



须弥山石窟



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宁夏回族自治区文物管理委员会

中央美术学院美术史系

编

文物出版社

北京

1988

XUMISHAN GROTTOES

COMPILED AND EDITED BY
THE CULTURAL RELICS PRESERVING COMMITTEE
OF NINGXIA HUI AUTONOMOUS REGION

&

DEPARTMENT OF ART HISTORY,
THE CENTRAL INSTITUTE OF FINE ARTS

CULTURAL RELICS PUBLISHING HOUSE

BEIJING

1988

摄影：陈志安、张宝玺、孙小伟等

封面设计：周小玮

责任编辑：黄文昆

须弥山石窟

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文物出版社出版

北京五四大街29号

百花印刷厂
美通印刷厂 制版印刷

新华书店北京发行所发行

787×1092 1/16开 印张：15.5

1988年9月第一版 1988年9月第一次印刷

ISBN 7-5010-0212-6/J·94 定价：23元





XUMISHAN GROTTOES

(summary)

The Xumishan Grottoes, with valuable statues of Northern Wei, Northern Zhou, Sui and Tang Dynasties housed in them, are located on eastern slope of Mt. Xumishan, 55 km. northwest of Guyuan County in Ningxia Autonomous Region. Before Liberation the grottoes were, however, little known because of the insufficient recordings about them in historical documents and the geographic remoteness of their location. It was not until after Liberation that the grottoes were discovered. In 1956 they were first seen in magazine reports. In 1962 the local government of Ningxia organized an initial investigation on them and twenty better-preserved caves were numbered. In May 1982 an integrative exploration was carried out by the united investigation group organized by the Ningxia Cultural Relics Preserving Committee and the Department of Art History of the Central Institute of Fine Arts and all the caves were numbered anew. In the same year the Xumishan Grottoes were announced to be included in the second group of the units with cultural relics specially protected by the state.

The exact date when the Xumishan Grottoes were first cut has been lost in history. Judging from the forms of the caves and the styles of the statues, the work probably started in the years of Taihe (477-499) under the reign of Emperor Xiaowendi, Northern Wei Dynasty, about 1500 years ago. Excavation of the caves and moulding of the statues were carried out on a large scale in Northern Zhou (557-581) and Tang (618-907). By the period of Tang a considerably grand grotto temple had come into being there, which was called Jingyunsi Temple, according to the recordings on the stone tablet erected in the years of Chenghua, Ming Dynasty,

for the occasion of rebuilding the Dafolou Mansion at Yuanguangsi Temple. The name was used through Five Dynasties (907-960), Song (960-1234, including Western Xia and Jin), and Yuan (1234-1368), until the beginning of Ming. In the 8th year of Zhengtong (1443), Ming Dynasty, "Monk Zhuoji Wangsu in the old Jingyun-si Temple" built a large number of Mansions for Buddhas and at his appeal Emperor Yingzong renamed the temple Yuanguangsi Temple.

The area of Guyuan was inhabited in ancient times by the nomadic tribes of Qiang and Rong nationalities. After it was included in the territory of Qin by King Zhaoxiang (306-251B.C.), Guyuan gradually developed into the political, economical and cultural centre of the area. It belonged respectively to Beidi Jun and Anding Jun in Qin (221-206B.C.) and Han (206B.C.-220A.D.). In Western Han it was the seat of Anding Jun, called Gaoping (114B.C.). Towards the late Northern Wei it was renamed Yuanzhou (436). The name Guyuan was not given to it until Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). With the flourishing of Buddhism in Northern Wei (386-534), Guyuan, endowed with fine natural conditions and rocks fit for carving, soon became the location for the building of the grottoes. In 1982 seven carved steles and a bronze statue, of Northern Wei, were unearthed in Guyuan. One of the steles carried the inscription of "the 2nd year of Jianming" (531), which reflects to some extent the prosperity of Buddhism then.

Through centuries of endeavours more than seventy of the one hundred and thirty-two grottoes in Mt. Xumishan were adorned with carvings and statues. The caves scatter on the cliff faces of eight peaks extending eastward. Owing to natural erosion and man-made destruction, only twenty caves or more with sculptures are extant today, which were mainly works of Northern Wei, Northern Zhou and Tang. They are concentrated in the southern and central areas, called Dafolou Mansion, Zisungong Palace, Yuanguangsi Temple, Xiangguosi Temple and Taohuadong Cave.

Northern Wei was the opening period of the Xumishan Grottoes. Most of the caves then were built on the cliff face of the area of Zisungong Palace. In Caves 14, 24 and 32, for instance, statues of Northern Wei can still be seen.

All the three caves are square in shape, each with a stupa-like pillar at the centre. The central pillars range from three-storeyed to seven, and are filled on all the four sides with niches, cut storey by storey. Niches with statues are also built in the walls of some of the caves. Among the statues are cross-ankled Bodhisattvas, and in-

dependent seated or standing Buddhas. But most of them are presented in groups, each containing a Buddha and two Bodhisattvas. The statues in the four niches at the upper storey of the central pillar in Cave 24 are quite exceptional. With "Getting into His Mother's Womb by Riding on the Elephant" carved in the back niche, "Going out of the City to Become a Monk" in the left niche, the Meditative Bodhisattva in the main niche and "Starting on the Journey with a Bowl in His Hand" in the right niche, this group of statues presents the only depiction of the Story of Buddha found in Mt. Xumishan. Northern Wei statues in the Xumishan Grottoes are all small, only 40-50 cm. in height, with thin faces and well-chiseled builds. Buddhas are attired in traditional loose gowns, but Bodhisattvas are dressed in broad-sleeved tunics open in the front. The change in the style of moulding and costumes shows the influence of the reforms promoted by Emperor Xiaowendi of Northern Wei in the people's clothes. As result of his reforms Han garments in Central China gained popularity in the North, and in the making of portraits the artistic style of the Southern Dynasties which favoured emaciated looks and well-chiseled builds flourished in North China, too.

The grottoes of Northern Zhou occupy a prominent place in Mt. Xumishan, with their large number, big size and fine sculpture. They are mainly located in the central area, the area of Yuanguangsi Temple and Xiangguosi Temple. The caves with statues now extant are Caves 45, 46, 48, 51, 67, etc. Among them Cave 51 is the biggest and contains the most magnificent statues.

The grottoes of Northern Zhou and Sui are square in shape with a central pillar. Compared with Northern Wei grottoes, the most remarkable change is the disappearance of the small niches carved storey by storey on the four sides of the pillar. Instead the central pillar carries a big niche on each side as well as a statue which is as tall as a man or even taller. The group of statues consists mainly still of a Buddha and two Bodhisattvas, but there appear a standing Buddha in a niche (Cave 46), a Buddha flanked by two disciples (Cave 48), and a Buddha accompanied by two disciples and two Bodhisattvas (Caves 51 and 70). As the principal statues, in addition to the Buddha seated with legs crossed, there is chaired Maitreya. The statues of Northern Zhou are characterized by low and flat hair coils, square and round faces, broad and thick shoulders and protruded abdomens. Completely free from Northern Wei's emaciated looks and well-chiseled builds, they brought into being a new style which called for thickness, heaviness and substantialness.

Caves 45 and 46 are the caves among the Xumishan Grottoes, in which the greatest number of statues and the richest decorative carvings are found. Cave 45 is the larger of the two. On the four sides of the central pillar and in the cave walls there are altogether fifteen big niches, each containing a Buddha flanked by two Bodhisattvas. Their heights vary from 1.8 to 2.5 m.. The Buddha looks solemn and serene. The Bodhisattvas are splendidly ornamented with precious crowns, necklaces and strings of pearls, but some of the statues were repainted in later dynasties and have, therefore, lost their original style.

The two caves have their walls all covered with decorative carvings. The central pillar in Cave 45 is particularly interesting. Ceiling at each of pillar's side has as a centre an incense-burner adorned with fluttering belts, flanked by a pair of dancing heavenly musicians facing each other. Between the musicians there is a child in transformation from a lotus. The gandharvas hold musical instruments in their hands, their shawls flowing in the wind. The curtains over the niches are saw-toothed and the niches are flanked by rope-patterned borders intertwined with pearls and vases. The four corners of the central pillar are supported by octagonal columns and the column base is carved with lotus-flowers. The head of the column connected with the ceiling is made to look like a wooden beam and bracket set. The four corners of the base of the central pillar are ornamented with elephant heads in low relief. What is the most attractive is the eight musicians carved on each side of the base, each playing a different instrument. These images provide valuable data for the studies of musical art in the Northern Dynasties. The platform of the central pillar in Cave 46 has, besides musicians, heavenly kings on its four sides. It is a great pity that the two caves are blackened by smoke.

Cave 51, the biggest cave in Mt. Xumishan, consists of the main chamber, antechamber and the right side and left side accompanying chambers. It is quite in form. The earthquake that occurred in 1920 in Haiyuan seriously damaged the cave-chambers and the statues were affected, too. The main chamber, a spacious cave with a central stupa-like pillar, is 14.6 m. broad, 12.5 m. deep and about 10 m. high. The central pillar, square in shape, each side being 5.5 m. in length, reaches the ceiling directly. Particularly the three Buddhas sitting in a row on the rectangular platform at the back wall of the main chamber, each mounting to 6 m. high, are really grandiose-looking. They are master works in grotto art of our country.

By the time of Tang, the art of the Xumishan Grottoes had attained its maturity.

The construction of the caves exceeded all its predecessors in number and artistry. Tang grottoes were mainly located in the three areas of Dafolou Mansion, Xiangguosi Temple and Taohuadong Cave. Caves with statues extant now Caves 1, 5, 54, 62, 69, 72, 79, 80, 89, and 105.

Cave 105, popularly called Taohuadong (Peach-Blossom Cave), had most of its frontal part of the cave-chambers dilapidated. But the main chamber is on the whole intact. A square cave with a flat ceiling and a central stupa-like pillar, it is the only Tang cave in which a central pillar is retained. The cave is 8.5 m. in breadth, 7.3 m. in depth and 5.9 m. in height. The pillar, each side being 3.1m. long, reaches the ceiling directly and without tapering, assuming a square and massive look. The Xumishan Grottoes were built on the sedimentary rocks of the Eocene series in Tertiary period, which was comparatively soft. The central pillar in Cave 105 was probably erected for reinforcement. The niches and the statues in the main chamber are on the whole intact. Niches are cut respectively in the left and right walls and the central pillar bears one niche on each face. Except the inner niche in the left wall which contains a standing Buddha only, all the other niches have attendant Bodhisattvas. The statue in the left niche of the central pillar is Ksitigarbha and that in the right is Avalokitesvara. The images in the rest of the niches are seated Buddhas. The niches are about 4 m. high, the standing Buddha 3.4 m. high, and the seated Buddha about 2.5 m. high and the Bodhisattva about 2 m. high. The Bodhisattvas wearing tall hair coils on the top of their heads and sashes round their bodies, stand in a graceful posture, full of strength and beauty. The style of heaviness and substantialness is clearly manifested.

Cave 62 is the most complete in the presentation of statues among Tang grottoes. The cave-chamber, square in shape, has an arched ceiling. Each side of the cave is about 3.4 m. long, and niches are built in three walls. The frontal wall bears three niches. The central niche contains a Buddha, two disciples and two Bodhisattvas, the principal figure being Maitreya. In the other two niches there is a Bodhisattva each. The right and left walls are symmetrically arranged. The principal statue in the inner niche of the right wall is Ksitigarbha and its counter-part in the left wall is Maitreya. On the reveal of both walls there are heavenly kings (*Lokapala*), who, wearing armours and holding spears in their hands, tread on demons.

Most of the Tang caves have rooms which are square in plan and, instead of niches cut into the walls, platforms are built along three walls for statues. A group

of statues is mainly composed of seven figures, including a Buddha, two disciples, two Bodhisattvas and two heavenly kings (or two warriors). Some groups have nine figures.

Among the statues Bodhisattvas received the greatest attention in delineation. The Bodhisattvas in Caves 54, 69 and 72 standing on lotus with long sashes wrapped round their bodies, have the upper part of their bodies naked and the lower part covered in long skirts, displaying an extremely beautiful curve in a pose both elegant and charming. But unfortunately almost none of the heads of the Bodhisattvas remains intact now.

Cave 5 was called in Ming Dynasty Dafolou (Colossal Buddha Mansion) due to the fact that there was then a big house in front of the cave. It is a cave in the shape of a horse-shoe. A figure of chaired Maitreya, mounting to 20.6 m. high. The statue, benevolent-looking, is both gigantic and exquisitely made. It has always been regarded as the representative work of Tang grottoes in Mt. Xumishan.

There are preserved in the Xumishan Grottoes eleven inscriptions made in Tang, Song, Western Xia, Jin and Ming Dynasties. There is also an inscription in Tibetan and three stone Tablets of Ming. They are important data for the understanding of the historical development of the grottoes.

Mt. Xumishan is another place with the interest of Chinese Buddhist art. In 1984 reconsolidation and repairing were done with the money specially allotted by the state. It can be predicted that the Xumishan Grottoes will attract the attention of the tourists and explorers.

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