

## **Mâyâ, the mother of the Buddha, in the Japanese tradition.**

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To start with, I shall recall some basic facts about Mâyâ: firstly, the enigmatic character of her name which means literally, “illusion”, then the broad outlines of the legend.

Seven days after the birth of her son Maya died and was reborn in a divine world which, according to the most popular tradition, was situated on Mount Sumeru, at the summit of the axis of the world, presided over by Indra, the sovereign of the gods himself.

According to the tradition, of which several more or less elaborate variants exist, as the Buddha was entering the Nirvana, Mâyâ made her voice heard and she even descended to the world below to pay homage to the Blessed One for the last time. It is also related that, conversely, the Buddha ascended on one occasion to the celestial abode where his mother resided to enable her to profit from teachings she had not heard because she died prematurely. The episode of his descent down the marvelous staircase has always remained famous in the Buddhist imagination.

How were these great themes expressed in the art of a country as far away from the Indian world as Japan? Here I would like to recall that it was with remarkable faithfulness.

In the second half of my lecture, I would like to dwell on one point where, on the contrary, Japan has innovated in relation to the Indian tradition.

The archaeologist Alfred Foucher, well-known for his many admirable works on Indian and Gandhârian Buddhist art, in his book, *La Vie e du Bouddha d 'après les textes et les monuments de l'Inde*, published in Paris in 1949, had observed that, unlike the Virgin Mary, the mother of Christ, the mother of the Buddha, had not been venerated and the figures who played the role of the madonna in the Buddhist world (the ogress Hârîtî converted by the Buddha who became a protector divinity; the feminized form of the bodhisattva Avalokitesvara) were entirely different figures.

Now it came to my knowledge, first by chance and later after research into texts, then on the spot, that in Japan, on a mountain overlooking Kôbe, there was a temple, well known locally and mentioned by name in a fourteenth century document, devoted to the worship of Mâyâ (since the early 9<sup>th</sup> century as the local inhabitants say). It is extremely interesting to note that both the inscriptions on the banners at the entrance to the temple and the iconography of the statue of Mâyâ as well, show that she was worshipped there, not only as the mother of the Buddha, but as a universal mother, the protector of mothers and children, and invoked to procure easy childbirth. We have here, therefore, a fortuitous and touching exception to the rule of the non-veneration of Mâyâ which Alfred Foucher thought he had recognized.