

Study on the Rise and Fall of Northern Wei Dynasty from the Perspective of Yungang Grottoes

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ABSTRACT

The Yungang Grottoes stand tall and towering. It has been completed after decades of construction and has existed for over a thousand years. The Yungang Grottoes can record the development of Buddhist culture during the Northern Wei Dynasty, and the changes in Buddhism received attention from various sectors of society at that time. Although it had a significant impact on the government and the people, it could promote the rapid development of Buddhism. The reason that the Yungang Grottoes were initially established was mainly to promote Buddhism and facilitate the unity of public thought. Therefore, it is a fusion of royal and Buddhist traditions, and reflects the unity of royal and Buddhist traditions. The Buddha statue shapes reflect the ethnic characteristics of the Northern Wei Dynasty, which are naturally prominently reflected in the grottoes. Therefore, behind the appearance of Buddhism, there are profound historical attributes. This article introduces the historical background, characteristics, and close relationship between Yungang Grottoes and the fate and development of the Northern Wei Dynasty.

Keywords: *Yungang Grottoes, Northern Wei Dynasty, Historic culture.*

1. INTRODUCTION: THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF YUNGANG GROTTOES

Since the end of the Western Jin Dynasty, the Five Hu forces have continuously attacked the Central Plains region, and there have been widespread killings among the sixteen states. Some ethnic minority regimes have undergone changes in various regions. During the following period, the Tuoba clan of the Xianbei ethnic group began to rise, and the social influence of the Northern Wei regime¹ it established continued to increase. In 439 AD, Tuoba Tao unified the north and was about to establish a unified dynasty. At the same time, Han culture continued to influence these ethnic groups, and Confucianism gradually gained recognition among ethnic minorities. The nobles of Northern

Wei also had a sense of crisis while dominating the north, that is, the purity of their own nation began to disappear, and many cultural contents began to be assimilated by Han culture. The Northern Wei Dynasty was established by ethnic minorities and was in charge of a large number of Central Plains people with cultural and religious differences.

The rulers of the Northern Wei Dynasty realized the need for a unified cultural belief and symbol representing the dynasty, so as to compete with the deeply-rooted Confucian culture in the spiritual realm at that time, in order to better consolidate the ruling foundation of the Xianbei ethnic group. The nobles of the Northern Wei Dynasty chose to promote the culture of Buddhism and devoted themselves to creating the Yungang Grottoes, making Yungang Grottoes a rare large-scale art work in China that had been completed in one dynasty and bears the imprint of the Xianbei ethnic group. The Yungang Grottoes had a large scale and were completed before the rulers of Northern Wei Dynasty moved the capital to Luoyang.

1. The Northern Wei Dynasty was established by the Tuoba clan of the Xianbei ethnic group. Xianbei is an ancient nomadic ethnic group that emerged on the Mongolian Plateau. It rises in the Great Khingan Mountains and constantly migrates southward. In the first year of Tianxing (398), Tuoba Gui migrated the capital to Pingcheng (now Datong City, Shanxi Province) and officially proclaimed himself emperor.

The construction of Yungang Grottoes began during the reign of Emperor Wencheng of Northern Wei (460 AD) and was completed during the reign of Emperor Xiaoming (524 AD), totaling over 60 years. It is the first large-scale grotto work directly built and operated by the royal family in China. The Yungang Grottoes are located on the Yungang Castle on Wuzhou Mountain, hence the name Yungang Grottoes. This place was a crucial location that connected the north and south at that time, and also a sacred place for the emperor's faith. The army was stationed here year-round, and in addition, the mountains here were easy to excavate. Therefore, in the view the emperors of Northern Wei Dynasty, that this place was the most suitable for the development of Buddhism.

2. THE THREE STAGES AND CHARACTERISTICS OF YUNGANG GROTTOS EXCAVATION

The Yungang Grottoes went through three stages of excavation and construction, mainly reflecting the early and middle stages of the Northern Wei Dynasty. The Yungang Grottoes is one kilometer long from east to west, with a total of 45 caves and over 51,000 statues of various sizes. Each stage of the grottoes has its own unique characteristics, reflecting the different stages of the development of the Northern Wei Dynasty at that time.

The first stage is the early stage, during which five caves were mainly built by Master Tanyao, namely the 16th to 20th caves today. Among these five caves, five emperors of the Northern Wei Dynasty were sculpted, with complex shapes, large sizes, grand scales, and distinct ethnic customs. The theme of "the emperor is the current Tathagata" was expressed, thus creating an atmosphere of "worshipping the Buddha is worshipping the emperor".

The second stage was conducted before the capital of Northern Wei was relocated, and with the support of the royal family, the cave Buddha statues were very exquisite, demonstrating the strong national strength of Northern Wei. At this time, the Northern Wei Dynasty was in its heyday, with frequent cultural exchanges and thriving trade among various countries. The caves at this time were very beautiful, and the forms and themes were rich and diverse.

The third stage of the project was carried out after the capital of the Northern Wei Dynasty was relocated, and the remaining old nobles lacked sufficient funds to participate in the excavation of the grottoes. Therefore, the project of this stage mainly consisted of small caves, with some changes in the style of the statues. Despite the small scale, the statues still maintained the thin and handsome images.

3. YUNGANG GROTTOS AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE NORTHERN WEI DYNASTY

The Yungang Grottoes has exquisite designs, diverse styles, grand scale, and enormous influence. It is not only a typical representative of Buddhist bases, but also a representative of the prosperity of the Northern Wei Dynasty. The three stages of its construction are closely related to the development of the Northern Wei Dynasty.

3.1 The Rise of the Northern Wei Dynasty - Worshipping the Emperors as the Buddha

During the reign of the kings of Northern Wei, they emphasized the idea of worshipping the emperors as the Buddhas, which led to the continuous development of Buddhist culture. After the Eastern Jin Dynasty, there were many phenomena of Han people becoming monks. People had transformed from former subjects of the emperor to followers of Buddhism. In the social environment of that time, attention had been paid to whether Buddhist followers worshipped the emperors and whether there were conflicts with the normal management of the country. In the early years of the Northern Wei Dynasty, the eminent monk Faguo was appointed as the ruler of the monks, responsible for overall control of the monks and disciples. Through the concept of "unity of emperor and Buddha", he emphasized the theory that the emperor is the Tathagata, which enabled many Buddhist believers to become followers of the Heavenly Son again. This not only met the actual needs of rulers, but also further affirmed the legitimacy of Buddhist behavior. Since then, Buddhism in northern China has further developed. After Emperor Taiwu of Northern Wei unified the north, his plundering and immigration policies led to the rapid development of the small city Pingcheng, making Pincheng become the center of northern China. Afterwards, the Northern Wei Dynasty strengthened its control over the

surrounding ethnic minorities and conquered the Western Regions, making Pingcheng an eastern metropolis. Nobles, merchants, and bureaucrats from different countries and ethnic groups gathered in Pingcheng, and Buddhist beliefs were further promoted.

In 439 AD, the Northern Wei Dynasty conquered Beiliang and relocated 30,000 households from the local area to Pingcheng, with the local eminent monk Tanyao among them. In 460 AD, Emperor Wencheng of Northern Wei appointed Tanyao to be responsible for the large-scale construction of Yungang Grottoes. Tanyao was the most suitable candidate at that time. He led the monks and craftsmen who had participated in the cave projects in the Mogao Grottoes of Dunhuang, Wuwei Tiantai Mountain, Tianshui Maiji Mountain and other regions to start the construction of a new Buddhist center in Wuzhou Mountain. Through six years of efforts, the first stage of the project was completed.

The Tanyao Five Caves were the focus of this phase of the project, specifically consisting of five tall stone Buddhas. Referring to the concept of "the emperor is the Tathagata", the images of the five emperors after the Northern Wei Dynasty's Taizu were directly carved into the Buddha's body through artistic carving. On the day of the opening of the Tanyao Five Caves, not only did the eminent monks gather, but the Emperor of Northern Wei also brought a hundred officials. After about half a century of excavation, the Yungang Grottoes was completed as a whole, with over 40,000 people participating in the project excavation. Some Buddhists from the Lion Kingdom (now Sri Lanka) also came to participate in this grand event.

3.2 The Peak of the Northern Wei Dynasty - Cultural Exchange

In 490 AD, the new emperor Tuoba Hong further affirmed the status of Yungang Grottoes and increased funding for it. Afterwards, the Northern Wei Dynasty conquered the Western Regions and promoted cultural exchange between the East and the West, making the capital city of the Northern Wei Dynasty, Pingcheng, the starting point of the eastern end of the Silk Road. Merchants and monks from various countries and ethnic groups gathered in Pingcheng. The trend of grotto statues formed in India for a long time emerged in the Northern Wei Dynasty. Under the craftsmanship of Liangzhou monks, the Wuzhou Mountain Grottoes were presented in the Western Regions style. During the

construction of the Yungang Grottoes, numerous monks from India, Sri Lanka, and Western Regions came to visit, and Tanyao of the Northern Wei Dynasty also recruited treasure statues from all over the country, specifically referring to existing Buddha statues for cave excavation. With the participation of several generations of eminent monks and skilled craftsmen from various regions, magnificent grotto works had been designed and excavated, making Yungang Grottoes the unparalleled Buddhist grottoes in the world.

Emperor Xiaowen of Northern Wei had ambitions, advocating for expanding territory and continuously enhancing the influence of Northern Wei in neighboring countries. In the fifth cave of Yungang Grottoes, Emperor Xiaowen requested to make his image the largest Buddha statue in the entire grotto project. The total height of this Buddha statue is 17 meters, and its legs are about 15.5 meters long. The huge knee area of the Buddha statue can accommodate 120 people and its feet can cover the area of 12 people standing. From this, it can be seen that this Buddha statue is very huge, with thin eyebrows and long eyes, which is of great appreciation value. Its ears droop to shoulders, bringing a sense of solemnity. The fifth cave Buddha statue is the main Buddha of Yungang Grottoes, representing the historical development of Northern Wei at that time. At the same time, it is also the most perfect and representative image of the emperor in the hearts of the highest ruler of Northern Wei, Emperor Xiaowen. It not only demonstrates the strong national strength of Northern Wei, but also indicates that the young emperor hopes to further achieve national development, making Northern Wei more powerful and brilliant.

The Buddha statue in the 19th Cave of Yungang is Tuoba Hong, the father of Emperor Xiaowen, who was poisoned to death during the internal strife of the Northern Wei Dynasty. At that time, Emperor Xiaowen was only 5 years old. The characters in the 19th cave are bodhisattvas sitting with crossing feet, being the image of a wise person before becoming a Buddha. This approach combines artistry and practicality, expressing strong respect for the prince who respects Buddha, and also achieving the purpose of Emperor Xiaowen commemorating and blessing his parents.

Before leaving Datong, Emperor Xiaowen presided over the excavation of Maitreya Buddha in the 13th Cave. Similar to the cross-feet Bodhisattva in the Tanyao Five Caves, under the right arm of

this Pusa, it is no longer a simple ancient Greek pillar, but a finely carved and richly dressed Chinese warrior. This fully demonstrates that the shape of the cave at this time was already in Chinese style, which is the only example in the entire grottoes.

3.3 The Late Stage of Northern Wei Dynasty - Maintenance of the Old Clan

The thirty years since Emperor Xiaowen moved the capital south to Luoyang in the 18th year of Taihe were the final stage of the construction of Yungang Grottoes. In 494 AD, Emperor Xiaowen of Northern Wei further promoted the reform of sinicization, emphasizing the importance of learning Central Plains culture. He prohibited the exchange of Xianbei language and wearing Xianbei clothing, actively promoted Han dialect and Hanfu, and introduced policies to encourage intermarriage between Xianbei people and Han people. Subsequently, Emperor Xiaowen strongly advocated to move the capital and designated Luoyang as the new capital, in order to enable the nobles of Northern Wei to gradually break away from their relatively backward national ideology, strengthen control over the Central Plains through continuous sinicization, and allow more Central Plains people to support the rule of Northern Wei.

After completing the capital relocation in the Northern Wei Dynasty, Pingcheng was referred to as the Northern Capital. Afterwards, the royal family faced certain difficulties in activities such as digging caves in the northern region of the Northern Wei Dynasty. However, overall, Buddhist culture in the Northern Wei Dynasty was further popularized throughout the country. During the reign of Emperor Xuanwu, the number of Buddhist temples doubled compared to the reign of Emperor Xiaowen. Although the rulers of Northern Wei after Emperor Xiaowen issued policies to restrain civilians from shaving, the number of monks continued to increase in the social and cultural atmosphere at that time. Relatively speaking, there has been a significant sinicization of Buddha statues in the Longmen Grottoes, and the Xianbei nobles stated that these Buddha statues do not belong to the Xianbei people. Therefore, the Xianbei nobles who remained in Pingcheng still promoted the excavation of the Yungang Grottoes and continued to build spiritual homes belonging to the Xianbei people.

In an environment where Buddhism was revered throughout society, Yungang remained a

sacred place for Buddhism in the Northern Wei Dynasty for a long time. Although the driving force for the continued excavation of Yungang Grottoes by the nobles of the Northern Wei Dynasty declined thereafter, many small and medium-sized grottoes developed by ordinary Buddhist believers began to appear in the local grottoes. These grottoes were not only numerous in number and diverse in layout, but also depicted phrases such as "pure land for life" and "lotus nurturing the livings". This means that at that time, there was a wide circulation of pure land worship ideas in the northern society of the Northern Wei Dynasty. This kind of praying mentality also reflects the practical hardships faced by the middle and small class people to some extent. From this, it can be seen that the Yungang Grottoes at this time were not controlled by the aristocratic class, but rather gained the participation and support of the middle and lower class people during the long-term excavation, reflecting the social situation at that time.

At that time, due to the participation of society and the public, the main body of the excavation of grottoes became more dispersed, and even family grottoes appeared. At this time, the characteristics of the grottoes were changing from large to small, with a large number of small grottoes. These small grottoes had diverse styles, representing not only the royal family but also local social forces. The themes of the statues were diverse, gradually presenting a patterned feature. The Buddha statues in the caves are all well dressed, and slender, with bodhisattva expressions of aloofness and detachment. These expressions and temperament can meet the public's understanding of the image of immortals, which is in line with the social ideological trend at that time. There are numerous cave statues, and there are also many overlapping layers of clothing pleats, resulting in increasingly complex exterior decorations.

In 523 AD, the "Six Town Uprising" occurred in the Northern Wei Dynasty, causing turmoil throughout the country. Class conflicts became increasingly acute, and the stability of the political power significantly decreased. Subsequently, the development of Yungang Grottoes gradually stagnated. In 533 AD, the Northern Wei Dynasty fell and the Xianbei ethnic group gradually disappeared.

4. CONCLUSION

The Yungang Grottoes, with its grand scale and exquisite carvings, has stood tall at the foot of

Wuzhou Mountain for over 1,500 years. The Yungang Grottoes can be said to be a dynasty carved on stone, and it is a history of the development of the Northern Wei Dynasty. It gave birth to the famous poem "Four hundred and eighty temples in the Southern Dynasty, many towers amidst the misty rain". It reveals the relationship between Buddhism and imperial rule and is a great treasure of the Chinese nation.

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