

# ***An Exploration of the Symbolic Significance and Cultural Connotations of the Seated Twin Buddhas in the Yungang Grottoes***

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**Abstract:** The Yungang Grottoes, as a representative of early Chinese Buddhist art, reflect the profound influence of Indian and Central Asian Buddhist art, while also incorporating elements of traditional Central Plains culture. This paper examines the seated twin Buddhas in the Yungang Grottoes, focusing on their symbolic meanings and cultural connotations. Through field investigations and a comprehensive literature review, the study analyzes the significance of the seated twin Buddhas from multiple perspectives, including Buddhist doctrine, socio-political context, and artistic expression. The advent of the seated twin Buddhas signifies both the visual articulation of Buddhist doctrine and a pivotal phase in the localization of Buddhist art in China. Furthermore, the construction of the Yungang Grottoes coincided with the flourishing of the Silk Road, a period of extensive cultural exchange between the East and the West. The artistic expression of the seated twin Buddhas incorporates decorative elements from Greco-Roman art, showcasing the profound cultural interactions along the ancient Silk Road. The research reveals that the seated twin Buddhas not only embody the Buddhist philosophical concept of "the harmony of the two truths" but also reflect the unique political landscape and cultural integration during the Northern Wei regime.

**Keywords:** Yungang Grottoes, Seated Twin Buddhas, Northern Wei regime, Cultural Integration, Symbolic Significance

## **1. Introduction**

In no civilization has art been so controlled by the intellect as in China; it might almost be said that it is an intellectual or philosophical expression [1]. This intellectual control is particularly evident in the realm of religious art, where philosophical and spiritual ideas are translated into visual forms that convey profound meanings. Among the many examples of Chinese religious art, the Yungang Grottoes stand out as a remarkable testament to the interplay between intellectual thought and artistic creation. The Yungang Grottoes, a significant repository of Chinese Buddhist art, have consistently garnered scholarly interest due to its intricate sculptural motifs and exceptional craftsmanship. Among these, the seated twin Buddhas stand out as a particularly striking motif, embodying profound Buddhist thought as well as rich artistic, political, and cultural connotations. Recent academic research on the Yungang Grottoes has primarily focused on artistic styles, historical contexts, and Buddhist thought. As Dai Pengfei states in his paper, "The halo motifs also reflect the positioning and

compositional relationship of the "Two Buddhas" within the niche. The phenomenon of the "Two Buddhas" forming the artistic theme of the "Trikāya Buddhas" together with the statue of Maitreya in the Yungang Grottoes demonstrates the planned and systematic approach of the Yungang artisans in cave construction and statue creation. " [2] This reflects his depiction of the motif of "Two Buddhas Seated Side by Side" and its relationship with the Trikāya in iconography. Peng Shuanhong, in his work *Interpretation of Buddhist Culture in the Art of the Yungang Grottoes*, observes that "The Buddhist cultural concepts of the Yungang Grottoes are frequently expressed through distinct Buddha statues and profoundly symbolic decorative elements, which convey extensive Buddhist teachings." [3] But systematic studies on the multiple meanings of the specific motif of the seated twin Buddhas remain insufficient. This study aims to explore the multifaceted significance of the seated twin Buddhas in the Yungang Grottoes through a multidimensional analysis. This paper seeks to fill this research by employing methods such as literature review, image analysis, and comparative study to comprehensively interpret the Buddhism, political, and artistic meanings of the seated twin Buddhas, offering new perspectives for a deeper understanding of the artistic value and historical significance of the Yungang Grottoes.

## **2. Historical background of the seated twin Buddhas in the Yungang Grottoes**

During the 5th century, the conquest of northern China favored the spread of Buddhism, and many Buddhist scholars and monks came to the Wei court. The Northern Wei regime captured Chang'an in 426 AD, occupied Liangzhou, and subsequently annexed the Northern Liang Kingdom in 439 AD. These military and political achievements significantly promoted the development of Buddhism in several ways. The capture of Chang'an and Liangzhou established the Northern Wei's connection with areas where Buddhism was already established, enabling the arrival of Buddhist monks, intellectuals, and religious books into Northern Wei territory. Second, Beiliang is an area known for its strong Buddhist tradition, and after it was conquered by the Northern Wei regime, more than 30,000 families moved to Pingcheng, among them more than 3,000 Buddhist monks and believers. This makes Pingcheng a Buddhist city [4]. They brought the Buddhist culture of Northern Liang to the Northern Wei Dynasty, and the Liangzhou grottoes model was one of the mother statues of Yungang Grottoes. With the participation of Liangzhou monks and craftsmen, Yungang Grottoes inherited the Liangzhou model to a large extent. The construction of the Yungang Grottoes began during the Northern Wei regime under the leadership of the monk Tanyao, who came from Northern Liang to Pingcheng. The project spanned several decades before its completion [5]. Tanyao supervised the construction of the Yungang Grottoes and facilitated the introduction of Buddhist culture from the Western Regions and Liangzhou to the Northern Wei, impacting the cave architecture, sculptural styles, and themes of the early grottoes, endowing them with distinctive artistic characteristics and substantial cultural importance [6]. During this period, the Northern Wei regime strongly promoted Buddhism, leading to unprecedented development in Buddhist art. As a royal project, the Yungang Grottoes epitomized the highest achievements of Northern Wei Buddhist art.

During the Northern Wei regime, Buddhism spread widely and developed significantly in China. Emperor Xiaowen's sinicization policies facilitated the integration of Buddhism with Central Plains culture, creating a fertile ground for the religion's growth. In the north, several empresses played instrumental roles in the development of Buddhism, with two figures from the Northern Wei regime standing out as particularly notable: Empress Dowager Wenming and Empress Dowager Ling [7]. Their patronage of Buddhist institutions and art not only strengthened the religion's influence but also reinforced its role in the political and cultural life of the empire. At the same time, the prosperity of the Silk Road provided conditions for the diversified development of Buddhist art, as it facilitated the exchange of ideas, artistic techniques, and religious practices between China, India, and Central Asia. Against this backdrop, the sculptural art of the Yungang Grottoes took on a unique appearance,

blending influences from Indian and Central Asian Buddhist art with elements of traditional Central Plains culture. This fusion of styles and ideas gave rise to innovative artistic expressions, such as the seated twin Buddhas, which emerged in this context of multicultural integration. These sculptures not only embodied the spread of Buddhist doctrine but also reflected the profound influence of the socio-political environment on Buddhist art. Grotto sculptures, as symbolic image signs, served as powerful conveyors of religious and social meanings. Xu Ting and Che Li observed that, as manifestations of religious culture, the iconography of grotto sculptures embodies profound religious concepts and beliefs. Conversely, as religion cannot live autonomously from society, it invariably manifests in a certain shape at a specific era, mirroring the social attributes of that time. Consequently, religious symbols are characterized by social attributes [6].

### **3. Symbolic significance of the seated twin Buddhas in Buddhist doctrine**

They are often interpreted as representing the scene of "two Buddhas seated together" or "two Buddhas preaching." The core narrative of the "Two Buddhas Seated Side by Side" motif originates from the "Emergence of the Treasure Stupa" chapter in the Lotus Sutra. According to the scripture, when Sakyamuni Buddha was expounding the Lotus Sutra, a magnificent stupa adorned with seven jewels emerged from the earth, enshrining Prabhutaratna (Many Treasures) Buddha, who had attained nirvana in the distant past. Fulfilling his ancient vow to appear wherever the Lotus Sutra is preached, Prabhutaratna Buddha miraculously manifested within the stupa and graciously offered half of his seat to Sakyamuni. This hallowed meeting produced the emblematic depiction of the two Buddhas positioned adjacent to one another within the magnificent stupa. The seated twin Buddhas simultaneously imply the philosophical notions of "non-duality of emptiness and form" and "non-duality of the absolute and the conventional," offering intuitive direction for practitioners.

From a Buddhist philosophical perspective, the seated twin Buddhas reflect the concept of "the harmony of the two truths." The two truths refer to the ultimate truth (paramartha-satya) and the conventional truth (samvriti-satya), representing the ultimate and worldly truths in Buddhism, respectively. The image of the two Buddhas seated together suggests the unity of these two truths, indicating that the ultimate truth is inseparable from the conventional truth, and the conventional truth is itself the ultimate truth. This concept holds an important place in Mahayana Buddhism, particularly in texts such as the Madhyamaka-karika. Through the image of the seated twin Buddhas, artists skillfully transformed this profound philosophical idea into a visual artistic form, making it more accessible to believers.

### **4. Socio-political implications of the seated twin Buddhas**

From a socio-political perspective, the emergence of the seated twin Buddhas is closely related to the political context of the Northern Wei regime. Li Jinyang's research indicates that the Yungang Grottoes occupy a distinctive status among Chinese grottoes, as their creation was infused with considerable political motives, rendering them a political endeavor [8]. Specifically, the Northern Wei rulers used Buddhist art to legitimize their authority and unify the diverse ethnic groups within their empire. Similarly, Xu Ting and Che Li argued that the image symbols of the Yungang Grottoes express social rules and order through the sanctification of ruling identity, the rationalization of hierarchical society, and the symbolization of moral ethics [9].

The seated twin Buddhas also reflect the Northern Wei rulers' emphasis on the legitimacy of their regime. The Lotus Sutra, a widely circulated Mahayana scripture during the Northern Wei period, contains the scene where Prabhutaratna Buddha bears witness to Shakyamuni Buddha, interpreted as a confirmation of the authenticity and authority of the Dharma. By depicting this scene as the seated twin Buddhas, the Northern Wei rulers implied that their regime, like Shakyamuni Buddha, was

recognized and validated by "Prabhutaratna Buddha," thereby reinforcing the legitimacy of their rule. After the Western Jin Dynasty lost its ruling power, the country fell into chaos, prompting northern nomadic tribes to move southward and forcing the Jin court to relocate to the south. During this period, several ethnic minority regimes emerged in the north, each competing for dominance. The profound chasm between the Han Chinese and ethnic minorities presented a considerable difficulty, as the minority leaders were tasked with governing a substantially larger Han populace. Historically, the Han Chinese regarded these minorities as uncultured barbarians, resulting in pervasive animosity. To address this issue, the minority rulers sought to legitimize their rule by adopting traditional Han concepts of legitimacy, aiming to ease tensions and consolidate their power. This issue became particularly pressing during the reign of Emperor Wencheng, who ascended the throne at the age of 12. He faced a ruling crisis due to powerful ministers, ethnic tensions between the Xianbei nobility and Han elites, economic difficulties caused by prolonged warfare, and the overexpansion of Buddhist influence. To maintain social order, he adopted a dual strategy. In implementing reform measures, he implemented inspection tours to understand the people's conditions, reduced taxes and corvée labor, and reformed the bureaucratic system to alleviate social tensions and reduce the risk of rebellion. In the use of Buddhist ideas to strengthen governance, he used Buddhist thought to strengthen his rule, a move closely tied to the localization of Buddhism during the Northern Wei period. Notably, the Northern Wei monk Faguo creatively integrated Confucian ethical concepts into Buddhist doctrine, constructing a unique theory of church-state relations. According to the Wei Shu Treatise on Buddhism and Taoism, Faguo proposed the theory that "the emperor is the Buddha" [10]. This integration of Confucian rituals with Buddhist doctrine not only met the political needs of the ruling class but also provided a legitimate basis for the spread of Buddhism in China. Emperor Wencheng vigorously promoted Buddhist revival policies, making Buddhism a crucial spiritual pillar for maintaining ruling order. Emperor Xiaowen, his successor, perpetuated this approach. The seated twin Buddhas arose in this context, employing Buddhist motifs to bolster political authority. Statistics show that the seated twin Buddhas initially appeared as main statues in the early grottoes but became a primary sculptural theme in the middle period. According to incomplete statistics, there are about 8 seated twin Buddhas in the first phase of the Yungang Grottoes, over 50 in the second phase, and around 20 in the third phase [11]. Therefore, it is not difficult to find from the above text that Buddhist art usually serves political needs. By examining the number of occurrences of the imagery of two Buddhas sitting facing each other in different periods, as well as the attitudes of Emperor Wencheng and Emperor Xiaowen of the Northern Wei Dynasty towards Buddhism, we can observe that the Northern Wei Dynasty had a strong need to maintain the legitimacy and stability of its rule.

## **5. Artistic expression and cultural integration in the seated twin Buddhas**

The seated twin Buddhas exhibit distinct artistic features. The two Buddha statues are typically arranged symmetrically, with solemn facial expressions, well-proportioned bodies, and flowing robes. The Buddhas often have high ushnishas (cranial protrusions) and soft facial contours, reflecting the characteristics of Northern Wei Buddha statues. The Buddhas typically don monastic robes adorned with parallel-line carvings, resulting in a simplistic yet rhythmic aesthetic. This garment integrates aspects of Indian Buddhist art with traditional Central Plains garb, creating a distinctive Northern Wei style.

In terms of posture, the seated twin Buddhas often display the meditation mudra or teaching mudra, embodying the core ideas of Buddhist practice. The two Buddhas sit facing each other, often with symbolic objects such as lotuses or vases between them, creating a harmonious and equal atmosphere. This composition not only has a strong visual impact but also conveys the Buddhist concept of "the harmony of the two truths." Additionally, the background decorations of the seated twin Buddhas are rich, often featuring flying apsaras, lotuses, and honeysuckle patterns. The flying sky represents a

realm of transcendence, freedom and spirit, symbolizing the freedom obtained by practitioners through practice in Buddhism. The lotus design again emphasizes holiness and beauty; Honeysuckle marks symbolize tenacity and eternity, symbolizing that Buddhism, like honeysuckle plants, has gone through the ages and has eternal vitality. These background decorations together build a sacred, beautiful and peaceful Buddhist art space, symbolizing the ideal pure land world of Buddhism, guiding believers to aspire to and pursue this spiritual realm. These together create a complete Buddhist artistic space, showcasing the exquisite craftsmanship and rich connotations of Northern Wei Buddhist art.

The artistic expression of the seated twin Buddhas also reflects the integration of Chinese and Western cultures. In terms of form, it retains the basic features of Indian Buddhist art, such as high ushnishas and monastic robes, while incorporating elements of traditional Central Plains art, such as soft facial contours and flowing robe carvings. This unity is visible not only in form but also in ornamental patterns. The honeysuckle motifs frequently observed in the seated twin Buddhas are ornamental features derived from Greco-Roman art through the Silk Road. This multicultural integration makes the seated twin Buddhas an important material for studying ancient cultural exchanges between China and the West.

## 6. Conclusion

Through an in-depth study of the seated twin Buddhas in the Yungang Grottoes, the following conclusions can be drawn: First, as a unique form of Buddhist art, the seated twin Buddhas epitomize the achievements of Northern Wei Buddhist art, showcasing exquisite craftsmanship and rich artistic expression. Second, this sculptural form embodies profound Buddhist doctrine, reflecting the spread and development of Buddhist thought during this period. Third, the emergence of the seated twin Buddhas is closely tied to the socio-political context of the Northern Wei regime, illustrating the interaction between Buddhist art and political power. Finally, as a product of cultural exchange between China and the West, the seated twin Buddhas provide important clues for studying cultural transmission along the ancient Silk Road. This dissertation does a comprehensive examination of the seated twin Buddhas in the Yungang Grottoes, examining their symbolic importance and cultural implications within Buddhist teaching, socio-political context, and artistic expression. Nonetheless, certain limits exist. The research predominantly depends on secondary literature, with no direct citations of genuine Buddhist texts. Subsequent research may enhance textual analysis. Secondly, there exists a deficiency in cross-cultural understanding, and further research might explore the similarities and differences between the seated twin Buddhas and Indian and Central Asian art, illuminating cultural exchanges along the Silk Road. Future study may incorporate interdisciplinary methodologies, including archaeology and sociology, to enhance the preservation and distribution of cultural assets.

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