

Analysis of Characteristics of Buddha Statues in Xumi Temple

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Abstract: The Buddha statue, reflecting the spirit of religious doctrine and the ultimate pursuit of mankind, is influenced by regional culture and aesthetics of the times. The style of Buddha statues varies with the time, space and the regional culture. That is because the inheritance of culture is composed of two aspects: first, cultural inheritance means the preservation of the essence of culture, and the worship of the pyramid top is still the ultimate pursuit of mankind; second, cultural assimilation and other influence further enrich and innovate the regional culture. By digesting and absorbing “nutrients”, the new culture has the characteristics of regional and contemporary aesthetics.

1. Introduction:

The generation of religion is always accompanied by the creation and aesthetic needs of art. A medium is a must in order to lead the believers, and that is why the symbolic “statue” is born as the embodiment of the ultimate human spirit.

Buddhism is born in ancient India and is now one of the most important religions in the world. A medium, that is, a Buddha statue is needed in order to immortalize the spirit and doctrine of Buddhism. The Buddha statue reflects a kind of artificial worship, and is a final symbolic form of human spiritual pursuit, which is essentially different from some figurative natural symbols such as totems.

Buddha statues themselves incorporate some aesthetic needs of religious doctrines and spirits. At the same time, they are also influenced by regional culture and aesthetics of the times. Different regions have different historical cultures, and different historical periods also have staged aesthetic needs and habits. Therefore, the characteristics of Buddha statues vary in different countries and in different historical periods.

The grotto temple, as an architectural form, is born in the ancient India in the 3rd century BC. It is an elegant and quiet place for Buddhist disciples and believers to live, teach, and meditate, which is often referred to as the “stone room”, similar to the “Taoist rite” for sermon and speculations. It also shares the same functions as the ordinary brick-and-wood temples. The grotto temple is mostly a temple built by mountains, and its style can be generally divided into the center column and the centerless column. Inside, there are often carved or clay Buddha statues, figures for offering, and meditation places. The top and surrounding walls are often covered with Buddhist scriptures and drawings. The grotto temple was introduced to China from the West through the Buddhist Silk Road after the Eastern Han Dynasty, then it gradually spread during the period of two Han Dynasties, and prospered during the Wei, Jin and Southern and Northern Dynasties. With the unification of the Sui and Tang Dynasties, the grotto culture and the grottoes were constructed in a huge amount, showing that the Buddhist culture has reached its heyday. After the Tang Dynasty, the grotto culture was gradually weakened due to various factors.

2. Introduction to the Xumi Grottoes

According to the Buddhist scriptures, the universe consists of five elements, namely, wind, fire, water, earth, and air, and Qijin Mountain and Xumi Mountain. The successive functions of the five elements help to form the Xumi Mountain, the name of which is a transliteration of Sanskrit, meaning the treasure mountain.

The Xumi Grottoes is located in the southern foot of the Xumi Mountain in Guyuan City, Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region. They are in the area of the Liupan Mountains in the Northern Wei Dynasty, about 2,000 m above sea level and five kilometers north away from the city. They were expanded and maintained during the Western Wei, North Zhou, Sui, Tang, Song, Ming Dynasties, thus making it the largest Buddhist temple site in the Guyuan prefecture in Ningxia. The Xumi Mountain, boasting jagged rocks of grotesque shapes, is solemn in winter and spring, and beautiful in summer and autumn with lush trees, therefore, it is regarded as one of the famous scenic spots in the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region and a famous tourist attraction in the Northwest China.

The Xumi Grottoes is unique. Unlike most of the grottoes that are built on only one stone cliff in China, the Xumi Grottoes is built on eight rocks separated by gaps, which are connected by ladders and bridges. Therefore, it is a complex composed of more than 100 grottoes. It the largest Buddhist temple site on the journey from Chang'an to the West, and also a famous Buddhist grotto art-piece on the Silk Road, known as Ningxia Dunhuang. The large grotto statues excavated on the peaks of the Xumi Mountain during the Northern Dynasties and the Sui and Tang Dynasties are important in historical and artistic research. Similar to the Dunhuang Mogao Grottoes, the Yungang Grottoes, and the Longmen Grottoes, the Xumi Buddhist Grottoes is a precious heritage of ancient Chinese Buddhism and art cultures, and also a valuable cultural treasure for all mankind.

3. Regional and Cultural Features of the Xumi Grottoes

The inheritance of culture is composed of two aspects: first, the preservation of the essence of culture and the worship of the pyramid top is still the ultimate pursuit of mankind; second, assimilation and all kinds of influence further enrich and innovate regional culture. By digesting and absorbing nutrients, the new culture has the characteristics of regional and contemporary aesthetics.

About three or four hundred years after the birth of Buddhism, the Chinese ancestors introduced the Buddhist culture to the Central Plains from the West. Thus, the Buddhist culture has existed in China for more than 2,000 years. Chinese Buddhist culture, after being integrated with traditional Chinese regional culture, has gradually become an religious culture with Chinese aesthetic characteristics, reflecting the ideology, beliefs, living habits, and daily speech of the Chinese people. The idea of causality and karma and the belief and pursuit in Buddhist teachings, together with the Confucianism and Taoism in China, constitute the religious culture of the Chinese people.

The main idea of the Buddhist culture and the ultimate belief of Chinese literati share the same goal, which is to pursue relief and “none”. However, the metaphysical spirit needs to be interpreted through an “image”. Since one ultimate law leads to numerous images, the Xumi Grottoes created thousands of different Buddha statues after repair and expansion.

The specific time of the earliest excavation of the Xumi Grottoes is nowhere to be found. However, based on the architectural structure of the grottoes and the characteristics of the statues, the earliest excavation is estimated to begin in the middle and late period of the Northern Dynasties. As one of the earliest ten grottoes excavated in China, it flourished and prospered in the Northern Zhou and the Tang Dynasties. With a history of more than 1,400 years, it boasts more than 160 existing grotto buildings distributing on eight peaks stretching for two kilometers, for example, the Dafo Building, the Zisun Palace, the Yuanguang Temple, the Xiangguo Temple, the Taohua Grotto, the Songshu Pit, the Sange Kilns, and the Heishi Ditch lie from the south to the north.

In the Northern Wei Dynasty, the grottoes are concentrated in the Zisun Palace, and their structure is square with statues built around the pillars. Take the 14th, 24th, 32nd, and 33rd grottoes as an example; they are mostly 3 or 4 m² central tower-column structures, with Buddha statues standing around the pillars. The 32nd grotto has the biggest number of pillars, reaching seven stories. In addition, the Buddhist murals also appeared in the upper layers of the towers of some grottoes, the contents of which are often stories about Buddhism and Sutra.

The image characteristics of Buddha statues during this period are similar with those of the Sixteen States Period in the aspect of eyes and structure. The difference lies in that the facial features of this period are slightly thinner, squarer and rounder with a relatively broader forehead. In addition, the clothes are symmetrically U-shaped or V-shaped with deep lines at this time. The biggest difference is the backlight pattern of the Buddha statue: the concentric circles were often adopted in the previous periods, while the pattern of lotus petals surrounding the circular head light was more often used in this period.

For the grottoes in the Northern Wei Dynasty, there are mostly three statues, one larger Buddha statue in the middle, and two smaller Bodhisattva statues on the left and the right. These statues are simple in style, and slender and high in shape. In the reform carried out by Emperor Xiaowen in the Northern Wei Dynasty, the Buddha costumes were changed to double-necked drooping robes, and the Bodhisattva costumes feature Han-style front-opening, which reflects the aesthetic needs at that time, which is to pursue the style of exquisiteness. The statues of this period are mainly in the 14th, 24th and 32nd grottoes.

The grottoes in the Northern Zhou Dynasty were excavated towards the north, with an architectural style of the flat square central tower and niches on three or four sides. Some grottoes consist of the front room, the main room, and the left and right ear rooms. The grottoes are large in scale with gorgeous carvings and delicate statues, which are mainly concentrated in the areas of Yuanguang Temple and Xiangguo Temple. The main existing grottoes are the 45th, 46th, 49th, 51st, and 67th grottoes, among which the 51st is outstandingly magnificent, and it is regarded as a rarest masterpiece of the existing statues in the Northern Zhou Dynasty.

During this period, the facial image of Buddha statues became more vivid with softer lines, and the shallow-carved screw-shaped hairstyle began to emerge. However, the figure was still slender with a slightly bulging abdomen, wide shoulders and a small waist. Overall, it is cylindrical-shaped with concise clothing lines.

The Beizhou Grottoes, with its large scale and number of delicate Buddha statues, occupies a prominent position in the Xumi Grottoes. The statues in the decorative niches are generally one Buddha and one Bodhisattva. As for the niches, they are decorated with tassels, various small Buddha statues, and many vividly-made music players. Compared with the Northern Wei Dynasty, the biggest change is that the niche in the central tower is replaced by a bigger one. In addition, the Buddha statues with low hair on the temples, a round face, thick shoulders, and a bulging abdomen, are grand and solemn, which is the best reflected in the 45, 49, and 51 grottoes.

In the Sui Dynasty, due to the influence of the culture and the aesthetic characteristics in that period, the statues began to become fatter with a relatively larger head wearing a screw-type hairstyle, a round face, a calm expression, a thick body, and a shorter lower body. However, the proportion of the statue was out of balance with dull postures, thus lacking a kind of dynamic beauty.

With further improvement, the Buddha statues in the Tang Dynasty reached its peak, with full facial images and a balanced body. The exposed chest muscles are vivid and stretched, with a sense of life and nature. Hair styles are more diversified, for example, the water-wave hairstyle. In addition, various kinds of costumes and decorations came into being. The reddish gilding is also the unique artistic style at that time. The grottoes of the Tang Dynasty are mainly concentrated in the north of Xiangguo Temple, with the most famous and magnificent ones being the Taohua Grotto in the 105th Grotto and the Dafo Building in the 5th Grotto.

The statues in the Ming Dynasty are unique with the hollow leaves of the crown, crescent-shaped middle leave, clothes with the edges engraved with fine patterns, slightly oval-shaped leg decoration, lotus-shaped pedestal with thick petals, and rich gold and red colors. The Xumi Grottoes were given the name of “Yuanguang Temple Grottoes” by Emperor Mingying in the Ming Dynasty. In this period, the statue returned to the traditional style, with a balanced body and soft-lined clothes. The statues have fine eyebrows, a high nose, a wide forehead, thick ears, and a soft and solemn expression. There are only three grottoes in the Ming Dynasty, whose style is basically consistent

with the overall context of the era.

4. Conclusion

The inheritance of religious culture is also a process of artistic creation and improvement. The spiritual communication of faith requires a medium, or an objective image. The statue is the best image and expression during the inheritance process. The statue is not only a real existence of worship, but a bridge connecting the human soul with Buddha. The development of the statue is influenced by the regional culture and the aesthetic culture. On the one hand, it integrates the spiritual pursuit and religious teachings; on the other hand, regional and aesthetic cultures influence the outer and inner expressions of the statues. In addition, the positive energy and role models of the times also shape the ultimate spiritual image of mankind. Therefore, different regions, historical cultures, aesthetic needs and habits, and historical periods are the reasons for the emergence of various styles of Buddha statues. The Xumi Grottoes are located in the desert in North China, making it the main thoroughfare to the Western Region. Since the opening-up of the Silk Road, it has also become the shortest route to go from Chang'an to the Western Region. The grotto statues have unique artistic characteristics under the influence of the regional and aesthetic cultures.

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