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Evolution of Aesthetic Style of Northern Dynasty Statues in Maijishan Grottoes

Abstract: The statues carved during the early Northern Dynasty in Maijishan Grottoes inherited the tradition of physiognomy since Qin and Han Dynasties, that of the character appraisal during the late Han and early Wei Dynasties, and the aesthetic trend of emphasizing “the backbone/strength of characters” in the literary and artistic theories of Wei and Jin Dynasties. They also absorbed and merged the styles of Indian statues of Gindra, Mathurā, and Gupta. As a result, they manifested the robust beauty of strength, reflecting the vigor and energy of the Xianbei people during their blooming period. The aesthetic style of the statues carved during the middle and late Northern Dynasty in Maijishan Grottoes changed from emphasizing “backbone/ strength” to advocating “romantic charm” (going after elegancy and vividness), and thus manifested a feminine beauty of grace and tranquility. It was a reflection of the concern of metaphysics and Buddhism in the Wei and Jin Dynasties about “the form and the spirit” and the spirit-oriented and connotation-oriented aesthetic trend resulted from this concern. On this basis, it absorbed and integrated the aesthetic judgment and statue style of the Southern Dynasty. No matter whether it attached importance to the “strength” or the “spirit” of the statue, the artistic connotation of the statues was primarily expressed through the facial features such as eyes and mouth, and the posture, and lines of clothing.

Key words: Maijishan; statues; strength; spirit; artistic connotation

Influenced by the thought of “*Qian Gang Kun Rou*” (乾刚坤柔) in Zhouyi (周易) (Wang Bi, 2013: 393), Chinese classical aesthetics divides beauty into two different styles: masculine and feminine. Masculinity is the robust beauty. In terms of artistic style, it embodies the characteristics of vigorous, bold and magnificent style. Femininity is the graceful beauty, referring to the elegant, fresh, and graceful stylistic characteristics in art. Should the statues carved during the early Northern Wei Dynasty in Maijishan Grottoes reveal a kind of robust beauty that attaches importance to the backbone-like strength, then the statues from the late Northern Wei Dynasty to the Northern Zhou Dynasty would show a kind of graceful beauty that emphasizes “spirit” of the characters, which are usually vivid and charming.

“Bone” is a symbolic term, which originally refers to the bones of human beings and animals. It is a kind of bones with meat, and extends to the skeleton of human beings. Bones have a supporting role, so they are also used to describe a person’s quality and temperament, the body and style of literary and artistic works, and the vigorous brushwork in calligraphy (Wang Li, 2000: 1694). “Bone” is also a term used in ancient Chinese physiognomy. It refers specifically to one’s bony appearance, and is considered to be directly related to one’s longevity, fortune, status, and conduct. It is believed that physiognomy can be achieved through one’s bone characteristics because bone has an inherent structure and character that can reflect a person’s dignity. Its historical origin can be traced back to the tradition of physiognomy since Qin and Han Dynasties and the character appraisal of the Wei, Jin, Southern, and Northern Dynasties. The ancients of China always got the essence of beauty through the observance of human nature. At the end of Han Dynasty and the beginning of Wei Dynasty, character appreciation turned to lay emphasis on one’s talents. Thus, as a general expression of the ideal way of life existence, bone is related to the concepts of *Qi* (气), *Feng* (风), and “force” apart from the original relationship with the characters and laws of the bone. It refers specifically to the plastid and dry implantation of characters, as well as the life force and vigorous spirit emanating from this implantation. In the Wei, Jin, Southern, and Northern Dynasties, emphasizing “theology” became the major trend of physiognomy, thus, “bone” is used to match with some expressive words, referring to the character’s very upright spiritual character and demeanor. The interpretation and application of “bone” in the late Han and early Wei Dynasties, especially since Wei and Jin Dynasties, had a profound influence on literary theory and aesthetic criticism of literature, calligraphy and painting at that time and later generations.

In literary creation, the emphasis on “the backbone / strength of characters” is manifested as a sincere feeling, distinct personality, forthright characteristics and vigorous poetic style. It mainly dates back to the Jian’an period in the late Eastern Han Dynasty. Writers, including Cao Cao, his son (Cao Zhi), and the *Jian’an Qizi* (建安七子, the 7 leading writers during the Jian’an period), poured into their poems the characteristic temper of the age on the basis of the inherited realistic tradition of Han Yue Fu—folk songs collected by a special government office of the Han Dynasty. They depicted the reality profoundly, reflected the sufferings of people’s livelihood, expressed their aesthetic experience from the real life, and boldly opened their mind and aspiration to

the public, mixing all these features to work out their poetic style. Their works are enriched in content, generous and melancholy in emotion, while also elegant and powerful in style, expressing the authors' anxiety in troubled times, sympathy for the sufferings of the common people, and their desire to make contributions to the country. They represented the aesthetic taste and the literary ideal of the Jian'an period. This poetic style was honored as the "Jian'an Style" or "the strength of character of the Han and Wei Dynasties", exerting far-reaching influence to the literary world of later generations, acquiring much importance from a lot of poets and literary theorists. Before long, Liu Xie, a literary theorist in the Southern Liang Dynasty, introduced the concept of "bone" into literary criticism and raised a new concept of *Feng Gu* (风骨, literally means "wind and bone"), which signifies strength of character. Liu Xie held the view that *Gu* is the logical persuasion while *Feng* is the strong artistic appeal of literary works. The highest aesthetic ideal should be *Feng Qing Gu Jun* (风清骨峻, literally means "fresh wind and lofty bone"), which is the perfect combination of logic and artistry. *Feng Gu* is similar in meaning to the words such as *Feng Li* (风力, wind power), *Gu Li* (骨力, bone power), and *Qi Gu* (气骨, air bone). They represent a healthy and inspiring aesthetic interest, indicating a vigorous aesthetic character with authors' abundant vitality. The beauty of strength contained in *Feng Gu* then became an important principle that the contemporary artists followed in their creation and art criticism.

In the field of calligraphy, ever since Zhong Yao of the Wei Dynasty (actually ruled by Cao Cao) composed *On the Strength of the Stroke*, Madame Wei, Wang Xizhi, Liu Xizai, Kang Youwei and other famous calligraphers have all discussed about the issue of the "backbone / strength" of calligraphy. People use this concept to denote the power of strokes in calligraphy. If the strokes lack the strength, then the beauty of the structure, organization, and spirit, and that of the calligraphic work as a whole would lose the very foundation. Therefore, the "backbone/strength" is actually the foremost formal or technological requirement for constructing the calligraphic beauty. In his work *Comment on Calligraphy*, Song Cao firmly asserts that "Strength is vitality" (Song Cao, 1979: 565).

In the field of painting, "backbone/strength" is also much valued just as in the calligraphy field, affected by anthroposcopy and character appraisal. Xie He of the Southern Qi Dynasty regarded that to achieve the "strength" as one of "the 6 principle techniques" for the creation of painting. This technique to

achieve the “bone / strength” refers to the strong, vigorous, broad and powerful brushwork in painting. The famous painter Gu kaizhi often talked about *Qi Gu* (奇骨, strange bone), *Tian Gu* (天骨, natural bone), *Juan Gu* (隽骨, bone in a meaningful shape), *Gu Fa* (骨法, the rule of painting bone), *Gu Qu* (骨趣, the interest in painting bone), etc. It can be seen that the expression of the character’s bone structure and bone outline was a principle strongly advocated by the pervasive painting theory at that time.

For the statues in Maijishan Grottoes, this aesthetic consciousness of valuing “the bone of characters” was not only influenced by the tradition of the Han and Wei Dynasties, but also closely related to its special geographical location—*Qin Area* (to be exact, Tianshui district of Gansu province)—as well as its assimilation and integration of exotic Buddhist art.

Since the pre-Qin Dynasty, the Tianshui district had been famous for its martial spirit and productivity of generals. Fifteen famous generals of Qin and Han Dynasties were listed in the “Biography of Zhao Chongguo” in *Han Shu*, of which those from the Tianshui and Longxi districts accounted for seven (Ban Gu, 2000: 2253). Therefore, it was widely recognized that “The land west of Hanguguan is known as the birthplace of ministers, and that east, of generals” (ibid). The development of this martial society and culture was closely related to the unique geographical location of Tianshui. Sitting at the upper valley of the Weishui River, Tianshui enjoys lush forests, warm and humid climate. Here Han people had lived together with Qiang, Di, Xianbei, Xiongnu and other ethnic minorities from the ancient times and thus formed a semi-farming and semi-grazing nomadic life style. Besides, during the Qin and Han Dynasties, it was a production area of the war horse and a junction with the diffusion and exchange of Han culture. Therefore, Tianshui had always been a place for war since the ancient times. On the other hand, with the collapse of the Western Jin Dynasty and the southward migration of the Jin scholars, the center of the Central Plains culture began to move southward, resulting in fracture of the development of the northern culture. Then came the decadent decline and passive inaction of the scholars in the Late Jin Dynasty, and the expansion and separation of the power of the minorities from the north. From the end of the Eastern Han Dynasty to the end of the Northern Dynasty, Tianshui was ruled by ethnic minorities. Although these ethnic groups were far behind the Han people in the Central Plains in politics (these ethnic groups were still at the end of the primitive clan society and the early stage of slavery), economy (the majority of them still lived a nomadic life and only a few turned



Fig. 1 The Buddha of Gandhara
(from the network)

to settled agriculture), and culture, they were brave, warlike, and good at expansion and iron handed ruling, so they were in the rising period of their national history. As a result, “the folks were accustomed to preparing for the war, advocating for force and horsemanship and archery” (ibid). Their ambition of fighting bravely and dominating the North was just close to the political ideal of the Wei Dynasty ruled by Cao Cao, so they also needed to seek a kind of artistic form similar to “Han Wei Feng Gu” with vigorous, robust, passionate and desolate characteristics to convey this aesthetic ideal. Due to the lack of culture, there was no ideology to unify the whole country for the ethnic government who had gained the reign of the Central Plain. Therefore, the ruling class highly praised Buddhism, making it as a tool to consolidate political power and reassure the people. This is also the reason why Buddhism spread and developed rapidly in the northern minority regime areas.

What’s noteworthy is that early Chinese Buddha statues were influenced by India statues of Gindra (Fig. 1), Marthura and Gupta (Fig. 2), all of which enjoy a style of solidity, roughness and hardness. When Buddha statues were first introduced to China, they were spread across the country with grottoes as the carrier down the Hexi Corridor. The corresponding era of the period when early statues in Majjishan were carved (from the Post-Qin Dynasty to the early Northern Dynasty) were the heyday of the Gupta D ynasty in India (4th-5th century). This was also the period when Chinese Buddha statues learned from the Indian ones. Therefore, Chinese Buddha Statues were profoundly influenced by Indian Buddha statues both in imaging technology and modeling basis. What’s more, since the statues of Gupta inherited and evolved from those of Gindra and Mathurā in Kushan Period, and this transformation took place around the 4-5th century, it is easy to figure out that all three kinds of statues tended to embody the same style of roughness and hardness if their features are carefully reviewed.

First of all, let’s take a look at the statues of Gindra. In history, the northern Gindra region had been ruled by Greek people for about 130 years, which stamped the statues of Gindra with Greek and Roman features. During the Kushan Period, many craftsmen in Gindra region were more or less nurtured and trained unconsciously by the Greek and Roman sculpture and some craftsmen were even Greeks and Romans. There is no doubt that Greek people worshiped strong physique since ancient times and they had the tradition of imitating muscular human bodies in engraving holy statues. Following this tradition, the statues of gods and heroes carved by Roman



Fig. 2 Gupta — statue of mathurā
(from the network)

Fig. 3 The 78th Lord Buddha on
the right wall of the Maijishan
Grottoes

Data from: Pingning Hua,
Wenbin Wei. *Art of Chinese
Grottoes· Maijishan*. Jiangsu: Art
Appreciation, 2013

people all shared muscular bodies, high foreheads, deep-set eyes and high-bridged noses. While the statues of Gindra integrated the features of ancient Greek gods and heroes with Indian native “32 physical characteristics” and “80 minor marks” and thus created the kind of “Indian Buddha statues with Greek features” that “combined gods and human figures into one.” Speaking of the style, the statues of Gindra show aesthetic features of solidity, roughness and hardness. These features can be further presented by the following elements from the images of statues: their long and square faces, broad foreheads, straight noses, thin lips, sunken eyes, muscular figures with curves. Plus, these statues often wear Roman robes, whose thick pleats are engraved with straight lines to highlight the texture of their robes.

The Buddha of mathurā advocates a sense of flesh, power and life, which is robust and naked. On the face, the shape of face is oval. The eyelids are dropping while eyes are steadfast. The alae of nose are kind of round. The upper lip is thin while the lower one is thick. The eyebrows are slanted upwards and curved like a cow. The earlobes are longer than those of the Gandhara’s. Speaking of clothes, the decorations are much fewer than those of the Gandhara’s. Mathurā has sheer kasaya, a patchwork outer vestment worn by a Buddhist monk. On the right shoulder so large part of the body is naked. Pleats are represented by parallel fine lines to highlight the undulation of the flesh.

Compared with the former two Buddhas, the most prominent characteristic of the Gupta style is that it takes the Indian Buddhist statue ritual of “loving each other” as the basic focus of the statue: spiral bun and hair lines, ear rings that hangs over the shoulder, three creases in the neck, round shoulders, a robust breast like a fan, a solid and well-built belly, round cheeks, sheer clothing, the thick lines as a wet coat, etc. The Buddha of Gupta not only focus on the beauty of physical strength and harmony, but also emphasizes the calm and introspective state of the spiritual world. The Buddha statue is endowed with extraordinary and refined solemnity and wisdom of philosophy, revealing the Buddha’s spiritual realm of deep and remote and round perception. with exquisite and implicit carving technique.

The aesthetic consciousness of emphasizing “the backbone / strength of characters” is reflected by the early statues of Maijishan (carved from the Later Qin Dynasty of the Sixteen Kingdoms to the early Northern Wei Dynasty), and is manifested as a style of statues with a grand, vigorous, hard and straightforward system.

The robust beauty of emphasizing “the strength of characters” is most



Fig. 4 The image analysis of the facial features of the statues carved in the early Northern Wei Dynasty (drawn by the writer of this paper)

clearly manifested through the facial features of the carved characters. The facial features of the Maijishan statues carved during the early Northern Dynasty are apparent mixtures of those of the Gandhara and mathurā. Take the figure of 78th Lord Buddha as an example (Fig. 4), its head is in a high bun and carved with water ripples, which is the typical characteristic of Gandhara. The face is round and the forehead, plump. The eyes are big, with eyeballs bulging. The upper and lower eyelids are curved into a rather large radian with the almond shape. The bridge of the nose is stiff, high, straight and wide while the nasal wing is large and round, and there is no nostril. The outline of the mouth is sharp, the corner of the mouth slightly up-warped, and the arc of the central line relatively straight. With the ears drooping over shoulders, relatively low cheekbones and thin buns, the statue looks solemn. On the whole, the face of the early statue was rough and stiff, with more emphasis on large block surface structure and a lack of fine depiction, but it had a sense of beauty of tranquility, solemnity, and simplicity. In addition, compared with the late Qin Dynasty and the Western Region style, the early statues of the Northern Wei Dynasty are less exotic and mysterious but more attentive to the manifestation of the Lord Buddha's inner world.

Besides, this kind of robust beauty can also be embodied through the shaping of the statue's posture. The statues carved during the early Northern Dynasty in Maijishan Grottoes inherited the style of the late Qin Dynasty. The postural characteristics are specifically manifested as follows: most of the lord Buddhas are tall and muscular, seated cross-legged in the lotus position with their hands in Dhyana Mudra. They are of straight shoulders and full chest, showing a posture of inverted triangular above the waist, which appears to be solemn, straight, vigorous and magnificent on the whole. However, it is worth noting that the statues in this period are all carved with the techniques of high relief, with the body part directly molded on the grotto walls except for their heads. The lines of those statues' bodies and torsos are straight and stiff, and the shape of the hands turns to be incondite and coarse, manifesting an imposing, simple but stiff, crude body movement (Fig. 3). The images of the lord Buddhas in Caves 148, 115, and 156 are all the same, and so do the movements of Bodhisattva. For example, the Bodhisattva in Fig. 5, 6 stands in a stiff and straight posture without any sense of curve beauty. The profiles of arms, in particular, are directly shaped into a straight line, and their hands are also geometrically block-shaped in rough and simple ways.

Beyond that, the clothing pattern design of the statues also manifests the



Fig. 5: From Cave 71

Assisting Bodhisattva on the right side. See also Hua Pingning & Wei Wenbin. *Chinese Grotto Art • Maiji Grottoes*, p. 47.

robust beauty of strength. The costumes of statues carved during the early Northern Dynasty in Maijishan Grottoes mainly include the shoulders-totally-covered style (affected by the Gindra style) and the right-shoulder-bare style (affected by the Mathurā style). The shaping of the Buddha clothing is mainly based on the intaglio lines with thickness and depth change, and the smocking is expressed by the protrusions between the two thick intaglio lines. On the smocking, slender and thick iron wires are used to carve intaglio lines and depict a sense of wet-wrapped (affected by Mathurā and Gupta styles). Those lines are robust, strong, massive and distinctly turned, showing a vigorous beauty of rough, plain, calm and solemn style.

EMPHASIZING THE “SPIRIT” The aesthetic style of the statues carved during the late Northern Wei Dynasty in Maijishan Grottoes changed from emphasizing robust beauty and vigorousness to advocating for grace and vividness. The statues are both concise and sensitive, laying emphasis on the characters’ inner spirit through the subtle carving of the facial features, the postures, and the lines of clothing. Should the statues carved during the early Northern Dynasty in Maijishan Grottoes reveal the aesthetic style of masculinity and boldness that attaches importance to the backbone-like strength, then the statues from the late Northern Wei Dynasty to the Western Wei Dynasty would show the style of femininity and grace that emphasizes “spirit” of the characters.

What is spirit? It originally refers to the harmonious sound. The point of harmony of sound lies in the ending (simple or compound vowel of a Chinese syllable), thus the meaning of spirit extends to the ending (Gu Yankui, 2010: 769). In Wei and Jin Dynasties, spirit was also used in character appraisal, in which it referred to the demeanor and disposition of man and the aesthetic style of works of art, which extended to the elusive beauty of image but beyond the image itself (Cheng Fawang, 1995: 162). “Spirit” in aesthetics firstly showed up in the music theory, which meant the harmonious and elegant sound, namely, the spirit of rhythm. Meanwhile, spirit also refers to a kind of flavor, which indicates the aesthetic qualities of an image, especially the subtle and soft one, that is, the lingering charm (Cheng Fawang, 1995: 162). In Wei and Jin Dynasties, musical literati’s appreciation of music beauty was inseparable from their taste of rhythm. *Cao Zhi*, a famous writer in ancient China, said in *Ode to a White Crane*: “Appreciate the graceful rhythm of *Qin* (a seven-stringed plucked instrument in some ways similar to the zither)” (Cao Zhi, 2013: 220). *Ji Kang*, a great thinker, musician and writer in ancient China, also mentioned

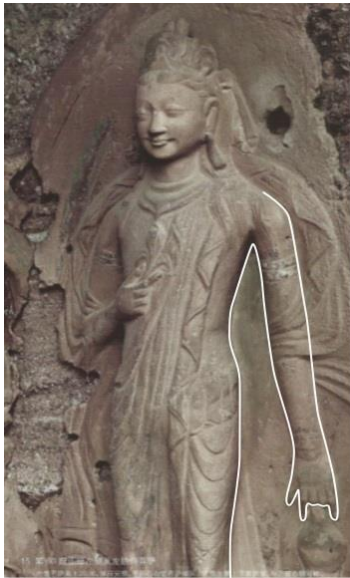


Fig. 6: From Cave 80
Assisting Bodhisattva on the left side.
See also Hua Pingning & Wei Wenbin.
Chinese Grotto Art • Maiji Grottoes, p.
53.

the “spirit” in *Ode to Qin*: “At the end of the song, all kinds of instruments came to an abrupt halt. Then musicians changed the tune and began to play some other wonderful tunes” (Ji Kang, 2014: 142). Therefore, on the one hand spirit refers to the beauty of sound itself (final), while on the other hand it is the sentiment and flavor of music. For the latter, spirit is applied to character appraisal and it is always used with the words like *Tiyun* (体韵), *Xingyun* (性韵), *Fengyun* (风韵), *Shenyun* (神韵), etc, referring man’s posture, disposition, expression, and bearing.¹ Obviously, spirit here refers to a flavor showing from but beyond the figure and appearance, describing the extraordinary and refined beauty which stirs the heart of people. The spirit applied to character appraisal always combine with the words of *Qing* (清), *Xiu* (秀), *Ya* (雅), *Dan* (淡), and *Yuan* (远), which mean quiet elegance, such as “elegance with spirit”, “noble spirit”, and “modest and gentle spirit.” Therefore, spirit is not a description of appearance, but inner accomplishment and intelligence. It is Xie He of the Southern Qi Dynasty who introduced the “spirit” in character appraisal to the painting evaluation and he associated *Qi* (气) with “spirit”. As the meaning of strength and vitality, *Qi* is more external and powerful, while spirit is more internal and relatively weak. Therefore, *Qi* is firm but spirit is soft. In Chinese classical aesthetics, when talking about beauty, those who prefer masculine beauty attach more importance to *Qi*, while those who prefer feminine beauty attach more importance to “spirit”. Xie He combined these two terms, which might refer not only to the characters in the paintings influenced by the character appraisal but also to the whole painting work and artist. Xie He held that paintings should convey a sense of beauty with strength and vitality, as well as subtle and soft charm. In a word, though the “spirit” mentioned by Xie He is from the perspective of the perceptual and intuitive image, it is more inclined to an inner spiritual meaning than the senses. Meanwhile, Xie He’s contemporary Wang Sengqian introduced the aesthetic category “spirit” into the calligraphy criticism. His understanding of spirit derived from that of the rhythm. He assumed that the graceful, rhythmic sense of modulation generated between the changes of calligraphy lines would evoke an aesthetic feeling connected with the beauty of music melody and this aesthetic feeling should be the origin of calligraphy spirit. Thus came the saying that “the spread of the characters is as miscellaneous as brocade

¹ Shi Shuo Xin Yv (a New Account of the Tales of the World) always quotes “spirit” in the comments of people. For example, “Wang Cheng’s spirit is unconventional, and his ambition is outstanding.” (Shi Shuo Xin Yv•Ya Liang, quoted from The Biography of Wang Cheng). And “Xi Tan’s personality is full of spirit.” (Shi Shuo Xin Yu • Xian Yuan, quoted from The Biography of Xi Tan), and so on.

mattress, and the spirit of them is as melodious as *Sheng* blowing” (Wang Sengqian, 1993: 20).

The aesthetic style of Maijishan statues changed from emphasizing “strength” to advocating “spirit” during the middle and late Northern Wei Dynasty due to complicated historical, political, and cultural reasons.

Firstly, it is closely related to the social, historical and cultural background of the Southern and Northern Dynasties. In the late Han Dynasty and Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties, the scholar-officials no longer believed in the traditional moral doctrine and sought for new spiritual sustenance because of the turbulent and divided society, the frequent warfare and the depressed economy. On the basis of the “vitality” and “the form and the spirit” discussed by the former sages in the late Han Dynasty, they returned to *Lao* (老), *Zhuang* (庄) and *I Ching* (易经), advocating to practice alchemy to become immortal, talk freely and be perfectly free without the restraint of traditional moral doctrine. And in Wei & Jin Metaphysics, the thought of “respecting the essence” was similar and related to the thought of “all is vanity” advocated by Master Kong in Buddhism Mahayana prajna, which made Buddhism be accepted by the scholar-officials. Therefore, the free talk of metaphysics and the reincarnation of Buddhism mixed together in the exchange of thoughts. By highly praised by emperors and the nobles, Buddhism was more widely spread and accepted by people. With the increasing number of monk and their association with celebrities and the hot topic about abiotic body with eternal spirit theory of Buddhist philosophy, there was a debate about form and spirit and an argument about words and meaning. Then this problem moved from critical thinking of Buddhism into the field of aesthetics and art through the character appraisal in the debate of metaphysics, which resulted in the new aesthetic custom—the honoring of god, the honoring of Chi and the honoring of meaning. What’s more, on the foundation of that aesthetic custom which kept Han tradition, south migrating upper-class people from Central Plain changed their aesthetic consciousness from the strength of characters in Jian’an into a romantic charm under the influence of feminine beauty respected by Jiangnan’s custom. Reflected in the plastic arts, the appearance of figure is as delicate as the character of southern China. Therefore, Buddhism statues are naturally characterized by inner wisdom conveying spirit through form.

Secondly, the aesthetic style of the statues carved during the middle and late Northern Wei Dynasty in Maijishan Grottoes absorbed and integrated the aesthetic judgment and statue style of the Southern Dynasty. Emperor Xiaowen

moved its capital to Luoyang in the late Northern Wei Dynasty (493 AD) and carried out sinicization, promoting the communication between the South and the North in philosophy, cultural trend and aesthetic taste. These statues carved during the late Northern Wei Dynasty tinged by kingship consciously replaced the right-shoulder-naked style with the Loose-Gown- with-Wide-Girdle style of the Han Dynasty. At the same time, the machismo who had the long round face and strong body in the early Northern Wei Dynasty was also replaced by graceful strength of tranquility and elegance. It is worth noting that the Sinicization of statues carve style did not happen overnight, but had experienced transmission and a process from changes to complication. There is no doubt that the style of statues carved during the Northern Wei Dynasty in Maijishan Grottoes was originated in the Southern Dynasty, then spread along the route of the Southern Dynasty → Pingcheng → Luoyang → Chang 'an → Tianshui, and further westward down the Silk Road. According to two archaeological excavating reports respectively submitted from Ten Thousand Buddhas Monastery (Chengdu) in the 1950s and Xi'an Road (Chengdu) in the 1990s, both of which are about the Buddhist stone statues carved in the Southern Dynasty, these were the earliest statues of the Loose-Gown-with-Wide-Girdle style, both the subject and form of which were from Jiankang. The style features and carving techniques of the Buddhist statues found in Xi'an Road, Chengdu, in particular, are consistent with those of the statues in Maijishan Grottoes carved in the late Northern Wei Dynasty. This proves the influence of the statues in the Southern Dynasty upon those in late Northern Wei Dynasty. In addition, looking from the entire historical background of the Northern Wei Dynasty, there had been many Sinologization tendencies in the large-scale construction and diffusion of the second phase of Yungang Grottoes (AD 485-493, from the death of Emperor Wencheng to the Eve of Emperor Xiaowen's moving the capital to Luoyang). For example, though the Loose-Gown-with-Wide- Girdle statues had already appeared, their heads were still in the "Liangzhou style". Buddha statue in the image of Han nationality, such as the sitting Buddha on the east side of the south wall of Yungang Grotto 17, also appeared. However, it was far less tall and robust than that in the early stage, and its exoticism and mystique in appearance had relatively reduced. The true maturity and popularity of the Chinesized Buddha statues on the Central Plains occurred at the late stage of the second phase and the third phrase of Yungang Grottoes, and the first phase of Longmen Grottoes. The approximate age was around the 510s and 520s, that is, Emperor

Xuanwu's later period to Emperor Xiaoming's period. The Loose-Gown-with-Wide-Girdle statues of Maijishan were first seen in the Grotto 86, 114, 115, 155, 91 and 156, etc. These caves were built between the late Taihe period of Emperor Xiaowen and the Zhengshi years of Jingming period of Emperor Xuanwu (499-508 AD), which happened to be the beginning stage of the transformation of the Maijishan statues under the influence of the Southern Dynasty's aesthetic culture. The typical feature was that it had both the Sinologization factors of the Central Plains and those of the previous dynasties in the same cave, forming a mixture of the post-Qin style and the Central Plains style. For instance, the Bodhisattva and the "Yingsu" (one of the art of Color Sculpture) were in the Loose-Gown-with-Wide-Girdle style and the *Xiu Gu Qing Xiang* (秀骨清像, having elegant skeletons and delicate features) style, but the lord Buddha statue still wore the mafor of the Northern Wei Dynasty with round collar and bare right shoulder (like the Cross legged Bodhisattva in Grotto 156). At the same time, the images of Flying Apsaras in the Southern Dynasty style also occurred in Grottoes 86, 11, and 115. But it was from the late period of Emperor Xuanwu (508—516 AD) to the end of the Northern Wei Dynasty (AD 517--535) after Emperor Xiaoming that the style of the Maijishan Grottoes was completely separated from the shackles of Indian and Western styles, and the Chinesized Buddha statue style began to become mature and popular in Maijishan.² The statue style of Maijishan was basically consistent with the third phase of Yungang Grottoes and the first phase of Longmen Grottoes in time and characteristics.

"Spirit" has two meanings in terms of the statues in Maijishan Grottoes: one is that the statues not only present the form, but also reveal the "spirit" of the characters, namely, their demeanor, temperament, inner activities and the verve of their spiritual realm; another is that the statues manifest a feminine beauty, i.e., charm, in contrast to the masculine beauty.

First and foremost, the above two meanings of "spirit" are conveyed through the statues' faces, such as the detailed shaping of their eyes and lips. The charm of characters is primarily expressed through their faces. Lu Ji of the Jin Dynasty once stated, "The face is truly consistent with the mood in that the former always changes with the latter" (Sun Qiuke, 2014: 191). Rodin, the famous French sculptor, also believed, "You can read one's soul by observing his face" (Wang Yong, 2008: 228). What Rodin said also makes it easy to

² The popularity of the Chinesized style in Maijishan brought about many classic works, including the sculptures involving the disciple and the Bodhisattva in Grotto 121 (Whispering), and the image of the disciple in Niche 9 of Grotto 133 that looks like "a little monk."



Fig.7 The image analysis of the statues in the Middle and Late Northern Wei Dynasty (drawn by the writer)

understand why he audaciously coated the body part of the effigy with a cloak while sculpting the great writer Balzac, and devoted all his efforts to shaping the profound uncovered face. The most important feature of statues carved from the late Northern Wei Dynasty to the Northern Zhou Dynasty in Maijishan Grottoes is the scrupulous shaping of the figures' faces. Undoubtedly, the most vital part of facial depiction lies in the eyes. During the Wei, Jin and Southern and Northern Dynasties, Chinese painters began to recognize the importance of the depiction of eyes as they seek to convey the spiritual bearing of characters. In Chinese history, there are such tales as Zhang Sengyao's *Hua Long Dian Jing* (画龙点睛, meaning to paint a dragon and dot its eyes as the vital finishing touch) and Gu Changkang's *Chuan Shen Edu* (传神阿堵, meaning to reveal the spirit through this, i.e., the eyes) while painting a man, and statements as "It is easy to paint a man playing the banjo, yet difficult to depict the expression in his eyes when he is watching the Swan geese leaving for the south." These allusions also require artists to produce works with not only similarity in form, but also life and soul. Hence the craftsmen of Maijishan Grottoes paid close attention to carving the eyes when making statues. *Yan* (眼) in Buddhist culture refers to vision, viewpoints, knowledge, and wisdom (Ren Jiyu, 2002: 255). Accordingly, *Yan* is regarded as a symbol of wisdom and accomplishments in Buddhism. There is a *Wu Yan* (五眼) theory in Buddhism, saying that with the achievement of *Fo Yan* (佛眼), one could see and hear everything, and thoroughly understand all the reality of dharma. Therefore, it is traditional to attach importance to the eyes of Buddha statues in ancient China, and to accomplish the sculpture with the most important procedure—*Kai Yan* (开眼), that is, to dot the eyes for the Buddha statues. *Kai Yan*, as an extremely sacred event, is generally held by morally eminent monks. Although *Kai Yan* has a hint of religious mysticism, from the perspective of aesthetics and art, it is exactly consistent with Gu Changkang's aesthetic pursuit of *Chuan Shen Edu*, and also reflects the Buddhist understanding of the aesthetic characteristics of Buddha statues from another side.

The spirit of the statues is firstly embodied in the shaping of facial features, including eyes and lips.

Generally, the statues from the middle and late Northern Wei Dynasty seem to present a beauty of tranquility and detachment. The statues are characteristic with mostly rectangular (but roundish in the jaw and forehead) and chiseled face, wide forehead, flat "meat bun" (the protuberant skull whose

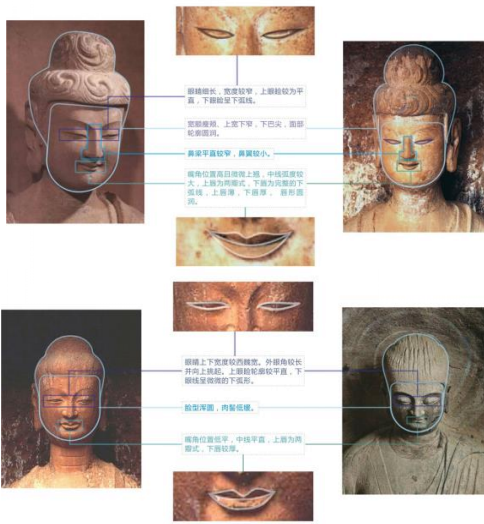


Fig. 8 The analysis of statues of the West Wei Dynasty (drawn by the writer)

Fig. 9 The analysis of statues of the Northern Zhou Dynasty (drawn by the writer)

shape is like bun, a symbol of nobility and high status), thin sideburns, relatively long neck, high nose bridge and thin nose wings. The eyes are slender and in the middle of the eyebrow and nose tip. The width between upper and lower eyelids is wide, and the outer eye corner is slightly higher than the inner one. The outline of the eye is smooth as the upper eyelid is largely curved while the lower is straight. All the features make the eye display the shape of downward facing crescents with a glimmer of smile. The corner of the mouth is relatively low with the middle part of the upper lip slightly curved, the mouth is comparatively small, whose width is approximately the same as that of the distance between the eyes. The lip is thin, and the upper and lower lip is in the same thickness. The lip curve is rounded, of which the upper lip is rounded with two petals, and the lower complete (Fig. 7). Examples include the Buddha on the left wall of the 17th Grotto, the cross-legged Bodhisattva in the 142th Grotto, and the lord Buddha in Niche 3 of the 23rd and 133rd Grottos.

The statues from the West Wei dynasty are much more elegant and graceful, manifesting a feminine beauty of tranquility. Generally, the statues in this period were characteristic with small size, graceful shape and moderate proportion. They were high in “meat bun”, straight in hairline, narrow in forehead, and plump in mandible. Compared with the rectangle-shaped thin face in the Northern Wei Dynasty, their faces became more obround. The eyes, slender and slightly open, are on the two-thirds part between the eyebrows and upper parts of nose. The eye tail is long, and the width between upper and lower eyelids is narrow. The outline of the eye is smooth as the upper eyelid is straight while and the lower is slightly curved; All the features make the eyes display the shape of upward facing crescents, staring downward with a glimmer of smile, giving a sense of tranquility and amiableness. The corner of the mouth is relatively high and slightly upturned with the middle part of the upper lip largely curved, showing a natural and quiet smile. The mouth is comparatively small, and the upper lip is thick while the lower is thin. The lip curve is rounded, of which the upper lip is angular with two petals, and the lower complete (Fig. 8).

The statues carved during the Northern Zhou Dynasty embody the facial and bodily characteristics of roundness and thickness, and have rich and vivid facial expressions. On the basis of realism, it is emphasized to reveal the inner world and spirits of the characters, thus showing a sense of thickness, contemplation and distance. The statues carved during the Northern Zhou Dynasty get rid of the features of people living in the west of China in the

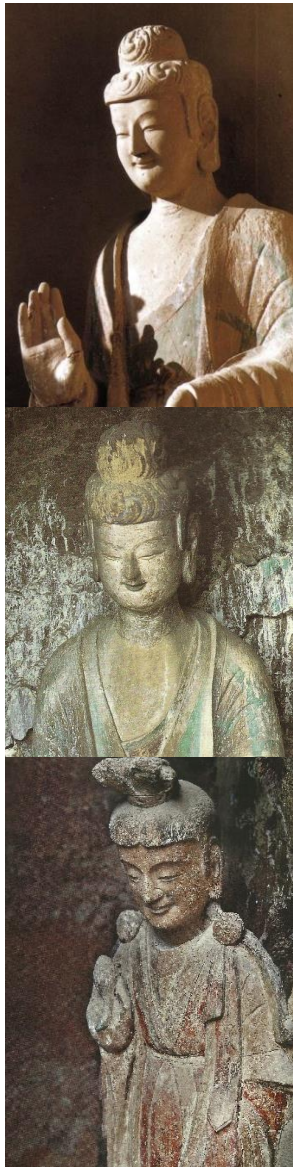


Fig.10 The Western Wei Dynasty Buddha Zhengbi in Grottoe 44

See also Jun Gang: *Majjishan Grottoes in the Kingdom of Buddha*, p. 39.

Fig. 11 The Western Wei Dynasty Sitting Buddha Zhengbi

See also Hua Ningping, Wei Wenbing. *The Art of Grottoes in China: Majjishan*, Jiangsu Fine Arts Publishing House, 2013.

Fig. 12 The Western Wei Dynasty Bodhisattva on the right side outside the main niche of Grotto 146

See also Hua Ningping, Wei Wenbing. *The Art of Grottoes in China: Majjishan*, Jiangsu Fine Arts Publishing House, 2013.

previous dynasties who have Roman noses and deep eyes with hair twisted in a high bun. Instead, they have round head, flat flash-cowl, short neck and broad shoulders, all of which embody quite typical features of young men in Qin Dynasty. In the middle place of eyebrows and nasal tip are their eyes, long and thin, and the width of which are wider than that of statues carved during the Wei Dynasty. The outer corner of the eye extends and rises upward, and the eye contours are smooth. The arc of the upper eyelid is flat and straight, while that of the lower eyelid is slightly lower. The statues look down slightly with a meditative air which is solemn and full of zen. The corners of the mouth are low and flat, the middle lines of the lips being straight and flat, the lips being large and thick. The upper lip is two-pan while the lower lip is thicker than the upper lip with a lower arc shape. For there is no smile on the faces, the characters look solemn and peaceful. (Fig. 9).

The “spirit” of the characters is also embodied by postures. Chinese aesthetics holds the belief that the key point of making art lifelike and charming is to endow it with dynamics which produces life. When creating statues, Indians often use an “S-shaped” or “trilogy” form to show the beauty of a woman’s body. This kind of visual representation embodies a smooth, loose, elastic aesthetic feelings and vitality of life to people. The statues of Buddha in Majjishan Grottoes also follow this form. However, it is obvious that the “S-shaped” form attached by Indians has already been adapted to an implicit and moderate style which is more acceptable for Chinese people. One typical example is the statues style of Grottoes 44 represented by Merit Lord “Yifu” in Yu Wentai period of Western Wei Dynasty (535-557 AD). On the basis of inheriting the features of thin neck and round shoulders (goes after “Elegant skeleton and delicate features”) in Luoyang Area during the Northern Wei, these statues exude the femininity of women with elegant, round and curved stylistic characteristics on the face and body. As shown in Fig. 10, 11, the heads of the Lord Buddha all lean slightly forward with eyebrows lowered to look around. Compared to the straight heads of Lord Buddha during the Northern Wei Dynasty, it exudes more gentle and motherly affability. Apart from that, the postures of Bodhisattva are more dynamic and charming compared with statues in former dynasties. For example, in Fig. 12 & 13, the head of Bodhisattva leans slightly forward and to one side at the same time, showing people a sense of girlish bashfulness and playfulness. Although the standing posture of Bodhisattva does not present a rather exaggerated “S-shaped” curve, features like thin neck, round shoulders in grace still reveal a line of beauty.



Fig. 13 The Western Wei Dynasty. Line Drawing of The Left Attendance Bodhisattva in Grotto 127, painted by Tang Chong. See also Tang Chong, *Line Drawings of Maijishan Grottoes*, People's Fine Arts Publishing House, 2004.

Fig. 14 The Western Wei Dynasty. Line Drawing of The Bodhisattva in Grotto 44, painted by Tang Chong. See also Tang Chong, *Line Drawings of Maijishan Grottoes*, People's Fine Arts Publishing House, 2004.

Another example, in Fig. 14, is that the Bodhisattva's one hand is slightly raised to the chest with the other hand naturally hanging down. And the head and the postures of the body also twist slightly, forming a "S-shaped" curve. On the face is a tender and enchanting smile. As shown in Fig. 10, 11, the head of the main Buddha is slightly tilted forward with a low-brow glance. Compared with the rigid and straight head movement of the main Buddha in the early Northern Wei Dynasty, this kind of low-brow glance gives people a kind of gentle and motherly affinity. In addition, the body posture of bodhisattva is more dynamic and has more lingering charm than the early dynasties. For example, the head of the bodhisattva in Fig. 12, 13 tilts slightly to one side while leaning forward, making people feel a sense of girlish shyness and playfulness. Although the standing posture of bodhisattva shows no exaggerated "s-shape" curve, the thin neck and shoulder and the gentle and graceful posture still shows twists and turns of the curvaceous beauty. For another example in Fig. 14, the bodhisattva's one hand is slightly raised to the chest, while the other is naturally drooped. The posture of the head and body is slightly twisted, forming an "s-shape" curve. And the bodhisattva looks charming and graceful in a smile.

The processing of clothing style and patterns also gives the statues a unique sense of rhythm.

The statues from the late Northern Wei Dynasty to the Western Wei Dynasty in Maijishan Grottoes all emerge from the walls in the form of circular carving. The clothes of Buddha on the statues has complicated and layered smocking because of converting into the Chinese Loose-Gown-with-Wide-Girdle style, and the carving of the girdles and smocking on the statues use the carving skills of bas-relief.

In the late Northern Wei Dynasty, the dress patterns on the upper parts of the statues bodies still use negative lines carving skills. Cassocks are loose, collars on the both sides droop, and lappets all hang. The lower parts of surplices hang naturally in front of the seats in the forms like petal of 3 pieces or 4 pieces, and are shown with the decorative method of lateral symmetry. Patterns on the skirt edge are processed with the methods of horizontal-alignment shape and vertical-ladder shape and emphasize more on the feeling of volume and space formed by the raised lines (Fig. 15). In the Western Wei Dynasty, the Buddhas' clothes hang down from shoulders with heavy collars, and skirt edges hang down in two petals, covering knees like flowers. Although the patterns of the skirt edges apply the two-petal symmetrical decorative

method, the lines are more concise and smooth, complex and changeable; The smocking between line and line on the edges is right-angled ladder type no longer, but is close to objective and natural patterns and have more natural rhythm (Fig. 16). During the Northern Zhou Dynasty, the statues are dressed in two kinds of cassock, which are in the Loose-Gown-with-Wide-Girdle style (Fig. 17) and *Tongjian* style (cassock covers shoulders) (Fig. 18). The processing of dress patterns makes them have more massiness and be fitter to the body. The skirt edges do not use symmetrical decorative method no longer, making the form of the smocking natural and vivid, concise and smooth.

It is worth explaining that shallow relief in the production with the help of light and shadow, usually using a 45-degree angle next to the light, through the light and shadow illuminated by the light to construct the outline and volume of the Buddha's pleat. The clothes wrinkles show a sense of line on the statue body after compressing the space in an equal proportion. The line is engraved on the statue. The upper eaves of the low point are 90 degrees perpendicular to the right angle. The edges of the lower eaves are slightly polished so as to receive light. The sculpture has a distinct ups and downs. These points will produce a sense of rhythm of changes in light levels of black, white and gray due to different light exposure. The technique of this line in Maijishan's statue relies mainly on the Line drawing in ancient Chinese painting. Line drawing expresses rhythm and rhyme by the ups and downs of lines, succession and turning, interpolation, density, direction, length and thickness. To translate the Line drawing technique of into sculpture is to express the intersection, interpenetration and pressure of volume and volume through the edge line. On the one hand, the line changes in density, strength, thickness and flexibility; on the other hand, according to the skeletal structure of the human body, the delicate fluctuations between skeleton and muscle are carried out by lines. Highly summarized and refined, giving the sculpture a certain degree of relaxation rhythm and tension. In fact, the application of lines in ancient Chinese painting and sculpture is the same, as Zong Baihua said: "Chinese sculpture is also like painting, do not pay attention to Stereoscopic property, but pay attention to flowing lines" (Zong Baihua, 1994: 100-3).

CONCLUSION The early statues of Maijishan Grottoes in the Northern Dynasty pursued bone strength in aesthetic style, so the body lines were handled more rigidly, vigorously and concisely, showing the "golden stone spirit" in the aesthetic appreciation of calligraphy. After the middle and late period of Northern Wei Dynasty, the lines of Majishan statues changed from

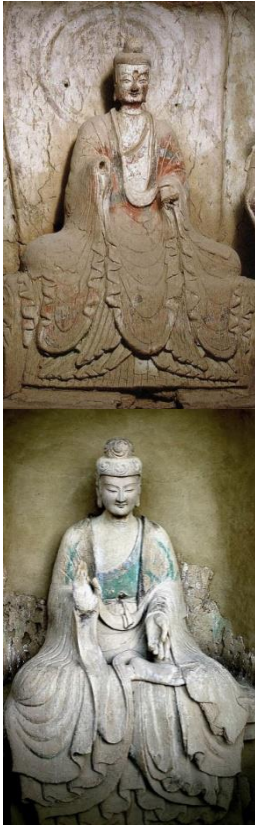


Fig. 15 The third niche of Grotto 133 in the late Northern Wei Dynasty

Fig. 16 The lord Buddha in Grotto 44 of the Western Wei Dynasty

rigid lines of previous generations to more smart curves, and the characters became more dynamic and elegant and full of charm. However, no matter how the techniques are handled or how the images are expressed, the statues of Maijishan in the Northern Dynasty cannot be separated from the influence of Chinese classical aesthetics and painting, which embodies the strong characteristics of traditional Chinese art and the purport of classical aesthetics.

Firstly, without sharp distinctions between painting and sculpture in ancient China, the former had overwhelming influence on the latter. Guo Ruoxu of Northern Song Dynasty mentioned, in his book *Pictures and News* 《图画见闻志》, a style of Buddhist painting called “Cao Family (曹家样) Style”. Guo also proposed, “All the sculptures and statues must be inspired by Cao’s and Wu’s styles” (Guo Ruoxu, 2007: 27-28). In Wu Daozi’s paintings, the sashes seem to flutter as if in the wind, while in Cao Zhongda’s, the robes cling to the bodies as if the people just emerge from water. Therefore, their different methods of dealing with the apparels can also be adopted in sculpture. In fact, Cao Zhongda was proficient in both painting and sculpting. The formation of “Can Family Style” was understandably a combination of both. The statues carved during the early Northern Dynasty in Maijishan Grottoes remained a lingering vestige of Cao's style, partly demonstrating that Chinese painting and structure was once inseparable in ancient times.

Secondly, as a representative of Chinese traditional art, the statues carved during the early Northern Dynasty in Maijishan Grottoes reflect the gist of Chinese classical aesthetics. Chinese people always emphasize the harmony between man and nature in the mode of thinking. They lay great stress on intuition and attach great importance to learning from the experiences so that they are good at grasping the essence of things with the help of empirical intuition. In this way, Chinese art is completely different from Western traditional one. As the latter strives to reproduce the objective reality, while the former, from the very beginning, pursues non-physical, non-objective imageries with both settings and inner feelings blended. From Zhou Yi’s “creating imagery through duplicating the object (立象以尽意)”, Wang Shu’s “taking the object out of the imagery (得意忘象)”, then Gu Yuzhi’s “capturing the spirit beyond form (以形写神)”, finally to Sheikh’s “adding artistic appeal (气韵生动)”, Chinese art has always placed “spirit” (神) upon everything but ignore “form” (形). Chinese calligraphy and painting are arts characterized by the movements of brushes, showing great uncertainty, ambiguity, implication, and multi-cultural meanings. Sculpture, as the objectification of



Fig. 17 The lord Buddha in the main niche of Grotto 62 in the Northern Zhou Dynasty

Fig. 18 Neifu, the niche behind the left wall of Grotto 141 in the Northern Zhou Dynasty

Chinese national spirit, must inevitably present what's on the sculptors' mind on the whole. While sculpting, predicated on that the entireness and harmony of the statues, devote more attention to the part full of "spirit". The statues of the Maiji Mountain Grottoes are based on personal feelings rather than anatomy. Observing the classic rituals of Buddhism, the satisfying statues are created through generalization and emotionalization. These states contain strong Chinese traditional aesthetic spirit.

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