jichang (Chinese, second half of twelfth century): Arhats crossing the river. 111.5 x 53.1 cm, Ink and colour on silk. About 1178. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (From the collection of Buddhist monastery Daitokuji, Kyoto, Japan).



FIG. 2 Toksöng painting (on the left), Samsöng hall in Odaesan, Woljōngsa. Photo by Beatrix Mecsi.

The Mysterious ‘Lonely Saint’ in Korea

In Chosŏn Korea (1432–1910), where Confucian ideology suppressed Buddhism, new iconographies appeared, and we can observe a special syncretism. From the seventeenth century onwards we can trace a special figure, called Toksöng or Naban jonja, who is usually represented as a monk in a landscape setting full of symbols of immortality. His figure is usually enshrined together with shamanist and Daoist images, thus making a special connection with those practices (Figure 2).

This connection is especially strong with them, since he is used in the same fashion: for real-world benefits and for long life. Scholars usually interpreted this figure within the framework of Korean folk religion and Daoism.¹⁸ If we look for its Buddhist sources, however, we can identify from these features the Indian Buddhist saint Piṇḍola Bhadravāja, one of the foremost pupils of Śākyamuni Buddha.¹⁹ We can

¹⁸ Zo, *Guardians*.

¹⁹ He is called Pinturo in Korea.

still see and identify this particular arhat, Piṇḍola Bharadvāja, in Korea in groups of sixteen or 500,²⁰ but as we have mentioned earlier, he was also worshipped as a separate figure from very early times; as we have evidence that the cult of Piṇḍola was existent in fifth century CE China.²¹ Because he has associations with magic and longevity, staying on Earth until the coming of Maitreya, he became surrounded by longevity symbols and placed together with Daoist and folk-deities in Korea.

This form of enshrinement is unique to Korea. In Japan, Piṇḍola is conceived as a healing saint and his figure is usually represented in a sculpted form outside the halls of Buddhist temples from the Edo period onwards. Images from both Korea and Japan depict Piṇḍola as an approachable and very human figure who is an intermediary to holier and more psychologically-distant Buddha-realms. This feature is supported by background religious texts which discuss Piṇḍola as not entering Nirvana, but living on Earth instead. In this way, he maintains a unique direct living connection with the historical Buddha Śākyamuni, whom he used to see face-to-face. Therefore, the identification of this figure with an arhat is very possible. It shows the legacy of arhat representations in places where those making offerings may not know this aspect, but fulfilling the original meaning of ‘arhat’.²²

²⁰ The difference in visual representation between Pinturo in Korea and Toksōng is that when Pinturo is represented, he is usually shown in the group of arhats, but very often his longer eyebrows make him identifiable within the group. When he is represented as ‘Toksōng’, he is shown alone within a landscape setting referring to immortality.

²¹ A Chinese translation of the text ‘Method of Inviting Pindola’ dated to 457 can prove this. *T.* 1689 no. 32, 784b–c (Kent, *The Sixteen*, 16, note 11).

²² Even at the turn of the twentieth century, this arhat is said to have served as the figure of inspiration for the Wandering Jew mythology in Europe. According to the Japanese scholar Minakata Kumagusu (1867–1941), the legend of Piṇḍola reportedly influenced the European legend of the ‘Wandering Jew’. This connects not only Buddhist traditions with Daoist and folk-religions in Asian countries, but also reaches the Western world and colours myths and legends related to Christianity. Minakata, ‘The Wandering Jew’, 123; Losonczi, ‘A bolygó zsidó legendájának eredete’.

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