

Investigation and Research on the Statues of Northern Zhou Grottoes in the Longdong Area

Ru Wang

Northwest Normal University, Lanzhou, Gansu, China

Abstract: *The Longdong region, as a pivotal birthplace of Chinese cave art, holds a distinctive geographical position. Its collection of cave temples from the Northern Dynasties period is notably well-preserved, bearing significant academic value. Moreover, the cave temples from the late Northern Dynasties period constitute a crucial component of research on Chinese cave temples, marking the transitional phase between the Northern Wei and Tang dynasties, which represent two pinnacle epochs in the domain of Chinese cave art. The text primarily delves into the evolution of the Northern and Southern cave temples during the Northern Zhou Dynasty, exploring their impact on the regional Buddhist culture. Additionally, it thoroughly analyzes the influence of external cultures on the cave sculptures in the Longdong region during the Northern Zhou period, as well as their integration with local and ethnic minority cultures. The research reveals that the cave art in the Longdong region not only imitates the cave art of the Central Plains and the Western Regions but also embodies the unique regional cultural characteristics and spirit of innovation. Through a comprehensive examination of cave sculpture styles, clothing features, and other aspects, this study holds significant implications for understanding the developmental trajectory of Buddhist art in the Longdong region during the Northern Zhou period and regional cultural exchanges.*

Keywords: Longdong Area, Northern Zhou Dynasty, Buddhist grottoes, Impact.

1. Introduction

The term "Longdong" refers to the Gansu region east of the Long Mountain (nowadays known as Liupan Mountain), including the eastern areas of Qingyang and Pingliang. Situated at the intersection of Shaanxi, Gansu, and Ningxia, it constitutes the core region of the Loess Plateau. Thus, "Longdong" primarily denotes a geographical concept. Within this region, a large number of Buddhist remains, predominantly cave temples, have been preserved. Compared to other regions, the modern academic investigation and research on the Buddhist remains in this area started slightly later. The Buddhist sculptures from the Northern Dynasties period preserved in the Longdong region exhibit characteristics that embrace influences from both Eastern and Western directions, while also integrating the distinctive style of the Loess Plateau. They profoundly reflect the Buddhist situation in Longdong during the Northern Dynasties, and simultaneously played a significant role in the development and dissemination of Buddhist art across China, forming a unique Longdong style. The geographical location of the Longdong region during the Northern Dynasties was extremely significant. It bordered Chang'an to the east and served as a crucial node on the Silk Road, where Buddhist ideas from both the east and west converged. Therefore, during the prosperous period of Buddhism in the Northern Dynasties, Buddhism in the Longdong region also flourished, leaving behind Buddhist remains such as cave temples and sculptural steles [1]. Since the 1960s, especially after the reform and opening-up, Buddhist sculptures in this region have been continuously discovered and published, gradually gaining recognition for their significance in Buddhist art research both domestically and internationally. However, overall, this region has not received adequate attention, and research on it has been relatively weak for a long time. This paper, through the study and summary of the cave temples in Longdong during the Northern Zhou period, demonstrates the region's important position in the history of Buddhism during the Northern Dynasties and its significant contributions to the propagation of Buddhism and Buddhist art [1].

Mr. Su Bai, the pioneering figure in Chinese Buddhist archaeology, long ago classified the nationwide cave temples into four major regions based on their cave structures and primary sculptures: Xinjiang, Northern Central Plains, Southern China, and Tibet [2]. His series of discussions regarding Chinese cave temples have become the fundamental spatiotemporal framework for our understanding of them. According to Mr. Su Bai, compared to the other three regions, the Northern Central Plains region boasts a plethora of cave temples with intricate contents, constituting the principal portion of Chinese cave temple relics. Consequently, he further subdivided it into four areas: Hexi Region, East of the Yellow River in Gansu and Ningxia, Shaanxi, and Shanxi-Henan and its eastern vicinity. The main cave temples in the East of the Yellow River in Gansu and Ningxia region include the Yongjing Bingling Temple Grottoes, Tianshui Maijishan Grottoes, Guyuan Xumishan Grottoes, Wushan Shuilian Cave Grottoes, and Longdong Grottoes. Furthermore, Mr. Su Bai proposed that the development and evolution of cave temples in the Northern Central Plains region could be divided into four major periods: the 5th to 6th centuries (first period), the 7th to 8th centuries (second period), the 9th to 10th centuries (third period), and after the 11th century (fourth period), with the first period being the heyday of cave temple excavation in this region. The spatial scope of this study, "Longdong," mainly refers to the cities of Pingliang and Qingyang in the eastern part of Gansu Province, belonging to the "East of the Yellow River in Gansu and Ningxia" region of the Northern Central Plains, and is an integral part of this region. Simultaneously, the time frame of this study, the Northern Zhou Dynasty, roughly falls within the 5th to 6th centuries, precisely during the peak period (the first period) of cave temples in the Northern Central Plains region. Considering these circumstances, this specialized study of the significant region (Longdong region) and the primary period (Northern Zhou Dynasty) of cave temples is highly necessary, aiming to provide references for future chronological studies of Buddhist archaeology and art in the region.

2. Basic Situation of Buddhist Grottoes in Northern Zhou Dynasty in Longdong Area

The nationwide survey of cave temples reveals that there are approximately 78 extant cave temple sites in the Longdong region of Gansu Province. These grottoes are primarily distributed along the banks of the Jing River and within the Long Mountains and Ziwuling Mountains [3]. The distribution includes Beishiku Temple in Qingyang City, Wangmu Palace Grottoes, Chenjia Cave Grottoes, Yunyan Temple Grottoes, and Zhulin Temple Grottoes in Jingchuan County, Pingliang City; Shikong Temple Grottoes in Zhenyuan County, Qingyang City; Baoquan Temple Grottoes and Zhangjia Goudong Grottoes in Heshui County; and Lianhua Temple Grottoes, among other small and medium-sized grottoes [4]. The most significant and representative grottoes are Beishiku Temple and Nanshiku Temple, both established during the Northern Wei period by Xi Kangsheng, the governor of Jingzhou in the Northern Wei Dynasty. The names suggest a north-south correlation, and geographically, they are positioned nearly opposite each other, merely 45 kilometers apart. Additionally, these two temples, along with the Mogao Grottoes in Dunhuang, Maijishan Grottoes, and Bingling Temple Grottoes, are collectively known as the "Four Great Grottoes" of Gansu. Due to the unique geographical location of the Longdong region, the grotto temples have been continuously developed since their inception during the Taihe period of the Northern Wei Dynasty. They evolved through the Western Wei, Northern Zhou, Sui, Tang, Song, Jin, Yuan, and Ming dynasties, forming a significant group of grotto temples. The artistic style of the statues evolved from the early rigid forms of the Northern Wei to the appearance and maturity of the flowing robes in the mid to late periods. During the Western Wei period, the statues inherited the Northern Wei style but became more delicate and elongated. In the Northern Zhou period, the statues moved away from the thin and slender style of the Western Wei, becoming more robust and widely popular. The charm of their Buddhist art, influenced by the Central Plains, also possesses strong regional characteristics, providing valuable references for the study of Buddhist art in China.

3. Analysis of the Statue Style of Northern Zhou Buddhist Grottoes in Longdong Region

Buddhist activities in the Longdong region date back to the Sixteen Kingdoms period. During the Northern Dynasties, both local officials and ordinary people actively participated in the construction of Buddhist grottoes, reflecting the widespread devotion to Buddhism. The rock cliffs in the Longdong region, being easy to carve, led to the creation of stone sculptures in various forms such as bas-relief, high relief, and some nearly in the round. However, the stone quality at the North and South Grotto Temples is slightly inferior to that of Longmen and Yungang, making intricate carvings difficult. This limitation has imparted a unique style to the statues at these temples: "simple and rigid." The Beishiku Temple is a significant Buddhist cultural relic in the Qingyang area of Longdong, valued not only for its Buddhist art but also as a long-standing center of Buddhist cultural activities in the

region. Many aspects of its religious activities have become integral to local folk culture. Additionally, the Beishiku Temple has deep connections with Silk Road culture, enriching its cultural heritage. While the artistic achievements of the North and South Grotto Temples do not match the fame of the grottoes in Dunhuang, Datong, Yongjijing, and Tianshui, they are the most representative and sizable ancient grotto temples in the Longdong region. They have influenced other grottoes in the Longdong and northwest Shaanxi areas. Particularly, while inheriting the artistic style of the Yungang Grottoes, the North and South Grotto Temples possess their own distinctive artistic qualities and appeal, providing valuable firsthand material for studying the Buddhist sculpture style and artistic techniques of the Northern Wei period.

Currently, among the large grotto groups in the Longdong region, the Northern Dynasties grottoes in the Beishiku Temple of Qingyang are the most abundant, with a total of thirty-five grottoes. These include nine Northern Wei grottoes, nine Western Wei grottoes, and seventeen Northern Zhou grottoes, specifically numbered as grottoes 60, 240, 71, 96, 103, 105, 106, 116, 117, 119, 122, 184, 194, 197, 204, 208, and 230. The South Grotto Temple has only one Northern Dynasties grotto (currently numbered as grotto 1), and the Wangmu Palace Grotto has just one Northern Dynasties grotto as well. The Shikong Temple Grottoes of the Northern Zhou period have a limited number of medium and large grottoes, with some smaller niches. These grottoes include large rectangular domed caves like grotto 2 and shallow rectangular niches like grottoes 4, 7, and 10. Beishiku Temple, located at the foot of Fuzhong Mountain in the Xifeng District of Qingyang City, Gansu Province, has a history spanning over 1500 years since its establishment in the second year of the Yongping era of the Northern Wei Dynasty. The temple has been continuously expanded and renovated through the Western Wei, Northern Zhou, Sui, Tang, Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties. Besides the mysterious caves from the Northern and Southern Dynasties, the temple is also famous for its vivid and inclusive Tang Dynasty grottoes. The Northern Zhou grottoes, which bridge the gap between the two periods, inherit the delicate features of the Northern Wei and mark the beginning of the "full and splendid" style of the Sui and Tang dynasties. Despite the brief existence of the Northern Zhou Dynasty, the preservation of its cultural relics at Beishiku Temple is invaluable. The grottoes on the cliff walls testify to the open and inclusive nature of Chinese civilization, illustrating the history of cultural integration and mutual learning over the millennia. In 1959–1960, Chen Xianru and Zhao Zhixiang from the Cultural Relics Work Team of the Gansu Provincial Museum discovered Beishiku Temple at the foot of Fuzhong Mountain on the east bank of the confluence of the Pu and Ru Rivers on the western side of Dongzhi Plain in Longdong [5]. In 1925, Mr. Chen Wanli accompanied the second Chinese expedition team of the American Fogg Art Museum to investigate Wangmu Palace Grottoes in Jingchuan and discovered the South Grotto Temple and its stele, predicting the existence of a corresponding North Grotto Temple [6]. Apart from the cultural centers of Chang'an and secondary centers like Dunhuang, Maijishan, and Xumishan, the Northern Zhou period also left behind a number of grottoes in other regions, such as Bingling Temple Grottoes in Yongjijing, Qingyang

Beishiku Temple, and Shikong Temple Grottoes in Huating County, though these grottoes are fewer in number and less well-preserved. However, they are still significant for a comprehensive understanding of Northern Zhou grottoes. The Northern Zhou period (557–581) lasted 24 years, during which Buddhist veneration reached a peak. Representative grottoes from this period at Beishiku Temple include grottoes 240 and 60. The statues of the Three Buddhas and Bodhisattvas in these grottoes inherit the delicate elegance of the Northern Wei and foreshadow the fullness and richness of the Sui and Tang dynasties. Grotto 240 is located in the northern section of the grotto complex on the lower level. It has a rectangular plan with a domed top, and the east, south, and north walls are carved with altar bases. The ceiling imitates a wooden structure, and the grotto features the Three Buddhas and attendant Bodhisattvas: Sakyamuni of the central world, Amitabha of the western Pure Land, and Medicine Buddha in the Eastern glass world. Grotto 60, situated at the southern end of the grotto complex, has a nearly square plan with a low altar and flat top. The main wall inside the grotto is carved with a Buddha flanked by two disciples, while the central parts of the south and north walls each feature a Buddha with a disciple on either side. The outer sides of the grotto door are adorned with small guardian figures. The Buddhas are depicted with low, flat topknots, round faces, broad shoulders, and are seated in the lotus position.

The Northern Zhou sculptures at Beishiku Temple underwent significant evolution and development after the continuous innovations of the Northern and Western Wei dynasties, incorporating the unique characteristics of the Longdong region. The craftsmanship became more refined, with diverse forms and smoother carving techniques, resulting in fuller and more robust figures that broke away from the delicate and slender style of the Northern and Western Wei periods. The Buddha statues typically feature low, flat topknots, broad faces, and short, thick necks with two or three neck folds. The shoulders are rounded, moving away from the previously narrow ones, and the facial features are more concentrated, with small, thin lips and a subtle smile. The faces, once gaunt, became round and full, the bodies robust, with broad shoulders and slightly protruding abdomens, and the upper bodies inclined slightly forward, yet with elegant and detailed lines. The Buddha statues of the Northern Zhou period often exhibit disproportionate head-to-body ratios, and the standing Bodhisattvas have slightly protruding bellies, lending the sculptures a simple and honest style that laid the foundation for the stylistic developments of the Sui and Tang periods. The sculptures' clothing became more diverse, retaining the simple and natural characteristics of Western Wei attire. For example, the central Buddha on the main wall of grotto 60 wears a cross-collared monk's robe with a knotted belt at the chest, covered by a wide, round-collared robe. The Buddha on the south wall of grotto 60 wears a full-shoulder cloak. In grotto 240, the Buddha wears a slanted-collar monk's robe with a knotted belt at the chest, overlaid with a broad-sleeved robe draped over both shoulders. The robes' hems naturally fall in front of the Buddha's seat, with sparse and symmetrical folds. The Bodhisattvas often wear high topknot crowns, with ornamental ribbons draping over their shoulders, a monk's robe, a necklace, and a long skirt. They wear a shawl that either crosses at the abdomen or drapes over the shoulders and falls behind the elbows. The disciples typically wear

round-collared robes or full-shoulder cloaks (as seen in grotto 60), with an inner monk's robe and an outer half-robe that bares the right shoulder (also in grotto 60). The guardian figures are depicted with small topknots, appearing lively and adorable, especially the pair of childlike guardians outside grotto 60, who are carved with wide-eyed, open-mouthed expressions, embodying a sense of innocence and purity. The Northern Dynasties sculptures at Beishiku Temple demonstrate a trend from large to smaller cave sizes, a stylistic shift from delicate to full and rounded figures with a tendency towards secularization, and clothing that evolves from elaborate to simple, with brighter color tones. The carvings are smooth and free, showcasing skilled craftsmanship and vibrant, lively figures. These sculptures represent the early stone carving art of Longdong, reflecting the cultural essence of the Northern Dynasties in the region and embodying the results of ancient cultural exchanges. They hold significant importance for studying the stone carvings around Beishiku Temple. During the Northern Zhou period, with the great integration of northern ethnic groups and the cultural exchange between the north and south, two different artistic styles—Central Plains and Western Regions—evolved from coexistence to fusion. Northern Zhou sculptures broke away from the traditional models established since the Northern Wei. The Central Plains' delicate, slender figures combined with the Western Regions' round, full faces to create a new "short and beautiful" image [7]. This fusion produced new figures that were both gentle and elegant, imbued with inner vitality, reflecting a harmonious blend of simplicity and grandeur, as well as grace and ease. The overall impression of these sculptures conveys a strong sense of social life and human spirit.

Additionally, the Bingling Temple Grottoes are among the earliest cave temples in China, showcasing a progression from the Western Regions' style to the Northern Wei's "delicate and serene" figures, the Northern Zhou's rounded and dignified forms, and finally the Ming Dynasty's elaborate and ornate sculptures. Each dynasty left distinct marks on these grottoes. Among the surviving Northern Zhou period grottoes are grottoes 6, 82, 134 and 172. Grotto 6, a representative work from the Northern Zhou, features a nearly rectangular domed cave with a vertically rectangular arched entrance. The main Buddha statue has a low flat topknot, a broad and short forehead with a white urna, crescent-shaped eyes gazing forward, a small, slightly smiling mouth, and compact facial features concentrated in the center, giving the face a fuller and more plump appearance. The neck is short and thick, and the Buddha is dressed in a densely pleated full-shoulder robe with faintly visible painted patterns. The robust body and heavy robe reflect a distinct archaic style. The Bodhisattva figures are characterized by short, vibrant faces, with crossed sashes on the chest, blending the legacy of the Northern Wei with Southern Dynasty art, completing the transition from slender to short and beautiful figures. Buddhist thought remained focused on meditation and contemplation, with themes of the Seven Buddhas and Thousand Buddhas being popular. The Northern Zhou sculptures at Bingling Temple transitioned from the late Northern Wei's delicate style to a fuller and more robust form. Despite the Northern Zhou's brief 24-year existence and the anti-Buddhist movement under Emperor Wu, the grottoes at Bingling Temple saw limited sculptural activity during this period, with grotto 6 being a notable

example. Although short-lived, the Northern Zhou dynasty pioneered a new style in Buddhist art. Centered in Chang'an, Northern Zhou sculptures embraced a fusion of Central Plains and Western influences, integrating early Northwestern and Southern Dynasty artistic elements. This resulted in a "robust and elegant" and "short and beautiful" sculptural style that became popular nationwide. The Shigong Temple Grottoes consist of 15 caves, originally built during the Northern Wei, with additions during the Northern Zhou and Sui dynasties. Grottoes 2, 4, 7, and 10 are believed to be from the Northern Zhou period. For instance, grotto 2 has a slightly circular plan with a domed top, similar to Northern Zhou to Sui Dynasty grottoes at Maijishan. The surviving robust sculptures and Bodhisattva ornaments resemble Northern Zhou sculptures at Xumishan in Guyuan, suggesting they date back to the Northern Zhou or Sui Dynasty [8]. The popular themes of the Three Buddhas feature statues with broad shoulders and stout bodies. The Bodhisattvas wear sashes and necklaces draped across their knees, similar to the Bodhisattvas in grotto 45 at Xumishan in Ningxia, exhibiting typical Northern Zhou style. The Northern Zhou grotto art across various regions is distinguished by its evolving cave structures, unique sculptures, and murals, reflecting the development of Chinese Buddhist cave art into a new stage with distinct national characteristics.

The Longdong region, positioned at the crucial juncture of the Hexi Corridor connecting to Chang'an, holds significant strategic and cultural importance. During the Northern Dynasties, the influx of Western Region culture and high monks from the Hexi Corridor moving eastwards had a profound impact on the Longdong region. Chang'an, as the capital of the Western Wei and Northern Zhou, was a vibrant center of Buddhist culture, driven by the devout faith of the rulers of both dynasties. As an extension of Chang'an's culture, the Longdong region inevitably absorbed Buddhist thought from the capital, leading to a convergence of Eastern and Western Buddhist cultures in the area. In 2013, Northern Zhou Buddha statues were discovered in a cache pit east of Dayun Temple in Jingchuan. The statues' robes, featuring full-shoulder and open-chest full-shoulder styles, closely resembled those of Northern Zhou period statues found in Xi'an, indicating a strong influence from Chang'an on Longdong's Buddhist art during the Northern Zhou period [9]. This influence extended beyond the style of the statues' robes to encompass the overall Buddhist culture in Longdong during the Western Wei and Northern Zhou periods. However, while Longdong's Buddhist development was influenced by Chang'an, it also exhibited unique characteristics. This indicates that Longdong Buddhism was within the cultural sphere of Chang'an but maintained its own distinct identity rather than being entirely dependent on the capital. Therefore, the Northern Dynasties grottoes in the Longdong region were not only influenced by the external Western Region culture and the itinerant high monks from various places, but also by the integration and understanding of Buddhism by the local Han Chinese and ethnic minorities. These factors contributed to a Northern Dynasties Buddhist tradition in Longdong that aligned with the overall trends of Northern Dynasties Buddhism while also displaying unique regional characteristics.

The geographical location of Longdong region is important,

with the eastern part adjacent to the Central Plains and the western part accessible to the Hexi Corridor. Its unique historical evolution has led to a rich collection of remains of grotto temples. Therefore, in terms of the artistic style of statues, the Northern Dynasty grottoes in the Longdong region are not only influenced by foreign Western Regions culture and high-ranking monks from various places, but also by the fusion understanding of Buddhism by the local Han and ethnic minorities in Longdong. In addition, these factors also make the Buddhist tradition of the Northern Dynasties in the Longdong region not only conform to the overall trend of Northern Buddhism, but also present unique local characteristics. In short, the development of grottoes in Longdong District is clear. From various factors, the art of grottoes in this area is not only an imitation of Yungang Grottoes and Longmen Grottoes, but also an innovation with distinct regional characteristics. This organic combination has created a unique and typical local style of grotto art in the Northern Dynasties of Longdong District, and its cultural and artistic value is extremely precious [10].

References

- [1] Wang Qifei. Introduction and Comment on the Study of Buddhist Statues in the Northern Dynasties in Eastern Gansu, *Dunhuang Studies*, no.2,2022.
- [2] Su Bai. *Archaeology of Chinese Grotto Temples*, Beijing, Life, Reading, and New Knowledge Sanlian Bookstore, 2019.
- [3] Gansu Provincial Cultural Relics Work Team and Qingyang North Grottoes Temple Cultural Management Office. *Longdong Grottoes*, Beijing, Cultural Relics Publishing House, 1987.
- [4] Zhang Baoxi. *Longdong Grottoes*, Beijing, Cultural Relics Publishing House, 1987.
- [5] Song Wenyu and Dong Huafeng. *Compilation and Study of Investigation Records of Mr. Huo Xiliang's North Grottoes Temple*, *Dunhuang Research*, no.4,2008.
- [6] Chen Wanli. *Journey to the West*, Lanzhou, Gansu People's Publishing House, 2002.
- [7] Zhang Naihui. *North Grottoes Temple, Northern Dynasties, Sui Dynasty Grottoes and Statues, Silk Road*, no.20,2010.
- [8] Wu Hong. *Research on Statues in Northern Zhou Grottoes*, Lanzhou, Lanzhou University, 2009.
- [9] Liu Yan. *Analysis of Clothing for Single Buddha Statues Excavated to the East of Dayun Temple*, official website of Jingchuan County Museum www.jxcbwg.com.
- [10] Duan Yaoqiong. *A Brief Discussion on the Northern Dynasty Grottoes in the Longdong Region*, *Cultural Relics and Architecture*, 2021.