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# The Artistic Characteristics of the Seated Buddha Statue on the Main Wall of the Sixth Grotto of Bingling Temple

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the artistic characteristics of the seated Buddha statue on the main wall of the sixth grotto of the Bingling Temple Grottoes in Yongjing County, Gansu Province, which was created during the Northern Zhou period (557–581). As a significant Buddhist site located along the Silk Road, the sculptures and murals of the Bingling Temple Grottoes illustrate the stylistic evolution of Buddhist art across different historical periods. This paper presents a detailed analysis of the artistic style and carving techniques employed in the creation of the seated Buddha statue in Cave 6. The facial features, hairstyle, robe folds, gestural handprints, and backlight decoration of the statue are meticulously examined in order to gain insights into the artistic techniques used during the Northern Zhou period (557–581). The analysis of these artistic features posits the significant role of this seated Buddha in the Buddhist art of the Northern Zhou Dynasty and elucidates its function in the cultural exchange of the Silk Road. It offers a crucial lens through which to comprehend the artistic style of the Northern Zhou period. This research aspires to contribute to the understanding of Northern Zhou Buddhist art and its place in Chinese art history.

**Keywords:** Bingling temple; Grotto; Seated Buddha statue; Artistic characteristics

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## 1. Introduction

The Bingling Temple Grottoes, located in Yongjing County, Gansu Province, stand as one of China's major Buddhist cave complexes with a history dating back to the Western Qin Dynasty (385–400). Positioned along the Silk Road, they reflect dynamic cultural exchanges between East and West and preserve a rich legacy of sculpture and mural art that illustrates the stylistic evolution of Buddhist aesthetics.

The seated Buddha on the main wall of Cave 6 is a representative work of the Northern Zhou period (557–581), a time marked by political consolidation and cultural integration. During this period, Buddhist art flourished under state patronage, resulting in the construction of numerous temples and grottoes. This particular statue exemplifies both the regional adaptation of Buddhist iconography and the diverse cultural influences along the Silk Road.

This study aims to analyze the artistic features and carving techniques of the seated Buddha in Cave 6, focusing on four key areas: facial structure, robe pleats, gestures and hand seals, and backlight decoration. Through this analysis, the

paper seeks to deepen the understanding of Northern Zhou Buddhist sculpture and its significance within the broader framework of Chinese art history and transcontinental cultural exchange.

## 2. Background and significance of the study

### 2.1. Background of the study

The Northern Zhou Dynasty (557–581), as the final stage of the Northern and Southern Dynasties, played a crucial transitional role in Chinese history. This period witnessed a strong endorsement of Buddhism, with the state actively constructing temples, caves, and pagodas while inviting monks from Central and South Asia to propagate Buddhist teachings. As a result, Buddhist art entered a phase of dynamic innovation, enriched by cross-cultural influences.

Situated within this historical context, the Bingling Temple Grottoes emerged as an essential religious and artistic center. Although initially developed during the Western Qin period, they underwent substantial expansion during the Northern Zhou era, reflecting both the political support for Buddhism and the stylistic maturation of Buddhist sculpture.

### 2.2. Significance of the study

As an important node on the Silk Road, the Bingling Temple Grottoes are not only a showcase for Buddhist art but also an important bridge for cultural exchange between Central Asia and China. The Buddhist sculptures in the grottoes reflect the artistic styles of different historical periods, incorporating elements from Central Asia, South Asia, and local Chinese art, and demonstrating rich cultural diversity (Figure 1) <sup>[1]</sup>.



**Figure 1.** Picture of the seated Buddha statue on the main wall of the sixth grotto of Bingling Temple

The seated Buddha on the main wall of Cave 6 is one of the most important works of the Northern Zhou Dynasty in the Bingling Temple Grottoes. Its creation not only reflects the high degree of development of Buddhist art at that time but also demonstrates the mastery of carving techniques and the unique artistic style of the Northern Zhou period. Through the study of this seated Buddha, researchers can better understand the characteristics and evolution of Buddhist art in the Northern Zhou, as well as its important position in the history of Chinese art.

## 3. Characterization of the art of Buddhist statues

This chapter examines the stylistic and symbolic features of the seated Buddha in Cave 6, with particular attention to its head, robe, gesture, and backlighting design.

### **3.1. Head artistic features**

The facial features of the seated Buddha in Cave 6 of Bingling Temple during the Northern Zhou period are clearly different from the previous Northern Wei Dynasty prominent bone structure style, but instead show a kind of a plump and volumetric sculptural style. This change reflects the significant evolution of Buddhist art in the Northern Zhou period in the style of statues <sup>[2]</sup>. Departing from the angular aesthetics of Northern Wei sculptures, the seated Buddha in Cave 6 presents a fuller, rounded facial form that reflects a shift toward benevolence and serenity.

The Buddha's slightly closed eyes and gently curved brows contribute to a contemplative expression, reinforcing the meditative character of the statue. The broad forehead symbolizes wisdom, while the elongated earlobes—meticulously carved with smooth, natural lines—retain traditional Buddhist symbolism, signifying attentiveness and spiritual receptivity.

Particularly notable is the Buddha's subtle smile, often referred to as the "Buddha smile", which imparts a sense of peacefulness and compassion. This facial expression, combined with the sculptural fullness and naturalism, embodies the Northern Zhou emphasis on emotional warmth and moral authority.

These stylistic choices reflect the growing influence of Han Chinese aesthetics during this period, marking a localized adaptation of Buddhist forms. The head of the statue, in both its physical modeling and expressive qualities, serves as a compelling synthesis of religious symbolism and artistic innovation.

### **3.2. Characteristics of the robe and the pleated art**

The seated Buddha of the Northern Zhou period in the main wall of the sixth grotto of Bingling Temple, the treatment of the robe has the typical artistic characteristics of the Mathura-style wet-suit Buddha statues, while incorporating the unique elements of the Han culture of the Central Plains, forming a heavy and spontaneous style.

#### **3.2.1. Mathura-type characteristics**

The Buddha statue is dressed in a robe, which hugs the body, showing the texture of the clothing and the physical features of the statue. Originating from Indian Mathura art, the wet-style drapery was inherited and refined during the Northern Zhou period, emphasizing body contours while preserving solemnity <sup>[3]</sup>.

#### **3.2.2. Central Chinese cultural identity**

Although the overall style of the robe reflects the characteristics of the Mathura-style wet-style, the treatment of the folds of the bodice at the neckline and at the hem of the sleeve robe is thicker and more complex. This treatment reflects the aesthetic characteristics of the Han culture in the Central Plains, emphasizing the sense of spontaneity of the robe as it floats in the wind. The folds of the robe not only show the texture and weight of the fabric, but also increase the three-dimensionality and realism of the statue, making it more vivid and vital. The weighty and cascading folds reflect the sculptor's nuanced grasp of the texture and dynamics of the fabric and their high level of skill.

#### **3.2.3. Expression of artistic style**

Through the meticulous treatment of the folds of the robe, the carvers not only demonstrate their high level of skill but also convey the spiritual connotation of Buddhist art. The folds of the robe symbolize the Buddha's teachings and the serenity of his practice, while the smooth lines and natural layering express his compassion and wisdom. The fusion of the Han culture of the Central Plains and the art of Mathura made the Buddhist statues of the Northern Zhou period show richer and more varied artistic features while preserving the traditional style.

Beyond the symbolic layering of robes, the statue's bodily gestures further express its meditative and cultural symbolism.

### **3.3. Characteristics of gesture and handprint art**

The seated Buddha of the Northern Zhou period on the main wall of Cave 6 of Bingling Temple presents a steady sitting

posture and typical meditative handprints. These features not only show the solemnity and serenity of the Buddha, but also reflect the unique treatment of posture and handprints in Buddhist art during the Northern Zhou period.

### **3.3.1. Sitting posture and handprint styling features**

The Buddha sits in a cross-legged lotus position, a meditative pose symbolizing tranquility, concentration, and spiritual power. The cross-legged sitting posture enhances the statue's visual authority and structural balance, and also increases the overall sense of balance and stability. The hands of the statue are folded and put down in front of the abdomen to make a meditation seal. The meditation mudrā is among the most frequently depicted gestures in Buddhist iconography, symbolizing inner peace and meditative wisdom.

### **3.3.2. Proportional stylistic features of the body**

In this statue, the upper arm is slightly longer than the forearm, and this proportion makes the posture of the statue more natural and expansive. The design of the longer arm increases the heaviness and majesty of the statue, and is also in line with the overall artistic style of the Buddha statues in the Northern Zhou period, which were rich, round, and thick. This kind of limb proportion treatment not only shows the craftsmen's deep understanding of the human body structure, but also reflects the pursuit of the beauty of the form of Buddhist art in the Northern Zhou Dynasty.

### **3.3.3. Expression of artistic style**

The posture and mudrā reflect the dual influence of Mathura aesthetics and localized Chinese sensibilities. The cross-legged sitting posture and meditation seal are typical elements of Indian Buddhist art, while the meticulous treatment of limb proportions and the natural smoothness of the posture demonstrate the understanding and innovation of the aesthetics of the human body by the craftsmen of the Central Plains. The postures and hand seals are not only the external manifestations of the Buddha statues, but also the symbols of the spiritual connotations of Buddhism. They convey the core teachings and spiritual pursuits of Buddhism and enhance the religious significance and infectious power of the statue.

## **3.4. Backlighting and decorative art features**

The backlighting of the seated Buddha in the main wall of Cave 6 of Bingling Temple reflects a diverse and unique artistic character, integrating cultural elements from Central Asia and the Central Plains, as well as the simplifying trend of Buddhist art in the Northern Zhou period.

### **3.4.1. Forms and patterns of backlighting**

The backlight of the Buddha statue is in a two-color, multi-headed, wavy flame pattern, which has a distinctly Central Asian style<sup>[4]</sup>. The flame pattern symbolizes light, and this design is inspired by the Persian worship of fire, which then spread widely in Central Asia and influenced Buddhist art. The flame pattern in the backlight not only shows the sacred light of Buddha but also enhances the solemnity and mystery of the statue. However, compared with the complicated and ornate flame motifs of the early period, the flame motifs of the Northern Zhou period have shown a trend of simplification, with more concise images and brighter lines.

### **3.4.2. Decorative patterns for headlights**

The inner circle of the Buddha's head halo is decorated with the Lonicera pattern, while the outer circle is painted with diamond-shaped geometric patterns and circled geometric patterns. Lonicera is a unique decorative pattern in the Wei, Jin, and Northern and Southern Dynasties, symbolizing eternity and immortality, with deep religious significance. The combination of diamond-shaped geometric patterns and circle-dotted geometric patterns increases the hierarchy and decorativeness of the head halo, enhancing the visual depth and structural rhythm of the halo.

### 3.4.3. Expression of artistic style

The backlight pattern of the Northern Zhou period is still dominated by the flame pattern, but the image has been simplified, and is no longer as gorgeous as in the early period. At the same time, due to the limited access to high-quality pigments, the Northern Zhou period of backlighting color is relatively simple, with a relatively weakened decorative effect. This phenomenon reflects the limitations of the social economy and material conditions at that time, but also makes the artistic expression of the backlight pay more attention to the expressiveness of the lines and forms, rather than relying on the vividness of the colors. This pursuit of simplified forms makes the Buddhist art of the Northern Zhou present a unique aesthetic in its decoration. The simplified treatment of flame patterns and the skillful use of geometric patterns not only enhance the aesthetic effect of backlighting but also make the Buddha statue as a whole more harmonious and beautiful. This synthesis of artistic styles underscores the Northern Zhou's pursuit of a localized Buddhist visual identity during a time of intense cultural exchange.

## 4. Conclusion

The seated Buddha on the main wall of Cave 6 at Bingling Temple stands as a representative masterpiece of Northern Zhou Buddhist art, offering rich insights into both stylistic evolution and cultural synthesis. Its full facial contours, layered drapery, meditative posture, and geometric backlighting reflect a profound integration of Indian Mathura stylistics, Central Asian iconography, and Han Chinese aesthetics. This hybrid visual language not only embodies the multicultural dynamics of the Silk Road but also illustrates how regional and foreign artistic influences were harmoniously fused during this period.

Beyond its aesthetic significance, the statue exemplifies the unity of artistic expression and religious meaning. Its serene expression and meditative pose encapsulate core Buddhist teachings such as compassion, insight, and spiritual discipline. Rooted in earlier dynastic traditions, yet anticipating the formal elegance of the Tang dynasty, this statue marks a pivotal moment in the development of Chinese Buddhist sculpture. Ultimately, the analysis reveals how ideological, aesthetic, and intercultural forces converged, anchoring the Northern Zhou period as a turning point in the indigenization of Buddhist art in China.

## Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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