

Enquiring the two transcendent Buddha statues of Cham art belonging to the Vijaya state in the 11th to 13th centuries

Tìm hiểu hai pho tượng Phật Chăm bằng đá thuộc Tiểu quốc Vijaya thế kỷ 11-13

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ABSTRACT

Although the stone sitting Buddha statue from the Thủ Thiện temple has been documented by French scholars since the early 20th century, the Buddha figure currently on display at the Đà Nẵng Museum of Cham Sculpture remains a mystery in Cham Buddhist art from the 11th to 13th centuries. In addition to the other stone Buddha statue in meditation position on display at the Museum of Fine Arts in Ho Chi Minh City, these masterpieces are a challenge for modern Cham Buddhist art historians. This paper will argue that the Thủ Thiện's Buddha image is Amoghasiddhi based on his hand gesture in *abhaya-mudrā* (gesture of fearlessness); while the other one is Vairocana with his hand gesture in *bodhyāgrī-mudrā* (the fist of wisdom). These two transcendent Buddhas may lead to the assumption that esoteric Buddhism was once practiced in the Campā kingdom during the Vijaya art period in the 11th to 13th centuries. It may also indicate the cultural relationships between Campā and the other Buddhist states during the time of esoteric Buddhism spreading throughout the entire Maritime Asia.

Pho tượng Phật ngồi bằng đá thuộc di tích Thủ Thiện, Bình Định, đã được các học giả Pháp tìm thấy vào đầu thế kỷ 20; sau đó, tuyệt phẩm này đã được chuyển về trưng bày tại Bảo tàng Điều khắc Chăm Đà Nẵng, tuy nhiên pho tượng này vẫn ẩn chứa nhiều bí ẩn chưa được tìm hiểu cho đến nay. Ngoài ra, một tuyệt tác điêu khắc đá khác cũng thể hiện đức Phật ngồi trong tư thế thiền định, đang trưng bày tại Bảo tàng Mỹ thuật Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh cũng thuộc thời kỳ Vijaya vào thế kỷ 11-13. Cả hai pho tượng vẫn còn là một thử thách đối với các nhà nghiên cứu nghệ thuật Campā trong việc thẩm định nội hàm của chúng. Tiểu luận này đặt giả thiết bức tượng Thủ Thiện là hình ảnh của đức Phật Amoghasiddhi dựa trên tạo hình ấn quyết *abhaya-mudrā* (vô úy thí); đồng thời giả định rằng đức Phật của Bảo tàng Mỹ Thuật TPHCM là Vairocana dựa trên ấn quyết *bodhyāgrī-mudrā* (trí huệ ấn). Hai pho tượng Phật này đưa đến nhận định rằng Phật giáo Mật tông từng được thực hành phổ biến tại vương quốc Campā vào thời kỳ Vijaya thế kỷ 11-13. Nhận định đó đồng thời phác họa mối liên hệ Phật giáo giữa Campā và các quốc gia khác trong suốt thời kỳ Phật giáo Mật tông phát triển, dựa trên mạng lưới hải thương châu Á đương thời.

Keywords: Campā Kingdom, Vijaya State, Esoteric Buddhist sculptures, Amoghasiddhi, Vairocana | Vương quốc Campā, tiểu quốc Vijaya, điêu khắc Phật giáo Mật tông, Amoghasiddhi, Vairocana

The sandstone sitting Buddha at the Museum of Fine Arts in Ho Chi Minh City

The sandstone sitting Buddha sculpture is currently on display with the accession number BTMT.203 and was believed to be a Buddhist sculpture originated from southern Vietnam, dating to the 12th century as reflected in the artifact annotation at the Museum of Fine Arts in Ho Chi Minh City (MFA-HCMC). However, the sculpture was sourced from the History Museum in Ho Chi Minh City (HM-HCMC), and was documented with accession number BTLS.6000, and described as headless and location unknown in the HM-HCMC's archives in June 1983; it was then moved to enrich collections of the MFA-HCMC in 1986, and has been integrated into the MFA-HCMC collections since it officially opened in 1989¹. The sitting Buddha statue is made of sandstone, dimensions are 64 cm high, 61 cm wide, and 40 cm deep.

The Buddha image wears a thin robe draped over the left shoulder, leaving the right shoulder bare, with the drooping edges created by successive thin ridges; the entire folds of his robes on his body are finely sculpted in vertical lines, as can be seen on his legs. Meanwhile, the robe is clinging to the body, revealing the body curves underneath, this style is sometimes called the 'wet look'.

He sits in the *sattvaparyāṅka* posture with the right leg on top of the left; his seat is a single-tiered lotus with delicately carved round lotus petals; he holds his hands at chest level as a *mudrā*, notably that the three middle fingers of the right are interlocked between the two middle fingers of the left, the remaining fingers interlaced as natural (Figures 1 and 2).



Fig. 1 The Buddha statue on display at MFA-HCMC. Photo: Nguyễn Thị Tú Anh.

¹ I would like to thank the authority of History Museum in Ho Chi Minh City for this information.



Fig. 2 Hand gestures seen from the front, right and left side of the statue. Photo: Nguyễn Thị Tú Anh.

Stylistically, the hand gestures were first documented in the Buddha sculpture found in the *Đông Dương vihāra* by French scholars in 1902 (Figures 3 and 4); the gesture has been called *bodhyāgrī-mudrā*, also known as the gesture of the ‘peak of enlightenment’. This typical *mudrā* is a symbol of Jina Vairocana as seen in some Buddhist traditions in East Asia; for example, the colossal bronze Buddha of the United Silla period remains in the Kyôngju area in Korea, dating back to the latter half of the 8th century; the term ‘*bodhyāgrī-mudrā*’ has thus become familiar to scholars whenever referring to the *mudrā* of Vairocana of Buddhist visual art in their works (Snellgrove 1978: 235, plates 180).

Despite the assumption of uncertain terminology mentioned in the archival photograph of a colossal body of Jina Vairocana in *bodhyāgrī-mudrā*² or *vajra-mudrā*, the *bodhyāgrī-mudrā*³ with interlocking hands was probably familiar to the Cham craftsmen from the 9th century onwards (Baptiste 2019: 345–346). Since then, the Cham esoteric Buddhist traditional art has perhaps been slightly adapted in the later centuries, such as the Buddha statue of the MFA-HCMC.

This *mudrā* also suggests the title for this sculpture as Jina Vairocana with his hands held in *bodhyāgrī-mudrā*, positioned in the center of a *Vajradhātu-maṇḍala*, who is the original of the five transcendent Buddhas of esoteric Buddhism (Kiyota 1968: 31–39). Its specific art stylistic and material can be assumed to be one of the works originating from the workshops in the ancient Campā Vijaya state in the 12th to 13th centuries.

² Vietnamese: trí huệ ấn; Chinese: 智慧印

³ Vietnamese: trí quyền ấn; Chinese: 智拳印



Fig. 3 Archival photograph of a colossal body of Buddha Vairocana (?) in *bodhyāgrī-mudrā* among architectural fragments at Đồng Dương. **Source:** École française d'Extrême-Orient, Paris, fonds Vietnam VIE 00344_b.



Fig. 4 Detailed the Buddha Vairocana (?), in *bodhyāgrī-mudrā*, dated back to late of the 9th century (c. 875 CE); being looted from the Đồng Dương vihāra, Quảng Nam. Photo: Courtesy of P. Baptiste.

The sitting sandstone Buddha at the Đà Nẵng Museum of Cham Sculpture (DNMCS)

The headless Buddha sculpture was found by Lucien Escalère in 1935 at a site belonging to Thủ Thiện village, Bình Nghi commune, Tây Sơn district, Bình Định province; this site was located near the Thủ Thiện temple in the Cham Vijaya state; Escalère thus suspected the Thủ Thiện temple was a Buddhist monument based on this sculpture and many other works found at this site (Chronique de l'année 1935: 471). The statue's dimensions are 72 cm high, 80 cm wide, and 47 cm deep; and it is made of grey sandstone (Figure 5).



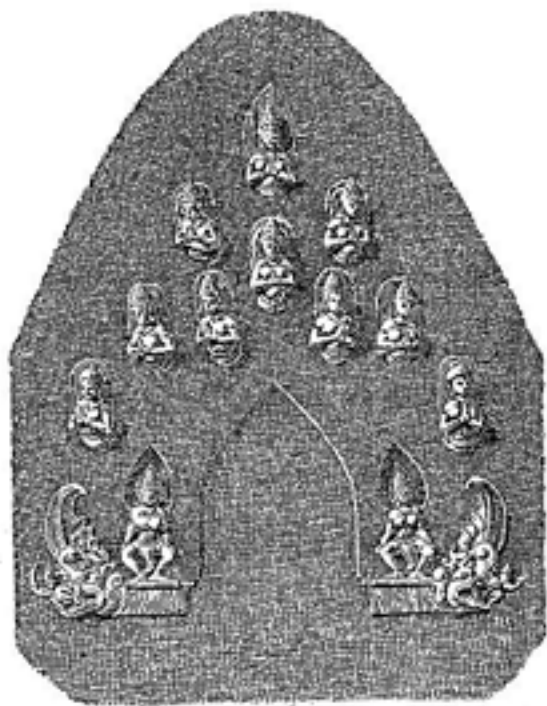
Fig. 5 The Buddha statue found at the Thủ Thiện temple on display at DNMCS. **Photo:** Nguyễn Thị Tú Anh.

That suspicion is supported by Jean Boisselier (1963: 275–277) with his assumption that this Buddha statue may belong to the Thủ Thiện temple; Boisselier (*ibid.*) strengthened the relationship between the Buddha statue and the Thủ Thiện temple by making comparisons with the sandstone carving high altarpiece adorned on the western interior brick wall of Thủ Thiện temple (Parmentier 1909: 179–184, plate 124), including:

1/ Ten images of bodhisattvas are arranged in a pointed arc; those are bust figures with their hands folded across their chests, their heads wearing four-tiered *kirīṭa-mukūṭa*, and jewellery around the neck, shoulders and wrists (Figure 6). The ten bodhisattvas appearing in the altarpiece perhaps symbolize the ten Earths of enlightenment (*daśabhūmi*) mentioned in esoteric canonical scriptures (Wayman and Tajima 1992: 303–5);

2/ Two Inner Offering Bodhisattvas (?) standing in god pose with two hands resting on knees, behind are two layers of pointed halo, wearing four-tiered *kirīṭa-mukūṭa* on the head; jewellery around the neck and arms (Figure 7);

3/ Two *makara* heads with a figure holding a sword appear in their mouth, reflecting a traditional style of the Đồng Dương Buddhist art (Baptiste 2019: 347, fig. 7)⁴. It should be noted that the high altarpiece of Thủ Thiện temple is the only work remaining in Cham art.



RETABLE DE THỦ THIÊN.
Échelle approximative: 0 m. 010 par mètre.

Fig. 6 Sandstone altarpiece installed on the western interior brick wall of Thủ Thiện temple. **Source:** Parmentier, 1909.



Fig. 7 An Inner Offering Bodhisattva adorned the altarpiece of Thủ Thiện temple. The 12th to 13th centuries; sandstone, 71 cm high. **Source:** website of the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco.

⁴ The Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, 1994: 66–67.

There is a close relationship in the art stylistic between the Buddha image and the sandstone carving altarpiece of the Thủ Thiện temple, as mentioned above (Boisselier 1963: 275–277), they may belong to the transitional period between the Chánh Lộ and Tháp Mẫm art styles, around the 11th to 12th centuries, although Boisselier (1963: *ibid.*) found dating the sculpture a challenge because the statue’s head was lost as a key detail reflecting the art stylistic of each art period. According to Henri Parmentier (1909: 181, 444), there is a similarity between the high altarpiece in the interior of Thủ Thiện temple and those of the main temple (or *Tour principale* in French) as well as the pillared hall of the Đồng Dương Buddhist monastery; these are the sole altarpieces of Cham art. Those considerations indicate that the Thủ Thiện temple was probably a Buddhist monastery (Figure 8).



Fig. 8 Thủ Thiện temple is in Tây Sơn district, Bình Định province. Brick and sandstone, the 11th to 13th centuries. **Photo:** Nguyễn Thị Tú Anh.

The proto-Indian art style reflects the contemporary Southeast Asian Buddhist sculptural fashion with outstretched knees, as explained by Boisselier (1963: 275–276), along with the design of thinly *sattvaparyāṅka* curving lotus petals adorning the pedestal, reflecting a Cham ancient tradition. Although the *sattvaparyāṅka* posture and lotus pedestal are the first noticeable similarities between the Thủ Thiện Buddha and the Buddha of MFA-HCMC, this statue also details various features.

The Thủ Thiện Buddha’s robe reveals the right half of the chest; the robe’s edge is folded and draped over the left shoulder; the draperies are carved horizontally, showing a classic fashion technique that can be seen from the Buddha’s robes of Đồng Dương. It is important to identify the title of this Buddha sculpture, thereby assuming the relationship between the two Buddha statues. The Buddhist scriptures will first be used to interpret this matter. In theory, the five sections in which each of the Jīna⁵ (Tathāgata or Buddha) dwells symbolize a Vajradhātu-*maṇḍala* (Thunderbolt Realm-*maṇḍala*); each transcendent Buddha has specific iconographical features associated with him, and hand gestures (*mudrā*) are also one of the symbols assigned to them.

⁵ Jīna means a ‘victor’ in Sanskrit.

(1) The sacred circle begins with Jīna Akṣobhya, who presides over the eastern quarter, performing the earth touching gesture (*bhumisparṣa-mudrā*). This *mudrā* is associated with the victory over the Mara, one of the important events in the life of Buddha Śākyamuni; (2) The second is Jīna Ratnasambhava residing in the southern portion of *maṇḍala*, who performs the gift-bestowing gesture (*varada-mudrā*); (3) The Jīna Amitābha abodes the western section of the *maṇḍala*, his hands held in the meditation gesture (*dhyāna-mudrā*); (4) The Jīna Amoghasiddhi is the ruler of the northern portion, displaying in the fear not gesture (*abhaya-mudrā*); (5) The Jīna Vairocana is the original of the five transcendent Buddhas of esoteric Buddhism, identified by his hands in the ‘gesture of the highest awakening’ (*bodhyāgrī-mudrā*), he occupies the center of Vajradhātu-*maṇḍala* (Mallmann 1976: 173–187; Vessantara 2008).

Boisselier (1963: 276) noted the peculiarity of the right hand raised vertically in front of the chest and the gesture of the left hand resting on the thigh with the palm facing forward following the traces of the remains; the gesture is interpreted as “*le rejet de Mara*” (known as the gesture of fearlessness)⁶ that fashioned Siamese Buddhist art only in the late times. It may be proposed that the right-hand performing *abhaya-mudrā*, the *mudrā* is associated with the Jīna Amoghasiddhi. The above comments suggest that probably this sculpture is an image of the Jīna Amoghasiddhi, with his hand gestures performing the *abhaya-mudrā*, as can be seen at the DNMCS.

In addition, Boisselier compared the Buddha of Thủ Thiệu temple with another sculpture found from the Phú Ngọc site, in Bình Định province; he notes that there is a difference in the Buddha’s robes; the last fold of the robe of the Phú Ngọc Buddha is larger, and with the hem of the robe forms two thin edges; the sleeve is reach to the left elbow, but not to the wrist like the Thủ Thiệu Buddha statue; he thus concluded that the Thủ Thiệu Buddha may reflect another traditional Buddhist art (Boisselier 1963: 275–277).

The inscription C. 92 engraved under the reign of Cham king Sūryavarmandeva, was found at the Mỹ Sơn Sanctuary, dating back to 1194 CE (Golzio 2004: 174–176); its contents are the most convincing evidence for the practice of esoteric Buddhism in Campā, in which the king ordered the construction of a temple dedicated to the esoteric Buddhist deity Heruka (*Śrī Herukaharmya*) in Mỹ Sơn Sanctuary (Trần Kỳ Phương and Nguyễn Thị Tú Anh 2023: 56–59). The temple was the first Buddhist shrine to be positioned in the Cham royal sanctuary, where Śiva-Bhadreśvara is the supreme god worshipped by the Cham elite; this Buddhist deity has also been practiced as a local cult in Java at the same time (Chutiwongs 2005: 85; Acri 2015: 261–282; Schweyer 2018: 76). The wrathful Heruka, the emanation of glorious Buddha Vajrasattva, was later adopted as an enlightened deity of the Highest Yoga Tantra in Angkor, Java, Sumatra and China in the 12th to 14th centuries (Schnitger 1937: 26, figure xxxiv; Bautze-Picron 2014: 107–128; Sharrock 2009: 49–64; Calo 2020: 1–20; Sharrock 2022: 126–164).

It should be noted that the Buddhist deity Heruka and his temple were the only ones discovered at the Mỹ Sơn Sanctuary, although the cult of Heruka and several emanational forms of his were found at various sites in Asia at the same period. The explanation is that the political crises occurring in northeastern India may have caused the spread of tantric Buddhism to Southeast Asia in the 12th century; recent

6 “[L]e geste des mains est, lui aussi, inhabituel avec la main gauche dans le giron, doigts en extension et la main droite élevée verticalement devant la poitrine, paume tournée en avant, d’après la trace de l’arrachement [...] Il semble, enfin, qu’elle ne soit pas inconnue de l’iconographie siamoise tardive où elle paraît interprétée comme «le rejet de Māra».” (Boisselier, 1963: 276)

studies on the esoteric Buddhism discovered in the Vajrayāna sect, including the Hevajra cult practiced in Java, Campā and Khmer (Acri 2016: 1–25; Acri and Sharrock 2022: 1–6).

Moving to the south of Campā territories, Peter Sharrock (2022: 139–141) points out the traces Cakrasaṃvara, another form of Heruka, worshipped at the Dương Long temple⁷, located near Vijaya port, during the renewed alliance with Angkor in 1203-1220. That is a 100-cm-high sandstone tympanum excavated in the 1980s at the site, showing a deity dancing with three heads, a smiling mouth without moustache, eight arms holding several attributes such as lotus buds, daggers (*kartari*) and his typical hand gesture, so-called *cakradharma-mudrā* or *vajrahūṃkāra-mudrā* (?), in which its outstanding features reflect the style of Khmer art (Figure 8). The mentioned ideas may indicate that the features of esoteric Buddhist art were very popular in the Campā Vijaya state during the artistic period from the 11th to the 13th centuries.



Fig. 9 The sandstone tympanum carving Cakrasaṃvara found at the Dương Long temple complex; 100 cm high. On display at the Bình Định Provincial Museum. **Photo:** Trần Kỳ Phương.

⁷ The Dương Long temple complex of three buildings is very close to the Thủ Thiện temple, just approx. three kilometres to the southeast on the southern bank of the Côn River.

Determining the relationship between the two Buddha statues

Theoretically, there are four forms of *maṇḍala*, including: 1/ The *Maha-maṇḍala* is a circle representing the images of the Buddhas, in which, the universe of the Buddhas is view more broadly; 2/ The *Samaya-maṇḍala* is represented the vows or precepts of the five Jīnas, to lead human to enlightenment; it is depicted by typical attributes or *mudrās* hold/performed by the Buddhas, such as a sword, a lotus, and a thunderbolt-pounder; 3/ The *Dharma-maṇḍala* depicted with a *bīja-akṣara* (the seed syllables of a mantra) is said to possess supernatural powers, and represent the Buddhas and bodhisattvas; 4/ The *Karma-maṇḍala* is regarded as fundamental to all temple architecture, or by the various arrangements of statues enshrined on altars (Takakusu 1956: 158; Takakusu 2008: 234–235; Kiyota 1978: 68–69; Tuệ Sỹ 2016: 314–334).

In addition, Shingon Mikkyo texts indicate that ‘the wisdom–fist’ denotes the ‘dynamic’ realm of wisdom, also called *Vajradhātu-maṇḍala*, with the left hand grasping the index finger of the right hand; while the ‘*mudrā* of meditation’ considered static is represented of the Buddha of the natural realm, called *Garbhadhātu-maṇḍala* (Womb Realm-*maṇḍala*) or realm of compassion (Takakusu 1956: 156–157). Junjiro Takakusu (*ibid.*) also notes that the two Buddhas are in two realms, differing in manifestation but identical in quality, with one and the same name as Mahāvairocana Tathāgata. As mentioned above, the *bodhyāgrī-mudrā* performed by Buddha Vairocana Đồng Dương is a unique feature of Cham Buddhist art (Baptiste 2019: 345–346). This also leads to a hypothesis that the two Buddha statues with *bodhyāgrī-mudrā* of Cham sculpture are both images of the Buddha Vairocana/Mahāvairocana of the *Vajradhātu-maṇḍala* and *Garbhadhātu-maṇḍala*, which are associated with the prevailing traditional school of esoteric Buddhism in the contemporary Campā during the 9th and 13th centuries.

Importantly, a recent discussion of Tháp Mẫm art style shows that it was only formed after the Vijaya state was occupied by Khmer king Jayavarman VII in the early 13th century (Southworth and Trần Kỳ Phương 2019: 340–342). This argument leads to the perception that the sandstone carving high altarpiece on Thủ Thiệu’s interior walls and the statue of Amoghasiddhi were probably made in the 12th to 13th centuries. Reality shows that the remaining structure of the Thủ Thiệu temple reflects a sanctum large enough for one Buddhist deity to be enshrined. This aspect also leads to the assumption that a wide-scale space of *karma-maṇḍala* can be created by incorporating images of the other Buddhas being worshipped in several different temples built within the Vijaya state territory.

The above ideas propose that both sculptures of the Jīna Vairocana and the Jīna Amoghasiddhi may have an integrality in the landscape of the *maṇḍala* created by the complex of temples that were built alongside of the Côn river, the longest river of Bình Định province. Especially, the estuary of the river connecting with the deep sea-port of Thi Nại, or Sri Boney in the ancient Cham language, which links the contemporary Maritime Asia.

CONCLUSION

Although it remains a challenge to determine the origin of which temple in Vijaya the Vairocana statue once belonged to, the comparison with the Amoghasiddhi statue has led to the assumption that both statues belong to a *Vajradhātu-maṇḍala*, once established in the landscape of the Vijaya state in the 11th to 13th centuries. The practice of establishing a ‘*buddhakṣetra*’, a symbol of a kingdom’s territory, was once very common in the structure of ancient Southeast Asian kingdoms following esoteric Buddhism such as Cambodia, Java, Thailand, and Campā as well (Sanderson 2003-04: 424–435); in which Heruka or Hevajra was worshiped as the supreme protector to the kingdoms by the Cham kings in Vijaya and the Khmer empire from 1203-c.1220 (Sharrock 2022: 126–164).

Recently, the study of Cham religion has made new strides, with the reading and translation of the latest discovered inscriptions as well as the editing of previously translated Cham inscriptions, including C. 123, C. 218 and C. 219; Amandine Lepoutre (2015: 117–157) points out that the Cham king Jaya Parameśvaravarman supported Buddhism and Shaivism around the 13th century in Vijaya (Binh Định province today). Her findings partially explain the statement about Cham Buddhism during the reign of Jaya Parameśvaravarman, similar to the cult of ‘Śiva-Buddha’ of the Javanese sovereigns reigning at the same time in the 13th century, notably under the reign of Raṅgah Rājasa (1222–1227) (Lepoutre 2015: 140). This opinion suggests that, hitherto, this issue needs to be examined and that the cult of ‘Śiva-Buddha’ may also have been practiced in Campā contemporaneously (?).

Although scholars have asserted that Cham Buddhism was unable to reach the same powerful religion as Brahmanism in Campā, this affirmation comes from the corpus of Cham inscriptions (Bronkhorst 2011: 52–53, note 56). This article adds some evidence to argue that Buddhism expanded as successfully in the final centuries of the Campā kingdom as Brahmanism had done earlier.

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