

Warriors, Kings, and Donors: The Integration of Tomb Art Elements in the Buddhist Imagery at Xiangtangshan Cave-temples

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ABSTRACT

During the 6th century CE, the construction of Buddhist cave-temples has been flourished in China despite the rapid regime change that took place in both the north and the south. The Northern Xiangtangshan cave temples as royal grottoes of the Northern Qi Dynasty (550-577), is a locus preserving an important specimen for the study of the artistic style and social culture of the time. During this socially turbulent period of the Northern Qi, the active interaction between different art forms results in fascinating outcomes. Art remains survived in tombs and Buddhist sculptural works, intriguingly sharing common features in various aspects, making a comparative study necessary to better understand Northern Qi art. In this study, the Northern Xiangtangshan cave temple is selected for comparison with tombs from the same period of the Northern Qi, shedding light on our exploration of the interaction between Buddhist and tomb art.

Keywords: *Northern Qi, Buddhism, Cave-temples, Tomb art*

1. INTRODUCTION

Buddhist sculptural art of the Northern Qi marks a fascinating period for the development of Buddhist art in China and constitutes an important transitional period between the Northern Wei (389—534), the former dynasty that dominates the north, and the Sui and Tang (618—907) Dynasties, another blossom of art and culture in Chinese history. Although the time span was short, the culture and arts of the Northern Qi exhibited idiosyncratic iconographic characteristics.

Buddhism has been widely disseminated during the Northern Qi, among the commoners as well as the royal. Buddhism has played a central role in shaping the Chinese culture from the second century onward. With the support of imperial power, Buddhism nearly reached the status of a state religion, under the patronage of the Gao clan in the mid-sixth century. Ordinary households or individuals worshipped Buddhism, dedicated statues, or engaged in the construction of monasteries, cave-temples, leaving countless art treasures. It was in such a context that the Xiangtangshan cave-temples were commissioned.

The Xiangtangshan Buddhist cave temples include a group of shrines cut out of limestone cliffs with carved sculptural motifs. Situated in the vicinity of city Ye (present-day southern Hebei province), the capital city of the Northern Qi, these caves were created under the official sponsorship of the royal family. Two main groups of caves are known as Northern and Southern Xiangtangshan, which is located at Gushan and Fushan respectively [1]. The northern group of caves, or Bei Xiangtang, is the largest and earliest caves at the site. The site is situated halfway up the side of Gushan, several hundred feet above a broad plain. The three main caves at this site are known as the North, Middle, and South caves. The north cave (cave 7) is the most ambitious in scale and complexity at Xiangtangshan [2]. The importance of this site lies primarily in two aspects. One is that it serves the function of demonstrating the religious and political aspirations of the ruling family. Another legend accounts that the tomb of Emperor Shen Wu, Gao Huan (496—547) of Northern Qi, was buried in a cave at the top of the central shaft. For this reason, this Northern Qi cave-temples relate to the perception of a burial place since its inception [3].

Nonetheless, the legend of Gao Huan's burial in the North Cave is only one of the many aspects revealing

the close connection between Buddhist cave-temple art and contemporaneous tomb art. What kind of relationship exists between these two media? Why is there such a strong relationship? How do we interpret it? How would the study of the connection between Buddhist art and contemporaneous tomb art shed light on our perception of the development of art in general during the Northern Qi period? There is still much evidence left underexamined. This essay intends to explore other aspects demonstrating the interrelationship between the tomb art and Buddhist cave as shown in the North cave in Northern Xiangtangshan.

Previous scholarships conducted over the years have already conducted extensive research on the art of Xiangtangshan against the broader artistic context of the Northern Qi period. Katherine Tsiang has provided a comprehensive survey of the whole site, dedicated to the exact style and iconography exhibited in each singular cave at Xiangtangshan [4]. Angela Howard has put Xiangtangshan under a broader context of constructing cave temples in the Northern Qi [5]. However, their research didn't explore much about the correlation between contemporaneous tomb art and Xiangtangshan art.

Other scholars, such as Li Yuqun and Chen Yuexin, have discussed the specific stylistic element (Buddhist clothes) of the Xiangtangshan in elaborate detail [6]. Their research laid the foundation for a more specified comparison of the depiction of garments found from and contemporaneous tomb art.

Zheng Yan's study focuses on the wall paintings of tomb art and archaeological images found in the Northern and Southern dynasties, serving as a point of departure for future research [7]. Although his research emphasizes mural paintings, it can be further examined given its geographical connection and probably the shared group of artisans in executing Buddhist art at the same time. The connection between wall paintings, murals, and relief carvings is a question left underexamined. This essay aims to serve as one example as a gesture for the examination in this direction.

As for Shen Lihua, his research is about the burial form and grave goods uncovered in Yecheng in the 6th century, based on which the burial phases and dates are deduced [8]. Xu Jing discusses how the design and decorations in a specific tomb engage to reveal the tomb owner [9]. Both of which offered us a fresh perspective to further explore the relationship between Buddhist and tomb art.

Meanwhile, although there is little discussion about the interaction between Buddhism and burials in the Northern Qi, there were scholarly discussions on the interaction among the two realms during Northern Wei, the previous period of the early sixth century, providing some points departure for the current study.

Overall the studies examined above show the room left for further research on the theme of the correlation between the cave-temple art of Northern Qi and contemporaneous tomb arts. Therefore, this study offers case studies to compare Xiangtangshan Buddhist art with tomb art, serving as an example for further study of the interrelationship between Buddhist art and tomb art during the middle period of China.

Comparing the art of Xiangtangshan to the tomb art of Northern Qi, we find various shared traits in style as well as iconography. A thorough analysis of the interrelationships between the Northern Qi cave temples and the paintings, ceramics, and other media found in burials of the period will allow us to understand the interactions between cultures better and identify familiar sources and origins of artistic themes and motifs. In a broader sense, the interactions, and exchanges between two types of arts can also be considered as the epitome of social and intellectual change in China and a medium for exploring interactions between China and other regions. In addition, Northern Qi is important as a transitional period between Northern Wei (5th century) to later dynasties including Sui and Tang. Examining to what extent did the art of the Northern Qi inherit the art of the Northern Wei, at the same time initiating the development of subsequent Buddhist art helps us to understand its historical importance.

The first section of this essay aims to provide a thorough analysis of the North Cave of the northern Xiangtangshan, with a specific focus on the cave's artistic element as well as historical context related to tomb art. The second section situates Xiangtangshan into a broader context of the Northern Qi, examining the multi-cultural trends, official sponsorship, and interaction between different art media. The third and fourth sections will elaborate on two major aspects that reveal the integration of tomb art elements into the sculptures of the North cave respectively: spirit kings, the protecting deities which were popular during the Northern Dynasties, and donor images. Finally, conclusions will be drawn based on the comparison.

2. CONTEXTUALIZING BUDDHIST ART IN SIXTH CENTURY CHINA

Northern Qi, a period with a multiethnic culture, is also an era of prolific artistic production. Famous artists like Cao Zhongda and Yang Zihua kept on exerting significant influence on artists in the following period in Chinese History.

The discovery of important burials of Northern Qi has shed light on mural paintings, funerary sculptures, and ceramics that provide us with a better means to identify and understand the art and culture in this period. For example, the Wanzhang tomb during Northern Qi located near the tomb of Gao Huan

provides an important source to know the artistic style back then. The tomb figure's oval and rounded face can be seen as a reflection of the preferred Xianbei style in Northern Qi. Besides, the representation of foreign figures, musicians, and animals found in the tomb of Lou Rui echoes with the exotic taste in sixth-century China.

The remarkable finds from tombs reveal a fuller picture of Northern Qi art than was previously known and suggest possible relationships between funerary art and Buddhist art. Previous studies pointed out that the idiosyncratic and scary imagery of squatting monsters that support the pillar of the cave temple may be originally designed to avert evil in the tomb and later borrowed to Buddhist art; Buddhist imagery of lotus blossoms and the jewel motif also frequently decorate ceramic objects and appear in tomb murals; the representation of figures in a rounded and three-dimensional way with a long nose and wide soft jawline can be both observed in the sculpture at Southern Xiangtangshan and in Lou Rui's tomb to show the Xianbei ideal.

Many shared motifs, similar carving techniques, and the common type of representation of figures can be found in Buddhist art and contemporaneous tomb art. Therefore, the interdisciplinary study of Buddhist and tomb art could provide us with a fuller understanding of this period in Chinese history to both its periodic feature and the political as well as religious ideals.

The North Cave (Great Buddha Cave) is the largest and earliest of the Xiangtangshan caves (Figure 1). It features a central pillar-shaped square in its overall form (Figure 2). In front of the cave, there are four lotus-shaped columns carved on the cliff face, which form a wood-like structure with open windows above the columns. The door of the cave was opened in the room below the columns. Inside the cave, a colossal central pillar immediately caught our attention. The central pillar opens on the front, right, and left sides, each with a niche holding Buddha and attendant bodhisattvas. Sitting in the central niche of the north cave is the Śākyamunī Buddha, dressed in full-shouldered robes, with a dense pattern of undulating clothing. It falls in front of the Buddha's body with wavy patterns, forming a U shape down the torso. The inner garment worn by Buddha is short and lays flat on the seat, which did not cover the bottom lotus seat. The back of the Buddha is a boat-shaped mandorla, the outer edge of the flame pattern, carved with dragons and flame-like patterns, with red, green, and blue colors. The inner edge of the flame is decorated with a pattern of lotus bands by rows of oval jewels. Two bodhisattvas flanked on either side of the Buddha, with the one the Buddha's proper left already missing. The bodhisattva on the right side of the seated Buddha dressed in a cape from the outside of the

shoulders, with one leg straight and the other leg bent, forming a dance-like posture.

The Buddha on the left side of the central pillar is seated on a throne with the left leg pendant and the right foot resting on the left knee. The thick-folds robe of the Buddha covered both of its shoulders and pendant below the throne, almost touching the ground. The Buddha puts his right hand forward with the palm outward facing the audience, while his left hand is raised in the mid-air as if he was holding something. The bodhisattvas beside the Buddha are preserved in a better condition compared to the one on the frontal side, they wear skirts covering the lower part of their body with the upper part of the torso bare out, revealing the rounded belly. The one on Buddha's right is in a dance-like position like that in the front niche, adding a sense of vividness. The Buddha on the right side of the pillar sits with both legs' pendants with feet on the ground. The costume of the Buddha on the south side differs from the previous ones in that he wears a thin robe covering both shoulders and falls open in the front with an inner garment in diagonal position crossing from upper left to the lower right of the upper torso. The bodhisattva on the Buddha's proper right is difficult to identify, the one on the right is dressed in a similar garment as those in the other two niches only with a long jewel falling across the body. The columns of the central pillar are supported by kneeling monsters with a hybrid creature, bearing the weight of the pillar on their shoulders. Beneath the niche, on the altar of the central pillar is a group of spirit kings each carved separately in the niche.

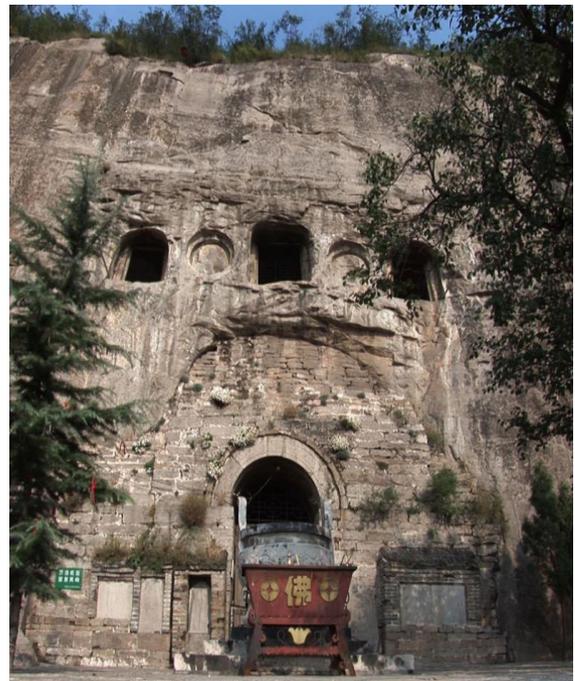


Figure 1. Façade of the North Cave, Northern Xiangtangshan, Hebei. Northern Qi.

<https://xts.uchicago.edu/content/north-site-north-cave>



Figure 2. The interior of the North Cave, Northern Xiangtangshan, Hebei. Northern Qi. Zhao Lichun, *Zhongguo Shi Ku Diao Su Jing Hua* (Chongqing, China: Chongqing chu banshe, 1998), page 3

The top of the central column of the patch and the back wall is connected to form a tunnel, creating a path for worshippers to circumambulate and pay tribute to the Buddha. The upper register of the niche lintel is carved with flame beads and flowers, and the roof is decorated with hanging mantles. There are four niches opened above the mantle, from left to right. Only the third niche on the left is empty, where it is said to have been the tomb of Gao Huan, Emperor of Northern Qi. A row of six stupa niches was curved on the north and south walls of the North Cave. Inside the niche holds a figure with a crossed-leg position, probably been remodelled by later generations. The hemispherical dome above the niche is decorated with flaming jewels with refined craftsmanship. At the top of the dome, above the arched lintel and flaming jewels, is a flower with three lotus blossoms.

On the front wall of the cave is a flat silhouette of a row of donor figures, with women on the right and men on the left separated on two sides of the entrance. Due to severe damage that occurred to the images, it is difficult for us to have a comprehensive grasp of its original arrangement. According to their iconography and configuration, we can infer that they may be the representation of royal patrons in procession to Buddha as those seen early in Longmen and Gongxian. However, several features made them stand out from their precedents in cave-temples, but more closely to the carving reliefs in funerary arts. Thus, the comparative study between the donor images in the North Cave and contemporaneous tomb art is crucial for the thorough understanding of the art in Northern Qi. The Northern Xiangtangshan is commonly associated with the imperial patronage of Northern Qi. According to the reference in Dao Xuan's biography of the monk Min Fen, the Northern Xiangtangshan was created by Wen

Xuan, who reigned as Northern Qi emperor from 550-559 [10].

There's also a legend that recorded Wen Xuan himself was buried in the North Cave. Due to the importance of the construction of cave-temple to the ruling elite, the establishment of the great North Cave at the beginning of Northern Qi under the imperial sponsorship can be understood as a masterful and vivid expression of religious and political aspirations of the ruling family. The new appearance features- the armors on the spirit kings, a distinctive way of depicting the donor figures – on the North Cave played an important role in shaping Northern Qi art and the formation of the new dynastic identity.

The Northern Qi was a turbulent time in history, with political chaos and years of war. Despite such circumstances, unprecedented exchanges between Chinese and foreign cultures had taken place. The transmission of religious ideas via overland routes provided Northern Qi with contact with cultures outside the boundaries of China from Central Asia to as far as India. Historical records have shown that mutual cultural interaction had occurred between China and other foreign countries. Chinese monks travelled frequently to India to bring Buddhist teachings and scriptures to China. Foreign monks had also been active in the Northern Wei court, translating sutras and spreading teachings. Besides, foreign goods and arts also transported along the trade route and diversify the lifestyles, thoughts, and art forms in mainland China. Therefore, Chinese people have been exposed to a variety of cultures and thus multicultural elements had pervaded in medieval China.

Northern Qi is also a period in which multiple ethnic groups coexist and are integrated. Such cultural diversity is due to the growing presence of non-Han Chinese origins in northern China since the end of the Han dynasty and thus had redefined China. After the fall of the Later Han (202-220 CE), various ethnic groups had moved within the borders of the empire and occupied northern and western China for centuries. Among which Xianbei, Tuyuhun, Ruru, and Turk were especially dominant in sixth-century China. Due to the strong military power, Xianbei subjugated the native Han people and became the ruling elite of the Northern Wei. Later, Eastern Wei, Western Wei, and Northern Zhou were all founded by the non-Han rulers (mixed cultural heritage), the Xianbei tribe, while the Northern Qi was built by Xianbei-ized Han Chinese. Gao Huan, the patriarch of the Northern Qi, also had close affiliations with the Xianbei. Gao Huan's grandfather was relegated to the frontier for his crimes, and from then on, the Gao family began to intermarry with the Xianbei clan and was Xianbei-ized. Gao Huan's mother, Han, suggests a highly possible root in Xianbei clans. Subsequent marriage alliances with other tribes like

Tuoba, and Ruru as well as prominent Chinese families had reinforced the connection between the Gao clan and other ethnic groups in China. Gao Yang, the emperor of Northern Qi was said to be personally identified with Xianbei culture and admired them as warriors on the horseback.

The imperial sponsorship of cave-temples can be understood as a justification of the rulers' rights and their political beliefs. A large amount of human and material resources used to build the cave-temples was devotional and piety to Buddhism and thus could bring blessings and benefit to the ruling class as well as the country. During the Northern and Southern Dynasties, when Buddhism was prevalent, the ruling class built cave-temples to bring themselves closer to the Buddha, likening their sovereignty to the supremacy of the Buddha. Therefore, they've relied on the belief of the masses in Buddhism to secure their rule and propagate their political ideals.

Rulers of these non-Chinese regimes have been engaged in dedicating Buddhist cave-temple. Emperor Xiaowen of Northern Wei has excavated the Bing yang Middle Cave after the moving capital from Datong to Luoyang. Since he was an ethnic minority, it is imperative for him to resort to religious ideas to consolidate his position. He thus promoted Buddhism and made use of the Buddhist concept of "equality of all beings" to legitimize his rule. The "Chinese looking" Buddha statues in the Binyang Central Cave with slender bodies and clothes of the Buddha statues are typical of the Han style. Therefore, the style and type of Buddha statues in Bing yang middle cave can also reflect the sanitization policy and philosophy during the reign of Emperor Xiaowen of Northern Wei.

3. NEY WAYS TO REPRESENT THE SPIRIT KINGS IN THE NORTH CAVE: ARMOUR AND CONFIGURATION

Among iconography depicted within the North Cave at Northern Xiangtangshan, there's a standing out motif that marked the zenith of the Buddhist art of this period, which is the spirit kings. The spirit kings depicted on the altar of the central pillar in the North Cave have always captured viewers' eyes with their spectacular craftsmanship and refined details. Aside from the caves at Xiangtangshan, they also can be seen at the Gongxian caves, in the Central Binyang Cave at Longmen, and on the pedestals of free-standing images or stele. Yet the spirit kings in the North Cave show significant deviations from the previous dynasties. Their distinctive clothing—the armor they wear and their configuration stand out from its precedents.

The spirit kings or shenwang, according to Buddhist writings translated into Chinese and introduced into the Central Plain before Northern Qi, allude to the guardian

of the Buddha's teachings, acting as a protector god. Furthermore, spirit kings are composite characters, some with animal heads, that symbolize natural spirits such as fire, wind, bodies of water, plants, and animals [11].

The earliest known series of spirit kings appear on the bottom panel of the carved wall surface at Longmen in the Binyang cave (Figure3) [12]. They were commonly found in groups at the base or foot of the central pillar or on three or four sides of the walls. In the three-wall, three-niche caves the location of spirit kings is usually chosen on the base altar of the three-wall Buddhist throne. In the Longmen cave temple, spirit kings appear in a different location than before, carved on both sides of the cave door under the picture of the emperor and empress saluting the Buddha. The west wall of the Gong Xian cave temple is also carved with several figures of the spirit kings in the same location as the jiyuetian. In sum, the location of the spirit kings is generally chosen in the lower base of cave temples, reflecting their low status and not being the main object of worship.

The combined image of spirit kings appeared in the Buddhist caves during the Northern Wei and became popular on a large scale in the Northern Qi. The sudden appearance of spirit kings in the Northern Wei period and their disappearance in the Tang and Song dynasties must have been in a pattern of creation, development, and disappearance. From a macroscopic point of view, the spirit king was inextricably linked to, religious thought, the spread of Buddhism, and the policies of the rulers of the time. Spirit kings, as a new emergence image in Northern Dynasty, have become the center of previous scholarly research. Emma C. Bunker's *The Spirit Kings in Sixth Century Chinese Buddhist Sculpture* analyzes the iconographic changes of spirit kings from Northern Wei to Northern Qi and traces back them to Indian origin. Chang Qing's *Spirit Kings' carving in Northern Dynasty* point out the influence from Southern Dynasty to Northern Dynasties' spirit kings.

Northern Qi spirit-kings from the Ye area at Northern Xiangtangshan is distinguished from the previous tradition in several aspects. They are mainly carved at the cave's bottom, at the central pillar base altar, and appear in the same base with lion and censer, with distinctive wearing armor. These characteristics stand out from their precedents and are crucial for the understanding of art and culture in the Northern Qi period.

In the sixth century, depictions of figurines or composite creatures similar to that of the spirit kings are also common in painted murals and stone carvings in tombs, either on tomb furnishings or epitaph stones. Therefore, it is reasonable to suggest the spirit kings' developing characteristics are likely to incorporate

elements from the contemporaneous tomb art. This section examines the introduction of new characteristics of spirit kings in the North Cave, as well as the relationship between the causes of such changes in tomb art.



Figure 3. Spirit Kings depicted on the entrance wall, Central Binyang Cave, Longmen, Henan. Northern Wei. Chang Qing, “Beichao Shiku Shenwang Diaoke Shulue”, figure 3.

The altar of the central pillar in the North Cave houses a group of spirit kings on the front, left, and right sides. Each spirit king occupies a concave niche cut into the base rock, with flames decorating the arch of the niche. Although spirit kings vary in number and image in cave temples, they usually follow the principle of symmetry when carved. In the case of a base in an odd number of niches like that in the North Cave, the middle niche is carved with an incense burner flanked by squatting lions, and the outermost niche is carved with spirit kings.

On the central altar of the North Cave, the censer is flanked by two-spirit kings on either side. On the right side are the Elephant Spirit King and the Fire Spirit King. The elephant spirit king has a elephant head with distinctive elephant trunk and large ears. The sitting posture of the elephant spirit king is facing to the right with one leg bent and one leg stomping on the ground, holding a lotus flower in its hand. The fire spirit king on the right side of the elephant spirit king with one hand on the upper part of the chest and the other hand in a lower position holds flames springing from its fingers and is in a similar pose with the elephant spirit king.

The altar on the fight face of the central pillar has a spirit king and a lion on either side of the central censer. The lion on both sides of the censer is facing toward each other in a squatted posture with a mane spread behind its head. The wind spirit king, holding the bottom of the bag with one hand and the pocket with the other has its short hair slanting backward and vertical-occupies the niche at the far left. On the far right of the altar is a figure whose face is damaged, but from the bird’s beak, we can infer that it should be the Bird Spirit King.

On the left side of the pillar, the central censer lid is half-open revealing smoke and flames inside. The lions flanking it are seen from the side, but their heads are turned to face outward. The River Spirit King, on the far left, carries a fish on the shoulder with one hand on its tail, and the Tree Spirit King on the far right is embracing a tree. The image of the tree mostly resembles ginkgo, with layers and layers of branches and leaves. The tree spirit king holds the tree in the middle of its chest, with the trunk of the tree forking left and right, revealing its head.

In terms of attire, the costume here is much more elaborate than any discussed examples. Each spirit king wears soft boots, loose trousers, but, instead of the usual upper garment, the spirit kings here in the North Cave wear a coat of armor with circular breastplates on either side. Except for the elephant and wind spirit kings, they all wear crowns on their head which is shaped by multiple lotus petals. All of them have flying ribbons on their backs. The flying ribbons crossed the shoulder of spirit kings, formed a curve, and flew out from the position of their elbows with the end of the ribbon flying in the mid-air behind them.

The way spirit kings are depicted in the North Cave gives the audience a sense of weight. Their plump face and well-rounded body shape fit into the stylistic feature of Northern Qi art, the representation of rounded body contours. Their bodies are represented compactly with the dwarf size and squatted position. One significant feature of spirit kings in the North Cave that was never seen in any of the previous ones is the armor they wear. The armor consists of an oval-shaped chest blade symmetrically on both sides of the spirit king’s chest with a bold scallop edge shoulder armor, and a gardebras. The gardebras are separated from shoulder armor, and a ribbon is used to tie together the chest armor and shoulder armor. Such exotic attire has never appeared in any cave temples before or since Northern Xiangtangshan.

The first appearance of armor in the Northern Xiangtangshan can be an important implication of the stylistic feature in the Northern Qi Dynasty. Bright (Mingguang) armor is the term given to the aforementioned sort of armor in the North Cave. The earliest known of such armor appears in the shield-holding warrior figurines in Northern Wei Dynasty. The shield-holding warrior figures are terracotta Hu men, which were common burial items in sixth-century tombs in Ye. Warriors with shields were frequently unearthed in pairs and placed in the tomb chamber at the tomb entrance or in the canal. Like the spirit kings functioning as a protecting deity, shield-holding warrior figurines in tombs are also considered as protectors to the tomb owner by frightening away the evils.

The earliest known example of such warrior clothing was found in the tomb of Yuan Xi in the first year of the

Xiaochang era (525 CE), where the figurine presses a large shield with its hand and is clothed in armor whose chest and back parts are composed of two large near-oval-shaped decks on the left and right, with a ribbon to tie the chest armor and shoulder armor together, just like the spirit kings in the North Cave. Another way spirit kings and shield-holding figurines resemble each other is they both have rough piping on their lapels.

During the Northern Wei period, it was rare to see tomb figurines wearing bright armor, but in the Northern Qi period, Mingguang armor became prevalent among tombs at that time. A large number of tomb warrior figurines wearing Mingguang armor were discovered in the tombs of the Northern Qi period particularly around the Ye area indicate that this kind of armor was already popular at that time and became a norm for warrior figurines to wear (Figure 4). Such a widespread pattern of Mingguang armor in tombs in the Ye region may have influenced contemporaneous Buddhist art, including the North Cave in Northern Xiangtangshan. North Cave artisans may have absorbed this pattern from tomb art and utilized it when designing the clothes for the spirit kings there.

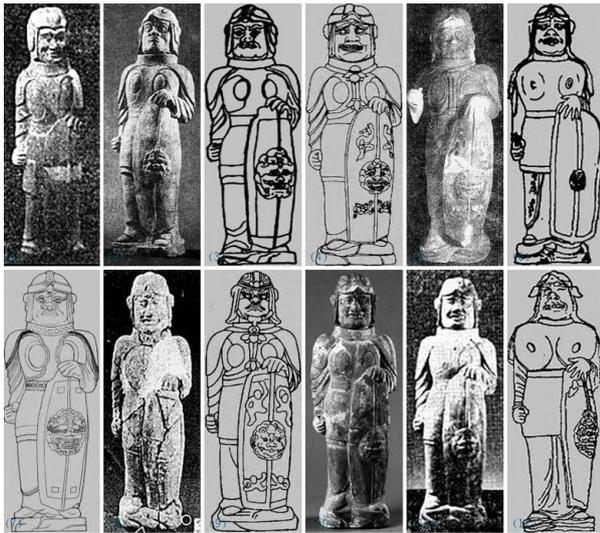


Figure 4. Warrior figurines from tombs of the Yecheng area. Eastern Wei and Northern Qi. Zhu Hu, “Weijin Beichao Huyong De Tuxiangxue Yanjiu” figure 44.

However, at Southern Xiangtangshan, the spirit kings' armor has vanished, and they now wear the Chinese kind of sleeved gown with a sash at the waist, as seen in Gongxian and Longmen. This suggests that the sculptures from the Xiangtangshan cave temples exhibit substantial variation and do not follow a one definable period style, implying the activity of several workshops or schools of artists and artisans operating at the cave sites.

An intriguing phenomenon about the spirit kings is that although the armor of the spirit kings' mimics that of the shield-holding warrior in tomb art, the crown they

wear deviates significantly from that of the warriors. While tomb warriors wear a round-topped domed helmet, a traditional Hu cap, most of the spirit kings in the North Cave who have hats on their heads wear a Sogdian style crown with a moni jewel in the middle, a typical symbol of Buddhism. The simultaneous appearance of varied styles in the spirit kings of the North Cave suggests that Northern Qi is an era in which multiple trends coexist.

The North Cave's symmetrical placement of lions and spirit kings on both sides of censors differs from the depiction of spirit kings in earlier cave temples. Spirit kings occupied the whole register in previous cave temples such as Longmen and Gongxian, with nothing appearing alongside them. Therefore, the emergence of lions and censors in the North Cave breaks the traditional pattern of spirit kings dominating every aspect of the register. Such a similar configuration of animals alongside protector deities has been a long tradition in tomb art. The gatekeeper warriors often appear in pairs with lions either in the entrance or in the canal of the tomb.

The newly emergent trait in the North Cave can also be observed in the contemporaneous stele. The Northern Qi's base in Metropolitan Museum is adorned with two Spirit Kings, one on each side (Figure 5). The Wind Spirit King sits to the right of the core group in the front, wearing a tall, pointed hat and clutching a satchel. On the left is the Fire Spirit King, who holds a burning address in his hand. The outfits, down to the strange volutes and cuts below the waist, are nearly identical to those worn by the North Cave's spirit kings [13].

The same pattern of spirit kings and lions as a pair arranged symmetrically on both sides of the censor reminds us of the layout in the North Cave.



Figure 5. Base of the Helianzishuo Stele, Metropolitan Museum, New York City. Source: Emmy C. Bunker, figure 16.

The spatial arrangement of spirit kings is interesting because it is different from the previous tradition. After comparing the placement of spirit kings in cave temples and contemporaneous steles, no specific pattern of the depiction can be found. The presence of a particular type of spirit kings or a link between the arrangement of

spirit kings in different cave temples seems to not follow a particular standard. This suggests that multiple ways of arranging the spirit kings coexist at Northern Xiangtangshan. We don't have a single narrative but at the same time, all these new modes are different from the previous tradition of Late Northern and Eastern Wei. We don't know the reasons why this transition happens, but it might provide us with some new questions to study in the future.

4. THE DONOR IMAGE IN THE NORTH CAVE:

In addition to spirit kings, another intriguing phenomenon within the North Cave is the depiction of donor images on two sides of the interior of the entrance wall (Figure 6&7). The plant motif and the way donor images are depicted remind us of the tomb art. Examining the Xiangtangshan examples against the broader context of depicting donor images in procession scenes, some new developments can be found in the depiction of donor images in the Northern Cave, including the configuration of donor images, the interaction between figures, the appearance of plants, and the flat carving techniques.

On the north side of the entrance wall, the donor images are carved on three registers (Figure 6). There's no clear cut in between them but based on the figure's position we can tell that they are separated by the edge of dresses. Two figures are depicted in the upper register. As can be inferred from the silhouette lines of the face, the left figure faces the right figure, holding a rounded fan in hand. I contend that they are both female donors according to the long dress and official hat they wear.

The figure on the right wears an official hat on her head and a long dress, and the lower left part of her body is covered by the person next to her. The figure on the left is dressed relatively simply, with no hat or other decoration on her head, and is possibly a servant. From the round bottom part and upper stems protruding out, we can tell that there are two plant motifs in the lower part of the first register, interspersed next to the figure's skirt.

The middle register depicts two figures facing to the right, with the figure on the left holding a parasol. Both figures feature a hairstyle of rounded buns, which is typical for the depiction of servants in the sixth century.

The lower register shows two figures facing each other. The figure on the left wears an official's hat and the bulging part of the robe suggests that he might be raising his hand or interacting with the figure on the right. The hierarchical scale and the hairstyle indicate that the one on the right should be a servant. This is a typical way to represent the hierarchical relationship of figures in the art of the early medieval period.



Figure 6. A group of donor figures. North side of the entrance wall, North Cave, northern Xiangtangshan. Northern Qi (550-577).:

<https://xts.uchicago.edu/content/north-site-north-cave>



Figure 7. A group of donor figures. South side of the entrance wall. North Cave, Northern Xiangtangshan. Northern Qi (550-577).

<https://xts.uchicago.edu/content/north-site-north-cave>

On the other side of the entrance wall, one finds another group of male donor figures (Figure 7). According to surviving pictures of the depiction of the wall, there are two main registers. Figures depicted in the upper register are difficult to identify due to the preservation condition. Yet there seem to be two or three figures depicted according to their identifiable feet. The middle register is preserved in a better condition comparatively, with four discernable figures. They are divided into two groups, each of which renders two figures facing each other as if they are communicating. The figures on the right wear a different type of hat with a protruding part on either side. Lines of a poem can be seen under the figures, which should be added later by tourists or so.

The arrangement of the donor images with a male figure on the left of the entrance while woman figures on the right conform with the representation tradition in Longmen and Gongxian. One couldn't resist asking why

the depiction of donor figures at Xiangtangshan relates to the previous tradition at Longmen and Gongxian? Are they arranged in similar ways? What's the invention?

The donor image became frequently depicted in cave-temples since the Northern Wei dynasty, suggesting the earnest devotion or wish of the donors to enter the imaginary realm of the Buddhas. Later, the single donor image developed into a procession scene with the main donors, standing in a simple linear arrangement, flanked by attendants who hold parasol or feather fans, or subsidiary figures that are usually someone of lower official ranks or their family members. The donor's age, status, and position are visually signaled by their garments, headgear, and hairstyles. The most renowned examples are the imperial procession images depicted at Longmen and Gongxian.

The donor figures share certain traits: The main donor is depicted in the central position with a hierarchical scale. They were followed or surrounded by attendants, who served their masters with parasols or fans. The overall composition of the image with the overlapping of figures and relative position creates a sense of depth. This arrangement of master and attendant forms and complex carving techniques are likely to have received influence from the murals in the burial chamber. For example, the same master-attendant configuration also appears in "Luo Shen Fu Tu" and "Xiao Zi Tu Sarcophagus", where the master is surrounded by a circle of servants. Therefore, scholars infer that the source of such configuration in cave-temple must be tomb arts [14]. From this point of view, we can see that tomb art has been consistently providing sources of reference to Buddhist art.

In the north cave of Northern Xiangtangshan, the donor image on either side of the door has demonstrated significant variations from the previous tradition. This section provides a thorough examination of the donor images in the north cave against the broader context of picturing donor images in the northern dynasties, analyzes its distinctions from its precedents, and explores factors that shaped these shifts and changes. Among the factors that shaped these changes, new developments taking place in contemporaneous tomb arts might exert a certain degree of influence on the current depiction of procession imagery in the north cave. Three particular aspects require further interpretation.

First, the configuration of donors in the North cave comprises an aspect that differs from the former tradition. Instead of using schematic, deliberate framing devices to separate different registers vertically, the division of the donors is presented more naturally and

realistically. In the Longmen cave temple, all the figures in the procession scenes are concentrated in one register, with the emperor or empress at the center of the depiction, surrounded by their attendants. (Figures 8&9)

The figures in the procession scene all stand on the same horizontal line uniformly, and there are harsh frame lines to separate the procession scene to other registers namely the birth story (Chinese: "bensheng" ;Sanskrit: *jataka*) and the spirit kings.



Figure 8. Emperor Xiaowen's procession scene in Bingyang central cave. Ishimatsu Hinako The Aristocratic Donor Figures Dressing in Han Clothes at Longmen and Gongxian Cave-temples: the Establishment of the Hierarchical Donor Imagery, figure 14 (left).



Figure 9. Empress Wenzhou's procession scene in Bingyang central cave. Ishimatsu Hinako .The Aristocratic Donor Figures Dressing in Han Clothes at Longmen and Gongxian Cave-temples: the Establishment of the Hierarchical Donor Imagery, figure 14 (right).

There are three registers on the front wall of Cave One in Gongxian cave-temple, with the upper layer of male biqui and trees followed by a group of donors and attendants. In the middle and lower register, two groups of high-crowned donors are followed by attendants [15]. Still, the configuration of figures on each register stays the same. Donors stand on horizontal lines in a stiff posture, with bold and thick frames marking the boundaries between each register. (Figure 10)



Figure 10. Male donors on the Front Wall of Cave 1, Gongxian cave-temple. Northern Wei. Ishimatsu Hinako, “The Aristocratic Donor Figures Dressing in Han Clothes at Longmen and Gongxian Cave-temples: the Establishment of the Hierarchical Donor Imagery,” figure 16.

In comparison, the donor images in the North Cave comprise a distinctive category. There is no frame to separate each register, instead, the figures’ dresses are elongated, forming a natural division between registers. Besides, instead of standing on a horizontal line rigidly, the figure in North Cave is depicted in a realistic way, appearing to intervene with each other. How to interpret this distinctive phenomenon? We cannot reach an absolute conclusion at this point. But we have multiple perspectives to consider. First, this configuration might be due to the limited space at the entrance of the north cave. Another scenario might be that the configuration of donor images in the North Cave derived its style from contemporaneous tomb art, in which scenes are usually presented vertically.

The second distinction appears to be the vivid interaction between figures at the North Cave, which is rarely found in the previous depiction of donor images. Take the first register of the imperial procession scene in Gongxian as an example, the emperor and his attendants are heading in the right direction, even the texture of their clothes is facing the right as well. The emperor was surrounded by attendants holding parasols and fans but there was no communication shown between the emperor and attendants or between attendants themselves. They just proceeded rigidly forward. The sense of interaction between figures in Longmen is because of different layers of attendants serving the emperor, thus overlapping with each other. However, in the donor image of the north cave, the interaction of figures can be frequently observed. The figures, rather than facing the direction as that of Longmen or Gongxian, face toward each other, in the bottom register on the right wall of Xiangtangshan cave

temple, the relative position between the master and its servant even adds more vitality to the image.

The structure of master-servant forms and overlapping compositions, as well as the communications and exchanges between master and attendants, is pervaded in tomb art. (Figure 11 & 12) The position and ratio of attendants relative to the master and interaction between figures are the same as those in the donor images of the north cave.

Figures standing on different planes in multiple layers. Most of them face outward toward the audience barely in the mood of talking with each other. This is because of the distinctive configuration of figures rather than limited space, which is the primary reason at Northern Xiangtangshan.



Figure 11. Sarcophagus of the filial son collection. Northern Wei. The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art. Ishimatsu Hinako, “The Aristocratic Donor Figures Dressing in Han Clothes at Longmen and Gongxian Cave-temples: the Establishment of the Hierarchical Donor Imagery,” figure 22.



Figure 12. The portrait of tomb owner in Luoyang Atkin Museum of Art, Nelson, USA Zheng Yan, *Wei Jin Nanbeichao bishua mu yanjiu*, figure 179.

The third distinction is about the depiction of plants in the North Cave. Such depiction of procession scene was not rare in the previous cave temples; however, none have shown plants in such a specific way like the North Cave in Northern Xiangtangshan. Procession scene of the donors in combination with nature has become a convention since the late Northern Wei, so the North Cave at Northern Xiangtangshan is following the tradition. They continued to emphasize background but the way they represent nature changed over time.

In procession scenes depicted at Longmen, one finds no trace of plants. At Gongxian, although trees can be seen, all of them appear at either beginning or the end of the procession, showing little relation with the figures. At the same time, they are taller than the figures to occupy the blank space above, functioning more like a background decoration. (Figure 13)



Figure 13. The procession scene on the west side of the south wall, Cave 1, Gongxian Cave-temples. Wang Lei. Northern Wei. The research on relievo of Emperor and Empress Worship Buddha of Gongxian Grottoes, figure 1-3-2.

On the north side of the entrance wall of the north cave, we can see small shrubs or grasses scattered around the figures. The small bushes in the North Cave may be a vivid representation of the environment in which the donor was in at the time, differing from the way trees are depicted in the previous donor images, probably to separate the figures. This similar depiction of plants and their relation to the main figure can also be seen in the portrait of the tomb owner on a sarcophagus in Luoyang (Figure 12). In front of them, we can see the depiction of the natural landscape which is studded with shrubs and grasses.

In addition, the relative importance of donor image also deviates from its precedents. The donor images are subject matters in Longmen and Gongxian taking up the whole wall. in Xiangtangshan, however, donor images are arranged in the limited space between the entrance and Buddha niche, in which the niche and Buddha figure are the main content that is intended to be represented, while the image of donor figures is less noticeable and took up a subordinate position. Rather

than serving as subject matter in those Longmen and Gongxian, donor images at Xiangtangshan is more like ordinary donors making offerings to the Buddhas in the niche beside it. As shown in figure 12, a group of people (donor figures) is placed at the back of the tomb owner, filling in the space behind. The space created by attendant figures facing each other is shaped by the reason why they are depicted there, which is the tomb owner that sits in the center of the space. The entourage of people beside the Buddha niche in the North Cave parallels the appearance of procession figures around the tomb owner, both indicate their secondary status.

Lastly, the scribed lines of figures also differ from its precedents, it is presumably another example that showcases the influence of tomb art on the north cave. The previous donor images in Longmen and Gongxian are shown in relief higher than those depicted at the North Cave, where the figures are depicted in a rather plain, flat way using low relief carving. Another argument to support my argument of the different inscribing ways. Besides, in comparison, the carvings of donor figures in the North Cave uses technique different from other reliefs and sculptures in the cave. The facial expression and dressing are carved delicately in Longmen and Gongxian, however, in Xiangtangshan, we don't see any details of robes or adornments depicted upon donor figures in the procession scene.

The flat carving technique reminds us of the similar representation frequently used in tomb art since the Han Dynasty. In Katherine Tsiang's research, she highlights the important role played by flat relief carving mode and motifs in the artistic changes in the late Northern Wei dynasty. Although Northern Xiangtangshan is several decades later than the late Northern Wei, this similar technique suggests that it might have absorbed contemporaneous tomb art, which inherits the flat-carving technique since Han Dynasty.

Nevertheless, another question to be addressed would be what happened to the flat carving technique after Late Northern Wei, because we don't see many flat carvings in tomb art in Northern Qi, which is beyond the scope of current research. But because of the immediately connected examples of flat carvings from Late Northern Wei, given the short span of the time from 530-550, it still has a chance for us to consider the possible influence.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Through this analysis, we can see that Buddhism began to absorb elements from real life and become more relevant, which has always been a distinctive feature of tomb art. The above studies show that during

the short period of 28 years in the Northern Qi Dynasty there was a very complex and frequent exchange between different art forms, and elements were constantly absorbed from real life.

The emerging styles and patterns in the Northern Xiangtangshan can be found in the tomb art of the same period. The new armor on the spirit kings first appeared in the Northern Wei period on warrior figurines from tombs with similar protective functions to spirit kings. In the Northern Qi period around the Yecheng area, wearing the Mingguang armor had become a programmed costume for warrior figurines of the time. Therefore, it can be presumed that the Northern Qi period Xiangtangshan cave temples formally absorbed the unique costumes of warrior figurines from tomb art. At the same time, the structure of the lion and the spirit king in a common row is also the first of its kind in the Northern Xiangtangshan, while such configuration is a long-standing tradition in the tombs.

The depiction of donor figures has always had essential importance in Buddhist caves. In the Northern Xiangtangshan, donor figures have changed from their previous rigid, archaic, and programmatic style to a more vivid representation. The formerly rigid, segmented borders of the figures have disappeared and have been replaced by a layering of the figures' dresses. Figures no longer move in one direction but are staggered and distributed in different layers with plants around. The interaction between the figures and the importance of the arrangement is also closer to real life. These character traits can be found in similarly in the mural paintings in the tombs. The arrangement of the attendants surrounding the tomb owner in the center and the interaction between the figures is very similar to that of the donor image in the North Cave, and it can be inferred that the tomb art provided a reference to the cave art.

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