

# The Historical and Cultural Changes of Yungang Grottoes

## Cultural Changes of Yungang Grottoes

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### Abstract

Yungang Grottoes were excavated in the Wen Chengde period of Northern Wei Dynasty, and ended in light years of Northern Wei Dynasty, which is of excellent value in art, history, culture, and tourism. This paper briefly describes the development history of Yungang Grottoes, and divides them into early, middle, and late stages according to the construction time, and analyzes their cultural changes from the representative grottoes in each period, hoping to play a certain reference role.

### Keywords

Cultural change, History, Yungang grottoes, Art analysis

### Introduction

Yungang Grottoes is not only a treasure of ancient art in China, but also a shining star in the world cultural heritage. It witnessed the historical turning point of the Northern Wei Dynasty from its heyday to the time when it moved to Luoyang and recorded the rise and fall of Buddhist art in northern China. At the same time, it combines the essence of Indian, Central Asian and China native arts, forms a unique Yungang style, and shows the brilliant achievements of Buddhist art in the Northern Wei Dynasty. It is of great practical significance to analyze and study the historical and cultural changes of Yungang Grottoes for the study of ancient history, religion, art and cultural changes in China and the promotion of local tourism industry [1].

### Overview of Yungang Grottoes

Yungang Grottoes is located at the southern foot of Wuzhou Mountain in the western suburb of Datong City, Shanxi Province. According to statistics, there are fifty-three existing caves with more than 50,000 statues, which is one of the most famous grottoes with the greatest artistic value in China.

Grottoes have been built for more than 1,500 years, and the oldest caves are Cave 16 to Cave 20 in Yungang, which was built by Tanyao and named as "Tanyas Cave 5" by academic circles. Other caves were mostly completed at the end of the fifth century.

Yungang Grottoes is a great grotto carving art with national characteristics and a shining pearl in the crown of Chinese art. It fully reflects the outstanding creative ability of working people in ancient China.

In modern times, imperialism wantonly destroyed and stole Buddha statues for huge profits. According to incomplete statistics, there are about 1400 stolen Buddha statues.

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC), to carry forward the national spirit and preserve the national history, the Party and the government organized professionals to repair Yungang Grottoes several times. and in 1961, it was listed as a national key cultural relic's protection unit [2].

## History of Yungang Grottoes

### *Yungang Grottoes in the northern Wei Dynasty*

The royal family of the Northern Wei Dynasty built Yungang Grottoes. Except for the Tanyao Cave, which was dug in 453, most of the other major caves were carved during the Northern Wei Dynasty's move to Luoyang from 460 to 494. After the Northern Wei regime moved the capital to Luoyang, the center of grotto sculpture was transferred from Yungang to Longmen, Luoyang, but the excavation of Yungang niche and grottoes did not stop. After more than one hundred years of repair and construction, a cave temple with a length of more than five hundred meters from east to west has been formed here, which has become a gathering place for tens of thousands of Buddha statues. The rulers of the Northern Wei Dynasty dug Yungang Grottoes to promote Buddhism, and the excavation of Yungang Grottoes also greatly promoted the prosperity of Buddhism in the Northern Wei Dynasty, and Yungang became a Buddhist holy land for a time. However, the workforce and material resources consumed in digging Yungang Grottoes are also amazing, and Tanyao Grottoes alone consumed half of the treasury of the Northern Wei Dynasty at that time. There are four main reasons why the Northern Wei Dynasty built Yungang Grottoes with great enthusiasm.

First, the teachings of Buddhism require people to endure hardships and submit to them, which is very beneficial for the rulers of the Northern Wei Dynasty to advocate and publicize class harmony, which can ease class contradictions and make the people feel at a position of exploitation and oppression. Second, in the Northern Wei Dynasty, to further expand its influence, Buddhism compared the emperor of the Northern Wei Dynasty to the Tathagata of today, and the rulers of the Northern Wei Dynasty also needed Buddhist endorsement to ensure the legitimacy of their political power [3]. Third, the rulers of the Northern Wei Dynasty intended to publicize their powerful national

strength by digging Yungang Grottoes. Fourth, at that time, some ruling classes worshiped Buddha very much, hoping to get a happy afterlife by building grottoes [4].

### *Yungang Grottoes after Tang Dynasty*

After the demise of the Northern Wei Dynasty, the construction of Yungang Grottoes was suspended until it was rebuilt in 640, the fourteenth year of the Tang Dynasty.

At this time, no matter in the court or among the people, worshipping Buddha was extremely popular. With the support of the Tang Dynasty, many craftsmen gathered in Yungang Grottoes and started individual grottoes construction. The three statues in the back room of Cave 3 were carved by the craftsmen of the Tang Dynasty in this period. About the condition of Yungang Grottoes in the Tang Dynasty, there are detailed and vivid records in Guang Hong Ming Ji: "Today, the people who see it spread the cloud, and the valley is 30 miles deep. In the east, the Buddhist temple is named Riling Rock, and in the west, the stone is carved as a niche, which can accommodate thousands of people. Seven of the cliffs are extremely steep, and the Buddhist niches are connected, and the rest are intermittent. The number of Buddha statues is well measured".

The next repair of the Yungang Grottoes occurred in the eighteenth year of the Chongxi era during the Liao Dynasty (1049). During the reigns of Emperor Xingzong and Emperor Daozong of the Liao Dynasty, the royal family of Liao personally oversaw the restoration efforts, presided over the Yungang Grottoes project, which lasted for more than ten years. There are ten big temples in total, most of which adopt the architectural mode of connecting grottoes in the back and building wooden structures in the front, and many large and small beam holes and rafters at Yungang cliff face are their relics. At the end of the Liao Dynasty, Yungang Grottoes were seriously damaged due to the war. In the early Jin Dynasty, monk Jinghui presided over the restoration of Yungang Grottoes again [5].

In the Ming Dynasty, Yungang Grottoes were officially named (previously called “Wu Zhoushan Grottoes Temple”). In February (1644), in the seventeenth year of Chong Zhen in the Ming Dynasty, Yungang Grottoes suffered severe damage again due to the war. Eight years of Shunzhi in the early Qing Dynasty (1651), the Yungang Grottoes were repaired again. In the middle and late Qing Dynasty, the ruling class attached immense importance to Yungang Grottoes to safeguard their own interests. According to the records in Dougan’s Datong County Records, Kangxi was thirty-five years old (1696), “I personally signed Ernie Root Gildan, and I went back to the Great Wall in winter and December, and I rode in Datong on the 12th”. The Record of Rebuilding Yungang Temple in the 37th year of Kangxi in the 5th Cave of Yungang (1698) also recorded the situation of “patrolling the Yungang Temple” and “writing books” in Kangxi’s northern expedition. During the period of the Republic of China, frequent wars, warlords’ separatist regimes, and no time to protect Yungang Grottoes led to serious theft of Yungang Grottoes, which became a great regret in the cultural history of our country. After the founding of People’s Republic of China (PRC), the state attached significant importance to the protection of cultural relics, repeatedly repaired Yungang Grottoes, and vigorously promoted the development of local tourism to ensure that this historical and cultural memory was passed down.

### **Cultural changes in Yungang Grottoes**

#### ***Magnificent early caves***

The early caves (caves 16 to 20) are located on the west side of the central part of Yungang Grottoes, which are the five caves with the earliest excavation time. Chisel in the early years of peace in Wen Chengdi. The artistic features of these caves are majestic, large-scale, and exquisite, and they are masterpieces of early Buddhist art in China. Among the five caves in Tanyao, the most outstanding artistic style is five giant buddhas, representing five

northern Wei emperors. To promote the development of Buddhism and promote Buddhism, Yao Tan deliberately combined the image of Buddha with the image of the emperor at that time in the process of sculpture. The height of the main statues in Tanyao Cave is more than thirteen meters, which is magnificent, tall, solemn, and solemn, giving people a majestic and sacred visual experience. Most of the five caves in Tanyao adopt horseshoe-shaped cave plane and dome top, and all kinds of exquisite Buddha statues are carved on the outer wall, which is rare in the history of Chinese art [6].

There are two main themes in Tanyao Cave: Thousand Buddhas and Three Buddhas. These ancient and exquisite statues not only have the cultural characteristics of Xianbei but also integrate the artistic characteristics of ancient India’s key tantra and Dharma. Most of the costumes of Buddha statues are in the form of ancient India, and there are obviously traces of figures from the western regions, Xianbei ethnic groups and even ethnic minorities in the northwest. Yungang Grottoes are a model of the integration and development of Chinese and foreign arts.

Cave sixteen is 12.5 meters wide, 8.7 meters deep and 15.15 meters high. The main statue of Sakyamuni on the north wall is 13.5 meters high, standing barefoot on the lotus platform, with the bun towering like a wavy hair pattern. His right hand is raised high, holding the fearless seal, and his left hand is slightly raised, showing a statement seal. His face is brave and tall, showing the imperial style. The image of the Buddha statue comes from Tuoba, Wen Chengdi (Figure 1, which ordered the excavation of Yungang Grottoes). Many thousands of Buddhas are carved on the four walls of the cave, which are majestic or amiable. Its small size is in sharp contrast with the tall main Buddha, and the religious atmosphere is extremely rich. In addition, there are many Buddhist niches in the caves, which are also of great artistic value. The pointed arches on both sides above the gate of Nanbi Cave are

extremely exquisite, with many musical instruments carved on the top of the Buddha's lintel. Musicians hold various musical instruments (such as flute, flute, pipa, Hu Jia, etc.), all of which have beautiful postures and kind eyes, giving people a keen sense of closeness [7].



Figure 1. The main statue of Sakyamuni is in Cave 16.

The main statue of Jiao Maitreya in Cave 17 is extremely tall, 15.6 meters high, burly, and majestic, and its image comes from Tuoba Huang, who died unfortunately without inheriting the throne. At present, the face and waist are severely weathered, and the arms are also broken and damaged due to rock structure and later weathering. However, he can still clearly distinguish his costume, wearing a high crown, and wearing various ornaments (snake ornaments and long wreaths, etc.) on his chest. Compared with complex ornaments, his clothes are simple and smooth, exotic, and full of artistic tension. Among the caves, the east and west walls are the most well preserved, with statues carved on the east wall and statues carved on the west wall. They are all dressed in shoulder-length coats, with high meat buns and strong bodies, forming the layout of the III Buddha with Maitreya, adding a bit of majesty and solemnity to the whole cave [8].

#### ***Magnificent mid-term grottoes***

The medium-term caves were built during the reign of Emperor Xiaowen, and they are magnificent and

magnificent. They are in the middle and east of Yungang Grottoes. Its main caves are caves 1 and 2, caves 5 and 6, caves 7 and 8, caves 9 and 10, and caves 11 to 13. The main project of Cave 3 (except for three statues of the Tang Dynasty) was also built at this time. Among the above caves, Cave 9-13 was painted in the Qing Dynasty. Because of its dazzling colors, extraordinary splendor, and great visual tension, it was called “Wuhua Cave” by the people. No matter the cave scale or artistic achievements, it is the highest in Yungang Grottoes, and it is favored by history lovers and art lovers. In the middle period, the caves were square, with front and back chambers and some caves [9].

The grottoes are built with worship paths in the back wall, and some caves are carved with square towers. From the perspective of modeling content, the number of cave statues in this period was significantly reduced, and the themes were diversified, with Sakyamuni and Maitreya statues prominent, while Manjusri, Vimala Kirti, Jiao Maitreya, Duobao Buddha and other statues existed. And there are Buddhist story niches, supporters, Buddha-born students, and stories of our bank. There are many kinds of niches, including traditional pointed arch niches and round arch niches, as well as curtain niches and tent niches. At the same time, the decorative patterns of Buddhist niches are extremely complex and exquisite. Common decorations include but are not limited to animal faces and Bashan furnaces. Some niches even use exquisite carvings, which show their elegant and natural posture to the fullest. The face of the Buddha statue is solemn and comely, plump, and solemn, and the costumes are mostly flattering [10,11].

Caves 1 and 2 are in the east of Yungang Grottoes. Because they are connected, their contents and properties are similar. There are square pagodas on the east and west sides of the outer walls of the two caves. Cave one is also called “Shigu Cave”; Cave 2 is also called “Cold Spring Cave”. There is a lot of accumulated water on the ground inside the

grottoes, and the tower column is seriously weathered. Both caves are square and flat-topped, and the four walls are carved with niches, which is a very typical pagoda temple cave.

Cave one is 5.75 meters high, 9.45 meters deep from north to south and 7.15 meters wide from east to west. There are two towers in the center of the cave. To ensure the artistry of the tower column.

Religious: The lower floor is carved with a round arch niche, and the Buddha statues in the niche are extremely beautiful and vivid. The upper layer is carved on all sides with a narrow curtain niche, which is solemn and heavy in style and gives people a strong and rich artistic experience. There is a sitting Buddha in the north and south directions, with extremely kind eyebrows and vivid carvings. There is a statue of Maitreya Buddha in the east and west directions, which is slightly solemn.

The top of the cave relates to Xu mi Mountain at the top of the tower. Observing its surroundings, there is a solemn and vivid image of two dragons coiled, which is full of smart beauty. At the north wall of the cave, there is a large niche with an open canopy, and there are three small niches in one niche. The main statue is Maitreya, who sits on Leo in a dignified state. Symmetrically arranged between the left and right tips, Shu Xiang sits in a posture of thinking Buddha, which is majestic and holy, and sets off with Maitreya Bodhisattva, forming an excellent artistic experience. There are narrative reliefs on the lower floor of the east wall, the content of which is the story in Zi Ben Sheng. At present, there are only the stories of "The King shoots the Zi by mistake" and "The King shoots the field hunting", and the others have been weathered [12,13].

Cave Two is 6.2 meters high from east to west, 10.8 meters deep from north to south and 7.55 meters wide, with three square towers in the center shown in Figure 3. There are exquisite carvings around the lower layer of the tower column, but it is a pity that it has been completely weathered; The middle floor is carved with niches on all sides, which not only

permeates Indian culture and northern minority culture, but also has the characteristics of China traditional architecture. The upper four corners are hollowed out and carved with octagonal prisms, forming a circumferential cloister. The upper and middle floors of the tower columns are all in the form of typical wooden structures, and there are octagonal prisms at the four corners, which are extraordinarily rich in traditional cultural characteristics. The four walls of the cave are all layered with niches, and the top layer is carved with niches of the Tiangong Jile, and the Jile holds a series of traditional musical instruments (such as gain, pipa, and pixie). On the wall, a meditation belt, a large-scale niche, and a long scroll relief story are carved in turn, and the bottom layer is a portrait of a donor. The main statue on the north wall is Jiao Buddha. There are four niches in the west wall, and solemn and sacred pagodas are carved between the niches. There are thousands of buddhas on the east wall, and there are four niches juxtaposed below, and there are seats inside the niches [14].

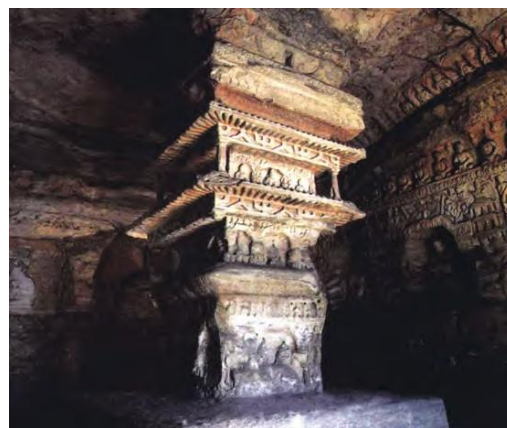


Figure 2. Central tower column of cave two.

Buddha, niche, and niche are carved with five-story tower columns. The story of the Buddha's bank is carved on the lower floor of the east wall, most of which have been weathered, and only the story of "the prince is more artistic" can be clearly identified. Above the two caves, there are sculptures of thousands of Buddhas and the music of the Heavenly Palace, which perfectly realize the strong contrast between stillness and movement, fantasy and reality, Buddhism and the world, and show the

superb professional quality of ancient artists to the fullest [15].

### ***Fresh and elegant late caves***

The late caves are fresh and elegant. They were built in the 18th year of Taihe in the Northern Wei Dynasty (494) and ended in the reign of Emperor Xiaoming. The main caves are distributed in the west of Cave 20. Cave four, Cave 14, Cave 15, the small caves on the upper part of the west cliff from Cave 11, and the small and medium-sized caves between Cave 4 and Cave 6 mostly belong to this period. In addition, in the early and middle caves, there are also many small niches carved in the late stage. The late caves are located on the cliff, mostly small and medium-sized caves, and their types are extremely complicated and diverse. Elephant grottoes are distributed on the external vertical wall of the grottoes, and the grottoes are oval in a plane and dome topped. The cave is big and small, and the main statue is high relief, which occupies most of the space of the cave. In the late caves, all kinds of statues in the caves are extremely complicated. Buddha statues and Bodhisattva statues are fresh in shape, beautiful and slender in posture, wearing blouses and crossing silks. Fithian looks thin and beautiful, with a high bun, wearing a long skirt sweeping the floor, wearing a small coat with a double-breasted jacket, not showing his feet, wearing a shawl on his shoulders, swaying in the wind and vivid posture. The clothes of the supporters are typical Chinese costumes. To sum up, the styles of late caves are quite different from those of early and middle caves.

With, not very gorgeous, magnificent, but handsome elegance, known as “show the ancient and clear phase”.

Cave fifteen shows the theme of thousands of buddhas, and there are many statues of thousands of buddhas on the inner wall of the cave. At present, there are 8,900 well-preserved caves shown in Figure 3, which has won the reputation of “Ten Thousand Buddha Caves”. There are thousands of lifelike buddhas carved on the north wall. The main

statue on its niche is Maitreya Bodhisattva. To show its majesty, he rides a lion on his crotch and stands on both sides with good looks. The main statues of the lower niche are Sakyamuni and Douban, which are extremely sacred and can be brought with them.



Figure 3. Interior of cave fifteen.

Give the viewer an impulse to bow down. There are thousands of buddhas carved on the upper floor of the east wall, and three pointed arches are juxtaposed on the lower floor. In the niches, there are sitting buddhas and sitting statues of two buddhas. Except for the door and the enlightened window, the south wall is a beautiful thousand Buddha statues.

The west wall can be divided into three layers: the upper layer is carved with thousands of Buddhas, and there is a pointed arch niche in the center. Because of improper storage and severe weather, the lower layer cannot be distinguished. There is a heavy niche carved on the north side of the middle floor. There is a Buddha and two Bodhisattvas inside the niche, and the buddhas are carved outside the niche. The middle of the niche is carved with a sitting statue, and the upper edge is carved with a flying hand holding a Chinese rope. The middle of the lower edge is carved with a flying hand holding a mani treasure ball.

The left and right sides are carved with five flying bodies, and the lintel is carved on both sides to support the group image. There are two shrines on the south side of the middle layer of the western wall, which are distributed up and down. There is a statue of Maitreya Bodhisattva in the ceiling niche



above, and there is a threatening Bodhisattva standing beside it. There are six flying figures inside the niche box, and Buddha statues are carved on the outside of the niche, with covers carved on them. There is a statue of one Buddha and two Bodhisattvas in the circular arch niche below, with flying and supporting heaven on both sides of the statue. There are two layers of relief between the niches. There is a Bashan furnace carved in the middle of the upper floor, and there are two lions beside the Bashan furnace as guards. There are aquatic plants, insects, birds, and fish carved on both sides of the lions, which are lively and lovely. It shows the scene of “clear waves rippling, fish jumping in Yu Yuan and Sha Ou gathering” in relief, and it is the only existing stone window carving artwork of the Northern Dynasty in China. In the middle of the lower floor, there is a flying sculpture, and there are three flying figures on both sides, all holding musical instruments. The movements are chic and elegant, dancing freely and full of dynamic beauty.

### Conclusion

Yungang Grottoes is a shining pearl in the crown of ancient Chinese art, which has important historical and cultural value. The relevant departments should deeply explore their historical and cultural changes, so that the splendid and magnificent Yungang culture will shine with new light in the new period, thus making certain contributions to the establishment of cultural self-confidence and the spread of national spirit.

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### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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