

Title: Materiality of China's Buddhist Icons: from Medieval Texts and Practices  
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It has been said that in 68 CE, Emperor Mingdi (r. 57-75 CE) of the East Han dynasty dreamed one night about being visited by a shining "gilded statue," an omen that presaged the arrival of Buddhism in China. Although in a vision and most certainly spurious in nature, this account nonetheless articulates the icon as a quintessential constituent of the new, foreign religion. Indeed, one of the most critical aspects of Buddhism, the icon has also been the most discussed topic in studies of Buddhism - in terms of its meaning (e.g., divine presence) and representation (iconography); yet the very material from which the statue is made often eludes scholarly attention. Doctrinally, material of an icon is probably of the least concern insofar as it is made correctly. In practice, however, Buddhist statues surviving from medieval China were created in a variety of materials: (gilded) bronze, wood, stone, jade, sand, fired and unfired clay, and ceramic, each of which would have entailed specific skills, tools, and a different manufacturing procedure. The availability of certain materials might be a factor, but the selection may also be intentional, since different materials have different qualities and capacities that would have solicited varied perceptions and understandings and meet varied ends. For instance, the *shining* statue in Mingdi's dream would have been less convincing if not *gilded*, although materiality of the sacred in communicating Buddhist divinity is never explicitly deliberated in Buddhist texts. This paper argues that materiality in Buddhism matters not only in its religiosity, but also ways in which the divine was understood materially in medieval China.