

# Analysis of the Image of "Dharmachakra Pravartana" in Nannieshui Stone Carvings

Chenxin Yang<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of Fine Arts, Nanjing University of The Arts, Nanjing, Jiangsu, China

## ABSTRACT

In the Buddhist stories that depict the life deeds of Buddha Shakyamuni, the "dharmachakra pravartana" is one of the most important events, often forming a "four phase diagram" with birth, enlightenment, and Nirvana. The statue stone carvings unearthed from the Nannieshui Cellar have been identified by scholars as the "dharmachakra pravartana" in one of the niche images, and the author has doubts about the identification. This article starts with the content represented by the image. Through the comparison and analysis of the specific details of the image, this article concludes that this image does not refer to "the first sermon in Sarnath" event, but rather expresses the concepts of "eternal Buddhism" and "the master of the universe, Shakyamuni". The focus is on promoting doctrine and thus transforming sentient beings.

**Keywords:** Nannieshui stone carvings, Dharmachakra pravartana, Sermon.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In 1957, more than 1100 stone carvings were unearthed from the cellar of Hongjiaoyuan in Nannieshui Village. Nannieshui Village is located in the northern part of Qin County, Changzhi City, Shanxi Province, 30 kilometers north of the county seat. It is adjacent to Huashan Mountain to the south and the Nieshui River to the north. It is named after its residence on the south bank of the Nieshui River and faces Gucheng Village in Wuxiang County across the river. According to historical records, during the Spring and Autumn period and the Warring States period, the area was called Nie County and belonged to Zhao. Nie cloth was cast here. The Western Han Dynasty established Nie County, while the Eastern Han Dynasty, Wei and Jin Dynasties established Ne County. During the Northern Wei Dynasty, it was temporarily changed to Yangcheng. In the 18th year of the Kaihuang reign of Sui Dynasty, it was changed to Jiashui County, and during the Tang Dynasty, it was merged into the county seat. This batch of cellar carvings began in the second year of Yongping in the Northern Wei Dynasty (509 AD), went through the Eastern Wei and Northern Qi Dynasties (534-577 AD), and lasted until the ninth year of Tiansheng in the Northern Song Dynasty

(1031 AD). This batch of cellar statues can be divided into three types based on their shape: stone pagodas, individual statues, and statue steles. Among them, there are more than 400 components of stone carved towers, each of which is of different sizes and has niches carved on all four sides, either in the form of a square or trapezoidal shape. They can be stacked into towers, and each tower is composed of 3-5 statue stone components, approximately 300 individual statues, and more than 50 statue steles. On over 1100 stone carvings, there are many images of Buddhist stories, one of which is believed to depict the "dharmachakra pravartana".<sup>1</sup> The author has doubts about this, and the following will explore this issue.

## 2. THE EXPRESSION CONTENT OF THE IMAGE RESEMBLING THE "DHARMACHAKRA PRAVARTANA"

The "dharmachakra pravartana", also known as the "Sarnath Sermon", "Sarnath Dharmachakra

---

1. In the book "Nannieshui Stone Carvings", the author believes that this scene portrays dharmachakra pravartana. Shanxi Provincial Institute of Archaeology, compiled by Qin County Cultural Relics Museum. Nannieshui Stone Carvings (Vol. 1) [M]. Beijing: Cultural Relics Press, 2022: 25.

Pravartana", "First Sermon", etc., is one of the important events in the life of Buddha Shakyamuni. The main content of the story should start with the "reunion of the five monks", gradually leading to the Buddha's initial sermon: the Buddha traveled several hundred kilometers west from Bodhi Gaya to search for the five people in the Kuxing Forest of Sarnath. But at this time, the five people, due to misunderstandings about the Buddha, discussed and decided to ignore him. But when the Buddha stood in front of them, the five of them still showed respect for the Buddha's temperament and hurriedly saluted to welcome him. Then the Buddha gave the first Dharma speech to the five people, and the five people became Arhat.



Figure 1 Dharmachakra Pravartana, from the Northern Wei Dynasty to the Eastern Wei Dynasty, numbered 164-4, museum collection of Nannieshui Stone Carvings and Statues.

The number 164-4 ("Figure 1") in the statue stones on all sides of the Nannieshui is often identified as the image of the "dharmachakra pravartana" in Buddhist stories. This image dates back to the Northern Wei to Eastern Wei periods.<sup>2</sup> In the painting, there is only one flat curved arch niche, and the main deity in the niche is the first sermon of Buddha. He wears a right shoulder style monk's robe inside and a double shoulder robe outside. His hand print is a meditation seal, and he sits on a low platform with a cross shaped bow. In front of the platform, there are two parallel dharmachakra; There is a strong warrior standing on either side of the main Buddha; At the bottom, there are two guardian lions standing in front of the

2. Shanxi Provincial Institute of Archaeology, compiled by Qin County Cultural Relics Museum. Nannieshui Stone Carvings (Vol. 2) [M]. Beijing: Cultural Relics Press, 2022: 189.

Buddha's throne with their heads turned back; The upper part of the niche has become blurred, with only some carved marks visible.

The image form in the Nannieshui Stone Carvings is quite unique, unlike most of the previous images of the dharmachakra pravartana, which often contain Chinese elements. Firstly, the manifestation of dharmacakra is not a single wheel appearing alone, nor is it a three treasure symbol appearing with the character "品", but rather "double dharmacakra". Secondly, the "two deer" were not carved on it, but were replaced by two divine beasts looking back at each other. Furthermore, the composition of the painting is simple and contains fewer visual elements. The image does not depict any other content, nor does it show the "five disciples". Instead, only two warriors appear as attendants on both sides of the main deity. The above are the special features of the image of the dharmachakra pravartana in the Nannieshui. Below, the author will analyze its single image and determine whether it represents the "dharmachakra pravartana" in the Buddhist story plot.

### 3. ANALYSIS OF THE IMAGE OF "DHARMACHAKRA PRAVARTANA"

In the early period without Buddha statues, the dharmacakra appeared as a symbol of the Buddha, often in the form of a dharmacakra pillar. Li Wenwen mentioned in her doctoral thesis that after the appearance of Buddha statues, images with dharmacakra can be divided into two categories: one is the ones without the two deer, symbolizing worship; If there are two deer, it represents the first sermon. It further divides the images with Buddha statues into the themes of Sarnath and five Buddhist monks.<sup>3</sup> Later, Gandhara used this image as a plot in Buddhist stories and depicted it in the four phase and eight phase diagrams, as a major event in the Buddha's life. After this image was introduced to China, it appeared in large numbers in the Kizil Grottoes, Dunhuang Grottoes, Yungang Grottoes, and other places, successively appearing in the form of statue steles and statue towers in the Han region; And most of them appear in Buddhist stories or are expressed in the form of patterns, which are closely related to the teachings of the Theravada and the Dharma Sutra.

3. Li Wenwen, A Study on the First Sermon Image in China and India [D]. Shanghai: East China Normal University Doctoral Dissertation (Tutor: Pro. Hu Guanghua), 2017: 96.

Firstly, only two dharmacakra are engraved in the dharmacakra pravartanan image of the Nannieshui stone carvings. In the historical development process of this image, there were no images with "double treasure marks" used to represent the initial statement. In previous research, many scholars have analyzed whether it is the "single treasure mark" or the "three treasure marks" and believe that it is related to the "sermon" in Buddhist scriptures. The single wheel actually appeared in early India, with its significance not only for preaching and worship, but also as an important symbol representing the Buddha; Later, a combination of a trident pattern and a single treasure symbol appeared in the image style, indicating that the single wheel image was the earliest symbol used to represent the sermon. Secondly, another form is the appearance of the "品" character style three treasure marks, which appears in Dunhuang and Yungang Grottoes in the Han region. For example, the image of the dharmacakra pravartana inside the east wall of the main chamber of Cave 6 of the Yungang Grottoes ("Figure 2"), with three treasures stacked into the character "品" and placed on the second floor steps. Although this image is different from Gandhara, it also forms a unique form of Chinese Han culture.

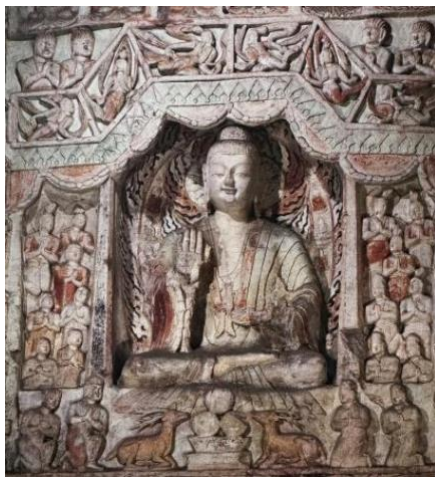


Figure 2 The niche of "dharmacakra pravartana" on the east wall of Cave 6 in Yungang.

In the study of the Three Treasures Mark, there is a discussion on why the "first sermon" is represented by dharmacakra. Gu Zhengmei believes that a single dharmacakra represents the birth of Maitreya Buddha once, while the three dharmacakra represent the birth of Maitreya three times. Therefore, the Sarnath first sermon will also

be represented by dharmacakra.<sup>4</sup> However, this statement has been refuted. Li Wenwen mentioned the "first sermon" more than once, as stated in the "Abhidharma Mahaprajnaparamita Sutra": "There are two types of dharmacakra: one in oneself, and the other in others. Under the Bodhi tree, there is one's own dharmacakra, while in the kingdom of Borneo, there is another's dharmacakra."<sup>5</sup> That is to say, if there are two deer in this image, it represents the first statement in the Sarnath; If there is no clear location information for the "Sarnath" in the picture, it is possible that it is the "first sermon" in the country of Borneo. In fact, in the initial turning of the dharmacakra pravartana in the Kizil Grottoes, there may not be images of dharmacakra with two deer, and there may even be monks on both sides. However, due to the lack of the symbol of the two deer, it cannot be distinguished as the "first sermon". There have been countless "sermon" in the Buddha's life, but the "first sermon" still needs further judgment. Based on the image information of the dharmacakra pravartana in the Nannieshui, can people determine whether the two dharmacakra here represent the Buddha's two first sermon?

Based on the above discussion, it can be seen that the "sermon" image here in the Nannieshui does not solely refer to the Sarnath first sermon, as "two deer" do not appear in the image. The deer are one of the important judgment criteria in the plot related to this image. In the Nannieshui, the image of the two deer has been replaced with a divine beast that looks like a lion. In the early Paradyndy of India, the first sermon of the Buddha in the eight phases diagram was a standard initial sermon image. Although there were no monks on the side, various signs such as dharmacakra, two deer, and Buddha's hand in the image of mudra of teaching indicate that the content expressed in this image is the Sarnath first sermon. In previous images, besides deer, there were also deer like images of antelopes and rhinoceros horns appearing in the picture regarding the animals set up here. For example, the Buddha story sculpture currently housed in the Fleur Museum of Fine Arts was depicted as two antelopes when depicting the first sermon. In the No. 10 Statue Stele in Cave 133 of

4. Gu Zhengmei, *Empress Wu Zetian and the Maitreya Buddha King Faith of Fallen and Luo* [C]// Collection of 2004 International Academic Symposium on Longmen Grottoes, Henan People's Publishing House, 2006: 169.

5. Li Wenwen, *A Study on the First Sermon Image in China and India* [D]. Shanghai: East China Normal University Doctoral Dissertation (Tutor: Pro. Hu Guanghua), 2017: 215.

Maijishan, there is no "dharmacakra" in the first sermon image, but there are two deer in different shapes in the lower part. The academic community has different understandings of the morphology of these two "deer", with one saying that they look at each other as a pair of male and female deer, and another saying that they are a combination of antelopes and deer.<sup>6</sup>

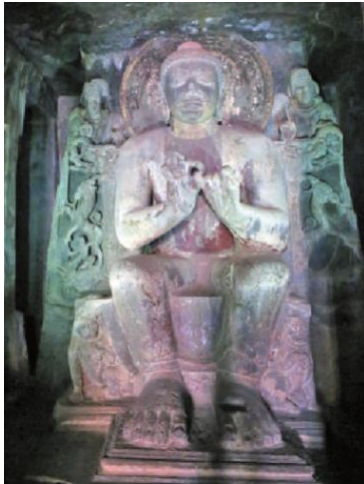


Figure 3 The main Buddha in Cave 16 of Ajanta Grottoes.

Based on the above discussion, deer, as a symbol of "Sarnath", are often used to express the first sermon and related scenarios. Other deer species that can be replaced include antelopes, rhinoceroses, and other deformations, all of which have the meaning of increasing the will of cultivators. However, there are very few images of "lions" appearing among them, similar to the lion beast image in the Nannieshui. The image of "lion beasts" appears in the statue of the main deity "first sermon" in the 16th cave of Ajandra ("Figure 3"). There are many styles of first sermon in the Ajanta Grottoes, among which the dharmamudra of the main deity are all mudra of teaching, such as Caves 1, 2, 4, 6, 7, 11, 15, 17, 20, and 21. The main deity is characterized by the Sarnath style "dharmachakra pravartana" statue. Unlike these caves, the main deity in Cave 16 is not a seated position, but rather a reclining position. There are no "double or single deer" or dharmacakra, but only a lion seat, surrounded by Capricorn fish, giant elephants, and attendants.

Lion seat has been popular since the art of Matura and Gandhara, but its subject matter is

6. Li Wenwen, A Study on the First Sermon Image in China and India [D]. Shanghai: East China Normal University Doctoral Dissertation (Tutor: Pro. Hu Guanghua), 2017: 222.

derived from the jade throne decoration in West Asia, which symbolizes the authority of kings. Gradually, the "lion" also became an indispensable pattern element in Buddhism, used as a metaphor for the supreme authority and greatness of the Buddha, and widely used by the people. Similarly, the author believes that the "lion beast" in the Nannieshui has a similar meaning to the "lion" in Ajanta. Gong Zhizhao once pointed out that although the "dharmacakra" statue in the 16th cave of Ajandra uses the "first sermon" statue style, the content expressed is the concept of "eternal Buddha Dharma".<sup>7</sup> The similarity between the "first sermon" image in the Nannieshui Stone Carvings and the Ajanta Grottoes lies in the fact that both do not depict the important "Sarnath" symbol, so there is doubt about whether the "first sermon" is represented. So, is this image portrayed in the Nannieshui only in the form of the "dharmachakra pravartana" and representing eternal Buddhism? According to Volume 2 of the Lotus Sutra, it is recorded that:

The heavenly robes offered by these deities to the Buddha sway and swirl in the air, while at the same time, millions of heavenly music are played in unison in the air, and various smallpox are fluttering. The words in the air are: "In the past, Shakyamuni Buddha started dharmachakra pravartana in the Kingdom of Borneo, and today he turns the most wonderful and largest dharmacakra again." At this moment, the Heavenly Kings wanted to proclaim this righteousness again, so they spoke in verse: Shakyamuni Buddha used to turn the Four Noble Dharmachakra at the beginning of the Kingdom of Polana, which respectively talked about various phenomena such as suffering, gathering, extinction, Dao, and the twelve causes and conditions, as well as the merging and dispersing of the five aggregates of form, receiving, thinking, action, and consciousness. Today, he turned the most wonderful and largest Dharma wheel again, speaking of the Lotus Sutra. Here, the Buddha has removed the power of wisdom and stated the true wisdom, without resorting to the method of expediency and directly stating the profound meaning of reality. This extremely profound method is difficult for ordinary people to believe.<sup>8</sup>

7. (Japan) Akira Miyaji, The Mural Paintings and Zen Views of Tuyugou Grottoes [M]. He Xiaoping, trans., Shanghai: Shanghai Classics Publishing House, 2009: 144.

8. (Post-Qin Dynasty)Kumarashi, trans., Lotus Sutra, found in Volume 9 of the "Taisho Canon" (CEBTA, 2022.Q4, T09, No.262.)

From the above classics, it can be seen that although the "dharmacakra" described in the "Lotus Sutra" points out "the first time", it emphasizes more on the eternal existence of the "dharmacakra", that is, "here, the Buddha has removed the power of wisdom and stated the true wisdom, without resorting to the method of expediency and directly stating the profound meaning of reality". After this visual form was introduced to China, especially since the Northern Dynasty, the ideas of Mahayana Buddhism began to gradually deepen, often expressed in the form of Buddhist stories, and had a certain degree of integration with Theravada Buddhism. So rather than saying that the "first sermon" image appeared as a part of the Buddhist story at this time, it has become a way to promote Buddhism and educate believers, and the statement here that Buddha has become the "eternal Buddha".

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The image of the dharmacakra in the Nannieshui stone carving has weathered hands of the main deity, which are now indistinguishable. But unlike the Buddha who holds the "mudra of teaching", this is speculated to be a meditation seal or touching the dharmacakra with both hands; In the same picture, there are also vague patterns on the upper part of the picture. It can be speculated that there are lotus and other patterns. It is unknown whether there are related images (Capricorn fish, giant elephant, centaurs, etc.) in Ajanta and the Mogao Grottoes of Dunhuang. From the above information, it can be inferred that although the "first sermon" image in the Nannieshui stone carvings is depicted on the four sided stones in the form of Buddhist stories, it does not refer to the "Sarnath first sermon" event, but expresses the concepts of "eternal Buddha Dharma" and "Master Shakyamuni of the universe", emphasizing the promotion of doctrines and the cultivation of sentient beings.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This article is the result of the Jiangsu Province Graduate Research and Practice Innovation Program project "Research on the Art of Grottoes Statues on Pingluo Road during the Northern Dynasty", Project No.: KYCX23\_2407.

#### REFERENCES

[1] Shanxi Provincial Institute of Archaeology, compiled by Qin County Cultural Relics

Museum. Nannieshui Stone Carvings [M]. Beijing: Cultural Relics Press, 2022.

- [2] Education Department of National Cultural Heritage Administration, Summary of Buddhist Grottoes Archaeology [M]. Beijing: Cultural Relics Press, 11993.
- [3] Tang Yongtong, Buddhist History of Han, Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties [M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Bookstore, 1991.
- [4] (Japan) Kurita Koru, The World of the Buddha [M]. Tokyo Prefecture: Nigensha, 1988.
- [5] Geng Jian, Stumbling Step by Step - My Research on Buddhist Art [M]. Jiangsu: Phoenix Publishing & Media Group (PPMG), 2007.
- [6] (Japan) Akira Miyaji, The Mural Paintings and Zen Views of Tuyugou Grottoes [M]. He Xiaoping, trans., Shanghai: Shanghai Classics Publishing House, 2009.