

The Evolution of the Clustered Lotus Incarnation in the Yungang Grottoes

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Abstract

This paper takes the clustered lotus incarnation images in the Yungang Grottoes as the research object, and explores their formal features, stylistic origins, and evolutionary process. It first clarifies the religious connotation of lotus incarnation as a symbol of rebirth in the Pure Land, aiming to illustrate that Pure Land themes appearing at Yungang before the sixth century do not necessarily fully conform to relevant Buddhist scriptures. On this basis, the paper focuses on analyzing the differences between the clustered lotus incarnation motifs in Yungang Cave 10 and Cave 5. The imagery of Cave 10 bears strong stylistic elements of the Western Regions and Gandhara, and was probably influenced by the sculptural traditions of Khotan and other regions, as well as the standardized iconographic system established under the supervision of Wang Yu. By contrast, the lotus incarnations in Cave 5 exhibit the sculptural characteristics of the elegant slender style (Xiugu Qingxiang), and are likely supplementary carvings shaped jointly by the agglomeration of cultural strength in Pingcheng, the artistic fashion of the Longmen area after the capital moved to Luoyang, and the decorative style of lotus incarnation tile ends from above ground temples such as Yongning Temple. Through a comparative study of related imagery from Yungang, the Siyan Stupa at Longcheng, Yongning Temple in Luoyang, and Guyang Cave at Longmen, this article seeks to reveal the developmental trajectory of this iconographic motif.

Keywords

Yungang Grottoes; clustered lotus incarnation; image evolution.

1. Introduction

The so-called Lotus Incarnation, also known as Lotus Birth, refers to the iconography of a sage revealing half of its body from within a lotus flower[1]. Mizuno Seiichi and Nagahiro Toshio define such images as "Incarnation Figures on Lotus Blossoms". They interpret the child-like figures born from heavenly lotus flowers as pure and immaculate beings[2]. As an iconic motif in Buddhist art, the Lotus Incarnation embodies the doctrine of rebirth in the Pure Land and frequently appears in classical texts depicting Pure Land Transformation Tableaux. However, after relevant Buddhist scriptures were translated into Chinese, it usually took a long time for such themes to be reflected in grotto statues and murals. As for the northern Central Plains region, academic discussions on the motif of lotus incarnation have mainly focused on tomb murals, Tang-dynasty Pure Land transformation paintings, and related sutra transformation images. Su Bai argued that the devotion to the Amitayus belief in the northern Central Plains was influenced by southern China after the 6th century, yet thematic representations of this kind are not found in grotto niches predating the Northern Wei capital relocation to Luoyang[3]. For this reason, the appearance of clearly structured and elaborately modeled lotus incarnation images at the Yungang Grottoes is particularly noteworthy.

2. Clustered Lotus Manifestation Figures in the Yungang Grottoes

Satoshi Yoshimura enumerated the various forms of lotus incarnation commonly seen at the Yungang Grottoes. Mizuno Seiichi and Nagahiro Toshio classified lotus incarnation into two categories without providing further explanation. Based on the stylistic presentation of lotus petals, Hu Yuxin divided such incarnations into three types: clustered lotus, upward-facing lotus, and downward-facing lotus[4]. Lotus incarnations in the forms of upward-facing and downward-facing lotuses are mostly found in the decorative bands surrounding the main statues within niche shrines. The clustered lotus incarnation takes a round lotus as its carrier, with the transformed boy emerging from the lotus center or between the petals, and this type is relatively rare in the Yungang Grottoes. The core problem lies in that the lotus incarnation image of Cave 5 adopted by Satoshi Yoshimura should belong to the same typology as the one from Cave 10 used by Mizuno Seiichi and Nagahiro Toshio, yet their visual forms differ greatly from each other, see Figure 1.



Figure 1. Left excerpted from *Study on the Birth Paintings of Heavenly Beings*, Page 16; right excerpted from *Yungang Grottoes*, Volumes VIII-IX, Page 16.

The clustered lotus incarnation figures in Cave 10 are located on the lintel of the south wall in the rear chamber. Five clustered lotus incarnation boys are arranged side by side in identical size, emerging from the center of double-layered multi-petaled lotuses. Their reliefs project prominently from the wall surface with a strong three-dimensional effect. The incarnation boys feature large heads and bare upper torsos, raising both hands to their shoulders while holding pearl garlands, presenting a simple and archaic style. Surrounding the figures are apsaras musicians and honeysuckle scroll patterns. Mizuno Seiichi and Nagahiro Toshio described the surroundings as decorated with frolicking child figures and interlocking Tang grass scroll ornaments[5], see Figure 2.



Figure 2. The clustered lotus incarnation figures in Cave 10, excerpted from *Yungang Grottoes*, Volume VII, illustration.

The clustered lotus incarnation figures in Cave 5 are situated on the ceiling above the cave entrance, directly above the seated Buddha in meditation beneath a tree. Five clustered lotus incarnation boys are arranged in a scattered layout with varying sizes. They emerge from double-layered multi-petaled lotuses without extending beyond the lotus center, and their reliefs rise only slightly above the wall surface. The incarnation boys have smaller proportional heads and bare upper bodies, with their hands pressed together in anjali mudra at the chest. Each is framed by a circular halo behind the head, and a faint body halo can also be discerned. Flying apsaras surround these lotus incarnation figures, see Figure 3.



Figure 3. The clustered lotus incarnation figures in Cave 5, excerpted from *Yungang Grottoes*, Volume II, illustration.

From the perspective of the cave excavation chronology, Cave 10 was carved during the 8th to the 13th year of the Taihe reign of Emperor Xiaowen (484–489 AD). Although the excavation of Cave 5 began around the same time as Cave 10, it remained unfinished when the capital was moved to Luoyang in the 18th year of the Taihe reign (494 AD)[6]. Notably, the lotus petals of the lotus incarnation motifs in Cave 5 also display obvious internal differences. Combined with the uncoordinated overall layout of the cave wall decorations, it can be inferred that the lotus incarnations on the ceiling of Cave 5 were most likely supplementary carvings completed after the relocation of the capital to Luoyang.

From the perspective of their spatial placement, the clustered lotus incarnation figures in both caves are positioned at an angle that requires upward gazing. This arrangement itself implies that such incarnations are not mere decorative patterns; instead, they were deliberately set within architectural spaces such as lintels and ceiling panels to serve as a transition and a medium connecting the mortal world to the Buddhist pure land. Yoshimura Satoshi further argued that these lotus incarnations collectively embody a segment of the birth process of celestial beings in the Pure Land cosmology[7], suggesting a chronological developmental sequence in which lotus incarnations evolve into celestial beings.

In terms of sculptural details, the clustered lotus incarnation figures in Cave 10 and Cave 5 differ in the number, shape, proportion, and posture of their lotus petals. These discrepancies, however, appear within Caves 1 to 20 constructed for the Northern Wei royal court, and do not reflect differences in the craftsmen's artistic skill. The clustered lotus incarnations of Cave 10 emphasize sculptural volume and spatial perception, which accord with the refined, grand, and vigorous artistic style of the second-phase grottoes. By contrast, although the later lotus

incarnations in Cave 5 retain certain stylistic features of the second phase, their formal presentation clearly evolves toward decorative symbolization.

3. Evolution of the Clustered Lotus Incarnation in Cave 10

Throughout the entire Yungang Grottoes, the arched lintel on the south wall of the rear chamber of Cave 10 is carved with a round lotus decorative panel featuring the upper bodies of incarnation boys, and no identical example of such imagery can be found elsewhere. The five boys are arranged in a row, with highly unified dimensions, proportions and postures, exhibiting obvious stylized stereotyped features, which may derive from pre-established iconographic norms. Mizuno Seiichi and Nagahiro Toshio held that the incarnation boy figures on the south wall lintel of the main chamber in Yungang Cave 10 bear characteristics of Western decorative art. As early as the Bharhut Stupa and Sanchi Stupa in India, relief carvings of human figures with both hands raised upward holding ritual objects had already appeared. Although these images are not explicitly themed on lotus incarnation, they are inherently closely associated with the lotus. They correspond to the description in *Mahāprajñāpāramitā Śāstra*: "From the navel of a person emerges a thousand-petaled golden precious lotus flower, radiating brilliant light as if ten thousand suns shine together."

Since the reign of Emperor Taiwu, the Northern Wei maintained frequent exchanges with various states in the Western Regions where Buddhist temple construction flourished[8]. These exchanges laid the groundwork for the introduction of lotus incarnation iconography into the Yungang Grottoes. *History of the Northern Dynasties · Biographies of the Western Regions* records the kingdom of Khotan: "The people esteem Buddhism, and there are numerous temples, stupas, monks and nuns. The king is particularly devout. On every vegetarian feast day, he personally sweeps the grounds and presents offerings." Although the Śākyamitra school of Hīnayāna Buddhism once prevailed in Khotan, Mahāyāna Buddhism remained the dominant mainstream belief[9]. As a vital symbol of rebirth in the Pure Land, the lotus incarnation took deep root in local religious faith in Khotan. Scholars generally regard the Yotkan Ruins as the ancient capital of Khotan, where lotus incarnation sculptures have been unearthed. Similar examples have also been discovered at the Kumulabat Buddhist Temple site in Moyu County. In these works, lotus petals do not enshroud the entire figure to form a clustered shape; instead, the figures emerge from double-layered multi-petaled lotuses with both hands raised to hold pearl garlands. Their iconography closely resembles the lotus incarnations in Cave 10 of the Yungang Grottoes. They reproduce the chiaroscuro relief technique epitomized by the Khotan painter Yuchi Yiseng, whose style was described as "figures seeming to step out from the wall" and "vividly lifelike at close glance". The Japanese Otani Expedition also collected lotus incarnation statues in the Hotan area, which may date to an even earlier period. The National Museum of Korea additionally houses a sixth century lotus incarnation figure excavated from Hotan, Xinjiang. Such lotus incarnation images concentrated in the Hotan region were likely produced with dedicated moulds. This sculptural tradition was brought by craftsmen from the Western Regions to Pingcheng[10], and later circulated back to the Hotan region through continuous cultural integration and fusion.

Nevertheless, the clustered lotus incarnation figures in Cave 10 are not a mere copy of Western Region prototypes. In his essay *The Agglomeration of Power in Pingcheng and the Formation and Development of the "Yungang Style"*, Su Bai summarized the common characteristics of the second-phase grottoes (including Caves 5 and 10): rapid Sinicization and a sculptural pursuit of exquisite and elegant craftsmanship[11]. The appearance of clustered lotus incarnation boys on the wood-imitation lintel of Cave 10 is most likely a product of the integration of the Sinicization reforms implemented in Pingcheng.

The most powerful driving force behind the Sinicization reforms lay in the endorsement of the Northern Wei royal house. Stele of Reconstructing the Great Grotto Temple on Wuzhou Mountain in Western Capital of the Great Jin Dynasty records: "One lies at Chongjiao (Fu) Temple, small yet well preserved. Its inscription states in brief: 'Qian'er Qingshi, General Pacifying the West, Palace Attendant, and Internal Minister of the Ministry of Personnel, chiseled the cliff and founded the temple.'" Su Bai argued that the ten temples recorded on the Jin Stele (including Chongfu Temple) mainly consisted of grottoes fronted by wooden halls and pavilions, and that Chongfu Temple corresponds to the paired Caves 9 and 10 at Yungang[12]. Qian'er Qingshi, originally surnamed Wang with the given name Yu, was later appointed Palace Attendant, General Pacifying the West, and enfeoffed as Duke of Dangchang. Book of Wei · Biographies of Eunuchs records: "Wang Yu was ingenious by nature and adept at organization and arrangement. He supervised the construction of the Lingquan monastic residences for clergy and lay believers at Fangshan in the northern commandery, the mausoleum and shrine of Empress Wenming, the horse shooting altar hall in the eastern suburbs of Luoyang, the expansion of the mausoleum garden of Empress Wenzhao, as well as the layout of the Supreme Ultimate Hall, the Eastern and Western Halls, and all inner and outer gates. Even in his old age, he worked tirelessly day and night, riding and traveling with the same diligence as young men." From an architectural perspective, Ding Mingyi pointed out that the wooden imitation cave form of Yungang Caves 9, 10 and 12—featuring front colonnades, three open gateways, and roof tile ridges carved on the upper part—as well as the architectural style of the hall shaped niches in the front chambers of the three caves, bear similarities to the royal buildings at Fangshan supervised by Wang Yu. Meanwhile, the layout of Caves 9 and 10 as a paired double grotto complex is closely related to the twin pagodas of Huifu Temple erected by Wang Yu for Emperor Xiaowen and Empress Dowager Feng[13]. Endowed with extraordinary artistic ingenuity described as "pursuing perfection to the utmost with exquisite conception", Wang Yu gained the favor of Empress Dowager Feng. He was "promoted from a humble eunuch to noble rank within a single year." Possessing such talent and status, he was entrusted by Empress Dowager Feng to oversee major constructions both during her lifetime and for her posthumous mausoleum. Although he was concurrently appointed Grand Architect in the early reign of Emperor Shizong (after 499 AD), the recorded projects he supervised were all completed during Empress Dowager Feng's lifetime: the Yonggu Mausoleum was built from the 5th to the 8th year of the Taihe reign of Emperor Xiaowen (481–484 AD)[14], and the three storey pagoda of Huifu Temple was erected in the 12th year of the Taihe reign (488 AD). His epitaph also notes that he "served three emperors in the inner court and confidential circle", which further attests to his prominent status. In summary, while supervising the construction of the paired Caves 9 and 10, Wang Yu likely paid deliberate attention to Empress Dowager Feng's devotional tradition of Buddhism, and the grotto iconography was influenced by the cultural style of Longcheng. Moreover, during the decade of his supervision, a standardized measurement and carving system for Buddhist sculpture was probably established.

Buddhism flourished most prominently in the Yan and Liang regions of northern China during this period, and the Feng clan ruled the Youyan area[15]. History of the Northern Dynasties records: "The Empress Dowager erected the Siyan Stupa at Longcheng and had a stone monument carved to commemorate it." This stupa was dedicated to her ancestor Feng Hong. A total of 14 fragmented torsos and 12 individual heads of lotus incarnation boy figures have survived from the Northern Wei Siyan Stupa. In The Northern Pagoda of Chaoyang, these bodily figures are classified into Type A and Type B, while the heads are divided into Type A, Type B, and Type C. The study identifies two distinct iconographic combinations of incarnation boys. Further comparison reveals that the combination of Type A torsos with Type A and Type B heads bears the closest resemblance to the clustered lotus incarnation figures in Cave 10. Both feature boys with hands raised to the shoulders holding pearl garlands, U shaped ornamental

drapery below the abdomen, and round, serene facial features. This similarity suggests that the standardized sculptural formula established under Wang Yu's supervision exerted an influence on the iconography of Yungang, see Figure 4.



Figure 4. Combination of Type A head images and Type A body images, collated by the author.

It is noteworthy that the clustered lotus incarnation motifs in Cave 10 can be regarded as the product of an institutional artistic experiment. According to Su Bai, the construction of grottoes in the Luoyang region mainly took the Yungang Grottoes as its model. The Guyang Cave of the Longmen Grottoes, excavated during the reigns of Emperor Xiaowen and Emperor Xuanwu, was carved in accordance with a predefined pattern and modeled after the second-phase caves of Yungang. The decorative design seen in the upper and middle niches of Guyang Cave, in which lotus incarnation boys hold thick floral garlands that interweave and hang down gracefully, can also be found in Yungang Cave 10, exhibiting equally exquisite and elaborate craftsmanship[17]. The Book of Wei records: Prince Yuan Xiang of Beihai enjoyed high prestige and great political power, and Wang Yu, Director of the Palace Works Administration, often catered to his every wish. The first-phase niche statues of Guyang Cave, initiated by the pious vow of Yuan Xiang and his mother, share many similarities with the paired Caves 9 and 10 at Yungang, which were constructed under the supervision of Wang Yu. Their shared interests facilitated the continuation of the Pingcheng artistic style across the Central Plains. Nevertheless, the clustered lotus incarnation type of Yungang second-phase Cave 10 was not adopted in the carving of Longmen Guyang Cave. Moreover, the incarnation images on the niche lintels are concentrated only in the early niches. This indicates that the mechanical imitation of the Yungang Mode was merely a temporary aesthetic consensus of a specific era, which was gradually replaced by newly formed local artistic trends.

4. Evolution of the Clustered Lotus Incarnation in Cave 5

The construction period of Cave 5 was longer than that of Cave 10. Following the death of Empress Dowager Feng and Emperor Xiaowen's relocation of the capital to Luoyang, it became impossible to fully replicate the highly centralized supervised construction mode adopted for Cave 10. There are considerable differences between the clustered lotus incarnation carvings in Cave 5 and Cave 10. On the one hand, the two caves may have followed different sculptural standards, and the ceiling area above the cave entrance was relatively easy to modify and reworked in later construction phases. On the other hand, the supplementary carvings added

to Cave 5 in the late period were long influenced by the above-ground Buddhist temples in both Pingcheng and Luoyang.

Nearly concurrent with the creation of the second-phase sculptures of the Yungang Grottoes was the large-scale construction of above-ground buildings in the Pingcheng area. Most of these buildings no longer survive, yet architectural components represented by tile ends provide crucial clues for exploring the relationship between lotus incarnation images in the Yungang Grottoes and lotus-patterned tile ends with incarnation motifs. Judging from available archaeological materials, such tile ends are mostly unearthed from high-grade building sites closely associated with royal sacrificial rituals and the mausoleum system. A number of relevant artifacts have been documented in archaeological reports and excavation bulletins of the Pingcheng area, see Figure 5.



Datong Caochangcheng No.1 Site: number C11



Datong Caochangcheng No.1 Site: number C4



Siyuan Buddhist Temple Site: number T010:9



Siyuan Buddhist Temple Site: number T011:2

Figure 5. Lotus incarnation tile ends in Pingcheng area, compiled by the author.

In the lotus incarnation tile ends of the Pingcheng area, most incarnation boys emerge shallowly from double-layered multi-petaled lotuses, assuming postures of holding the hands in anjali mudra or symmetrically grasping ritual objects at the chest. Their facial features are simplified and mostly blurred, retaining only undulating outlines. Notably, the lotus petals on the lotus incarnation tile end numbered C4 unearthed from Site No. 1 at Caochangcheng in Datong feature a bulging middle section and pointed apexes, with their outer contours extending close to the rim. Each petal is internally divided by vertical incised lines, enclosing slightly raised lotus flesh. These characteristics bear a striking resemblance to the two examples of clustered lotus incarnations in Cave 5. Nevertheless, the lotus flesh in Cave 5 appears distinctly fuller; both the lotus petals and the vertical dividing lines within them tend to be thicker. The nipple-shaped

inter-petal ornaments also evolve toward more figurative lotus forms, ultimately forming a double-layered structure.

Record of the Buddhist Temples of Luoyang provides a detailed account of the origins, evolution, layout and scale of Buddhist temples inside and outside the city of Luoyang during the Northern Wei Dynasty. Although its author Yang Xuanzhi compiled depictions of extravagant Buddhist activities in Luoyang out of a critical stance toward Buddhism, with certain exaggerated elements, the work still serves as a valuable historical reference[18]. On the lotus incarnation tile ends from the Yongning Temple, all incarnation boys are depicted with hands pressed together in prayer mudra. They have slender, graceful and delicate figures, with the outer ring decorated with pearl roundels and lotus petals. The lotus petal structure tends to be regularized and abstract, and the surface bears traces of polishing. As a typical representative of early Chinese Buddhist temple architecture, the lotus incarnation tile ends unearthed at Yongning Temple were most likely deliberately designed works[19]. Nevertheless, the author inclines to the view that they inherited the tile end style of the Pingcheng area. The archaeological report Yongning Temple of Luoyang in the Northern Wei Dynasty does not specify the total number of lotus incarnation tile ends, only noting that ten specimens can be restored[20]. Based on the decorative patterns on the tile face and the forms of the incarnation figures, the report classifies these lotus incarnation tile ends of Yongning Temple into two types and two subtypes. Further categorized by the number of lotus petals and the modeling of incarnation figures, Wang Feifeng divides them into Type a and Type b[23].

Although scholars have proposed different classification systems for the lotus incarnation tile ends of Yongning Temple, it is certain that their figural style evolved toward the elegant, slender aesthetic of Xiugu Qingxiang. Departing from the round and serene facial features seen in Yungang Cave 10 and the Chaoyang Northern Pagoda, this new style became the prevailing fashion in the Longmen area after the capital moved to Luoyang. Flat stylization became a prominent developmental tendency of these tile ends: the pointed tips of the lotus petals curl inward, adjacent petals fit closely together, the lotus flesh is no longer connected, and the lower-layer petals are simplified into abstract geometric forms. Notably, the lotus incarnation motifs on Yongning Temple tile ends retain the feature of the incarnation boy emerging from the center of the round lotus as seen in Yungang Cave 10, yet replace the surrounding lotus petals with distinctive circular halos. In the period following the relocation of the capital to Luoyang, grotto excavation at Yungang did not decline. The second-phase caves including Cave 5, together with small and medium sized caves in the western section, continued to draw on the human resources, material supplies and financial resources originally concentrated in Pingcheng[22]. In terms of iconographic themes within the caves, belief in the Amitayus Buddha began to exert influence across northern China. Scholar Su Bai argued that the Amitayus Buddha statues at Qieshan Mountain in Nanjing, constructed after the second year of the Yongming reign (484 AD), may have impacted the sculptural imagery of the Binyang Cave carved at Longmen between 500 and 523 AD[23]. As Buddhist scriptures were translated and spread further northward, the clustered lotus incarnations on the ceiling of Cave 5 embody a visual representation of the Pure Land world that differs distinctly in style from those in Cave 10.

5. Conclusion

The evolution of the form and style of clustered lotus incarnation motifs in the Yungang Grottoes reflects the exchanges, integration, and Sinicization of Buddhist art during the Northern Wei Dynasty. The lotus incarnations in Cave 10 inherited traditions from the Western Regions and India, and developed a relatively standardized iconographic style under the promotion of supervisory officials such as Wang Yu. By contrast, the lotus incarnations in Cave

5 were evidently influenced by the Central Plains sculptural system and traditional above-ground Buddhist temples after the capital relocation to Luoyang, exhibiting more pronounced decorative characteristics. From the Western Regions to Pingcheng, and then from Pingcheng to Luoyang, the iconography of clustered lotus incarnations embodies the complex cultural influences shaped by cross-civilization communication.

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