

A Study on the Multicultural Presentation in the Yungang Grottoes Sculptures

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Abstract: This paper explores the themes, forms, and content of Buddhist sculptures in the Yungang Grottoes from a multicultural perspective, revealing the cultural intersections and integrations reflected in the dissemination and localization of Buddhist art. Situated in the Northern Wei Dynasty, the Yungang Grottoes serve as a significant testament to the collision of Eastern and Western cultures. With the opening of the Silk Road, Buddhism was introduced to China and gradually integrated with indigenous Chinese culture, resulting in the remarkable artistic achievements exemplified by the sculptures in the Yungang Grottoes. The Buddhist sculptures in these grottoes were profoundly influenced by Gandhara art, Greek art, and Central Plains culture, culminating in the unique “Yungang style.” The sculptures’ attire, facial expressions, and carving techniques not only demonstrate the fusion of diverse cultures but also reflect the deep intertwining of Buddhist philosophy and local traditions. Particularly notable is the depiction of Buddhist stories, which illustrates the commonalities among various religious art forms, such as the artistic parallels between Indian Buddhist narratives and the Christian “Annunciation” motif.

Keywords: Yungang Grottoes, Buddhist Art, Multiculturalism, Gandhara Style, Cultural Integration

1. Introduction

As one of the world’s three major religions, Buddhism boasts a long and profound history, tracing its origins back to 6th-century BCE India. At that time, India was in the midst of its era of regional states, characterized by rapid economic development driven by the exploitation of local agricultural resources. This period of economic growth, combined with the rigid caste system, gave rise to numerous social conflicts. The increasing power and status of the Vaishya class directly threatened the ruling position of the Brahmins, who were regarded as the “orthodox” aristocracy [1]. To maintain their dominance, the Brahmins sought to reinforce the caste system, solidifying social stratification and limiting mobility. This incited anger among the Vaishyas and Shudras, leading to widespread resistance and the emergence of various sects, among which Buddhism became the most influential.

However, the origins and development of Buddhist art were intricately linked to, yet distinct from, the growth of Buddhism itself. Although Buddhism was established in the 6th century BCE, its development was initially hindered by taboos against idol worship, delaying the emergence of Buddhist art until the 4th century BCE. Consequently, early sculptural techniques were notably absent. In the 4th century BCE, Alexander the Great of the Greek Macedonian kingdom conquered parts of

India, marking the beginning of the Hellenistic period [2]. This political shift introduced a large number of Greek artisans into India, thereby incorporating Greek sculptural techniques into Indian art. Early Buddhist art can be succinctly described as the interpretation of Buddhist themes through Greek styles, as exemplified by the Gandhara and Mathura schools of art. Gandhara art, an earlier form of Buddhist art, fully integrated Greek aesthetics, reflecting the organic fusion of Indian culture with Greek artistic traditions [2]. Mathura art, which emerged slightly later, absorbed the essence of Gandhara art while focusing on constructing a localized style of Buddhist art. With the opening of the Silk Road, both Gandhara and Mathura art spread to China, profoundly influencing early Chinese Buddhist art. This influence is evident in sites ranging from the Kizil and Bezeklik Caves in Xinjiang to the Mogao Caves in Dunhuang, the Dazu Rock Carvings in Chongqing, and finally the Yungang Grottoes in Shanxi. Under the impact of various Buddhist cultural influences, each grotto developed its unique artistic style. This study focuses on the Yungang Grottoes, one of China's four major grotto complexes, to investigate the themes, forms, and content of Buddhist sculptures from a multicultural perspective. The aim is to uncover the "multiculturalism" inherent in the Buddhist art of the Yungang Grottoes.

2. Early Fusion of Cultures

As has frequently been noted, an abrupt change in the artistic rendering of Buddhist sculptural images in northern China occurred around the end of the fifth and the beginning of the sixth centuries of the Northern Wei dynasty (386-534). In the last decades of the fifth century, during the reign of Emperor Xiaowen (471-99), and continuing into the early sixth century, Buddhist imagery characteristic of Chinese art replaced the foreign derived images predominant in the earlier part of the fifth century.

During the Eastern Han Dynasty, the opening of the Silk Road marked the formal introduction of Buddhism into China. At that time, China had not yet achieved unification, and warfare remained frequent. The teachings of Buddhism resonated with people suffering from the chaos of war, addressing their yearning for a stable and peaceful life. As the number of Buddhist followers grew, idol worship within Buddhism also emerged in China. Consequently, Buddhist art began to spread in the form of grottoes, murals, and temples. The dissemination of Buddhist art in China was also a process of gradual localization. Early Chinese grottoes, such as the Bezeklik and Kizil Caves in Xinjiang, preserved the stylistic influences of Gandhara art. During the Northern Wei Dynasty, Buddhist grotto art incorporated the unique stylistic features of nomadic cultures into the foundation of Gandhara art. This era, represented by the Yungang Grottoes in Datong, Shanxi, witnessed further development of Buddhist art. By the Tang Dynasty, Buddhist art had gradually assumed a distinctly Sinicized style. Throughout its dissemination, Buddhist art coexisted with multiple social and cultural transformations in China, blending diverse cultural influences while manifesting localized characteristics.

The Yungang Grottoes were established during the Northern Wei Dynasty, when nomadic peoples had taken control of the Central Plains. In 386 CE, Tuoba Gui ascended to the throne as King of Wei, proclaimed the Great Wei, and established Buddhism as the state religion. In 398 CE, the capital was relocated to Pingcheng [3]. As the economic, cultural, and political center of the time, Pingcheng also served as an important hub along the Silk Road. Emperor Tuoba Tao, who succeeded to the throne, developed a deep interest in Buddhism, attracting numerous Indian monks to China to propagate the faith and oversee the construction of many temples. When the rulers of the Northern Wei realized the social utility of Buddhism, they integrated it into the political and cultural framework and actively promoted it. On the one hand, Buddhism was used to consolidate their rule and maintain social stability; on the other, it was employed to demonstrate the prosperity of the state and reinforce an inclusive and multicultural national image. This dual purpose led to the commissioning of the Yungang Grottoes. One of the most distinctive features of the Yungang Grottoes is their

multiculturalism. The content, facial expressions, forms, attire, architectural designs, and styles of the sculptures demonstrate an organic integration of Greek, Indian, Central Asian, Xianbei, and Central Plains cultures. This synthesis gave rise to a distinctive model known as the “Yungang Model” [4]. The Yungang Model incorporates various artistic styles into Northern Wei Buddhist art, including performance themes depicted in dance and musical figures, as well as ritualistic forms reflected in the design of Buddhist statues and celestial beings. These elements collectively provide direct evidence of the multicultural nature of the Yungang Grottoes, showcasing the intersection and fusion of Eastern and Western cultures. Fei Xiaotong’s concept of “cultural consciousness” is highly relevant in this context: “Each culture appreciates its own beauty and the beauty of others. When all cultures coexist harmoniously, the world achieves unity.” Examining the interaction of different cultures within the Yungang Grottoes not only helps to trace the developmental trajectory of Chinese Buddhist sculpture but also reveals how its multicultural characteristics have influenced the social and artistic evolution of later generations. This comprehensive exploration uncovers the cultural and artistic value of the Yungang Grottoes from multiple perspectives.

3. Sculpture

The Yungang Grottoes are carved into a sandstone lens located within the upper rock strata of the Jurassic Datong Formation and Yungang Formation, stretching over 1,000 meters from east to west. Currently, 254 caves are numbered, including 45 main caves and 209 subsidiary ones. There are over 59,000 preserved Buddhist statues distributed among the eastern, central, and western sections of the grottoes. Differences in construction periods have led to variations in sculptural styles among these sections. The central section spans approximately 230 meters in length and contains nine primary caves (Caves 5–13) and 111 subsidiary caves. Although this section is the shortest in length among the three, it is the most concentrated area in terms of both the number and scale of caves. Moreover, it surpasses the other sections in its diverse expressions of Buddhist thought.

In the early caves of Yungang, most of the Buddha statues are either dressed in right-shoulder-exposed robes or in full-shoulder robes. Based on the realistic depiction of drapery in ancient Indian and Gandharan art, the ornamentation on Yungang’s right-shoulder-exposed robes exhibits greater decorative qualities. Beneath the robe lies the so-called “Samghati,” which closely fits the body and appears to be made of sheer gauze. In addition to hooked floral patterns, motifs like honeysuckle and bead chains are carved along the edges of the garments. The newer type of Buddha image that appeared toward the end of the fifth century and, by the early part of the sixth century, replaced the older type has an almost insubstantial body dressed in a thicker pleated robe. The stiff-looking linear patterns of folds of the outer garment as shown on the new late Northern Wei Buddha images impose a unified design over the figure that largely hides the shape of the body beneath. This type of representation is generally regarded as a more Chinese-looking, or Sinicized image. The Buddha statue in Cave 19, the tallest seated Buddha with an exposed right shoulder in Yungang, alongside the open-air Buddha of Cave 20, serves as an exemplary instance of rich and meticulously detailed robe patterns. The right-shoulder-exposed robe is a typical style of Western Buddhist attire. The outer robe appears thick, with prominently carved drapery patterns that are elegant and intricate, seemingly made from high-quality woolen material. These robes exhibit strong three-dimensional effects and a distinct sense of gravity. The right-shoulder-exposed attire, popular in ancient India, is a simple, reverential, and open form of dress. Thus, in early Indian and Gandharan art, the Buddha often dons such robes. When Buddhist art spread to China, although the exposed-shoulder attire did not conform to Chinese ethical norms, it was adapted and preserved with slight modifications. This reflects the process of mutual adjustment and adaptation among different cultures during the evolution of the Yungang Grottoes’ sculptural attire in its early stages. During this period, the full-shoulder robe also appeared alongside the right-shoulder-exposed robe. The full-shoulder robe is one of the hallmarks

of ancient Indian and Gandharan Buddhist art. Many large Buddha statues in the early Yungang caves wear such garments. For instance, the attire of the standing Buddha in Cave 19 features a neckline that descends from the right shoulder to the upper chest, looping back over the left shoulder. The drapery flows downward from both shoulders, converging in a semi-elliptical shape at the center. The fabric's texture is intricate and consistent, forming water ripple-like patterns that cling closely to the body, with clear contours. While the drapery appears thick and rugged, reminiscent of Gandharan style, its close-fitting effect reflects the Mathura artistic tradition. As Liang Sicheng remarked: "Although the carvings in Yungang display considerable Gandharan influence, the facial features and garment folds of the colossal statues in the five western caves exhibit a distinctly central Indian flavor" [5].

In Cave 18, Gandhara-style hanging sculptures of human figures appear. This artistic form, originating from Greek art, was commonly used in the veneration of Gandhara stupas. For instance, the Gandhara-style flying deity brackets feature high-relief flying figures closely attached to the leaf-patterned decorative bases. Their lower limbs are completely hidden within the lowest part of the leaf-shaped carving, leaving a nearly square tenon-shaped projection designed to fit into the pre-carved recesses on appropriate parts of the stupa. These hanging sculptures were either connected and inserted with wooden rods or bonded using plaster or mud paste. Apart from the two Bodhisattvas standing on pedestals, we also observe that the design and carving techniques of the ten celestial beings and the ten disciples are groundbreaking. Half-body or head-only donor figures are widely adopted across the Yungang Grottoes, appearing in various Buddha niches. However, full-body, half-body, or head-only depictions of disciples emerging through the grotto walls are unparalleled elsewhere. For instance, the "maiden" holding a flower or a purification bottle has a complete form, yet her lotus pedestal is half-concealed within the wall. Above her, the disciples' figures progressively diminish from full-body to half-body to head-only depictions, with the projecting portions gradually reducing. Their heads are entirely carved in round relief, protruding prominently, while their torsos and lower bodies increasingly merge into the grotto walls. This large-scale hanging sculpture technique is unique to this location within the Yungang Grottoes, displaying a distinct plurality of character representations. This exemplifies the early Yungang sculptures' inheritance of Gandharan Buddhist artistic styles. The disciple figures in Cave 18 not only reflect the cultural diversity of Yungang's sculptural forms but also vividly showcase the integration of various cultural elements in the facial expressions of the figures. The five disciple figures preserved on the eastern wall exhibit serene and varied expressions, demonstrating exceptional craftsmanship. They seem to stand solemnly, attentively listening to the Buddha's teachings. The "maiden" holding a purification bottle appears youthful and focused, exuding calmness and vitality. The disciple holding a lotus bud is silent and reflective, appearing deep in thought, while another disciple with clasped hands near his chest wears a gentle smile, radiating inner joy. Particularly striking are the roundly sculpted disciple heads emerging from the lower wall. Their necks are connected to the wall surface, resembling a joyful liberation from the sea of suffering. The European-style faces, characterized by deep-set eyes, high noses, and gaunt, sharply defined features, include finely detailed expressions such as neatly aligned teeth, a slightly recessed forehead with a rounded "Mahapurusa mark" sculpted at its center, and hollowed temples and cheeks. High cheekbones and angular facial contours present the visage of a wise, experienced individual. Gracefully curled eyebrows, slightly drooping almond-shaped eyes, a protruding chin, and pronounced parentheses-shaped lines at the mouth's corners emphasize a highly exaggerated Western aesthetic. These details enhance the solemn yet joyful emotions of the figures, embodying a distinct realism. The prototypes for these sculptures were clearly influenced by the Western Regions, but the Yungang artisans, utilizing their exceptional skills, recreated these images with striking originality. This group of sculptures is one of the most representative in the Yungang Grottoes and can be considered a highly successful example of disciple figures in Chinese cave

temples. The early Yungang Grottoes sculptures, whether in clothing styles, sculptural forms, or facial expressions, underwent a process of cultural collision, adaptation, and fusion. By actively absorbing foreign cultural and artistic elements and incorporating localized features, the Yungang Grottoes sculptures continually evolved, endowing them with groundbreaking significance. Ultimately, this led to the development of Yungang Grottoes' unique multicultural model.

4. Content and Symbol

The Yungang Grottoes are not only known for their exquisite Buddhist statues but also for the well-preserved carvings on their walls. The grottoes currently feature over 270 depictions of Buddhist story scenes, of which 218 can be identified in terms of their themes and content, while nearly a hundred have eroded significantly. These include jataka tales recounting the Buddha's past lives of virtue and benevolence, avadana tales illustrating the causes and effects of Buddha's teachings, and stories drawn from scriptures like the Vimalakīrti Sūtra and the Lotus Sutra. Most of these stories arrived in the Central Plains with the spread of Buddhism, where they were adapted by local artisans and subsequently recorded in the grottoes. In the early period of the grottoes, narrative carvings were sparse. By the middle period, 12 grottoes, excluding Cave 3, featured an abundance of narrative depictions with diverse content, grand scale, and varied forms. For instance, the jataka tales carved in Cave 7 highlight the essence of life; the avadana tales in Caves 9 and 10 celebrate the fortune of existence; and the carvings in Cave 6, illustrating stories from the Buddha's life, depict the journey and enlightenment of life. During the process of interpreting these Buddhist stories, foreign cultural influences were continuously integrated into local traditions, resulting in a distinctive narrative style unique to the Yungang Grottoes.

Among these carvings, the Buddha story panels in Cave 6 stand out for their richness and for best exemplifying the cultural diversity of the Yungang Grottoes' themes. These stories are primarily based on religious tales introduced from abroad, as evidenced by their narratives and the symbolic elements embedded within them. The story of "The Descent of the Gods to Select the Buddha" is a prime example, objectively validating the cultural plurality present in the grottoes. This tale is set in Kapilavastu in ancient India during the 6th century BCE and recounts events surrounding the Buddha's life before and after his birth. The Buddha's birth, guided by mystical and supernatural forces, symbolizes not only his royal lineage but also a transcendent power—a divine "guidance" and "choice." Thus, while "The Descent of the Gods to Select the Buddha" ostensibly depicts the Buddha's birth, it conveys a universal principle: humanity must transcend material constraints and seek spiritual guidance to achieve inner awakening. The inclusion of this subject matter in the Yungang Grottoes not only directly attests to the introduction of Buddhist culture during the Northern Wei dynasty but also reflects the dynasty's top-down acceptance of the core tenets of Buddhism. Originating in India, Buddhist stories were visualized through Buddhist art, infused with the cultural essence of the Central Plains by Northern Wei artisans. This process showcases the essence of Buddhist philosophy and represents the multidimensional integration of diverse cultures.

In Cave 37, the story of "The Elephant-Mount Conception" illustrates the multiculturalism of the Yungang Grottoes from a content perspective. Buddhist scriptures emphasize that Queen Maya (the mother of Siddhartha Gautama) conceived after seven days of seclusion and observance of vows, during which she dreamt of a white elephant with six tusks entering her right side. This symbolizes her sanctity and purity, untainted by earthly desires. The carving depicts, on the left side, a downward-diving elephant with a figure seated on its back, holding the infant Siddhartha in his arms, foretelling Queen Maya's pregnancy. On the right side, Queen Maya is shown reclining, her eyes closed, still immersed in her dream. Christianity contains a similar narrative: "The Annunciation," a significant episode recorded in the Bible, tells of the Virgin Mary's conception by the Holy Spirit, followed by the angel Gabriel informing her of this miraculous event. From a narrative perspective, both stories

document the birth of central religious figures, underscoring the guidance of supernatural forces mentioned earlier, and rejecting paternal lineage as the source of their divine origins. Artistically, whether in the paintings of “The Annunciation” or the carvings of “The Elephant-Mount Conception,” the scenes are constructed around the relationship between the “intruder” and the “receiver.” The spatial arrangement drives the story forward, creating interaction between the characters and enabling the flow of religious messages, enhancing the sanctity of the divine birth. This shared artistic and thematic expression highlights the commonalities among diverse religious arts in the Yungang Grottoes.

Returning to Cave 6, the story of “The Manifestation of the Tree Deity” similarly demonstrates the integration of diverse cultures. Tagore once said, “Greek civilization arose in brick houses made of clay, while Indian civilization was born in forests” [6]. Trees have a close association with Indian civilization; even in the seals unearthed from the Indus Valley Civilization, depictions of tree worship can be found. Before the emergence of Buddha images, devotees often worshipped sacred trees as symbols of the Buddha. In Buddhist scriptures, sacred trees hold a holy and exalted status. Several significant moments in the Buddha’s life are linked to sacred trees: his birth beneath the ashoka tree in Lumbini Garden, his enlightenment under the Bodhi tree in Bodhi Gaya, and his nirvana beneath the sal tree in Kushinagar. Even the past seven Buddhas achieved enlightenment and attained Buddhahood in connection with sacred trees. The story of “The Manifestation of the Tree Deity” focuses on the Buddha’s meditation under the Bodhi tree, where he resisted the disturbances of Mara and ultimately attained enlightenment. As Buddhism spread from India to China, the worship of tree deities also entered Chinese culture. However, this reverence gradually shifted toward a belief in the Buddha himself. In this grotto, the depiction of “The Manifestation of the Tree Deity” features the Bodhi tree carved on the left and upper sections, arching like a giant umbrella to cover the Buddha meditating beneath it. On the lower right, the Buddha is shown in deep meditation. Here, the “tree” functions as a Buddhist symbol, visualizing the Buddha’s life and embodying the early Buddhist faith. Moreover, the symbolic meaning of the tree in Buddhism became richer, evolving from a representation of the stages of the Buddha’s life to a symbol of compassion and wisdom. To further convey the spiritual essence of Buddhism, artisans carved this story into the grotto, using localized expressions to tell the tale of “The Manifestation of the Tree Deity.”

5. Conclusion

As Buddhist art developed in China, the Yungang Grottoes, serving as a cultural hub during the Northern Wei period, exhibited characteristics of multiculturalism in various aspects. In terms of content, the Buddhist sculptures in the Yungang Grottoes directly attest to the eastward transmission of Buddhism, with themes such as Shakyamuni Buddha, the Three Eastern Buddhas, and Kumāra Tāṇḍa. If the themes of these sculptures directly reflect cultural “exchange,” then the techniques used to create Buddhist sculptures better demonstrate “integration.” The early sculpting techniques of Buddhist statues in the Yungang Grottoes were directly influenced by Gandhara art and other Greek sculptural styles. Later, under the influence of the localization of Buddhist art and the ruling authorities, the sculpting methods integrated the physical characteristics of the Central Plains and various ethnic groups. The carvings within the grottoes reveal the commonalities among religious arts from different cultural backgrounds, further evidencing the multiculturalism of the Yungang Grottoes. Overall, the Yungang Grottoes are a precious cultural heritage of China. Their display of multicultural characteristics holds a significant position on the global cultural stage. Research on the Yungang Grottoes aids in exploring the connections between Chinese Buddhist culture and world culture, better promoting Chinese culture and narrating the story of human civilization.

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