

From the Bamiyan Grottoes to the Yungang Grottoes in China: An Exploration of historical traces and reasons of cultural blending

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Abstract. The Bamiyan Grottoes in Afghanistan are the epitome of cultural integration, integrating Greek, Persian, Indian, White Huns and other cultures. The Yungang Grottoes in China, which were influenced by the Bamiyan Grottoes, not only have many characteristics of the combination of Chinese and foreign cultures, there is also the imprint of the cultural integration of the Chinese nation. There are three reasons for cultural integration: first, the grottoes have a superior geographical location; second, the superior geographical location makes the area where the grottoes are located not only a transportation hub, but also a place full of political and cultural disputes and friction, thus cultural exchanges are extremely frequent; Third, local rulers implemented proper cultural decisions and treated different cultures with an inclusive attitude.

Keywords: Buddhist cave art; cultural blend; history

1. Introduction

As the main carrier of Buddhist culture, grotto art originated from ancient India and was introduced to Central Asia, the Chinese Central Plains and Southeast Asia through the Silk Road. Influenced by cultural regions, the grotto art in different regions has gradually formed its own characteristics. From these magnificent Buddhist caves, it is not difficult to find traces of cultural blending.

This paper will introduce the Bamiyan Grottoes and take the Yungang Grottoes as the focus object, exploring the traces and reasons of cultural intermingling around them and discussing the connection between the two.

2. A collection of civilizations at the Bamiyan Caves

The Bamiyan Grottoes in Afghanistan is an unavoidable topic when people mention Buddhist caves. The Bamiyan Grottoes are excavated on the cliff face, with a total of about 750 large and small caves. Located there is the world's largest carved standing Buddha statue - the Bamiyan Buddha.

2.1. Traces of cultural blending

The Eastern Bamiyan Buddha has a strong Gandhara style. The Buddha statue stands cross-legged, with the right knee slightly protruding, similar to the wandering posture shown by the Gandhara Buddha statues that inherited the Greek sculpture style. The Buddha statue retains wavy curly hair behind its ears, and the shoulder-length Buddha robe appears thicker. These features are similar to those of Gandhara Buddha statues. The Western Bamiyan Buddha has a strong Indian Gupta art style. Different from the Eastern Buddha, the Western Buddha has a slightly thicker head, neck, torso and limbs. The Buddha has a square face and a round head.

The eastern and western Buddhas are tall and majestic. The relics around the Buddha contain artistic genes from other civilizations. The murals around the Buddha statue include female harp players from Mathura art in India, nobles from ancient Persian, and princes from the White Hun Empire... As Japanese scholars Higuchi Takayasu wrote in the book *Bamiyan Caves*: "If you take an overview of the structure and murals of the Bamiyan Caves, you will find that many elements are mixed together. Of course, it goes without saying that the style of the Gupta Dynasty in India was introduced. There are also influences from the Sasanian Dynasty, Eastern Roman Byzantine art, and

cultural elements from Tibet and Tocharistan. These elements are seamlessly integrated into the entity of Bamiyan art."

2.2. Reasons for cultural blending

The Giant Buddha of Bamiyan is the epitome and master of Bamiyan's artistic fusion. But why is the Bamiyan region so culturally rich and diverse? There are three main reasons. First of all, Bamiyan 's geographical location itself is at the junction of two different regional cultures. Bamiyan is located in present-day central Afghanistan and combines the cultural characteristics of the southern Afghanistan influenced by Indian culture and the northern Afghanistan influenced by Greco-Iranian culture.

Secondly, due to Bamiyan's superior geographical location, it is not only a transportation artery connecting India, Iran and Central Asia, but also a place of war since ancient times. On the one hand, as an important hub of the ancient Silk Road, different cultures have been preserved in Bamiyan through trade and commodity exchange . On the other hand, the alternation of ruling dynasties in the Bamiyan region has destined it to be a melting pot of multi-ethnic cultures. From the Persian Empire to the Alexander Empire, Persian culture and Greek civilization were brought here successively. During the same period as Alexander's empire collapsed, the Mauryan dynasty in India gradually emerged and eventually ruled the region. At this point, ancient Greek culture and Indian Buddhist culture were intertwined and fused, gradually forming the unique Gandhara art. After the breakup of the Bactrian kingdom, the Kushan Empire was established here after a period of chaotic contention. The Kushan Empire's tolerant attitude towards religions, which was born out of the blending of cultures, allowed Buddhism, Greek gods, Brahmanism, Manichaeism and other different faiths to flourish, further promoting the development of multiculturalism.

Finally , the enlightened cultural eclecticism of the entire Afghanistan region has allowed it to escape the fate of being obliterated by history and being washed away by trends, and instead absorbed a steady stream of diverse cultures. The characteristics of being open to different cultures and religions enabled Afghanistan to eventually form "Greek-style Buddhist art" with strong Greek and Roman styles , becoming a shining star in the history of human culture .

3. The cultural blend of Yungang Grottoes

After the unfortunate bombing of the Eastern Bamiyan Buddha in Afghanistan , among all the Gandhara art, the Yungang Grottoes in China became the most complete one. The Yungang Grottoes were excavated on the mountain. There are 45 main caves and 209 subsidiary caves.

The multiculturalism of Yungang Grottoes can be reflected in two aspects: the blending of foreign and Chinese cultures and the blending of Chinese national culture.

3.1. combination of foreign cultures

Yungang Grottoes have countless manifestations of absorbing different major civilizations. The "Five Tanyao Grottoes" are representative of the initial construction results of the Yungang Grottoes. Among them, the seated Buddha statues in Cave 17, 19 and 20, which are strong and tall, embody the artistic style of Maosura Buddha statues, and the right-shouldered clothes they wear close to the body are representative of the clothing style of Indian Buddha statues. The standing Buddha statues in Cave 17, 18 and 20 are dressed in shoulder-length cassocks. This kind of clothing is a typical representative of Gandhara artistic creation. The disciple on the eastern side of the Buddha statue in Cave 18 has kind eyebrows and kind eyes. This facial feature has a strong exotic appeal. The image of a disciple of Kassapa close to the left of the main image has a high nose and deep eye sockets with a strong Western flavor. It has prominent cheekbones, retracted cheeks, and graceful curly brows that show the curly hair of Westerners.

"Taihe Grottoes" was built slightly later than " Five Tanyao Grottoes ". The scene of six Hu kneeling as donors carved on the south wall of the back room of Cave 7 is consistent in layout with the Greek-

style horizontal stone carvings, and the number of characters is also the same as the Gandhara scene. In addition, the columns on both sides of the picture fully express the Corinthian relief columns in the Gandhara artistic style, and the wingless "flying" statues evolved from the images of winged gods, winged birds, and flying men in Egyptian, Roman, and Indian cultures. The above features all reflect the influence of foreign multi-cultural art on Yungang Grottoes.

Although the Yungang Grottoes are obviously influenced by the artistic styles of Gandhara, Central India and Central Asia, However, from the perspective of architectural sculptures and other aspects, the sculptures of the Yungang Grottoes also undergo a gradual process of Chineseization. Take the columns of Yungang Grottoes as an example . At first glance, several stone sculptures in front of Cave 9 and 10 are Greek Ionic columns. But if you look closely at the column, you will see that the continuous patterns carved all over the column reflect more of the traditional Chinese treatment. In addition, the pillars that are thick at the top and narrow at the bottom do not conform to the straight columns of ancient Greece that are evenly thick at the top and bottom. This is the design of pillars that are divided according to proportion and have thick roots and thin tops, a "point closing" technique of ancient Chinese architecture. In addition to the column body, the column head also reflects the Chinese characteristics. The capital on the upper floor of the eastern wall of the front room of Cave 10 is engraved with a boy transformed from a banana flower into a mountain leaf, which is very different from the Western capital style. From the early Greek capitals to the Han Chinese column-shaped architectural art, we can see the collision and integration of Chinese and Western cultures in the Yungang Grottoes.

3.2. Blending of National Cultures

As for the sinicized parts of the Yungang Grottoes, it is not clear how long it took for them to be truly sinicized . However, the leadership of the Liangzhou Monk Group, which was deeply influenced by Buddhism in the Western Regions, began to waver around 481.

In the middle period of the construction of Yungang Grottoes, on one side was the strong Hu style that still dominated, and on the other side was the gradually revealed Han style skills and aesthetics. The previous statues of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas were full of Hu people's sentiments, and most of them wore Xianbei costumes with "pinned collars and small sleeves" . In the middle period, the faces of some Buddha statues began to become moderate and delicate, and the Buddha's robes appeared in the style of "prayer clothes and broad belts". Buddhist niches with graceful bones and clear statues became fashionable from then on. If the earliest Buddha statues in robes and belts in Cave 6 have not yet escaped the "Hu and Brahma " appearance, then the statues in the numerous niches on the outer walls of Cave 11, 12 and 13 have completely "changed from Brahma to Han". In the later period , Buddha statues all wore robes and belts, short shirts, and cross-woven silk fabrics. In addition to clothes, the awakening of Han nationality culture is also reflected in the change of the fashion trends of Buddha statue accessories from crowns, armpits and leg-fitting skirts to flower-man crowns, silk fabrics and flamboyant trains . The large number of Han artifacts such as Boshan stoves, animal face decorations, and octagonal pillars also reveal the atmosphere of ethnic integration.

If you have the opportunity to walk from the first phase of the cave to the third phase of the cave, the feeling of ethnic integration and continuous Chineseization will be more directly experienced. The five giant Buddhas in the first phase of the cave "Five Tanyao Caves" symbolize the five Tuoba clan emperors of the Northern Wei Dynasty. The majestic and domineering Buddha statues vividly express the boldness and robustness of the Xianbei people. In the second phase of the caves, the worshipers representing secular people have gentle expressions and peaceful temperaments. From this phase, the Yungang Grottoes began to be localized. Compared with the strange and magnificent grottoes in the first phase, the design and construction of the second phase caves incorporate the meticulous processing and ingenious conception of Han nationality culture, showing a graceful and gorgeous new Chinese Central Plain style. The third phase of the caves fully absorbs the aesthetic elements of the Southern Dynasties: Graceful Bones and Clear Figures", which have a gentle appearance and slender body, with a restrained and reserved beauty. From the grandeur of the first phase to the wealth

and splendor of the second phase to the elegance and freshness of the third phase, the changing artistic styles of the Yungang Grottoes vividly display the interweaving and fusion of national cultures.

4. Behind the colorful culture

The Yungang Grottoes are unique in that they have widely absorbed the essence of Chinese and foreign sculpture art and integrated it into a master of early Chinese Buddhist art. Behind this point is the inevitable collision of multiple coincidences.

As the easternmost point of the Silk Road during the Northern Wei Dynasty, Pingcheng became an international metropolis at that time due to its important geographical location. The rulers of the Northern Wei Dynasty attached great importance to foreign trade. Their open and inclusive policies not only attracted merchants from Western and Central Asia, but also prompted monks from ancient India to come here through the Silk Road. The Yungang Grottoes were excavated at a time when international exchanges were extremely developed during the Northern Wei Dynasty. Different cultures accommodated and developed in international exchanges. Buddhist culture and ancient Indian grotto culture were introduced to Pingcheng.

At the same time, the Pingcheng era of the Northern Wei Dynasty in the past hundred years was also a period of unprecedented national exchanges and integration. The Jie , Di , Qiang, Xianbei and other tribes have been integrated into the big family of the Chinese nation to a large extent and have become brothers and sisters of the Han people . Against the background of national integration, Emperor Xiaowen of the Northern Wei Dynasty made Pingcheng the capital and began to implement Sinicization reforms. As one of China's nine ancient capitals, Pingcheng is located in the intersection between cold and warm areas. Since ancient times, it has been a tug-of-war where farming civilization and nomadic civilization collided, and a link for ethnic exchanges and integration. The implementation of the Sinicization reform accelerated the historical process of the integration of northern ethnic groups into the Chinese nation. The transformation of Buddhist costumes and Bodhisattva costumes in Yungang Grottoes into Han costumes is a reflection of Emperor Xiaowen's reform policy of "wearing Han costumes", and also fills the vacancy in the evolution of Buddhist art in the Southern and Northern Dynasties in China from "Hu and Brahma appearance" to "Changing from Brahma to Hanx".

After establishing Pingcheng as its capital , the Northern Wei Dynasty continued to maintain close exchanges with countries in the Western Regions, which not only brought advanced Buddhist thought and statue templates to Pingcheng, but also made Pingcheng the political, economic, and cultural center of the time. In addition, Emperor Wencheng of the Northern Wei Dynasty ordered the eminent monk Tan Yao to dig a cave in the mountain. Tan Yao was originally a Zen monk from Liangzhou and studied under the eminent monk Tan Wujue from Tianzhu. Therefore, the Yungang Grottoes were the result of the convergence of multiple cultures from the time they were excavated. In summary, Pingcheng serves as a gathering place for the Western Regions, Liangzhou eminent monks and Han dynasties, which enables the Yungang Grottoes to integrate the cultural essence of Xianbei, Han and Central Asia and continue to enrich it.

5. The inextricable connections between Bamiyan and Yungang

Buddhism was not originally introduced to China directly from India, but from the Western Regions via Central Asia. This can be seen from the fact that many early Buddhist translators and eminent monks were from Afghanistan. Buddha statues were excavated in the Bamiyan Grottoes, and the popular styles at that time were spread to China through the spread of Buddhism. Five Tan Yao Grottoes in Yungang Grottoes, as the first batch of giant Buddha caves in China, were influenced by the Bamiyan Buddha. It can be said that it was under the influence of the excavation of the Bamiyan Grottoes that the Yungang Grottoes came into being.

There are also many similarities between the two. The Bamiyan Grottoes and Yungang Grottoes are both strategically located. They can not only enjoy the cultural exchanges brought about by being a transportation artery, but also have a historical atmosphere of regime change and ethnic blending. Both of them coincidentally encountered enlightened rulers who implemented open and inclusive cultural policies, which allowed different cultures to be preserved, flourish, and intertwined. Through the commonalities between the two, we can discover the reasons why their culture and art are so colorful.

Both the Bamiyan Grottoes and the Yungang Grottoes embody the history of cultural integration and are eternal treasures of human.

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