

STONE INSCRIPTIONS AND CHINESE BUDDHIST PRACTICES IN
THE TANG DYNASTY (618–907 CE)

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TANG DYNASTY (618–907 CE)

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LAY ABSTRACT

To gain insight into the social and religious network available to everyday individuals and to understand the broader context of Chinese Buddhism during the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE), I focused on stone inscriptions obtained from a famous Buddhist site situated near the capital city of Luoyang, the Longmen Grottoes. My dissertation focuses on the ordinary people connected with the inscriptions through three perspectives: 1) Why and how did they establish these Buddhist projects and engrave their inscriptions? 2) What practices did they participate in and how were their Buddhist thoughts reflected through these practices? 3) What social and religious networks were they involved in, and how did they spread Buddhism in the Tang dynasty? My objective is to unveil an insider's perspective to reveal the religious and social lives of Tang Buddhists and reconstruct their Buddhist practices through the materials composed by contemporaries of the era.

ABSTRACT

To gain a better sense of the social and religious networks accessible to ordinary people and then grasp a larger context of Chinese Buddhism in the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE), I concentrated on stone inscriptions retrieved from a significant Buddhist site located close to the capital of Luoyang, Longmen Grottoes. My dissertation foregrounds the practitioners associated with the inscriptions from three perspectives: 1) Why and how did they establish these Buddhist projects and engrave their donative inscriptions? 2) What practices did they participate in associated with their projects at Longmen, and how were their Buddhist thoughts reflected through these practices? 3) In what social and religious networks were they involved, and what were their roles in spreading Buddhism in the Tang dynasty? I aim to recover an insider's perspective, unveil the religious and social lives of the people behind these lifeless stone relics, and reconstruct the dynamic history of Buddhist practice based on materials composed by contemporary devotees.

I approach these questions through five chapters. Chapter Two introduces the dynamic connection between the Buddhist projects and their patrons at Longmen by focusing on a representative cave in the early Tang. Chapter Three addresses an innovative funerary practice identified in epigraphy, archaeological findings, and Buddhist scriptures during the Tang dynasty—the cave burial and discusses the religious and social influence of this new mortuary practice. Chapter Four introduces the devotional practices conducted by female donors at Longmen and focuses on their roles in promoting Buddhism in local communities. Chapter Five delves into the background and networks behind family-sponsored projects and investigates the increasing influence of this form of Buddhist project. Chapter Six explores the strategies employed by Buddhists in relocating Indian sacred sites at Longmen through the composition of their donative inscriptions.

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Abbreviations and Conventions

Abbreviations for Primary Sources

Biographies = *Gaoseng zhuan* 高僧傳 (*Biographies of Eminent Monks*) [T2059 and Tang Yongtong annotated edition, 2012].

Continued Biographies = *Xu gaoseng zhuan* 續高僧傳 (*Continuation of Biographies of Eminent Monks*) [T2060 and Guo Shaolin annotated edition, 2014]

Huilu = *Longmen shiku beiketiji huilu* 龍門石窟碑刻題記彙錄 (*Collection of the Inscriptions and Colophons at Longmen Grottoes*).

T = *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新脩大藏經. Full citations from the *Taishō* canon are given in the following form: *Taishō* volume number, text number, page, register (a, b or c). E.g., *Continued Biographies* 續高僧傳 (*Xu gaoseng zhuan*), vol. 10, CBETA T50n2060_p0526c22.

TMH = *Tangdai muzhi huibian* 唐代墓志彙編

Zonglu = *Longmen shiku zonglu* 龍門石窟總錄 (*General Records of Longmen Grottoes*)

Abbreviations for Longmen Grottoes

LGRA = Longmen Grottoes Research Academy 龍門石窟研究院

LGT = Leigutai Area 擂鼓台區

WFG = Wanfogou Ravine Area 萬佛溝

YDQG = Yidaoqiaogou Ravine Area 一道橋溝

Conventions

All transliterated Chinese terms are rendered in pinyin.

All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

The numbering system and the measuring data of caves, niches and images, except those specifically cited from other sources, are all derived from *Zonglu*.

All the inscription numbers at Longmen align with the numbering system in *Huilu*.

Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 The Story of Lady Liu

In the third year of the Longshuo 龍朔 reign period (663 CE), a young lady of noble birth traveled from the south to the city of Luoyang 洛陽. Dressed in fine attire and accompanied by servants, she journeyed in a carriage. Her family's villa was located in modern-day Shiling Village 石嶺村 in Yichuan 伊川, approximately 28 kilometers from Luoyang.¹ To reach the city before the closure of the southern Dingding Gate 定鼎門 at nightfall, they had to depart early in the morning. Traveling along the western bank of the Yi River 伊河, a major route for southern travelers, they paused their journey around midday at the Longmen Valley for a respite from the relentless summer heat.

The young lady was called Lady Liu 劉氏, a widow who had newly lost her spouse, Yao Yi 姚懿 (courtesy name Shanyi 善意, 591–663 CE), the Grand Master of Imperial Entertainments with Silver Seal and Blue Ribbon, the Commander-in-chief of the two prefectures of You and Xi, the District Duke of Changsha 銀青光祿大夫幽巖二州都督長沙縣公. She was on a trip to Luoyang, perhaps to attend to a few family matters left by her husband. She was still immersed in the great sorrow of losing her life companion, but more than that, she was concerned about losing the source of income for the entire family due to her husband passing away. Her eldest son, Yao Yuanchong 姚元崇 (later renamed Yao Chong 姚崇 and Yao Yuanzhi 姚元之, 650–721 CE), was only thirteen years old. She still had another younger son, Yao Yuanjing 姚元景 (d.u.), and at least three daughters, Baniang 八娘, Jiuniang 九娘 and

¹ See Yao and Yang's speculation about the location of the Yao's family (2010, 78).

Shiniang 十娘 (likely her eighth, ninth and tenth children), who all relied on her.² Hence, the burden of supporting the whole family was laid on this young widow's shoulder, as described in the stele of her husband, the Stele of Yao Yi 姚懿碑 “Her two sons became orphans when they were still young, and the entire family counted on her. 二子少孤，一門所恃。”³

While Lady Liu traversed the Longmen Valley, burdened by worries and uncertainty about the future, she witnessed the majestic towering summits with lofty cliffs standing along the riverside, on which thousands of caves and niches ranged like stars. Inside these numerous caves, Buddhist images in various sizes, with elaborate decorations, all faced her with their numinous visages as ten thousand manifestations of the Buddha. Deeply moved by the sacred beauty of Longmen and reflecting on her own worldly struggles, Lady Liu, likely a devout Buddhist since youth, promptly made a heartfelt vow before the Buddhas. Earnestly praying for the well-being of her children, she pleaded for the blessings of the World-Honored One (Buddha) to ensure their future success. This could manifest in two ways: either secure positions as officials themselves, or marriages that brought them into official families. She promised to return to Longmen and sponsor a cave if her wish would be fulfilled one day.

Forty-two years passed, and at some point between the first and second month of the first year of the Shenlong reign period 神龍 (January 30–March 28, 705 CE), a large cave patronized by Lady Liu and her descendants was finally completed.⁴ Named the Jinan Cave 極南洞 (Extreme South Cave), Cave 1955 is situated on the southern end of the West Hill and at an

² *Jiu Tangshu* 舊唐書 96/3021–3029.

³ See the transcription of 「Xizhou dudu Youzhou dudu libu shangshu shi wenxian Yao fujun beiming 雋州都督贈幽州都督吏部尚書謚文獻姚府君碑銘」, hereafter “the Stele of Yao Yi” 「姚府君碑」, in *Quan Tangwen* 全唐文 328/3326–3327. The stele of Yao Yi still exists, erected in his hometown, today's Xiya Village 西崖村 of the Sanmenxia City 三門峽市 in Henan Province. The stele is 3.7 metres high, 0.98 metres wide and 0.32 metres deep. See Bai Genxing 拜根興, “Qing qianjia xuezhe dui ‘Yaoy shendaobei’ de jiedu yu tansuo 清乾嘉學者對《姚懿神道碑》的解讀與探索,” in *Sichouzhilu yanjiu jikan* 絲綢之路研究集刊, 2022 (01), 415.

⁴ See Yao and Yang 2010, 78.

elevated level.⁵ The cave comprises an ante-yard and a main chamber, with a platform set up outside the cave, from where one could overlook the river, face the verdant East Hill and survey the beautiful wetland landscape extending to the south. Its façade is about 4.2 metres high and 5.5 metres wide, and its main chamber is designed with a vaulted roof, with a height of 4 metres, a width of 4.1 metres and a depth of 4.95 metres. A stone altar was encircled on the rear wall, and two side walls, above which a combination of Buddhist images was set up, including a main image of a seated Maitreya and two disciples against the rear wall, while the images of two bodhisattvas, two divine kings and vajrapāṇi guardians were erected on both side walls, all life-sized. Outside the main chamber and on the southern wall of the ante-yard, the donors made a stele in relief, with a height of 166 cm, to engrave their donative inscription, of which a large proportion of characters are now missing due to the erosion; only 258 characters have been identified or recovered based on references from other epigraphic and historical texts.⁶



Fig. 1-1 Location of Cave 1955 on the West Hill at Longmen (Lan LI, 2023)

⁵ See the explanation of “West Hill” and “East Hill” at Longmen in the next section of this chapter.

⁶ Yao and Yang 2010, 77.

From reading the affiliated inscription of Cave 1955 (Inscription no. 2753 in *Huilu*), we know that Lady Liu's aspirations for her children's success and prosperous marriages materialized remarkably. Her renowned son, Yao Chong, achieved significant milestones precisely at the time when the project concluded. He received esteemed titles as the Supreme Pillar of State (*shang zhuguo* 上柱國) and Marquis of Liang District 梁縣侯. Additionally, he held prominent positions such as Minister of two state affairs departments 二尚書 (Ministry of Rites 春官 and Ministry of War 夏官) and the Chancellery and Secretariat in the third rank 鸞臺鳳閣三品. Moreover, due to the prestigious position of Yao Chong in the Tang court, in the first year of the Chang'an 長安 reign period (701 CE), Lady Liu was conferred with a noble title in accordance with the official position of her son (i.e., Lady of the Pengcheng Commandery 彭城郡夫人). Her other son, Yao Yuanjing 姚元景 (d.u.), whose name is obscured by rock erosion on the donative inscription, held government positions as the Grand Master of Closing Court 朝散大夫 (ranked 5b2) and the Aide of the Court of the National Granaries and Treasury 司農寺丞. Notably, these two sons also acted as devout Buddhists, contributing two niches of Maitreya images at the Qibao tai 七寶臺 for the Guangzhai Monastery 光宅寺 in Chang'an in 704 CE.⁷ Furthermore, two daughters, Baniang and Shiniang, married high-ranking officials. For instance, Shiniang's husband, Chen Zhengguan 陳正觀 (d.u.), held prestigious positions such as the Grand Master of the Palace 中大夫 or Grand Master of Palace Leisure 中散大夫, ranked between 4b2

⁷ The images at the Qibao tai were made by the imperial family members, officials and monks who participated in the Buddhist events held by the imperial family. See Yao Xiaojun 楊效俊, "Chang'an guangzhai si qibao tai fudiao shifo qunxiang de fengge, tuxiang ji fuyuan tantao 長安光宅寺七寶台浮雕石佛群像的風格、圖像及復原探討," in *Kaogu yu wenwu* 考古與文物, 2008, no.5, 71–73, 81–82. Also, see Chen Jinhua's discussion on the Qibao tai in "Śaṅkara and Scepter: Empress Wu's Political Use of Buddhist Relics," in *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* (2002), 25 (1–2): 49–50.

and 5a1.⁸ Additionally, six of her grandsons, a granddaughter-in-law, and a great-grandson, with their names identified in the inscriptions, all participated in this family project.

After roughly four decades, all of Lady Liu’s descendants came together at her request. In a display of filial piety, they each contributed money from their personal savings and salaries (“took out their money and salary” 各抽貲俸) to fulfill their mother’s (and grandmother’s) Buddhist vow. The family expressed their belief that through the power of this merit-making project, “(all the donors) will receive the glory and happiness together 同沐榮慶” and “sons and grandsons constantly maintain peace and happiness 子子孫孫常保平安.” Furthermore, Lady Liu and her children (and grandchildren) also hoped that their descendants of later generations and their family dependants would climb to this and visit this “secluded pavilion 幽閣” to pay consistent respect for their family project and strengthen merits for the family lineage (Fig. 1-2).

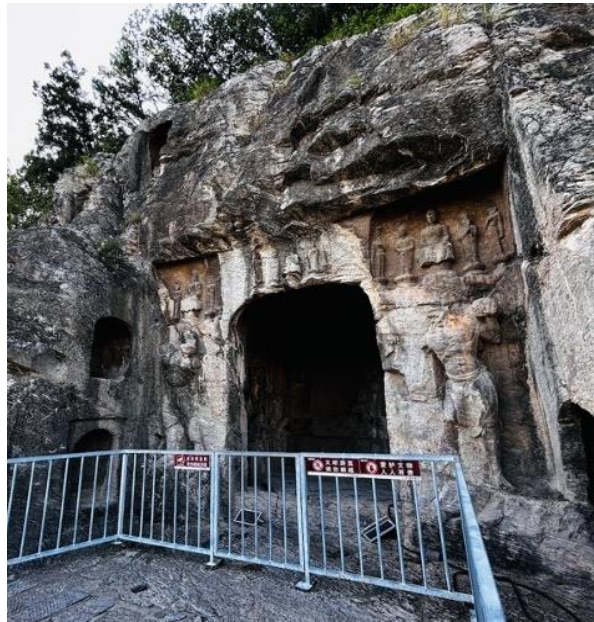


Fig. 1-2 Cave 1955 (Jinan Cave 極南洞) (Lan LI, 2023)

⁸ Su Ting 蘇頌 (680–737 CE), a Tang chancellor, wrote a praise to Chen Zhengguan and this should be the same person, “shou Chen Zhengguan jiangzuo shaojianzhi 授陳正觀將作少監製,” see *Quan Tangwen* 全唐文 251/ 2542.

Lady Liu was eighty-two years old when her long-anticipated project was finally completed, and undoubtedly, this must have been the pinnacle of her life. This family cave stands as a testament to all her accomplishments as an extraordinary wife and mother in her long yet challenging journey, during which she fulfilled her promise to her late husband and his entire family, not only raising all their children in safety but also educating them to achieve successful careers and marriages. According to the praise for her in the stele of her husband, Yao Yi, “The lady, relying on the blessing, achieved harmony and peace on her own. Her thoughts and actions were in accord with her morals, and she taught her children the three obediences. She respected her ancestors and guided her descendants, managing the entire family in a way that was respected by her neighbors. 夫人於資福祉，實受靈和，思德待(侍)行，三從及嗣，祇先導後，在閭成家。” After the death of her husband, she undertook the responsibility of a male householder, as she “looked after the seniors and juniors with appropriate methods and educated them with propriety and manners. 長幼咸若，禮訓所陶。” Undoubtedly, Lady Liu was depicted as a model of a virtuous woman within Confucian norms.⁹

Two years later, on the eighth day of the first month in the third year of the Shenlong reign period (February 14, 707 CE),¹⁰ Lady Liu passed away in her residence in the Cihui Ward 慈惠坊 in Luoyang.¹¹ Surprisingly, at her moment of passing, Lady Liu rejected the idea of being buried jointly in a tomb with her spouse (*fu*-burial 祔葬) in Xiashi District 硤石縣 (in today’s

⁹ See the discussion on Confucian norms among Buddhist women in medieval China in Bret Hinsch, “Confucian Filial Piety and the Construction of the Ideal Chinese Buddhist Woman.” *Journal of Chinese Religions* 30 (2002), no. 1: 56–73.

¹⁰ The dates of Lady Liu and Yao Yi’s death differ in two epigraphic sources: According to the Stele of Yao Yi, he passed away in the second year of the Longshuo period (January 15, 663), while in Epitaph of Yao Yi (*Yao fujun muzhi* 姚府君墓志), he passed away in the third year of Longshuo period (January 4, 664). Lady Liu is said to have passed away in the third year of the Shenlong period (February 14, 707) in the Stele of Yao Yi, but in Yao Yi’s epitaph, she apparently died in the second year of the Jinglong period (February 4, 708).

¹¹ The Cihui Ward 慈惠坊 is located on the southern bank of the Luo River, about 15 kilometres north of Longmen.

Sanmenxia City) but instead requested a separate burial on the outskirts of Longmen. Lady Liu explained her reason for deviating from the tradition of a spousal joint burial:

When we are alive, we are burdened by our bodies. After death, our spirits wander freely. However, all things are respected in the unseen realm, and reverence will reach its destination no matter how far away it is. So why do we need to be buried together (*hezang*, 合葬) and perform rituals afterwards? In the past, Bing Genju (Bing Yuan 邴原, d.u., an official in the Three Kingdoms Period) rectified the morality and authority of the court. Together with knowledgeable Confucian scholars, he pointed out that sharing the same tomb is wrong. This idea has won my heart. You should follow their suggestion and not change my will. Isn't this the filial piety described in the *Erya*?¹² After my death, you can bury me in a tomb on the outskirts of Longmen Mountain. I hope to be close to our home, so that I can be comforted by the love of my whole life. 生以形累，死以魂遊，然事尊在冥，無遠不至，何必合葬，然後為禮？昔邴根矩沐德信，並通儒達識，咸以同窆為非，實獲我心，當從其議，無改吾志，爾雅孝乎。歿已可於龍門山外用窆窆，冀近家園，以慰吾平生之好耳。”

In her last words, Lady Liu argued that the spouse-joint burial is not an ancient custom and lacks support from Confucian scholars. As a woman who possesses all the essential virtues and appropriate propriety in a society rooted in Confucian values, she opposed the traditional rule of joint burials and insisted on being separated from her spouse and her marital family. The reason she provided not only convinces us that she was determined to dissolve her marital bond¹³ but

¹² See Chapter “釋訓” in *Erya* 爾雅, “善父母為孝.” See *Erya zhush* 爾雅注疏 (2000), 123.

¹³ Jessey Choo 2022, 72.

also showed her determination to cut off all the causes and conditions in this life, reflecting a strong Buddhist influence. What Lady Liu addressed as the “love of her whole life,” without question, refers to her beloved family. Nevertheless, there is another possibility that she means the place where she would love to be interred. The burial site she opted for is close to the Longmen Valley, a Buddhist sacred site where she accommodated her family project. Therefore, there is no doubt that she was a devout Buddhist almost throughout her life. Even though the authors of Yao Yi’s Stele and epitaph did not indicate Lady Liu’s religious affiliation, powerful evidence from her family cave and dedicatory inscription at Longmen may convince us that her Buddhist thoughts and practices might have become a strong spiritual support during those hard times and helped her overcome many difficulties.

Finally, her children reverently abided by her will: On the fifteenth day of the ninth month in the second year of Jinglong 景龍 reign (October 3, 708 CE),¹⁴ they buried her in a grave located in the southern hillside of the Wan’an Mountain 萬安山 (a mountain in the southeast of Longmen, around 12 kilometres away).¹⁵ If we go beyond historical analysis and explore her life story from other disciplines, like Buddhist studies, we might uncover new assumptions about her motivations and experiences. By sponsoring a cave and Buddhist images at Longmen, Lady Liu hoped the merits cultivated from her family project would guard her descendants and ensure the prosperity of the family lineage. Moreover, she believed that through her devotional

¹⁴ Two epigraphic sources of Yao Yi differ on Lady Liu’s burial methods: Yao Yi’s Stele specifies the last words about Lady Liu’s separate burial and the fact that her children complied with her will. However, the epitaph of Yao Yi said that Lady Liu was buried in a joint burial (*fu*-burial) with her husband in the same tomb, which is “safely fu-buried in this chamber (Yao Yi’s tomb) 安祔於茲室,” without indicating the specific burial location. See *Quan Tangwen buyi—Qiantang zhizhai xincang zhuanji* 全唐文補遺: 千唐志齋新藏專輯 (Xi’an: Sanqin chubanshe, 2006), 104—105. I am inclined to accept the data revealed in Yao Yi’s Stele when it conflicts with the epitaph of Yao Yi by comparing the accuracy of these two sources.

¹⁵ The Wan’an Mountain 萬安山 is a famous burial site in southern Luoyang, where archaeologists located and identified the mausoleums of the imperial families of the Eastern Han and CaoWei Dynasties. See “The Archaeological Investigations and Excavations on the Imperial Mausoleums in the Eastern Han Dynasty in Luoyang, Henan Province 河南省洛陽市東漢帝陵的考古調查與發掘,” in *The Annals of Chinese Archaeology* 中國考古學年鑒 2018, 144–146.

engagements in Buddhist practices, she would be able to relinquish all the sufferings in this life and attain transcendence through rebirth in the Buddha's land, like numerous patrons who excavated caves, made images and engraved their inscriptions at Longmen.

Research Questions

Our surviving historical records, such as the *Old Book of Tang* (*Jiu Tangshu* 舊唐書) and *New Book of Tang* (*Xin Tangshu* 新唐書), include the biographies of her son, Yao Chong, who is a renowned official that made tremendous efforts in assisting the Tang court from Wu Zetian 武則天 (r. 689–705 CE) to Emperor Xuanzong 玄宗 (r. 712–756 CE).¹⁶ In Yao Chong's official biography, Lady Liu only appears once as the excuse for him to quit his position and engage in filial acts without mentioning her name or any further information. It is without a doubt that our understanding of Lady Liu and her Buddhist practices would be very limited, or we would not even notice her story if we relied solely on normative history like official records.

Therefore, in addition to abundant historical records and Buddhist scriptures associated with important figures, such as imperial members and eminent monks under the Tang, we still need a better sense of the range of daily life and practices accessible to ordinary Buddhists. Many Buddhist sites preserve a large quantity of stone inscriptions that include both scriptures

¹⁶ The Tang dynasty (618–907 CE) boasts two major historical sources chronicling its history: the *Jiu Tangshu* (舊唐書) and the *Xin Tangshu* (新唐書). 1) *Jiu Tangshu* (舊唐書, Old Book of Tang) was Compiled during the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period (907–960 CE). It is the first official history of the Tang dynasty, edited by Liu Xu 劉煦 (credited) but heavily influenced by Zhao Ying 趙瑩. It includes 200 chapters: Annals of the Tang emperors (Volumes 1–20), Treatises on various aspects of Tang society (Volumes 21–50) and was regarded as a foundational source for Tang history. 2) *Xin Tangshu* (新唐書, New Book of Tang): was compiled during the Song dynasty (960–1279 CE) by scholars like Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 and Song Qi 宋祁. This project was commissioned by Emperor Renzong of Song 宋仁宗, who felt the *Jiu Tangshu* lacked clarity. It includes 225 chapters in 10 volumes. Its structure is like *Jiu Tangshu*, with annals, biographies, and treatises. In *Xin Tangshu*, there is more critical analysis and focus on reason than in *Jiu Tangshu*. Also, there are different organizations and information not found in the *Jiu Tangshu*. Therefore, referring to both sources is crucial for a comprehensive understanding of the Tang dynasty.

and donative vows. These mostly untapped materials provide an important perspective on Buddhist practice in medieval China.

By focusing on stone inscriptions preserved at sites such as the Buddhist cave temples (*shikusī* 石窟寺) and monasteries of the Tang dynasty and connecting them with relevant Buddhist texts, I propose to study the practitioners, both monastics and laity, who were associated with the inscriptions from three aspects:¹⁷

1) Why and how did they establish these Buddhist projects and engrave their donative inscriptions?

2) What practices did they participate in associated with their projects at Longmen, and how were their Buddhist thoughts reflected through these practices?

3) In what social and religious networks were they involved, and what were their roles in spreading Buddhism in the Tang dynasty?

My research consists of three types of materials: textual records, epigraphic sources and archaeological evidence, which I will examine critically and from a multidimensional comparative approach. Not only shall I examine all relevant texts preserved in surviving historical books and Buddhist scriptures, but I will also make extensive use of donative inscriptions and caves as well as the images inside these caves at Longmen. I will conduct a comprehensive analysis of these epigraphical materials and objects of material culture alongside relevant textual sources, through which to recover an insider's perspective and will try to unveil the religious lives and thoughts of the people behind these lifeless stone relics and reconstruct the dynamic reality of Buddhist practice based on materials composed by contemporary devotees.

¹⁷ For the definition of cave temples and their distributions in China, refer to Su 1996, 16–20.

1.2 Caves, Images, and Stone Inscriptions

This dissertation focuses on the Buddhist sites in Luoyang during the Tang dynasty, especially centred on the primary sources retrieved from the Longmen Grottoes. It highlights the idea that the stone inscriptions found at Longmen should not be interpreted in isolation but rather in conjunction with the caves where they were carved and the images to which they are attached. It is essential to associate these inscriptions with the projects they were part of and examine the interrelations among the caves, images, and the stone inscriptions identified at the site. This approach will allow us to access the Buddhist thoughts and practices of practitioners through the analysis of their words left in the inscriptions, as well as reveal the religious landscape of Buddhism in the Tang dynasty.

I. Caves

The Longmen Grottoes are located in the southern suburb of Luoyang, approximately thirteen kilometres away from the urban area of modern-day Luoyang, stretching from the site of Yingtian Gate 應天門, the southern gate of the Sui-Tang palace, to the northern entrance of the West Hill at Longmen. Two hills, the West Hill 西山 (Xishan, also known as Longmen Hill 龍門山) and East Hill 東山 (Dongshan, also known as Xiangshan or Fragrant Hill 香山), stand opposite each other on either side of the Yi River 伊河, which flows through the area. This geographical arrangement gives rise to a natural gate-like formation named Yique 伊闕 (The Gate of the Yi River) in early historical records.¹⁸

¹⁸ For one of the earliest records of the name of Yique, refer to the chapter “Yi shui/ Yi River 伊水” in *Shuijing zhu* 水經注, vol. 15, “伊水又北入伊闕，昔大禹疏以通水。兩山相對，望之若闕，伊水歷其間北流，故謂之伊闕矣。” 361.

Throughout history, this region emerged as a vital nexus for both land and water transport, serving as an indispensable route for travellers and pilgrims moving in or out of Luoyang from the south. Before and after the relocation of the capital to Luoyang in the eighteenth year of the Taihe reign period 太和 (494 CE) during the Northern Wei dynasty (386–534 CE), Buddhist projects (i.e., Guyang Cave or Cave 1344), including large-scale excavations of caves and creation of images, were initiated at Longmen Grottoes.¹⁹ These cave-cutting and image-making projects, alongside the pilgrimages and devotional activities conducted by Buddhists, continued up to the Northern Song dynasty, with the last recorded inscription dating to the seventh year of the Zhenghe reign period 政和 (1117 CE). Despite experiencing two major interruptions (ca. 534–641 CE and after 1117 CE), these endeavours helped establish Longmen Grottoes as one of the most prominent Buddhist art centres in medieval China.

¹⁹ There is still a debate on the earliest date for the excavation of the first cave at Longmen, the Guyang Cave. Ishimatsu Hinako 石松日奈子 infers that the beginning date is 498, see Ishimatsu 1999; Uehara Kazu 上原和 speculated that the earliest niche in the Guyang Cave should be 483, see Uehara 2006; Wen Yucheng 温玉成 asserted the excavation date as 493, see Wen 1993. Since the earliest inscription identified in the Guyang Cave is the image niche made by Lady Yuchi in the nineteenth year of Taihe, 495 CE, I speculate that the initial date is around the time when the capital was relocated, i.e., shortly before or after 494 CE.



Map 1-1 Longmen and Luoyang City (Archaeological Report *Sui-Tang Luoyang City*, vol. 4, Plate II)

Yet, Longmen's presence in history did not fade into obscurity after the Northern Song dynasty. Rather than being solely a place of Buddhist devotion, Longmen transformed into a renowned historical and tourist destination. Visitors, extending beyond devout Buddhists, flocked into the area, drawn by its magnificent landscapes and the opportunity to honour historical figures like Bai Juyi 白居易 (722–846 CE), who had once stayed and left their traces at Longmen. These visitors appreciated Longmen and composed poems and prose in homage to its splendour and the historical depth it represented.²⁰

Premodern Chinese scholars were primarily attracted to the aesthetic beauty of the natural landscapes and calligraphic significance of Longmen inscriptions, focusing less on exploring

²⁰ On Bai Juyi and his activities in the Xiangshan Monastery at Longmen, please refer to his biography and corpus. Bai Juyi renovated the Xiangshan Monastery and was buried in the East Hill at Longmen, adjacent to his close friend, Master Ruman. Therefore, many literati in the Song dynasty visited Longmen to pay their respects to this great poet, see *Jiu Tangshu* 166/4355–58; *Quan Tangwen* 全唐文, vol. 676, 6904–6906.

further information relevant to religious or historical analysis. Nevertheless, their literary compositions about Longmen are treasured as fundamental resources and guidelines for later scholars. In the early 20th century, expeditions and sinologists from the West and Japan, equipped with the methodologies from modern disciplines like archaeology and art history, broadened the scope of study of the site of Longmen. They not only appreciated the artistic styles and variety of Buddhist images but also engaged in gathering comprehensive contextual data from the caves housing these images and inscriptions. Their approaches went beyond the traditional technology of rubbings, incorporating the creation of detailed survey maps and photography, which laid the groundwork for future academic pursuits.

French sinologist Édouard Chavannes (1865–1918), who visited Longmen in 1907, published photos of images and rubbings that he had taken from Longmen in his book, along with discussions on particular topics about Longmen.²¹ Japanese and Chinese scholars have achieved more fundamental works on introducing caves at Longmen and collecting substantial data on the site, which became significant sources for later scholars who could not arrive at the site to grasp the general information about Longmen. Ōmura Seigai 大村西崖 (1868–1927), in his *Shina bijutsushi chōso hen* 支那美術史彫塑篇 published in 1915, selected the earliest inscriptions and images made in the Guyang Cave 古陽洞 to conduct the discussion on Buddhist art in the Northern Wei Luoyang.²² In 1926-1931, Tokiwa Daijō 常盤大定 (1870–1945) and Sekino Tadashi 関野貞 (1867-1935) published their investigations on Chinese Buddhist historical sites during the 1910-1920s, *Shina bukkyō shiseki* 支那仏教史蹟, the second volume

²¹ Chavannes, Édouard. *Mission archeologique dans la Chine septentrionale*. 2 vols. Publications de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient 12–14. Paris : Ernest Leroux, 1909, 1913, and 1915.

²² Ōmura Seigai 大村西崖, *Shina bijutsushi chōso hen* 支那美術史彫塑篇 (Tokyo: Bussho kankōkai zuzōbu 仏書刊行会圖像部, 1915), 189—210.

of which includes photographs and illustrations of a part of caves at Longmen.²³ Guan Baiyi 關百益 counted more than 2200 inscriptions at Longmen in his book, *Yique shike tubiao* 伊闕石刻圖表.²⁴ In 1936, Mizuno Seiichi 水野清一 and Nagahiro Toshio 長廣敏雄 conducted a six-day onsite investigation of the caves and inscriptions at Longmen. As a result, they published all the photographs, records and survey maps collected from Longmen in the book of *Ryūmon sekkutsu no kenkyū* 龍門石窟の研究, in which they introduced 28 large caves of the Northern Wei and Tang and included a catalogue of 2429 inscriptions.²⁵

Modern scholars have realized that it is not possible to grasp the general situation of the Longmen Grottoes unless they are clear about the exact number of caves, images, and inscriptions. Consequently, the numbering of caves at Longmen Grottoes has been subject to various systems given by scholars, as mentioned above, who conducted on-site investigations from the first half of the 20th century. In the spring of 1954, the Longmen Baoguan suo 龍門保管所 (Institute for Preservation, now known as the Longmen Grottoes Research Academy 龍門石窟研究院, hereafter the LGRA) at the time began its first on-site investigation and overall numbering of caves and niches at Longmen, resulting in counting 2161 numbered caves and niches.²⁶ However, no further documentation of this project remains. Subsequent attempts at numbering were made by Yan Wenwu 閻文儒 from Peking University in 1962 on the principle of giving numbers in divisions, and by Longmen scholars between 1974 and 1983.²⁷ In the

²³ See Tokiwa and Sekino, *Shina bukkyō shiseki* 支那仏教史蹟, 6 vol. Text and 6 vol. Portfolios, (Bukkyō shiseki kenkyūkai 仏教史蹟研究会), 1926–1931.

²⁴ According to Liu and Li, the original text by Guan Baiyi is, “合之十數年來的搜羅所得，汰同存異共得二千二百餘種。其中北魏至隋約佔十之四，唐宋佔十之六。” in *Yique shike tubiao* 伊闕石刻圖表 (Luoyang: Henan shengli bowuguan, 1935). However, I cannot locate this information in Guan’s book, so it requires further confirmation. See Liu and Li 1998, 11.

²⁵ See Mizuno and Nagahiro, 1941. *Ryūmon sekkutsu no kenkyū* 龍門石窟の研究 (*A Study of the Buddhist Cave-Temple at Lung-Men*). Tokyo: Zauhō kankōkai 座右寶刊行會.

²⁶ See *Wenwu cankao ziliao* 文物參考資料, 1954 (4): 121.

²⁷ These scholars include Li Wensheng 李文生, Cao Guangxiang 曹光祥 and Li Yukun 李玉昆.

autumn of 1988, collaboration with the Central Academy of Fine Arts 中央美術學院 led to another investigation and numbering project. Completed in 1991, Longmen scholars established the latest and most widely accepted numbering system and provided preliminary records of most caves.²⁸ It has been identified that the Longmen Grottoes house 2,345 grottoes, more than 100 thousand images and approximately 2,840 inscriptions created by donors from the Northern dynasties to the Song dynasties.²⁹ According to the geographical distributions of caves and niches, this numbering system begins with the northern end of the West Hill, from Cave 1 to 2043, and then extends to the East Hill, from 2044 to 2345. Moreover, the LGRA also identified 733 donative inscriptions with dates. In addition, approximately 30 percent of those undated inscriptions could be attributed to the Northern Wei dynasty, while 60 percent were likely created during the Tang dynasty.³⁰

In addition, the size of the caves at Longmen also varied significantly. There is no consensus on a standard for categorizing the caves and niches based on their sizes. *The General Records of Longmen Grottoes* (*Longmen shiku zonglu* 龍門石窟總錄, hereafter *Zonglu*) suggests that caves or niches exceeding 30 centimetres in each dimension were considered for numbering.³¹ However, this standard has been criticized because its criteria are poorly defined. For a more precise classification of the sizes of caves at Longmen, I turn to Li Chongfeng's chronological study on the large caves at Longmen in the Tang, in which he sets up the size of 3

²⁸ See Liu and Li 1998, 8; Li 2014, 444.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ See Liu and Li 1998, 8. Additionally, with the rise in archaeological investigations and excavations carried out by the LGRA in recent decades, there has been a corresponding increase in the number of newly discovered caves and inscriptions, which have not been included in the general records published in 1998 and 1999 (Liu and Yang, 1999).

³¹ Liu Jinglong 劉景龍 and Yang Chaojie 楊超傑, eds. 1999. *Longmen shiku zonglu* 龍門石窟總錄 (Hereafter *Zonglu*). 12 vols. Beijing: Zhongguo dabaiké quanshu chubanshe 中國大百科全書出版社. The standard for the Longmen Grottoes Research Academy to give a number for the caves and niches on the cliff is above 30 cm, also see *Longmen shiku yanjiusuo* 龍門石窟研究所, 1994, "Preface." However, I think using size as the only criterion to differentiate the caves and shrines and their functions at Longmen is not appropriate. It depends on the *in situ* situation in the specific case, such as in the South Binyang Cave, in which the average size of an intrusive shrine is between 0.5 m and 1 m. There are a couple of shrines with heights and widths exceeding 2 or 3 meters, which could be regarded as large-size projects.

meters and above as the criterion to divide the caves into the large-sized ones and medium and small-sized ones.³² Nonetheless, the criteria for differentiating between medium and small-sized caves and niches remain undefined. In this dissertation, I suggest adopting 1 meter as the basic measure for categorization. By employing the method of iconography, Sofukawa Hiroshi 曾布川寬 first proposed that caves (*ku* 窟) and niches (*kan* 龕) should be interpreted respectively, for they were designed to face different groups of donors: the large caves were made by the imperial family and upper aristocrats, while monastics, lower aristocrats and ordinary people sponsored the caves or niches in medium or small sized.³³

II. Images

How do we find clues among a hundred thousand images in more than two thousand projects at Longmen to comprehend the paradigm shifts of the themes and artistic styles of Buddhist images from the Northern dynasties to the Tang dynasty? To capture an overview of the images made by donors and how the prevalent themes varied depending on the periods and donors, archaeologists and art historians began their chronology with the selection of large-sized caves that preserve intact layouts and primary statues, which reflect distinct features and artistic styles of Buddhist images, along with the prevalent Buddhist thoughts associated with them. For example, in the chronology of Longmen in the Northern dynasties, previous works of scholarship have chosen Buddhist images in the Guyang Cave 古陽洞 (Cave 1433), Central Binyang Cave 賓陽中洞 (Cave 140), and Lotus Cave 蓮花洞 (Cave 720) as representative cases to demonstrate the evolution of Buddhist arts in the Northern Wei dynasty from the end of the 5th century to the

³² See Li Chongfeng 李崇峰 2014, 444—445.

³³ Sofukawa, Hiroshi 曾布川寬, “Ryūmon sekkutsu ni okeru Tōdai zōzō no kenkyū” 龍門石窟における唐代造像の研究, in *Tōhō gakuho* 東方学報, 1988 (60): 372–376.

first three decades of the 6th century. After typologically analyzing the specific characters of the main images in these caves and putting them in sequence from the early to late period, scholars Su Bai 宿白³⁴ and Wen Yucheng 溫玉成 inferred the approximate date of these projects by referring to historical records and images with precise dates and specific characters engraved on side walls in these caves.³⁵ Similarly, Ding Mingyi 丁明夷,³⁶ Sofukawa Hiroshi 曾布川寬³⁷ and Li Chongfeng 李崇峰 conducted their chronological studies of the large and major projects achieved in the Tang dynasty and summarized the major characters of the Buddhist images included in these projects.³⁸

The themes of Buddhist images vary from the period due to the motivations of the donors and the functions of the projects, among which, from the Northern dynasties to the Tang, there are several dominant themes, including Śākyamuni Buddha, Maitreya Bodhisattva in the Northern dynasties and Maitreya Buddha in the Tang, the Amitābha Buddha (or the Buddha of Immeasurable Life) triad and Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva. Other themes became popular due to the texts circulating at the time, especially in the Tang dynasty, when more diverse themes appeared, including beliefs on Medicine Buddha, Kṣitigarbha Bodhisattva, and the images of the Path of Karma (*yedao* 業道, perhaps a theme related to karmic retribution), etc.³⁹ Meanwhile, in accordance with funerary practices, such as cave burial, a couple of caves and niches were

³⁴ Su Bai 宿白, “Luoyang diqu beichao shiku de chubu kaocha,” in *Zhongguo shikusi yanjiu* 中國石窟寺研究 (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1996), 153–175.

³⁵ Wen Yucheng 溫玉成, “Longmen beichao xiaokan de leixing, fenqi yu dongku painian 龍門北朝小龕的類型、分期與洞窟排年,” in *Longmen Grottoes* 龍門石窟 (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1991), vol. 1, 170–224.

³⁶ Ding Mingyi 丁明夷, “Longmen shiku Tangdai zaoxiang de fenqi yu leixing” 龍門石窟唐代造像的分期與類型, in *Kaogu xuebao* 考古學報, 1979, no. 4: 519–546.

³⁷ Sofukawa 1988, 367–376.

³⁸ Li, Chongfeng 李崇峰. “Longmen shiku tangdai kukan fenqi shilun: yi daxing kukan weili 龍門石窟唐代窟龕分期試論——以大型窟龕為例,” *Shikusi yanjiu* 石窟寺研究 (2013), no.4: 58–148.

³⁹ Jiao Jianhui 焦建輝 of LGRA gave a presentation on the typological studies of the images of *yedao* at Longmen at the 2019 international conference on Buddhist Epigraphy at Oxford University, and his paper will be published in *Dunhuang Studies* in 2024 (in press).

excavated at Longmen to bury the corpses of deceased Buddhists. Therefore, I categorized the images with identified themes in their affiliated inscriptions into seven categories for further analysis in this program. These are dominant themes among the images at Longmen: Amitābha Buddha 阿彌陀/彌陀, Maitreya Bodhisattva or Buddha 彌勒,⁴⁰ Avalokiteśvara (or Guanshiyin/Guanyin) Bodhisattva 觀世音/觀音菩薩, Śākyamuni Buddha 釋迦牟尼/釋迦佛, Kṣitigarbha (or Dizang) Bodhisattva 地藏菩薩, the Medicine Buddha 藥師佛 and Burial caves (*yiku* 瘞窟) (see Appendix 1).⁴¹

In addition to general chronological studies on images, scholars also conducted in-depth discussions on specific themes of Buddhist images at Longmen, as well as the paradigm shift within their evolutions. Tsukamoto first revealed the transition of prevalent themes of images at Longmen, from Maitreya and Śākyamuni Buddha in the Northern Wei to Amitābha in the Tang dynasty, becoming an inspiration for later scholarship on Buddhist practices at Longmen.⁴² However, Sofukawa proposed a contrary viewpoint regarding the popular themes of images and the reflected Buddhist ideas by pointing out that the Śākyamuni and Maitreya Buddhas were still the most prominent themes in large caves at Longmen during the Tang dynasty, especially

⁴⁰ In most medieval Chinese Buddhist visual culture, the depictions of Maitreya differed respectively in the Northern dynasties and Sui-Tang, due to the prevalence of different scriptures (*Foshuo guan mile pusa shangsheng doushuaitian jing* 佛說觀彌勒菩薩上生兜率天經 T14n0452; *Foshuo mile xiasheng jing* 佛說彌勒下生經 T14n0453). In most images in the Northern Wei in northern China (including Longmen, Yungang, Dunhuang and part of images in Xiangtang shan), Maitreya is depicted as a bodhisattva, dressed in luxurious clothes and wearing jewels and sitting in cross-leg position on a high seat/chair, which represents his presence as Maitreya bodhisattva in the Tusita Heaven. From late Northern dynasties to Tang, as cults of Maitreya Buddha and his pure land flourished, most images were depicted him as a Buddha descending: sitting with two legs on floor and dressing in a monastic robe. See Hida Romi 肥田路美, “Miroku Butsu no Shinkō to Iza-gata Nyorai-zō: Goseiki kara Zōtenbu Kōki Izen made 彌勒仏の信仰と倚坐形如来像—五世紀から則天武后前期以前まで”, in *Chūō Ajia Bukkyō Bijutsu no Kenkyū: Shaka, Miroku, Amida Shinkō no Bijutsu no Seisei o Chūshin ni* 中央アジア仏教美術の研究—釈迦・彌勒・阿彌陀信仰の美術の生成を中心に (2018), 47—63. Yu-Min Lee 李玉珉, “Sui-Tang zhi Mile Xinyang yu tuxiang” 隋唐之彌勒信仰與圖像 (The Maitreya Cult and Its Art in the Sui and T’ang Dynasties), in *Yishuxue* 藝術學 1 (1987): 91–117. Also, please refer to the evolution of early Maitreya images from India to Central Asia in Miyaji (1992), Sponberg and Hardacre eds. 1988. For an overview of the scholarship on the cult of Maitreya and Maitreya images, please refer to Wang Huimin 2006.

⁴¹ Including the Udayana-style Buddha images (*Youtian wang xiang* 優填王像) and images of Vairocana Buddha (*Lushena fo* 盧舍那佛), since these were another style or manifestation of the Śākyamuni Buddha.

⁴² Tsukamoto 1941, 231–236.

among those monumental projects dedicated by imperial family and aristocrats.⁴³ He refuted the claim that although the number of identified Amitābha images in the Tang drastically increased, which was a much higher number than those of the Śākyamuni and Maitreya images, most of them were made in small projects and sponsored by donors from lower classes.

Moreover, the King Udayana style Śākyamuni image 優填王造釋迦像 at Longmen represents a unique theme found there in the early Tang (650–690 CE). According to the investigation conducted by Li Wensheng, at least seventy Udayana images and forty-two niches have been identified at Longmen, five at Gongyi Grottoes 鞏義石窟 (about 55 km east to Longmen). The primary features of the images of Udayana style at Longmen include the muscular body, sitting with two feet on the ground, baring the right shoulder and no pleats on the robe. For the introduction of this image to the Tang, there is a consensus that Xuanzang brought a sandalwood Buddha image from India, which could be the prototype of the Udayana images at Longmen.⁴⁴

The amount of Avalokiteśvara (Guanyin) images is only second to the number of Amitābha images at Tang Longmen. In my preliminary investigation, I recorded and analyzed 54 Guanyin images with clear dates and summarized their characteristics during their evolution.⁴⁵ I assert that in addition to the influence of the *Lotus Sutra*, the popularity of the Guanyin images in the Tang should have resulted from the increasing cults in the West Pure Land. The *Lotus Sutra*, a Mahayana Buddhist text that emphasizes the universality of Buddhahood, became increasingly

⁴³ Sofukawa Hiroshi 曾布川寬 1988, 367–376.

⁴⁴ Please refer to the previous scholarship: Hida Romi 肥田路美 1986; Li Wensheng 李文生 1985; Okada Ken 岡田健 1996; Sofukawa Hiroshi 曾布川寬 1988.

⁴⁵ Li Lan 李瀾, “Longmen shiku tangdai guanyinxiang de xingxiang bianqian: yi jinianxiang wei zhongxin” 龍門石窟唐代觀音像的形象變遷—以紀年像為中心 (The Evolution of the images of Avalokiteśvara at Longmen Grottoes During the Tang Dynasty—Centred on the Statues with Clear Dates), in *The Symposium of the Oriental Art History* (Seoul: Association of Oriental Art History, 2018, vol. 6), 7–43.

popular during the Tang Dynasty. The sutra portrays Guanyin as a powerful and compassionate figure who can save all beings from suffering.⁴⁶ Pure Land Buddhism, which focuses on rebirth in the Pure Land of Amitābha Buddha, also gained popularity during the Tang. Guanyin is seen as a central figure in Pure Land Buddhism, helping devotees to be reborn in the Pure Land.⁴⁷

While carvings and niches containing statues dominate Longmen Grottoes, scholars have also explored Buddhist funerary practices there. This includes the use of caves and niches as tombs during the Tang dynasty. Some of these tombs incorporated statues, but most were simpler spaces designed to hold relics without any decorations. Zhang Naizhu 張乃翥⁴⁸ and Li Wensheng 李文生 conducted their investigations and statistical analysis on the burial caves and niches.⁴⁹ Zhang identified 39 burial caves, a number that been revised to 42 (see Chapter 3). He performed a typological study, outlined the evolution of these burial caves at Longmen, and provided interpretations of dedicatory inscriptions associated with two of the caves. Li and Yang confirmed 94 niches excavated and used at Longmen and offered the basic data, including typological study and location distribution of these niches. Although some standards for distinguishing burial caves are still ambiguous, these two investigations provide an overview of the burial sites and Buddhist funerary practices at Longmen under the Tang. Liu Shufen 劉淑芬 explored further by tracing the origin of cave burial⁵⁰ and its development in medieval China by referring to Buddhist scriptures and epigraphic materials. She also pointed out that the

⁴⁶ See the discussion on Avalokiteśvara and the Lotus Sutra in Chün-fang Yü, *Kuan Yin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokiteśvara* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 7–15 and “Chapter 1,” 31–91.

⁴⁷ Chün-fang Yü, *Kuan Yin*, 31–91. Also, see Li Yukun 李玉昆, “Woguo de Guanshiyin Xinyang yu Longmen shiku de Guanshiyin zaoxiang” 我國的觀世音信仰與龍門石窟觀世音造像, in *Longmen shiku yiqianwubai zhounian guoji xueshu taolunhui lunwenji* 龍門石窟一千五百週年國際學術討論會論文集 (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1996), 157–165.

⁴⁸ Zhang, Naizhu 張乃翥, “The New Discovery of *yiku* of Tang at Longmen and the Discussion on Their Cultural Significance 龍門石窟唐代瘞窟的新發現及其文化意義的探討,” in *Kaogu* 考古, no. 2 (1991): 160–169.

⁴⁹ Li Wensheng 李文生 and Yang Chaojie 楊超傑, “Longmenshiku fojiao yizangxingzhi de xinfaxian—xi Longmenshiku zhi yixue 龍門石窟佛教瘞葬形製的新發現——析龍門石窟之瘞穴,” in *Wenwu* 文物 no.9 (1995): 71–77.

⁵⁰ Liu Shufen, “Death and the Degeneration of Life Exposure of the Corpse in Medieval Chinese Buddhism,” *Journal of Chinese Religions*, 28/no.1 (2000): 1–30.

emergence of cave burial at Longmen stemmed from Chan practice and revealed the conflation between Buddhist austerity and indigenous tradition reflected in this funerary practice.

III. Stone Inscriptions

In medieval China, Buddhists reached a consensus that carving the Buddha's teaching and their own meritorious deeds onto rock surfaces, such as mountain caves and cliffs, would ensure the preservation of their merits and eternal transmission across generations.⁵¹ Despite the convenience and portability of paper, its vulnerability to damage and alteration made it a less reliable medium for the long-term preservation of writing words. In contrast, stone, with its durability and perceived permanence, was regarded as a symbol of eternity, making it a preferred choice for engraving Buddhist texts. This perception was grounded in the belief that stone inscriptions would withstand the test of time, allowing their merits to be well preserved and passed down to later generations or following lives without interruption.

The study of the stone inscriptions at Longmen started early in the Northern Song dynasty (960–1127 CE), under the field of “the study of metal and stone” (*Jinshi xue* 金石學) with a concentration on collecting rubbings for calligraphy connoisseurship, along with limited contextual information about the site, without paying too much attention to the Buddhist images on the site. The earliest records of the inscription after Tang could be found in *Jigu lu* 集古錄 (A

⁵¹ Refer to the donative inscription written by Tang Yong 唐邕 (d.u.), the principal patron of stone carving sutra in the Northern Xiangtang Grottoes. Tang Yong's original text is, “As silk scrolls can be spoiled, bamboo documents do not last long, metal tablets are difficult to preserve, and parchment and paper are easily destroyed. Therefore, I took out the seals of the seven offices and opened the coffers of the seven treasures, investigated the Buddhist texts, and ordered the trace of the silver chisel. In the agreement, it was declared that the celebrated mountain at the Gushan 鼓山 Cave is completely engraved.” 以為縑緗有壞，簡策非久，金牒難求，皮紙易滅。於是發七處之印開七寶之函，訪蓮華之書。命銀鈎之跡，一音所說，盡勒名山，於鼓山石窟之所寫……” See Zhang Lintang 張林堂 (2007), 117. My translation partly refers to Katherine Tsiang, “Monumentalization of Buddhist Texts in the Northern Qi Dynasty: The Engraving of Sūtras in Stone at the Xiangtangshan Caves and Other Sites in the Sixth Century.” *Artibus Asiae*, vol.56 (1996), 237.

Record of Collected Antiquities) by Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 (1007–1072 CE) and *Jinshi lu* 金石錄 (A Record of Inscriptions on Metal and Stone) by Zhao Mingcheng 趙明誠 (1081–1029 CE).⁵²⁵³ Other epigraphers in the Ming and Qing dynasties (1368–1911 CE) noticed the stone inscriptions at Longmen and started to take rubbings or compile catalogues for them, among which Wang Chang 王昶 (1724–1806 CE) collected part of Longmen inscriptions in *Jinshi cuibian* 金石萃編 (An Anthology of Inscriptions on Metal and Stone),⁵⁴ and Lu Zengxiang 陸增祥 (1816–1882 CE) also included part of Longmen inscriptions in *Baqiongshi jinshi buzheng* 八瓊室金石補正 (Corrections to the Inscriptions on Metal and Stone from the Hall of Eight Agates).⁵⁵ Sun Xingyan 孫星衍 (1753–1818 CE) recorded about 440 inscriptions⁵⁶ in *Huanyu fangbei lu* 寰宇訪碑錄 (A Record of Steles Collected from All Over the World).⁵⁷ Additionally, Huang Yi 黃易 (1744–1804 CE) narrated his experience of collecting more than three hundred rubbings at Longmen in his travel log, *Songluo fangbei riji* 嵩洛訪碑日記 (A Diary of Visiting Steles in Songshan and Luoyang).⁵⁸

As for collecting basic data on Longmen inscriptions, it is worth mentioning that in the two appendices of *Ryūmon sekkutsu no kenkyū* 龍門石窟の研究 compiled by Tsukamoto Zenryū, he

⁵² Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修, “The Inscription of the Three Shrines by Cen Wenben,” in *Jigulu bawei* 集古錄跋尾, in Yan Gengwang 嚴耕望 ed., *Shike shiliao congshu*, no. 47 石刻史料叢書: 編乙—四七 (Taipei: Yiwen yinshu guan, 1966), vol. 5., 10–11.

⁵³ Zhao Mingcheng 趙明誠 recorded two Longmen inscriptions in his book, see *Jinshi lu jiaozheng* 金石錄校證, collated by Jin Wenming 金文明 (Shanghai: Shanghai shuhua chubanshe 上海書畫出版社, 1985), vol.3, 54 “第五百八十六: 唐三龕碑上; 第五百八十七: 唐三龕碑下”; vol. 5, 85, “第八百三十九: 周整法師龍門石龕像碑”; vol. 6, “第一千一百八十六: 唐龍門西龕石像銘.”

⁵⁴ *The Collected Chapters of Stone and Bronze Inscriptions*, a collection of the inscriptions from the Chinese ancient bronze wares and steles compiled in 1805 C.E.

⁵⁵ Lu Zengxiang 陸增祥, *Baqiongshi jinshi buzheng* 八瓊室金石補正, *Shike shiliao xinbian* 石刻史料新編 (Taipei: Xinwenfeng chuban gongsi, 1977).

⁵⁶ See Liu and Li 1998, p.9. I counted the amount as 439, almost the same.

⁵⁷ Sun Xingyan 孫星衍 and Xing Shu 邢澍, *Huanyu fangbei lu* 寰宇訪碑錄, in Yan Gengwang 嚴耕望 ed., *Shike shiliao congshu*, no. 56 石刻史料叢書: 編乙—五六 (Taipei: Yiwen yinshu guan, 1966), vol. 1.

⁵⁸ Huang Yi 黃易, *Songluo fangbei riji* 嵩洛訪碑日記 (Wu Chongyao 伍崇曜 ed., *Yueyatang congshu* 粵雅堂叢書, 1853 CE), pp. 10–11.

records the contents of 1047 inscriptions in the *Longmen shikelu luwen* 龍門石刻錄錄文 (The Transcriptions of the Record of Stone Carvings at Longmen)⁵⁹ and listed 2429 inscriptions identified at Longmen in the *Longmen shikelu mulu* 龍門石刻錄目錄 (The Catalogue of the Record of Stone Carvings at Longmen).⁶⁰ Additionally, Tsukamoto conducted discussions on Buddhism in the Northern Wei dynasty by referring to the epigraphic sources at Longmen and regarded those donative inscriptions engraved by Northern Wei donors as essential materials, along with historical texts, to unveil the development and Buddhism during this period.⁶¹ Meanwhile, he also delved into particular themes, such as the images dedicated by monks and nuns and the prevalent cults adopted in the Northern Wei according to the data reflected in all the collected inscriptions. Tsukamoto counted the number of projects sponsored by monks and nuns and pointed out that their motivations for making images are different based on gender, as most nuns patronized images centred on personal or family purposes while many monks participated in image-making for broader motivations, like “making the cave for the state.”⁶²

From 1970 to 1974, The Cultural Relic Preservation Institute of Longmen Grottoes (*Longmenshiku wenwu baoguan suo* 龍門石窟文物保管所, the predecessor of Longmen Grottoes Research Academy, LGRA) carried out a general survey on the inscriptions at Longmen, from which came the statistical data included in the two volumes of *Collection of the Inscriptions and Colophons at Longmen Grottoes* (*Longmen shiku beiketiji huilu* 龍門石窟碑刻

⁵⁹ Mizuno and Nagahiro 1941, 247—363.

⁶⁰ Mizuno and Nagahiro 1941, 365—449.

⁶¹ See Tsukamoto Zenryū 塚本善隆, *Ryūmon sekkutsu ni arawaretaru hokugi bukkyō kenkyū* 龍門石窟に現れたる北魏仏教研究 (Study on Buddhism in the Northern Wei dynasty as Observed at Longmen Grottoes), in Mizuno and Nagahiro, 1941, 141—242. This chapter has also been translated and published separately by Lin Bao 林保堯 and Yan Juanying 顏娟英, see *Longmen shiku—Beiwei fojiao yanjiu* 龍門石窟—北魏佛教研究 (Hisnchu: Chuefeng Buddhist Art Institute and Foundation, 2005).

⁶² Tsukamoto 1941, 213.

題記彙錄, hereafter *Huilu*), compiled by Liu Jinglong 劉景龍 and Li Yukun 李玉昆.⁶³

According to the introduction written by Li Yukun, this survey identified 2840 inscriptions⁶⁴ at Longmen, among which 733 inscriptions⁶⁵ have precise dates and Tang inscriptions account for about 60 percent of the total amount.

In his overview of the *beike tiji* 碑刻題記 (stele carving and inscriptions) at Longmen in *Huilu*, Li Yunkun, in presenting the basic data, also briefly introduced the inscriptions at Longmen from multiple aspects, from their shapes and sizes and writing format to the identities and statuses of donors and their principal purposes of engaging in cave-cutting and image-making activities. Li also selected a couple of representative inscriptions to highlight their value as supplements to historical documents to study Chinese history and the history of Chinese Buddhism, including the popularity of specific themes of images from the Northern dynasties to the Tang, the development of Buddhist schools in the Tang and so on.⁶⁶ Li's work offers a comprehensive understanding of the Longmen inscriptions before we delve into specific topics and further explorations.

Furthermore, scholars of medieval Chinese history have found that the Longmen inscriptions have preserved many donors' names and information related to their backgrounds or social statuses. They used these sources to conduct textual research and matched them with the historical figures recorded in surviving documents. For example, Wen Yucheng identified the caves and images sponsored by donors whose names were included in the two Tang historical

⁶³ See Liu and Li 1998, p.11. Liu Jinglong 劉景龍 and Li Yukun 李玉昆, *Longmen shiku beiketiji huilu* 龍門石窟碑刻題記彙錄 (*Collection of the Inscriptions and Colophons at Longmen Grottoes*), (Beijing: Chinese Encyclopedia Press 中國大百科全書出版社, 1998), 2 vols.

⁶⁴ This number is still increasing with the new discoveries and collections of inscriptions in the Longmen area. According to the *Huilu* (*Collection of the Inscriptions*), there are 2852 numbered inscriptions plus nine supplementary pieces, see Liu and Li, 1998, 648–650. In addition, I added a newly discovered inscription from the Wanfogou area in 2017, which makes the latest total number of 2862, see Appendix 1.

⁶⁵ Liu and Li 1998, 11.

⁶⁶ Liu and Li 1998, 8–52.

books, *Jiu Tangshu* 舊唐書 and *Xin Tangshu* 新唐書, and associated their biographies with the donative inscriptions, highlighting the advantages of epigraphy to complement the history, especially for the study on people from the upper classes.⁶⁷ Moreover, by proofreading and collating a specific stone inscription and its cave or niche, some scholars aim to recover the project's complete (or relatively complete) historical context, including its donor(s), time, and the specific historical events associated with this project. Zhang Ruoyu 張若愚 rectified the affiliated project of the Yique foka zhi bei 伊闕佛龕之碑 (Stele of Yique Buddha Shrine, No. 0074) from the Qianxi Cave (Cave 20) to the South Binyang Cave (Cave 159) by comparing the descriptions of decorations and patterns in the inscriptions and then interpreted that the motivations of the patron, Prince Wei 魏王, to sponsor the South Binyang Cave derived from political considerations rather than a devotional act.⁶⁸ Yao Xuemou 姚學謀 and Yang Chaojie 楊超傑, in their proofreading of the donative inscriptions of Cave 1955 (Inscription No. 2753), corrected the previous viewpoint that this cave was dedicated to the late Lady Liu by her son Yao Chong and other children and confirmed that the principal patron of this cave was Lady Liu herself.⁶⁹ Li Xiaoxia, associating her interpretations of the inscriptions of the *Datang neishisheng gongde bei* 大唐內侍省功德碑 (Stele of the Imperial Bureau of the Great Tang, No. 1632), identified the group of Buddhist images dedicated to Emperor Xuanzong by court eunuchs and

⁶⁷ Wen Yucheng, “Longmen suojian liang Tangshu zhong renwu zaoxiang gaishuo” 龍門所見兩唐書中人物造像概說. In *Longmen shiku yiqianwubai zhounian guoji xueshu taolunhui lunwenji* 龍門石窟一千五百週年國際學術討論會論文集, (1996): 123–139.

⁶⁸ Zhang Ruoyu 張若愚, “Yique foka zhibei he qianxisi, binyangdong 伊闕佛龕之碑和潛溪寺、賓陽洞,” in *Wenwu* 文物, no.1 (1980): 19–24.

⁶⁹ Yao and Yang 2010, 74–81.

the time of their completion.⁷⁰ Other scholarship published in recent decades has been focused on the Longmen inscriptions and historical figures.⁷¹

Other research on the Longmen stone inscriptions has focused on collecting fundamental data for chronological research or treating them as supplementary sources for studies of Chinese history, often overlooking their properties as products of religious activities. Nevertheless, scholars of Buddhist studies have recognized the value of the Longmen inscriptions for exploring medieval Chinese Buddhist practices. By connecting the activities of prestigious monk Shandao 善導 (613–681 CE) at Longmen, the third patriarch of the Chinese Pure Land tradition, and the caves engraved with the Amitābha Buddha image as well as the *Guan wuliangshou fo jing shu* 觀無量壽佛經疏 (Commentary on the Sutra on Contemplation of the Buddha of Immeasurable Life, T37no1753) composed by Shandao, Kuramoto Shōtoku 倉本尚徳 has argued that these projects were initiated by the disciples of Shandao (e.g., Cave 1074 and the donor Huishen 慧審), who advocated the Western Pure Land teachings at Longmen and Luoyang.⁷² Moreover, he points out that the emergence of numerous caves and niches dedicated to the Amitābha Buddha at Longmen during the Tang dynasty was driven by the influence of Shandao and his teaching. Kuno Miki 久野美樹, in her book on Tang Buddhist arts at Longmen, carefully selected and included lengthy stone inscriptions alongside images to shed light on specific Buddhist ideas and

⁷⁰ Li Xiaoxia 李曉霞 and Gu Hongyao 谷宏耀, “Longmenshiku ‘datang neishisheng gongde zhi bei’ xiangguan wenti zaikao” 龍門石窟『大唐內侍省功德之碑』相關問題再考, *Dunhuang Research* 敦煌研究, 2018(6): 59–68.

⁷¹ See He Zhijun 賀志軍 and Li Xiaoxia 李曉霞, in “Longmen shiku luzheng zaoxiangkan yu tangdai bianzhe xianxiang 龍門石窟盧征造像龕與唐代貶謫現象,” *Zhongguo guojia bowuguan guankan* 中國國家博物館館刊, 2018, 178 (no.5): 86–96. See the latest scholarship about Li Yichen and his family: Ji Aimin 季愛民 and Jiao Jianhui 焦建輝, “Li Yichen jiazhu de shiku yingjian yu luoyang shenghuo 李義琛家族的石窟營建與洛陽生活,” in *Gugong bowuyuan yuankan* 故宮博物院院刊, no.8 (2023): 48-57, and so on.

⁷² Kuramoto Shōtoku 倉本尚徳, “Ryūmon hokuchō Zui-Tō zōzōmei ni miru jōdo shinkō no hen'yō 龍門北朝隋唐造像銘に見る淨土信仰の變容,” in *Higashiajia bukyō gakujutsu ronshū* 東アジア仏教学術論集, no.2 (2016): 361–390.

practices.⁷³ Moving beyond the approach of iconography, she highlighted the need to identify the themes of Buddhist images through the examination of their associated inscriptions. For example, in her analysis of the Jingshansi Cave 敬善寺窟 (Cave 403), she challenged the previous interpretations of the main theme being Amitābha Buddha and his Pure Land, arguing instead that the main image should be regarded as the manifestation form of the Śākyamuni Buddha, based on the terms related to the Buddha's traces in the inscriptions.⁷⁴

Additionally, in recent decades, archaeological research at Longmen has experienced a remarkable surge of new discoveries, including the uncovering of previously unknown epigraphic evidence.⁷⁵ This includes *moya* 摩崖 inscriptions left by visitors and donors on the East Hill, as well as fragments of steles that were originally erected in front of the caves. Furthermore, the collection and examination of archaeological findings found near Longmen and in Luoyang, such as epitaphs of Buddhists interred near grottoes and stone stupas belonging to monastics located in the monasteries around Longmen, have enabled scholars to delve deeper into the complex relationship between Buddhist patronage and practices in Luoyang during the Tang dynasty.⁷⁶

1.3 Stone Inscriptions as Primary Sources

⁷³ Kuno Miki 久野美樹, *Tōdai Ryūmonsekkutsu no kenkyū: zōkei no shisōteki haikei nitsuite* 唐代龍門石窟の研究：造形の思想的背景について (Tokyo: chūōkōronbijutsu shuppan 中央公論美術出版, 2011).

⁷⁴ Kuno 2011, 271—276.

⁷⁵ See two archaeological reports on the Leigutai and Wanfogou areas in the East Hill at Longmen: Longmen Grottoes Research Academy 龍門石窟研究院, *Longmenshiku kaogu baogao dongshan leigutaiqu* 龍門石窟考古報告—東山擂鼓臺區 (The Archaeology Report of Longmen Grottoes- the Leigutai Area at East Mount), (Beijing: Science Press 科學出版社, 2018). Longmen Grottoes Research Academy (LGRA) 龍門石窟研究院, *Longmen shiku kaogu baogo: dongshan wanfogou qu* 龍門石窟考古報告：東山萬佛溝區 (The Archaeology Report of Longmen Grottoes: The Wanfogou Area at East Mountain), (Beijing: Kexue chubanshe 科學出版社, 2021).

⁷⁶ See Zhang Naizhu 張乃翥, *Longmen quxi shike wencui* 龍門區系石刻文萃 (Rubbing Selection from the Stone Inscriptions of Longmen Area) (Beijing: Guojia tushuguan chubanshe 國家圖書館出版社, 2011). Wang Zhenguo 王振國, *Longmen shiku yu Luoyang fojiao wenhua* 龍門石窟與洛陽佛教文化 (Zhengzhou: Zhongzhou guji chubanshe, 2006).

This dissertation mainly concentrates on the stone inscriptions affiliated with the projects of caves and images at Longmen, which are still to be found in their original locations within caves and shrines alongside images and, thus, difficult to remove. In this study, I treat stone inscriptions as the primary source and highlight the independence of inscriptions as research material. My selection of these immovable inscriptions for study aims to reconstruct the original contexts of those who made them and to gain deeper insight into the sited relationship between stone inscription, cave and image, and Buddhist practice. Thus, the way we categorize the stone inscriptions preserved on the sites at Longmen became a crucial prerequisite for advancing our analysis.

Zhao Chao 趙超 has classified stone inscriptions into 10 categories⁷⁷ according to the locations of engraving and functions: Engraved stones (*moya* 摩崖), Stele (*bei*, 碑), Epitaph (*muzhi* 墓志), Stupa inscriptions (*taming*, 塔銘, affiliated inscriptions of Buddhist pagodas that include the *śarīra* reliquaries), Buddhist stone pillars (*jingchuang*, 經幢), Image-making inscriptions/records (*zaoxiang tiji* 造像題記), Stone relief carvings (*huaxiangshi* 畫像石), Scriptural stone slabs (*jingban* 經版), Land purchase contract slabs (*diquan* 地券) and architectural components. By referring to Zhao's categorization, all the stone inscriptions at Longmen could be attributed to the category of "Image-making records" or *zaoxiang tiji*. However, upon examining the genre and content of all donative inscriptions and the functions of their associated projects, I suggest that the Longmen stone inscriptions be expanded within Zhao's framework to include three other categories: Engraved stones/*moya* 摩崖, Stele/*bei* 碑, epitaph/*muzhi* 墓志.

⁷⁷ Zhao, Chao 趙超, *Zhongguo gudai shike gailun* 中國古代石刻概論 (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe 文物出版社, 1997), 3.

In his discussion of the stone inscriptions carved on the cliffs of Mt. Tai, usually known as *moya*, Robert Harrist pointed out that “the inscriptions were a form of public display accessible to anyone at any time.”⁷⁸ Similarly, a large part of the stone inscriptions at Longmen were engraved on cliffs or prominent spots such as the façade or doorway of a cave, making them easily readable for visitors. Donors at Longmen, from imperial families to ordinary people, expected their dedicatory inscriptions to be read by anyone passing by this area and hope more merits would be generated from the dynamic process of “reading and interpretation.”⁷⁹ Therefore, generally speaking, these stone inscriptions at Longmen could be regarded as “Engraved Stones” in public space.

The traditional writing format of donative inscriptions/ “Image-making records” adopted by donors in the Northern dynasties at Longmen favours a concise and direct method of expressing their religious intentions. These inscriptions often begin with a brief commendation of the Buddha’s teachings, followed by the mention of the beneficiaries of these projects and the wishes for them to fulfill their religious aspirations, like attaining the Ultimate Awakening or being reborn in a Buddha land. This straightforward style is adopted even in elaborate image niches commissioned by high-ranking aristocrats in the Guyang Cave (Cave 1433) and Lotus Cave (Cave 712), where those stone inscriptions stick to this genre without indicating further information related to the life stories of beneficiaries or employ specific rhetoric in praise of their projects. Nevertheless, the evolution of Tang donative inscriptions is evident in the enriched complexity of their genres. These inscriptions not only adhere to the traditional framework of making vows but also incorporate elements from contemporary literature and other epigraphical

⁷⁸ Robert E. Harrist Jr., *The Landscape of Words: Stone Inscriptions from Early and Medieval China* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2008), 17.

⁷⁹ Harrist 2008, 18.

sources, such as official records and epitaphs. This fusion has blurred the boundaries of the functions of stone inscriptions in separate categories, particularly among the stele, donative inscriptions and epitaphs, resulting in a mutual influence that incorporates diverse elements from each other.

The stele, referring to a stone slab mounted on a base shaped like a large tortoise (named *bixi* 赑屭), is the predominant epigraphic format found in China. These steles serve as public monuments, featuring inscriptions that include commendations, eulogies, imperial orders, or historical and religious texts (spotted in governmental buildings and monasteries).⁸⁰ Among grottoes at Longmen in the Tang dynasty, there are donative inscriptions of large caves with the title of “Stele/*bei* 碑,” which were set up outside the cave in a place where an independent stele should be erected. The most representative instance is the *Yique fokan zhibei* 伊闕佛龕之碑 or “The Stele of the Yique Buddha Niche (Inscription no. 0074),” of Cave 159, the South Binyang Cave 賓陽南洞, engraved on a colossal high-relief stele initially carved in the Northern Wei dynasty.⁸¹ This stele reveals that Prince Wei, Li Tai 李泰 (620–652 CE), sponsored the creation of the five main images in the cave in 641 CE. This was done to commemorate his late mother, Empress Zhangsun 長孫皇后 (601–636 CE). The stele is likely a form of memorial writing imitating official documents, rather than expressing religious vows or involvement in activities typically associated with monumental buildings and sites. Similarly, on the northern wall of Cave 159, a group of residents from the Sichun Ward 思順坊 in Luoyang sponsored a large image niche (N96) in 648 CE and titled their dedicatory inscriptions as *Mile xiang zhi bei* 彌勒像之碑 or “The Stele of Maitreya Image (Inscription no. 0077),” in which they regarded the

⁸⁰ Harrist 2008, 24.

⁸¹ Zhang Ruoyu 1980, 102.

function of their inscription, engraved in a stele-shape low relief, to be the same as those independent steles. There are still more examples of stone inscriptions⁸² that were designed and engraved as steles at Longmen. A unique example is the inscription no. 1129 of Cave 689, in which the donor Xu Qian 許乾 named his inscription a *beiming* 碑銘/ “Stele inscription,” engraved on the southern wall of the niche. The genre of his inscription imitated those inscriptions on steles; however, the place where this inscription was engraved does not indicate any physical form that looks like a stele. By examining the structure and genre of stone inscriptions written as stele/*bei*, I infer that they should refer to the writing style of *xu* 序 (preface) in the Tang dynasty, a genre that circulated in contemporary literature and is often seen in official records, understood as the narrative or illustration to a book or literary work.⁸³

As mentioned in the introduction of image themes in the last section, there are a number of burial caves that were excavated to bury the bodies of Buddhists. My previous investigations identified at least five on-site inscriptions related to cave burial across the whole Longmen complex, among which four inscriptions were attached to the burial sites (Inscription no. 507, no. 1336, no. 1650, and no. 2699). These dedicatory inscriptions were written in the genre of contemporary epitaphs in a standard format, which includes the name, death, and burial dates of the occupants, as well as the sketches of the deceased’s life experience and praises of their virtues and religious achievements.⁸⁴ In addition, many inscriptions dedicated to deceased family members also adopted the genre of epitaph or imitated its format. Therefore, I attempt to conduct a comparison between the dedicatory inscriptions and contemporary epitaphs and then extract the

⁸² For example, No. 1632 大唐內侍省功德碑 (Cave 1250); No. 1634 牛氏像龕碑 (Cave 1264).

⁸³ Chu Binjie 褚斌杰, *Zhongguo gudai wenti gailun* 中國古代文體概論 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1990), 378—381.

⁸⁴ Timothy M. Davis, *Entombed Epigraphy and Commemorative Culture in Early Medieval China: A History of Early Muzhiming* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2015), 4–5.

similar elements included in both writing styles to see how the compositions of donative inscription borrow the genre of contemporary epitaphs in the Tang:

Contemporary epitaph:⁸⁵

- 1) TMH Linde 021⁸⁶: [biography]+[virtues]+[burial] + [mourning (of filial sons)] + [eulogy/inscription of praises of the dead]
- 2) LM_No. 1336 (Cave Burial): [biography] + [virtues and Buddhist practice] + [deathbed practice and burial] + [mourning] + [eulogy/*ming* 銘 praise of her Buddhist practice and cave burial]
- 3) LM_No. 1650 (Cave Burial): [biography]+ [virtues as Buddhist practices] + [deathbed practice and cave burial] + [mourning] + [eulogy/*ming* 銘 praise of Buddhist practice and cave burial]

Dedicatory Inscription:

- 1) LM_No. 0074: [Buddhist teaching] +[biography] + [virtues (and support for Buddhism)] + [introduction of the project (in supporting Buddhism and seeking location)] + [description of landscape and images] + [motivation (of Buddhist merits)] + [eulogy/*ming* 銘 of Buddhist teaching]
- 2) LM_No. 0507: [Buddhist teaching] +[biography] + [virtues as Buddhist practices] + [introduction of the cave burial] + [mourning] + [description of image] + [motivation]
- 3) LM_No. 0778: [Introduction]+[biography]+[virtue]+[mourning]+[motivation] + [Buddhist teaching]

⁸⁵ I also attributed the two stone inscriptions engraved in burial caves and dedicated to the deceased to epitaphs, rather than ordinary donative inscriptions.

⁸⁶ See *Tangdai muzhi huibian* 唐代墓誌彙編. Ed. Zhou Shaoliang 周紹良 and Zhao Chao 趙超 (Shanghai: Shanghai Chinese Classics Publishing House 上海古籍出版社, 1992), 409–410.

- 4) LM_No. 1112: [introduction of the project] + [biography]+[virtue]+[motivation] + [description of landscape] + [eulogy/*ming* of Buddhist teaching]
- 5) LM_No. 1129: [Buddhist teaching] + [description of landscape] + [introduction of the project] + [description of the image and Buddhist idea] + [mourning]+[motivation]+[eulogy/*ming*]
- 6) LM_No. 1399: [Buddhist teaching] + [introduction of the project] + [description of landscape] + [motivation]+[eulogy/*ming* of Buddhist teaching]
- 7) LM_No. 1506: [Introduction]+[motivation] + [description of image] +[virtues] + [narrative/*shu* 述]
- 8) LM_No. 2730: [Buddhist teaching as preface] + [biography]+[introduction] + [description of landscape] + [motivation] + [*ci* 詞/ praise of Buddhist teaching]

It is evident that Tang stone inscriptions absorbed new elements found in epitaphs, including biographies of the beneficiaries and the praises for their virtues and Buddhist practices, narratives of the construction process as well as descriptions of contextual information such as location selection.

Three different types of writing could be distinguished from the dedicatory inscriptions at Longmen: traditional inscriptions, the genre of preface/*xu* and those influenced by the epitaph. This classification forms the basis of my hypothesis on the development of dedicatory inscription genres at Longmen.

Initially, these inscriptions adhered to the traditional structure observed in earlier dynasties, such as the Northern and Sui dynasties. This structure typically included elements like the name of the donors, dates, beneficiaries, vows, and other standard components. Second, we should

note that the influence of official document writing, especially among the inscriptions written by Tang officials, reflected an attempt to demonstrate their social positions and depict them as individuals with a sense of responsibility, which became an appropriate means to convey their filial piety and personal connections. Notably, during the Tang dynasty and earlier, emperors and empresses often composed *xu* for Buddhist projects, such as scripture translations or the construction of monasteries (e.g., *Yanta shengjiao xu* 雁塔聖教序 in the Xingshan Monastery 興善寺 in Chang'an).⁸⁷ The writing of the *Yique fokan zhi bei* 伊闕佛龕之碑 (Inscription No. 0074) epitomizes this genre, adhering to its conventional format, thereby associating it more closely to the social function of Buddhist projects. Third, the emulation of the epitaph format in stone inscriptions likely stemmed from the similar roles of burial caves, graves, and dedicatory images—all aimed to confer benefits on the deceased within or without a Buddhist context. Consequently, the same fixed terms and expressions found in traditional epitaphs were incorporated into this type of inscription.

In addition to preface/*xu*, there are also other genres identified in the stone inscriptions, including inscription/*ming* 銘, praise/*zan* 讚 and record/*ji* 記, which require further distinction and comparison with contemporary literary works, focusing on the process of adopting these genres in the compositions of dedicatory inscriptions in the Tang dynasty.

1.4 Buddhist Practitioners and Their Practices

What insight can we gain into the patrons at Longmen and their Buddhist practices by reading their donative inscriptions? I am fascinated by Amy McNair's reflection in her book that

⁸⁷ Tay Yuxuan, *Changing Times of Tang: A Study on the Imperial Prefaces as a Buddhistic Political Legitimation*, MA Thesis (National University of Singapore, 2023), 9–23.

Longmen “preserved the voices of hundreds of medieval donors.”⁸⁸ Her remarkable work on donors at Longmen not only uncovers their identities and social statuses but also delves into their motives for initiating projects, through which she aims to piece together the history of Longmen. Thus, she adopts the approach of selecting significant themes and showcasing them through the examination of representative caves in chronological sequence, from the Northern dynasties to the Tang. Building on her previous work, I will now examine Longmen practitioners of the Tang dynasty through the lens of religious studies, employing specific perspectives and methodologies from that field.

Modern scholars view the Tang dynasty as a period of significant success for Chinese Buddhism, which not only continued the wide dissemination of Buddhist teaching and expansion of Buddhist sites after the Northern (386–589 C.E.) and Southern (220–589 C.E.) dynasties but also embraced new translations of Buddhist scriptures and images from India and Central Asia.⁸⁹ As one capital of the Sui-Tang dynasty, Luoyang was not only a political and economic centre but also a metropolis and cultural hub that gathered merchants, diplomats and monastics from all over the world.⁹⁰ Foreign Buddhist monks flocked to Luoyang,⁹¹ brought new Buddhist scriptures and joined the translation bureaus in major monasteries.⁹² Empress Wu Zetian in particular, who

⁸⁸ Amy McNair, *Donors of Longmen: Faith, Politics, and Patronage in Medieval Chinese Buddhist Sculpture* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2007), 1.

⁸⁹ For the overview of Tang Buddhism, please refer to Tang 2016, 1; Weinstein, *Buddhism under the T’ang*, 1987, 3–5; Michihata 1958, 13–16.

⁹⁰ Xiong 2017, 137 & 144; Chen 2017, 76–81.

⁹¹ See the biographies in *Song Gaosengzhuan* 宋高僧傳, such as Divākara 地婆訶羅 (613–687 CE), T50no2061_p719a19–b4; Bodhiruci 菩提流志 (572? —727 CE), T50no2061_p720b4–c13.

⁹² In the Sui dynasty, Emperor Yangdi established the Translation bureau in the Shanglin Garden 上林園 in Luoyang, and he invited the Indian eminent monk Dharmagupta 達摩笈多 (?–619 CE) to translate Buddhist scriptures. Meanwhile, another eminent monk, Yancong 彥琮 (557–610 CE), who held the position of Director, made tremendous contributions to the translation enterprises in Luoyang. See Continued Biographies 續高僧傳, vol.2, “煬帝定鼎東都。敬重隆厚。至於佛法彌增崇樹。乃下勅於洛水南濱上林園內。置翻經館。搜舉翹秀。永鎮傳法。登即下徵笈多并諸學士。並預集焉。四事供奉。復恒常度。致使譯人不墜其緒。成簡無替於時。及隋綱云頽郊壘煙構。梵本新經一時斯斷。笈多蘊其深解遂闕陳弘。始於開皇中歲。終於大業末年二十八載。所翻經論七部。合三十二卷。即起世緣生藥師本願攝大乘菩提資糧等是也。並文義澄潔華質顯暢。具唐貞觀內典錄。至武德二年終於洛汭。初笈多翻普樂經一十五卷。未及練覆。值偽鄭淪廢不暇重修。今卷部在京。多明八相等事。有沙門彥琮。內外通照華梵並聞。預參傳譯偏承提誘。以笈多遊履具歷名邦。見聞陳述事逾前傳。T50no2060_p 435c6-21. Also, see the formation of the Nei daochang 內道場 (imperial practice centre)

heavily relied on Buddhist ideology and the support from the monastics in Luoyang, forged identity of this geographic location as the “Central Buddhist Realm” and also promoted Luoyang as the “Divine Capital (*Shendu* 神都).”⁹³ Luoyang became the centre where Buddhism flourished and attracted thousands of Buddhists, both monastics and laity, to join this Buddhist enterprise.

According to historical records and Buddhist canons, in addition to participating in translation careers, a number of eminent monks (and nuns) entered the court and became the auxiliary Buddhist masters for the imperial family and aristocrats, while devout and wealthy laity (or office-holders) enthusiastically patronized Buddhist monasteries and monastics in Luoyang city.⁹⁴ Undoubtedly, the grottoes complex at Longmen attracted numerous donors to “relinquish all their properties (*choushe jingcai* 抽捨淨財, Inscription no. 0076)” in order to sponsor Buddhist projects.

These donors at Longmen represent a diverse group, ranging from imperial families, aristocrats, court attendants, and governmental officials to local residents, commercial guilds and ordinary individuals without titles or organizational affiliations. The motivations behind their patronage and religious objectives, as reflected in their projects, also vary widely. Some excavated caves to cultivate merit for deceased family members, while others sought to ensure the well-being and prosperity of the living. A number of them aspired to rebirth in a pure land by dedicating images to specific themes, whereas others wished for all the sentient beings in this realm to attain the ultimate Awakening at the same time. In light of these variations, I have

and Fanjing guan 翻經館 (translation bureau) in Luoyang in the Sui dynasty (581–618 CE) in Guo Shaolin’s 郭紹林 discussion, “Suidai dongdu luoyang de fojiao nei daochang he fanjing guan 隋代東都洛陽的佛教內道場和翻經館,” *The Religious Cultures in the World* 世界宗教文化 4 (2006): 29–31. Also, for the translation projects initiated in Luoyang during the We Zetian era, see Weinstein 1987, 43–47.

⁹³ Sen, Tansen, *Buddhism, Trade, and Diplomacy in the Realignment of Sino-Indian Relations, 600-1400* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2002), 55–101.

⁹⁴ About the monastics and patrons in the official monasteries and the palace Buddhist centers, please refer to Michihata 1985, 16–28; Chen Jinhua 2004; Nie Shunxin 2020, 45–170; Zhou Yuru 2008.

classified the data into distinct categories and conducted data analyses on each category, such as the total amount of inscriptions sharing similar motivations or the donors who commissioned images under the same themes. Through this process, my goal is to synthesize a comprehensive understanding of the dominant motivations and prevailing Buddhist ideas at Longmen under the Tang.

These data and basic information on stone inscriptions may reveal preliminary insights about practitioners and their practices at Longmen. For instance, a large number of projects were sponsored by monastics, both monks and nuns, in the Tang dynasty. Some monastic donors indicated their affiliated monasteries in Luoyang or the religious lineages they belonged to. Some devoted themselves to long-term austerity, while some concentrated on enhancing their meditative regimes. Furthermore, the changes in the proportion of projects patronized by monks and nuns from the Northern dynasties to the Tang suggest a shift in predominant practices among monastics in the Tang dynasty, probably due to the increase of monasteries in surrounding areas or the introduction of new Buddhist scriptures.⁹⁵

Moreover, we find a substantial number of female names among the donors listed in the inscriptions. Buddhist women, as a marginalized group, have long been neglected or undervalued in Buddhist scriptures and official historical records compiled by men, rendering them “hidden from history.”⁹⁶ However, relying solely on normative historical sources significantly limits our grasp of the social and religious lives of Buddhist women during this period. To get a complete understanding, it is essential to extend our exploration beyond “orthodox” texts and records, delving into epigraphic and archaeological evidence. The incorporation of epigraphy as a

⁹⁵ See Wen Yucheng, “Tangdai Longmen shisi kaocha 唐代龍門十寺考察 (Investigations on the Ten Monasteries at Longmen in the Tang),” in *Longmen Grottoes 龍門石窟* (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1992) vol.2, 217–232.

⁹⁶ Faure 2003, 4.

primary source for studying Buddhism offers the potential for a radical re-envisioning of our scholarly understanding of how women in medieval China reshaped their religious identity and social roles through their practice of Buddhism. Furthermore, inspired by Caroline Walker Bynum's study of Christian women in medieval Europe, which shows how religious women sought to control their surrounding environment by manipulating food-related practices, I will explore whether Buddhist women's participation in devotional activities is evidence of their search for effective ways to control their lives and promote their social status, asserting their agency under the practices for Buddhism in Chapter 4.⁹⁷

Another outstanding phenomenon in the Tang dynasty about Buddhist practices at Longmen is the increase in family-sponsored projects, indicating that patrons preferred to support Buddhist projects in the name of their families rather than large collective projects that prevailed in the Northern dynasties while also adopting innovative elements introduced over time. Moreover, earlier studies have focused on the independent identities and social status of donors to the neglect of investigating the networks to which they belonged, isolating the relevant records in the inscriptions and producing only limited individual histories. In order to remedy these shortcomings, it is necessary to focus on the studies of networks among families. In the meantime, we should also integrate the fusion of traditional values, such as filial piety in Chinese Buddhism, in our discussion of family projects in Chapter 5.⁹⁸

In contrast, I observed a significant difference between the Northern dynasties and the Tang dynasty in analyzing the involvement of monastics in creating images dedicated to Amitābha and Maitreya. During the Northern dynasties, out of the total 12 projects dedicated to

⁹⁷ Bynum, Caroline Walker, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (London: University of California Press, 1987), 208.

⁹⁸ Strong, John S., "Filial piety and Buddhism: The Indian Antecedents to a 'Chinese' Problem," in *Traditions in Contact and Change* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier Press, 1983), 171–186.

Amitābha, 4 were undertaken by monastics, accounting for 33 percent. However, in the Tang dynasty, out of the 286 projects, only 8 were carried out by monastics, representing a mere 3 percent. Similarly, for Maitreya images, monastics were responsible for 12 out of 25 projects in the Northern dynasties, making up 48 percent, while in the Tang dynasty, they were involved in only 3 out of 15 projects, reducing the proportion to 20 percent. However, this decline in monastics' involvement at Longmen during the Tang dynasty does not necessarily indicate a decrease in their numbers. Textual materials and archaeological evidence from the surrounding areas suggest that monastics may have shifted their focus to other activities, such as practicing in nearby monasteries.⁹⁹ I will discuss the surrounding monasteries and landscapes at Longmen to some extent in Chapter 6.

When studying the Buddhist practices reflected in Longmen inscriptions, one of my primary perspectives is to reconsider the range of “ritual activity” conducted *in situ* by including all the activities related to a Buddhist site. Drawing on Catherine Bell’s articulation of ritual theory, I argue that all these actions, from cave-cutting, and image-making, to the performance of regular offerings and rituals after the completion of the project, should be treated as a complete process of “ritualization.”¹⁰⁰ Since the purpose of the ritualization is to negotiate authority and self by applying specific strategies of setting the boundary between the sacred and secular worlds (Bell 1992, 196), I highlight the motivations of donors as the leading factor in the ritualization of Buddhist sites, through which donors could build or strengthen the connections to their family, Buddhist community, and even mundane society.

⁹⁹ Please refer to the hagiographies found in *Song gaoseng zhuan* 宋高僧傳, the archaeological evidence provided by LMGRA (Longmen Grottoes Research Academy), the study on Xiangshan Temple, by Wen Yucheng 1998, and the research conducted by Li Chongfeng 2014, 529–558.

¹⁰⁰ Bell 1992, 74.

Innovative practices such as cave burial were widely adopted in the Tang dynasty. Archaeologists have identified evidence of burial caves and niches at Longmen, which correspond with records in Buddhist texts. The funerary practices associated with cave burial include both traditional Chinese funerals and Buddhist elements. Therefore, the study of cave burial at Longmen will allow us to gain insight into Buddhist funerary practices, their formation, and influence during the Tang dynasty. Furthermore, whether the acceptance of this new death practice shares an internal connection with the cult of the Amitābha Buddha and Western Pure Land, as my hypothesis, requires further discussion in the following chapters.

Another critical perspective I will apply is Antonino Forte's concept of the "borderland complex."¹⁰¹ Through spatial transformation, the capital, Luoyang, naturally became a new centre of Buddhism in China. Buddhists who lived in the peripheral regions, suffering from a sense of inferiority, sought the true dharma by circulating Buddhist texts from India and engaging in new practices to relocate a new Buddhist centre in Tang China through their interpretations of Buddhist cosmology.

1.5 Structure

I plan to conduct this project based on the perspectives and approaches mentioned above and divide my dissertation into seven chapters:

Chapter One introduces the project and provides a research overview. I will raise the research question and present the general situation of stone inscriptions and Buddhist practices in the Tang dynasty at Longmen.

¹⁰¹ Antonino Forte, "Hui-chih (fl. 676-703 A.D.), A Brahmin Born in China," in *Estratto da Annali dell' Istituto Universitario Orientale* 45 (1985): 105–134.

Chapter Two introduces the dynamic connection between the Buddhist projects at Longmen and their patrons by focusing on the most representative cave in the early Tang, the South Binyang Cave 賓陽南洞. I first conduct a chronicle and typological study of 48 dated projects in this cave and then an in-depth analysis of the relationship between Buddhist devotional activities and the donors' social and religious networks reflected in historical texts and donative inscriptions preserved in this cave. Furthermore, I aim to explore how networks have been built among Buddhist donors and reconstruct the construction sequences of the small and medium-sized projects in the cave.

Chapter Three addresses an innovative funerary practice mentioned in inscriptions and Buddhist hagiographies during the Tang dynasty, the cave burial (*yiku*, 瘞窟). By sorting the historical records about cave burial in Buddhist texts, like biographies of eminent monks, and combining them with the latest archaeological excavation at Longmen, I reveal the donors and beneficiaries behind these projects, their specific motivations, the working procedure of the ritual of cave burial, and the religious and social influence of this new mortuary practice.

Chapter Four introduces female donors' devotional practices at the sites and highlights the role of women in disseminating Buddhism in local Buddhist communities. I have collected 601 dedicatory inscriptions written by women. Some female donors not only expressed their various vows but also introduced their experience of Buddhist practices in these inscriptions, from which their life stories may sometimes be briefly sketched. I explore how women helped promote the spread of Buddhism in Tang China and analyze the social and religious networks of these female donors.

Chapter Five investigates the role of families and family members in sponsoring Buddhist projects and the dynamic changes between family-sponsored and other collective projects. I

delve into the family background and social networks of the donors to see how they employed the family as a unit to invest in Buddhist projects and promote Buddhist ideas in the Tang society.

Chapter Six discusses the relocation of Buddhist sacred sites from India to central China. My analysis explores how Chinese Buddhists, grappling with the merging of Buddhism and traditional Chinese practices, used inscription writing to address two challenges. First, the inscriptions tackled a sense of inferiority some Chinese Buddhists felt towards Indian Buddhism. Second, they aimed to establish the legitimacy (orthodoxy) of newly built Buddhist sacred sites in China.

Chapter Seven concludes the study, reiterates the research question and hypothesis, and assesses the viewpoint.

Appendices include tables of the statistics of data cited in each chapter.

Chapter Two: The South Binyang Cave – A Case Study

This chapter will delve into the projects of image niches and their associated patrons within the South Binyang Cave 賓陽南洞 (Cave 159) at Longmen Grottoes. I selected the South Binyang Cave as a particular example not only because it preserves a large number of relatively complete Buddhist images and donative inscriptions with precise dates carved in a specific period of the Tang history (i.e., with projects dated from 641 to approximately 666 CE) but also because it showcases a wide variety of Buddhist projects in different sizes and levels of artistry, as well as a broad range of donors from the social elites to ordinary people, alongside information on their social networks. This makes the South Binyang Cave an exemplary case for examining Buddhist practices and practitioners in the Luoyang area during the early Tang. Furthermore, the cave preserves information on several patrons whose names are also mentioned in the received historical records of the Tang dynasty, highlighting the importance of epigraphic sources as crucial supplements to our understanding of Tang Buddhism, aspects of which the normative history does not reveal.¹

The South Binyang Cave, located in the northern part of the West Hill of the Longmen Grottoes, is one of the three Binyang Cave projects initiated by the imperial patrons of the Northern Wei but left unfinished until the beginning of the Tang dynasty.² This cave is one of the largest grottoes at Longmen, with a height of 951 cm, a width of 788 cm and a depth of 1001 cm (Fig. 2-1).³ Other than the five main colossal Buddhist images (the Buddha, two disciples and

¹ For example, names in the two Tang histories, *Jiu Tangshu* and *Xin Tangshu*.

² See the record of the initial project of Three Binyang Caves in “Annals of Buddhism and Daoism” 釋老志 in *Wei Shu* 魏書 114/ 3043. Also, for the previous discussions on the Northern Wei patrons of the Three Binyang Caves, please refer to Soper, Alexander C. 1966. “Imperial Cave Chapels of the Northern Wei Dynasties: Donors, Beneficiaries, Dates.” *Artibus Asiae* 28, no. 4, pp. 241–70. Amy McNair, *Donors of Longmen*, 2007, 31–50.

³ See Liu Jinglong, *Binyang Caves: Cave 104, 140, 159 of Longmen Grottoes* 賓陽洞：龍門石窟第 104、140、159 窟 (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 2010), 207–208.

attendant bodhisattvas) against the rear (western) wall, the South Binyang Cave includes 319 image niches of various sizes, among which 69 projects preserve inscriptions disclosing the dates of completion, as well as information about donors such as their identities or the purposes of their projects.

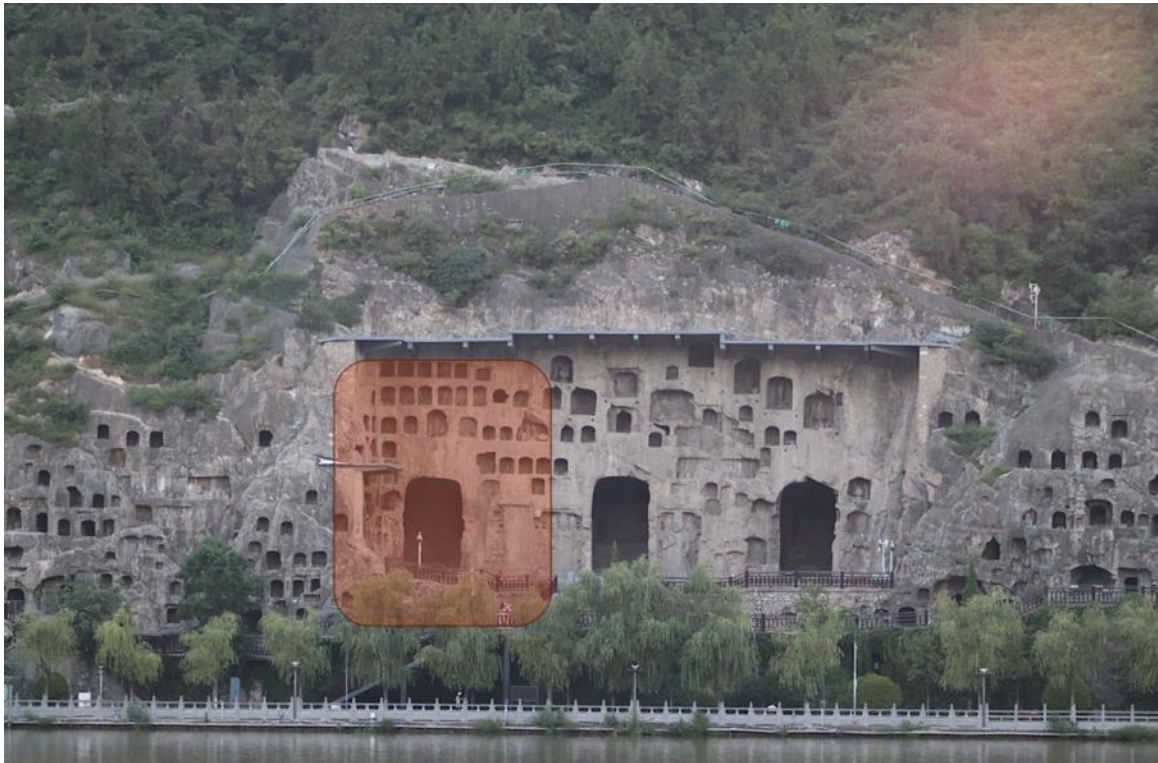


Fig.2-1 Location and Façade of the South Binyang Cave 賓陽南洞 (Cave 159) (Lan LI, 2023)

Tang donors of these dated projects include members of the imperial family, court attendants, high and low-ranked officials and ordinary individuals listed only by name or their Buddhist titles, like “Disciple of the Buddha 佛弟子 (e.g., Inscription no. 0076)” and “Woman of Pure Faith 清信女 (e.g., Inscription no. 0078),” or indicating the social communities or ethnic groups to which they belonged. We can thus see that donors from an extensive social range of Tang society participated in the same practices, including cutting stone caves or niches, making

images of the Buddha and engraving their special vows. Their devout activities were all closely clustered within the same cave, side by side, putting them on equal footing with one another, blurring the boundaries of their social statuses.

In addition to studying the many dated inscriptions left by donors, we can also learn about the development of Buddhist art in the early Tang period (specifically between 641 and 668 CE) by examining the themes and styles of the surviving Buddhist artworks themselves.

Archaeological and historical factors such as location, layout and style of the incised image niches in this cave are also worth studying. Furthermore, the themes and styles of the images could reflect devotional practices aimed towards specific buddhas or bodhisattvas. For example, we can see the gradually growing popularity of the cult of Amitābha Buddha in the early Tang in this case.⁴ Also, the distribution of dated image niches and remnants on the walls allows us to reconstruct the process in which the space was exploited and the relation of each project to earlier or later periods of patronage activities. All these are critical surviving items of evidence that will enable us to rebuild a rich picture of the development of Buddhism in the early Tang capital, Luoyang, with regard to the dissemination of Buddhist teaching, popular Buddhist cults, and even the technologies for creating Buddhist material culture.⁵

In this chapter, to grasp a comprehensive understanding of the development of the South Binyang Cave in the early Tang, I first conduct a chronological and typological study of these

⁴ Scholars have noticed this shift from the study of the Longmen images of the Tang. See Tsukamoto 1941.

⁵ See previous scholarship in the South Binyang Cave within the early Tang Buddhist art and Buddhism: Zhang Ruoyu 1980. 19–24. Okada Ken 岡田健. “Ryūmon sekkutsu sho-Tō zōzō ron—sono ichi 龍門石窟初唐造像論—その一, in *Bukkyō geijutsu* 仏教芸術 171 (1987): 81–104. McNair 2007. Chang Qing 常青 and Wang Zhenguo 王振國, “Longmen suidai he tangdai zhenguanqi kanxiang jiqi baoshou yu duoyangfengge 龍門隋代和唐代貞觀期龕像及其保守與多樣風格 (The Buddhist Images from Sui Dynasty and Zhenguan Reign Period of Tang Dynasty at Longmen Grottoes and Their Conservative and Multiple Styles),” in *Shikusi yanjiu* 石窟寺研究, no.8 (2018): 130–165. Wang Delu 王德路. “Luoyang longmen shiku binyangnandong chutang zaoliang kaocha 洛陽龍門石窟賓陽南洞初唐造像考察.” *Dazu xuekan* 大足學刊, vol.3 (2019): 88–111. Peng Minghao 彭明浩, “Longmen binyang sandong kaizao guocheng yanjiu 龍門賓陽三洞開鑿過程研究,” in *Zhongguo zhonggushi yanjiu* 中國中古史研究. Shanghai: Zhongxi shuju, vol.8 (2021): 309–347.

niches and images, then introduce the contents of the inscriptions and their donors. By associating them with materials conveyed in various media, I attempt to reconstruct the process of excavating all the projects and unfold the networks in which the donors were involved.

2.1 Chronological and Typological Study

According to the colossal stele set up outside of the entrance of the South Binyang Cave, the *Yique fokan zhibei* 伊闕佛龕之碑 (The Stele for the Yique Buddha Niche), the five main statues against the rear wall were made by the fourth son of Emperor Taizong 太宗 (r. 626–649 CE), Li Tai Prince of Wei 魏王李泰 (620–653 CE), in the year of 641, in memory of his late mother, Empress Wende 文德 (601–636 CE) (Fig. 2-2 & 2-3).⁶ The Longmen Grottoes Research Academy (LGRA) conducted an overall archaeological survey on all the caves and niches at Longmen during the 1970s and has identified 319 numbered niches in the South Binyang Cave, among which 69 donative inscriptions with dates of the Tang dynasty have been confirmed.⁷ I have chosen 48 image niches, and inscriptions with precise dates and relatively complete images to discuss their donors.

⁶ Biographies of Empress Wende and Li Tai, in *Jiu Tangshu* 51/2164–2167, 76/2653–2657. Also, please refer to relevant scholarship in Zhang 1980, 19. Eisenberg, Andrew, “A Study in Court Factionalism: The Politics of Tang Taizong,” in *Tang Studies*, no. 20–21 (June 1, 2002): 39–69.

⁷ There are 23 numbered shrines on the western wall, 103 on the southern wall, 116 on northern wall, 69 on eastern and 8 on the walls of the doorway. There are 66 dated shrines identified in this cave, among which I’ve selected 47 to conduct the chronological research. The numbering works of the caves and niches of the Longmen Grottoes has done by the Longmen Research Academy in 1974, see in Liu and Li, 1998, p11. Also, see the records of the images and shrines in *zonglu*, in Liu and Yang, 1999. vol.1 (Record), 46–91. Furthermore, the number of dated shrines comes from my on-site investigation and sorting-out of relevant records.



Fig. 2-2 Main Buddha Statues in the South Binyang Cave (641 CE) (Liu Jinglong, 2010)

Fig. 2-3 *Yique fokan zhi bei* 伊闕佛龕之碑 (The Stele for the Yique Buddha Niche, 641 CE)

I first conducted a chronological and typological study of the dated niches and images based on the dates from the inscriptions. Twenty-four niches were made in the Zhengguan 貞觀 reign period, from the fifteenth to the twenty-third year (641–649 CE). Sixteen were made in Yonghui 永徽 reign period, from the first to the sixth year (650–655 CE), and eight image niches belong to Xianqing 顯慶 (656–661 CE) and later reign periods. The latest dated niche in this cave was made in the third year of the Qianfang 乾封 reign period (668 CE).⁸ Drawing on the chronological studies of the caves and images of the Tang dynasty at Longmen conducted by four scholars,⁹ as well as my own research, I have divided these 48 image niches into three

⁸ The latest dated inscription in Cave 159 is no. 0146 in 673 CE. The chronological study in this chapter only selected projects with relatively complete images to conduct further discussion, so the latest selected project is completed in 668, Niche S100 (Inscription no. 0167).

⁹ See Ding Mingyi 丁明夷, “Longmen shiku Tangdai zaoxiang de fenqi yu leixing” 龍門石窟唐代造像的分期與類型, in *Kaogu xuebao* 考古學報 no. 4 (1979): 519–546. Sofukawa Hiroshi 1988, 199–397. Wen Yucheng 溫玉成, “Longmen tangku painian 龍門唐窟排年 (Chronology of the Tang Grottoes at Longmen).” in *Longmen Grottoes* 龍門石窟, vol. 2, (Beijing:

groups according to the layout of the niches, artistic style of the images and content of the inscriptions. Furthermore, I summarize the primary characters of the layouts and artistic styles in these three groups, respectively, and matched them with the corresponding phases: the first phase from 641 to 649 CE, the second phase from 650 to 655 CE, and the third phase from 656 to 668 CE (Chart 2-1 & Table 2-1).

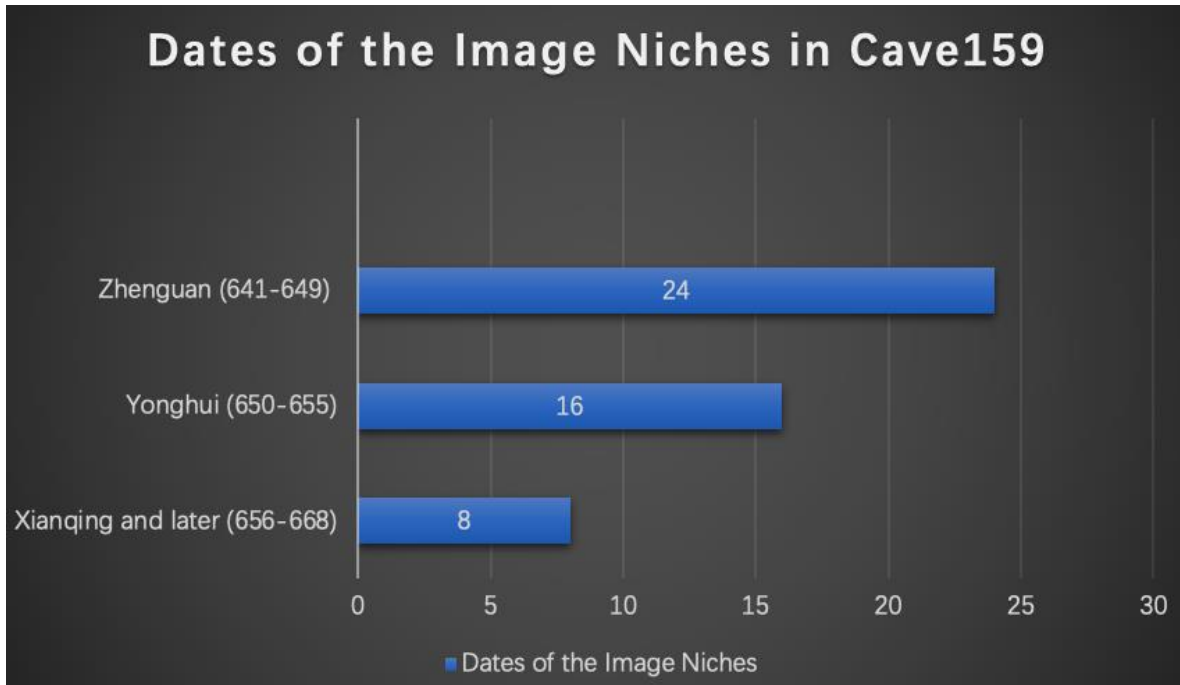


Chart 2-1 Dates of the Image Niches in Cave 159

Wenwu chubanshe, 1992), 172—216. Li Chongfeng 李崇峰, “Longmen shiku tangdai kuan fenqi shilun: yi daxing kuan weili 龍門石窟唐代窟龕分期試論——以大型窟龕為例,” in *Shikushi yanjiu* 石窟寺研究, no. 4 (2013): 58–148.

Group	Dated Niche	Date
Group 1	24 niches: S7, S9, S10, S13, S19, S21, S23, S24, S25, S26, S32, S34, S38, S45, S46, S47, N29, N46, N47, N48, N53, N71, N96, E32	The fifteenth to twenty-third year of Zhenguan reign period From 641 to 649 CE
Group 2	16 niches : S4, S8, S50, N2, N14, N24, N36, N56, N64, N65, E2, E8, E13, E17, E18, E24	The first to sixth year of Yonghui reign period From 650 to 655 CE
Group 3	8 niches : N52, N114, N110, N102, N100, S100, E7, E54	The first year of Xianqing to the third year of Qianfeng reign period From 656 to 668 CE

Table 2-1 Three Phases of Dated Image Niches in Cave 159

The evolution of the projects from the first to the third phase:

1. Façade or Layout: In the first phase, the image niche with two-tier arches is the most common layout, with an ogee arch on the top and a round arch below (Fig. 2-4), and the niche with only a single round arch appeared later during this phase. During the second and third phases, the niches with only round arches become the dominant style.



Fig. 2-4 Niche S19 in Cave 159, 641 CE (Lan LI)

2. Image Combination: In the first phase, the most typical combination of images includes only a single Buddha image flanked by two attendant bodhisattvas. The images of attendant disciples first appeared in the twentieth year of the Zhenguan reign (646 CE) and became prevalent later (Fig. 2-5). In the second phase, the combinations of images become more complex, and the most common example is a buddha with two bodhisattvas or a buddha with two attendant disciples and two bodhisattvas. The most typical combination of images in the third phase became simpler again, with only a single Buddha image flanked by two disciples or bodhisattvas.



Fig. 2-5 The Niche S7 in Cave 159, 649 CE (Lan LI)

3. Characteristics of Images:

1) Buddha images: In the first phase, most Buddha images wear *saṃkākṣikā*, a kind of underclothes passing over the left shoulder and under the right armpit, as an inner cloth and a Han-style robe on top.¹⁰ Starting from image S9 of 646 CE, the depiction of a knot tied over the chest of the Buddha image appears and becomes one of the key characteristics in the later period, also see the images of S10 (648 CE), and E24 (650 CE) in the second phase. Three types of *mudrā* performed by the Buddha could be found in the first phase: the preaching *mudrā* (*Shuofa yin* 說法印) and the *mudrā* of bestowing fearlessness (*Shi wuwei yin* 施無畏印) are the two most

¹⁰ The Han style robe, also called *baoyi bodai* 褒衣博帶 (a loose gown with a wide girdle), a style that was prevalent in Buddhist images during the Northern and Southern dynasties. See the studies of Fei Yong 費泳, “Foyi yangshizhongde ‘baoyibodai shi’ jiqizai nanbeifang de yanyi” 佛衣样式中的“褒衣博帶式”及其在南北方的演绎”, in *Gugong woguyuan yuankan* 故宫博物院院刊, no.2 (2009):73–88. Also, please refer to Yi Lidu’s discussion on baoyi bodai seen at Yungang and Longmen in the Northern Wei dynasty, *Yungang Art, History, Archaeology* 2018, 43–48.

common *mudrā*, while the meditation *mudrā* (*Chanding yin* 禪定印) appears occasionally. One unique preaching *mudrā* is found in this phase: the hand (usually the right hand) uplifted to the chest with only the forefinger and middle finger outstretched. The design of the pedestal for the buddha image also changes from the square pedestal without decoration to the contracted waist pedestal decorated with lotus petals (i.e., S9, 646 CE; Fig. 2-6).



Fig. 2-6 Niche S9 in Cave 159, 646 CE (Lan LI, 2018)

In the second and third phases, most buddha images wear the *saṃkaksikā* inside and the Han-style robe outside. Compared to the first phase, more buddha images have a knot tied over the chest. The preaching *mudrā* and the *mudrā* of bestowing fearlessness are also the most prevalent *mudrās*. In addition, a new pattern of pedestal emerges in this phase: the contracted waist square pedestal decorated with lotus petals, first seen in Niche E24 (Fig.2-7, 650 CE).



Fig. 2-7 Niche E24 in Cave 159, 650 CE (Lan LI)

A new *mudrā* is seen in Niche S100 in the third phase, the *mudrā* of touching the earth (*Chudiyin* 觸地印)¹¹, which became a popular gesture in the later period. Additionally, the buddha image in Niche S100 wears a *kāśāya* (*Jiasha* 袈裟) of Indian style, with the right shoulder bare.

¹¹ The Buddha image with the *mudrā* of touching the earth usually symbolizes the scene when Śākyamuni attained the ultimate Awakening under the bodhi tree and defeated the army of Māra/demons. The earliest instance of this theme is identified in the Ci'ensi Monastery 慈恩寺 in Chang'an 長安 around 654 CE. In the later period, there were also the Amitābha images with this *mudrā* of touching the earth that were made at Longmen and other sites in the Tang Dynasty. See the discussion of the *mudrā* of touching the earth in the Tang dynasty in Chapter 3 of Hida Romi 肥田路美, *Shotō bukkō bijutsu no kenkyū* 初唐佛教美術の研究 (Tokyo: Chūō kōron bijutsu shuppan, 2011), 103—117. Also, see the discussion on the Amitābha images with this gesture in Kuno 2011, 309–354.



Fig. 2-8 Niche S100 in Cave 159, 668 CE (Liu Jinglong, 2010)

2) Images of Attendant Figures: The images of the attendant disciples at the beginning of the first phase are line-carved; their two palms are placed together, and they stand stiffly and upright behind the Buddha's pedestal. More images of attendant disciples emerged in the second phase: they wear the *saṃkakikā* beneath and the Han-style robe over it and stand on circular pedestals. The attendant bodhisattvas in the first phase bare the upper body and wear skirts, among which most do not wear the jewel strings across the chest. Beginning from Niche S9 in 646 CE, the bodhisattvas stand on circular lotus pedestals or undecorated circular pedestals. One or two crossing jewel strings are seen in images during the second and third phases. The bodhisattvas either place two palms together or raise one hand while lowering the other. The most representative bodhisattvas in the second phase are seen in Niche E24: raising one hand and lowering the other one and standing on circular lotus pedestals. The figures of the donors are depicted either kneeling or standing (Fig. 2-7). Images of kneeling donors are engraved outside

or below the image shrines. In addition, some image niches have an incense burner and a pair of lions carved below the altar.

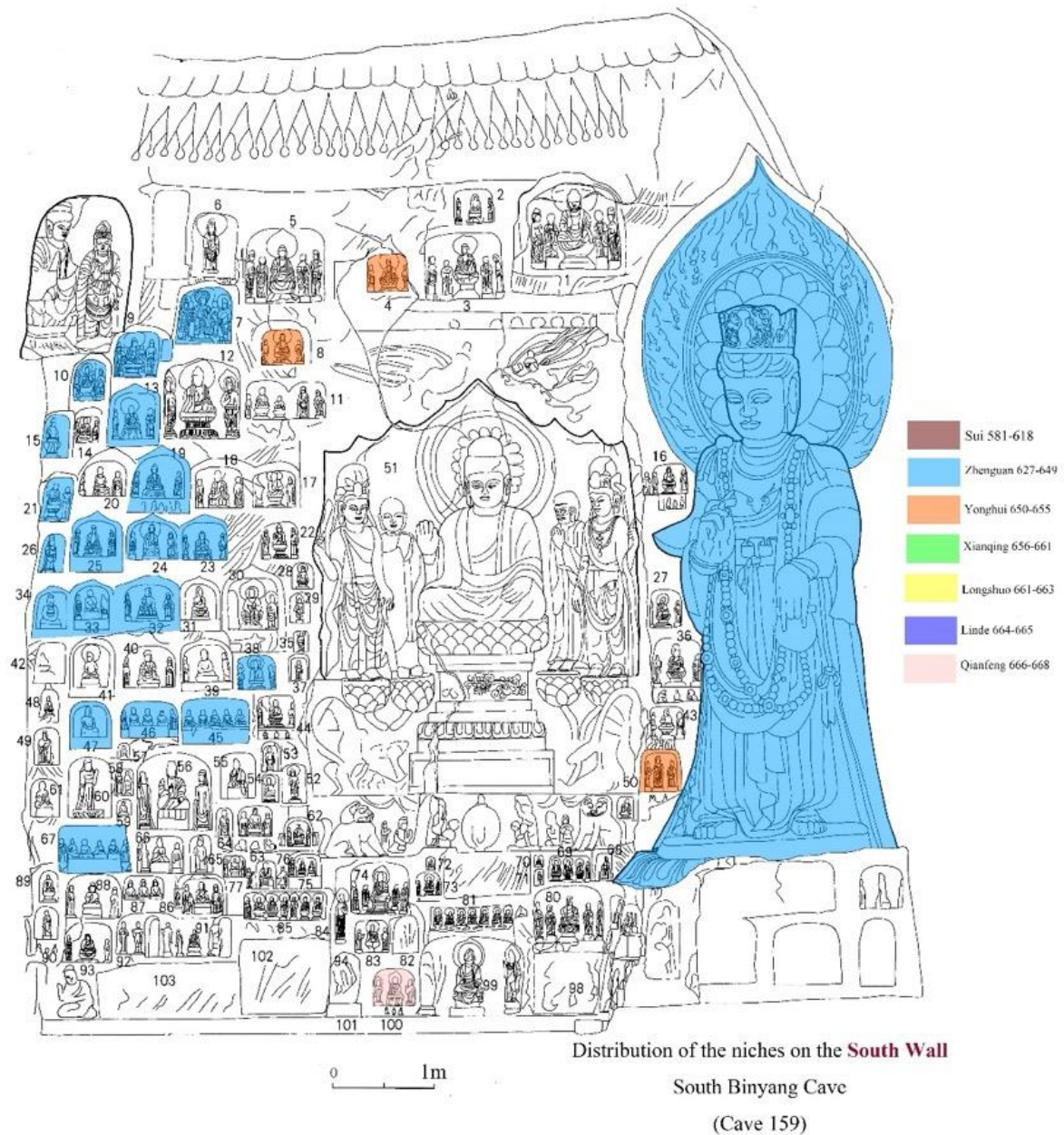
In contrast to the Northern Dynasties layout seen at Longmen (e.g., Guyang Cave/Cave 1433, Lotus Cave/ Cave 712, Weizi Cave/ Cave 1181), where main images dominate the rear wall and smaller niches line the side walls, large Tang dynasty grottoes demonstrate a different stylistic approach. The sequential carving of small image niches is less pronounced in Tang works.¹²

The distribution of the three groups of image niches clearly reflects the original situation of the walls when the Tang donors started to cut niches into the surface, which helps us to trace back to the general construction sequence in this cave: the earliest Tang donors began their projects in the first phase (641–649 CE) on the southern wall since most dated niches of the first phase are scattered horizontally across the middle band of the southern wall, and some are on the northern wall in notably prominent spots. Subsequently, in the second phase (650–655 CE), the focus shifted primarily to the northern wall and eastern wall, with only three dated niches being engraved on the southern wall. Most projects of the second phase were situated on either higher or lower spots of the Zhenguan projects, giving the impression of taking over the space left by the first phase. In the third phase, the remaining small projects were distributed in whatever spaces were left, mainly at the bottom of the walls near the baseline or concentrated below the main images on the western wall. A further assumption suggests that because Cave 159 was initiated in the Northern Wei and left unfinished until the Sui-Tang dynasties, the initial preference of donors for the middle and upper bands of the walls could be attributed to the

¹² In addition to the South Binyang Cave, three other large Tang caves have a close layout as Cave 159, which includes many small incised niches: Cave 669 (Laolong Cave 老龍洞), Cave 1069 (Poyao Cave 破窑) and Cave 1192 (Tangzi Cave 唐字洞). Similar to Cave 159, most niches and images in these three caves were dated to the early Tang period, from which we can infer that patron at Longmen first referred to the designs of previous projects and adopted the layouts and artistic styles seen in the grottoes made in the Northern dynasties, such as Cave 1443 and Cave 140 (Central Binyang Cave).

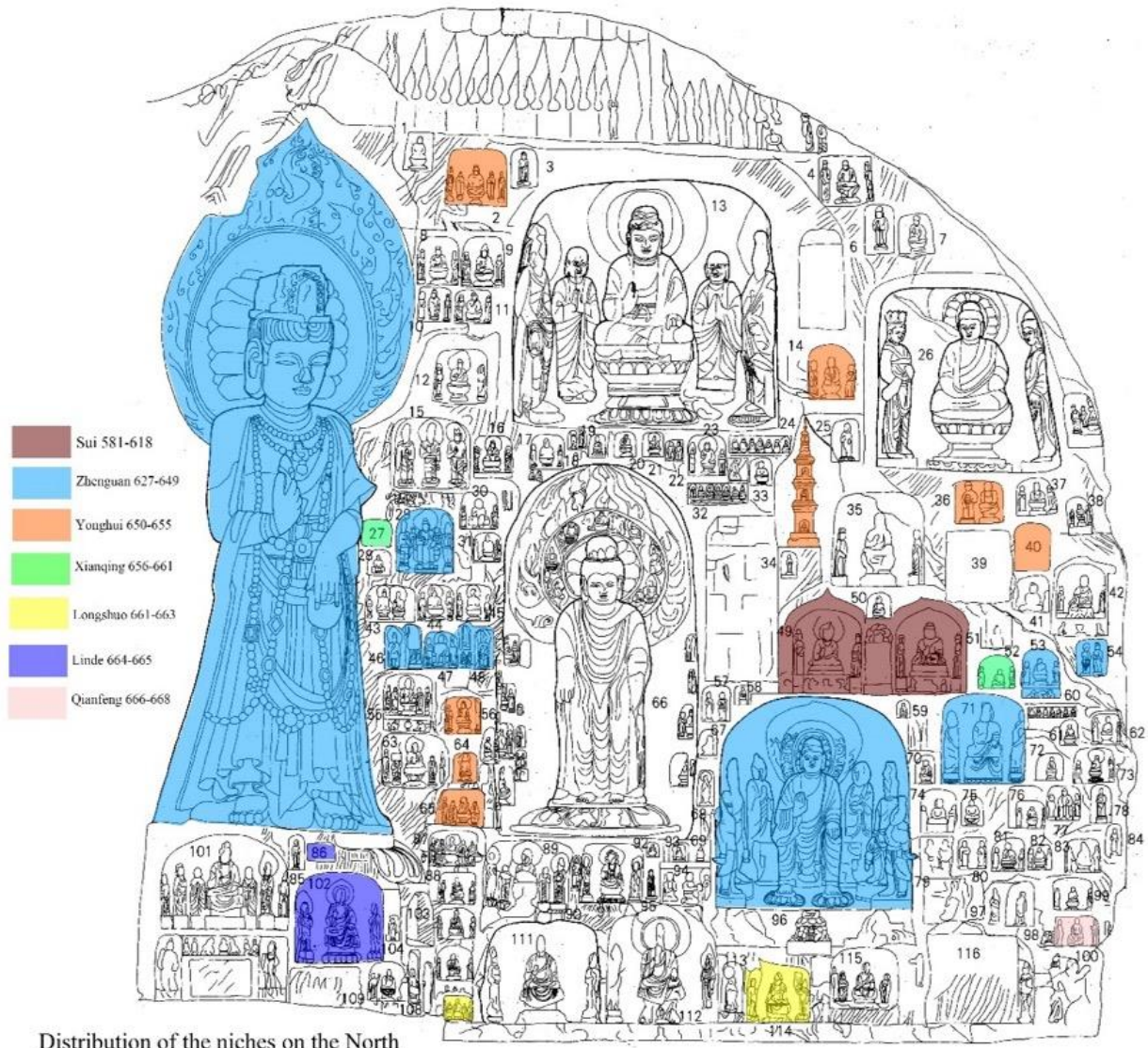
presence of an uncarved foundation surrounding the walls at the time of Li Tai's project, which existed for an extended period without any alteration beyond the Zhenguan period.

Consequently, in the third phase, when there was no more space, donors were compelled to move their project to the lower band within the cave¹³ (See Maps 2-1 to 2-4).



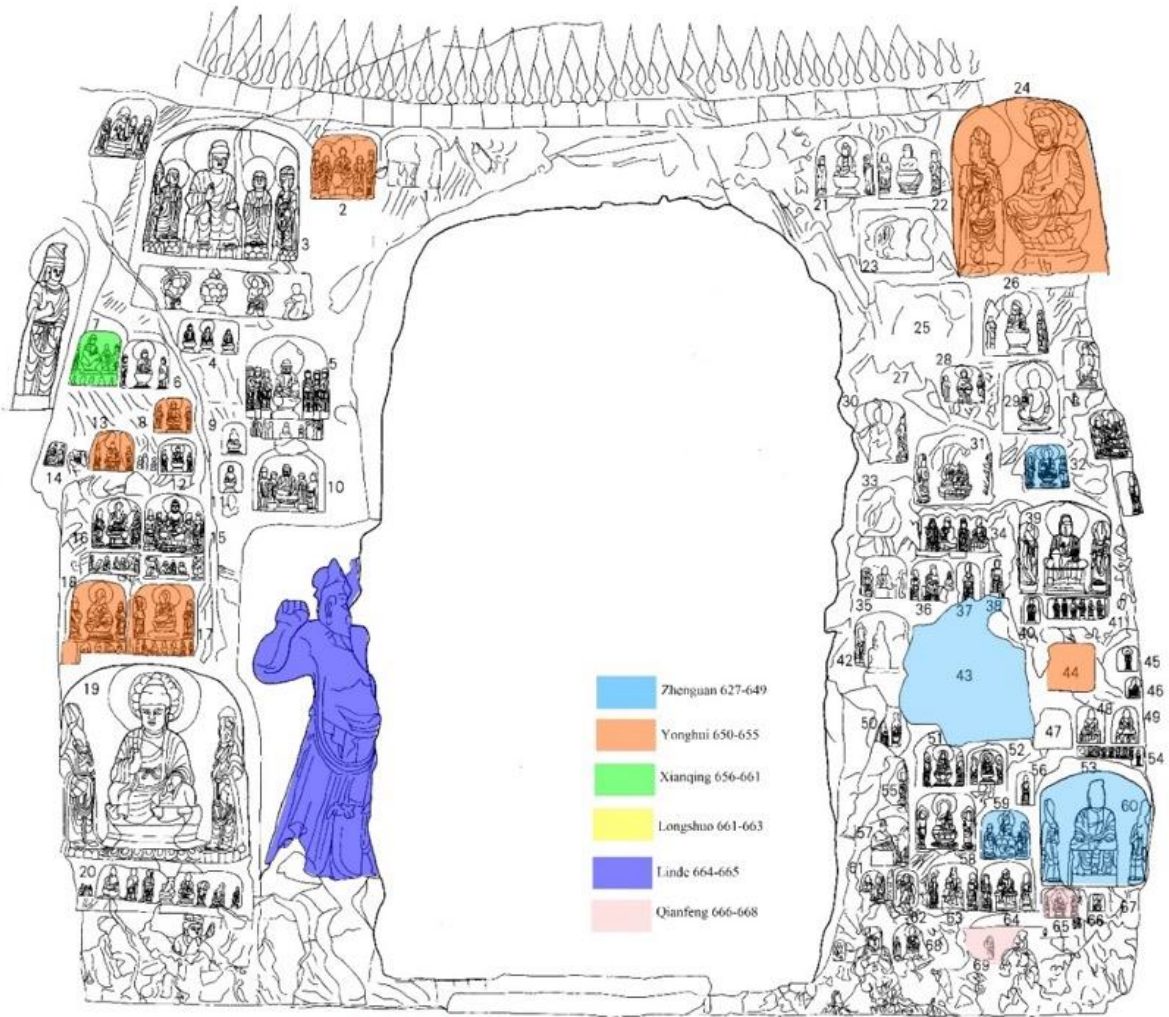
Map 2-1 Distribution of the niches on the southern wall in Cave 159

¹³ Peng Minghao 2020, 326.



Distribution of the niches on the North
Wall of the South Binyang Cave
(Cave 159)

Map 2-2 Distribution of the niches on the northern wall in Cave 159

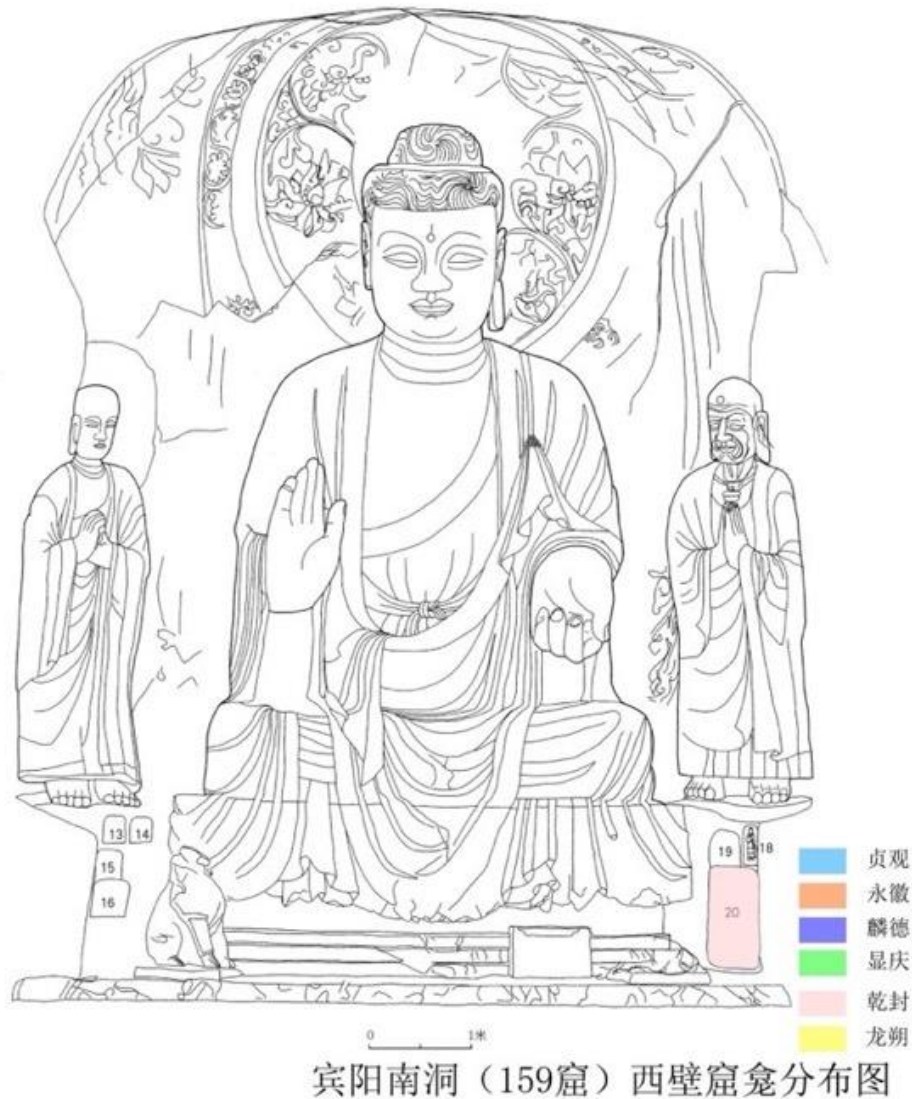


Distribution of the niches on the **East Wall**

South Binyang Cave
(Cave 159)

0 1m

Map 2-3 Distribution of the niches on the eastern wall in Cave 159



Map 2-4 Distribution of the niches on the western/rear wall in Cave 159

2.2 A Reconstruction of the Construction Sequence in Cave 159

The evolution of the small (under 1 metre) or medium niches (between 1 and 3 metres) in Cave 159 from 641 to 668 CE demonstrates the formation process of images and niches in the early Tang. However, we still need to know information about the undated projects, especially those large and medium projects that are situated in prominent locations, to grasp a comprehensive

understanding of the patronage activities in Cave 159. Hence, these dated projects also become essential references to analyze the approximate dates and possible patrons of a couple of large-sized niches in the dominant locations of the northern and southern walls without inscriptions. By examining the key characteristics of the dated projects, interpreting their affiliated donative inscriptions, and correlating this information with pertinent historical records (i.e., *Jiu Tangshu* and *Xin Tangshu*), I aim to reconstruct the chronological order of construction in Cave 159 during the early Tang period. My preliminary assumption outlines four peaks of image-making activities spanning from 641 to 668 CE.

First Peak: 641–643 CE (Map 2-6-2; Map 2-7-2)

The first peak includes completing the five main images on the rear wall sponsored by Li Tai in 641 CE and a cluster of dated small niches of other imperial members or officials such as Cen Wenben 岑文本 (595–645 CE), excavated on the southern wall during the fifteenth and sixteenth year (641–642 CE). In addition, I am of the opinion that two large-sized niches, S51 on the southern wall and N66 on the northern wall, should be considered among the earliest projects in Cave 159 (Figs. 2-9 & 2-10), probably initiated concurrently with or shortly after the five images of Li Tai in 641 CE. A comparison of the images within these two niches against those of the dated projects reveals apparent alignments with the images from the first phase. For example, the disciple images of S51 were carved in the form of low relief and depicted as standing stiffly behind the Buddha's pedestal. Additionally, the crowns and jewel strings of the bodhisattva figures in S51 bear a close resemblance to the style of bodhisattva images made in the Northern and Sui dynasties at Longmen.¹⁴ The heavy body of the standing buddha image in N66 and the

¹⁴ Okada 1987, 99–100; Chang and Wang 2018, 159.

decorative patterns within the niche indicate a strong influence of the images of the Northern Zhou Dynasty (557–581 CE) style, which was adopted in the Buddhist images made in the Zhenguan reign period (627–641 CE) in Chang’an.¹⁵ After referring to the description of projects provided in inscription no. 0074 in Cave 159, which states, “keeping the old (images) remained by adding adornments or making the new (images) which reach the utmost wonderfulness (*huo rengjiu er zengyan, huo weixin er jimiao* 或仍舊而增嚴，或維新而極妙),” I agree with the viewpoint put forth by Zhang, Okada and McNair that the large projects on the prominent locations of the side walls of Cave 159¹⁶ should be regarded as part of the projects of “making the new images (*weixin* 維新).” Furthermore, the conspicuous locations of S51 and N66 underscore their significance as primary projects in this cave, situated centrally on the northern and southern walls. It is highly probable that these two niches were originally designed together¹⁷ and sponsored by imperial family members or high-ranking officials.

¹⁵ Okada 1987, 99–100; Sofukawa 1988, 236–238.

¹⁶ Zhang Ruoyu 1980, 22–23; Okada 1987, 99–100; McNair 2007, 79–80.

¹⁷ Wang 2019, 95.



Fig. 2-9 Niche S51 on the southern wall Fig. 2-10 Niche N66 on the northern wall (Liu 2010)

Two dated projects with donative inscriptions on the southern wall are identified to be directly related to Princess Yuzhang 豫章公主 (d.u.), an adopted daughter of Empress Wende who was favoured by both the empress and Emperor Taizong. It is said that the princess's biological mother passed away shortly after her birth, leading to her adoption by the empress. The empress raised her with the same level of care and affection that she extended to her own children.¹⁸ The inscriptions indicate that these two projects of Buddhist images were not solely sponsored by the princess but also together with her attendants, such as two of her wet nurses and their family members. The inscription of Niche S19 (and S20) says (Inscription no. 0149):

On the tenth day of the third month of the fifteenth year of the Zhenguan reign period under Great Tang (April 25, 641 CE), Princess Yuzhang reverently commissioned the creation of a *ta* of image.¹⁹ Her heartfelt wish was for her own safety and the well-being.

¹⁸ The original text is “下嬪生豫章公主而死，后視如所生。” See *Xin Tangshu* 新唐書 1975, vol. 75, 3470.

¹⁹ The character *ta* 塔, with its original meaning of *stūpa*, was used as a measure word of the image niche here, without referring

The princess's wet nurse (*ni*), [sa], also participated in this noble endeavour, together with her son, Jiang Xiuzi, and a total of five individuals. Together,²⁰ they erected this image stūpa with the fervent aspiration that all sentient beings might attain true enlightenment.²¹

大唐貞觀十五年三月十日，豫章公主敬造一塔，願己身平安，并為一切含識。公主妳 [薩] 為己身並 [兒] 蔣脩子等五人亦同造像一塔及一切含識共登正覺。

Moreover, Niche S25 was sponsored by another wet nurse of the princess and the other five donors, without including the prince among the patrons (Inscription no. 151):

On the second day of the sixth month of the fifteenth year of Zhenguan reign period of Great Tang (July 15th, 641 CE), the [wet nurse] of the Princess of Yuzhang, [Zhu], Putou and six people in total reverently made a *ta* of images. 大唐貞觀十五年六月二日，豫章公主 [妳竹]，普頭六人敬造像一塔。

Apart from the donors of these two projects, which partly involved Princess Yuzhang without her being the principal participant, it is also noteworthy to examine the dimensions of these two projects and consider their donors *de facto*. Niche S19 measures 64 cm in height, 50 cm in width and a depth of 6 cm, while its counterpart niche S20 is 66 cm high, 45 cm wide and 6 cm in depth. Niche S25 is 43 cm in depth, 43 cm in width and 6 cm in depth.²² Therefore, regarding the small sizes of these two projects and the limited participation of Princess Yuzhang, along with the absence of any commemorative mention of Empress Wende in her inscriptions—despite their extraordinary and close relation—it seems unlikely that this prestigious princess sponsored only

to a project or image of stūpa. The relationship between this image niche and a stūpa needs further discussion.

²⁰ Based on the inscription's content, it is possible that this refers to a twin niche, one for the princess and the other for her wet nurse, corresponding to S19 and S20, respectively.

²¹ The character "妳" (*ni*) signifies a wet nurse.

²² All the measuring data of caves, niches and images at Longmen, except those specifically mentioned in other sources, are all derived from *Zonglu* 總錄 (*General Records*), 1999.

two small niches in a large project that was dedicated to her late adopted mother. It is highly probable that she funded a large image niche in Cave 159, showing her deep affection for her late mother as a filial daughter and her support for her adopted brother when Li Tai commenced his project or just after the completion of the main five images. Thus, it is conceivable that one of the two large niches previously discussed could have been commissioned by Princess Yuzhang. Considering the locations, sizes and contents of Niche S51 and N66, I incline that S51 was most likely the project sponsored by the princess and was completed between 641 and 642 CE.

Second Peak: ca. 644—648 CE (Map 2-6-3; Map 2-7-2; Map 2-8-2)

The first surge of construction in Cave 159 was led by the Prince of Wei, Li Tai, with the aim of honouring his late mother. This endeavour received support from other imperial family members and senior officials within the Tang court, and probably praise from Emperor Taizong. Zhang Rouyu and McNair pointed out that one purpose for Li Tai in patronizing the colossal images in Cave 159 was to obtain a good reputation for his filial piety and,²³ in turn, to strengthen his political capital to compete with the crown prince, Li Chengqian 李承乾 (618–645 CE). When resuming the image-making activities in this uncompleted cave left by previous dynasties, Li Tai might devise a blueprint for positioning all the incised niches and images accompanying the dominant five images he sponsored in his cave, similar to the neatly arranged niches in those grottoes of the Northern Wei dynasty, such as Cave 1443 (Guyang Cave).²⁴ However, the result of this political struggle shows that Li Tai finally failed in his goal of pleasing his father and winning the position of crown prince. He was relegated to the position of Commandery Prince

²³ Zhang 1980, 21–22; McNair 2007, 87.

²⁴ For a discussion on the original design and executions of affiliated niches in Cave 1443 and the later sponsorship changes, refer to Wei Zheng 韋正 and Ma Mingyue 馬銘悅, 109–112; Zhang Wen 張雯 2012, 134–140.

(*Junwang* 郡王) of Donglai 東萊 in 643 CE, left the capital and never came back.²⁵ After his relegation, those planned projects might have ceased and led to the original plan not being strictly executed, resulting in the construction of new projects conducted without orderly arrangement.

Still, we can find evidence of another summit of making images in 648 CE, initiated by more than one hundred people from the same neighbourhood in Luoyang, the large niche numbered N96 on the northern wall, from Inscription No. 0077. The relief stele engraved with this inscription is titled “*Milexiang zhi bei* 彌勒像之碑 (Stele of the Maitreya Image),” with a subtitle of “The residents of all ages from Sishun Ward in Henan District of Luo Prefecture, universally for the Dharma Realm, have collectively commissioned the creation of a Maitreya image niche, situated beneath this stele and to the east, for the benefit of all beings throughout the Dharma Realm. 洛州河南縣思順坊老幼等普為法界敬造彌勒像一龕，在此碑下進東。” (Fig. 2-11). The project, Niche N96, is identified as one of the largest projects in Cave 159, with a height of 233 cm, a width of 170 cm and a depth of 100 cm. The images within the niche demonstrate clear features of the first phase, especially the postures and decorations seen in the disciples and bodhisattvas (Fig. 2-12). Additionally, the relative location between N96 and N66 and traces on the wall explain that these two projects were probably designed together, or the excavation of N96 was slightly later than N66.²⁶ According to the previous presumption of the initiation of N66, sometime between 641 and 642 CE, and my viewpoint on a temporary cessation of all the planned projects after the relegation of Li Tai after 643 CE, alongside the precise date of completion in 648 CE of N96, it is plausible to infer that the residents of Sishun

²⁵ The original text, “（貞觀十七年夏四月）癸巳，魏王泰以罪降爵為東萊郡王。” See *Jiu Tangshu*, 3/ 55. Donglai is today’s Laizhou County in Shandong Province.

²⁶ Chang and Wang 2018, 160.

Ward voluntarily launched their collective project after the first peak and impelled the second surge of image-making activities in Cave 159. Since the most prominent spots on the southern wall and part of the northern wall had been already taken, they may have decided upon the current location, which is the eastern and lower part of the northern wall, as their second ideal choice.



Fig. 2-11 Rubbing of the Stele of Maitreya Image (Inscription no. 0077) (LGRA Collection)

Fig. 2-12 Niche N96, 648 CE (Liu 2010)

From Inscription No. 0077, we learn that this project was patronized by donors from the same neighbourhood, Sishun Ward (see its location in Map 2-2), in the city of Luoyang. 124 donors were listed on the lower part of the donative inscription, with the names of male householders positioned on the first part while the female dependants with their affiliated titles (e.g., the wife

or mother of someone, 某某妻 or 某某母) placed in the later part. The name list clearly indicates the family connections of at least sixteen (or nineteen) male householders and their female dependants (Table 2-2). From this, we see that at least 19 families in the same neighbourhood were involved in a single Buddhist project.



Map 2-5 Location of the Sishun Ward in Sui-Tang Luoyang (The Map is credited to Victor Xiong, 2017)

	Male Donors	Female Family		Male Donors	Female Family
1	Liu Junjie 劉君解	Wang, Wife of Liu Jie 劉解妻王	12	Yan Decao 閻德操	Ren, Mother of Yan Cao 閻操母任
2	Wei Wenche 衛文徵	Zhang, Wife of Wei Che 衛徵妻張	13	Wang Wushi 王武士	Chen, Wife of Wang Wushi 王武士妻陳
3	Zhang Guicai 張貴才	Li, Wife of Zhang Cai 張才妻李	14	Liu Deche 劉德徵	lǚ, Mother of Liu Che 劉徵母呂
4	Liu Dingguo 劉定國	Duan, Wife of Liu Guo 劉國妻段	15	Li Renchu 李仁楚	Zuo, Wife of Li Chu 李楚妻左
5	Guo Wugan 國武幹	Ma, Wife of Guo Gan 國幹妻馬	16	Duan Junyan 段君言	Zhao, Wife of Duan Yan 段言妻趙
6	Guo Wujin 國武進	Wang, Wife of Guo Jin 國進妻王			
7	You Shitong 游士通	Wang, Wife of You Tong 游通妻王		Other family connections seen in Cave 159 寶陽南洞所見其他家庭關係	
8	Chen Gounu 陳苟奴	Le, Wife of Chen Gou 陳苟妻樂		Cui Guiben 崔貴本	Lady Wang (Mother? Wife?) 王氏 (母?妻?)
9	Zheng Shiwei 張世威	Li, Wife of Zhang Wei 張威妻李		Zhang Jundao 張君道 (connection with Zhang Junyan?)	Lady Song 宋婆
10	Pei Liuying 裴六英	Zhao, Mother of Pei Ying 裴英母趙		Yang Sengwei 楊僧威	Zhang Jifei, daughter 張寂妃 (女)
11	Zhang Junyan 張君彥	Liang, Mother of Zhang Yan; Liang, Aunt of Yan 張彥母梁 · 彥姨梁			

Table 2-2 Family Connections of Donors in Inscription No. 0077

There are some donors who participated in this collective project and also sponsored their individual projects in the same cave concurrently or slightly earlier or later. For instance, Cui Guiben 崔貴本 patronized Niche 46, 47 and 48 on the northern wall, which was completed one year later in 649 CE. Zhang Junyan 張君彥 made a small niche, S13, on the southern wall in 644 CE. Zhao Juncai 趙君才 or Zhao Cai 趙才, who sponsored two individual niches completed in 648 and 649, N10 and N29, also joined the construction of N96.²⁷ Therefore, despite a potential halt in activity due to diminishing support from the imperial family, donors from other classes in the Luoyang society continued to invest their properties and carried on Buddhist enterprises in

²⁷ It is not uncommon to see donors simplify their three-character (or four-character) names into two characters in the inscriptions of Buddhist projects. For example, many female donors in the No. 0077 only listed the first and last characters of their male family members to save the place and keep the unified format. Considering the close completion dates of these projects, I suggest that the name Zhao Juncai 趙君才 in no. 0077 and Zhao Cai 趙才 in two other individual projects should refer to the same person.

the South Binyang Cave, which likely paved the way for a third construction peak shortly after the completion of N96.

Third Peak: 650—655 CE (See Map 2-6-4, Map 2-7-3; Map 2-8-3)

The most representative project within this surge of activity is Niche E24, located on the top of the eastern wall, sponsored by Liu Xuanyi 劉玄意 (d.u.), the second husband of Princess Nanping 南平公主 (d.u.) with the title of the Commandant-escort 駙馬都尉.²⁸ He was in the position of the provincial governor of the Ru Prefecture 汝州刺史 when he patronized Niche E24 in Cave 159 (See Fig. 2-7). The niche is 154 cm in height, 150 cm in width and 45 in depth, classifying it as a large niche in the cave. He also commissioned another project, a life-sized Vajrapāṇi guardian at the northern doorway (Fig. 2-13). Access to this niche, however, is not as easy as other large projects, suggesting that by the time Liu Xuanyi commenced his project at Longmen, the ideal spots were already occupied. Additionally, a number of niches and images that share similar features and artistic levels with E24 dominate the upper bands of the northern and eastern wall, such as Niche N13, N26, E3 and E19 (in the lower section), situated in more distinguished locations than E24. Thus, prior studies have pointed out that these projects were likely planned together or excavated slightly earlier than Liu's project.²⁹

²⁸ Liu Xuanyi was the son of Liu Zhenghui 劉政會, he married Princess Nanping, see *Jiu Tangshu* 58/2313.

²⁹ Wang Delu 2019, 95.



Fig. 2-13 The Vajrapāṇi Guardian Image Sponsored by Liu Xuanyi (Liu 2010)



Fig. 2-14 Locations of Cave 20 and Cave 159 (Lan LI 2023)

Furthermore, McNair has proposed that Princess Nanping could be the likely patron of the Qianxisi Cave 潛溪寺洞 (Cave 20), and she may have sponsored the large cave around 650 in honour of her late father, Emperor Taizong (Fig. 2-14).³⁰ I concur with her viewpoint and suggest that the emergence of a third peak in Cave 159 could be attributed to the new project funded by the princess, aiming at commemorating the emperor who had recently passed away close to the cave dedicated to his wife (primarily the main five images) by his brother. Consequently, being the husband of the Princess of Nanping, Liu Xuanyi, along with other donors who were also likely of high rank, was obligated to support his wife and sponsored at least two projects at the beginning of the Yonghui reign, triggering another increase in image-making activities.

Fourth Peak: ca. 665 CE (Map 2-6-5; Map 2-7-4; Map 2-8-4)

Most of Cave 159 was completed before 656 CE, leaving limited space for later work. An inscription (No. 0145) dated 665 CE (Linde 2 麟德二年), notable for its donor's historical role, deserves attention. This inscription may indicate a fourth, previously less-studied phase of activity in Cave 159, potentially influencing Longmen's subsequent development. The inscription says, “[On behalf of all beings] in the Dharma Realm, Wang Xuance reverently commissioned the creation of one [Maitreya] image. This was completed on the fifteenth day of the ninth month of the second year of the Linde Reign period (October 29, 665) 王玄策□□□□□□□下及法界[眾生], 敬造[彌勒]像一鋪, 麟德二年九月十五日.”³¹ The donor of Niche W20 is Wang Xuance 王玄策 (d.u.), a renowned

³⁰ McNair 2007, 86.

³¹ See the transcription of this inscription by Li Yukun, “Longmenshiku xin faxian Wang Xuance zaoxiang tiji 龍門石窟新發現王玄策造像題記,” in *Wenwu*, no. 11 (1976), 94.

Chinese diplomat and military officer in the early Tang³², who served as an envoy of the Tang court to Central and South Asia during the Zhenguan and Xianqing 顯慶 reign periods (ca. 643–657 CE). It is recorded in *Lidai minghua ji* 歷代名畫記 (A Record of Famous Paintings of All Dynasties), in the second year of the Linde reign, Wang Xuance obtained the original copy of “The Sculpture of Maitreya Bodhisattva under the Bodhi Trees (*putishu xia mile pusa suxiang* 菩提樹下彌勒菩薩塑像)” from the Western Regions (*Xiyu*, 西域) and commissioned a statue based on this original in the Jing’ai Monastery 敬愛寺 at Luoyang.³³

The images inside Wang Xuance’s project have long been lost, leaving an empty niche with a height of 100 cm, a width of 50 and a depth of 20 cm. Fortunately, the rediscovery of his inscription allows us to get insight into the spread of innovative patterns in Tang Buddhist arts. Li Yukun discerned the term “Maitreya 彌勒” through the remaining strokes and advocated that this should be the new pattern of Maitreya Bodhisattva brought from the West by Wang Xuance.³⁴

In addition to Wang Xuance’s project, in the same year, there were three other projects completed in Cave 159, sponsored by governmental officials in Niche N102, W20 and S101. Despite their small size and placement at the bottom of the cave wall, these final additions suggest a renewed burst of artistic activity within Cave 159. This may have even extended beyond the cave itself, possibly influenced by the introduction of new styles of Buddhist art.

³² See the discussion on Wang Xuance’s diplomatic activities in Sen, Chapter One, “Military Concerns and Spiritual Underpinnings,” 15–54. Also, for the introduction of Buddhist projects sponsored by Wang Xuance, see Sen, 42. In addition, for all the missions to the India by Wang Xuance, please refer to Lévi, Sylvain, Chatterjee, S. P. (Shiba Prasad) and Bimala Churn Law. *The Mission of Wang Hiu-en Ts’e in India*. 2nd ed. Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1987. Feng Chengjun 馮承鈞, “Wang Xuance shiji 王玄策事輯,” in *Xiyu nanhai shidi kaozheng lunzhu huiji* 西域南海史地考證論著匯輯 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1957), 102–128.

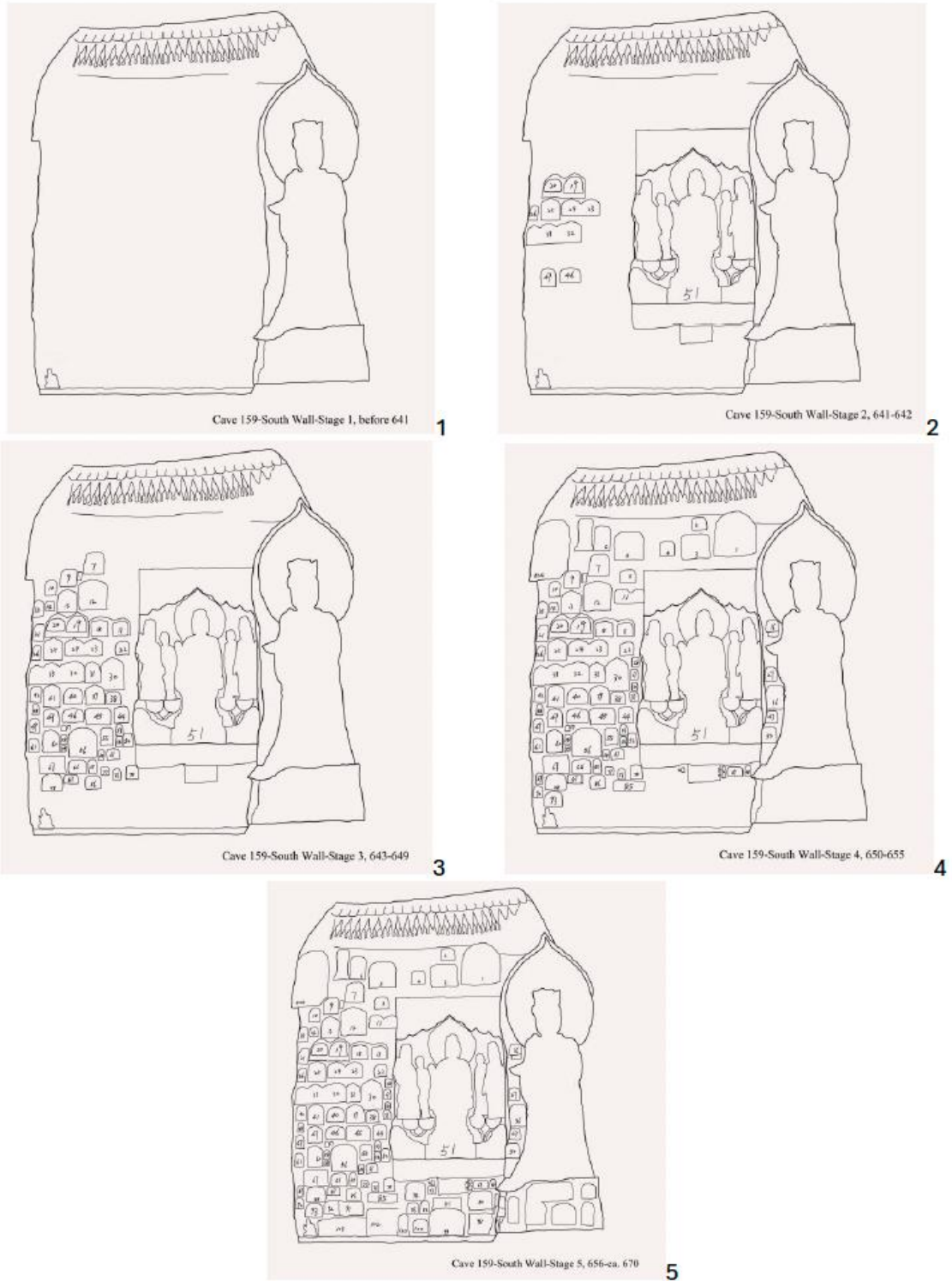
³³ The original text is, “敬愛寺 據裴孝源《畫錄》云，有孫尚子畫。彥遠按：敬愛寺是中宗皇帝為高宗、武后置，孫尚子是隋朝畫手，裴君所記為謬矣。佛殿內菩提樹下彌勒菩薩塑像，麟德二年（665）自內出，王玄策取到西域所圖菩薩像為樣。巧兒張壽、宋朝塑，王玄策指揮，李安貼金。” See *Lidai minghua ji* (1964), vol.3, 71–72.

³⁴ Li Yukun 1976, 94.

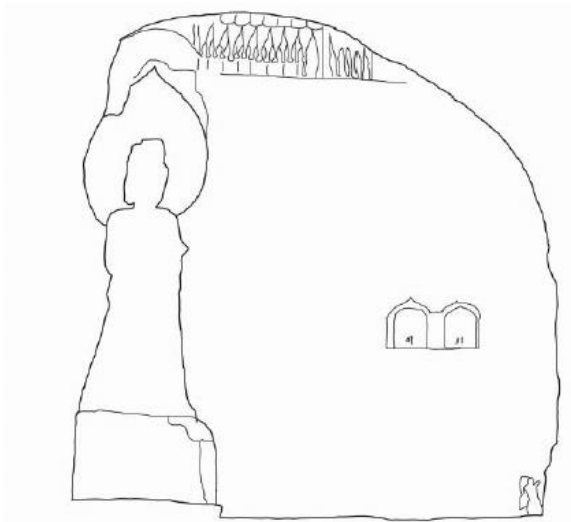
Afterwards, patrons commissioned caves and niches in various sizes on the cliffs outside or to the south, making these projects the finale of the construction of the South Binyang Cave during the early Tang. Inscription No. 0077 mentions a female donor named ‘Wife of Wang Ce 王策妻’. This could potentially be the wife of Wang Xuance, based on the common practice of shortening three-character names to two characters. This may explain why Wang chose this cave as the place to accommodate his project, for his family member had already initiated their Buddhist offerings.



Fig. 2-15 Location of Niche W20 (in green colour) sponsored by Wang Xuance (Liu 2010)



Map 2-6 Reconstruction of Excavating Sequence on the Southern Wall in Cave 159



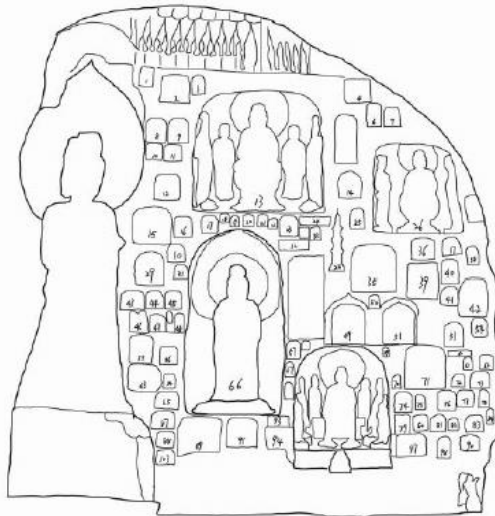
Cave 159-North Wall-Stage 1, before 641

1



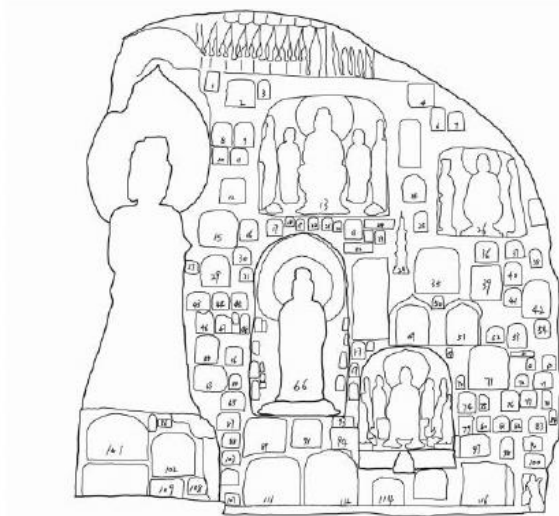
Cave 159-North Wall-Stage 2, 641-649

2



Cave 159-North Wall-Stage 3, 650-655

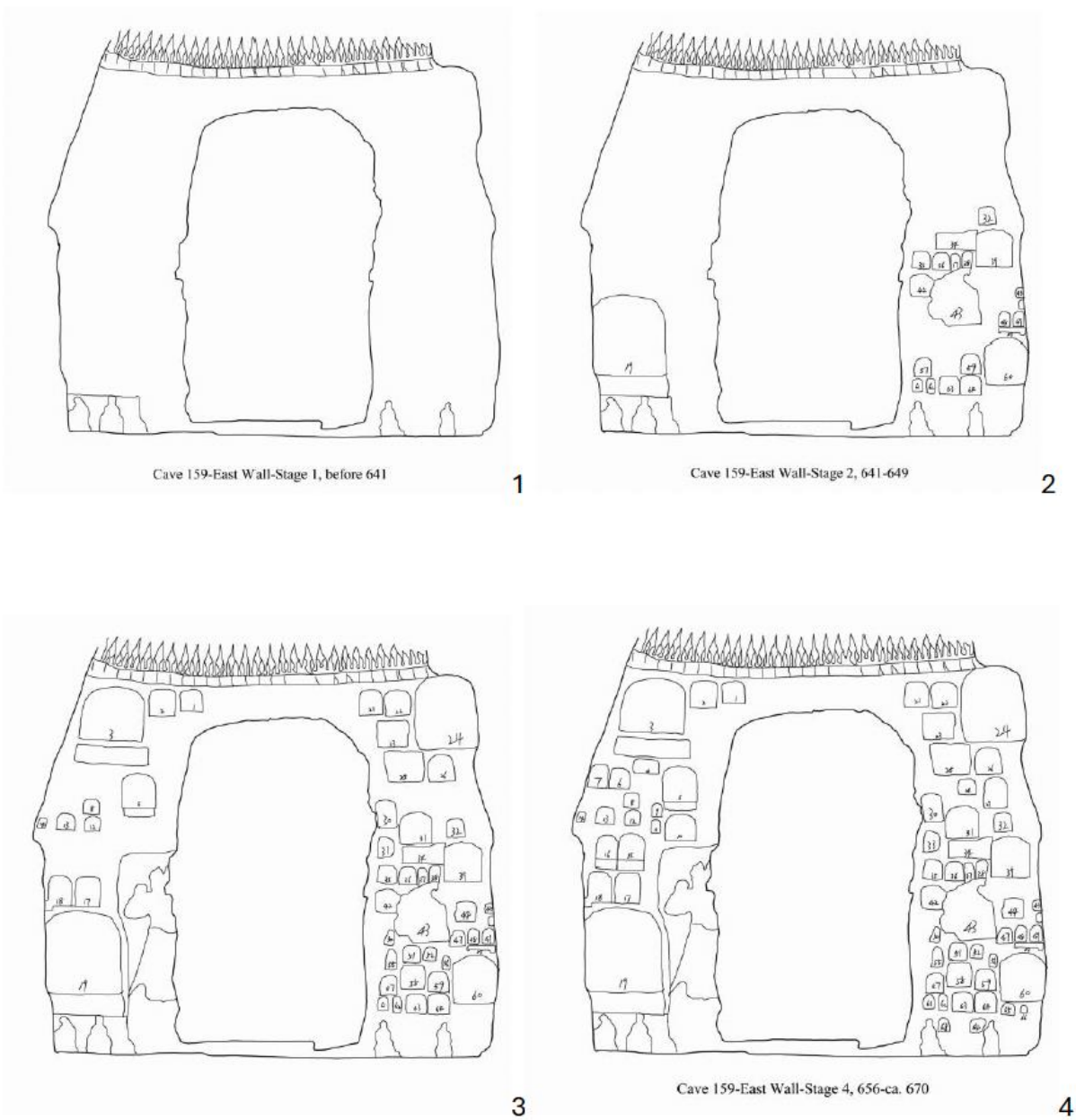
3



Cave 159-North Wall-Stage 4, 656-ca.670

4

Map 2-7 Reconstruction of Excavating Sequence on the Northern Wall in Cave 159



Map 2-8 Reconstruction of Excavating Sequence on the Eastern Wall in Cave 159

2.3 Donors and Their Practices

2.3.1 Data: Identity, Gender and Social Status

The identities of donors of the 69 dated image niches are varied, from members of the imperial family to common people without any titles. The length of the inscriptions differs, they were

made for various purposes, and the projects were dedicated to different subjects: the emperor, the imperial family, ancestors of the seven generations, late parents, husband or wife, children, or (late) Buddhist masters.

The gender ratio among the donors is interesting: 38 image niches were solely sponsored by male donors and 18 by females, and 7 projects were made by couples or groups that included both men and women. The proportion of female donors is 26 percent or higher, which suggests that female practitioners played an important role in sponsoring grottoes and making Buddhist images in the early Tang (Chart 2-2 & 2-3).

Donors in South Binyang Cave (with Dates)

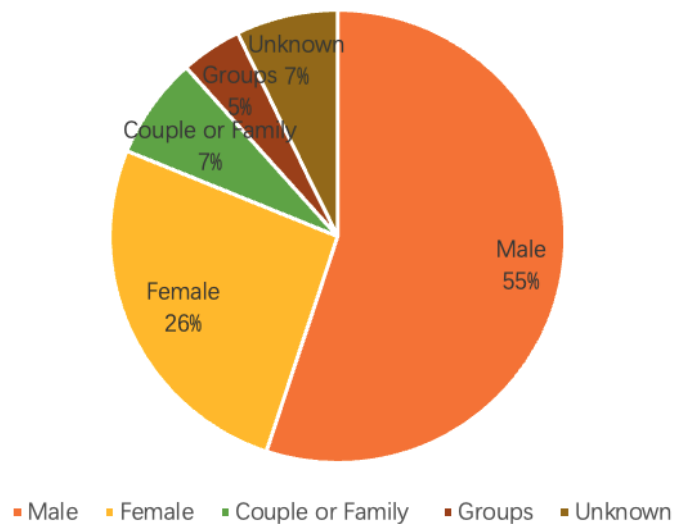


Chart 2-2 Gender Proportion of Donors in Cave 159 (with Dates)

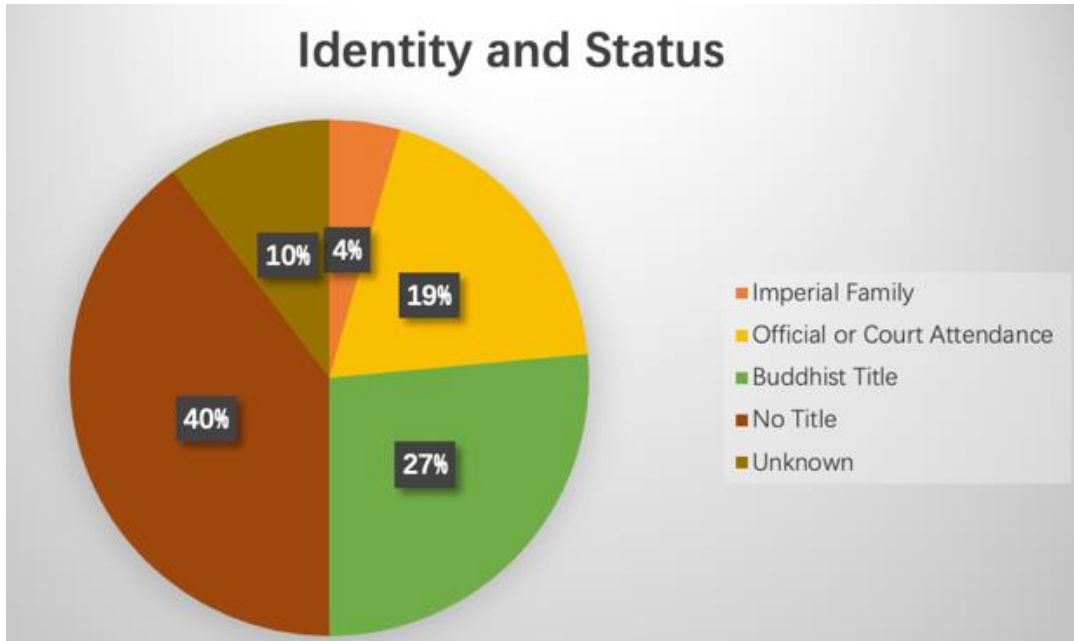


Chart 2-3 Identity and Status of Donors in Cave 159 (with Dates)

Aside from the patron of the main Buddha images, Li Tai, there are two other imperial family members: his sister, the Princess Yuzhang and the husband of his other sister, Princess Nanping, the Commandant-escort 駙馬都尉 Liu Xuanyi. Thirteen image niches were patronized by officials or court attendances, including the Director of the Chancellery, the wet nurses of the Princess Yuzhang and eunuchs in the court, etc. Donors of eighteen image niches described themselves only as “Disciple of the Buddha 佛弟子” or “Woman of Pure Faith 清信女.” Twenty-seven donors only carved their names or their householders’ names in the inscriptions without any official titles or noble ranks, while the identities of the remaining donors were unknown.

2.3.2 Motivations

One of the motivations for the carving of images is for the merit of a deceased person or family member. Niche S24 was made for Lu, the Supervisory Official of the Prince of Wei, and completed in 641 CE (Fig. 16).³⁵ In the inscription (No. 0150), it says:

On the first day of the fifth month of the fifteenth year of the Zhenguan reign period of the Great Tang (June 14th, 641 CE), the Supervisory Official of the Prince of Wei, Lu, has passed away, (we) made a *gan* (earthenware, it refers to a niche here) of images for (him). 大唐貞觀十五年五月一日，魏王監陸身故，為造像一坩。



Fig. 2-16 Rubbing of Inscription No. 0150 of Niche S24 (LGRA Collection)

Also, in Niche S10, the Amitābha image made by Zhao Cai 趙才 for his late wife Gongsun (648 CE, Inscription No. 0205):

³⁵ The dates in the inscription usually indicate the completion date of the caves, niches, or images. There are many examples in the Longmen Grottoes, such as the inscription for the Great Vairocana Buddha, patronized by the Empress Wu and completed in the second year of Shangyuan reign period (676 CE). In its inscriptions, it says, “...至上元二年乙亥十二月卅日畢功。” This project completed in the thirtieth day of the twelfth month of the second year of Shangyuan reign period (January 20, 676 CE).

I, Zhao Cai, reverently made an image of Amitābha along with two bodhisattvas for my late wife, Gongsun. I wish that she might be born in the Land of Bliss and that those with bodies in the Dharma Realm attain true awakening together. Recorded on the eighth day of the fifth month of the twenty-second year of the Zhenguan reign period (June 4th, 648 CE). 趙才為亡妻公孫敬造彌陀像一軀並二菩薩，願生妙樂國土，法界有形同登正覺，貞觀廿二年五月八日記。

In the Amitābha Buddha niche made by the disciple of Three Caverns 三洞弟子 for his late wife (Niche E18, 653 CE, Inscription no. 0214), the donor also expresses the wish for the spirit of his late wife to be reborn in the Pure Land:

On the seventeenth day of the first month of the fourth year of Yonghui reign period (February 19th, 653 CE), the disciple of Three Caverns for his late (wife made) an image shrine of Amitābha Buddha. I wish the spirit of my late wife to be reborn in the Pure Land, and the survivors receive this blessing. 永徽四年正月十七日，三洞弟子為亡彌陀像一龕，願亡妻靈往淨土，現存獲福。

Some donors stated that their purpose of donating a Buddha image is for their own benefit such as prayers for recovering from a severe disease or for the safety of their family members. In the shrine made by “the woman of pure faith,” the donor [...] Miaoguang 妙光 had a “foul disease and dreamt of making five images,” then she indeed donated an image shrine of five Buddha images (Niche S46, 641 CE) in the South Binyang Cave.³⁶ For the safety of the family members:

In the Amitābha Buddha niche made by the wife of Yang Shuqi 楊叔察, Lady Wang (Niche S9,

³⁶ The original inscription (Inscription No. 0153) is, “On the sixth day of the seventh month of the fifteenth year of Zhenguan reign period under Great Tang (August 17th, 641 CE), the woman of pure faith, [lost] Miaoguang got the foul disease and dreamt of making five images of statues, which are completed with reverence today. 大唐貞觀十五年七月六日，清信女口妙光身得惡，夢見造像五軀，今敬造成。” See Liu and Li, 38. In Chapter 4, I will explore the topic of donative inscriptions related to dreams and the practices of female donors.

646 CE), who expresses her wishes that “the whole family, husband and wife, adults and children, all the family members both inner and outer are safe, as well as the parents of the past seven generations and all sentient beings attain true awakening together,” as well as the universal wish of “parents of the past seven generations and all sentient beings attain true awakening together.”³⁷ In the Amitābha Buddha niche made by Zhang Jundao 張君道 and others (Niche N52, 656CE), the donors wish the whole family, “adults and children,” 合家大小 to be safe.³⁸

Many donors also made image niches for the collective merits for their neighbourhood, or all sentient beings, without indicating their purpose for making images. In the image niche sponsored by Zhang Junyan 張君彥 (Shrine S13, 644 CE), the former Aide of Henan District 河南縣丞, he stated the motivation for making an image shrine is to wish that “all sentient beings in the dharma realm attain the true awakening together (法界眾生俱登正覺).³⁹ A similar wish was expressed in an image shrine dedicated to the Amitābha Buddha by Xiahou Ke'er 夏侯客兒 in 651 CE (Shrine N56), in which she prayed for “the past parents, the existing family members and all beings in the dharma realm” and aspires for them to “attain true awakening together 俱登正覺.”⁴⁰

³⁷ Inscription No. 0201: “The wife of Yang Shuqi, lady Wang, made a shrine of the Amitābha Buddha along with two bodhisattvas. I wish the whole family, husband and wife, adults and children, all the family members both inner and outer are safe, as well as the parents of the past seven generations and all sentient beings attain true awakening together. On the eighth day of the tenth month of the twentieth year of Zhenguan reign period (November 20th, 646 CE). 楊叔察妻王敬造阿彌陀像一龕並二菩薩，願夫妻、合家大小、內外眷屬願得平安，過往七世父母、一切含生俱登正覺，貞觀廿年十月八日。”

³⁸ Inscription no. 0089: “The disciple Zhang Jundao, [...], Old woman Song (Song Po), reverently made a niche of the image of Amitābha Buddha. We wish the whole family, adults and children, are safe without [...], on the twentieth day of the sixth month of the first year of Xianqing reign period (July 17th, 656 CE). 弟子張君道、□□□、宋婆敬造阿彌陀像一龕，願合家大小平安無□□，顯慶元年六月廿日。

³⁹ Inscription No. 0157: “On the fifteenth day of the fifth month of the eighteenth year of Zhenguan reign period (June 24th, 644 CE), the former Aide of Henan District, Zhang Junyan, reverently made a niche of images. I wish all sentient beings in the dharma realm attain the true awakening together, and at the same time for all beings in the dharma realm reverently made a niche of images. 貞觀十八年五月十五日，前河南縣丞張君彥敬造像一龕，願法界眾生俱登正覺，並為法界眾生敬造像一龕。”

⁴⁰ Inscription No. 0082: “On the twenty-sixth day of the fourth month in the second year of Yonghui reign period (May 19th, 651 CE), the disciple and the mother of Menghui, Xiahou Ke'er, reverently made a shrine of the Amitābha Buddha along with two bodhisattvas, for the past parents, the existing family members and all beings in the dharma realm to attain true awakening

In the inscription 0074 of Niche N96, the donors stated a broad range of wishes which include “wish the dynastic foundation be forever stable” 皇基永固 to wish people who were on the “dark paths” 幽塗 could “go to the other shore immediately and ascend with purity” 趣彼岸而清昇.⁴¹

Some image niches were also made without indicating the themes of the images or including specific wishes. For example, Niche S26, donated by a “woman of pure faith” in 642 CE, only mentioned making a single statue of the Avalokiteśvara/Guanshiyin, who saves the world from suffering 救苦觀世音.⁴²

2.3.3 Project Themes

In addition to a wide range of motivations of these projects that reflect the Buddhist practices of the donors in Cave 159, diverse themes also demonstrate the prevalent Buddhist images and the transitions between the different cults in the early Tang. Among these 69 dated image niches, there are twenty niches dedicated to Amitābha Buddha, three for Guanyin/Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva, three for Śākyamuni Buddha, and only two for Maitreya Buddha (Table 2-3). In the early Tang, the projects related to Amitābha Buddha gained prominence and became dominant in the early Tang. According to the investigation by Tsukamoto, the earliest images of the Buddha of Immeasurable Life 無量壽佛 (i.e., the Amitābha Buddha) appeared at Longmen in 519 CE during the Northern Wei Dynasty. This

together. 永徽二年四月廿六日，弟子孟惠母夏侯客兒敬造阿彌陀像一龕並二菩薩，為過去父母、見存眷屬、法界眾生俱登正覺。”

⁴¹ See the translation of Inscription No. 0077, *Milexiang zhibei* 彌勒像之碑 (The Maitreya Image Shrine) in Appendix 1.

⁴² Inscription No. 0155: “On the twenty-fifth day of the third month of the sixteenth year of Zhenguan reign period of the Great Tang (April 29th, 642 CE), the woman of pure faith, Shi Dafei, reverently made an image of Guanshiyin (Avalokiteśvara) who saves world from suffering. 大唐貞觀十六年三月廿五日，清信女石姐妃敬造救苦觀世音一軀。”

indicates that the scriptures focused on the cult of Amitābha had already circulated in the Luoyang region by that time. He pointed out that the popularity of Amitābha in Luoyang could be influenced by one patriarch of Pure Land Buddhism, Tanlun 曇鸞 (c. 476–542) and his association with Bodhiruci 菩提流支 (? —527), who translated the *Wuliang shoujing lun* 無量壽經論 (*Treatise on the Sutra of Immeasurable Life*, T. 1524). Tanlun, having received the Pure Land teaching from Bodhiruci, spread the belief of Amitābha Buddha throughout Luoyang, and it eventually became popular by the early Tang.⁴³

Theme 造像題材	Amount 數量	Date 年代
Śākyamuni Buddha 釋迦牟尼佛	3	654-655 CE
Maitreya Buddha 彌勒佛 (菩薩)	2	648 CE
Amitābha Buddha 阿彌陀佛	20	646-666 CE
Avalokiteśvara 觀世音菩薩	3	642-649 CE
Kṣitigarbha 地藏菩薩	2	667-673 CE
Others and Unknown 其他及未知	39	

Table 2-3 Themes and Amounts of Images in Cave 159

Furthermore, evidence of new practices in this period, such as the burial cave, could be found in the South Binyang Cave inscriptions. In Inscription No. 0078 of Niche N53, completed in 648 CE, a woman described why she buried her late son in a “stone niche” and explained the reason she carried out this burial method was “to not go against his (her son’s) wish” and that he wanted

⁴³ Tsukamoto 1941, 141–242.

to be buried in a stone niche on the Longmen Hill (the West Hill) when he died. Therefore, she carried his body and buried him in a stone niche on the East Hill at Longmen.⁴⁴

2.4 A Donor of Multiple Facets: The Case of Cen Wenben

On the southern wall of the South Binyang Cave, there is a pair of image niches sponsored by Cen Wenben⁴⁵ and Cen Sizong 岑嗣宗 (d.u.), who might be a nephew of Cen Wenben according to their family lineage.⁴⁶ Cen Wenben is also the author of the inscriptions dedicated to Empress Wende, engraved on “The Stele for the Yique Buddha Shrine” 伊闕佛龕之碑. This inscription includes more than 1800 characters.⁴⁷ There is a consensus that the inscription on the colossal relief stele outside of the South Binyang Cave, the Yique Stele, was written by Li Tai who dedicated this inscription and a group of five colossal images in the cave to his late mother, Empress Wende.⁴⁸ According to the records of Ouyang Xiu in *Jigu lu*, the author of this

⁴⁴ The woman of pure faith Xiao for her late filial son reverently [had] made an Amitābha Buddha image along with two bodhisattvas. I wish that he might be reborn in the Land of Immeasurable Life, to see the body of Buddha from his present body, as for his own karma, may he eternally to sever the karma of life and death, and never again to be in the category of adversaries. However, before my late son abandoned his life, he wished to be buried in a stone niche at Mount Longmen. Because of the deep affection between mother and son, therefore, I would not go against his original wish. On the twenty-fifth day of the eighth month of the twenty-second year of Zhenguan reign period (September 17th, 648), (I carried my son's body) from the capital then buried (him) in a stone niche on the eastern mountain of this monastery. 清信女蕭為亡兒孝子敬造阿彌陀佛一軀并二菩薩，願當來往生無量壽國，從今身見佛身，己業永斷生死業，不復為怨家眷屬。然亡兒未捨壽以前，願亡後即於龍門山石龕內。母子情深不違本志，即以貞觀廿二年八月廿五日，從京□就此寺東山石龕內安□。(Inscription no. 0078, C159-N53).

⁴⁵ Relevant historical records and scholarship about Cen Wenben: See his biographies in *Jiu Tangshu*, 70/2535–2541; *Xin Tangshu*, 120/3965–3969. Discussions on Cen Wenben's inscriptions at South Binyang cave, see: McNair, Amy. “Early Tang Imperial Patronage at Longmen.” *Ars Orientalis* 24 (1994): 65–81. Discussion on Buddhist miracle tales about Cen Wenben, see Shinohara, Koichi, “A Source Analysis of the Ruijing Lu (“Records of Miraculous Scriptures”),” in *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 14, no. 1 (1991): 108–29. Sun Yinggang, “Imagined Reality: Urban Space and Sui-Tang Beliefs in the Underworld,” in *Studies in Chinese Religions* 1, no. 4 (2015): 380–381. For a translation of Cen Wenben's miracle tale please refer to: Donald Gjetson, *Miraculous Retribution: A Study and Translation of T'ang-lin's Ming pao chi* (1989), 196–197 and 210.

⁴⁶ The epitaph of Cen Sizong has been found and collected in *Quantangwen buyi* 全唐文補遺; see “大唐故洛州象军岑府君墓志铭”, in which it mentions he is a grandson of Cen Zhijing 岑之敬 (519–579 CE), and son of Cen Derun 岑德潤, and he held a position as the Military Administrator of Luo Prefecture 洛州參軍 then passed away in 646 CE, at the age of thirty-six; *Quantangwen buyi*, 99–100.

⁴⁷ Zhang 1980, 19.

⁴⁸ See Zhang Ruoyu, 1980, 19–24; McNair, 2007, 75–88.

inscription is Cen Wenben, and the calligrapher Chu Suiliang 褚遂良 (596–658 CE) transcribed it on the stele.⁴⁹ Why did Li Tai appoint Cen Wenben as the author of the inscription?

Let us look into the personal experience of Cen Wenben, especially the experience related to Buddhism, that is conveyed by different materials. Apart from his support for the project of building the colossal Buddha images and drawing up the inscription for the empress and prince, Cen Wenben was also the donor of a Buddha image shrine in this cave. This pair of image niches of Cen Wenben and Cen Sizong were numbered as S32 and S33, with the western shrine sponsored by Cen Wenben (S32) and the eastern one (S33) most likely sponsored by Cen Sizong, according to the inscription engraved below the shrines (Inscription No. 0152, Fig. 17):

On the fifth day of the sixth month of the fifteenth year of the Zhenguan reign period of Great Tang (July 18th, 641 CE), Cen Wenben reverently made the western *ta* (stūpa) of a buddha and two bodhisattvas, and Cen Sizong reverently made the eastern *gan* (earthenware) of a buddha and two bodhisattvas. (We) respectably wish all sentient beings attain true awakening together.⁵⁰ 大唐貞觀十五年六月五日，岑文本敬造西塔一佛二菩薩，岑嗣宗敬造東塔一佛二菩薩，仰願一切含識同登正覺。

⁴⁹ Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修, “The Inscription of the Three Shrines by Cen Wenben,” in *Jigu lu* (1966), vol. 5, 10–11. It says, “唐岑文本三龕記貞觀十五年，右三龕記，唐兼中書侍郎岑文本撰，起居郎褚遂良書。字畫尤奇偉，在河南龍門山，山夾伊水，東西可愛，俗謂其東曰香山，其西曰龍門。龍門山壁間鑿石為佛像，大小數百多，後魏及唐時所造，惟此三龕像最大，乃魏王泰為長孫皇后造也。” Translated and discussed by McNair 2007, 161.

⁵⁰ Both the character of *ta* 塔 and *gan* 坩 are not common quantifiers to describe the images cave and shrine in the donative inscriptions at Longmen, especially *gan*, with which the original meaning is “earthenware.” There are four inscriptions in the South Binyang Cave include *gan* as the quantifier, and 10 in total in the images shrines of the early Tang, between Yonghui and Xianqing reign period (650-661 CE) use this character to describe the images shrine. See Inscription No. 0032, 0088, 0093, 0320, 0395, 0408, 0998, 1034, 1037, 1372.



Fig. 2-17 Rubbing of the Donative Inscription of Cen Wenben and Cen Sizong (Inscription no. 0152) (LGRA Collection)

Compared to the size of other projects in Cave 159, this pair of niches are relatively small: Niche S32 is 57 cm high, with a width of 53 cm and a depth of 8 cm; the height of S33 is 38 cm, with a width of 33 cm and a depth of 5 cm. They both have the façade of two-tier arches, the most common layout in this phase. The image combination in each niche is the same, including a buddha image flanked by two attendant bodhisattvas (see Fig.2-18). Each buddha is sitting in the lotus position on a square pedestal, lifting his right hand in the Abhaya mudrā (gesture of fearlessness), wearing an undershirt underneath and a Han style robe on top. The attendant bodhisattvas stand on lotus pedestals on both sides, wearing high crowns and waist-ropes, either bringing two palms together in front of the chest or holding a water vessel in one hand down the

side of the body. The wall space below the Niche S32 (Cen Wenben’s shrine) has been polished and engraved with the donative inscription for this pair of Buddha niches.



Fig. 2-18 Niche S32 (right) and S33 (left) in Cave 159 (Lan LI, 2018)

If we compare the size and the style of Cen Wenben’s project to other image niches in the cave, we can see it is neither a conspicuously large project nor does it show a particularly elaborate artistic style. This project made by a high official is only moderate in size and is located among a cluster of Zhenguan image niches of similar dimensions (see Map 2-6-2 & 3). From the content of the inscription, we learn only the date and the identity of the donor as well as a succinct and non-specific universal vow. But by looking at other records of Cen Wenben preserved in different surviving historical records, we are able to delineate the background and the actions and attitudes towards Buddhism of this representative donor.

So far, I have gathered three types of existing sources about Cen Wenben that could be found in historical documents, Buddhist miracle tales and the inscriptions written by him. In his biographies in the two official Tang histories, Cen Wenben was well known for his outstanding

talent and excellent literary works, especially his writings of memorials and other official documents.

Wenben was a man of profound intellect and natural refinement, possessing both handsome features and graceful demeanor. His scholarship extended deeply into the classics and histories, where he demonstrated comprehensive and integrated understanding. Renowned for his eloquence, his writing garnered widespread acclaim.⁵¹

文本性沈敏，有姿儀，博考經史，多所貫綜，美談論，善屬文……

He also possesses a good reputation for the virtuous qualities of modesty, frugality, kindness, filial piety and loyalty, and then became one of the close counsellors of the emperor, who often asked his advice on state affairs. According to his biographies, Cen Wenben possesses all the virtues of a traditional scholar and government official:

Wenben, deeply rooted in his scholarly background, exuded an aura of modesty and courtesy. Upon encountering old acquaintances, he treated them with utmost respect, regardless of their humble origins. His abode reflected his unpretentious nature, devoid of elaborate adornments like mattresses or bed curtains. Renowned for his exemplary filial piety, he lovingly raised his younger brothers and nephews with genuine kindness and affection. Emperor Taizong often praised him for his 'broad-mindedness, sincerity, loyalty, and cautiousness,' declaring him a confidant worthy of trust.”⁵² 文本自以出自書生，每懷撝挹。平生故人，雖微賤必與之抗禮。居處卑陋，室無茵褥帷帳之飾。事母以孝聞，撫弟侄恩義甚篤。太宗每言其「弘厚忠謹，吾親之信之。」

⁵¹ *Jiu Tangshu*, 70/2535.

⁵² *Jiu Tangshu*, 70/2538.

Since Cen Wenben composed the inscriptions for the project sponsored by the Prince of Wei and even donated a Buddha image niche in the same cave, some scholars regard Cen Wenben and Chu Suiliang as Li Tai's supporters who wanted to help him become the heir instead of Li Chengqian 李承乾 (618—645 CE).⁵³ However, evidence from the biographies of Cen Wenben and Li Tai has challenged this assumption.

At that time (the eleventh year or seventeenth year of Zhenguan, 637 or 643 CE?), the Prince of Wei, (Li) Tai, who won the favour (of Taizong) that surpassed all other princes, initiated a large-scale construction of mansions and houses. Wenben thought this way of extravagance should not be encouraged. He submitted a memorial in which he stated the significance of frugality and said Tai should be restrained. (The emperor) Taizong commended him and bestowed three hundred duan (sections) of silk on him. In the seventeenth year (of Zhenguan reign period, 643 CE), he was promoted to the Grand Master of Imperial Entertainments with Silver Seal and Blue Ribbon (civil official of rank 3b in Tang).⁵⁴ 是時魏王泰寵冠諸王，盛修第宅，文本以為侈不可長，上疏盛陳節儉之義，言泰宜有抑損，太宗並嘉之，賜帛三百段。十七年，加銀青光祿大夫。

It is interesting to see that Cen Wenben submitted a memorial sometime between the eleventh and seventeenth year of the Zhenguan reign period (637–645 CE) to criticize Li Tai for transgressing his status by constructing large mansions and enjoying a luxurious life and to suggest that emperor Taizong constrain him. Meanwhile, the Grand Master of Remonstrance, Chu Suiliang 褚遂良 (the calligrapher who transcribed the Yique Buddha Shrine Stele), also

⁵³ *Xin Tangshu* 80/3571: “……（貞觀十七年）既而太子敗，帝陰許立泰，岑文本、劉洎請遂立泰為太子。長孫无忌固欲立晉王……” I could not find this incident in *Jiu Tangshu*, and *Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑑 (197/6195) has taken this opinion in *Xin Tangshu* to prove that Liu Ji and Cen Wenben supported Li Tai as the heir to Taizong. I am skeptical about Cen Wenben's supportive attitude toward Li Tai, for this record only appears in relatively late historical documents.

⁵⁴ *Jiu Tangshu*, 70/2538.

submitted a memorial around the fifteenth year of Zhenguan (641 CE, also the year of the completion of the South Binyang Cave project) remonstrated to the emperor that what he bestowed to Li Tai every month has exceeded the regulation of the crown prince, Li Chengqian.⁵⁵ According to the emperor Taizong's comment on Cen Wenben of "loyal and cautious," all the actions of Cen Wenben related to the South Binyang Cave should be regarded as examples of he obeyed the principles of a loyal official, which were rooted in traditional values, to cultivate the virtues such as righteousness, loyalty and humaneness in one's life.

Let's turn our eyes to materials other than historical records, in which we could find that Cen Wenben is not only an upright and loyal official but has also been depicted as a devotional Buddhist in contemporary Buddhist literature. Several Tang miracle stories record his participation in Buddhist practices, such as the anecdote of feasting the ghosts in *Mingbao ji* 冥報記⁵⁶ collected by Tang Lin 唐臨 (600—659 CE) which is also included in *Fayuan zhulin* 法苑珠林:⁵⁷

In the anecdote about Sui Renqian 眭仁蒨 (d.u.), Cen Wenben became a student of Renqian when he was young (before twenty). Renqian then told Wenben that he could see ghosts⁵⁸ and made friends with a ghost, Cheng Jing 成景 or the Aide Cheng 成長史, and requested a feast from Wenben for his friend. Since "The existences of ghosts and gods also need

⁵⁵ *Jiu Tangshu* 76?2654. Chu Suiliang says in his memorial, "昔聖人制禮，尊嫡卑庶。謂之儲君，道亞睿極，其為崇重，用物不計，泉貨財帛，興王者共之。庶子體卑，不得為例。……且魏王既新出閣，伏願常存禮則，言提其耳，且示儉節，自可在後月加歲增。……" See also Wu Jing 吳兢, comp., *Zhenguan zheng yao* 貞觀政要, edited and with critical introduction by Xie Baocheng 謝保成 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2003, *juan* 6, p. 350; Wu, Jing, Gabe van Beijeren, Glen Dudbridge, and Hilde Godelieve Dominique De Weerd. *The Essentials of Governance*. Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 102–104

⁵⁶ Translated by Gjertson, Donald E. *Miraculous Retribution: A Study and Translation of T'ang Lin's Ming-Pao Chi*. Berkley: Centers for South and Southeast Asia Studies, University of California, 1989. p. 197.

⁵⁷ *Fayuan zhulin* 法苑珠林, vol.6 "The Section of Six Destinies," T53n2122_p0315b09–p0316b12.

⁵⁸ It seems in this story, only Renqian could see ghosts and he instructed Wenben of how to arrange the feast and prepare presents for the ghosts, and help with the communication between Wenben and Jing, as "亦傳景意辭謝."

to eat but could not have enough food and frequently suffer from starvation 鬼神道亦有食，然不能得飽，常苦飢，” Renqian requested help from Wenben to treat the ghosts to a meal, and they would be full for a year. Wenben thus started to prepare delicacies for feeding the Aide Cheng and his servants, and set up the feast on the water’s edge, because “ghosts do not want to enter human’s houses 鬼不欲入人屋.” At the banquet, Wenben also prepared a present of fake gold and silk, made of tin and paper, for the ghosts by following Renqian’s instructions.⁵⁹ Then, unexpectedly, he refused the gratitude from Cheng Jing for telling his lifespan.

Another Buddhist practice Wenben performed in this story was making an image for his teacher: After a few years, Renqian contracted a severe disease due to the summons from the official of Mount Tai 太山府君 to appoint him as an assistant magistrate of the netherworld.⁶⁰ Renqian decided to go to Mount Tai to report (that he did not want to accept the position) in front of the official and asked Wenben to prepare the luggage for him, but it seemed too late because the document of appointment had almost done and he must die when it is complete. Jing suggested Renqian urgently make a Buddha image so the document will automatically expire 急作一佛像，彼文書自消. Wenben then donated three thousand *qian* to paint an image of the Buddha on the western wall of the monastery for Renqian, and the document expired as expected.

⁵⁹ It is interesting to see the application of fake gold and silk for the deceased from the other realm, made of cheap, light and flammable materials such as tin and paper in the Sui and early Tang period. The activities of burning paper productions for the dead approximately appeared in the Wei and Jin dynasties and has become a common rite in the Tang dynasty. From historical documents, in *Fengshi wenjian lu* 封氏聞見記 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2005), vol. 6, 60: “紙錢,” “魏、晉以來，始有（紙錢）其事。”“送葬，為鑿紙錢，積錢為山，盛加雕飾，舁以引柩...” Also in *Jiu Tangshu*, 130/3617: “王嶼傳”: “.....嶼專以祀事希幸，每行祠禱，或焚紙錢，禱祈福祐，近於巫覡，由是過承恩遇。”

⁶⁰ The geographical location of Mount Tai 太山 or 泰山 is in the eastern region of North China, Shangdong Province today. In following paragraph, it explains the duty of the official of Mount Tai is similar to the Director of the Imperial Secretariat in the human realm “太山府君尚書令，錄五道神如諸尚書.” For the evolution of the belief in the Mount Tai and its connection to the nether/unseen realm in and after the later Han dynasty, see Yü, Ying-Shih, “‘O Soul, Come Back!’ A Study in The Changing Conceptions of The Soul and Afterlife in Pre-Buddhist China,” in *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 47, no. 2 (1987): 387–395.

In the miracle tale of Sui Renqian, we see he acted as a mentor of Buddhist practice for Cen Wenben when he was young, through instructing him how to feed the ghosts⁶¹ and make fake paper productions for the deceased and explaining the apparatus and hierarchy in different realms as well as how they interact with each other. Furthermore, in another anecdote in *Mingbao ji*, Cen Wenben is depicted as a devoted Buddhist who recites the *Lotus Sutra* and is saved by his pious actions.⁶² One episode in this story is exactly associated with the practice related to the Chapter of the Universal Gate of the *Lotus Sutra*.⁶³ When Wenben took a boat to cross the River Wu, an accident happened: the boat broke apart in the middle of the river, all the passengers fell into the water and drowned. At that moment, Wenben heard a voice saying, “If you chant the name of the Buddha, you will not die 但念佛，必不死也。” Then he followed and chanted the Buddha’s name three times, and the waves pushed him out to the river bank. After this incident, Wenben set up a feast in Jiangling (his hometown) and invited monks to join. There came a guest monk who predicted his future by saying, “This all under the heaven (the world) is just in unrest, you are fortunate to have not affected by this calamity and will finally live in the peace and tranquillity and become wealthy and noble 天下方亂，君幸不預其災，終逢太平致富貴也。” After saying this, the monk left and disappeared immediately, then Wenben found two *śarīra* in his bowl. As we know from his biography, this prophecy was fulfilled later in Cen Wenben’s life.

⁶¹ About the tradition of feeding the hungry ghosts 施食餓鬼. This ritual has been traced back to Ānanda, who saw a hungry ghost with burning mouth and asked the Buddha for the way to feed them, “佛告阿難：‘若有善男子、善女人，欲求長壽、福德增榮，速能滿足檀波羅蜜，每於晨朝、及一切時，悉無障礙，取一淨器，盛以淨水，置少飯粃及諸餅食等，以右手加器，誦前陀羅尼滿七遍……能令諸鬼一切恐怖悉皆除滅，離餓鬼趣’”. See *Dhāraṇī Sutra for Saving the Burning-Mouth Hungry Ghosts* 佛說救拔焰口餓鬼陀羅尼經, T21n1313, translated by monk Amoghavajra (Bukong 不空). See English translation by Charles Orzech, “Saving the Burning-Mouth Hungry Ghost,” in *Religions of China in Practice*, ed. Donald S. Lopez, Jr. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996), 278–283.

⁶² *Mingbao ji* compiled by Tang Lin, in *Fayuan zhulin*, chapter 56 “The Section of Stimulus-Response” 感應緣, T53n2122_p0712c22–p0713a01.

⁶³ See In Chapter of Universal Gate, T09no262_pp56c02-58b7.

As mentioned in his official biographies, Cen Wenben had an excellent reputation for his filial piety towards his parents and for taking care of his family, “He is famous for serving his mother with filial piety and has raised his younger brothers and nephews with very sincere kindness and affection.” 事母以孝聞，撫弟侄恩義甚篤。In his writing of the inscription of Li Tai’s project, he highlighted the pure filiality 純孝 of the Prince and pointed out that only those who are upright and purely filial could achieve great awakening through Buddhist practices.⁶⁴

Therefore, it is impossible to ignore the connection between Buddhist practices and filial devotion or considering serving parents with filial piety as an important Buddhist practice in the early Tang. As indicated in the inscription below, Li Tai’s project of building Buddhist images for his mother and decorating the South Bingyang Cave is probably an act of reciprocity (No. 0074):

Behold the splendor of the *dharmakāya*, and the eight tribulations naturally dissolve. Hear the echoes of great awakening and ascend to the six heavens of the realm of desire. How could those lacking uprightness and honesty compare this? With charitable acts, (Li Tai) constructs the Buddha's works, repaying the kindness of his mother's nurture. Expanding the fields of merit, he aids the path to enlightenment. How could those devoid of pure filial piety achieve this? 是以睹法身之妙而八難自宛，聞大覺之風而六天可陟，非正直者，其孰能與於此也？善建佛事，以報鞠育之慈，廣修福田，以資菩提之業，非純孝者其孰能與於此也。

The writing style of this inscription is not very religious, nor did it try to convert people to Buddhism directly. The style of this inscription is more like prose (and eulogy), which we could grasp the virtue of Empress Wende, the filial piety of Prince Wei, and the promoted status of

⁶⁴ Also see the discussion on Buddhist scriptures and filial piety during the Tang in Ch'en Kenneth, "Filial Piety in Chinese Buddhism," in *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, no. 28 (1968): 89–97.

Luoyang and Longmen as the centre in the Chinese Buddhist cosmology as well as the highlight of conducting filial piety in Buddhist practices.⁶⁵ These detailed descriptions make this inscription more like a brilliant literary work than religious propaganda.

By examining these three sources together, we gain a richer understanding of high-ranking government officials who practiced Buddhism in the first half of the 7th century Tang Dynasty. Cen Wenben emerges as an exemplary figure who embodied both Confucian virtues and Buddhist devotion. The historical records highlight his reputation for filial piety and kindness towards his family, reflecting traditional Confucian values. On the other hand, the contemporary miracle tale portrays him as a dedicated Buddhist practitioner. In the South Binyang Cave project, he highlights the connection between building Buddhist works and conducting filial piety in the inscriptions. As Teiser points out, Tang society is crucial for assimilating the “imported” Buddhist philosophies and rituals into Chinese religious traditions.⁶⁶ One strategy the Buddhist community engaged in was to adopt filial devotion as one of the universal motivations to convert people from different social classes.

Let us go back to my question proposed earlier: Why did Li Tai choose Cen Wenben to write the inscription? Why did Cen Wenben highlight the filial devotion of Li Tai and connect it to the Buddhist practice? Because Cen was an ideal candidate who has already been famous for possessing mainstream virtues, filial piety, towards his parents and also one of the closest people to the emperor Taizong and also a widely-known Buddhist, thus his figure reflected perfect assimilation of both traditional (Confucian) virtues and the Buddhist idea.⁶⁷ This purpose also has

⁶⁵ We could compare this genre with other surviving works by Cen Wenben that were dedicated to religious purposes, such as *Meng fashi bei* 孟法師碑/the Stele of Master Meng.

⁶⁶ Stephen Teiser, *The Ghost Festival in Medieval China* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1988), 12.

⁶⁷ In Cen Wenben's biography, he redressed the injustice for his father when he was fourteen years old. Then his father rehabilitated his position and Wenben became famous (for his reputation of defending for his father). See *Jiu Tangshu*, 70/2535. “父之象，隋末爲邯鄲令，嘗被人所訟，理不得申……（文本）時年十四，詣司隸稱冤，辭情慨切，召對明辯，眾頗異之。試令作蓮花賦，下筆便成，屬意甚佳，合毫莫不歎賞。其父冤雪，由是知名。”

been explained in later Buddhist literature, as Zongmi 宗密 (780–841 CE) commented on the *Yulanpen Sutra*, “The Great Mulian (Maudgalyāyana) wanted to save/ferry his parents because of his mind of filial piety 大目犍連因心之孝，欲度父母。”⁶⁸

2.5 Summary

In this chapter, we have seen the representative image niches, inscriptions and donors in the South Binyang Cave (Cave 159) in the early Tang. We can reconstruct the entire construction process in this cave, from which the prevalent Buddhist ideas and related practices associated with donors were unfolded, as well as the religious and political networks that connected them. All these activities reflected the dynamic development of Buddhism and its impact to the Buddhist community in Luoyang during the early Tang.

Moreover, differing from the practices based on the canonical doctrines, the practices of cutting stone caves and niches, making Buddhist images towards specific cults, as well as the relevant worship, have been regarded as popular practices in Chinese Buddhism and conducted by a broad range of donors. From the example of the South Binyang Cave, we could see donors from the imperial family to ordinary individuals. By gathering and comparing the materials in various media of Cen Wenben, we also catch a glimpse of how people with different social statuses practice the same Buddhist activities on the same site. Beyond all doubt, there is no clear boundary to tell the difference between people belonging to different social classes and their motivations for making Buddhist images.

⁶⁸ T39_505a [0505a06]: Zongmi 宗密, *Yulanpen jingshu* 孟蘭盆經疏: 始於混沌。塞乎天地。通人神。貫貴賤。儒釋皆宗之。其唯孝道矣。應孝子之懇誠。救二親之苦厄。酬昊天恩德。其唯孟蘭盆之教焉。……大目犍連因心之孝。欲度父母。報乳哺之恩故。出家修行。神通第一。觀見亡母。墮餓鬼中。自救不能。白佛求法。佛示盆供。救母倒懸。繇愛其親。施及一切故。

Another conclusion confirmed by the projects in this cave is the emphasis on the traditional value such as filial piety in Buddhist image-making practices and the cultivation of merits for people in the other world. In addition to emphasizing the filial devotion of making images for beneficiaries, we could also see the development of new practices concerning the dead conducted in the Buddhist caves and stone shrines that emerged in the Tang dynasty. A large number of image shrines in Tang were dedicated to the dead family member in their inscriptions. As a result of this tendency, the dissemination of Buddhism not only absorbed the traditional value such as filial piety into its critical ideas but also began to take care of the other aspect of social life, such as the funerary practices, the disposition of the dead and the communication with the other realm.

Again, in the case of Niche N53, its inscription has revealed how practitioners in the early Tang used the stone shrine to conduct the burial ritual for the deceased family member to us, and this is not the only example of the burial cave at Longmen during the Tang dynasty. Even though it is impossible to store the remains of the dead in this half-a-meter shrine, in which the images of the Amitābha triad have also been placed, the information from the inscription indicates that Lady Xiao buried her son in another place somewhere on the opposite bank of the Yi River, the eastern hill and under the scope of a monastery. It is worth noting that archaeologists of the Longmen Grottoes Research Academy have identified a couple of burial caves from the latest investigation. In the next chapter, I will explore the potential connection between the emergence of this new burial practice and the rise of the Amitābha Buddha cult and his Pure Land. I will discuss the motivations of the donors, their religious and social backgrounds, and how archaeological evidence allows us to reconstruct the site and practices.

Chapter Three: Cave Burials and Buddhist Funerary Practices at Longmen

In this chapter, I introduce inscriptions associated with the funerary practice of cave burial at Longmen, then trace the origin and development of this particular practice in Buddhist scriptures and historical documents, such as the hagiographies of eminent monks. By carefully examining content about the conducting of burials and the related rituals as reflected in the inscriptions and archaeological sites at Longmen, I try to reconstruct how Chinese Buddhists in the Tang blended a death practice with Indian roots into traditional Chinese funerary culture and made this radical practice into a new path to attain their religious goals or even control their lives.

To the south of the South Binyang Cave, the cliff is honeycombed with hundreds of small or medium-sized image caves and niches, most of which could be dated to the early period of Emperor Gaozong's reign (r. 649–683 CE). One specific inscription (No. 507) engraved on the doorway of a small and unimpressive cave (Cave 440), with the content almost completely preserved, gives us explicit information about the donors behind this project as well as the practices related to a unique mortuary custom of the Tang.

According to the donative inscription and the remnants *in situ*, there once was an image of Śākyamuni in the King Udayana style set against the rear wall (Fig. 3-1).¹ The donor who sponsored this cave declares that he excavated a cave as a burial site for his late wife, to fulfill her last wish and follow ritual propriety:²

¹ The King Udayana style Śākyamuni image (*Youtianwang zao shijia xiang* 優填王造釋迦像) at Longmen represents a unique theme found there in the early Tang (ca. 650–690 CE). According to the investigation conducted by Li Wensheng, at least seventy Udayana images and forty-two niches have been identified at Longmen, five at Gongyi Grottoes 鞏義石窟寺 (about 55 km east to Longmen). The primary features of the images of Udayana style at Longmen include the muscular body, sitting with two feet on the ground, baring the right shoulder and no pleats on the robe. For the introduction of this image to the Tang, there is a consensus that Xuanzang brought a sandalwood Buddha image from India 刻檀佛像, which could be the prototype of the Udayana images at Longmen. See: Hida Romi 1986; Li Wensheng, 1985; Okada Ken 岡田健 1996; Sofukawa Hiroshi 曾布川寬 1988.

² Zhang 1991, 160. Also see Liu and Li 1998, 113–114.



Fig.3-1 Cave 440 (from north to south) (Lan LI, 2016)

On the twenty-third day of the eleventh month of the first year of Longshuo 龍朔 reign period of the great Tang (December 19, 661 CE), the Gentleman-literateur in Luoyang District, Shen Bao, on behalf of his late wife Lady Lou, reverently made a niche for the image of Śākyamuni Buddha image made by King Udayana ... In the twelfth month of the fifth year of the Xianqing 顯慶 reign period (January 6th-February 4th, 661 CE), she was lying in bed due to illness in our mansion in the Sigong Ward 思恭坊 and [said], “When we came of age (literally [the age of wearing] hairpin and cap), we made the promise that we would live together until old age. However, our intention was not blessed, and now I suffer from an incurable disease. After my death, please comply with my will.” On the twenty-eighth day this month (February 2nd, 661 CE), she passed away in our private residence. (I immediately invited the monastics and the Buddha, built a dharma altar, set up the offerings

and presented incense, and did not realize that seven times seven days (forty-nine days after death) had passed. On the day determined by divination, by following the auspicious omen,³ I carried (her body) in the fragrant hearse that decorated with treasured banners to the bank of Yi River. Her corpse lays in the concealed cliff, and her soul is hidden in the solitary rock. This is truly called taking the method of *shituo* (尸陀, Skt. *śītavana*), as the ritual model.”

大唐龍朔元年十一月二十三日，洛陽縣文林郎沈哀為亡妻婁氏敬造優填王像一龕，……顯慶五年十二月，寢疾于思恭之第而(譚里)曰：“笄冠之初，契期偕老。豈意非福，痼瘵纏躬。不諱之後，願從所志。”其月二十八日薨於私第，遂延僧請佛，度建法壇，設供陳香，累七不覺。篋口荀日，⁴休兆葉從，寶幢香車，送歸伊濱，屍陳戢崖，魂藏孤岩，實曰屍陀法，禮也。

Even though we cannot ascertain all the precise procedures included in this ritual of *shituo* in the Tang dynasty and how this funerary practice was carried out in a cave or mountain niche located at a Buddhist site, three facts about cave burial in this period may be summarized from the inscription:

1. It is presented as the deceased's original purpose to inter her body in a cave, and this burial method is regarded as a ritual. This situation indicates that the idea of cave burial, or burial in a Buddhist site, has already become one of the burial methods adopted among lay Buddhists in the early Tang.

2. The practice of cave burial includes two parts: the memorial service before the burial

³ The original text is 篋口荀日,休兆葉從, which seems a supplementary expression of 鬼篋葉從 in contemporary epitaphs, in which the descriptions of the selection of an ideal location for the dead through divination and geomancy are very common. Please refer to *Tangdai muzhi huibian* 唐代墓誌彙編 (TMH), for example, 【顯慶 091】“大唐故顯慶四年二月二日張達妻李夫人墓誌銘並序：今以吉辰令月，龜篋葉從，若有魂靈，安其宅兆。……” The earliest version of this expression is probably deprived of *Shangshu*, See the Chapter of “Dayu mo 大禹謨” in *Shangshu* 尚書, “龜篋協從，卜不習吉.” Please refer to *Shangshu zhengyi* 尚書正義 (1999), 95—96.

⁴ It could possibly be 篋「居/宅」荀日.

and the ceremony of burying the corpse on site, from which we could see how Buddhist monastics could be involved in the ceremony and the role of non-Buddhist/traditional Chinese funerary practices, such as the site selection by divination,⁵ within a context of Buddhist funerary practice.

The memorial ceremony prior to burial includes five steps: 1) Inviting monastics and the Buddha; 2) Establishing a dharma altar; 3) Setting up offerings and incense (for forty-nine days); 4) Determining the burial date and location through divination and seeing auspicious omens; 5) Conveying the body to the site.

Apart from the first three steps, steps four and five are common in the traditional funeral. It is common to see the term “divining the house location” (*buzhai*, 卜宅) in a Tang epitaph, describing the process of choosing the tomb (or *yinzhai* 阴宅, the house of the dead) using divination. However, rarely does it appear in a Buddhist scripture or the record of a Buddhist funeral.

3. For practitioners in Tang, cave burial was closely associated with the practice of *shituo* 尸陀, a burial method that originated from India, which advocates abandoning the corpses in the wild to feed animals.⁶ However, in this case, this practice has been adopted by Chinese Buddhists with some accommodation to local conditions.

Further inscriptions related to cave burial have been identified at Longmen, from which we may learn about the social and religious background of the occupants of the burial caves and also

⁵ Please refer to Choo’s discussion on burial divination, see Choo 2022, 119–137.

⁶ There are a number of works that discuss the burial of exposing the body 露尸葬 or the forest of corpses 尸陀林: See Liu Shufen 劉淑芬, 2008, “林葬——中古佛教露尸葬研究之一,” in *Zhonggu de fojiao yu shehui* 中古的佛教與社會, 183–243. Liu Shufen. “Death and the Degeneration of Life: Exposure of the Corpse in Medieval Chinese Buddhism.” *Journal of Chinese Religions* 28 (2000): 1–30. Also, see Wang Lei Wang, Lei 王磊, “Shilun zhongguo shiqi fojiaotu de quanshen zangfa 試論中古時期佛教徒的全身葬法” in *Journal of Sun Yat-Sen* 中山大學學報 (社會科學版), no. 2 (2013): 107–114.

take a glance at this unique Buddhist funerary practice.

Burying a body in a cave or mountain niche was not a new invention of the Tang Buddhists. It may be traced back to early Buddhist ascetic practice in China, especially among monks who conducted austerities in remote mountain area. If we turn to the surviving historical record, we find a useful amount of evidence in the hagiographies of eminent monks before the Tang or during the early Tang period. These records offer exemplary models of the unique burial practice as well as evidence of new developments of funerary Buddhism in medieval China.

Why were the dead placed in caves at a Buddhist site, and how did Chinese Buddhists carry out this practice?

By combining materials conveyed by three different media—surviving textual documents, donative inscriptions as well as archaeological findings—this chapter aims to explore the evolution of this particular funerary practice from its origin to the later development of Chinese Buddhism in Tang.

3.1 The origin and evolution of cave burial in hagiographies of eminent monks

Several records in the *Biographies of the Eminent Monks* (*Gaoseng zhuan* 高僧傳, hereafter *Biographies*) touch upon the cave burial in the early period of Chinese Buddhism. The biography of Shan Daokai 單道開 (?—359 CE) says he lived in, and finally passed away in, a mountain hut.⁷ Before he died, he admonished his disciples to “place his corpse in a stone cave” 以屍置石

⁷ For the studies on Shan Daokai, see Kory, Stephan N. “Ambivalent Roots and Definitive Branches: Discourses on the Holy Man Shan Daokai (d. 359? AD).” *Asia Major* 31, no. 2 (2018): 69–106. Again, various descriptions of the burial cave for Shan’s body in later historical documents: see Ouyang Xun 歐陽詢 (557—641 CE) et al., comp., *Yiwen leiju* 藝文類聚 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1982), chapter 73, p. 3a: “善道開尸在石室，北壁下，形體朽壞止有白骨在，昔在都識此道士，聞之使人慨然，其業行殊異，當蟬蛻解骨耳，石室中先有甌盛香得，編掃除燒香。” Which talks about the extraordinary death of Shan and the disposition of his body in a stone chamber. It is assumed that he was not really dead but “molted like a cicada and released from his bones.”

穴中, and then they followed his wishes by “moving the body into a stone chamber” 移之石室. Four years later (363 CE), visitors climbed the mountain and visited his stone chamber and saw “Kai’s skeleton, incense and candles, and pottery wares still existed” 開形骸及香火瓦器猶存.⁸

Some cases indicate the mummification⁹ of eminent monks. He Luojie 訶羅竭 (?—298 CE) travelled to the west and stopped in a mountain cave to practice austerities. He then passed away during deep meditation. When his disciples cremated him by following “the method of western regions” (Ch. *xiguo fa* 西國法), his body became indestructible and even was unburnt by fire. They then “moved his body back into the stone chamber” 移還石室, and after thirty years, his corpse still sat steadily in the cave.¹⁰ In addition, the story of He Luojie is the earliest example we could find about conducting the cave burial for a Buddhist monk, as well as firstly presenting the connection between the meditative approach and this new burial method.

Similarly, Zhu Tanyou 竺曇猷 (d.u.), who had practiced austerities in his lifetime, died in a “mountain chamber” 山室 by the end of the Taiyuan reign period (376–396 CE).¹¹ His biography also mentions that some extraordinary situations happened to his body, which turned into green colour without decay for a long period.

Apart from being used as a place for meditation and cave burial, a stone chamber was also linked to other Buddhist mortuary practices, such as self-immolation. Huishao 慧紹 (423–451 CE) conducted the self-cremation in a stone chamber 石室 that was stacked with firewood, in

⁸ T50n2059_p0387b02–c14.

⁹ For early Buddhist mummies in China, see Robert Sharf, “The Idolization of Enlightenment: On the Mummification of Ch’an Masters in Medieval China” *History of Religions* 32.1 (1992): 5–10.

¹⁰ T50n2059_p0389a03–a16.

¹¹ T50n2059_p396c–397a. Cave exposure also appears to have been common among Dunhuang monks. In addition to Shan Daokai and Zhu Tanyou, one similar biography may be found in the meditation master Bo Sengguang 帛僧光 (T50n2059_p395c). Furthermore, a monk from Central Asia (Samarkand or Kangju 康居) named Shi Huiming 釋慧明, who journeyed to Zhejiang one century later during the Southern Qi dynasty (479–502) was so inspired by Zhu Tanyou’s example that he meditated and chanted scriptures alongside Zhu’s corpse until his own death at age 70 (T50n2059_p400b4–11). See Sharf, “Idolization,” 7–8; and Zürcher, *Buddhist Conquest*, 145–146.

which he made a niche (*kan* 龕) to accommodate his body.¹² When the cremation began, he lit the pyre and then sat in the niche. In the same way, Sengyu 僧瑜 made a pile of firewood into a niche 集薪為龕, then burnt himself while sitting in the niche.¹³

By referring to the examples in *Biographies*, it is apparent that in the early development of cave burial practices, the idea of burying the bodies in stone chambers or caves was not initiated by those eminent monks nor the disciples who cautiously obeyed the last wishes of their masters (except Shan Daokai's case). It appears that the emergence of the cave burial derives from ascetic practices conducted by eminent monks renowned for their *toutuo* 頭陀 austerities (Skt. *dhūta*), especially those who lived outside of the society and conducted long-term meditation in the mountains.

The specific circumstances of how Chinese monastics accepted and practiced cave burial in later periods, from the Northern dynasties until the Tang dynasty, becomes clearer when we delve into the biographies in *The Continued Biographies of Eminent Monks* (*Xu gaoseng zhuan* 續高僧傳, hereafter *Continued Biographies*). Not only did an increasing number of biographies mention this burial practice, but the compiler Daoxuan 道宣 (596—667 CE) also provides relevant background information and details of several procedures, including the careers of eminent monks, their deathbed rituals, the burial ceremonies and devotional actions of their followers after the funerals. All of these records enrich the bigger picture of the adoption and evolution of cave burial from the Northern Dynasties to the Tang.

In the *Continued Biographies*, approximately thirty eminent monks directly adopted the cave burial as a way to dispose of their bodies or displayed death practices related to a cave,

¹² Benn, James A, *Burning for the Buddha: Self-Immolation in Chinese Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), Discussions on *kan* 龕 (niche or coffin) in 34, 179, 185, 270n.69 and 299n.49.

¹³ T50n2059_p0405a08—b01.

which usually describe cave burial as excavating a cave or niche to place the body (*zao ku/ kan chuzhi* 鑿窟/龕處之).¹⁴ For example, in the biography of Jizang 吉藏 (549—623 CE), after his death, there was an imperial order that “ordered a stone niche on Nanshan Mountain be sought to accommodate (the body)” (*ling yu Nanshan mi shikan anzhi* 令於南山覓石龕安置). His disciples then followed the order and “collected his remaining bones and buried them in the northern cliff (of Zhixiang Monastery)” (*shou qi yigu zaoshi yiyu beiyan* 收其餘骨鑿石瘞于北巖).¹⁵ Also, the disciples of Zhilin 智琳 (?—613 CE) buried his whole-body relic in a mountain niche (*quanshen sheli ji bian shankan* 全身舍利即窆山龕).¹⁶ It is noteworthy that Zhilin’s original intention was to dispose of his body with the method of *shituolin* (尸陀林, Skt. *śītavana*), which refers to exposing the body in a forest. However, his disciples apparently declined his request by building a stūpa (Ch. *fangfen* 方墳) and a mountain niche (Ch. *shankan* 山龕) to accommodate his body instead. Even though no evidence in Zhilin’s case shows that his burial niche was open to the public and wildlife, we may presume it was left open since his original wish was to expose the body. Furthermore, the evidence from other contemporary biographies indicates that some of the burial caves were open to the wild. For example, the burial niche of Fachun 法純 (519—603 CE) in the Sui dynasty (581—618 CE) was said to have “the exterior door open to feed the birds and beasts” (*wai kai xuemen yi shi feizou* 外開穴門以施飛走), which corresponds with the *Shituolin* method of Zhilin.¹⁷

¹⁴ Meanwhile, there are a number of biographies that indicate many monks conducted meditation and practiced austerities in a cave or mountain niche when they were living. For example, the disciple of Kang Fanglang, Lingshao 令韶, who practiced contemplation in a cave for a few days without standing up, see T50n2059_p0347a28–b24. Fazan 法瓚 enjoyed conducting meditation and practiced the austerity in a cave 安心寂定, 樂居巖穴, see T50n2060_p0506c19–p0507a18.

¹⁵ T50n2060_p0513c19–p0515a08.

¹⁶ T50n2060_p0504a27.

¹⁷ T50n2060_p0575b17–p0576a22. Liu Shufen. “Death and the Degeneration of Life: Exposure of the Corpse in Medieval Chinese Buddhism.” *Journal of Chinese Religions* 28 (2000): 9.

Additionally, some burial sites were supposed to open for later visitors to pay their respects. In the biography of Faxi 法喜 (563—623 CE), people visited his burial cave and witnessed his imperishable appearance.¹⁸ This situation is similar to Zhilin, whose original wish was also to expose his body in the wild but ended up being buried in a mountain cave.

There are abundant descriptions of the incorruptible bodies of those eminent monks who have been buried in a cave or stone niche so later visitors could directly see their bodies from the outside, so it is easy to speculate that these caves or niches were not sealed. Shiyu 世瑜 (583—645 CE) and Sengche 僧徹 (d.u.) were buried in a sitting position in a mountain niche, and both of their bodies still looked the same as their living appearances after three years (*sanzai zhihou, youcun chuzuo* 三載之後，猶存初坐).¹⁹ Afterwards, the disciples of Sengche even covered his body with lacquered cloth, and then made images as well as copied scriptures that were dedicated to him.²⁰ It is still unclear whether they made the images according to the appearance of their master. However, I suspect there is some connection between shaping the whole-body relics of eminent monks as sacred images and the practices of cave burial. In the biography of Huikuan 惠寬 (584—653 CE), it says his “numinous appearance erectly sat in the mountain as if he were still living” (*lingxiang zaishan, duanzuo ruzai* 靈相在山，端坐如在), which suggests that he was buried in a way that his body could be seen by the later visitors, either in the way of exposure in forest or in a cave burial.²¹ Likewise, Jietuo 解脫 still sat in a mountain cave where could be seen from the outside many years after his death in the Yonghui 永徽 reign period (650—656 CE). This feature of leaving the doors open exactly conforms to the description in

¹⁸ T50n2060_p0587a20-p0588a04.

¹⁹ T50n2060_p0595b20-c25.

²⁰ Sharf, “Idolization,” 13.

²¹ T50n2060_p0600b29-p0601b29

Continued Biographies, “ascending to the cliff and hiding in the caves, in which there are bodies could be seen from a distance” (*chengya louku, wangyuan zhiren* 乘崖漏窟, 望遠知人).²²

Nevertheless, not all the burial caves and niches were intended to be open to either pilgrims or animals. In the biography of Zhiyi 智顛 (538–598 CE), his burial is described as: “The dry skeleton is erect and sits steadily as if he is still living, while [the tomb] is sealed with a stone gate that shuts with a metal lock” (*kuhai teli duanzuo rushing, yiyi shimen guanyi jinyue* 枯骸特立端坐如生, 瘞以石門關以金鑰).²³ If we refer to the burial method proposed by Zhiyi himself, “pile the stones to encircle the corpse, plant pine trees to cover the tomb” (*leishi zhoushi zhisong fukan* 累石周屍植松覆坎), it is easy to infer that this burial method also involves the preservation of the whole-body relic and a burial space that consists of a stone chamber and a stone door.²⁴ Furthermore, in the biography written by Zhiyi’s disciple, Guanding 灌頂 (561—623 CE), he described Zhiyi’s burial niche as a meditation niche (*chankan* 禪龕) as well as a niche tomb (*kanfen* 龕墳), which presumably reveal the multiple functions of this type of stone niche/cave.²⁵

If a burial cave were to be sealed for some reason, that would make it closer in form and function to a tomb. For example, from the biography of Huichao 慧超 (?—624 CE),²⁶ we can see his body was first accommodated in a newly excavated cave next to a monastery, then after his followers had paid their respects and given offerings for a whole year, his disciples decided to seal the cave, build a stūpa above it and to engrave an inscription on the right side (*hou sui sai qi*

²² T50n2060_p685a23.

²³ T50n2060_p0567c28–29.

²⁴ T50n2060_p0567a22.

²⁵ “道俗奔赴燒香散華，號繞泣拜過十日，已殮入禪龕之內……道俗弟子侍從靈儀還遺囑之地，龕墳雖掩妙迹常通。”T50n2050_p0196c02–06.

²⁶ T50n2060_p0581c22—p0582a21. In Huichao’s biography, it says he passed away in the seventh year of Wude reign period (624 CE) at the age of more than seventy years 年七十餘, so his year of birth could be located between 545 and 554 CE.

kuhu, zhita yusheng, leiming yuyou 後遂塞其窟戶，置塔於上，勒銘於右). The reason for sealing a burial site should probably be to protect the relics/corpses from incursions from outside. The disciples of Fashun 法順, for example, were afraid of intrusion by others since there was an extraordinary fragrance dispersed in the place of the body, so they sealed him in a niche (*xuelü deng kongyou waiqin, nai cangyu kannei* 學侶等恐有外侵，乃藏于龕內).²⁷

3.2 Major features of cave burial practice (See Appendix 2)

3.2.1 Textual practice and mental cultivation

Let us first look into the principal scriptures which those eminent monks carrying out cave burials studied and lectured on, as well as the major mental cultivation they conducted. It is not surprising that the sūtra they upheld the most often is the *Lotus Sūtra*. More than ten biographies among those thirty eminent monks show evidence that these monks learned and based their practices on the *Lotus Sūtra*. For example, Zhilin is said to have upheld the Lotus Sutra and *Vimalakīrti Sūtra* (*Fahua, weimo, shouchi chengsong* 法華、維摩，受持成誦) and also practiced the Tattvasiddhi and Vinaya (*yuanlin chenglun, jianxi pini* 爰稟成論，兼習毗尼). Sengfeng elucidated the Lotus Sutra in his last lecture (*Miaofahua jing, zuihou yanbie* 妙法華經，最後言別).²⁸ Faxi regarded the *Lotus Sūtra* as the origin of all the scriptures he learned (*yi Fahua wei zong* 以法華為宗). Huixian 慧顯 (ca. 570—627 CE) took reciting the Lotus Sutra as his occupation (*yi song Fahua weiye* 以誦法華為業).

Aside from the *Lotus Sūtra*, the *Nirvana Sūtra*, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*, *Huayan Sūtra* and

²⁷ T50n2060_p0653b16–p0654a12. The number of Fashun’s biography is slightly different in later compilations. In the Korean Buddhist Cannon and Taisho, it is numbered 29, “唐雍州義善寺釋法順傳二十九(智儼)”; in the version of Zhonghua shuju in 14, one biography has been added in front so that Fashun’s biography is numbered as 30, see 982—984.

²⁸ T50n2060_p0526c22.

Diamond Sutra are also primary texts upon which they focused. Four of the monks are said to have specialized in the Sanlun (Three Treatises, 三論), three of them upheld the *Shidi jinglun* (The Treaties on the Sutra of Ten Stages 十地經論, Skt. *Daśabhūmi-vyākhyāna*), while three of them learned the *Shelun* (i.e., *She dacheng lun*, Summary of the Great Vehicle 攝大乘論).

Furthermore, most of those monks were renowned for conducting ascetic practices and focusing on austerities. Twenty-three out of thirty biographies highlight their meditative practices; they either aspired to develop different ascetic regimes and took long-term meditation as their occupation or they frequently practiced austerities (*toutuo* 頭陀, Skt. *Dhūta*) 多行頭陀, while living in mountains and caves to practice meditation throughout their lives (*yinju yanxue*, *xichan weiwu* 隱居巖穴, 習禪為務). For example, Shan Daokai used to “live alone in a thatched hut (in the Luofu Mountain) and was detached from worldly things” (*duchu maoci*, *xiaoran wuwai* 獨處茅茨, 蕭然物外). Both He Luojie and Zhu Tanyao lived in a stone chamber, in which they conducted austerities, and practiced meditations before they passed away. When it comes to the *Continued Biographies*, those monks who were included in the “Chapters on Practices of Meditation 習禪篇” constitute a large proportion of practitioners of cave burial. Faren 法忍 (d.u., died at 67) practiced *toutuo* under a cliff for more than thirty years, and his niche chamber (*kanshi* 龕室) “only enough space for a knee (*cai rong xitou* 纔容膝頭).” He performed extreme austerities such as never going out, neither adding wadding to his robes in winter nor reducing his clothing in summer 形不出戶, 故寒不加絮, 熱不減衣. Similarly, Zhikai 智鑑, a disciple of Zhiyi, practiced meditation with the power of thought (*xiuxi chanfa teyou nianli* 修習禪法特有念力) and held firm with his resolve of focusing on meditative

approach in the mountain for more than twenty years (*changxiu dingye* 常修定業).²⁹ Daolin 道林 excavated a cave on the mountain and concentrated on meditation within it (*zaoshan wei ku ningdao qizhong* 鑿山為窟凝道其中) for many years.³⁰ Jietuo 解脫 also perished in the mountain cave he used for meditation for more than forty years, and his body still steadily sat in it after his death.

3.2.2 Deathbed Rituals

1) Predications and preparations for death

Unlike the cases in the *Biographies*, most eminent monks known for cave burial in the *Continued Biographies* are said to have been able to predict the moments of their death (about twenty-one out of twenty-seven/thirty masters), and some of them even instructed their disciples how to deal with their bodies. In a large proportion of these cases, the masters wanted to expose their corpses in the wild, in the prescribed manner of *shituo*. However, the disciples or lay followers disobeyed their orders by accommodating their bodies in a cave (*ku* 窟) or niche (*kan* 龕) instead, such as in the examples of Jizang 吉藏 and Zhilin 智琳.³¹

The most representative case is the biography of Faxi 法喜, who had already found an ideal place to expose his corpse among the steep mountains when he was alive. Nevertheless, his disciples could not endure carrying out this action when seeing the dignified and upright appearance of their master, so they decided to excavate a cave to bury him. The deceased Faxi seemed upset about this decision and then made it snow to hinder their conducting of the burial

²⁹ T50n2060_0570b15–p0570c01.

³⁰ T50n2060_p0579c04–p0580a03.

³¹ T50n2060_p0503c18–p0504a29.

ritual, and even descended to his disciples on the way to warn them not to disobey his initial instructions. However, his disciples were very determined to bury his body in the cave and carried on the funeral.

Only two monks in the *Continued Biographies*, Sengzhen 僧珍 (d.u.) and Ācārya Tong 通闍梨 (Tong duli, d.u., died after 659 CE), took the initiative in adopting cave burial and excavated the caves for themselves when they were still alive.³² Sengzhen regarded Mount Matou 馬頭 as the ideal place to excavate his burial site, the “numinous cave (*lingku*, 靈窟).”

In addition to the *Continued Biographies*, other contemporary Buddhist literature also includes cases that introduce the intentional acceptance of burial caves/niches for Chan masters. For example, the biography of the fourth Chan patriarch, Daoxin 道信 (580–651 CE), included in the *Lidai fabao ji* 曆代法寶記, says he commanded his disciples to excavate a (dragon) niche for him on the mountain side (*yu wu shance zao longkan yisuo* 與吾山側造龍龕一所). When the niche was ready, he entered the niche, sat in meditation position and passed away all of a sudden (*yanran zuohua* 奄然坐化).³³ A year after his burial, the stone door of the niche opened by itself and showed the incorruptible countenance of the master. His disciples then wrapped his body with lacquered cloth and kept the door open 葬後週年，石戶無故自開，大師容貌端嚴無改常日...乃就尊榮加以漆布，自此已後更不敢閉。

2) Extraordinary visitors and phenomena

In Daoxuan’s writing, the death moment of an eminent monk was usually accompanied by some

³² It is said in Sengzhen’s biography that a dog excavated the burial cave for him, see T50n2060_p0653b16–p0654a12; see the biography of Tong duli, T50n2060_p0661a12–a28.

³³ T51n2075_p0181c09–p0182a10.

extraordinary phenomena, or unexpected visitors, such as a bizarre figure or a group of heavenly beings, usually from the implied place of rebirth. Not long prior to the death of Fachun, a young boy in white clothing stood on his right side, holding a light in his hand (*baiyi tongzi shoupeng guangming, lishi yuyou* 白衣童子手捧光明，立侍於右).³⁴ Three days before the death of Daolin, both monastics and laypeople surrounding him heard music played by *jia* (a wind instrument, 笳) from the heavens while strange fragrances came down from the sky. Sometimes, the summoner appeared in the form of a monastic, such as in Zhixi's 智晞 (557—628 CE) case.³⁵ On other occasions, celestial beings, playing music and scattering flowers and incense, came to welcome the eminent monk to his ideal place of rebirth, Tuṣita Heaven or the Western Pure Land, as in the description in Dao'ang's 道昂 (565—633 CE) biography.³⁶

3) Incorruptible body

Another principal way to manifest the supernatural power of an eminent monk is to show miracles related to his body, which might remain intact without any sign of decay for a couple of years. The countenance of the monk usually appeared bright and clear, as if still alive, the upright seated position did not collapse at all while his hands and feet remained soft. Sometimes, the body even exuded a unique fragrance. All these extraordinary manifestations denote the sacredness of a Buddhist master.

About nineteen biographies include detailed descriptions of the incorruptible body or unusual events related to the body. Of course, biographies other than those associated with cave

³⁴ T50n2060_p0575b17-p0576a22.

³⁵ T50n2060_p0582a24-p0583a03.

³⁶ T50n2060_p0588a26-c14.

burial also highlight this feature of the body. However, it became a critical criterion by which to evaluate the outstanding achievement of an eminent monk after he passed away.

As we noted, the body of He Luojie was unable to be burnt even after a few days of cremation, so his disciples had to move it back to the stone chamber. And in another biography, the whole body of Zhu Tanyou turned green after decades of burial in a cave.

A typical trope found in the biographies is where a monk passed away during the hottest days of the year, but his body did not decay at all. On the contrary, his flesh even became brighter and more pliable after death, as in the case of Jizang. His body became brighter and paler before the funeral (*se yu xianbai* 色逾鮮白), it neither decomposed nor stunk, and remained steadily sitting in the lotus position. Zhilin's disciples first followed his will by placing his body in the mountains in midsummer and then checked it again at the end of the autumn, finding, to their surprise, that the body was still intact and undamaged (*futi yanran, cengwu suoyi* 膚體儼然，曾無損異). Similar reports are made for Sengbian 僧辯 and Zhikai, whose body even exuded a unique fragrance.

Monks who intended to dispose of their bodies by exposing them in the wilderness but were thwarted by followers who placed them in caves or niches still implemented their wishes through postmortem manifestations. Fachun was buried in an open stone niche to feed his body to the birds and beasts, and his intention was fulfilled as all the flesh was scavenged, but the skeleton remained undisturbed (*shenrou jiejin, haigu buluan* 身肉皆盡，骸骨不亂).

Conflicts arose when masters intended to dispose of their bodies in a particular manner while their followers, especially the laity, wished to be able to pay respect and give offerings to sacred whole-body relics. What is the function of the dead body of an eminent monk, and what kind of sacred power did lay people wish it possessed? Through the display of the whole-body

relic, was the human body somehow transformed into a sacred object?

Faxi's biography clearly reflects this conflict: on the one hand, he found a burial place for himself and enjoined his disciples to abandon his body among the steep mountains; on the other hand, the disciples and lay followers could not endure the dignified appearance of their venerated master to be exposed in the wild, so they excavated a burial cave to preserve the body. Despite the warning of the master's spirit during the burial ceremony, they were resolutely determined to disobey his will and finally placed the body in a burial cave, where his body remained seemingly incorruptible. However, this is not the end of the story. Even after death, Faxi still employed his supernatural power to carry out the practice of *shituolin*. When his followers lifted his robe, they found out his body had been almost entirely eaten up by animals while only the head and neck remained intact. From the record of Faxi, it is apparent that the principal concern among the monastic and lay followers is to present the sacredness of a master in front of the whole community, convincing them of the superpowers of the master as well as visible records of the particular achievement they are able to attain, rather than exactly to follow the master's last words.

4) Ideal place of rebirth

Maitreya's Tuṣita Heaven and Amitābha's Western Pure Land had become the two major ideal places of rebirth for monks commemorated in the *Continued Biographies*. In the biography of Zhiyi, before his death, he showed respect to Maitreya by offering half of his accoutrements, including three garments, an alms bowl and staff, but at the same time, he also aroused the aspiration to be reborn in Amitābha's realm. When someone asked his status in another realm, he answered, '... My masters and friends will follow Avalokiteśvara and Mahāsthāmaprapta to

meet me (*wu zhu shiyou cong guanyin, shizi jielai ying wo* 吾諸師友從觀音、勢至皆來迎我)’... after these words, he passed away in front of the colossal stone image on Mount Tiantai, facing the west and sitting upright as if entering dhyāna. His disciples then followed his last instruction to dispose of the corpse ...”³⁷

Meanwhile, we could see an obvious preference for the Western Pure Land rather than Tuṣita Heaven as reflected in the biography of Dao’ang 道昂:

“He has the intention connected to the West (Pure Land), and wish to be reborn to the western paradise/the Amitābha’s Pure Land (*Sukhāvati*)... Afterward, he knew his life had reached its end, then announced in advance to those who he was bounded up with... (at the moment, the beginning of the eighth month) Ang raised his eyes and looked up, then saw the numerous heavenly beings, various orchestral music harmonized with each other, among which there was a clear voice, distant but resonant, told the crowd, ‘We descended to welcome (Dao’ang) with the music from Tuṣita Heaven.’ Ang said, ‘The heavenly principle is the foundation for births and deaths, of which the origin and mechanism is not determined by prayers. I frequently prayed with my mind and wished to be reborn to the Pure Land. Why has my sincere request not been fulfilled?’ As his voice faded, the crowd saw the heavenly beings and music move upward, go in distance and disappear immediately. Then, they found other fragrant flowers and celestial musicians clustering together like a cloud, flying toward him (Ang) and hovered above his head, and all people could see them. Ang said, “Everyone, please stay, now the numinous appearance from the West beckons, and this is what I have been waiting for, so I will go.” After he finished talking, they merely saw the incense burner fall from his hands, and he passed away in an

³⁷ T50n2060_p0567a25–b26.

erect sitting position at the high seat in the Baoying Monastery, at the age of sixty-nine and the eighth month of the seventh year of the Zhenguan reign period (September 9th to October 8th, 633 CE).³⁸ 志結西方，常願生安養…後自知命極，預告有緣…昂舉目高視，乃見天眾續紛，管絃繁會，中有清音遠亮，告於眾曰：“兜率陀天樂音下迎。”昂曰：“天道乃生死根本，由來非願。常祈心淨土，如何此誠不從遂耶？”言訖，便覩天樂上騰，須臾遠滅，便見西方香花伎樂，充塞如團雲，飛湧而來，旋環頂上，舉眾皆見。昂曰：“大眾好住。今西方靈相來迎。事須願往。”言訖，但見香爐墜手，便於高座端坐而終，卒于報應寺中，春秋六十有九，即貞觀七年八月也。

Dao'ang regarded Amitābha's pure land as the priority place of rebirth, to which he was very determined to go after death, even if it required him to turn down an invitation from Tuṣita Heaven. Let us put the story back into the general background of the Buddhist practices in Tang and associate it with the contemporary epigraphical and archaeological materials at Luoyang. It is unsurprising to see that monastics prefer the Western Pure Land over other postmortem destinations. By comparing the amounts of images dedicated to Amitābha and inscriptions that reflect aspirations to be reborn in the Western Pure Land to those attributed to Maitreya and Tuṣita Heaven, it is apparent that the cult of Amitābha gradually became popular from the Northern dynasties to the Tang.³⁹

³⁸ T50n2060_p0588a26—c14. I also referred to the translation in Koichi Shinohara, “Writing the Moment of Death in Biographies of Eminent Monks,” in *Heroes and Saints: The Moment of Death in Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, ed. Phyllis Granoff and Koichi Shinohara (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2007), 57—58. See the discussion in Daniel Getz, “Rebirth in the Lotus: Song Dynasty Lotus Sutra Devotion and Pure Land Aspiration in Zongxiao's *Fahua jing xianying lu*” in *Chung-Hwa Buddhist Journal*, no. 26 (2013): 33—65.

³⁹ According to Liu and Li's book and my previous investigation, there are approximately 73 inscriptions that include the name of “Maitreya” 彌勒 that have been identified, among which 50 have precise dates, with 35 belonging to the Northern Wei Dynasty (386–534 CE) and 15 belonging to the Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE). Meanwhile, there are 300 inscriptions containing the name of Amitābha Buddha (*amituo fo* 阿彌陀佛 or *mituo* 彌陀) or the Buddha of Immeasurable Life (*wuliangshou fo* 無量

5) Geographic Distribution

The distribution of the burial caves recorded in the two biographies shows that cave burial was more accepted in the northern regions than in the South (See Map 3-1). In *Continued Biographies*, a disproportionate number of monks practicing cave burial come from the monasteries in the North; only four come from the southeastern area (Zhilin, Zhiyi, Zhixi, and Zhikai) and two from Sichuan (Shiyu and Huizhen).

In particular, seven out of thirty examples are related to monks from the capital Chang'an. It is interesting to see that Nanshan or Mount Zhongnan (*Zhongnan shan* 終南山) became a popular area for burying the bodies of monastics and other religious practitioners in the Tang. In Daoxuan's record, we read that Jizang was buried at Zhixiang Monastery on Nanshan (*song yu Nanshan Zhixiang si* 送於南山至相寺); Huijun was first buried to the west of the Gaoyang plain and then his disciples moved his body to the eastern cliff of the Fengde Monastery on the Nanshan (*qian Nanshan Fengde si dongyan* 遷南山豐德寺東巖); Zhizheng was a monk of the Zhixiang Monastery at Mount Zhongnan, and his burial cave is located on the northwestern cliff of Zhixiang Monastery (*yu si zhi xibei zaoyan kan zhi* 於寺之西北鑿巖龕之), and so on.

壽佛), among which 154 have precise dates, with only 12 pieces belonging to the Northern Wei Dynasty (386–534 CE), one belongs to the Northern Qi Dynasty (with the precise date of 572 CE), 140 belong to the Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE), and one belongs to the Northern Song Dynasty (with the precise date of 1079 CE). These data are from Liu and Li 1998, 68–70; Tsukamoto 1941, 231–236; and my previous investigations.



Map 3-1 Distribution of the Burial Caves of Eminent Monks in the two *Biographies* (Map from Google Map)

Meanwhile, Daoxuan also recorded a considerable number of monks active on Mount Zhongnan, among whom some conducted radical practices that related to death, including self-immolation, or exposing the body in the forest.⁴⁰ The correlation between Buddhist death practices and the mountains close to capital cities, such as Mount Zhongnan (Chang'an) or the Longmen mountains (Luoyang), requires further analysis.

3.2.3 Details of burial methods

Details of how to conduct a cave burial still require further discussion. In the materials extracted from the hagiographies, we may see three major elements that affect the function or nature of the cave burial practice.

⁴⁰ Benn 2012, 76–83.

1) Using an existing or a new site

Under most circumstances, traditional Chinese funeral practice would not favour adopting a used or existing tomb for burying family members. A similar attitude applies to disciples and followers of a monk, who would rather excavate a new cave or stone niche for accommodating the body than use an existing one. There were, however, exceptions to this general rule.

First, it was not uncommon to use an existing niche in the early stage, especially to bury a monk in the cave where he used to conduct mediative practices. For example, the burial caves for He Luojie and Zhu Tanyou were also the stone chambers within which they carried out long-term seated meditation while alive. An alternative method was to seek an existing mountain niche or cave to bury the body. For instance, an imperial order commanded disciples to find a stone niche on Nanshan to accommodate Jizang’s body. In Faren’s case, he practiced meditative approaches in a compact stone chamber for more than thirty years but passed away in another cave to the north of the monastery. Huixian passed away in deep meditation in the mountains, and his peers first placed the corpse in a cave 同學輿屍置石窟中, then sealed his remaining tongue in a stūpa after his body was eaten by tigers.⁴¹

In addition to using an existing cave for burial, thirteen biographies from the *Continued Biographies* mention burial caves excavated specifically for funerary purposes. The terminology used to describe the burial site varied from cave/grotto (*ku* and *xue*), niche (*kan*) or stone chamber (*shishi*), that is, “to excavate a cave to place it (the body) 鑿窟處之 (Sengfeng),” “to excavate a grotto/*xue* to place it 鑿穴處之 (Huijun),” “to excavate on the cliff and place it in a niche 鑿巖龕之 (Zhizheng),” “to make a cave to accommodate it 作窟處焉 (Huichao),” “to excavate a niche to place it 鑿龕處之 (Fachun),” “to make a niche and place it in a sitting

⁴¹ T50n2060_p0687c09—c19.

position 作龕坐之 (Shiyu),” and so on. All these activities indicate that those burial caves or niches were projects that only started after the death of the occupants and particularly served a funerary function.

2) Sealed or Open

A crucial design element of the burial cave is whether it is sealed with a door or open to visitors and wild animals. As we recall from the inscription of Lady Lou (Cave 440), it says to bury her body on the cliff is to follow the ritual of *shituo*. In belief of the impermanence of life, Buddhists in medieval China adopted the way of exposing the body in the wild from Indian Buddhist practices (*yezang*, 野葬)⁴² and then promoted it as one of four major burial methods for Buddhists in the Central Kingdom (i.e., India, *Zhongguo sizing* 中國四葬): water burial, cremation, earth burial and forest burial.⁴³ In Daoxuan’s discussion on “The Chapters of Abandoning the Body 遺身篇,” he lists six different ways of disposing of the corpses, and the exposure in forest 林葬 is one of them.⁴⁴ Meanwhile, cave burial is one of the other burial

⁴² The origin of *shituolin*/ the forest of *shituo* could traced back to the time of the Buddha. According to the *Fo benxing jijing* (Sutra on the previous activities of the Buddha) 佛本行集經, when the prince Siddhārtha left home to seek for the true path, he once observed the practices conducted by the ascetics in a forest. The ascetic told him this was the woods for abandoning the corpses, one could offer his body as the almsgiving to other beings, which could cultivate the merits for him to ascend to the heaven. See T03n0190_p0747b14–18. Also, in the *Datang xiyu ji* 大唐西域記, Xuanzang talks about there are three forms of burial methods in India: cremation, water burial and abandoning the body in the wild. 送終殯葬, 其儀有三: 一曰火葬, 積薪焚燎; 二曰水葬, 沈流漂散; 三曰, 棄林飼獸。See B13n0080_p0594a12–13.

⁴³ In Daoxuan’s *Shifenlu shanfan buque xingshichao* 四分律刪繁補闕行事抄, he introduces that there are four kinds of burial methods in the central kingdom (i.e., India): to drown the body in the river, to cremate, to bury on the banks and to abandon in the forest to feed the predator birds and tigers, among which the Vinaya addresses more on the cremation and exposed in the forest. 水葬投之江流。火葬焚之以火。土葬埋之岸。勞林葬棄之中野為鷗虎所食。律中多明火林二葬。See T40n1804_p0145b20—22.

⁴⁴ In addition to the four types of funerals mentioned in the Western regions 西域本葬, 其流四焉, including cremation, water burial, earth burial and forest burial, Daoxuan also expressed his opinions on two other burials for the monastics in his time: “ascending to the cliff and hiding in the caves, in which there are bodies could be seen from a distance” 乘崖漏窟, 望遠知人 and “applying ashes and smashed bones on the images, through which to display the offerings to the body.” 灰骨塗像, 以陳身奉之供。Nevertheless, Daoxuan, to some extent, disagreed with these two burial methods in his later discussion. Especially for burying the bodies in mountain niches, his attitude was ambivalent: on one hand, to abandon the body on the cliff violates the monastic rules (vinaya, 律); on the other hand, this is a great detachment according to the intention. 放身巖壑, 據律則罪

methods included, and according to Daoxuan's description, burial caves on cliffs are open to the outside, without any doors or covers. Cave burial is similar to the exposure in the forest, which entails placing the body in the cave to feed the birds and beasts (Fachun, Faxi). Therefore, it seems that cave burial is a variant form of the practice of *Shituo*/exposure of the body, with only a change of the location from the wild to a built structure.

A tendency to seal the burial cave probably emerged during the Sui and Tang. Several cases show there was no initial plan to install a door for the burial cave: on the one hand, it could fulfill the master's wish to feed wild animals with his body, and on the other hand, the disciples and followers could pay their reverence and give offerings to the sacred relics of eminent monks. Nevertheless, after a long period of displaying the body, the disciples decided to seal the cave probably for protective purposes, as in the biography of Huichao and Fashun. Probably, then, there was a conflict between meeting the needs of the laity who sponsored the saṃgha and following the instructions of the deceased master.

In contrast, a few burial caves were designed to be sealed with a door from the beginning, as in the case of Zhiyi.⁴⁵

3) Burial Postures

From the descriptions in the *Biographies*, there are two major burial postures for placing the corpses in the cave/ niche: Most eminent monks were buried in a sitting posture as if they were still practicing meditation and alive, while some of them were placed in the cave with the corpse lying down on the right side:

當初聚，論情則隨興大捨。He also pointed out this burial might include defilements from non-Buddhist society due to the impure mind of practitioners, even though it had been regarded as a radical religious practice. 雖符極教，而心含不淨，多存世染。See T50n2060_p0685a21—b21; *Xu Gaoseng zhuan*, 2012, 1168—1169. I also refer to the interpretation by Benn 2007, 252–253.

⁴⁵ T50n2060_p0567c28.

“Suddenly, an elephant came to the niche without cause, and through a few days, [Fa]ren became ill, then passed away on his right side in a cave in the north of the monastery, at the age of sixty-seven. 忽有一象無事至龕。經于數日，忍便現疾，於寺北窟右脇而終，春秋六十有七……”⁴⁶

Faren's dying posture, lying down on his right side, was probably an imitation of the Buddha's position in parinirvāṇa.

Evidence from contemporary scriptures also proves the coexistence of these two burial postures in the Buddhist funerals. In the *Wuchang jing* 無常經 (Skt. *Anityata Sūtra*, T17n0801),⁴⁷ translated by Yijing 義淨 (635—713 CE) in the Wuzhou 武周 period (the first year of the Dazu reign period 大足元年, 701 CE), there is a specific description on the Buddhist deathbed ritual and how to carry out the funeral for Buddhists:⁴⁸

If the mourners come to the burial site and see it (the corpse) could be accommodated in a downwind place, then they should command (to place) the body lying on one side, with the right side touching the ground and (the body) facing the sunshine. If it is in the windward area, they should apply a high seat and place (the body) sitting on it, with various decorations. 若送亡人至其殯所，可安下風，置令側臥，右脇著地，面向日光。於其上風，當敷高坐，種種莊嚴。

3.2.4 Postmortem Practices: Affiliated Structures of Burial Caves

After the completion of the burial cave/niche, under most circumstances, the disciples of the eminent monk would set up a stūpa, erect a stele and engrave inscriptions recording the virtuous conduct of their master alongside the burial site. For instance, after burying Huichao in an

⁴⁶ T50n2060_p0557b29–c12.

⁴⁷ T17n0801.

⁴⁸ T17n0801_p0746c24–26.

excavated cave for more than one year, his followers sealed the cave, upon which they built a stūpa and engraved an inscription on the right side 置塔於上,勒銘於右.⁴⁹ Zhiyi ordered a white stūpa be erected at his burial site so that “Whose who were seeing it would arouse their mind.” 仍立白塔，使見者發心。⁵⁰

A stūpa atop or aside from a burial cave, usually in engraved relief, is another structure often associated with the burial cave. Examining the biographies (and other Buddhist literature) of monastics during the Sui and Tang dynasties reveals that the stūpa burial was still a primary burial method for them, in which their bodies were cremated into relics and buried underneath the stūpas erected by their disciples and lay community. Meanwhile, Buddhist monastic codes (Skt. vinayas) also offer specific instructions on how to build a stūpa to accommodate the relics. The *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya* 根本說一切有部毘奈耶 indicates the purpose of building a stūpa is to bury the relics of a venerable one, “(The Householder Anāthapiṇḍada asked,) ‘If the Blessed One would permit, I would erect a stūpa for the Noble Śāriputra’s bones in a suitably available place now.’⁵¹ There, the great multitudes of men would be allowed to do honour as they wish.’ The Buddha said, ‘Householder, you can build (a stūpa) as you wish.’ (給孤長者) ‘若佛聽者，我今欲於顯敞之處以尊者骨起窠觀波，得使眾人隨情供養。’ 佛言：‘長者，隨意當作。’”

Also, the *Dhamagupta Vinaya*, the *Four-part Vinaya* 四分律⁵² (translated in 408 CE), introduces the materials for building a stūpa, “They did not know and asked what materials to use. Then [they] reported that to the Buddha and the Buddha said: ‘I allow you to use stones and

⁴⁹ T50n2060_p0581c22–p0582a21.

⁵⁰ T50n2060_p0567a22.

⁵¹ T24n1451p291c1–3. The Chinese vinaya was translated by Yijing 義淨 at the beginning of the eighth century.

⁵² T22n1428_p0956c04–06. The Vinaya was translated by Buddhayaśas 佛陀耶舍 and Zhu Fonian 竺佛念 in 408 CE.

bricks. If it is built with wood, it should be plastered after finishing.’ 不知以何物作。白佛，佛言：‘聽以石壑、若木作，已應泥.’ It also allows erecting a stūpa in the cave and drawing images on it, as in the *Ten Recitation Vinaya* 十誦律, “Anāthapiṇḍada asked again, ‘It would be good if the Buddha allows me to draw [images] on the stūpa.’ The Buddha said, ‘Excepting images of male and female conjoined, I allow you to draw [images].’ (給孤獨居士) 又言：‘佛聽我畫塔者善。’佛言：‘除男女和合像，餘者聽畫。’”⁵³

Therefore, the stūpa carved on the cliff alongside a burial cave should have the same function as the single stūpa built above the ground, while burial caves and niches might function as the burial chamber beneath the structure. This way of adaption is an imitation of wooden buildings constructed on the ground.⁵⁴

The practice of erecting a stele and engraving the inscription that commemorates and eulogizes one’s virtues and achievements has a long tradition dating to pre-Qin times (221–207 BCE). In the *Annals of the Emperor Shihuang of Qin* 秦始皇本紀 of *Shiji* 史記 (Records of the Historian), it says the emperor built a terrace on the top of the Langya Mountain and erected a stone carving work on it, on which was inscribed an inscription praising the virtues of Qin 南登琅邪……復十二歲，作瑯邪臺，立石刻，頌秦德，明得意。⁵⁵ In addition, the ministers all agreed that they should inscribe the virtues and achievements of the emperor on metal and stone as a record and model 羣臣相與誦皇帝功德，刻于金石，以為表經。⁵⁶

This approach of carving the classics on stone was applied by Confucian scholars in the

⁵³ T23n1435p351c17–p352a10. The Chinese version was translated by Puṇyatara 弗若多羅 at the beginning of the fifth century.

⁵⁴ See M. N. Deshpande, “The (Ajanta) Caves: Their Historical Perspective,” in *Ajanta Murals*, ed. A. Ghosh (New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 1967), 14–21.

⁵⁵ *Shiji*, 6/244.

⁵⁶ *Shiji*, 6/247.

Han dynasty (202 BCE—220 CE),⁵⁷ not only to transmit the Confucian classics but also to strengthen the authority of Confucianism as a national ideology.⁵⁸ Afterwards, Chinese Buddhists adopted this strategy to disseminate Buddhist teachings. Beginning from the sixth century, Buddhist monastics such as Sengchou 僧稠 (480—560 CE) and his disciples engraved passages from Buddhist scriptures in cave temples to propagate their ideas as well as praise the accomplishment of the master. It is said in the inscriptions of the Central Xiaonanhai Cave (built between 550—560 CE), they wanted to “follow the contemplation practice of the late master (Sengchou)” and the purpose of engraving the sutra and eulogy is to hope the texts would be transmitted (in stone) and become imperishable (*loushi banjing, chuanzhi buxiu* 鑿石班經, 傳之不朽). According to the biographies of eminent monks, their followers set up the steles and wrote inscriptions to pass down and spread the virtues and religious ideas of their masters.

In summary, affiliated structures such as stūpa and stele should be regarded as essential parts that make a burial cave project “complete.” By absorbing elements from both Buddhist and traditional Chinese architectures, this new form of burial practice become much more acceptable and inclusive for Chinese Buddhists during this period.

3.3 Epigraphical Sources at Longmen

In addition to the textual record, a number of on-site inscriptions at Longmen have been identified as being associated with burial caves or the practices of cave burial. These sources match well with the records of cave burial found in the hagiographies:

According to Inscription No. 1336, Cave 887 is the burial cave of Lingjue 靈覺, a

⁵⁷ Please refer to the “Three Styles of Scripts” of the Cao Wei Dynasty 三體石經 (carved in 241 CE and damaged at the end of the Northern Wei Dynasty, around 534 CE).

⁵⁸ Tsiang 1996, 253.

renowned nun from the family clan of Wu Zetian 武則天), who may have been the daughter of Wu Sansi 武三思 (?–707 CE).⁵⁹ The inscription indicates that she studied under the supervision of the Chan master, Puji 普寂 (651–739 CE), an eminent monk famous for his meditative practices.⁶⁰ After she passed away in the twenty-sixth year of Kaiyuan reign period (738 CE), her youngest brother, Wu Chongzheng 武崇正, “excavated a niche on the western cliff at Longmen” 遂于龍門西岩造龕.^{61,62}

Also, Cave 1336 has been recognized as the burial cave of Huideng 惠燈, another eminent nun in Luoyang during the period from Empress Wu’s reign to Xuanzong (r. 712–756 CE). According to the inscription engraved outside (No. 1650) the cave, Huideng was a disciple of the Chan Master, Zhiyun 智運 (ca. ?–675 CE), in the inner place of practice (*nei daochang*, the Buddhist monastery in the imperial palace 內道場) and also a nun of the Ningsha Monastery 寧剎寺 in Luoyang.⁶³ Meanwhile, she also developed a close relationship with the Wu clan, and was revered as a master for the clan for generations 家代門師, as stated by Wu Chongzheng in the inscription. The sponsors of Huideng’s burial cave were Cui Yao 崔瑤 (678–749 CE), the Right Imperial Insignia General 右金吾將軍,⁶⁴ and his wife, the District Princess of Yonghe

⁵⁹ Wen Yucheng 1996, 130.

⁶⁰ T50n2061_p0760c10-p0761a10.

⁶¹ The name of Wu Chongzheng is not recorded in surviving historical books, and his identity is still controversial. Qing scholar Lu Zengxiang inferred that Wu Chongzheng was probably the youngest son of Wu Youji 武攸暨 (663–712 CE) and Princess Taiping 太平公主 (665–713 CE). According to the research conducted by Wen Yucheng 溫玉成, Wu Chongzheng should be the third son of Wu Sansi 武三思. See Lu, vol. 32 (1985), 215–216; Wen 1996, 130.

⁶² Liu and Li 1998, 304–305. The original inscription: “大唐都景福[寺威儀]和上□□銘/和上諱靈覺俗姓[武氏] □□□□之次[女]也[外父]泗[州]刺史□□□□/國太[平]長公主□□□□補□□之/……普[寂]禪師□□□□授以 [禪]法……” “季弟崇正哀友于之/義重悲同氣之[情深]如□□□遂為銘曰”

⁶³ Zhiyun is also a principal donor of a significant project dedicated to Emperor Gaozong and Empress Wu Zetian, The Cave of Ten Thousand Buddhas (Wanfo Dong, 萬佛洞, Cave 543), together with Director Yao Shenbiao 姚神表, who was probably a female palace official. See McNair 2007, 132–139. According to my analysis, Zhiyun passed away before the completion of Cave 543, see my discussion on Zhiyun’s death dates in Chapter 4.

⁶⁴ See Cui Yao’s epitaph, “唐故光祿卿崔公墓誌銘並序,” in *Tangdai muzhi huibian xuji* 唐代墓志彙編續集 (TMHX), 621–622. Also, please refer to the biographies of Cui Yao’s grandfather and father in *Jiu Tangshu*, in which briefly introduced the family genealogy of Cui Yao’s family until his generation, 77/2691.

from the Wu clan 永和縣主武氏, who claim in the inscription to be devoted followers of Huideng. After Huideng died in 731 CE, they immediately excavated a cave on the western cliff at Longmen to accommodate the body of their master (*sui yu Longmen xiyan zaokan anzhi* 遂于龍門西岩造龕安置).⁶⁵

Not only monastics but also laypeople adopted this burial practice in Tang, especially lay women: see, for example, Cave 1850 at Longmen, Burial Cave for Lady Zhang.⁶⁶ The inscriptions record that Lady Zhang was the wife of Xiao Yuanli 蕭元禮, Head of Xiang Prefecture 相州刺史, who “took refuge in the Buddha when she was young, frequently touched upon the concept of Suchness (Skt. *tathatā*) and understood that all dharmas are conditioned...” 少歸佛口，頻涉真如，知諸法之有為。⁶⁷ When she passed away, her family buried her body in a cave and hoped that “by being held in this *lingkan* (numinous niche), her serene appearance would be immortal.” 載此靈龕，庶使幽容，長垂不朽 (ca. the beginning of the 8th century).⁶⁸

In Inscription no. 0078 from the South Binyang Cave (Inscription No. 0078), a mother dedicated an Amithābha image niche (Niche N53 on the northern wall) to her late son. The inscription also presents the reason to bury her son in a stone niche at Longmen is to follow his last wish.”⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Liu and Li 1998, 384. The original text: “大唐□□□尼和和……諱惠燈……事內供奉禪師尼智運歸依” “於是右金吾將軍崔瑤及妻永和縣主武氏，……遂于龍門西岩造龕安置。……崇正，家代門師，幼瞻儀範，德行備彰於耳目，玄邃不可以言……一勒貞石而紀德。”

⁶⁶ See Zhang 1991, 161. Cave 1850 (蕭元禮夫人的瘞窟，俗稱“張氏瘞窟”) Cave of Lady Zhang. Compared to the record of this inscription in Collections of Inscriptions and Colophons at Longmen Grottoes (Liu and Li 1998), this inscription in Zhang’s paper (1991) was recorded and transcribed earlier, which also preserves more characters. Therefore, I used the transcription in Zhang’s paper here.

⁶⁷ The epitaph of Xiao Yuanli says he died at the age of 51. According to Liu Wei’s analysis, he should die after the first year of Tianshou 天授 (690 CE), probably during the reign period of Wansui tongtian 萬歲通天 (696—697 CE). Lady Zhang and Xiao Yuanli were buried together on the mountain that is in the south of Longmen during the sixth year of Kaiyuan 開元 (718 CE). See Liu 2012, 66. For the epitaph of Xiao Yuanli, please refer to the *Heluo muke shiling* 河洛墓刻拾零 2007, 227.

⁶⁸ Liu Wei 2012, 66–67.

⁶⁹ Liu and Li, 24. Please refer to my translation of No. 0078 in Chapter 2, 85.

To conclude, by comparing the descriptions in the inscriptions of burial caves at Longmen to the biographies, similar scenarios and rhetorical narratives could be seen in the Longmen inscriptions as well:

1) Prediction of the precise time of death: See the inscription for Huideng 惠燈 (Cave 1336, Inscription No. 1650), “on the tenth day of the first month of the nineteenth year of the Kaiyuan reign period (February 20, 731 C.E.), (she) suddenly told her younger sister, ‘I have lamented for a long time, the day of my death is about to arrive.’ She took a bath, burned incense, then passed away while sitting in meditation.” 以開元十九年正月十日，忽告其妹曰：吾哀久矣盡期將至，澡浴焚香，坐而便化。

2) Preparation for death, in the inscription of Lingjue (Inscription No. 1336), she requested hot water for bathing, changed robes, burned incense and sat erect in meditation, then passed away 忽謂門人，令具湯水，澡浴換衣，焚香端[坐]，□□無常。⁷⁰ Again, in the biography of Jizang, in the early morning of the day of his death, he also asked for hot water to take a bath and wore a new clear robe. He then “demanded the attendant to burn incense and chant the Buddha’s name. Zang sat in a cross-legged posture, contemplating calmly as if with a happy expression.” 索湯沐浴，著新淨衣。侍者燒香，令稱佛號。藏加坐儼思，如有喜色。⁷¹

3) The place of rebirth: In the inscription of Niche N53 (Inscription No. 0078) in the South Binyang Cave at Longmen, the donor expressed the wish for her late son to be reborn in Amitābha’s land by commissioning a project dedicated to Amitābha Buddha.⁷² It says, “I wish that he might be reborn in the Land of Immeasurable Life, to see the body of Buddha from his

⁷⁰ Liu and Li 1998, 384.

⁷¹ T50n2060_p0514c03-04

⁷² Liu and Li 1998, 24.

present body, as for his own karma, may he eternally sever the karma of life and death. 願當來往生無量壽國, 從今身見佛身, 已業永斷生死業.”⁷³ Here, we could see a connection between the cult of the Amitābha and the practice of cave burial.

4) Self-cultivation: Many eminent monks buried in caves specialized on meditative practices, and this situation also applied for the examples at Longmen, the occupants of two burial caves, the nuns Lingjue and Huideng,⁷⁴ as mentioned above, specialized in meditative practice, and were included in the lineage of great Chan masters in the Luoyang area.

In the archaeological materials retrieved from Longmen, some major characteristics of a burial cave correspond with the descriptions in the hagiographies, so I will conduct a further discussion in the next section.

3.4 Archaeological Evidence from Longmen

The picture of how Tang people conducted the practice of cave burial becomes clearer if we add the evidence from the latest archaeological discoveries, not only through identifying the traces that match the historical records, but also from the careful examination of the on-site remnants while connecting to other contemporary material culture, such as underground tombs and monastery architectures on the ground.

According to the previous investigations conducted by the Longmen Grottoes Research Academy (LGRA), there are about 42 burial caves and 94 burial niches at Longmen that were excavated and used in the Tang dynasty. At least four on-site inscriptions preserve the dates (from 648 to 732 CE), the occupants, the patrons and the reasons for conducting these projects.⁷⁵

⁷³ Niche N53 in Cave 159, Inscription no. 0078.

⁷⁴ Liu and Li 1998, 304–305, 384.

⁷⁵ Zhang 1991, 160–169; Li and Yang 1995, 71-77. For the amount of burial caves at Longmen, in recent years, the archaeologist

Until now, there has been no consensus on the detailed standards to define a burial cave or niche if we do not refer to the epigraphical materials. Among the identified burial caves and niches at Longmen, only two burial caves preserve solid evidence such as fragmentary bones, burial figurines and objects that also seen in the underground tombs (YDQG K2 and WFG K2), for which I will give specific introduction later.

Due to the lack of written evidence, previous scholars have come up with a couple of general criteria to distinguish possible burial caves and niches from sites used for other functions. First, most burial sites are located in high or remote places that are difficult to access. Second, they usually have a simple layout, including a square plan and unpatterned walls without any images or decoration. Third, a stone bed or low altar for placing the body was set up in the inner half of the main chamber, especially those excavated during the Kaiyuan reign (713–741 CE) period and later. Fourth, the remnants or components used for sealing the caves were sometimes found at the door or opening to a burial site. Even though there are a few exceptions, all these pieces of information make it feasible to recognize a large proportion of burial caves and niches at Longmen.

3.4.1 Burial caves with inscriptions

(1) Cave 440, Burial cave for Lady Lou 婁氏:

Cave 440, the burial cave for Lady Lou, is a medium-sized project in a horseshoe-shaped plan, with a width of 153 cm, a depth of 102 cm and a height of 152 cm.⁷⁶ The northern and southern

of the Longmen Grottoes Academy has conducted several investigations on the area of Dongshan 東山 (the East Hill) of Longmen and discovered some new caves and niches, among which some could be identified as the burial caves or niches. According to my previous field works, I also think the amount of the identified burial caves at Longmen should be modified, and a re-discussion of their character and function is necessary. Since there is no clear result on how to modify the total number of burial caves and niches, I mainly rely on the research results proposed by previous scholars while adding my own work to this paper. Therefore, Zhang confirmed there were 39 burial caves in 1991, with three burial caves discovered between 2005 and 2017, and the total amount of burial caves at Longmen should not be less than 42 at present. See LGRA 2021, vol.1, 191–193.

⁷⁶ Zhang 1991, 160. However, the size of this empty niche is unclear since the northern wall has already collapsed; it is only

walls are partly collapsed with large holes, through which the cave is connected to the adjacent caves. There is a square-shaped seat carved on the rear wall, from which an image is missing. By analyzing the remaining traces and comparing them with other images in this area, we can infer there was a Buddha image in the King Udayana style set up on the altar. Zhang noticed the asymmetrical space in the cave and assumed there should be an empty niche in the cave, which was originally used to accommodate the corpse in a sitting position (Fig. 3-2).⁷⁷



Fig.3-2 Cave 440: The Northern Wall (collapsed) (Lan LI, 2016)

(2) Cave 887, the burial cave for Lingjue 靈覺:

The cave of Lingjue has a rectangular plane and a barrel-vault roof. It is 108 cm high, 97 cm wide,

speculation the occupant was placed in this place in a sitting position. By referring to the situation of Niche N53 in Cave 159, this cave might only work as an image cave for cultivating merits and giving offerings, while the real burial site for Lady Lou is on a steep cliff or a deep ravine at Longmen.

⁷⁷ Zhang 1991, 161.

and 252 cm deep (Fig. 3-3). The inscription is engraved on the right-side wall inside the cave. The layout of this cave suggests that the occupant is very likely to have been buried in a lying posture, probably on the right side.⁷⁸



Fig. 3-3 Cave 887 (Lingjue Cave): Façade (Xinglong LI, 2017)

(3) Cave 1336, Burial cave for Huideng 惠燈:

Cave 1336 includes an anterior space and a main chamber (Fig. 3-4 & 3-5). In the ante space, two vajrapāṇi guardians are standing on both sides of the door. The main chamber has a square plan, with a height of 134 cm, width of 132 cm and depth of 184cm. There is a stone altar built against three walls and a square niche cut into the rear wall, with a height of 47 cm, a width of 48 and a depth of 40 cm. The inscription dedicated to Huideng is engraved on the cliff above the door

⁷⁸ According to the surviving records, some eminent monks passed away in a position of lying down on their right side, imitating the Buddha's nirvana. In this case, the layout shows that the body could only be buried in a lying down posture, and since this is a burial site for an eminent nun as well as a Buddhist site, I incline that the burial posture of Lingjue should be lying down on her right side. See the discussion on burial postures of eminent monks in the previous section, particularly Faren's biography, T50n2060_p0557b29-c12.

(Inscription No. 1650). Since there is not enough space to allow the body to lie in front of or on the altar, scholars presume the burial method of Huideng might be the same as Lady Lou, who was buried in a sitting posture.⁷⁹



(Left) Fig. 3-4 Cave 1336 (Huideng Cave): Façade

(Right) Fig. 3-5 The 3D Elevation and Plan of Cave 1336 (Xinglong Li, 2016)

(4) Cave 1850, the burial cave for Lady Zhang 張氏瘞窟：

On the façade of this cave, there are two guardians dressed in official robes, holding swords in their hands, and standing on both sides of the door. The main chamber has a square plan and flat roof, with a height of 175 cm and a width of 239 cm. There is a stone bed set on the back half of the cave, with a height of 45 cm, depth of 108 and length the same as the cave. The inscription dedicated to Lady Zhang is engraved on the cliff above the door (Fig. 3-6 & 3-7). It is obvious that the layout of this cave, the setting of door guardians dressed in official clothes and the stone bed

⁷⁹ Zhang 1991, 163.

in the cave imitate the tombs of the contemporary era; hence, the posture of the dead should be lying down on the stone bed, the same as the burial method in an underground tomb.



Fig. 3-6 Cave 1850 (Lady Zhang Cave): Façade (Xinglong LI, 2015)



Fig. 3-7 The Stone Bed inside Cave 1850 (Lan LI, 2015)

3.4.2 Other Burial Caves at Longmen

According to previous investigations, about 42 identified burial caves are scattered across the two hills at Longmen, the West Hill (or Longmen Hill 龍門山) and the East Hill (or Fragrant Hill 香山).⁸⁰ Except for those four caves with inscriptions, there are six other identified burial caves on the West Hill, among which four are located in the Pearl Spring area (*Zhenzhu quan* 珍珠泉) area. Even though the precise number may increase due to the latest archaeological discoveries, a majority of extant burial caves, more than 30, are located on East Hill. All of these burial caves have been dated to the Tang dynasty by reference to the layout and the caves or images associated with them or in the adjacent area.⁸¹ In addition, the distribution of burial caves indicates that East Hill had become the major site for burying Buddhists.

(1) The West Hill: The Upper Pearl Spring Area (Cave 475–478)

The Pearl Spring (*Zhengzhuquan* 珍珠泉) area is a natural spring site close to the central part of West Hill. Without any existing inscriptions, Zhang⁸² identified four caves on the cliff that are about six meters above the spring and path by the Yi River 伊河 (Fig. 3-8).

⁸⁰ Zhang (1991) and my previous investigations.

⁸¹ For the chronological study on the burial caves at Longmen, there are no surviving documentary record that the adoption of the burial caves was initiated during the Northern dynasties in this area, and epigraphical materials do not show evidence that there were burial caves at Longmen before the Tang. Even though the criteria applied by previous scholars, such as Zhang (1991) and Li (1995), to date and classify the burial caves and niches at Longmen are not completely convincing, their dating works are still reliable references for us to understand the approximate dates of those burial sites.

⁸² Zhang 1991, 161, 168.



Fig. 3-8 Burial Caves at the Pearl Spring Area (Lan LI, 2018)

The layout of Cave 475 is different from the other three caves and includes an ante-chamber and a rear chamber. Zhang dated this cave as the earliest among all the burial caves in this area, probably from the early Tang. No inscription was discovered in this cave. There is a 6cm-deep groove carved on the top of the door, which Zhang infers was used for installing wooden eaves outside the cave.⁸³ The ante-chamber has a rectangular plan with the length of each side from 1 to 1.25 metres and a height of 1.36 metres. There is a U-shape altar circling the three walls, on which the remnants tell there should be six to eight statues set up. The main chamber is about 1 meter high, 1.7 meters wide and 1.4 meters deep (Fig. 3-9).

The evidence for dating Cave 475 as the earliest burial cave in the Tang includes a two-chamber layout that is similar to the burial cave for the Empress Yifu 乙弗皇后 (510–540 CE) of the Western Wei dynasty (535–557 CE), the Cave 43 at the Maijishan Grottoes 麦积山石窟

⁸³ Zhang 1991, 161.

(present Tianshui 天水, Gansu Province 甘肅省).⁸⁴ Meanwhile, Zhang indicates that the ways of erecting statues in the ante-chamber and installing wooden eaves in front of the cave also reflect the influence of the Buddhist grottoes of the late Northern dynasties in the Gansu region.⁸⁵ However, since no other burial caves with the same layouts and interior settings were identified at Longmen, there is clear evidence showing the direct impact came from another region in a different period on the burial cave at Longmen.



Fig. 3-9 Cave 475: The Ante and Rear Chambers (Lan LI, 2018)

Three other burial caves in the Pearl Spring area, Cave 476-478 (No. 2-4 burial caves on the northern cliff of Zhenzhuquan 珍珠泉北崖二—四號龕), all have a single-chamber layout.

Based on interior decorations and the style of the altars or platforms in the main chambers,

⁸⁴ The biography of Empress Yifu in *Beishi* (The History of Northern Dynasties) says she died as a Buddhist nun and killed herself under the imperial order of Emperor Wen of the Western Wei. After her death, her sons and attendants excavated a niche (*kan*) on the cliff of Maiji (the original text is “鑿麥積崖為龕,” but the size of this *kan* is large enough to be called a cave, with a width of 320 cm, and a height of 173 cm in the main chamber) and placed her coffin (*Shenjiu*, 神柩) inside. Her burial cave has been named *Jiling* 寂陵, the Mausoleum of Quietness. See *Beishi* 北史, 13/507; Fu Xinian 傅熹年, “Maijishan shiku suojian gu jianzhu” 麥積山石窟所見古建築, in *Zhongguo shiku: tianshui maijishan* 中國石窟—天水麥積山 (Chinese Cave-temples: Maijishan in Tianshui) (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1998), 204.

⁸⁵ Zhang 1991, 163.

Zhang dates them from the Kaiyuan to Tianbao (742—756 CE) reign periods. He infers that the date of Cave 476 is close to the burial cave of the nun Huideng, Cave 1336, which was completed in 735 CE. Like the cave for Huideng (Cave 1336), Cave 477 and 478 have the images of Vajrapāni guardians on both sides outside the door, through which the completion time of these two caves could be presumed as the same period as Cave 1336.

Zhang also proposes there is a transition in the burial posture reflected from the layout of burial caves in this area, from the sitting position (Cave 475, 476) to laying down (Cave 477, 478), which requires further evidence (Fig. 3-10).⁸⁶



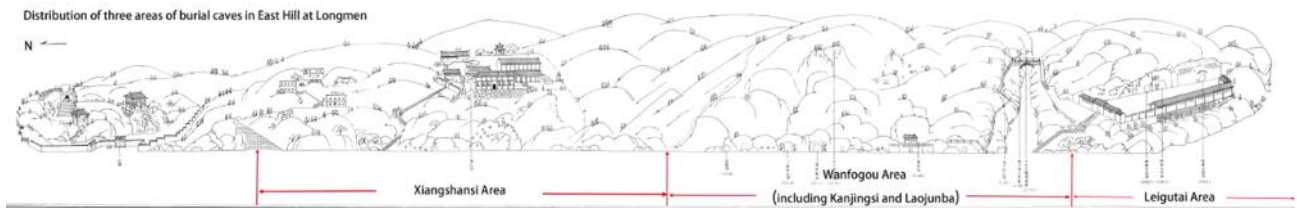
Fig. 3-10 Cave 478 (Lan LI, 2018)

(2) The East Hill 東山

On the south cliffs of the East Hill, more than 30 identified burial caves cluster in three main

⁸⁶ According to my observation, the evidence Zhang presents for the shift from sitting to laying down positions does not seem particularly compelling. Except for Cave 475, Caves 476—478, all made a U-shape alter that encircled the rear and two side walls. These alters could be used for either setting up Buddhist images or accommodating the corpses. Cave 475 is smaller than 477 and 478, in which the alter against the rear wall is only about 92 cm in width, too narrow for an adult body to down. The alters in Cave 477 and 478 are 185 cm and 144 cm in width, which are enough for placing a body in a lying down position. By referring burial caves with a stone bed inside, it is reasonable to presume there might be a change in burial positions. However, since the evidence is not strong enough, we need to seek more concrete clues to prove this transition.

areas: the Leigutai 擂鼓臺 area, the Wanfogou 萬佛溝 area and Xiangshansi 香山寺 area. The East Hill in these areas is covered with dense bushes and trees, and its precipices face south or confront the caves and niche on the other side of the Yi River, which made this area a quiet and ideal place for Buddhists to conduct ascetic practices and bury their bodies (Map 3-2).



Map 3-2 Distribution of Three Areas of Burial Caves in the East Hill at Longmen

1) Leigutai Area (LGT&YDQG)⁸⁷:

The Leigutai area 擂鼓臺 (Drum-beating Terrace), located on the southern end of the East Hill, consists of three major caves (South, Central and North Leigutai Cave, or Cave 2050, 2055 and 2062) on a terrace that stands about 20 metres higher than the river and more than eighty adjacent caves and niches in medium and small sizes (Fig. 3-11).⁸⁸

⁸⁷ I cite two numbering systems in this study: the first system was made in the general investigation conducted by Longmenshiku yanjiusuo (present Longmen Grottoes Research Academy, LGRA) and the CAFA (Central Academy of Fine Arts) in 1991, which has numbered all the caves at Longmen from Cave 1 to 2345. In 2005, the LGRA started a new archaeological program to compile accurate reports on the caves, images and other archaeological discoveries at Longmen. The program divided the grottoes into several areas and conducted surveying and mapping, respectively. They first started from the Leigutai Area in the East Hill and set a new standard to number the caves and niches, from which they focused more on the interrelations between the large or medium caves and their affiliated niches in an area. Therefore, they numbered the caves in the Leigutai area (including Yidaoqiao) from LGT K1 to K9 and YDQG K1&2. See LGRA, 2018. Between 2014 and 2018, the LGRA conducted the archaeological program in the Wanfogou area and gave the numbers from WFG K1 to K24. In my study on these two areas in East Hill, I adopt this new numbering system while still listing their old number in the 1991 system to help readers have a better understanding of connections between caves and niches.

⁸⁸ According to the classification of the numbering system and survey maps published in 1991, the caves were included in the Leigutai area from Cave 2050 to 2128. I also consider six caves and niches found on the hillside that are only 300 meters south of the major caves (Cave 2044–2049) should also be included in the Leigutai area. Therefore, there are 84 numbered caves in the Leigutai area in total. In the archaeological report on the caves and architecture of the Leigutai area published in 2018, the Longmen Grottoes Research Academy merged the caves and niches in the Yidaoqiao Ravine into the Leigutai area and published the records and survey maps in Appendix 4. See Longmen Grottoes Research Academy, vol. 3, 340–349. The archaeological report 2018 has given a new series of numbers to the caves in the Leigutai Area, from LGT K1 to K9, for the



Fig. 3-11 View of the Leigutai Area from the Western Side of the Yi River (Lan LI 2008)

About 330 meters to the south of the Leigutai terrace, a ravine extends into the East Hill from west to east, which is named the Yidaoqiao Ravine 一道橋溝 (The Ravine of the First Bridge). Approximate 50 meters above the foot of the hill, there is a complex of two caves and three affiliated niches⁸⁹ excavated on the northern hillside, facing the south. Two caves were numbered as Cave 2044 and 2049 in the 1991 system and re-numbered as YDQG K1 & 2 (Cave 1 & 2 in the Yidaoqiao Ravine) in the latest archaeological report of Leigutai Area in 2018.⁹⁰ Archaeologists conducted an on-site investigation and excavation in 2005 and confirmed these two caves were used as burial sites according to their particular layout and the artifacts unearthed

caves in large or medium sizes and their affiliated niches. For the numbers compiled in 1991, see Longmenshiku yanjiusuo, 1994.

⁸⁹ The amounts of niches are different in the 1991 numbering system and 2018 archaeological report, in the former it is four niches but three niche in the latter. This is a result of the revision of the criteria to classify caves and niches that conducted by the Longmen Grottoes Research Academy (LGRA), and they removed the original Cave 2045 from the catalogue.

⁹⁰ LGRA 2018, vol. 3, 340–347.

inside the caves (Fig. 3-12).



Fig. 3-12 An Overview of the Yidaoqiao Ravine and the Location of the Burial Caves (in red)

(Lan LI, 2013)

Both caves have an ante-court and main chamber layout. The YDQG K1 (Cave 2044) has a square-plan ante-court, with each side 155 cm. The main chamber is 172 cm in height, 200 cm in width and 180 cm in depth.⁹¹ A stone bed was set up against the rear wall and connects to the two side walls in the main chamber, with a height of 27 cm and a width of 126 cm. The size of the stone bed is large enough to place an adult body on it. Unlike the door of other image caves, the doorway was divided into two layers. The inside door frame is 106 cm high and 86 cm wide, while the outside frame is 95 cm wide, which makes it easy to install a door to seal the cave from

⁹¹ LGRA 2018, vol.3 “Appendix 4”, 340–347.

the outside (Fig. 3-13 & 3-14).



(Left) Fig. 3-13 YDQG K1: Façade;

(Right) Fig. 3-14 YDQG K1: Stone Bed (LGRA, 2018)

More crucial evidence of a burial site has been unearthed from the YDQG K2 (Cave 2049), which is 10 meters east of K1. There is a 94 cm-high stele engraved on the left part of the facade, side by side with the door of K2, on which the inscriptions have become blurred and only a few characters could be identified until now.⁹² The remaining inscription includes the content as “the late (person) from the Qu Prefecture” 故衢州 and “the courtesy name is Wu...” 字無..., which indicate that the occupant of this burial cave is probably a layperson rather than a monastic.

The size of the main chamber of K2 is similar to K1, with a height of 148 cm, a width of 225 cm and a depth of 168 cm. A 103 cm wide stone bed is set up against the rear wall and side

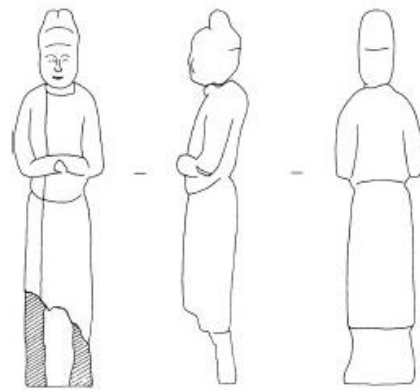
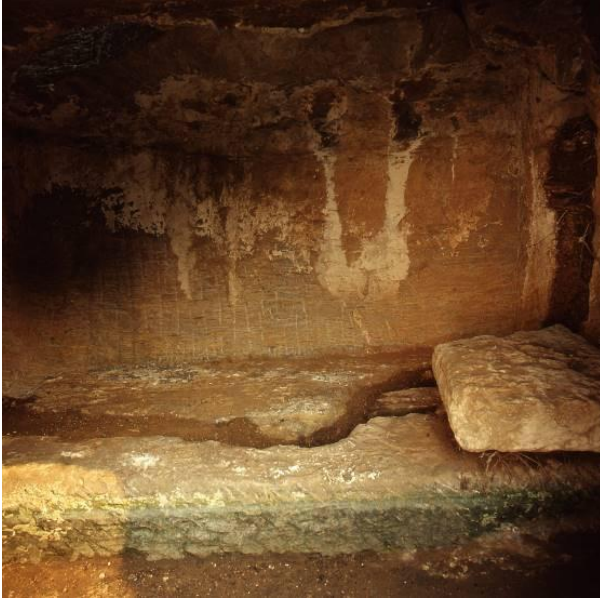
⁹² The original text of inscriptions of YDQ GK2 as follow: 故衢州□/□崇□字無□趙□/□/□典郡□名□/□騎□/□地□/□/□/□/□五日□/□月十□日歸□林……均蔡琰孝□□曹……精/不……. See LGRA 2018, vol. 3, 341.

walls, which occupies the most space inside the cave. On the floor next to the threshold inside the chamber, a rectangular stone base was placed, 107 cm in length and 18 cm in width, for installing a door and paring with the two circular holes on the top of the doorway.

When archaeologists cleaned inside K2 in 2005, a 5 cm layer of soil was piled up on the floor, and a stone bed in the main chamber. They unearthed fragments of a stone door and burial artifacts such as pottery figurines, animals and vessels from the space between the bed and the front wall. They also found a copper coin with the marks of *Kaiyuan tongbao* 開元通寶 among all the artifacts.⁹³ It is worth mentioning the two male figurines and a horse statue have a strong style of burial artifacts in the Tang, and their unearthed location also corresponds with the place for funerary objects in contemporary tombs (Fig. 3-15 & 3-16).⁹⁴ Material evidence indicates that this stone chamber functioned as a burial site on the cliff for an ordinary person (probably a Buddhist).

⁹³ The coin with the characters of *Kaiyuan tongbao* 開元通寶 is not very precise dating material, given its extensive circulation throughout the Tang dynasty from 621 to around 907 CE, making it difficult to pinpoint the specific time of the artifacts found alongside it. See Xu Diankui 徐殿魁, “Shilun Tang Kaiyuan tongbao de fenqi 試論唐開元通寶的分期,” in *Kaogu*, no.6 (1991), 557–559.

⁹⁴ See the burial figurines unearthed from the tombs in Yanshi of Luoyang region in the Tang. See The Institute of Archaeology, CASS, *Yanshi xingyuan tangmu* 偃師杏園唐墓 (The Tang Tombs at Xingyuan in Yanshi County) (Beijing: Kexue chubanshe, 2001), 45. The clay figurines unearthed from K2 are very similar to the figurines from the Tang tombs at Xingyuan, dated to the High Tang period, from 694—731 CE based on the dates included in the epitaphs.



附圖+2 第2窟主室床台前男立像 (1/3)

Fig. 3-15 YDQG K2: Stone Bed;

Fig. 3-16 A Pottery Figurine Unearthed from YDQG K2 (LGRA, 2018)

2) Wanfogou Area 萬佛溝:

To the north of the Leigutai Area, a natural ravine extends from the west to east into the mountains, separating the caves in Leigutai from other parts in the East Hill. A number of caves, niches and images of various sizes are scattered on the 1 km-long northern cliff of the ravine, for which the Wanfogou Area (A Ravine of Ten Thousand Buddhas) was named. The original numbers in the 1991 system given to the caves and niches in this area are Cave 2129—2179, including 51 numbered caves and three affiliated niches. From 2014 to 2018, archaeologists from the Longmen Grottoes Research Academy conducted a new project of on-site survey and mapping and the compilation of the archaeological report. They discovered five new caves and niches and set new criteria to classify and number these caves and niches into twenty-four caves

and thirty-five niches,⁹⁵ WFG K1—K24, which highlight their sizes, functions and interrelations according to the archaeological evidence.

The northern cliff inside the ravine is steep and rises almost straight from the bottom in some places. A large part of the cliff is covered with dense vegetation and became inaccessible once the ancient plank road on the cliff broke down, which makes it an ideal place for meditative practices or burials isolated from the disturbance of the outside world (Fig. 3-17). Based on the remnants left on the cliff and caves, I have identified at least six burial caves in the Wanfogou area and divided then into three groups: WFG K11-13, K10 and 14, and K1.⁹⁶



Fig. 3-17 An Inside Look at the Wanfogou Ravine, from East to West (LGRA, 2021)

⁹⁵ For the new numbering system in the Wanfogou area, please refer to the archaeological report: LGRA 2021, vol. 1, 3–4. I will list both the old and new numbers when introducing the examples.

⁹⁶ The numbers of burial caves in the Wanfogou differ in previous scholarship and my investigation. Zhang only confirmed two burial caves in this area, which should be Cave 2157 and 2161. See Zhang 1991, 169. I confirmed Cave 2158–2161 are all burial caves.

a. WFG K11—13 (Cave 2158–2160)

The caves of K11, K12 and K13 are almost at the same level and share a similar layout in the main chamber (Fig. 3-18). Each has a square plan and a stone bed that occupies most ground space inside the cave without any traces of images or decoration on the walls, from which we can identify that all of them are burial caves. Even though the details and interior settings may slightly differ from each other, it is quite possible they were made at the same time or in a close sequence.



Fig. 3-18 An Aerial View of WFG K11-13, from Right to Left (LGRA, 2021)

The WFG K11 (Cave 2158) also has an ante-court and main chamber layout, of which the upper part of the ante-court has already collapsed with only a part of the floor left. The plan of the main chamber is 274 cm in width and 289 cm in depth, and its height is 175 cm. A 13 cm high stone bed is carved against the rear wall and connected to two side walls, with a depth of 123 cm. Four small circular holes were chiselled on the threshold and the side walls of the doorway and were probably used for installing the door (Fig. 3-19).



Fig. 3-19 WFG K11 (Cave 2158): Stone Bed (Lan LI, 2016)

On the façade of the WFG K12, a round-arch shape stele in high relief is set up on the left of the door, on which the inscription is unreadable due to the severe weathering (Fig. 3-20). The size of the main chamber is similar to K11, which is about 165 cm high, 234 cm wide and 213 cm deep. The stone bed on the latter part of the main chamber is higher than K11, which is 28 cm in height and 120 cm in depth. The top of the stone bed could provide enough space to accommodate a body and a couple of burial artifacts.



Fig. 3-20 WFG K12 (Cave 2159): Façade (Lan LI, 2016)

Without an ante-court or any other exterior settings on the façade, the burial cave of WFG K13 (Cave 2160) has a simpler layout and only includes a low stone bed that occupies most ground space inside (Fig. 3-21). It seems both the body and burial objects were placed together on the bed.



Fig. 3-21 WFG K13 (Cave 2160): Interior Space (Lan LI, 2016)

b. WFG K10 (Cave 2157) and K14 (Cave 2161)

Zhang identified two burial caves in the Wanfogou area, WFG K10 and K14 (Cave 2157 and 2161), which are the second and third largest caves in this area, with each side of the caves about 300 cm.⁹⁷ However, since the layout and interior settings in these two caves are distinct from the previous examples, their functions as burial caves are still ambiguous.⁹⁸

Both caves have a well-designed façade, an ante-court and a rear chamber layout, as well as large interior space. Unlike K11–13, which has stone beds inside the main chamber, there is no evidence of images, decorations, or any interior settings made of stone found in these two caves. There are a pair of square holes chiselled into the floor close to the rear wall and a set of three circular holes cut close to the door (Fig. 3-22 & 3-23). By associating the square grooves carved on the doorway, I infer that all the holes and grooves were used for setting up facilities made of other materials, such as a wooden structure or platform and the chamber was once sealed, and it is highly possible this is a burial cave.

⁹⁷ Zhang names these two burial caves at Wanfogou as the No.1 and No. 2 burial caves on the northern cliff at Wanfogou 萬佛溝北崖一號及二號窟, which pair with K10 and K14. See Zhang 1991, 169.

⁹⁸ This does not mean they were not used for burials, for they both have evidence of sealing the interior space. The evidence from these two caves is not concrete enough, or even contradicted.



Fig. 3-22 WFG K10 (Cave 2157): Façade;

Fig. 3-23 WFG K10: Interior Space (Lan LI, 2016)

Evidence for sealing has been found in the WFG K14 (Cave 2161), which has groups of square holes engraved on the upper part of the doorway (Fig. 3-24 & 3-25). Differing from the interior setting of K10, a high altar encircling the rear and side walls is set up in the main chamber of K14, on which the traces of shallow grooves used for placing stone statues are still clear.

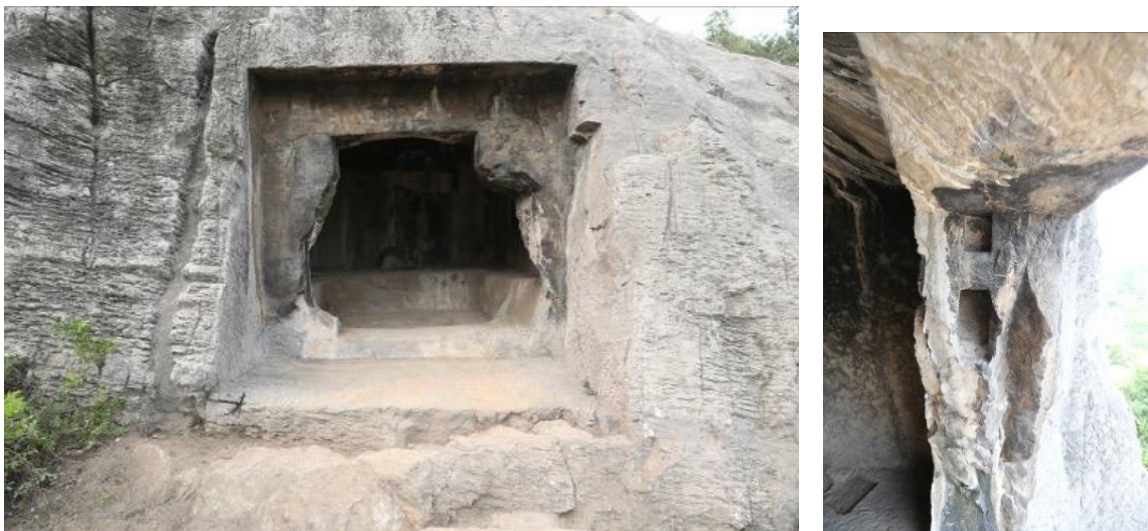


Fig. 3-24 WFG K14 (Cave 2161): Façade;

Fig. 3-25 WFG K14: Square Holes at the Doorway (Lan LI, 2016)

Meanwhile, archaeologists have identified four inscriptions on the walls inside the cave, among which one inscription includes a precise date:

On the sixth day of the third month (April 19, 861 CE), our family travelled to this place, in the *xinsi* year of the Xiantong reign period, the Regent (of the Eastern Capital, Luoyang) Lu Jun (778–864 CE).⁹⁹ 三月六日，一家遊此，咸通辛巳，留守盧鈞。

The inscription shows that this cave was completed before 861 CE, which means it was not sealed until then. We may raise two questions regarding the function of K14: If this is a cave designed for burial, how could visitors get access to the cave and leave their notes on the walls? And if the altar on the cave were designed for displaying Buddhist images, could this cave have been first used as an image cave and then sealed for burial, or were the square holes on the doorway made for installing extensional structures other than sealing components? There is still a need for further exploration regarding the function of K14.

c. WFG K1¹⁰⁰

In September 2015, archaeologists from LGRA discovered a complex of cave and niche located on the hillside of the east end of the Wanfogou ravine and numbered it as WFG K1 and its affiliated niche K1-1. From 2015 to 2017, they conducted archaeological excavations on the site in front of the cave and unearthed groups of remnants for building extensional structures, a large number of architectural components and relevant artifacts. The whole complex was built on the

⁹⁹ See Lu Jun's biography in *Jiu Tangshu*, 177/4591–4593 and *Xin Tangshu*, 182/5367–5369. According to *Xin Tangshu*, Lu Jun was in the position of Regent of the Eastern Capital 東都留守 in Luoyang after 857 CE.

¹⁰⁰ See Longmen Grottoes Research Academy (LGRA), *Longmen shiku kaogu baogao: dongshan wanfogou qu* 龍門石窟考古報告：東山萬佛溝區 (The Archaeology Report of Longmen Grottoes: The Wanfogou Area at East Mountain) (Beijing: Kexue chubanshe, 2021), vol.2, 12–28.

mountain slope, from which the drop between the top of the cave to the bottom layer is more than 12 meters (Fig. 3-26).



Fig. 3-26 An Aerial View of WFG K1 and Its Affiliated Structures (Xinglong Li, 2017)

The main chamber of WFG K1 has a square plan, with a height of 160 cm, a width of 160 cm and a depth of 140 cm. There is a square niche cut into the rear wall, with a height of 106 and a width of 91 cm. The function of the square niche is still unknown. From the chiseled traces left on the ground and walls, we could reconstruct a stone bed with the height of 24 cm, length of 189 cm and depth of 92 cm (Fig. 27). The method of opening a square niche on the rear wall is the same as in Huideng's cave (Cave 1336). However, the constructor cut a stone bed against the rear wall in this cave instead of an altar that encircles three walls. According to the size of the stone bed, we could infer that the occupant might have been buried in a lying down posture in the case of Lingjue and Lady Zhang, rather than in a sitting posture as with Huideng and Lady Lou. A square niche was excavated on the east side of K1 (numbered as K1-1), with a height of

145 cm, a width of 97 cm and a depth of 70 cm. Except for a long strip of lime plaster left on the side walls, which was probably used as an adhesive, no other evidence of adornments could be seen in this niche.



Fig. 3-27 A 3D Reconstruction of the Stone Bed in Interior Space inside WFG K1 (Lan Li and Xinglong Li, 2018)

From the excavation on the site in front of the cave, archaeologists unearthed many large fragments of the stone architectural components used to renovate or adorn the façade and the platform outside the cave. More importantly, a stone door was discovered under the cliff before the cave, of which completely matches the size of the cave door. Therefore, the stone door was probably used to seal the opening of the burial cave. The patterns on the stone door are very similar to those on Tang period tomb gates found in Luoyang region, which also demonstrates that the design of this cave is probably based on the contemporary tombs (Fig. 3-28 & 3-29).



Fig. 3-28 Three Fragments of the Stone Door (Lan LI, 2017)

Fig. 3-29 A Digital Reconstruction of the Cave Sealed with the Stone Door (Lan Li and Xinglong LI, 2017)

Furthermore, there are five fragments of an inscription unearthed from the site below the cliff, on which engraved passages of a sutra could be located in the Buddhist canon. By piecing them together, we could recover a completed version of the Amitābha Sutra, translated by Kumārajīva, written in 55 columns and 36 rows.¹⁰¹ By referring to the size of each character (2.5 cm each side) and the space around them, we are able to measure accurately the size of the whole inscription, which is 137.5 cm high and 86.4 cm wide. The size of the inscription perfectly fits in niche K1-1, with a 5 cm space left on each side for filling the adhesive materials. Therefore, we can confirm that K1-1 was originally designed for accommodating the Amitābha Sutra (Fig. 3-30).

Also, the name of a donor is preserved in the colophon: “The eldest son Zhang Sijing 長子

¹⁰¹ T12n0366.

張思敬。” By collecting the historical records of the person called Zhang Sijing in the Tang dynasty, we confirm the official who worked in the position of the Right Scribe 右史, the Imperial Diarists of the Secretariat in the Tang court during the Chang’an reign period (701–705 CE) is the most likely donor for this project.¹⁰² ¹⁰³ Furthermore, there is a stele in high relief was erected outside the cave of K1 and K1-1, on the eastern wall of the ante-platform, which is 184 cm high with a head decorated with two coiled dragon-like animals and a turtle-shape base. By analyzing the style and size of the stele and matching them with the standards applied to officials of different ranks in the Tang, we can easily infer that the donor of this project must be ranked grade five or higher.¹⁰⁴ Since the grade of the Right Scribe is “the upper rank of the secondary grade six (*cong liupin shangjie* 從六品上階),” which is close to the standard, Zhang Sijing might have the privilege of building a project for his parents one grade higher than his rank to show his filial piety.¹⁰⁵ Therefore, the date of the whole project, including the burial cave, the niche of Amitābha sutra and the affiliated structures, should be located in the Kaiyuan reign period,

¹⁰² See records about Zhang Sijing from the two histories of the Tang: *Jiu tangshu*, 90/2917, 《朱敬則》條：“敬則知政事時，每以用人為先。桂州蠻叛，薦裴懷古；鳳閣舍人缺，薦魏知古；右史缺，薦張思敬。則天以為知人。” Also, in *Jiu Tangshu*, 189/4963 《儒學下》“王元感”條：“（長安三年）……鳳閣舍人魏知古、司封郎中徐堅、左史劉知幾、右史張思敬，雅好異聞，每為元感申理其義，連表薦之。” *Xin Tangshu*, 199/5666 《儒學中》：“王元感”條：“（長安三年）……徐堅、劉知幾、張思敬惜其異聞每為助理疏薦之，遂下詔褒美，拜太子司儀郎兼崇賢館學士。”

¹⁰³ There is another Zhang Sijing in *Tang huiyao* 唐會要, who was an oppressive official 酷吏 under the reign of Wu Zetian and was relieved from his position after Wu’s abdication in 705 CE. By referring the inscriptions dated to the Wu Zetian period at Longmen, they all adopted the modified characters system invented by Wu. If this Zhang Sijing started the project and carved Buddhist scriptures when he was in power, then the engraved sutra must include the characters from the new character system. Therefore, this project could only be carried out before or after the reign period of Wu Zetian (690-705 CE). See the record of another Zhang Sijing in *Tang huiyao*, vol. 41: “神龍元年三月二日制。……周利貞。裴談。張福貞。張思敬。王承。劉暉。楊允。薑暉。封行珣。張知。衛遂忠。公孫琰。鍾思廉等十三人。皆為酷吏。……比周興、來俊臣、侯思立等，事蹟稍輕，並宜放歸草澤，終身勿齒……” There are abundance epigraphical materials about the modified characters of Wu Zetian at Longmen, among which the engraved sutras in the Central Leigutai Cave 擂鼓台中洞 (LGT K4) are most representative. Please refer to the archaeological report on Leigutai: LGRA 2018, vol.1, 76—81.

¹⁰⁴ For the standards of erecting the steles by official in the Tang, we could refer to the *Datang kaiyuanli* 大唐開元禮 and *Tang huiyao* 唐會要. In 《大唐開元禮》卷三《序例·雜制》記載：“凡立碑，五品以上螭首龜趺（趺），高不得過九尺；七品以上立碑圭首方趺，（趺）上高四尺。” See 1990, 12. In 《唐會要》卷第三十八《葬令》記載：“……舊制，碑碣之制，五品以上立碑（螭首龜趺，上高不過九尺），七尺以上立碑（圭首方趺，趺上高不過四尺）。……” See 1955, 691.

¹⁰⁵ *Jiu Tangshu*, 42/1799.

between 705 and 741 CE.¹⁰⁶



Fig. 3-30 Rubbing of A Fragment of the Amitābha Sutra Inscription (LGRA, 2021)

¹⁰⁶ The unearthed ceramic vessel and other artifacts provide additional evidence to date the site to the Kaiyuan period. Please refer to the archaeological report on the Wanfogou area, see LGRA 2021, vol. 1, 28.



Fig. 3-31 A Digital Reconstruction of WFG K1 and K1-1 with Stone Door and Inscription (Lan LI and Xinglong LI, 2017)

By combining remnants left on the cliff and platform outside the cave and architectural components, we could reconstruct a complex of structures functioning as protective facilities for the cave as well as recover a path from the mouth of the ravine toward this complex of caves and buildings. All these discoveries indicate that not only should we treat this site only as a simple burial site for a Buddhist, but we should also understand that the external structures were used as a site for mourners (they could be family members or disciples) to conduct rituals before and after the burial ceremony, as well as subsequent memorial services on important anniversaries.

In addition, people who visited the grottoes in the Wanfogou ravine or the surrounding area (e.g., Xiangshan Monastery 香山寺) might visit this site at the same time for different purposes.

According to the inscriptions carved by tourists of the Song dynasty on the adjacent wall outside the cave, the date of Jaiyou 嘉祐 reign period (1056–1063 C.E.), we know that visitors to this site were present as late as the eleventh century.¹⁰⁷

d. WFG K2

As with WFG K1, K2 is also a newly discovered burial cave in the Wanfogou area that has no previous record. The location of this cave is on the almost-vertical cliff to the east of K3, without any accessible path and it was filled with soil and vegetation before the excavation. It had “disappeared” for a long term from the view of later visitors.

The cave is 217 cm wide, 55–75 cm high and 100 cm deep (Fig. 3-32).¹⁰⁸ Archaeologists have unearthed fragmentary bones and teeth from the bottom layer of the soil in the cave, along with funerary objects such as pottery burial figurines, coins and iron nails, etc. The identifiable figurines include two male attendants, one female attendant, two guardians and parts of animals, demonstrating a similar style as the pottery figurines from contemporary tombs.

¹⁰⁷ It says: “知恪/嘉祐丁酉仲夏十日□□知恪知恭知遜知廉游甥秘書丞/新俸東郡王□同至轉運使主客郎中□□□題/行之岩□來,” in which Zhike 知恪 should be the person who composed this tourist note, and the Dingyou 丁酉 year of Jaiyou reign period is 1057 C.E, see LGRA 2021, vol.1, 13–15.

¹⁰⁸ Li Xiaoxia 李曉霞, “Longmen shiku wanfogou xin faxian” 龍門石窟萬佛溝新發現. *Wenwu jian ding yu jianshang* 文物鑒定與鑒賞, no. 8 (2019), 158-160.



Fig. 3-32 WFG K2: Façade (Lan LI, 2016)

3) Xiangshansi Area 香山寺

To the northern part of East Hill, a complex of wooden architectures was erected on the halfway of the hill, which is today's Xiangshansi Monastery (Monastery of Fragrant Hill). Identified by historical documents and archaeological excavation, the original Xiangshan Monastery¹⁰⁹ is located on the southern end of East Hill, one of the most renowned monasteries at Longmen in the Tang dynasty.

The present Xiangshan Monastery was relocated in 1708. The records of the burial caves and niches in this area are insufficient, but there is a considerable number of burial caves in this area. Zhang has identified 24 out of 39 burial caves at Longmen in this area.¹¹⁰ However, the records of the same caves in *Zonglu* and Zhang's article mismatch in many places, while some burial caves in this area identified by Zhang neither lack detailed information nor accessible for

¹⁰⁹ There are many works of scholarship about the founding and developments of the Xiangshan monastery. See the record in *Huayanjing zhuanji* 華嚴經傳記 and the biography of Divākara 地婆訶羅/日照 about the establishment of the monastery during the reign period of Wu Zetian, see T51no2073_pp154c10-155a9. The famous poem, Bai Juyi 白居易, had conducted some renovations and added supplement facilities in the late Tang dynasty. See “Xiu xiangshansi ji” 修香山寺記, in *Quan Tangwen*, 676/6906–6907; for the discussion on the layout of the Xiangshan Monastery, please refer to Wen Yucheng 1992, Li Chongfeng 2014.

¹¹⁰ Zhang 1991, 168.

on-site investigation due to the steep terrain (Fig. 3-33).



Fig. 3-33 View of the Burial Caves in the Xiangshansi Area from the Foot of the East Hill (Lan LI, 2018)

Nevertheless, we can still glimpse caves scattered on a lower layer and summarize a few general features of the burial cave in the Xiangshansi Area. Take Cave 2330 and 2343, for example; both have a medium-sized, single-chamber layout and set up a low stone bed that takes up more than half of the ground space in the cave. These features are similar to K11-13 in the Wanfogou area. Zhang dates all the burial caves in this area to the Middle Tang period and earlier to the burial caves in the Wanfogou Area (Fig. 3-34).¹¹¹

¹¹¹ Zhang did not clarify the standard for his dating of different phases in the Tang dynasty, so I infer he adopted the most widely accepted standard of dating the Middle Tang from 766 to 835 CE.



Fig. 3-34 Cave 2343 (Lan LI, 2018)

To sum up, most burial caves at Longmen have a single room layout; only Cave 475 on the northern cliff in the Pearl Spring area has two chambers. Meanwhile, these burial caves have different layouts: to carve the Buddhist images and altar on the walls makes it no different from other image caves; to making a stone bed in the chamber that imitates a tomb chamber; or only a simple rectangular plane without any images and decorations. Burial niches could also be classified into four different types based on their façades: with a pagoda above; with an image niche above; with a circular arch façade, and with a square façade.¹¹²

It is obvious to see the tendency of how the layouts of the burial caves changed at Longmen in Tang, from the Zhenguan (626 –649 C.E.) to the Kaiyuan reign period (713–741 C.E.), from the setting of an altar and images surrounding the walls to carving a stone bed on the back half of the cave, from which we could also sketch out the shift of the burial method: from burying the dead in a sitting posture (e.g., Lady Lou and Nun Huideng) in the early stage (Taizong and Gaozong, 626–683 C.E.) to lying down the body on a stone bed in the later period

¹¹² See Li and Yang 1995, 73.

(Kaiyuan period). Moreover, the evidence of sealing the cave with a door (stone or wooden) could also be found on the front wall or doorway in some caves (e.g., Cave 1 at Wanfogou, Cave 2161).

3.4.3 Burial Niches at Longmen ([Map 3-3](#))¹¹³

In addition to the burial caves that include enough space and facilities to accommodate the whole body, Buddhist donors also excavated a considerable amount of burial niches (*yixue* 瘞穴) that are in smaller sizes than burial caves and that only allowed them to bury the bones or ashes of the dead. The sizes of the burial niches at Longmen are usually no more than 50 cm on each side (height, width and depth).¹¹⁴ Li and Yang have concluded three major criteria to define a burial niche: 1) The limited interior space for making images and unpatterned walls without decorations; 2) The mortise and tenon structure of the opening for installing a square sealed slab (now lost) (Fig. 3-35); 3) The stūpas in relief were engraved on the top of some burial niches, imitating the stūpas set up for relic-burial on the ground (Fig. 3-36).¹¹⁵

¹¹³ Since the map of West Hill is too long to fit in this copy, so I've converted it into a video instead.

¹¹⁴ Li and Yang 1995, 71.

¹¹⁵ Li and Yang 1995, 71.



Fig. 3-35 Burial Niche with Sealed Trace Outside Cave 543 (Lan LI, 2017)



Fig. 3-36 Cave 2276: Burial Niche with Stūpa Above (Lan LI, 2017)

According to Li and Yang's investigations, the 94 identified burial niches are distributed in 14 areas on the West and East hills at Longmen.¹¹⁶ Most distribution areas are much higher than the image caves and niches, located on a steep cliff that is inaccessible without a ladder or a plank pathway. In a nutshell, there is a partitioning between the areas for image caves and burial sites. The donors of image caves and niches generally selected the lower part of the cliff or the location that is close to the road to conduct their projects, while those who excavated a burial site for the dead spontaneously chose an inaccessible spot that is far away from the crowd.¹¹⁷

The majority of burial niches have a simple square plane and plain walls without any images, and their layouts are distinguished by the different types of façades. Aside from the burial niches with stūpas atop or the openings of mortise and tenon sealing structures, burial niches with a round arch or square façades are also prevalent.

3.5 A Comparative Study Between Three Types of Sources

After the specific introductions on textual records, epigraphical materials and archaeological evidence about the burial caves and niches in the Tang dynasty, the whole picture of this unique death practice might look clearer if we conduct a comparative study between the same elements included in these three types of sources, including the location, layout and interior setting and external affiliated structure of burial caves:

3.5.1 Location

¹¹⁶ Li and Yang 1995, 72–73.

¹¹⁷ There are some exceptional examples, where built their burial sites are found in a location that is among or surrounded by image caves, or in a large-size cave, such as the burial niche on the walls of the ante-court of Cave 543, the Cave of Ten Thousand Buddhas.

Most burial caves and niches are located on the upper parts of the steep cliffs, from several to dozens of meters above the paths by the Yi River, or in the deep ravine in the mountains, among the dense forest, which are difficult to access, such as the Leigutai area and Wanfogou area in the East Hill (Fig. 3-37 & 3-38).¹¹⁸

Similar criteria for selecting an ideal burial site also could be found in the hagiographies of eminent monks. Zhiyi chose a place on a mountain peak to bury his body and demanded that his tomb be covered with pine trees, which indicates that an ideal place could be a high place in the mountains surrounded by dense woods.¹¹⁹ Faxi once was on a tour of the steep mountains when he saw a quiet and secluded place and wanted to be buried at this site (*xingjian yichu youyin, kewe qihai zhisuo* 行見一處幽隱，可為栖骸之所).¹²⁰ Even though his disciples disobeyed his original wish of exposing the corpse, they still excavated a cave on the mountain to accommodate his body. Sengzhen (in the biography of Fashun¹²¹) saw the extremely lofty terrain of the Matou mountain and regarded it a numinous place for cave burial (*kong'an chongsui, kanwei lingku* 空岸重邃，堪為靈窟). In the inscription of the burial cave for Lady Lou (Cave 440), it also says her soul was ensconced in a “solitary crag” 魂藏孤巖.

¹¹⁸ Longmen Grottoes Research Academy (2018), vol. 1, 3–6; LGRA (2021), vol. 1, 2–3.

¹¹⁹ T50n2060_p0564a18–0568a14.

¹²⁰ T50n2060_p0587a20–p0588a04.

¹²¹ T50n2060_p0653b16–p0654a12.



Fig. 3-37 Burial Caves and Niches in the Shiniuxi 石牛溪 Area (including Cave 887) (Xinglong LI, 2015)

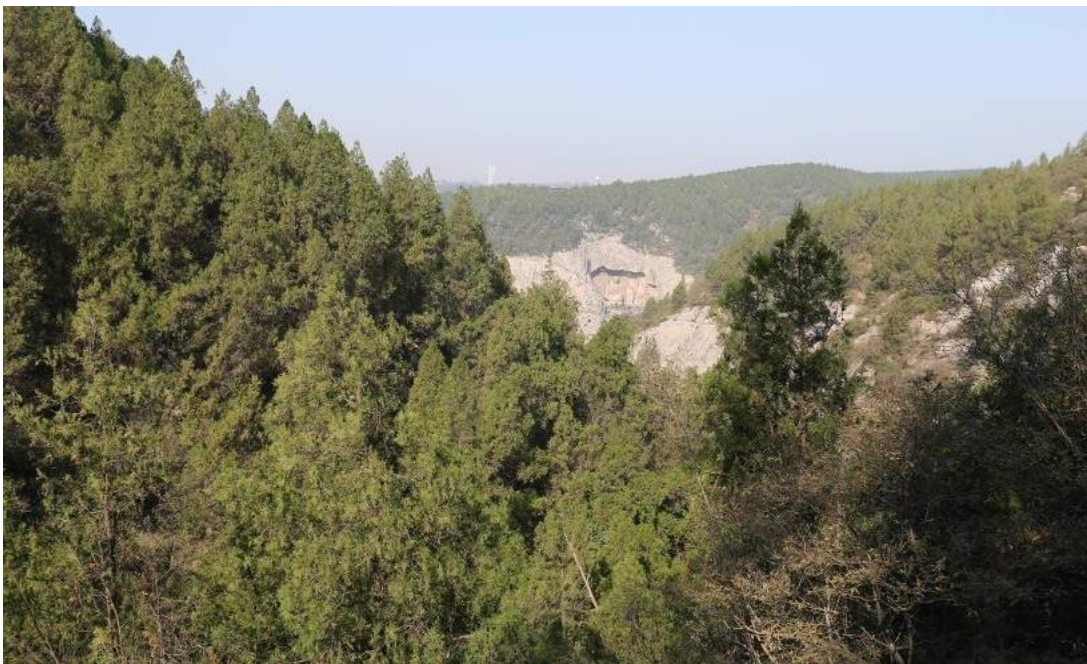


Fig. 3-38 View from the East End of the Wanfogou Ravine, WFG K1, to the West Hill, (Lan LI, 2015)

It is interesting to see specific descriptions of the topographic condition of Longmen as an ideal burial place from an epitaph of the period of Tiance wansui 天冊萬歲 (695-696 CE), in which it states,

“On the 28th day of the 10th month of the first year of the Tiance reign (705 CE), Lord Feng was laid to rest on the perilous cliffside of Longmen Hill.¹²² To the left (east), the tomb connects with Mount Song, bearing witness to the celestial terrace of the Prince Jin of the Eastern Zhou dynasty. To the right, it adjoins Huayin, gazing upon the magical chamber of Ping (Changsheng).¹²³ To the south, it approaches the blessed grounds (i.e., Longmen monasteries), where it manifests the appearance of Maitreya in Tuṣita Heaven. To the north, it reaches the moat city, in which the Monarch of the Golden Wheel presides under the Pole Star. Selecting this auspicious location for the tomb and reverently accommodating the spirit and soul within it – these are the acts of a filial son fulfilling his final duty to his parents, and the completion of the funeral rites. 即以天冊萬歲元年十月廿八日窆於龍門山之懸岩。左連嵩岳，睹周晉之仙臺；右帶華陰，睇平公之神室；南臨福地，兜率圖彌勒之容；北極隍城，紫微立金輪之帝。卜其兆域，奉安神靈，孝子之事終矣，禮之畢也。

This epitaph also highlights the importance of selecting the burial site through divination and geomancy: It is the responsibility of a filial son to conduct the ritual of selecting a perfect place to accommodate the spirit and soul of his parents. At this stage, the purpose of selecting a quiet and secluded place to conduct cave burial is not only (or not) for abandoning the bodies and

¹²² “The Epitaph of Lord Feng of the Great Zhou” 大周故封府君墓志銘, in *Tangdai muzhi huibian* 唐代墓誌彙編 (TMH), 1992, 879–880.

¹²³ It might refer to the anecdote of Ping Changsheng 平常生, whose story has also been included in the *Liexian zhuan* 列仙傳. It says he died several times but came back to live every time, and he finally became the gate guardian of the Huayin city, in now Shaanxi Province, in the west of Longmen, Luoyang. See *Liexian zhuan jiaojian* 列仙傳校箋 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2007), 46–47.

benefiting all beings but also becomes a requirement for being a virtuous person of filial piety who conducts appropriate ritual propriety for his parents.

Another epitaph discovered in the Longmen area also details concrete reasons for Tang Buddhists to choose the mountains at Longmen as their ideal burial place: “The Epitaph for the late Lady Wang of Taiyuan from the Zhao Commandery in Tang,” composed by the Head of the Run Prefecture, Xu Qiao, for his late wife, Wang Lin, who passed away in the Run Prefecture (Nanjing), in the twenty-ninth year of Kaiyuan reign period (741 CE). Both of them were practitioners of Chan Buddhism. It says in her epitaph,¹²⁴

On the twenty-eighth day of the seventh month in the autumn of this year of Xinsi (September 12, 741 CE), Lady Wang Lin passed away peacefully in her bedchamber at her residence in Run Prefecture... Guided by divination, she had chosen final resting place in the surroundings of Longmen... On the second day of the eleventh month of the same year (December 14, 741 CE), in accordance with her last wishes, her coffin was settled at the Wang Ridge of Qinghe Village amidst the western mountains of the Longmen region. From this tranquil vantage point, one can gaze upon the majestic gates of the Yi River (Yique) in the distance, while the nearby county of Yichuan lies to the side. Surrounded by towering Buddhist stūpas and sacred niches (*lingkan*), the landscape exudes an aura of ultimate bliss. The melodious chimes of whale-shaped bells and the resonant chants echoing from Mount Yu fill the air with a symphony of compassion. This sacred ground, the peak of Lengqie Mountain (Skt. Laṅkā), represents the very shore of liberation. How could one compare this serene haven to the desolate ridges of Mang Mountain (Mangshan) in the north or the barren plains of the western mounds? There, the wind whispers through rustling poplar trees,

¹²⁴ See Zu Qiao 徐嶠, “Tang gu Zhaojun jun Taiyuan Wangshi muzhiming 唐故趙郡君太原王氏墓誌銘,” in Zhao 2009, 331.

mingling with the eerie cries of ghosts in the night. The vast expanse of gray mist provides a shroud for wandering souls, concealing them from the harsh realities of the daytime world... 以今辛巳之年秋七月二旬有八日，薨於潤州之正寢。……卜宅龍門之上，……即以其年十一月二日安厝于龍門西崗清河王嶺，從遺語也。前瞻伊闕，傍對伊川。寶塔靈龕，盡為極樂之界。鯨鐘魚梵，常送大悲之聲。即是楞伽之峰，自然解脫之岸。豈比夫北邙之壟，西陵之原，白楊蕭蕭，夜雜鬼哭；蒼煙漠漠，晝掩魂游者乎！……”

In this passage, the composer explains why they regard Longmen as a more ideal burial place than Beimang (北邙), the Mangshan Mountain in the north of Luoyang, which is the most famous burial location for medieval Chinese and Xiling (西陵), the mound to the west. Since the slopes at Longmen and its surrounding area were distributed with various Buddhist buildings and images, there must be an auspicious and sacred site for devotional Buddhists to receive a better rebirth after death.

3.5.2. Layout, Interior Settings and Burial Postures

Most burial caves found at Longmen have a single chamber layout, in which a stone bed/altar was set up against the rear wall and connected to the side walls. There are some exceptions: The cave for Lady Lou (Cave 440) is designed as an image cave, in which a Buddha image was set up against the rear wall, and the place for the body is in an empty niche on the northern wall. The cave of the nun Lingjue (Cave 887) has a vertical rectangular plane that looks like a coffin, so the body could only be buried in a lying down posture, probably on her right side.

If we refer to the relevant records from the hagiographies, most eminent monks passed away in a sitting position, as if entering meditation. Also, in the inscriptions for the burial cave

for two nuns, Lingjue and Huideng, they all died in a sitting position.

There are examples of another dying position of lying down on one's right side. In the biography of Faren, who is a devotional practitioner of *dhūta* in the mountains, and his biography tells us he passed away by lying down on his right side in a cave 於寺北窟右脇而終.¹²⁵ As mentioned above, the *Foshuo wuchang jing* 佛說無常經 (*Sutra of Impermanence*) also introduces two burial positions that apply to Buddhists: sitting or lying down on the right side.¹²⁶

According to the archaeological evidence collected from the burial caves at Longmen, in the cave with a stone bed against the rear wall (e.g., Cave 1850 and those in the Wanfogou area), the burial posture should be lying down, probably on the right side of the body. Other than the cases that indicate the burial posture of sitting in the inscriptions, such as the Cave of Huideng (Cave 1433), it is hard to tell the precise burial position of the occupant, which requires further evidence.

3.5.3 Affiliated Structures

A certain number of burial sites include the stūpas and steles as part of their original design at Longmen, and this corresponds with the records of building a stūpa atop the burial cave and engraving the inscription aside. Additionally, some donors also made images or an image niche alongside the burial cave. For example, the complex of WFG K15 consists of a square-plan burial cave in the middle, in which a groove encircling the walls was used for installing the sealing component, an image niche that includes a group of five images on the left and a nine-

¹²⁵ T50n2060_p0557b29-c12.

¹²⁶ T17n0801_p0746c21-p0747a10.

story stūpa in relief on the right (Fig. 3-39).¹²⁷ In this situation, the central cave functions as a container for the body, while the stūpa is an indication of a Buddhist burial site. Furthermore, I infer that the main image in the image niche should be Amitābha Buddha, and the sponsor who built this complex might hope to cultivate merit for the dead by making the images so he/she could be reborn in the Western Pure Land. By associating this cave with the case of WFG K1, it seems, from the viewpoint of Tang Buddhists who sponsored projects at Longmen, either carving the Amitābha Sutra or making the images of Amitābha Buddha could create the same merits for the dead.



Fig. 3-39 WFG K15: Burial Cave, Image Niche and Stūpa (Lan LI, 2016)

3.6. Conclusion

¹²⁷ By referring to the layout and size of this cave, it could probably use to bury a body in a sitting position.

By investigating textual, epigraphical, and archaeological materials, we can reveal five key aspects of cave burial practices during the Tang Dynasty:

1) The origin of cave burial in Chinese Buddhism

As we have seen, the practice of cave burial had a close relation with the ascetic regimes or meditation practiced by some monks at the beginning and then was gradually adopted by the universal monastics and lay community. Most occupants of the burial caves were also practitioners of long-term meditation and were renowned for their meditation/austerity, indicating that this burial method was most probably associated with meditation practice 禪修. Furthermore, there is more background information about the mental cultivation and textual studies of these monks, from which we could further infer the relationship between certain Buddhist scriptures and the practices of cave burial.

Practicing meditation in a mountain chamber could be seen earlier in the *Biographies of the Eminent Monks* by Huijiao (497— 554 CE); during the third to fourth centuries, some monks passed away in their meditation chamber while still sitting in the crossed-leg position (e.g., Shan Daokai 單道開, He Luojie 訶羅竭, Zhu Tanqiu 竺曇猷). In addition, some monks conducted self-immolation in a cave, such as Monk Huishao and Sengyu. Therefore, there is no doubt there was a connection between the ascetic meditative practice and the mountain cave/niche used for disposing of the dead body, but this connection had been limited to monastics so far.

2) Procedures of the cave burial practice

Rhetorical narratives that include the prediction of death, the visiting of divine figures and animals, extraordinary phenomena and so on, were often applied in Buddhist hagiographies, which became a crucial source for grasping the procedures in the practices of cave burial. When

it comes to the time of the *Continuous Biographies of the Eminent Monks* by Daoxuan (596—667 CE), further narratives of Buddhist funerals and the practice of cave burials emerged, especially in the Chapters on the Practices of Meditation 習禪篇. We could see that Daoxuan used more elaborate language to present the extraordinary phenomena that happened after the death of these eminent monks and more specific descriptions of how to conduct a funeral, as disciples or devotional laity, for their great masters.

Meanwhile, it is noteworthy that Daoxuan also devoted a large segment of his text to present the deathbed rituals in some biographies, in which we may see a completed procedure of funerary practices for Tang monastics, from the signs and preparation before the death (bathing, feasts, recitations of a specific Buddha's name and his buddha land, usually the Amitābha Buddha and the Western Pure Land, or Maitreya Buddha and the Tuṣita Heaven, or both) until carrying out appropriate funerals and burial ceremonies, including accommodating the body in an excavated cave/stone chamber, disposing of the body in the forest to feed the birds and feasts (Skt. *sitavana* 尸陀), burying the dead in a tomb and setting up a stūpa on it, following the traditional/Indian style of cremation or some other burial methods. All these records concern the funerary practices of eminent monks from the northern dynasties to the early Tang.

By piecing all the information retrieved from archaeological sites, we are also able to reconstruct the ritual space and objects and comprehend the function of different components of a burial site as well as the process of an on-site ritual.

3) The selection of location

In the *Continued Biographies*, many monks from the monasteries in Chang'an chose the cliffs and forests of Mount Zhongnan, located in the south of the city, as their ideal burial site.

Similarly, increasing evidence shows that Buddhists from Luoyang and surrounding areas aspired to bury their family members to the south of the city, either excavating a burial site on the vertical cliff of hills at Longmen or burying them in the cemeteries of the monasteries at Longmen. Based on these sources, I tried to prove that location was also a crucial factor for Buddhist practitioners. In the eyes of medieval Buddhists, Mount Zhongnan was a place of austerities and death, which also make it a sacred place for burial. If we refer to the death practices among the monastics of Sanjie jiao 三階教 (Three Levels Teaching) at Mount Zhongnan, there is no doubt that is why this place became a centre of various Buddhist funerary practices.

It might be too much to claim that the Buddhist site at Longmen vis-a-vis Luoyang completely imitated the function of Mount Zhongnan to Chang'an, but we can say this idea might be plausible since both of them possess similar mountain landscapes and were located not far in the south to the city, which makes them a more accessible place for ascetic practitioners and donors.

4) Prevalent Buddhist thoughts in Tang

What are the most popular Buddhist ideas in Luoyang under the Tang? Let us focus on the donative inscriptions and other epigraphical materials. If we look into the popularity of specific Buddhas at Longmen in the Tang dynasty, it is apparent that the cult of the Amitābha Buddha and the Western Pure Land is predominant, with more than 300 inscriptions, including the vows aimed towards Amitābha Buddha. Compared to the wish of being reborn in Tuṣita Heaven, the Western Pure Land seems a more popular place for the dead. This phenomenon does not perfectly match the records in the hagiographies of eminent monks to some extent, in which

many of them wanted to be reborn in Maitreya's abode or mix these two lands together. For example, Zhiyi, before his death, offered half of his personal property to Maitreya; on the other hand, he said that Avalokiteśvara and Mahāsthāmaprāpta were coming to welcome him. Again, in the example of Monk Dao'ang, he turned down the invitation from the Tuṣita Heaven and insisted on being reborn in the Amitābha's Western Pure Land.

Why was the Amitābha Buddha more popular in the Luoyang region in the Tang? How does Amitābha belief influence the funerary practice during this time in this region? Or could this be a universal phenomenon? There should be some relationship between the popularity of some Buddhist scriptures, such as the *Amituo jing* 阿彌陀經 or *Wuliangshou jing* 無量壽經, and the practices of following the instructions in these texts. Furthermore, another text underlines the ideal way of conducting a Buddhist funeral through the emphasis on impermanence, the Sutra on Impermanence (*Wuchang jing*) 佛說無常經 (T17n801), and this scripture offered guidelines for the mourners, in which it instructs how to place the dead in the correct positions as well as the different disposal methods of the body of monastic, from the burial in a stūpa, cremation, to the *shituo* or even burial underground like the laity and non-Buddhists.

5) A transition from the monastic rituals to the laity

At last, when we delve further into the cave burial at Longmen, it is difficult to ignore the interaction between the monastics and lay community in the Tang. First, note how the laity adapted to this innovative practice from their monastic models. Taking the biography of master Zhiyi again, which indicates his body was sealed in a stone niche with a stone gate and a metal lock.¹²⁸ According to the archaeological reports, a number of burial caves and niches have been

¹²⁸ T50n2060_p0567c28.

identified at Longmen, preserving the remnants of sealing or being installed with gates. This situation corresponds with the records in Buddhist texts, and there is a possibility that the laity adopted the way of burying eminent monks as their own burial method.

On the other hand, lay people's influence on Buddhist funerals also deserves consideration. For the examples at Longmen, some laypeople only accept it in form while ignoring its initial purpose of preserving the whole-body relic within its on-site context (thinking of the burial caves for Lady Lou and Lady Zhang). In other words, later practitioners only embraced the role of burial caves in the funerary practice but removed its function as a meditation place. But for what reason? According to the inscriptions, laypeople in the Tang also modified the procedure of funerary practices like cave burial by assimilating elements from traditional Chinese funerals, especially emphasizing divination. They also endowed this innovative practice with new meanings; likewise for other Buddhist devotional actions, such as excavating caves, making Buddhist images, and engraving Buddhist scriptures.

Another significant phenomenon reflected in the inscriptions about burial caves is the dominant factor of gender, the female Buddhists. As we have read, four extant inscriptions and burial caves at Longmen were all dedicated to Buddhist women, including two nuns and two laywomen. What kind of role did women play in the dissemination and promotion of Buddhist practices like cave burial in this area during this period? Are there other devotional actions advocated and performed by female Buddhists simultaneously? I suggest it is time to turn our eyes to them in the next chapter.

Chapter Four: Female Buddhists and Their Practices at Longmen

The discussion in the previous chapter reveals how female practitioners adopted “new” and radical practices at Longmen in the Tang dynasty. According to the inscriptions, people who dedicated burial caves for deceased monastics or laity were either family members of the occupants or had a deep connection with their Buddhist practices. That being so, how do we know about the basic Buddhist practices and the devotional projects conducted by non-mainstream groups such as women?

The general question I have borne in mind when reading the images and inscriptions left by women is, what was their role in spreading Buddhism in the Tang? Three subsidiary questions might help us to answer this larger query: who were these women, and what were their social and religious statuses? What kind of religious practices did they conduct, not limited to cutting caves and making images at Longmen? What were their motivations for getting involved in these Buddhist practices, and what social and religious goals did they want to achieve through practicing Buddhism?

Since most textual records do not reflect the voice of female practitioners, the epigraphical and archaeological materials related to women stand out as critical sources for comprehending the practices of female Buddhists. In this chapter, I will focus on the inscriptions, images and associated practices that were initiated by women, giving an overview of female practitioners and their projects at Longmen, describing and summarizing the main characteristics of the images they made. I then offer an analysis on their motivations, in search of the voice these female donors wanted to present through the practices of Buddhism.

The methods we apply for collecting and interpreting the primary sources may define how much of the big picture could be recovered about female Buddhists in the Tang. For this reason,

one approach I employed in this study is to examine the data collected from 601 inscriptions identified on the site at Longmen (from the Northern dynasties to the Tang), either composed solely by female donors or in which women acted as principal donors and practitioners (i.e., as occupants of burial caves) and neither were involved in projects led by male donors nor participated in group projects that included both male and female donors. I will first conduct a comprehensive analysis of all the data by distributing them into several categories, including the proportions of female donors' participation in different activities compared to the participation by men, projects sponsored by nuns and laywomen and the transitions between them in different periods, the titles these female Buddhist adopted to claim identities that were distinct from their social status, and so on.

Then I will select inscriptions representing female Buddhists, not only those in which female donors expressed their various vows, but also those where they (or the authors of these inscriptions) introduced their personal experience of Buddhist practices, from which their life stories may sometimes be briefly sketched. In addition, it is important to understand the characters of women's practices by referring to the projects they made, so I will also present images and caves/niches related to female Buddhists. By analyzing the descriptions in the inscriptions and the on-site contexts, I will finally discuss the specific Buddhist practices conducted by women at Longmen.

In this study on female Buddhist practice at Longmen, it is important to note that while the focus is on the inscriptions made by donors during the Tang dynasty, it is necessary to trace back the inscriptions and Buddhist images made by female donors during the Northern dynasties (386–581 CE). This will allow us to establish a consistent dataset and connect them to the projects built during the Tang dynasty by their female counterparts. By comparing and

associating the materials collected from different historical periods, we can gain a comprehensive understanding of how the projects of female Buddhists developed over time. This analysis will also shed light on the main features, similarities and differences, changes in popular themes, and the specific motivations that were more appealing to women.

4.1 The Story of Another Lady Liu

Let us first look at the story of another Lady Liu 劉氏, a laywoman who donated Buddhist images at Longmen in response to a dream. In her inscription (no. 0997, Cave 669-Niche 151) (Fig. 4-1), she writes,

The woman of pure faith and a disciple of the Buddha, Liu, had a sudden dream of ascending the mountain and climbing a cliff at the eastern bank of Yique Valley. In the dream, she felt terrified, and she then made a vow to donate a thousand buddhas to awaken my thoughts and bring a pleasant mind. (Afterward) she made (a thousand buddhas) in accordance with the dream, however, she was afraid those tiny thousand images might be worn away over time. So, she returned to make an Amitābha image to satisfy the vow in the dream. As the scripture says, the Buddha possesses multiple bodies, and the multiple bodies of the Buddha could be considered as one. By means of this supernatural power (of the Buddha), may all sentient beings arouse their minds of Bodhi and achieve the right awakening together. On the first day of the tenth month of the first year of the Yonghui reign period of the Great Tang (October 10th, 650 CE). 清信士女佛弟子劉夜忽夢於闕峽水東升山履壁，夢中惶懼，願造千佛悟便思惟，心開情悅。如夢即作，恐千像微小久久磨滅，迴造阿彌陀像一區，以遂夢中之願。經言，佛一身為多，多身為一，恃斯神力，一切含靈同發菩提，俱登正覺。大唐永徽元年（650年）十月一日。



Fig. 4-1 Rubbing of Inscription No. 0997 (LGRA Collection)

Lady Liu, who identified herself as “a woman of pure faith” (*qingxinnü* 清信女), stated her purpose for excavating a niche and making images on the cliff at Longmen was to pacify the fear (*huangju* 惶懼) experienced in her dream. She dreamed that she suddenly ascended the steep cliff of the East Mountain, so, feeling fearful, she made a vow to donate a thousand buddhas images. Later, she fulfilled her vow as stated in the dream and made the images (*ru meng ji zuo* 如夢即作). After completing this project, she became concerned that the weather would easily erode these tiny images engraved on the surface of stone cliffs and make them indistinct. Therefore, she returned to Longmen and sponsored a niche for an Amitābha image to “satisfy the vow in the dream” (*sui meng zhong zhi yuan* 遂夢中之願). She also explained the reason for choosing the theme of a thousand buddhas since the Buddhist canon says the Buddha possesses multiple bodies, and these bodies all become the one (*fo yi shen wei duo, duo shen wei yi* 佛一身

為多，多身為一).¹ Obviously, she wished to attain the ultimate awakening with all beings by relying on the divine power of the Buddha.

Consequently, how did female donors like Lady Liu and Lady Zhang believe that with the help of Buddhist practice, such as commissioning images on a Buddhist site, they could achieve their religious goals and change their lives? Before jumping into further discussion on the specific examples, I want first to take a general view of women's projects at Longmen.

4.2 Data

4.2.1 The Method of Selecting Samples

By carefully examining the names and titles of the donors and the contexts provided by the donative inscriptions from the on-site evidence at Longmen, I have identified 601 inscriptions associated with the projects that were sponsored only by female donors or that featured women as the principal donors and practitioners (i.e., the occupants of burial caves). I will introduce my methods and unfold the analysis of data related to women's practices in this section.

First, I examined the names of the donors to locate any characters with an apparent inclination of GENDER. From the Northern dynasties to the Tang, the titles of monastic donors straightforwardly declare their gender, either monks or nuns. Most frequently, monastics used the titles of *bhikṣu* (*biqiu* 比丘) and *bhikṣuṇī* (*biqiuni* 比丘尼) to refer to themselves. Nuns

¹ Some original texts about the multiple bodies of the Buddha: T1428 四分律,“(0949c19)於第十一日，世尊於大眾中現神足變化，一身為多身、多身為一身，於近現處、若遠不見處、若近山障石壁身過無闕，遊行空中如鳥飛翔，出沒於地猶若水波，履水而行如地遊步，身出烟焰猶若大火，手捫摸日月身至梵天。時諸大眾見世尊如是變化，皆大歡喜得未曾有厭離心生。” On the eleventh day, the Buddha showed his miraculous powers to the assembly. He transformed his body into many bodies and many bodies into one body. He appeared near and far, passed through mountains and walls without obstruction, flew in the air like a bird, appeared and disappeared on the ground like water waves, walked on water like walking on land, and his body was like a flame of smoke. He touched the sun and moon with his hand and went to the Brahma heaven. At that time, all the people saw the Buddha's transformation and were very happy. Their minds never again gave rise to difficulties.” The expression “multiple bodies of the Buddha” “一身為多（身），多身為一（身）” could be seen in many Buddhist scriptures, such as in the *Huayanjing* 華嚴經 (T. 279), *Shidijing* 十地經 (T. 287), without only in reference to the miracle of Śākyamuni.

sometimes used an abbreviated title such as *ni* 尼 or the *ni* of a particular monastery. Other, less commonly used, monastic titles also reveal the gender, like the term *śramaṇa* (*shamen* 沙門) or *saṃgha* (*seng* 僧), which on most occasions refer to monks. There are some exceptional examples: the nun Zhiyun 智運 (ca. ?–675 CE), who was the leading donor of the Wanfo Cave (Cave 543), a cave dedicated to the imperial family and completed in 581 CE, styled herself “*shamen* 沙門” (Skt. *śramaṇa*) in the inscription (Inscription No. 0620). Lingjue 靈覺, the occupant of a burial cave (Cave 887) and an eminent nun of the Jingfu Monastery 景福寺, has the title “*heshang* 和上” (*upādhyāya*), which usually refers to a senior monk.² Her gender may be confirmed by reading the family lineage in the inscription (Inscription No. 1336).³ The reason for applying a prestigious title, which blurs their genders to female monastics was very likely to praise their accomplishments in Buddhist practices, or because that they had once been endowed with high religious and social status. Both Zhiyun and Lingjue had a close connection with the imperial family of Wu Zetian, who was a well-known sponsor of Buddhism and proclaimed herself as a Wheel-Turning King to uphold the dharma.⁴ This is a fascinating phenomenon during the reign period of Wu Zetian). Meanwhile, even though there were also many projects led by Buddhist nuns at Longmen during the Northern dynasties, the titles of nuns tended to directly reflect their gender. For example, there is a group project led by monastics and followed

² Another assumption proposed by my supervisor, Dr. Benn, who pointed out that the title of “*heshang* 和尚” could be an abbreviation of “*heshangni* 和尚尼” (Skt. *upādhyāyini*). In Sanskrit, a female religious instructor or “female preceptor.” A qualified nun (*bhikṣuṇī*) of at least twelve years standing may confirm the *upasampadā* ordination on a female probationer (*śikṣamāṇā*). The ordination can be performed only after formal agreement has been received from the *bhikṣuṇī saṃgha*. The newly ordained nun must live under the tutelage of the *upādhyāyā* as a disciple for a minimum of two years. The duties of the *upādhyāyā* and her disciple are the same as those for a male preceptor and his disciple.

³ Her full title is “The Ceremony Master of the Jinfu Monastery in the Capital of the Great Tang 大唐都景福[寺威儀]和上”, see Inscription no. 1336 of Cave 887.

⁴ About Wu Zetian and her connection to the Wheel-Turning King, please refer to Chen Yinke 陳寅恪 2001, 165–169; Hughes 2021, 96–110; Sun Yingang 2015, 43–52.

by noble women in the Lotus Cave (Cave 712), in which the leaders were nuns from the Zhongming Monastery 中明寺, Daoyang 道揚, Daoji 道積 and Daobao 道保, all of who are given the title *bhikṣuṇī* (*biqiuni* 比丘尼) (Inscription No. 1133). However, we need more concrete evidence to prove that giving these prestigious and gender-blurred titles to female monastics was an innovation by the Tang people to honour their extraordinary religious achievements.

The situation becomes more obscure when trying to separate the names of laywomen from those of laymen. The easiest way to identify gender is from their family titles, which I regard as “affiliated titles.” For example, the description of an individual as “the mother/wife/daughter of someone” (*moumou zhi mu/qi/nü* 某某之母/妻/女) reveals the gender. Similarly, recognizing female donors from their Buddhist titles is also an effective method. There are several titles that Buddhist women preferred to call themselves, especially “women of pure faith (*qingxin nü* 清信女). In addition, “disciple of the Buddha” (*fo dizi* 佛弟子) is also a general title for laywomen.⁵

In some cases, we have to rely heavily on characters that are gender orientated in the donors’ names. For women’s names⁶ in the Tang dynasty, several characters appeared with surprising frequency to indicate their gender. The character (salutation?) of *niang* 娘 was extensively used to name women only in the Tang dynasty. In addition, there are also some other characters adopted by women to name themselves, like *niang* 孃 (same as 娘), *po* 婆, *fei* 妃 (not referring to the concubine of the nobleman but a commonly used character in women’s names),

⁵ However, “disciple of the Buddha” is a gender-neutral title adopted by both male and female donors; more context, such as the names or family relationships, is needed when identifying the gender of the donors with this title.

⁶ See Jiao Jie 焦傑, “Tan tangdai funü mingzi de tedian” 談唐代婦女名字的特點, in *Zhongguoshi yanjiu* 中國史研究, No.3 (2001), 79—84.

for example, Xiangli po 相里婆, Songjing fei 宋景妃. Meanwhile, it is a universal phenomenon to employ the character of *niang* 娘 in female names, usually as part of childhood names. A question may arise whether these female donors who engraved their identities in donative inscriptions had adopted other names or adult names, but it is less likely they employed this method, given more references from the contemporary literature in the Tang dynasty.⁷ Among the cases at Longmen, we find many women with the character *niang* are also labelled with reference to their seniority among children in a family, such as Wu siniang (Wu Fourth Daughter) 吳四娘, Fan Erniang (Fan Second Daughter) 樊二娘.⁸

There are still a large number of inscriptions in which the gender of their donors could not be determined; thus, another question may arise about how to separate the projects conducted by men according to their names and why we should not first extract the men's projects. Compared to the inscriptions written by women, those projects made by men or unknown donors are very ambiguous with regard to gender. Hence it would be too arbitrary to assume the donor is male if we only see a gender-ambiguous name without any supplementary information or unless we see very gendered characters in their names. Even so, I have distinguished some of the projects sponsored by male donors by referring to the gender-oriented characters in their names, associated titles or contextual information, such as the donor claiming among the beneficiaries his "late wife." This chapter will not touch too much upon the projects by men, which I aim to unravel in the next step of my study.

⁷ For example, in the popular literature or miracle tales that circulated in the Tang, such as Nieyin niang 聶隱娘. In addition, historical documents and epigraphical materials like epitaphs also provide references for women's names in the Tang. See Jiao Jie, 2001.

⁸ See the discussion on Women's Names in Chapter 10.1 of Wilkinson, *Chinese History: A New Manual* (fifth Edition) 2018, 181—184.

4.2.2 Male and Female Donors

The second step in collecting data is to extract the projects whose sponsors are female from the total amount of all projects according to the information contained in their inscriptions. For the purposes of understanding popular Buddhist ideology among female practitioners at Longmen, as well as for alignment with the general data statistics and categorization, I have classified the images and inscriptions with identified themes and functions into seven categories. These are seven dominant themes among all the images at Longmen.⁹ According to the statistical data, the ratios of female practitioners under different categories range from twenty-three percent to fifty-six percent, which accounts for a large proportion of the total amounts. In addition to the cave burial, projects dedicated to Amitābha (306 in total), and Avalokiteśvara/Guanyin (241 in total) were the most popular themes among donors in the Tang dynasty. These projects were well supported by Buddhist women due to their proportions, which we should not overlook.

Meanwhile, it is worth mentioning that there is still a considerable amount of images for which donors and themes remain unknown—more than 2100. According to the criteria for sample selection in this research, a project would not be attributed to female donors unless concrete information is associated with females, including women who self-identify or the presence of very gender-oriented characters in their names. For this reason, the number of projects we have identified as women's projects is only the minimum proportion in each category, and the real quantity must be more, accounting for higher ratios of female sponsorship (See Appendix 1 & Chart 4-1).

⁹ See my discussion in Chapter 1, 17.

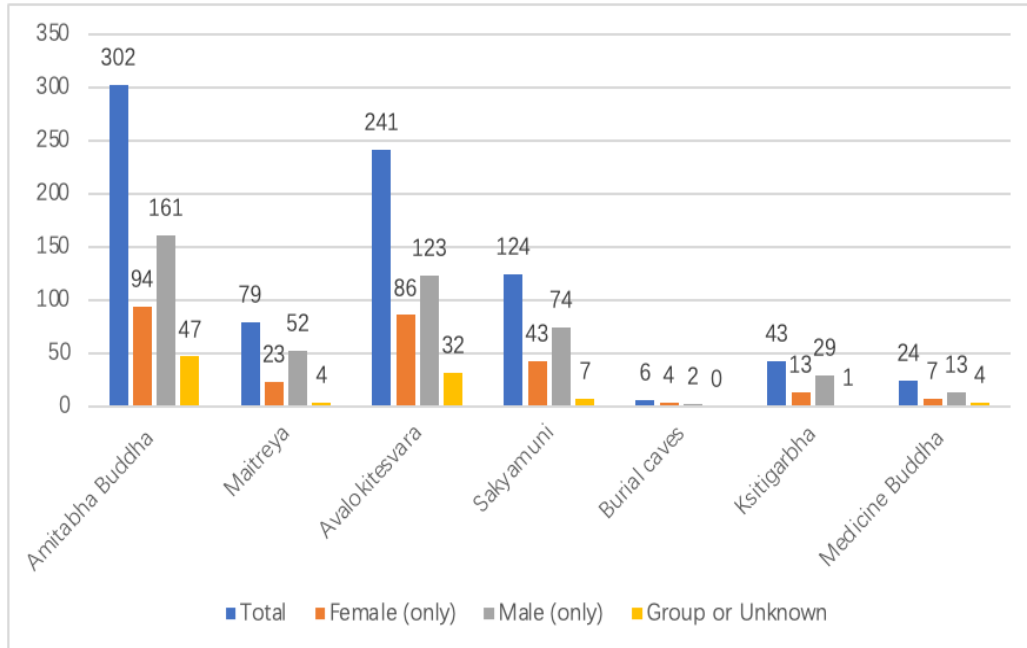


Chart 4-1 Image Themes and Ratios of Women’s Projects at Longmen

4.2.3 Nuns and Laywomen

Among the 601 inscriptions and projects made by female donors, 101 were initiated by nuns, and 500 were made by laywomen. For further discussion in the next steps, I also collected 191 inscriptions with precise dates that were dedicated only by women in the caves and niches at Longmen, of which 59 inscriptions include the dates of the Northern Dynasties and 132 projects belonging to the Tang.

Among the 59 dated inscriptions of the Northern dynasties, we observe that 28 inscriptions were associated with projects sponsored by nuns, accounting for approximately 47 percent of all projects made by female donors. However, in the Tang dynasty, the number of inscriptions written by nuns decreased significantly, with only 15 out of 132 inscriptions being attributed to them. This decline is a reduction in the rate of nuns’ participation to approximately 11 percent in the Tang dynasty. Consequently, the proportion of nuns’ involvement in all dated female projects

at Longmen is estimated to be around 18 percent. Notably, there is a discernible trend indicating a decrease in the proportion of nuns' engagement in cave cutting and image making, while the participation of laywomen increased from the Northern dynasties to the Tang. This shift in participation aligns with the overall involvement of monastics at Longmen during the Tang dynasty (Chart 4-2).¹⁰

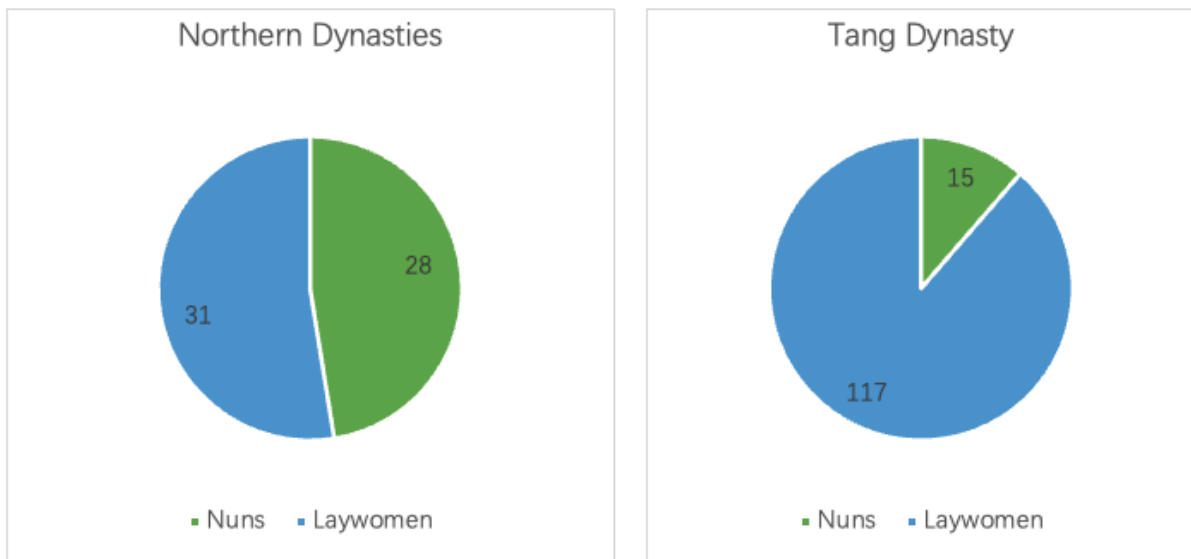


Chart 4-2 Proportions of Images Made by Nuns and Laywomen from the Northern Dynasties to the Tang Dynasty

4.2.4 Individual or affiliated identities

Among 601 inscriptions only written by women, donors of 463 projects identified themselves as independent identities, such as (so and so) *niang* 娘 or *po* 婆 (Lady), a number which also includes 101 inscriptions of nuns. In addition to the independent titles, there are 131 inscriptions

¹⁰ See the investigations and archaeological reports in LGRA 2018 and 2021. Also, in Wen Yucheng 1998, and Li 2014, 529–558.

belonging to the donors with affiliated titles, indicating their relation to male family householders.

According to the data provided, it is evident that a significant number of dated projects in the Northern dynasties were sponsored by female donors. Out of the 59 projects, 28 were sponsored by nuns, while 21 were sponsored by laywomen who used their independent identities or Buddhist titles directly. This accounts for approximately 83 percent of the female donors during this period. Additionally, there were 10 dated inscriptions by women that indicated their family titles and roles within the family. Even if we exclude the number of nuns and focus solely on laywomen, the proportion of those who chose to use their independent identities rather than family-affiliated titles remains high at around 70 percent. A similar pattern can be observed in the Tang dynasty, where out of 136 dated inscriptions by female donors, 15 projects were donated by nuns who used their monastic titles. In contrast, 81 cases involved female donors who opted for their independent identities, while only 38 cases presented family-affiliated titles. This translates to approximately 71 percent (including nuns) or 67 percent (excluding nuns) for the former and 28 percent (including nuns) or 31 percent (excluding nuns) for the latter (refer to Chart 4-3 for a visual representation).

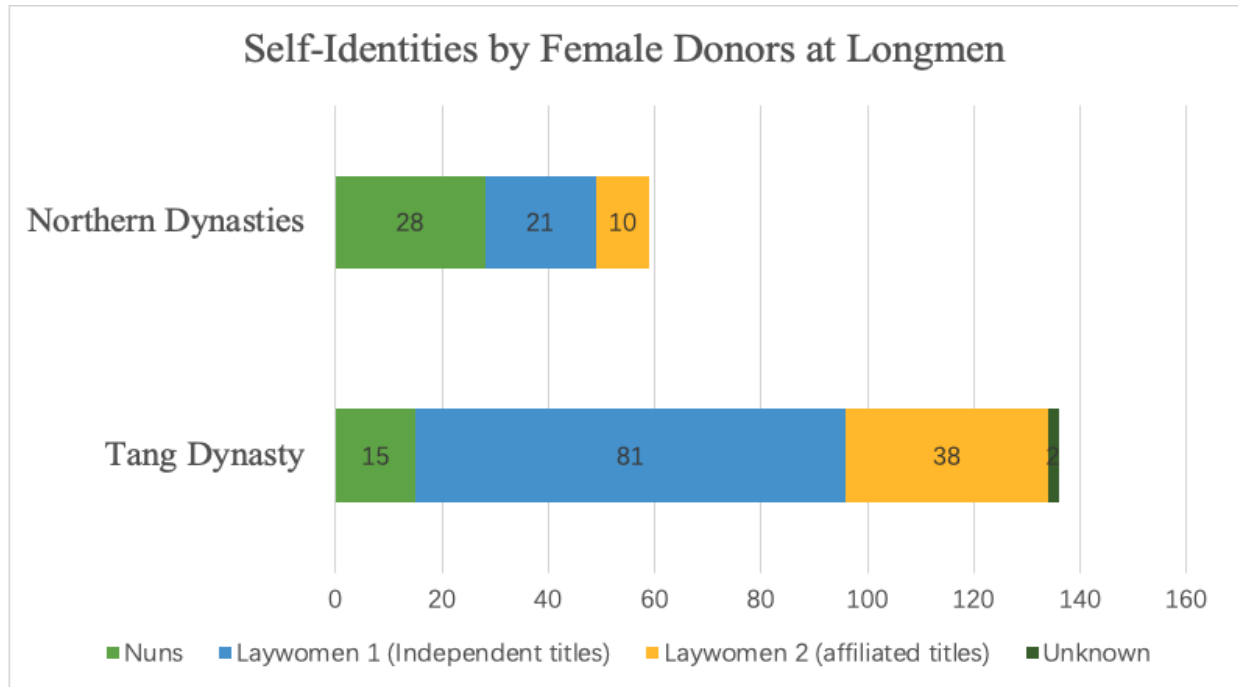


Chart 4-3 Self-Identities by Female Donors at Longmen

It is surprising to note that only a small number of female donors who hold affiliated titles mention the official titles of their male householders, typically their husbands. There are a total of 23 inscriptions, with seven examples belonging to the Northern dynasties and 16 projects dating to the Tang dynasty. Considering this data, it is evident that the impact of women who participated in carving caves and creating images at the Longmen Grottoes during the Tang dynasty has been underestimated. This is clear from the substantial number of images sponsored by female donors and the high proportion of independent titles used, rather than identities attached to male householders. However, it is important to explore how these caves and images on the cliff at Longmen are presented and what specific features make their project distinct from others. To achieve this, we need to examine the introduction of archaeological evidence uncovered from the site.

4.3. Projects

4.3.1 Distribution of the Projects ([Map 4-1](#))¹¹

The distribution of the 583 projects sponsored by female donors at Longmen is significantly different from that of their male counterparts. Based on the survey map of female donor projects, it is evident that most of these projects were excavated in large caves, specifically the South Binyang Cave (Cave 159) and Guyang Cave (Cave 1443), as affiliated niches and images. In fact, there are a total of eleven large-sized caves (Cave 159, 543, 669, 712, 883, 1181, 1192, 1387, 1443, and 1519) that contain at least ten projects sponsored by women. Furthermore, out of the total 583 projects, approximately 468 of them are located in these large caves, accounting for approximately 80 percent of all female donor projects (Table 4-1).

Table 4-1 Large Caves that Preserve Projects of Female Donors at Longmen

Cave No.	Amount	Date
Cave 159 South Binyang Cave 賓陽南洞	54	Tang
Cave 543 萬佛洞 Wanfo Cave	26	Tang
Cave 557 清明寺洞 Qingmingsi Cave	17	Tang
Cave 669 老龍洞 Laolong Cave	51	Tang
Cave 712 蓮花洞	15	Northern Wei

¹¹ Since the map of West Hill is too long to fit in this copy, so I've converted it into a video instead.

Lianhua/Lotus Cave		
Cave 883 石牛溪 Shiniuxi Cave	13	Northern Wei
Cave 1181 魏字洞 Weizi Cave	14	Northern Wei
Cave 1192 唐字洞 Tangzi Cave	34	Tang
Cave 1387 藥方洞 Yaofang Cave	26	Northern dynasties to Tang
Cave 1443 古陽洞 Guyang Cave	88	Northern Wei
Cave 1519 火燒洞 Huoshao Cave	14	Northern Wei

Certain large caves were favoured by female donors more than others, and they chose to concentrate their projects in a specific location during a particular period. One such cave is Cave 159 (South Binyang Cave 賓陽南洞), which is discussed in Chapter 2. Many female donors in the early Tang dynasty selected this cave to create their Buddhist projects, starting from the time immediately after Prince Wei completed the main images on the rear wall, up until the reign of Emperor Gaozong. Inscriptions from 54 projects indicate female patrons, with 20 inscriptions containing precise dates ranging from 641 to 677 CE, although most date between 641 and 655 CE.

Similarly, Cave 543 (Wanfo Cave 萬佛洞) and Cave 669 (Laolong Cave 老龍洞), located in the middle of the West Hill, were also preferred locations for Buddhist women to carry out their projects. Cave 543 had 26 niches, with 11 projects that include precise dates from the first year of Yonglong (680 CE) to the first year of Chuigong (685 CE). Of these 11 projects, 7 were dated during the Yonglong period (680–681 CE). The principal donors of Cave 543 were two prominent females: a prestigious nun named Zhiyun 智運 (?–675 CE) and a high-ranked palace female officer named Yao Shenbiao 姚神表 (d.u.). The main construction of Cave 543 was completed in 580, and after the large cave and main images of Amitābha and his attendants were finished, other donors came and found a place for their small niches and images. Motivated by various vows, they left their traces on the walls inside or outside the caves. Since this project was sponsored by contemporary females of distinguished status, who also left their figures of giving offerings in the cave, their followers, especially female adherents, were inclined to donate images in accordance with their example (Fig. 4-2 & 4-3).



Fig. 4-2 Cave 543 (Wanfo Cave 萬佛洞) (Lan LI, 2018)

Fig. 4-3 Donors at the Doorway of Cave 543, Probably Nun Zhiyun (Lan LI, 2018)

A similar situation can be observed in Cave 669, where 51 projects by female donors are preserved. Based on 21 dated inscriptions, it appears that the process of conquering the walls in this cave was a lengthy one, spanning from 638 CE (the twelfth year of Zhenguan 貞觀) to 718 CE (the sixth year of the Kaiyuan reign period). However, a significant number of these projects were initiated during the early reign period of Gaozong, specifically between 651 and 668 CE. Unlike other caves, Cave 669 does not have a predominant theme with large images occupying the interior space. Instead, it features approximately 270 small or medium-sized niches scattered across the walls. This suggests that it may have taken a longer time for donors to fill the available space in the cave (Fig. 4-4).¹²



Fig. 4-4 Cave 669: Interior Space (Lan LI, 2023)

¹² Zonglu (*General Records*) 1999, vol.4, 76–112.

4.3.2 Sizes

So far, the largest projects we have identified sponsored by female donors at Longmen are Cave 543 (Wanfo Cave, 680 CE) and Cave 1955 (Jinan Cave) (ca. 705–710 CE), also the only two large-sized caves that have a size exceeding 300 cm. Wanfo Cave (Cave of Ten Thousand Buddhas), located on a concave cliff in the middle of Longmen Hill (West Hill), is an elaborate and majestic project dedicated to the imperial family by the renowned nun who served in the palace, Zhiyun. The name of this cave engraved in the gigantic lotus relief on the roof is Dawanwu qianfo dong 大萬五千佛洞, The Cave of Great Fifteen Thousand Buddhas), sponsored by nun Zhiyuan and Palace Officer Yao Shenbiao. Wen identifies the theme of the complex of images set up against the rear wall as Amitābha and his attendants.¹³ However, Sofukawa argues that the theme should be Śākyamuni, according to the titles of the Buddhas in different directions among the ten thousand Buddha images in the cave.¹⁴

There are several medium or small-sized caves at Longmen, measuring between 100 to 300 cm, that were sponsored by women. One notable example is Cave 331, also known as the cave of Lady Han, which dates to 661 CE. This cave stands out as one of the few independent caves sponsored by female donors at Longmen. It is located on a cliff in the southern part of the South Binyang Cave, which is situated along the main road leading to the complex of grottoes. As a result, it is easily accessible to visitors.

Cave 331 is considered a medium-sized cave at Longmen, with dimensions of 160 cm in height, 125 cm in width, and 198 cm in depth. The cave is divided into two sections: an anterior yard and a main chamber. The rear wall of the main chamber features a combination of five

¹³ See Wen 1992, 194–195.

¹⁴ Sofukawa 1988, 299–306.

statues. The central figure is the principal image of Amitābha, flanked by two disciples and two bodhisattvas on either side. Additionally, the main chamber is adorned with orderly arranged images of a thousand Buddhas on the northern and southern walls.

At the entrance of the anterior yard, there are figures of two heavenly kings, two Vajrapāṇi guardians, and two donors. The figures on the northern wall exhibit clear masculine features, while the figure on the southern wall represents a female donor. These sculptures can be seen on the northern and southern sidewalls, respectively (Fig. 4-5).



Fig. 4-5 Cave 331 (Lan LI, 2018)

Cave 353, made by a laywoman known as Sheli 舍利, is an open niche situated on the northern cliff of West Hill (Longmen Hill). It is positioned on an elevated area of the cliff, which is adorned with numerous small niches and caves. The niche is located approximately four meters above the visitor's plankway. The central figure in Cave 353 is Amitābha accompanied by two bodhisattvas. Previous research has considered Cave 352 and 353 to be part of the same project,

as they share similar dimensions and themes.¹⁵ The completed project measures 140 cm in height, 213 cm in width, and 90 cm in depth. The niche itself is around 140 cm in height, 110 cm in width, and 90 cm in depth. Based on the façade and on-site evidence, it is evident that this niche was created in conjunction with the neighboring niches on the northern side. This suggests that these two niches were designed and constructed simultaneously (Fig. 4-6 & 4-7).



Fig. 4-6 Location of Cave 353 (Lan LI, 2017)

¹⁵ Zonglu 1999, vol.2 (record), 67.



Fig. 4-7 Cave 353 (*Zonglu*, vol. 2)

Small niches and caves refer to those projects with a size under 100 cm (either in height or width), which also apply to most projects of female donors at Longmen, among which the most popular themes are Amitābha Buddha and Avalokiteśvara.

4.3.3 Images

The dominant theme favoured by female donors in the Tang dynasty was the creation of images of Amitābha and his attendants, known as the Western Pure Land Triad.¹⁶ A total of ninety-four image caves and niches can be identified with this theme, with forty-nine containing precise dates and forty-six being made during the Tang dynasty. The Amitābha images typically consist

¹⁶ The original text to describe the Amitabha triad was identified in the *Guan wuliangshou jing* 觀無量壽經 (*Sutra of the Meditation on the Buddha of Immeasurable Life*) (T. 365), 「說是語時，無量壽佛住立空中，觀世音、大勢至，是二大士侍立左右。光明熾盛不可具見，百千閻浮檀金色不可為比。」 See T12no0365_p342c16-19.

of three main figures (the Buddha and two disciples), but larger projects included additional bodhisattvas. This variation in the number of figures may have been due to limited space or the intentions of the donors. Changes in the patterns of representing the Buddha were relatively slight compared to the figures of disciples, bodhisattvas, and other figures, primarily seen in the garments, *mudrā* (hand gestures), and pedestals.¹⁷ The artistic level of these projects varied, with larger projects or those associated with well-known names being more elaborate and intricately decorated. However, even medium and small-sized images reflect an elegant style, indicating the significant investment made by their donors.

Niche S9, located on the southern wall of Cave 159 in the South Binyang Cave (Fig. 2-6), is a small-sized niche dedicated to Amitābha and his attendants. It measures 46 cm in height and 44 cm in width. The niche was sponsored by the wife of Yang Shuqi in 646 CE, as indicated by the donative inscription (Inscription No. 0201) carved on the left side outside of the niche. The location of Niche S9 is relatively difficult to access, as it is situated on the upper layer of the wall, above most niches and close to the ceiling. Despite its modest size and challenging location, the artwork within the niche displays intricate craftsmanship and is comparable to projects donated by wealthier individuals of higher status. For instance, the depiction of the Buddha's pedestal in Niche S9 bears a resemblance to the one found in Niche E24, which was donated by the husband of Princess Nanping 南平公主 in 650 CE.

While some projects may not be well-preserved, their artistic quality and original context can still be discerned. Niche N56 in Cave 159, donated by Meng Hui's 孟惠 mother, Xiahou Ke'er 夏侯客兒, in 651 CE, is an example of such a project (Fig. 4-8). Measuring 39 cm in

¹⁷ Please refer to the chronological studies on the Buddhist images at Longmen in the Tang; see Ding, 1979, 519—546; Wen 1992a, 172–216; Sofukawa 1998, 199–397; Li 2014, 441–528.

height and 6 cm in width, this niche bears signs of weathering after more than a thousand years. Despite its less prominent placement and potential lower labor intensity compared to neighboring projects, the general artwork and preserved patterns indicate its significance within the cave complex.



Fig. 4-8 Niche N56 in Cave 159 (Lan LI, 2018)

It is noteworthy that the combination of Amitābha Buddha and a thousand Buddhas was popular during the Tang dynasty. This can be observed in the caves at Longmen, particularly in Cave 543 where the inscription mentions fifteen thousand Buddha images densely covering the space, except for that occupied by the group images of Amitābha and his attendants. These images extend even to the sidewalls of the doorway. Similarly, Cave 331 dedicated to Lady Han and Cave 669 dedicated to Lady Liu also feature the theme of Amitābha and a thousand Buddhas. This suggests that the combination of Amitābha Buddha and ten thousand Buddhas was not a coincidence but rather a recurring theme during the Tang dynasty, possibly influenced by a

specific cult based on Buddhist teachings.

Apart from the combination of Amitābha Buddha and his attendants, another prominent theme at Longmen is the depiction of Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva (Guanshiyin 觀世音 or Guanyin 觀音). Out of the total 86 Guanyin images at Longmen, twenty-three are dated and were made by female patrons. These Guanyin images exhibit noticeable changes in art style and appearance from the early Tang period to the high Tang period.¹⁸ The Guanyin images created by female donors reflect this evolution. For example, the image of Zhi Dafei 石姐妃(S26), made in 642 CE, showcases a style similar to earlier images in the Northern dynasties, with a primitive expression and less emphasis on body curves (Fig. 4-9).

However, during the late period of Emperor Gaozong' reign and the reign of Wu Zetian, the style of Guanyin images at Longmen underwent a significant shift. The emphasis was placed on the body's S-shape curve, resulting in a higher level of artistry and more elaborate decorations. This can be observed in the project dedicated by the Nun Zhenzhi 比丘尼真智 from the Yifeng Monastery in Xu Prefecture in 681 CE, preserved on the southern wall outside of Cave 543 (Fig. 4-10). Subsequently, the artwork of Guanyin images declined after the Wuzhou period. These images exhibited more tension and heaviness in the body, with fewer decorations. An example of this can be seen in the niche made by Lady Fei Erniang 費二娘 and Dushishi niang 杜十娘 in Cave 597, completed in 715 CE (Fig. 4-11).

¹⁸ Please refer to my previous work on the typological studies of the dated Guanyin images at Longmen in the Tang dynasty. See Li 2018, 7–43.



Fig. 4-9 Niche S26 in Cave 159; Fig. 4-10 Guanyin Image by Nun Zhenzhi in Cave 543;
Fig. 4-11 Guanyin Images in Cave 597 (Lan LI, 2018–2023)

After reviewing the information about images, we can see that the images or caves associated with female donors are mostly in small and medium sizes. Two dated caves, the Wanfo Cave and Jinan Cave, exceed a height and width of 300 cm, so they could be regarded as large-sized caves. A small number of independent caves or niches on the cliff, with the size between 100 to 300 cm, such as Cave 331 (Cave of Lady Han 韓氏洞), Cave 352 (Cave of Sheli 舍利造像龕), Cave 1917 (Cave for Lord Lu 盧公龕, Inscription no. 2730), etc.¹⁹ Most of the niches are in small sizes (i.e., under 100 cm), showing a relatively simple and concise layout without very high artistic level or elaborate decorations.

In contrast to the stereotype of making images by following the principles instructed by Buddhist texts strictly, in fact, many projects were sponsored by reflecting a mix of themes and

¹⁹ Since records regarding the locations of some projects in *Zonglu* are not clear, the identification of all the medium-sized independent caves and niches by women needs further on-site investigations.

more seem to be random combinations of images, which means the cults mirrored from these projects sometimes are not clear and could not be interpreted only according to Buddhist scriptures. While this is a common phenomenon seen in most small-sized projects at Longmen during the Tang, since a mass of women's projects are in small sizes, this feature stands out more.²⁰

During the Tang dynasty, some image niches ostensibly depict Avalokiteśvara. However, these depictions sometimes deviate from the traditional Western Pure Land Triad, with figures like Kṣitigarbha Bodhisattva 地藏 (No.1416 in Cave 1034), Medicine Buddha, or even Maitreya Buddha (e.g. The niche in Cave 1504 北市絲行像龕 sponsored by Nun Jingyuan 淨元 with Inscription No. 2549) (Fig. 4-12).²¹ However, women who received religious training in monasteries and possessed a knowledge of Buddhist doctrines, especially nuns, would likely make images based on the descriptions found in texts without breaking up the innate combinations, such as seen in the case of the nun Zhiyun and Cave 543.

²⁰ According to my statistics on the images of Amitabha and Guanyin, combinations that include figures that do not correspond with the Buddhist scriptures are common.

²¹ Inscription no. 2549: On the twenty (...) day of the fourth month of the thirteenth year of the Tianbao reign period (May 14–26th, 754), Nun Jingyuan (...), Wang Zhenzi together made a *pu* of Maitreya. The wife of Bao zhiru, Zong (...), wished up to the imperial (...), the Buddha sun (...), made Guanyin (bodhisattva) one body, and wished together (...) ascended (...) wrote and made the niche (...). 天寶十三載四月廿日訖，比丘尼淨元、王真恣共造彌勒一鋪，寶誌如妻宗願上皇，佛日造觀音【菩薩】一區，願共登書造龕。



Fig. 4-12 Maitreya and Avalokiteśvara Images by Nun Jingyuan in Cave 1504 (Lan LI, 2018)

Examining the funding sources of female donors is also crucial when considering the expenses involved in commissioning images. McNair's discussion on the expenditure incurred by laywomen in patronizing projects offers insight into how female donors perceived their investments in building Buddhist projects at Longmen.²² Although her examples mainly pertain to the Northern dynasties, they provide clues about the financial conditions of women at that time. My analysis of general data on female donors further enriched this perception. In summary, when a female donor contributes to a family project under the family name, her family will likely provide the necessary funds. However, if the donors seek to create images for personal reasons, it raises the question of whether the family or male family members would still support her financially. As a result, most women-funded projects tend to be smaller in scale and have fewer

²² McNair 2007, 53–56.

inscriptions, potentially due to limited financial backing from male householders or collective groups.

4.4 Inscriptions

Inscriptions by women are typically short and concise, usually consisting of no more than 50 characters or between 50 and 100 characters in most cases. Some inscriptions even only include the names of two or three characters alongside the images, or names and the character *zao* 造 (made) to indicate that they are the donors. For example, "Zheng Sanniang made" 鄭三娘造 (Inscription no. 0070). Despite their brevity, these inscriptions still provide valuable information about the project amounts and diverse motivations that encouraged women to donate images to Buddhist sites. Through these inscriptions, women were able to express their vows and aspirations towards achieving their religious goals.

Upon examining the contents of these inscriptions, it becomes apparent that the motivations of female donors are primarily focused on themselves and their families. I have identified five main categories of motivations and compared the amounts associated with each category. The largest number of projects, totalling 133 image niches or caves, was dedicated to deceased family members such as parents, spouses, or children. The second largest category consists of projects that express wishes for the safety and well-being of the family or care for family members, including the female donors themselves, with a total of 50 projects. Additionally, there are 16 inscriptions where women expressed their desires to receive cures for diseases (Chart 4-4).

By analyzing the vows and motivations expressed in the inscriptions, we can gain insights into the priorities and concerns of female donors regarding their religious practices.

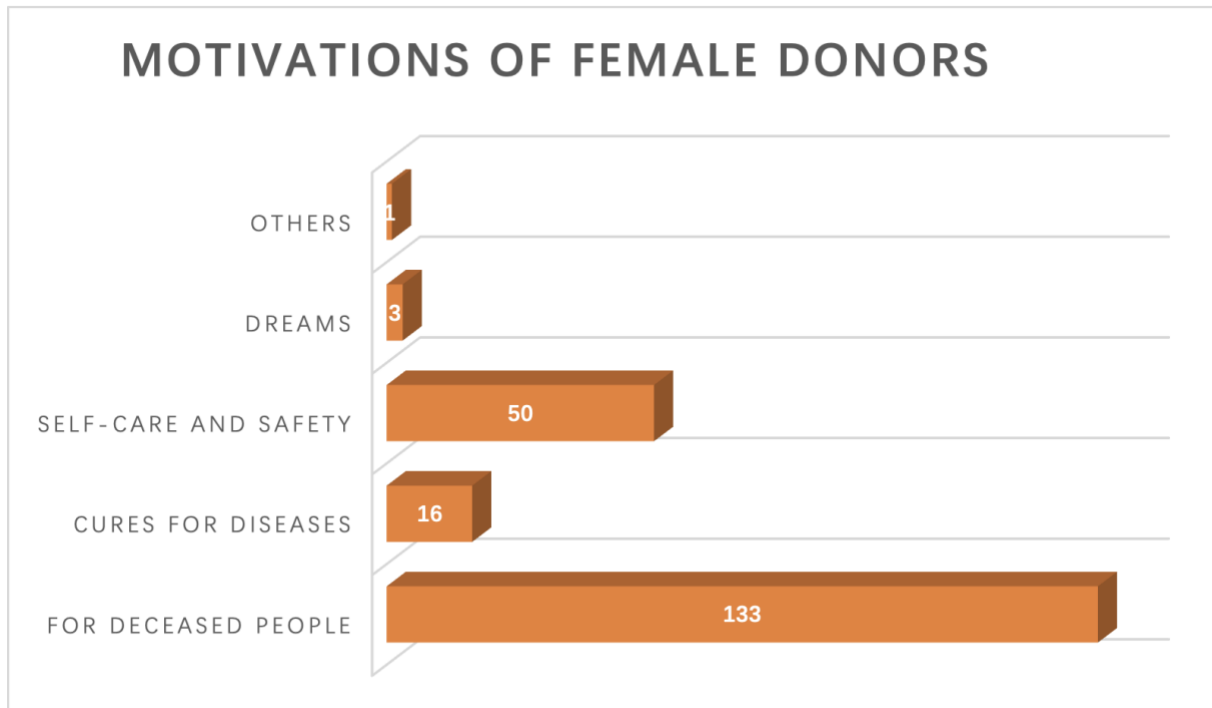


Chart 4-4 Motivations by Female Donors at Longmen

4.4.1 For Deceased People

The inscription of Lady Lu (Lu *shi* 盧氏) (No. 0775, Cave 560, 677 CE), the wife of the Administrator of Su Prefecture Cui Yuanjiu (Suzhou changshi Cui Yuanjiu 蘇州長史崔元久), states that she donated this image niche in remembrance of her late mother and wished to repay her protection and education in her childhood (Fig. 4-13). She says, “(I) encountered misfortune in my early years and lost my father a long time ago. Owing to my loving mother's protection and education, I was able to grow up and establish myself (in the world) 夙遭不造，早喪所天，慈母保育，得至成立.” She wished to take care of her mother every morning and evening; however, she failed to perform her filial piety and fulfill her “will of the crow” (*wuzhi* 烏志), like the crows that feed their parent in return, for her mother passed away suddenly. She immersed herself in this sorrow of pain and made an image niche on the cliff at Longmen to lay her

aspiration to recall her mother's love. This project is typical for donors making images for their late parents. Meanwhile, there are many other examples of dedicating the projects to the dead, for a specific person or including universal beneficiaries called “Xianwang 先亡 (Previously deceased)” or “Wangzhe 亡者 (deceased).” For instance, in the inscription of Lady Han, the wife of Yang (...) from Luo Prefecture 洛州人楊妻韓 (Inscription no. 0387, Cave 331, 661 CE), she made a niche of Amitābha Buddha along with a thousand bodies of a thousand Buddhas 千佛千軀. She wished “the deceased and the living attains true awakening together 願先亡、見存俱登正覺.” Lady Han's inscription describes another attempt at making Amitābha Buddha and a thousand Buddha images together for deceased people (Fig. 4-14).



(Left) Fig. 4-13 Rubbing of Inscription no. 0775 in Cave 560 (*Beijing tushuguan*, 2000)

(Right) Fig. 4-14 Inscription no. 0387 in Cave 331 (Lan LI, 2008)

Making images for a family-centric purpose, like honouring the deceased parents, also applies to nuns. In this example of En'en (恩恩), she made a complex of images for her late parents. Her project includes three sub-projects: a Dizang bodhisattva (地藏菩薩) image completed on the death anniversary of her late father and another Dizang image on the death anniversary of her late mother. In addition, she also made an image of the Yedao (業道), the god of the karmic path, to the parents of seven generations (七世父母) and previously deceased people (先亡) (Fig. 4-15).²³ As a monastic, En'en also remembered saving her karmic parents in previous lives to cultivate merit according to the Buddhist canon, and notably, she completed this project a day before the Ghost Festival, the fourteenth day of the seventh month in the third year of the Shenlong reign period (神龍三年七月十四日, August 15th, 707 CE).

²³ For the definition of "parents of seven generations" (*qishi fumu* 七世父母), it is unclear whether it refers to the biological parents traced back to seven generations of the donor or if it signifies a karmic relationship with one's parents from the most recent seven rebirths. Zongmi, in his work *Foshuo yulanpenjing shu* 佛說盂蘭盆經疏, suggests that the parents of even generations are distinct from one's biological parents (*suosheng fumu* 所生父母), and should be differentiated from the concept of "ancestors of previous generation" (*shangdai zuzong* 上代祖宗). He further explains that although the parents of seven generations may appear distant in the present life, they are instrumental in giving birth to an individual, enabling them to cultivate the path to awakening (*shengwo xiudao zhi qi* 生我修道之器). Consequently, it is recommended to offer tribute to the parents of seven generations during the Ghost Festival, specifically on the Fifteenth Day of the Seventh Month, along with one's biological parents. For more information, refer to T39no. 1792_510c5–12.



Fig. 4-15 Rubbing of Inscription No. 2743 in Cave 1931 (LGRA Collection)

4.4.2 For Safety, Self-care and Cures

Among the 50 projects dedicated to safety and care, female donors often expressed their concerns for their families and themselves. For instance, Princess Yuzhang, in her inscription, stated that she made the images “for her own safety” (*jishen ping'an* 己身平安) (Inscription no. 0149, Cave 159-S19, 641 CE). Similarly, many donative inscriptions reveal a universal wish for the “safety of the entire family, including adults and children” (*hejia daxiao ping'an* 合家大小平安) through the creation of Buddha images. Lady Wang (Wang po 王婆), for example, made an image of Guanyin on the façade of Cave 557 (Qingmingsi Cave 清明寺, Inscription No. 0748) to ensure a safe journey for her son, Song Xuanqing 宋玄慶, who would be traveling to the east in 676 CE.

Furthermore, the act of making Buddhist images to pray for a safe pregnancy was exclusively carried out by female donors. In 678 CE, Lady Fan, the wife of Liu Baozui 劉寶最,

reverently made an image of the Medicine Buddha for her pregnancy (*renshen* 妊身 and also for the well-being of respected masters and parents, hoping to avoid tribulations (*wei shiseng fumu jingzao, mianli kunan* 為師僧父母敬造, 免離苦難 (Inscription No. 1791, Cave 1394).

Inscriptions such as those found in Cave 597 (Inscription No. 0899, 715 CE) reveal not only a desire for family safety but also the reciprocal nature of Buddhist practice. Lady Fei erniang 費二娘 expressed her wholehearted worship of the bodhisattva and the accomplishment she obtained. Lady Du shisiniang 杜十四娘, on the other hand, mentioned her recovery from an illness and donated a Guanyin image, wishing for the safety of her entire family. It is likely that Lady Dushishi niang had made a vow to create a Guanyin image during her illness, and upon her recovery, she fulfilled her vow. This connection between image-making and praying for the cure of diseases is evident.

Additionally, Lady Cuishisi niang 崔十四娘 revealed in her inscription the reason for making an image of the Amitābha Buddha—her constant illness throughout her life (Inscription no. 1801, Cave 1410, 702 CE).

4.4.3 Dream, Spirit and Others

Some images had special or mysterious purposes, such as fulfilling dreams or expelling evil spirits. These cases were rare but worthy of further exploration. For example, Miaoguang 妙光, a devout woman who suffered from a foul disease (*shen de e* 身得惡), dreamt of making five [Buddhist] statues (*meng jian zaoxiang wushen* 夢見造像五身). Upon waking up, she followed her dream and completed the project, hoping to cure her illness (Inscription no. 0153, Cave 159-S46, 641 CE). Similarly, Lady Liu (no. 0997) also regarded her dream as a guidance for her

Buddhist practice. Another case was Sheli (舍利), the daughter of Chang Wencai (No. 0395, Cave 353), who created a niche for Amitābha Buddha and two bodhisattvas “to appease the restless spirits at home” (*wei jiane guishen buan* 為家內鬼神不安) and believed this was a method of exorcism (Fig. 4-16).



Fig. 4-16 Rubbing of Inscription No. 0395 in Cave 353 (LGRA Collection)

Apart from the projects motivated by common aspirations, such as cultivating merit and seeking blessings, I want to draw attention to the case of Gan Yuanhui 甘元暉 (Inscription no. 2677, Cave 1787), who explicitly stated in her inscription that she did not initiate a new project for her deceased sons, but rather “restored and rebuilt the damaged images” (*xiuzhi poxiang* 修治破像) that her son had left behind, which gives us a glimpse of how a Buddhist image could be

maintained for family members. Another inscription of a large and elaborate project, the Jinan Cave 極南洞 (Cave 1955, Inscription no. 2753), sponsored by Lady Liu 劉氏, also declared that the purpose of excavating a family-funded cave was to wish her “children and grandchildren perpetual peace and happiness” (*zizi sunsun changbao anle* 子子孫孫常保安樂) and she hoped that her future descendants would ascend this “secluded pavilion” someday (*houyi deng ci youge* 後裔登此幽閣).²⁴ All the evidence suggests that female donors, like their male counterparts, might assume the primary responsibility to construct or maintain a Buddhist project for the whole family in the Tang dynasty and act as a leading figure in a family project. I will now turn to the example of Inscription no. 2730 of Cave 1917, “The Praise of the Stone Image at Longmen Mountain for the late Grand Master for Closing Court (The Lower-Five rank in Tang), who worked as Revenue Manager of the Zi Prefecture, Lord Lu” 大唐故朝散大夫行梓州司戶盧公龍門山石像讚 (696 CE). This cave is a medium-sized independent project carved at the south end of Longmen Hill, with a height of 174 cm, a width of 160 and a depth of 172 cm. Although all the images have been lost, it is clear that it was a project that involved considerable labour and expense.

The inscription reveals that the patron of this project was the eldest daughter (*zhang nü* 長女) of Lord Lu 盧公, the deceased beneficiary. She was also married to Li Jingyou 李景由, an official of the Superior Prefecture of Commander-in-chief of the Great Yi Commandery 益州大郡督府士曹參軍事. She claimed that she undertook this project for her late father and “rites became ingrained in her nature and filial piety flowed naturally from her heart.” (*lize chengxing*,

²⁴ See Yao and Yang 2010, 75–77.

xiaoxing yinxin 禮則成性，孝行因心). Thus, her motivation for this project was driven by two types of duties as a daughter: the principles of rites (*li* 禮) and filial piety (*xiao* 孝).

She also described her effort to repay “the debt of kindness” (*yubao zhide* 欲報之德). She “traveled to the eastern river and longed for his spirit, reminisced on the southern terrace, and wept with blood” (*sheng dongshui er chihun, xiang nangai er qixue* 聖東水而馳魂，想南陔而泣血) and closely searched for a place of merit (*bangqiu fudi* 傍求福地). Eventually, she found an ideal location at Longmen Hill 龍門山, where she “gave up ten thousand pearls and jade” (*she qi zhucui wan* 捨其珠翠萬) to carve a cave, inside which she placed a set of stone images.

The inscription engraved by Lord Lu’s daughter is a unique case among those at Longmen in the Tang dynasty. It is closer to those structures and genres reflected in projects led by men or male householders on behalf of their families (e.g., Inscription no. 1112 in Cave 670 韋利器造大彌陀像記) or group works (e.g., Inscription no. 0077 思順坊老幼造彌勒像之碑 in Cave 159-N96). Meanwhile, its rhetoric strongly imitates those contemporary writing styles of dedicatory inscriptions and epitaphs. Not only did she give a detailed description of the landscape to highlight the auspicious location she selected for her father as seen in other similar cases,²⁵ but she also claimed herself to be a “filial child” (*xiaozi* 孝子) to emphasize the legitimacy of a daughter to lead a family project at this level. The married elder daughter was allowed to take charge of conducting a project of remembrance for the late father.

²⁵ “Looking southward to the Isle of Bamboo, embraced by verdant waters. Gazing northward to Ding Gate, where white clouds linger from morn till dusk. Green pines veiled in mist encircled the Hawk Stupa (the stupa of King Sivi 尸毗王, who exchanged his flesh to a hawk for saving a pigeon in Jataka), lending it an air of profound serenity. Black and orange smoke swirls and gathers, enveloping the Longmen Mountains... 笙州南望，綠水縈迴，鼎門北臨，白雲朝夕。蒼松霧合，環鷹塔而陰深；黛橘烟凝，繞龍□【門】□【靈】靄。”

Actually, it would not be surprising to draw a parallel between the example of Lord Lu's daughter and the case in the Wanfo Cave (Cave 543, the Cave of Ten Thousand Buddhas) and its two main female donors. This comparison allows us to see how women were given more agency to play a leading role in significant Buddhist projects. In the donative inscription engraved on the ceiling (Inscription no. 620), the *śramaṇa* Zhiyuan stated, “For the Heavenly Emperor, Heavenly Empress, Crown Prince, and all princes, I reverently made a niche of fifteen thousand Buddha images 沙門智運奉為天皇、天后、太子、諸王敬造一萬五千尊像一龕.” As a Chan master serving in the palace, she cultivated merit on behalf of the imperial family. Most vows in the inscriptions of female donors indicate that their motivations were primarily focused on themselves and their families rather than taking on a dominant role in a collective project. However, both Zhiyuan sponsoring a cave for the imperial family and Lord Lu's daughter taking charge of a family project demonstrate that women had the potential to assert their agency in a Buddhist context and engage in practices according to their own will without conforming to the social norms and traditional values that were expected in daily life. The following discussion will provide further evidence of female donors and their practices.

4.5 On-site Practices

Through the examination of women's inscriptions, it becomes evident that there is a consistent trend of creating images for deceased family members from the Northern dynasties to the Tang period. This practice constitutes a significant portion of the projects at Longmen. Interestingly, there is no discernible gender preference in these projects, as it is difficult to determine whether women or men were more inclined to donate towards Buddhist projects for the deceased. However, it is worth noting that there are three distinct types of Buddhist practices that are

specifically associated with female donors and their projects at Longmen. In this section, I will delve into these practices and shed light on their significance.

4.5.1 Making Images and Self-benefit

During the Tang dynasty, many donors visited Longmen to create Buddhist images as a means of seeking cures for diseases or praying for the safety of their family members. This practice is evident from the vows engraved in the donative inscriptions. Additionally, a fascinating anecdote from Tang Buddhist literature, known as the story of the Monk Weizheng and the spiders, further supports the prevalence of creating images for self-care purposes at Longmen. This story is recorded in *Shimen zijing lu* T 2083 (*A Record of Those to Be Mirrored by the Disciples of Śākya* 釋門自鏡錄, compilation attributed to Huaixin 懷信), under the title "The story of Monk Weizheng, the Taiping Monastery in the Divine Capital (Luoyang) of Great Tang, suffered from spiders (new record) 唐神都太平寺僧威整害蜘蛛事[新錄]." ²⁶

According to the account, Weizheng was known for his diligent practice of wisdom-liberation, one of the two approaches to liberation, along with mental liberation. He dedicated himself to listening and learning without wasting a single day (修慧解，精勤聽習，略無棄日). He resided in the Taiping Monastery, which was established by the Royal Princess Taiping in the Divine Capital (神都太平寺).²⁷ Monk Weizheng frequently preached on various Mahāyāna sutras, spreading the teachings of Buddhism and greatly benefiting the community.

One day, Weizheng accidentally injured a spider's leg, which resulted in him contracting

²⁶ T51n2083_p0814b16-c01.

²⁷ According to Luo Zhao, the Taiping Monastery was founded by Princess Taiping, and he inferred this anecdote of Huizheng probably happened during 686—705 CE, see 羅炤, 2010, 172. “神都太平寺是‘唐垂拱二年太平公主建’。據此可知，‘唐神都太平寺僧威整害蜘蛛事’應該發生在垂拱二年（686年）至神龍元年（705年）之間。

an illness related to spiders. This incident highlights the consequences of his actions and the interconnectedness of all beings.

[One day], Zheng suddenly noticed a spider on the rear wall behind his bed. He approached it with a stick, but accidentally broke one of its legs. He sent someone to remove the spider, but it returned the next day. Zheng sent someone to take it to the south of the river (likely the Luo River, as the monastery was located north of it). However, the spider came back after just one night. Frustrated, Zheng used his fingers to remove the broken leg, but in the process, he was bitten on the finger. Once again, he assigned someone to send the spider to a remote area. However, the spider returned the following day and bit his finger again, catching him off guard. Although the resulting boil was small, the pain it caused was unbearable. Zheng once again sent someone to take it far far away, and from then on, it did not return.

As time went on, the boils on Zheng's body began to multiply and spread. He gradually felt a slight itch on his body and would scratch it with his hands. To his horror, boils immediately formed on his hands, and spider silks could be found within them. These silks extended two or three *cun* (approximately 6 to 9 cm) when pulled out from the boils. The suffering Zheng endured day and night was indescribable. 忽於床後壁上見一蜘蛛，以杖狹之，遂誤斷一脚。遣人送却，至明日還來。整見，又遣人送，送向水南，經宿又來。整乃以指剔其所患之脚，遂被咬其手指，又遣人送極遠之處。他日不覺，復來重咬其指，乃雖小瘡，痛不可忍。又令更送，自爾不來。瘡後稍增漸遍身體。體覺漸微痒，以手搔之，隨手作瘡，瘡中有蜘蛛絲。出瘡皆漸大二三寸許，曉夕苦痛難言難忍。

After a long-term search, Weizheng still could not find the cure for this bizarre illness, and his

symptoms even got worse, finally making images at Longmen function as the successful solution to cure him:

After a period of two years, he continued to experience the emergence of small spiders during moments of weeping and urination and had yet to fully recover. Despite seeking numerous treatments, none were able to provide a cure for his ailment. In response, his disciples and followers would frequently gather to collectively pray to the Buddha on his behalf, resulting in a slight improvement in his condition. Subsequently, they donated all of clothing and possessions to create a complex of fifteen thousand Buddha images on Longmen Hill. Currently, the construction of these images is nearing completion, and his boils have gradually diminished in size. Isn't it caused by uninvited enmity from the past? 經二年間，涕唾小便皆有小蜘蛛子出，至今不差。百方推問莫之能療，合寺徒眾時時來集為其求佛，即覺小可。罄捨衣資，於龍門山造一萬五千像一鋪。像今欲成其瘡稍斂。豈非宿殃不請之所致耶。

Weizheng donated a cave on the East Hill 東山 of Longmen, which he named Dawanwu qianfo kan 大萬伍千佛龕 (The Niche of Fifteen Thousand Buddhas, Cave 2055 and LGT K4 in new number).²⁸ The cave has a complex layout and features fifteen thousand Buddhas carved inside and outside the cave, as well as main images in the center. The name of the cave is engraved on the façade, above the door (Fig.4-17 & 4-18). A fragment of inscription with the words “Taipingsi seng 太平寺僧 (Monks of the Taiping Monastery)” was found in front of the cave in 2008, indicating a close connection between the cave and the Taiping Monastery in Luoyang.²⁹ Weizheng and his disciples sponsored this cave with the theme of fifteen thousand Buddhas,

²⁸ LGRA 2018, vol.1, 62–109.

²⁹ LGRA 2018, vol.2, 96–97.

hoping to obtain healing from the merit of this project. Their wish was fulfilled. Weizheng was a prominent monk who lived in an imperial monastery funded by Princess Taiping. His example might have inspired other people who sought cures and health to make Buddhist images following their Buddhist masters. The reason for choosing one thousand, fifteen thousand or multiple Buddhas as the theme is not clear, but it might be related to the belief in the Buddha's ability to manifest multiple bodies.³⁰

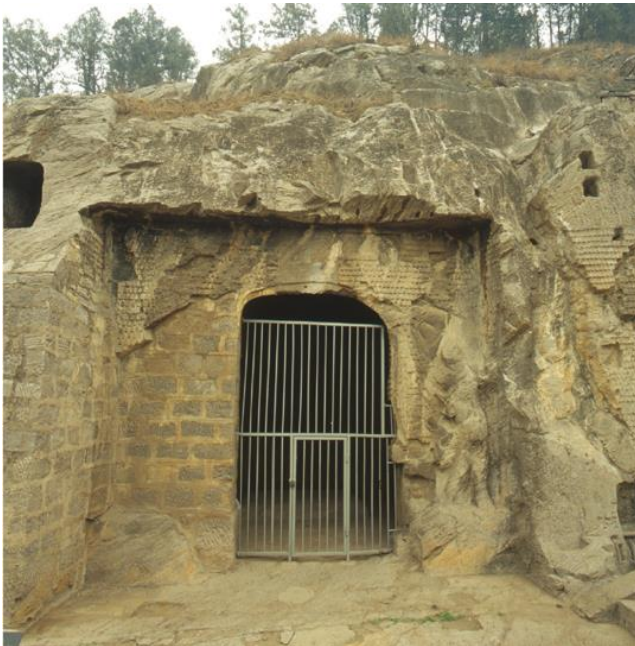


Fig. 4-17 LGT K4 (Cave 2055): Façade;

Fig. 4-18 Inscription of Name of LGT K4 (LGRA, 2018)

4.5.2 “New” Practice

My goal is to explore the "new" practices of female donors at Longmen in the Tang dynasty,

³⁰ According to the Four-part Vinaya 『四分律』卷 51：「世尊於大眾中現神足變化，一身為多身、多身為一身，於近現處、若遠不見處、若近山障石壁身過無闕，遊行空中如鳥飛翔，出沒於地猶若水波，履水而行如地遊步，身出烟焰猶若大火，手捫摸日月身至梵天。」，T22, no. 1428, p. 949c24–29. Not referring to the cures of disease but it means the supernatural power that the Buddha manifested.

especially their funerary practices of cave burial. I have already discussed the main features of burial caves at Longmen, the process of cave burial, and its impact on the Buddhist community in the Tang period. I have also noted that four out of five extant inscriptions related to cave burial at Longmen are linked to female occupants (Cave 440 & Inscription no. 507, Cave 887 & Inscription no. 1336, Cave 1336 & Inscription no. 1650, and Cave 1850 & Inscription no. 2699).

I will start with the case of Cave 1850, which was dedicated to a woman named Lady Zhang 張氏 as her final resting place around the early 8th century.³¹ As I have described the layout and interior decoration of Cave 1850 in the previous chapter, I will focus on how the inscription (no. 2699) carved on the façade above the cave entrance reveals the attitude of female Buddhists toward Buddhist funerary practice.³² Although some characters are illegible, we can still understand the main message that the inscription conveys to us:

Lady Zhang (d.u.), the wife of Xiao Yuanli (ca. 647–697 CE), the Posthumous Commissioned with Extraordinary Powers and Head of the Xiang Prefecture, took refuge in Buddhism when she was young, frequently traversed the concept of suchness (*zhenru*; Skt. *tathatā*) and comprehended that all dharmas are conditioned...Carried in this numinous niche (*lingkan*), may her serene appearance last forever and attain immortality.³³

故贈使持節相州刺史蕭元禮夫人張氏，少歸佛□，頻涉真如，知諸法之有為，不□有□□□晤金□□□無無□□無禮之源。似存□□，為□若喪，自因□□，載此靈龕，庶使幽容，長垂不朽。

To support our claim that this cave was a burial site, we rely not only on the inscription

³¹ Liu Wei, 2012.

³² See Zhang 1991, 161. Cave 1850, Cave of Lady Zhang. Compared to the record of this inscription in Collections of Inscriptions and Colophons at Longmen Grottoes or Huilu (Liu and Li 1998), this inscription in Zhang's paper was transcribed earlier, which also preserves more characters. Therefore, I used the transcription in Zhang's paper here.

³³ According to Liu Wei's analysis, Xiao Yuanli probably died between 696–697 CE at the age of 51. See Liu 2012, 65.

associated with it, but also on its architectural features. The door guardians in official attire and the stone bed resemble the components found in contemporary tombs.³⁴ Moreover, the design of the stone bed suggests that the body was laid down horizontally, as in an underground tomb. However, what was the rationale behind placing her body in a cliffside cave, adorned with numerous Buddhist figures and niches? How did this ensure that Lady Zhang's appearance would remain intact and immortal?

The inscription dedicated to Lady Zhang states that “her serene appearance would last forever and attain immortality” (*shushi yourong, chang chui buxiu* 庶使幽容，長垂不朽): How does cave burial facilitate immortality? Before addressing this question, I will examine a shift in the rhetorical strategies for four female occupants at Longmen:

The inscriptions in the burial caves of Lady Lou, Huideng, Lingjue and Lady Zhang reveal different attitudes towards the preservation of the bodies and the fate of the souls. Lady Lou's husband mourned that “her corpse displays in the concealed cliff, and her soul is hidden in the solitary rock” (*shi chen jiya, hun cang guyan* 尸陳戢崖，魂藏孤巖). He portrayed the cave as a gloomy and lonely place for hiding the dead. In contrast, the inscriptions of Huideng (Cave 1336) and Lingjue (Cave 887), two eminent nuns, emphasized the security and eternity of the caves for their bodies and spirits. Huideng's inscription said, “to conceal her spirit for a thousand years” (*cang hun qianqiu* 藏魂千秋), while Lingjue's body “will be forever hidden in the serenity of the nether world, eternally and unchanging.” Finally, Lady Zhang's family (1850)

³⁴ I mainly refer to the layouts described in the archaeological reports on the Tang tombs unearthed from the Chang'an and Luoyang regions. Under most circumstances, the burial beds used for placing the corpses were usually made of wood or bricks, only the occupants of higher social status could use the stone beds and burial objects. See The Institute of Archaeology, CASS, 1966, 4–22; 2001, 16–29, 96–107. Also, please refer to two representative tombs which set up the burial beds unearthed in the Luoyang region: the tomb of the imperial concubine Doulu 貴妃豆盧氏 (662–740 CE) of Emperor Ruizong 睿宗 (r. 684–690 CE) and the tomb of the couple Anpu 安菩 in the Longmen area (with the date of 709 CE). See Luoyangshi wenwu gongzuo dui 洛陽市文物工作隊 1982, 21–22; 1995, 38–39. For more information about the stone burial objects used in the Tang tombs, see Yuan Shengwen 袁勝文 2017, 204–211.

regarded the cave as a numinous niche with divine power that could keep her appearance intact and immortal. These inscriptions show how the function of burial caves evolved from a simple container to a sacred space for preserving the bodies and ensuring the rebirth of the souls.

Being engraved in a burial site for a Buddhist, surrounded by thousands of Buddhist images in a Buddhist sacred site, the concept of attaining "immortality" appears to contradict to Buddhism's core teaching of "impermanence." It is important to note that attributing the pursuit of "immortality" solely to Daoist practices, which focus on longevity techniques to achieve transcendence and ascend to heaven, would be arbitrary. However, it is worth considering the interpretation of the relationship between the body and spirit in early Daoist texts. For instance, Chapter “*Tiandi* 天地 (Heaven and Earth)” in the Outer Chapters of *Zhuangzi* 莊子 explains this dualistic interaction as follows: “...when things were completed, each emerged with a pattern, called its body. The body contains the spirit, which possesses particular characteristics called its nature. 動而生物，物成生理，謂之形；形體保神，各有儀則，謂之性。”³⁵ Therefore, during the Tang dynasty, it is possible that the belief in the body as the vessel for the spirit was widely accepted.³⁶

Additionally, a stereotype had already emerged in the Six Dynasties (220–589 CE) that underground tombs were "expected" to collapse or be opened one day.³⁷ This belief led to the widespread use of epitaphs, as the stone was seen as the ideal medium to endure eternally and

³⁵ *Zhuangzi jishi* 莊子集釋 1961, 424. I partly refer to the translation by HÖchsmann, Hyun and Guorong Yang, *Zhuangzi* (London: Routledge, 2016), 150–151.

³⁶ We can also associate the idea of “immortality” expressed in epigraphic materials with the discourse of “*Shen bumie* 神不滅 (Imperishability of the Soul)” in early Chinese Buddhist scriptures, which admit that the soul is imperishable and transmigrating. According to Sangyop Lee, this idea could be a unique pattern recreated by Chinese Buddhists in a special historical period, which also influenced the understanding of the body and soul dichotomy in later dynasties. See Sangyop Lee’s dissertation, “The Soteriology of the Soul: The *Shen bumie* 神不滅 Discourse in Early Medieval Chinese Buddhism” (2021), 5–44.

³⁷ Shi Jie, “‘My Tomb Will Be Opened in Eight Hundred Years’: A New Way of Seeing the Afterlife in Six Dynasties China” in *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 72, no.2 (2012): 217–257.

convey information to future generations. By combining elements from traditional Chinese funerals and Buddhist practices, I have attempted to interpret the concept of “immortality” as having both physical and spiritual dimensions.

On the physical layer, the donors of the burial cave believed that since stone possesses a more enduring quality than other materials, the body sealed in a mountain cave would be well-protected for a very long time, even outlasting the underground tombs. Lay Buddhists were convinced that by following the burial method of their models in Buddhist practice, they would attain the same extraordinary achievement, such as receiving an incorruptible body. On the spiritual layer, the donors were determined through this practice, as a path to immortality, the occupants buried in caves would be forever released from their sufferings and obtain a better rebirth. For example, the patrons of Lingjue’s burial believed she would be reborn “to the highest of the highest stage of birth (in the nine stages).”

For female Buddhists who had the goals either to attain the ultimate awakening or rebirth to the pure land, the cave burial offered a path that not only allowed the practitioners to achieve their religious goal but also accommodated the concerns or needs of their family or followers.

4.5.3 Buddhism and Exorcism

In examining the story of Lady Liu, it is evident that she sponsored two image niches: one for Amitābha images and another dedicated to a thousand Buddha images. However, the physical evidence at the site only reveals a portion of her projects. The combination of images associated with the donative inscription consists of images of Amitābha Buddha and his attendants. Lady Liu's niche is located on the upper part of the rear wall of Cave 669, measuring 162 cm in height, 146 cm in width, and 26 cm in depth (Fig. 4-19 & 4-20). The central figure within the niche is

Amitābha, standing at a height of 107 cm. Flanking the Buddha are two disciples and bodhisattvas on both sides. Additionally, there are depictions of an incense burner, donors, and lions under the Buddha's pedestal. The Buddha is seated on a contracted waist square pedestal adorned with lotus petals. The style of this lotus pedestal bears resemblance to the style of the Amitābha image created by Liu Xuanyi in Niche E24 of the South Binyang Cave (Cave 159). Furthermore, it is worth noting that the dates of these two niches are very close, as both were created in the tenth month of the first year of the Yonghui reign period. Niche E24 in Cave 159 was made on the fifth day, while the niche in Cave 669 was made on the first day of the tenth month in 650 CE.



Fig. 4-19 Niche 151 in Cave 669 (*Zonglu*, vol. 4)

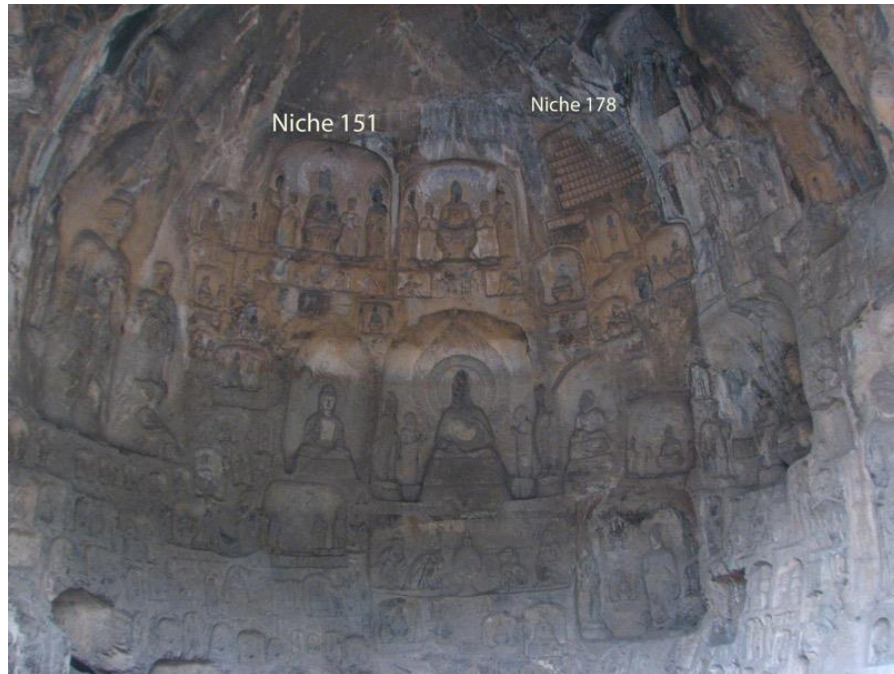


Fig. 4-20 Location of Niche 151 and Niche 178 in Cave 669 (Lan LI, 2008)

There is no evidence to suggest that Lady Liu created a thousand buddhas in Cave 669, apart from the Amitābha image niche. Additionally, there are no indications of a worn-out image in the cave, implying that Lady Liu chose separate locations for the two projects. However, she claimed in one donative inscription that both projects were excavated in the same place.

Interestingly, despite dreaming of climbing the cliff on the eastern bank of the Yi River, Lady Liu engraved her project and inscriptions in a cave on the opposite side, specifically the West Hill at Longmen (Fig. 4-21).



Fig. 4-21 View from East Hill, in the Wanfogou Ravine, to the West Hill (Lan LI, 2018)

It is worth noting that an adjacent niche (Niche 178) in the Laolong Cave exhibits a similar pattern of multiple Buddhas, which were sponsored by a monk named Zhishan 智山 from the Jingshan Monastery 敬善寺. In his inscriptions, Zhishan clarified the themes as “the Buddhas of Ten Directions,” “the Twenty-five Buddhas,” “the Fifty-three Buddhas,” and so on. Niche 178 also dates back to 650 CE, as indicated by Inscription No. 0946. However, Niche 178 is slightly smaller in size compared to Niche 151, measuring 93 cm in height, 115 cm in width, and 2 cm in depth, with images carved in low relief.

These coincidences prompt us to consider the relationship between these two niches. The donors of the projects in Cave 669 consisted of both monastics from the monasteries at Longmen and Luoyang, as well as members of the laity. During this time, certain popular themes emerged and were reflected in the inscriptions, such as the cults of multiple Buddhas, a thousand

Buddhas, or the dedication towards the Amitābha Buddha and Avalokiteśvara. It is possible that Lady Liu's project was excavated under the guidance of monastics, who may have influenced her choice of theme.

Meanwhile, the cave that houses her niche is named "Cave of Old Dragon" 老龍洞 (Laolong dong), located in the middle of West Hill at Longmen and right on the western bank of the Yi River (Fig. 4-22). Most of the 270 numbered niches in this cave are small or medium-sized, with a height of under 100m. The image niche of Lady Liu is a relatively large project in a prominent location, allowing the images to directly face the Yi River and East Hill.³⁸ Lady Liu did not provide specific details about her selection of this location in the inscription. However, it is evident that the place on the eastern bank had a significant impact on her decision. The creation of Buddhist images to fulfill wishes in a dream can be seen as an exorcistic ritual, aimed at pacifying the terrifying feeling and ensuring it does not recur, either in the dream or in reality.³⁹ While Lady Liu's ultimate goal was to attain awakening, her fundamental motivation seems to be driven by the desire to overcome the fear she experienced in her dream.

³⁸ See *Zonglu* 1999, vol.4 (Record), 76–117.

³⁹ *Campany* 2020, 5-6.



Fig. 4-22 Location of Cave 669 (Lan LI, 2016)

Similar to the example of Lady Liu in Cave 669, the case of Miaoguang, as mentioned earlier, demonstrates that the project was inspired by a dream (Inscription no. 0153). Miaoguang, a “woman of pure faith,” was afflicted with a severe illness and sought a cure by creating a niche containing five images (Fig. 4-23). On-site evidence reveals that this niche consists of three main figures, likely representing Buddhas, seated on a tall pedestal with their hands placed in front of their bodies in a meditation *mudrā*. Additionally, two attendant figures, presumably Bodhisattvas, stand on low pedestals on either side, with their hands clasped together in front of their chests. Presently, the five Buddhist images crafted by Miaoguang can still be observed on the southern wall of South Binyang Cave (Cave 159, Niche S46). This niche is relatively small, measuring 34 cm in height, 54 cm in width, and 8 cm in depth, and is situated among a collection of similarly sized niches (refer to Chapter 2 for more details).⁴⁰

⁴⁰ See *General Record*, 1999, vol. 1(Record), 74.

The most captivating part of this story is the straightforward instruction to make five images delivered in her dream. No further information was provided about the representative meaning of the five images, nor the instruction for location selection. Nevertheless, making dreams and fulfilling wishes in dreams also promises a new path for these female practitioners to pursue their religious goals.



Fig. 4-23 Niche S46 in Cave 159, sponsored by Lady Miaoguang (Lan LI, 2018)

4.6 A Big Picture: The Life Stories of Female Buddhists at Longmen

In addition to presenting data on female donors at Longmen and their vows and practices for their projects, the inscriptions also provide insights into the life stories of these women. These inscriptions offer glimpses into the lives of two nuns, Huideng and Lingjue, who chose cave burial. Both Huideng and Lingjue were part of the Wu clan and had close ties to the imperial family. Huideng 惠燈 (650—731 CE), a renowned nun in Luoyang from the reign of Emperor Gaozong to Xuanzong, was particularly favored by Wu Zetian, the Heavenly Empress.

According to Huideng's inscription (Inscription no.1650), she initially served as an attendant to the esteemed Chan Master, Zhiyun 智運 and took on the mourning obligation after his passing.

The dedicatory inscription (Inscription no. 1650) further reveals:

"The Chan Master possessed innate talent and, at the age of just over ten, she served as an attendant to Auxiliary Chan Master Nun Zhiyun in the palace, along with her sister Hui [...]. They both took refuge [in Buddhism], seeking to discern the non-attachment of emptiness. During [the mourning period] for their master, she expressed her grief and longing to surpass the required rituals, refraining from [washing and dressing] from the beginning to the end. It was not until the thirteenth and fifteenth months of mourning that she lost all the hair on her temples." 「禪師」□□□□[天]資慧晤，年甫十餘，與妹惠□□事內供奉禪師尼智運，歸依□□□行動誠，初以出□□之繫□□□□□空辨空之無着，不□□月洞□□□□遭和上「憂」，哀慕過禮，自初至終不加「櫛沐」，逮於祥禫鬢鬢發全脫。

After her ordination, Huideng entered the Internal Place of Practice (Ch. *nei daochang* 內道場, the Buddhist monastery in the imperial palace) and served the imperial family, in which she:

(Huideng) had served in the palace for more than thirty years, during which she ate no grains and wore only patchwork robes, without any desires. The Renzhu/ruler admired her noble chastity and venerated her personally. As highly venerated her as the master and attached importance to her, then called her “Hehe”; hence, the Zhonggong/Empress bestowed her with this title. In the last years of the Chang’an reign period (701–705 CE), an imperial grace was issued to command her to leave (the palace) and settle in the

Ningcha Monastery in the capital (Luoyang)...”⁴¹ 一侍軒闕卅餘年，絕粒納衣，無所營欲。人主欽其高節，躬親供養，既以師資見重，遂謂之和和焉，尔乃中宮便為號。實長安末年恩敕令出，於都寧刹寺安□...

After Wu Zetian's death, Huideng moved to Ningsha Monastery 寧刹寺 in Luoyang 洛陽, the capital city, by imperial decree. She stayed there for twenty-six years until her death in 731 CE. Huideng had a close connection with the Wu clan, the imperial family of Wu Zetian. She was honoured as "a master of the clan for generations" 家代門師 by Wu Chongzheng 武崇正 (d.u.), who wrote her epitaph. Her burial cave at Longmen 龍門 was sponsored by Cui Yao 崔瑤 (678–749 CE), a high-ranking official, and his wife, a district princess of the Wu clan, who were her devoted disciples. They built the cave on the western cliff of Longmen right after Huideng's death (the epitaph was carved four years later, in 735 CE). Wu Chongzheng stated that he "carved on solid stone and recorded her virtues so that after countless kalpas, her fame would still exist 勒貞石而紀德，庶劫□[過]而名存," indicating her close relationship with the Wu clan. Some scholars suggest that Huideng was born in a collateral branch of the Wu clan, whose ancestors had lived in Peng prefecture 彭州 for generations.⁴² However, this hypothesis lacks

⁴¹ There is an issue about time conflict and unparalleled information of people according to the timeline in this inscription. As the inscription indicates, Huideng passed away at her eighty-four in 735 CE, so she was born in 653 CE. Afterwards, she began serving Master Zhiyun in her teens, which is approximately from 663 to 672. No specific evidence indicates the precise death time of Zhiyun; however, by referring to the particular time node when Huideng received the imperial order to move to the Ningcha Monastery during the Chang'an reign period, probably the year 704 or 705, after more than thirty years' service in the imperial Buddhist centre, we are able to retrospect the life of Huideng and the time when she took mourning obligation for Zhiyun, which is sometime between 664 and 674 CE. Therefore, it is noteworthy to identify who the emperor (*renzhu*) and empress (*zhonggong*) are recorded in this inscription according to Huideng's timeline. It shows since Huideng had been serving in the palace for more than thirty years and become renowned for her virtuous character, then the emperor praised her, and the empress endowed her with a noble title, which should be a time node between 695 and 705 CE. It is well known that Wu Zetian ascended to the throne in 690, so she should be emperor or *renzhu* mentioned in Huideng's inscription. However, the function of *zhonggong*/empress under her reign period requires further confirmation. Therefore, the timeline related to Master Zhiyun in Huideng's inscription is unmatched in her own inscription (no. 602). According to Huideng's life story, Zhiyun passed away sometime between 666 and 675, but the inscription in the Wanfo Cave includes a precise date of completion in 680. Therefore, it is possible that Zhiyun passed away before the completion of her project.

⁴² Jia 2021, 35–37.

solid evidence due to missing characters on the original inscriptions.

Lingjue (ca. 681–732 CE) was a prominent Buddhist nun. Her secular surname was Wu, but her father's identity is disputed. Some scholars believe that he was Wu Youji 武攸暨 (? — 712 CE), the husband of Princess Taiping 太平公主 (ca. 662—713 CE), while others argue that he was Wu Sansi 武三思 (?–707 CE), a powerful court official. Based on the inscription written by Wu Chongzheng, who claimed to be Lingjue's youngest brother (Ch. *jidi* 季弟), Lu Zengxiang 陸增祥, a Qing scholar, suggested that Lingjue was Wu Youji's daughter and Wu Chongzheng was his youngest son.⁴³ However, Wen Yucheng challenged this view and proposed that Lingjue and Wu Chongzheng were both children of Wu Sansi, whose name was omitted from historical records.⁴⁴ Therefore, the question of Lingjue's father and Wu Chongzheng's identity remains unresolved. Regardless of her paternity, Lingjue belonged to a prominent and influential family and enjoyed a high social status.

Before entering the monastery and becoming a nun, when Lingjue “at the age of blossoming femininity (like a plum in bloom for marriage), she thereupon abandoned garments and accessories adored with pearl and jade, as well as the grand chimes and bronze vessels (which symbolized noble status). She renounced the luxurious life and left the dusty world behind, achieving freedom from worldly attachments and attaining emptiness. 當穠李之年，遂能捨□□珠玉之服玩，鐘鼎□□□，辭榮出塵，離染□□，□空□也。” The Inscription also indicates that the nun Lingjue had studied under the supervision⁴⁵ of the Chan master, Puji 普寂

⁴³ *Baqiongshi jinshi buzheng* 1985, vol.32, 30a–32a.

⁴⁴ Wen, 1996, 130.

⁴⁵ The transcript by Liu and Li is quite obscure, “於□因□□山普□【寂】禪師□□□□。” I refer to the supplementary information made by Wen Yucheng, which is “於時，因禮嵩山普寂禪師，受具足戒），授以【禪】法。” See Wen 1996, 130.

(651–739 CE), an eminent monk famous for his meditative practices 於時，因禮嵩山普寂禪師，受具足戒，授以【禪】法。⁴⁶ After she passed away in the twenty-sixth year of the Kaiyuan reign period (738 CE), her youngest brother, Wu Chongzheng, “excavated a niche on the western cliff at Longmen.” It seems unlikely that a nobleman born into an imperial lineage in the Wu clan would have written dedicatory inscriptions for two prestigious nuns only by coincidence. His actual relation to the female monastics in the palace and the Buddhist influences he received still needs further investigation.

In the context of Longmen, we have noted that there are fewer details available about the life stories of laywomen in the inscriptions of projects conducted by women like the nuns Huideng and Lingjue. However, there is still some fragmentary information recorded by female practitioners themselves or revealed by their male counterparts. These male sponsors were responsible for Buddhist images and dedications to their female family members, using this method as a means of remembrance. Since this chapter specifically focuses on projects associated with female practitioners, it is appropriate to introduce examples made by women or consider women as the main participants, such as in cave burials and their relevant Buddhist practices.

Two inscriptions of the burial caves of two laywomen also introduced their religious practices in the early stages of their lives. Still, as the inscription indicated, Lady Lou is a very devoted Buddhist who aims to follow the path of her master and abandon her body. It says,

“Lou, having sown the seeds of virtue in her previous life, had early on refined her meditative mind. She discerned the nature of reality, distinguishing illusion from truth, and understood the fundamental distinction between self and non-self. She held the

⁴⁶ T50n2061_p0760c10—p0761a10.

Dharma in high esteem, valuing it more than mountains, while regarding vast wealth as lighter than feathers. Rejecting the prevailing custom of extravagant funerals, which places fine garments in tombs. She admired the ancient sages who had taken refuge [in Buddhism] and vowed to abandon her body in the wilderness.” 然婁宿殖德本，早瑩禪心，識幻真幻之機，表身非身之始。重一法於山岳，輕千金若鴻毛。鄙時俗之逸終，枕衣繡於泉壤，慕先哲之歸向，□【誓】分軀於草莽。

In a similar way, the inscription of Lady Zhang elucidated that “(She) took refuge in Buddhism at a young age, frequently contemplated the concept of Suchness (Skt. *tathatā*) and understood that all phenomena are conditioned (arisen from causes and conditions). 少歸佛□，頻涉真如，知諸法之有為。” Therefore, her family members adopted the cave burial as her burial method to be in accordance with her religious goal.

4.7 Conclusion:

Based on the discussion above, it is evident that the female donors at Longmen during the Tang dynasty came from various backgrounds, including imperial family members, renowned nuns, officer-holding families, and ordinary women. Most of these women preferred to use their independent titles. However, the majority of women-funded projects were relatively small or medium-sized, with inscriptions that were concise. This could be attributed to a lack of financial support from male householders or a collective group. Nevertheless, it is important not to underestimate the contributions and impact that female Buddhists made in spreading Buddhism, as evidenced by the observation of images and inscriptions at Longmen.

The motivations behind female patrons' support for Buddhist images were primarily self- and family-centered, as indicated by the vows expressed in many women's projects.

Additionally, their reasons for engaging in Buddhist practices were diverse. Some specific themes that gained popularity during the Tang dynasty, such as the cults of Amitābha and Guanyin, may have been influenced by the advocacy of female practitioners. Furthermore, female patrons at Longmen not only engaged in conventional Buddhist practices like cave cutting and image making but also embraced innovative practices such as cave burial and the incorporation of non-Buddhist elements, particularly among laywomen.

It is also worth considering the projects in which women participated but did not hold dominant roles, such as those initiated in the name of a family or a group comprising both male and female donors. In such cases, it is important to examine the specific facts and information the donors tend to emphasize and convey to their audience.

Chapter 5: Family Caves and Buddhist Practices at Longmen

5.1 Overview of Family Projects

The previous chapter explored the world of female donors at Longmen, examining the projects they spearheaded and the practices they engaged in. Their religious beliefs, financial resources, and social positions all played a significant role in shaping these activities. Unlike the male donors—who often emphasized their official titles or prestigious family connections—female patrons provide a unique lens through which to observe motivations. This observation, coupled with the patterns seen in earlier chapters (such as the South Binyang Cave), highlights the need to explore donors' family backgrounds and social networks. Understanding these dynamics reveals how families, as a collective unit, invested in Buddhist projects, ultimately shaping the spread of Buddhist thought within Tang society.

Previous scholars have already noticed the role of families and family members in sponsoring Buddhist projects, especially among families of aristocrats, and studied the specific Buddhist ideas adopted by them and their social status.¹ Dedicatory inscriptions at Longmen reveal that a large number of projects at Longmen, both in the Northern dynasties and the Tang, were dedicated to the family members. Previous research has not sufficiently explored the different participants involved in collective Buddhist projects. It's important to distinguish between family-sponsored endeavors (involving close relatives) and those including individuals without clear family ties. Additionally, we need to understand the changing motivations and

¹ Previous scholarship on the medieval Chinese family and Buddhism: Kenneth Ch'en. "Filial Piety in Chinese Buddhism." *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 28 (1968): 81–97. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2718595>. Cole, R. A. (R. Alan). *Mothers and Sons in Chinese Buddhism*. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1998. Schopen, Gregory. "Filial Piety and the Monk in the Practice of Indian Buddhism: a Question of 'Sinicization' Viewed from the Other Side." *T'oung Pao* 70, no. 1 (1984): 110–126. <https://doi.org/10.1163/156853284X00044>. Strong, John S. "Filial piety and Buddhism: The Indian Antecedents to a 'Chinese' Problem." *Traditions in contact and change* (1983): 171-186. Chen, Jinhua, "Family Ties and Buddhist Nuns in Tang China," in *Asia Major* 15, no.2 (2002): 51–85.

relationships behind these collaborations over time. Why did Tang-era donors increasingly choose to support Buddhist projects in the name of their families?

In this chapter, I want first to present the data associated with projects that were devoted to family members and analyze the dynamic shifts in the beneficiaries, the scales of the projects, and the changes in prevalent Buddhist thoughts embodied in the themes of their projects. Then, I will choose representative inscriptions of these projects, including projects dedicated to varied family members to uncover their family background, the Buddhist ideas they adopted in their families and the goals they sought to achieve through making Buddhist images and practicing associated rituals. Finally, I want to discuss the major characteristics of the family caves in the Tang dynasty. My aim is to identify the elements they inherited from preceding eras and the innovative aspects they introduced over time. This integration of Buddhist ideas with traditional Chinese values not only left a lasting impact on their contemporary period but also influenced subsequent times.

I define a family project or a family-sponsored cave as a project that was either dedicated to family members, for a particular person or for the whole family, or a project that was patronized in the name of a family. In addition, this definition also includes all the projects that claimed family members as part of all beneficiaries (such as the projects that were first dedicated to the state and imperial family) as well as those for family members in an extended category (like the “parents of seven generations” *qi shi fumu* 七世父母).

5.1.1 Data

1) Projects dedicated to family members

There are 846 projects dedicated to family members. The dated projects for family

members are 385 in total, among which 135 are dated to the Northern dynasties and 250 to the Tang dynasty.

2) Family-sponsored projects as collective projects

The data at Longmen shows a shift of the main components of collective projects from groups of laypeople organized by monastic leaders or people in the same neighbourhood (e.g., a city ward, such as Niche 96 in Cave 159 that was sponsored by people from the Sishun Ward) to units such as the family, from the Northern dynasties to the Tang.

A total of 125 projects were identified as collective projects, supported by families, such as couples, children, siblings, and entire family units, as well as non-family members organized by their communities, sometimes led by monastic leaders. Among these projects, 77 projects, spanning from the Northern dynasties to the Tang, contain specific dates. Additionally, 19 were initiated in the Northern dynasties, and 57 were during the Tang.

Meanwhile, 85 out of 125 collective projects were claimed to be patronized as units of family, with only 48 projects preserving dates. Among those 48 family-sponsored projects, 4 projects were dated to the Northern dynasties, and 44 were made in the Tang.

Therefore, ratios of family-sponsored projects in the Northern dynasties account for 22% of collective projects and increased to 77% in the Tang dynasty. Ratios of non-family projects in the Northern dynasties was 79%, then dropped to 21% in the Tang dynasty (Chart 5-1 & 5-2).

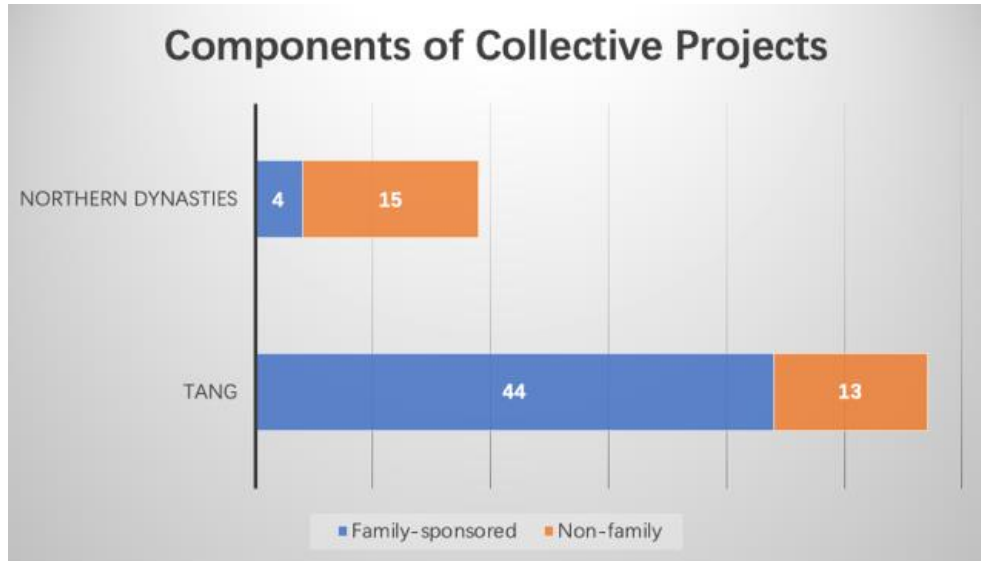


Chart 5-1 Components of Collective Projects at Longmen

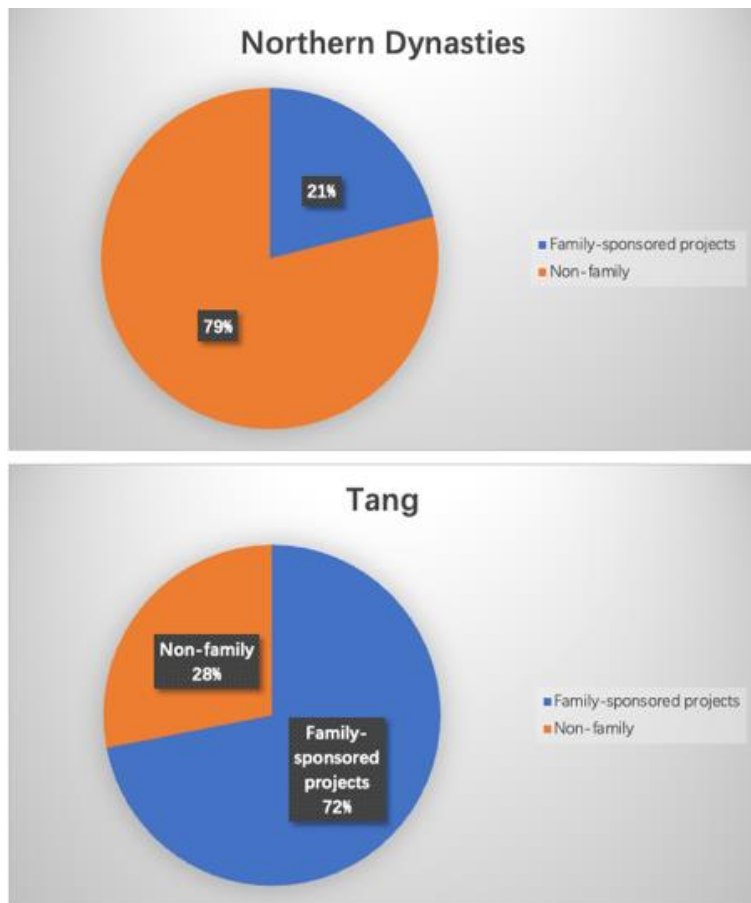


Chart 5-2 Proportions of Family-sponsored Projects from the Northern Dynasties to the Tang

Examining the prevalence of family-sponsored projects within collective Buddhist undertakings, I discovered a significant rise in their proportion during the Tang Dynasty compared to the preceding Northern Dynasties. This suggests a shift in Tang society towards smaller-scale patronage, with families favoring the sponsorship of individual Buddhist caves or niches.

5.1.2 Motivations

I divided the purposes for patrons excavating caves or niches and making images at Longmen into three major categories: 1) for deceased beneficiaries (most of them were family members), 2) for the safety of family and oneself (it is difficult to separate the projects dedicated to both individual and family under most circumstance) and 3) for pursuing cures for illnesses. Some projects were created for unusual reasons. For instance, some were made to fulfill a dream request (e.g., Lady Liu's dream in Chapter 4). Others depict non-Buddhist figures, such as Daoist practices in Cave 2644 or images of traditional deities like Taishan fujun 太山府君 made by Du Fali 杜法力 in Cave 403.²

334 projects were devoted to deceased beneficiaries and raised the vow for them to be reborn in an ideal place, among which 170 projects, accounting for 51 percent, were made for parents and ancestors.

1) For Deceased People

² Taishan fujun 太山府君 (Lord of Mount Tai), also known as Taishan Wang 太山王, is a deity revered in Daoism as the ruler of Mount Tai, one of the Five Sacred Mountains. He is considered to be a powerful figure who oversees the cycle of life and death and judges the souls of the deceased. See Yü 1987, 387–395.

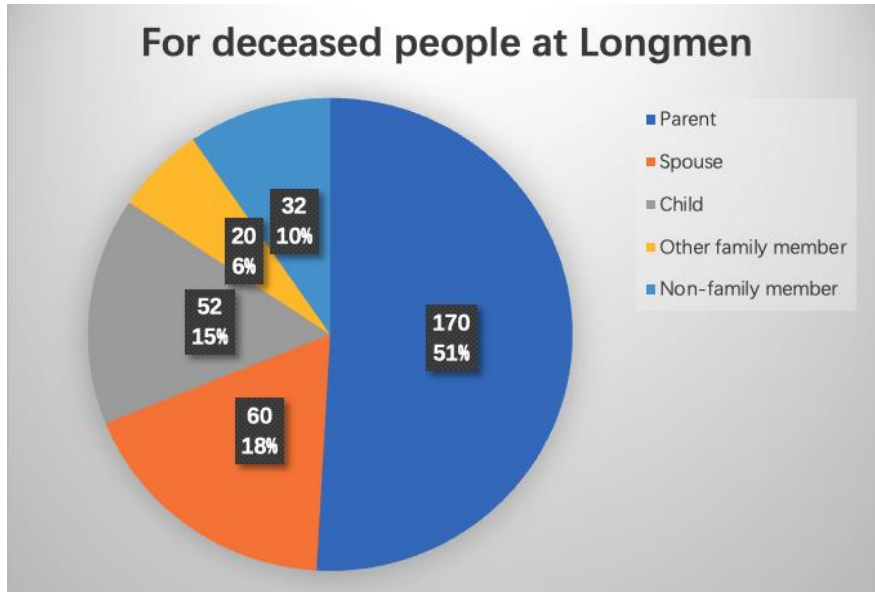


Chart 5-3 Family Projects for Deceased People

Projects that were dedicated to deceased people at Longmen (possible overlaps): 170 caves or niches were made for late parent(s), 60 projects for deceased spouses, 52 for children and 20 for other family members, such as siblings, cousins or uncles and aunts, with another 32 projects made for non-family members or left the beneficiaries unknown (Chart 5-3).

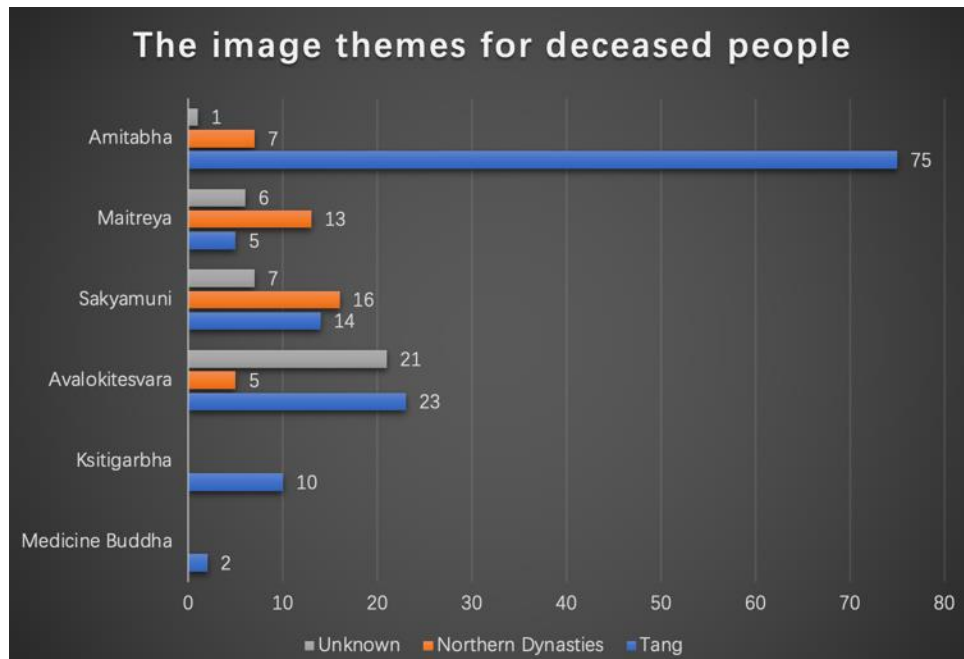


Chart 5-4 Project Themes for Deceased People

The cult of Amitābha Buddha (as the major theme) shows a dominant position among the images made by Tang family projects: there are 83 identified and dated projects in total, among which only 7 projects are dated in the Northern dynasties, while 74 were made in the Tang, and only 1 is dated to the Northern Song, and 1 is unknown (Chart 5-4).³

The cult of Avalokiteśvara/Guanyin takes second place among the prevalent themes accepted by donors at Longmen, which is 49 projects in total. This amount only refers to the projects that promoted Guanyin as the primary subject of worship rather than as an attendant bodhisattva in the combination of the Amitābha images. To specify, 5 independent Guanyin images were made as family projects in the Northern dynasties, 1 in the Sui, while there are 21 projects belonging to the Tang, and 1 for the Five dynasties (907–960 CE).

The third is the worship of the Śākyamuni Buddha, which is 37 in total. There are 16 projects in the Northern dynasties, 1 in the Sui, 6 made in the Tang, and 7 projects without clear dates. In addition, there are 7 Śākyamuni Buddha images of the Udayana King style that could be defined as family projects in the Tang.

The cult of Maitreya (both the bodhisattva and the future Buddha) was widely accepted in the Northern dynasties, accounting for 13 out of 24 family projects at Longmen. When it comes to the Tang dynasty, the number of family projects focusing on Maitreya belief dropped to 5 and left 6 projects unidentified.

It is notable that the projects that make Kṣitigarbha/Dizang bodhisattva as a primary theme emerged in the Tang dynasty, and there are 10 family projects centred on this cult in Tang: 5 projects are demonstrated as single image, while another 5 were set up in combination with

³ The amount of identified projects listed in this chapter only refers to the investigation result on inscriptions, in which the titles of the Buddhist figures were indicated. It has not yet included the images that could be identified through their artistic characters without clear dates, which is expected to be carried out in the next step.

Guanyin, forming a new theme of Two Bodhisattvas.⁴

2) For the Safety of Family Members and Self-care

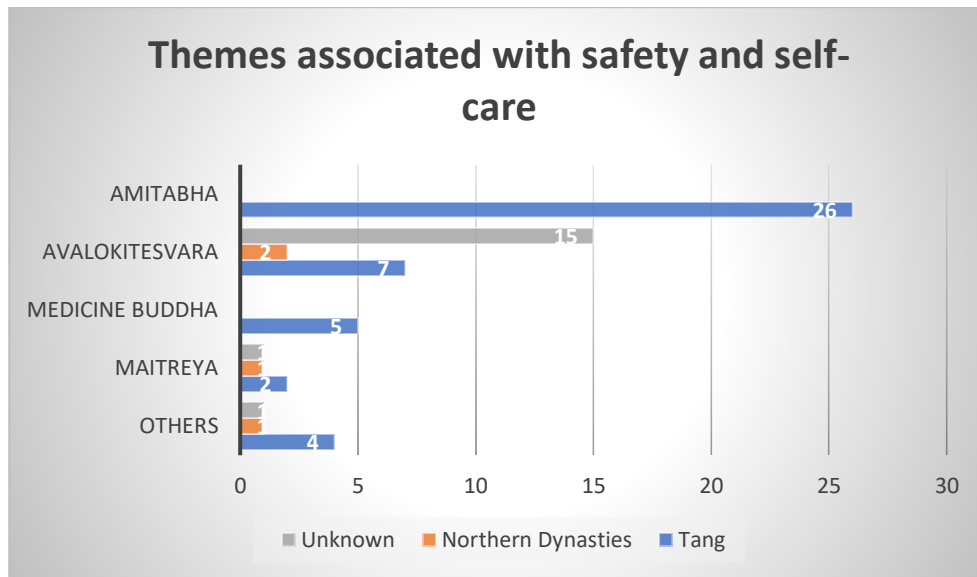


Chart 5-5 Projects Themes for the Safety of Family and Self-care

In addition to pursuing the merits and happiness for departed family members (*zhui fu* 追福) as their primary motivation to patronize caves and images for family members, praying for the safety and well-being of family members became a secondary mainstream aspiration accepted by Tang donors (Chart 5-5). Still, the cult of Amitābha Buddha occupies a leading position among family projects devoted to motivations of safety and self-care, which is 26 in total, and all made in the Tang dynasty. Meanwhile, Guanyin became a popular theme that could be rested on multiple wishes, and 24 projects were dedicated to Guanyin to pray for the benefit and safety of families. Only 7 projects of Guanyin could be dated to the Tang, and 2 are in the Northern dynasties, while 15 identified images do not indicate dates.⁵ The prayer for the Medicine Buddha

⁴ For the combination of Guanyin and Dizang, please refer to Yü, Chün-fang, and Yao Chongxin. “Guanyin and Dizang: The Creation of a Chinese Buddhist Pantheon,” in *Asiatische Studien* 70, no. 3 (2016): 757–96. <https://doi.org/10.1515/asia-2015-0031>.

⁵ Even without clear dates, the period of Guanyin images at Longmen could be told by analyzing their artistic characteristics according to typological research. According to my observation, most independent Guanyin images could be dated to the Tang dynasty. See Lan Li 2018, 7–43.

(Yaoshi fo 藥師佛) became a new tendency in the Tang dynasty, with the number of five family projects.

We can see changes in collective projects from the Northern dynasties to the Tang: in the Northern Wei, many collective projects were sponsored by a group of people either from a large family or those living in the same *yi* 邑 (community or village), see the cases (e.g., Niche N81, S106, D118, etc.) from Cave 1443 古陽洞. The scale of group projects changed during the Tang dynasty, as more projects that were donated by a smaller group, such as a couple or parents and children, emerged. It is apparent that the projects patronized by people from the same lineage gradually played a predominant role beyond other forms of collective projects in the Tang dynasty. Consequently, the definition of “family” in the Tang dynasty in a dedicatory inscription should be re-examined.

5.2 In the Name of Filial Piety: Projects Dedicated to Parents and Ancestors

Since sponsoring Buddhist projects became an exemplification of performing filial piety, donors in the Tang society, especially those from renowned clans with long lineages (*Shijia dazu* 世家大族), were inclined to cut caves and make images not only to cultivate merit for their parents and families but also to strengthen their social status, maintain their relations to ancestors and enhance their ties within the family.⁶ As a result, a particular type of family caves emerged at Longmen within this context and was transformed into a new form (or complementary form) of ancestral worship under the impact of Buddhism. Inscriptions of family caves usually claim the beneficiaries were parents or ancestors of the donors, including the specific concept of ancestors

⁶ Choo 2022, 9–10.

in the Buddhist context, “parents of seven generations.” Similar to projects of those image steles (*zhaoxiao bei* 造像碑) sponsored by families in the Northern dynasties, donors of family caves, as spouses and descendants, listed their names according to the order of seniority and generation.⁷

I want to delve into the significant rise of family-backed projects during the Tang Dynasty, particularly those where children (and grandchildren) sponsored initiatives to honor or seek blessings for their ancestors. The focus is on understanding how these projects demonstrate filial piety and what unique merits the sponsors expected from Buddhist practices. This exploration aims to uncover the ways these initiatives, distinct from traditional funeral rites or ancestor worship, contribute to preserving the memory of the departed, reinforcing family bonds, and potentially elevating social prestige.

Let us return to the dedicatory inscription of Li Tai in the South Binyang Cave (Cave 159): as the Stele of Yique Buddha Niche 伊闕佛龕之碑 (Inscription No. 0074) underlines in its conclusion, the principal purpose for Prince Wei to patronize the main Buddhist images was to repay “the kindness of raising and upbringing (*juyu zhi ci* 鞠育之慈)” shown by his late mother, and this action could be validated as “pure filial piety (*chunxiao* 純孝).”⁸ Additionally, the author (i.e., Cen Wenben) highlights that since Li Tai is an upright person who possesses pure filial piety, he is qualified to build “works for the Buddha (*foshi* 佛事)” and to construct “a field of merit (*futian* 福田)” on this site.

Not far from the colossal statues patronized by Prince Wei, around fifteen metres to the south and on the highest cliff, another filial son also excavated a relatively smaller Buddhist

⁷ For the studies on Buddhist image steles in the Northern dynasties, please refer to Kuramoto 2016; Wong, 2004.

⁸ Liu and Li 1998, 19–20. Also, see my translation in Chapter 2, 94.

niche and engraved his earnest words to memorize his late mother. The son of the late Lord Qian of Hua Prefecture (Huazhou changshi Qian gong 華州長史騫公) (No. 0464 and Cave 401), an official in the Revenue Bureau, reverently made a niche of Amitābha Buddha flanked by two attendant Bodhisattvas (the Amitābha triad) for his late mother.⁹ In the affiliated inscription, he claimed that the construction of this project was his mother’s last wish, and since he “values ethical relationships (*chong yu renlun* 重於人倫),” he should obey the last command of his late mother to demonstrate “the brightness of morality shining upon the world” (*zhi xing guang yu di yi* 至性光於地義.)

In another common scenario, all children and family members come together to support the creation or restoration of a cave or an image in honor of their parent(s), effectively turning the project into a family-sponsored endeavor. For example, three sons from the Wei clan made a life-sized statue of the Great Amitābha Buddha (*Da Mituo xiang dengshen yi pu* 大彌陀像等身一鋪) to commemorate their late mother in 715 CE (Cave 670), Lady Zhao, the Grand Mistress of Fuyang Prefecture who was native to the Tianshui Commandery (*Fuyang jun taifuren* Tianshui Zhao *shi* 扶陽郡太夫人天水趙氏). The three sons of Lady Zhao all held official positions in the Tang government: Wei Liqi 韋利器, the former Vice Director of the Palace Library (*qian mishu shaojian* 前秘書少監); Wei Libin 韋利賓, the former provincial governor of Sui Prefecture and (Wei) (*qian Suizhou cishi* 前遂州刺史); Wei Lishe 韋利涉, the former Official for the Supervision of Farmland (*qian jiantian wei* 前監田尉).

⁹ According to Song Dexi’s analysis (2006, 57), the Lord Qian mentioned in this inscription was probably the father of the donor of Cave 401, who was also the father of the prime minister in the Wuzhou period, Qian Weidao 騫味道 (?—689 CE). No further information proves that the donor of this project is Qian Weidao, but this is probably a Buddhist project sponsored by his family in which he might have participated. See Song Dexi 宋德熹, “Tangdai qianqi libu kaogong yuanwailang de shenfen beijing” 唐代前期吏部考功員外郎的身分背景, in *Xingda lishi xuebao* 興大歷史學報 (2006) no. 17, 41—66.

Lady Zhao was born and grew up in a prestigious family, she was the daughter of Zhao Renben 趙仁本 (?—670 CE),¹⁰ the late Junior Executive Attendant of the Ministry of Personnel and the Ministry's Bureau of Appointments (*silie shaochang bo* 司列少常伯), and the elder sister of Zhao Jian 趙諫, the General of Left Mighty Guard and Vice-Regent of the Eastern Capital (Luoyang) (*zuo weiwei jiangjun dongdu fu liushou* 左威衛將軍東都副留守).¹¹ Her noble background and refined character led to a childhood defined by gentleness and grace. As she matured, her intelligence and virtue shone through, demonstrating a deep understanding of classic texts like the Book of Odes and the Book of Rites (*you rouwan, zhang xianming, shili tianran, tushi anhe* 幼柔婉，長賢明，詩禮天然，圖史暗合). Her father, Zhao Renben, was amazed by her exceptional abilities. He praised her, saying she possessed the wisdom of a 'female counselor,' capable of guiding a ruler with her virtue. He believed she could be an exemplary wife, offering guidance within the home, and a respected mother whose wisdom and reputation would be widely admired (*nüshi fuzuo junzi, neng xun fadu, shicheng fude. Cong zhai chuixun, duo zhu caiming, siwei muyi* 女師輔佐君子，能循法度，是稱婦德。從宅垂訓，多著才名，斯為母儀。)"

It is common to see intermarriages between renowned clans before and during the Tang dynasty.¹² Even though the inscription does not mention her marriage, we know that Lady Zhao, as a daughter of a former chancellor under Gaozong period, married into another renowned

¹⁰ Zhao Renben 趙仁本 (?—670 CE), a chancellor in the Gaozong's reign. See his biography in *Jiu Tangshu*, 81/2759. The original text is, “趙仁本者，陝州河北人也（？）。貞觀中，累轉殿中侍御史……乾封中，歷遷東臺侍郎、同東西臺三品，尋轉司列少常伯，知政事如故。時許敬宗為右相，頗任權勢，仁本拒其請托，遂為敬宗所構，俄授尚書左丞，罷知政事。咸亨初卒官。”

¹¹ The department of *Silie* 司列, from 662 to 684 the official variant of the Libu 吏部 (Ministry of Personnel and the Ministry's Bureau of Appointments). See Hucker, 1987, 451–452. The title of *Shaochang bo* 少常伯, from 662 to 671, is the official designation of all Vice Ministers, *Shilang* 侍郎, see Hucker 1987, 414.

¹² See Qiu Luming 仇鹿鳴, *Weijin zhiji de zhengzhi quanli yu jiazhu wangluo* 魏晉之際的政治權利與家族網絡 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2012). Also, please refer to Nicolas Tackett, “The Evolution of the Tang Political Elite and Its Marriage Network,” in *Journal of Chinese History* 中國歷史學刊 4, no.2 (2020): 277–304.

family, the Wei clan¹³, and bore at least three sons. Lady Zhao passed away when she was seventy-seven, and then her sons buried her with her husband, probably in their family cemetery in the capital of Chang’an (*nian qishiqi hong, hefu jingzhao* 年七十七薨，合祔京兆).

Afterwards, her filial children decided to patronize a cave that accommodated the images of the Amitābha triad to commemorate and cultivate merit for their late mother.

This project was completed on the tenth day of the eighth month of the third year of the Kaiyuan reign of Great Tang (September 12, 715 CE). In considering the prestigious reputation of the beneficiary and to promote the social identity and lineage of their family, the three sons invited a distinguished scholar,¹⁴ Qiu Yue 丘悅(?—ca. 715 CE), also a former colleague of the principal sponsor Wei Liqi,¹⁵ to write the praise (*zan* 贊) for their late mother (Inscription no. 1112).¹⁶ Meanwhile, the youngest son, Wei Lishe, was in charge of transcribing (*shu* 書) the inscription for carving.

Qiu Yue was an academician of the Institute of the Glorification of Literature (*zhaowen guan xueshi* 昭文館學士) and held the title of Grand Master for Imperial Entertainment with Silver Seal and Blue Ribbon (*yinqing guanglu da fu* 銀青光祿大夫) (ranked 3b in Tang times), a prominent scholar who became the master of Prince Qin 岐王傅 (fourth son of Emperor Rui,?—

¹³ The Wei clan: 韋氏, probably the Wei clan of Jingzhao area 京兆杜陵韋氏。

¹⁴ It is common to see Tang families hire famous scholars and calligraphers to write epitaphs for their parents to reinforce their social status and show their filial devotion. I assume a similar situation was also adopted in writing the dedicatory inscriptions in the Tang, especially for donors from an office-holding family or distinguished lineage, an inscription written by renowned officials or scholarship would well demonstrate their filial devotion and promote the social identity of their families. See Choo, 2023, 20. Also, Ditter proposed the idea of “Commerce of Commemoration” in composing epitaphs in the Tang, which also applies to commission dedicatory inscriptions for particular families or beneficiaries. See Alexei Ditter (2014) THE COMMERCE OF COMMEMORATION: COMMISSIONED *MUZHIMING* IN THE MID- TO LATE TANG, *Tang Studies* 32, no. 1(2014): 21–46.

¹⁵ See Qiu Yue’s biography, which says “丘悅者，河南陸渾人也。亦有學業。景龍中，為相王府掾，與文學韋利器、典簽裴耀卿俱為王府直學士。” In *Jiu Tangshu*, 190/ 5015.

¹⁶ It is said in his biography in *Jiu Tangshu*, Qiu Yue passed away at the beginning of the Kaiyuan reign period (713–742 CE) 開元初 without clarifying an accurate date. Since he drew up the inscription for Lady Zhao in the third year of Kaiyuan, we can speculate that he probably died after the commission of this work in 715 CE.

726 CE) and was favoured by Emperor Ruizong (662–716 CE). In the inscription written by Qiu Yue, the Wei brothers not only displayed deep sorrow about their loss but also highlighted the religious achievement they hoped this project could achieve (Fig. 5-1):

Relying on those who are able and benevolent, and providing those mysterious effects, we carved the rock face, revealing the true form. High upon a secluded alcove, we have crafted an empty throne. Facing east, it commands a view of the countless bridges and fords of the River Yi, while to the north, it surveys the myriad paths through the Dingding Gate. Our wish is that she may ascend to the Heaven of the Thirty-Three, where her merits will be fully attested, and partake in the feast on Mount Gr̥dhraḱūṭa, where her supernatural powers will know no bounds. 唯託能仁，用資冥果，坎巖壁現真容。因高制龕，即空疏座，東臨伊水百億津梁，北走鼎門大千方便。所願上升切利，功德證明，宴坐耆闍，神通無礙。

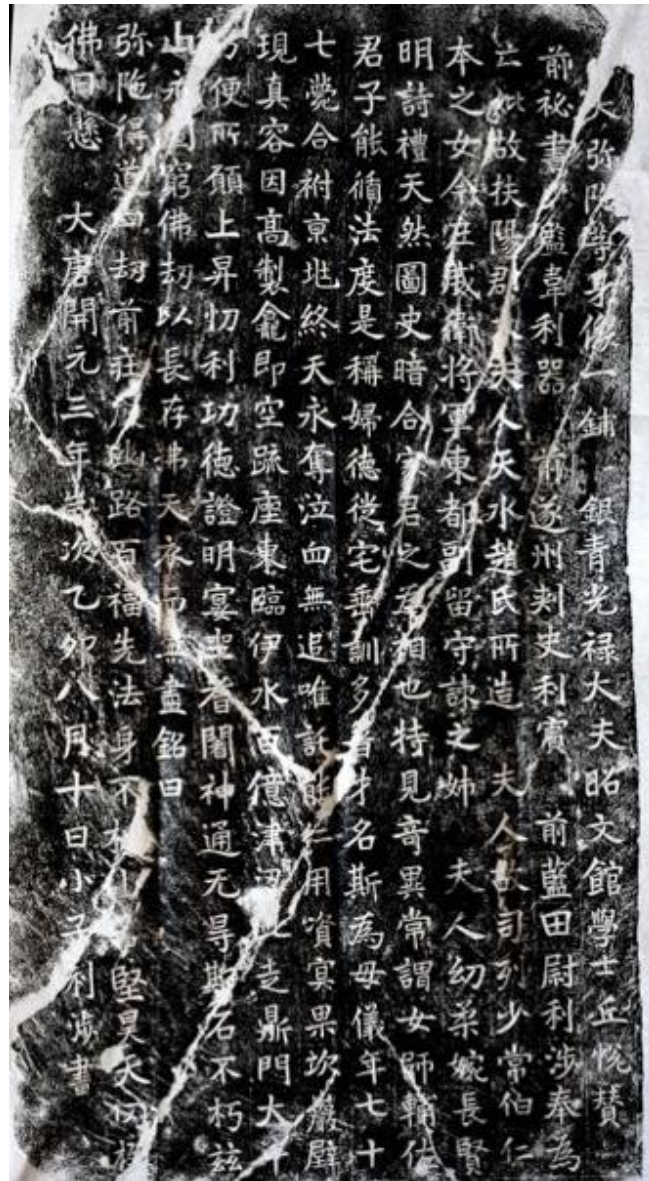


Fig. 5-1 Rubbing of Inscription No. 1112 (LGRA Collection)

Additionally, two family projects patronized by the children of Li Yichen 李義琛(d.u.) and Lady Zheng 鄭氏 show a consistency in the Buddhist practice of the Tang family through which they could fulfill an obligation as descendants.¹⁷

¹⁷ See the latest scholarship about Li Yichen and his family: Ji Aimin 季愛民 and Jiao Jianhui 焦建輝, “Li Yichen jiazou de shiku yingjian yu luoyang shenghuo 李義琛家族的石窟營建與洛陽生活,” in *Gugong bowuyuan yuankan* 故宮博物院院刊, no.8 (2023): 48–57.

The first project of Li Yichen’s family was conducted in the first year of the Chuigong reign period (685 CE) by his six sons and two daughters, who claimed they were dedicating a niche of stone images 石像一龕 to their late father (Cave 1058).¹⁸ In the donative inscription (No. 1506) (Fig. 5-2), “A Narrative (*shu*) of the Fragrant City for the Lord Li, who is native to Longxi and the late Provincial Governor of Qi Prefecture in the Tang 唐故岐州刺史隴西李府君香城述” (685 CE), they listed all the children, “The fatherless sons Jian, Wan, Gen, Chan, Tao, Zhun and two daughters 孤子堅，綰，互，迪，燾，準并二女.”¹⁹ We have no clue about the time when Li Yichen passed away, but his death must have brought profound grief to his children. As they stated in the inscription, “Even if we were to sacrifice the very lives of our ordinary bodies, we still cannot fully repay (the kindness of) our birth (*fanqu xunxing, ji wuda yu shengcheng* 汎軀徇性，既無答於生成).” Consequently, to overcome the deep sorrow of losing a parent as their “heavenly compassion was suddenly deprived (*tianci yan duo* 天慈奄奪),” they decided to patronize an image cave to “slightly reward the indebtedness of raising (*weichou yu gufu* 微酬於顧復)” and “establish the merit to aid the spirit (*shufu ziming* 樹福資冥).”

¹⁸ *Zonglu* records it as Cave 1058, but *Huilu* records it as Cave 1085. I confirmed that this cave is Cave 1058.

¹⁹ The Fragrant City refers to the Buddha’s land. See 集古今佛道論衡》卷3：「文帝幸弘福寺立願重施敘佛道先後事第八貞觀十五年五月十四日……用其功德奉為先靈。願心悟無生神 遷妙喜。策紺馬以入香城。」 See T52, no. 2104, pp. 385c13–386a2.

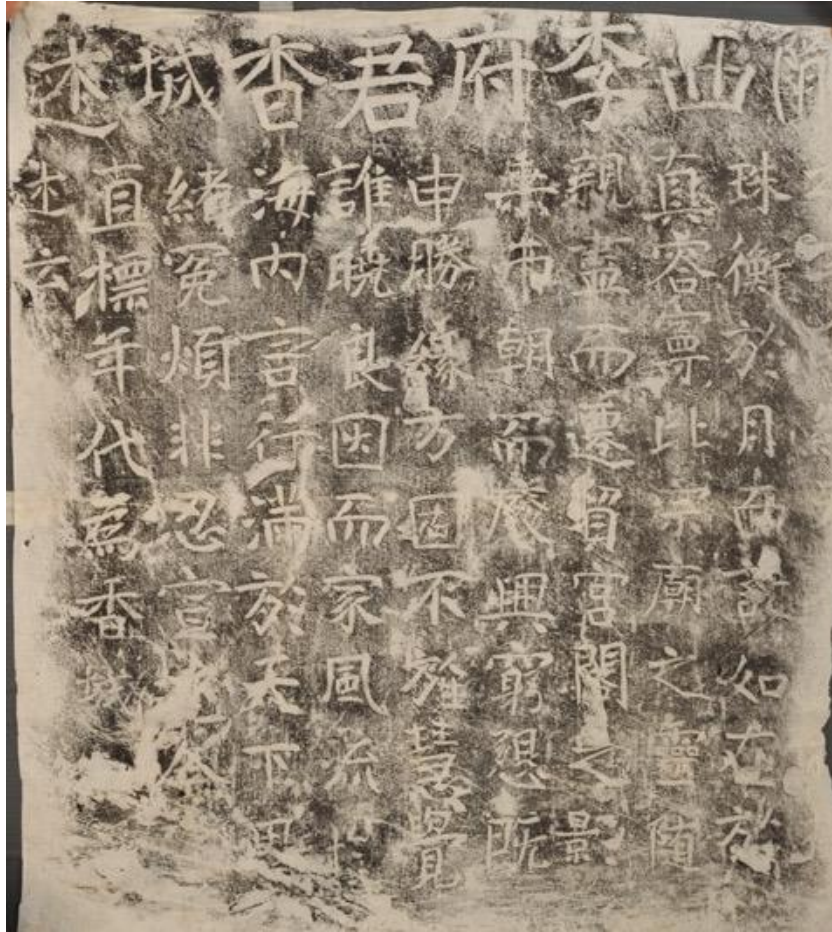


Fig. 5-2 Rubbing of Inscription no. 1506 (LGRA Collection)

Nine years after their first project, during which the family faced a few unexpected events, only four sons and two daughters united again to patronize another cave to pursue merit (*zuifu* 追福) for their late mother. This time, the names of Li Jian²⁰ 李堅 and Li Zhun 李準 were missing (No. 1442, 燾及盧氏兩女造像記) (Fig. 5-3).²¹ The new cave is situated adjacent to the first project and is almost identical in size (Cave 1063), completed in the third year of the Changshou 長壽 reign period (693 CE), with the theme dedicated to Amitābha Buddha.²² By referring to the

²⁰ No further clues about the later situation of Li Jian were identified.

²¹ I partly referred to the transcription of No. 1442 of Ji and Jiao 2023, 51.

²² It is numbered Cave 1063 in *Zonglu* 總錄, but Cave 1047 in *Huilu* 彙錄. I confirmed that the correct number is Cave 1063.

unearthed epitaph of Li Zhun, we can grasp that he contracted an illness and passed away two years before the completion of the second project, in the first year of the Ruyi 如意 reign period (692 CE), due to excessive grief at his mother's death, which caused him "to destroy his inborn nature with sorrow until he became senseless to all his emotions (*yi ai miexing, zhiqing ganjue* 以哀滅性, 至情感絕)."²³ As a result, scholars infer that Lady Zheng probably passed away in 692 CE, slightly earlier than the death of her son.²⁴ Furthermore, considering the burial of Li Zhun took place on the thirteenth day of the fifth month of the third year of the Changshou reign period (April 12, 694 CE), and Lady Zheng's cave was completed on the fifteenth day of the same month (April 14, 694 CE), it appears that all those involved selected the dates with careful consideration. They did so not only to conduct rituals for their departed family members but also, simultaneously, to reunite all the family members once more.²⁵

Children of Lady Zheng who participated in the cave construction are: (Li) Wan 李綰, Grand Master for Closing Court (5b in Tang) who served as the Magistrate of Chang'an District (*chaosan dafu xing... Chang'an xianling* 朝散大夫行□長安縣令); (Li) Gen 李亘, Gentleman for Closing Court (7b1) who served as (...) Assistant of Palace Library (*chaosan [lang] xing mishu sheng... lang* 朝散□「郎？」行秘書省□□郎); (Li) Chan 李迪, Grand Master for Court Discussion (5a1) who served as Provincial Governor of Zi Prefecture (*chaoyi dafu xing zizhou cishi* 朝議大夫行緇州刺史); (Li) Tao 李燾, Companion for the Heir Apparent (5a2) (*taizi zhongyun* 太子中允) and two daughters who were married to the members of the Lu clan (*Lushi liangnü* 盧氏兩女).

²³ See the epitaph of Li Zhun 李準, in Li Xianqi and Guo Yinqiang, *Luoyang xinhuo muzhi* 洛陽新獲墓志 1996, 33.

²⁴ Ji and Jiao 2023, 52.

²⁵ Ibid.

It is noteworthy that the inscription was left unwritten when the project was completed. Much later, in the eighth year of the Kaiyuan reign period (March 28, 720 CE), a grandson of Li Yichen and Lady Zheng, Li Xiong 李夔, who was the Gentleman for Court Discussion (6a1) who worked as the Defender of Henan District (*chaoyilang xing Henan xianwei* 朝議郎行河南縣尉) at that time, visited this site and recalled the previous traces (of Buddhist images) made by his elders (*mianxiang qianzong* 緬想前蹤). He then engraved the inscription and probably composed an eulogy (*ming* 銘) for his late grandmother.²⁶



Fig. 5-3 Rubbing of Inscription No. 1442 (LGRA Collection)

²⁶ It seems they were missing words of this inscription as he said 曰 at the ending part, which might be a *ming*/eulogy 銘 written by Li Xiong.

Cave 964 also reveals how descendants commission a family cave under the name of “the Inscription of Family Images (*jiaxiang ming* 家像銘)” to honor the donor’s parents, demonstrate his filial piety and promote social identity. The donor, Wei Muqian 魏牧謙, who is native to the Julu Prefecture with the honorific designation of the Supreme Pillar of State, and the position of the Court Gentleman for Consultation (6a1) who served as the Recorder of the Directorate for Imperial Manufactories in the Tang dynasty (*Tang chaoyilang xing shaofujian zhubu shangzhuguo Julu* 唐朝議郎行少府監主簿上柱國鉅鹿).²⁷ The Wei clan from the Julu prefecture 鉅鹿魏氏 was a renowned clan during the Sui-Tang dynasties,²⁸ which many prestigious officials in the Tang attributed to their family lineage, such as Wei Zheng 魏徵, a prime minister with an outstanding reputation of straight admonishment under the reign period of emperor Taizong. Meanwhile, several epitaphs of officials who served in the Tang court were identified as members of the Wei clan.²⁹ Even though no further evidence related to Wei Muqian’s background has been identified in historical records yet, it is without a doubt that his family belonged to a prominent lineage.

Then Lord Wei presents that there are two writing styles/genres in this inscription,

²⁷ 主簿: Recorder, usually ranks 7, 8, or 9.

²⁸ The Wei Clan in Julu Prefecture 鉅鹿魏氏 was a renowned clan during the Northern dynasties and Sui-Tang, from which many famous officials, including Wei Shou 魏收 (506—572 CE), Wei Zheng 魏徵 (580—643 CE), played significant roles on the political stage, see *Beishi*, 1974, vol. 56, 2023—2039; *Jiu Tangshu*, 1975, vol. 71, 2545—2563. In addition to the Wei clan in Julu, other sub-branches of the Wei clan also existed during this period but gradually shrunk in the Tang, which made the Julu branch the only representation of the clan. According to his analysis of epitaphs of the Wei clan in the Tang dynasty, Li Jianhua 李建華 found that all the epitaphs dated after 696 CE claim from the Julu, see Li Jianhua, “Weizheng juwang kao 魏徵郡望考”, in *Tangdu Journal* 唐都學刊, 2022, vol.38 (No. 2), 23. Since the project patronized by Wei Muqian 魏牧謙 was completed in 717 CE, he and his family were probably included in this clan lineage.

²⁹ Some epitaphs that related to the Wei Clan in the Tang dynasty: [*Tang gu chaoyi dafu shangzhuguo Fengzhou sima Wei fujun muzhiming bing xu* 唐故朝议大夫上柱国泮州司马魏府君墓志铭并序] (Jinglong025 in TMH); [*Datang gu Zhengzhou changzhong Julu Wei jun muzhiming bing xu* 大唐故郑州长中鉅鹿魏君墓志铭并序] (Kaiyuan 075 in TMH, d. 718 CE); [*Datang gu youjinwu jiangjun Wei gong muzhiming bing xu* 大唐故右金吾将军魏公墓志铭并序] (Kaiyuan 241 in TMH, d. 726 CE), etc.

including a preface (*xu* 序) and an inscription/eulogy (*ming* 銘).³⁰ The preface tells the story and contextual information of this project, while the eulogy expresses his understanding of Buddhist dharma and the merits, he hoped to gain from conducting this project. In the first half of this inscription (No. 1399), the preface, Lord Wei quoted the Buddhist text he used to read, “The Buddhas of past, future and present consist of the Buddhas of Three Periods. No one can seek liberation without converting to and relying on (Buddhism) 過去、未來、見在為三世佛，欲求解脫而不歸依者，未之有也。” Then he explained that since his late father believed in the Buddha’s teaching, he dedicated this project to his late parents (Fig. 5-4):

My ancestors greatly revered Buddhism and held it in the highest esteem. During my recent service as the Defender of Henan Prefecture (Luoyang), I was contemplating the ultimate purpose of life when I was struck by a terrible personal tragedy – the loss of my parents. I grieved deeply for their passing, shedding bitter tears and wailing in despair, feeling as if my very soul was shattered. 先世尚焉，崇信極矣。頃任河南尉，祇向終畢而遭閔凶，攀慕號踊，肝心圯裂。

Not only did Lord Wei want to show his obedience to his parents as a filial son by following their steps, but he also revealed the mechanism between cultivating merits and making Buddhist images, which is “To eradicate the sins accumulated since time immemorial, we rely on the power of merit cultivated through worldly actions and conditions. 以為滅無始世界之罪憑有為功德之助。”

³⁰ For the genre of *ming* 銘 in medieval China, considering the context in donative inscriptions or epitaphs, I am inclined to translate it as “eulogy” rather than its literal meaning as “inscription,” which is not equal to the generic term of primary sources of this program, to avoid confusion. The *ming*/eulogies in the epitaphs or donative inscriptions were always in the latter part of the main text, written in parallel and rhyme, to express the emotions of the mourners or donors for the dead or beneficiaries. Please refer to my Introduction (Chapter 1), 31–35.



Fig. 5-4 Rubbing of No. 1399 (LGRA Collection)

At the end of his inscription, Lord Wei again addressed the connection between Buddhist teaching and conducting filial piety by expressing how much effort he poured into this project:

The Buddha's boundless teachings transform the world,

While human lives, alas, are destined to end.

佛之化兮化無窮，人之生兮生有終。

Trees seek tranquillity, yet winds arise unbiddenly, and young sprouts face ceaseless destruction and look up at the tiered sky.

樹靜不期兮而有風，栽毀無已兮仰曾穹。

In the land of the divine turtle and Luo River where Heaven and Earth converge, the mountains of Longmen echoes of Great Yu's grand endeavor.

龜洛之地兮天之中，龍門之山兮禹之功。

Where I've carved a niche on enduring stone, eastward it expands.

Within the floating clouds, the true image is seated on his throne.

龕貞石兮長巖東，座真容兮半雲空。

Through countless ages, may this niche endure and inspire,

A testament to unwavering faith, a flame that will never tire.

千秋萬歲兮人所崇，天長地久兮福所蒙。

In addition, more detailed examples can be observed among the approximately 170 identified projects devoted to deceased parent(s). For instance, on the fifth day of the fifth month in the fifth year of the Yonghui reign period (May 26, 654 CE), Deng Sixiao, Sixin, Siyi, Siduan and others 洛陽縣鄧思孝、思信、思議、思端等, who are native to the Luoyang District, for their mother Liang and late father, past and living family members, reverently made a niche of Śākyamuni stone image and completed this day 為母梁及亡父、過去見存眷屬，敬造釋迦石像一龕，即日成就 (on the West Wall, Cave 1069). They highlighted their wishes in the inscription (No. 1467) (Fig. 5-5):

Even when countless grains of sand in the Ganges are bathed in light, and countless eons across the universe are moistened by dew, we still rely on the Buddha's true marks.

Therefore, we have carved (these words) in this secluded corner of the mountain, where is a waterway connected to the eight (holy) rivers (of India). We paced slowly here, as if riding on the three carts (symbolic of different speeds of spiritual progress from the Lotus Sutra). As the sun sets and the moon rises, elaborate carvings easily decay, we have inscribed these words on the rock by the river, hoping they will endure as long as heaven and earth. 光濟恆沙，露霑塵劫，仰憑實相，勒此山隅。津通八水，安步三車。日往月來，雕章易朽，固茲泉石，天長地久。

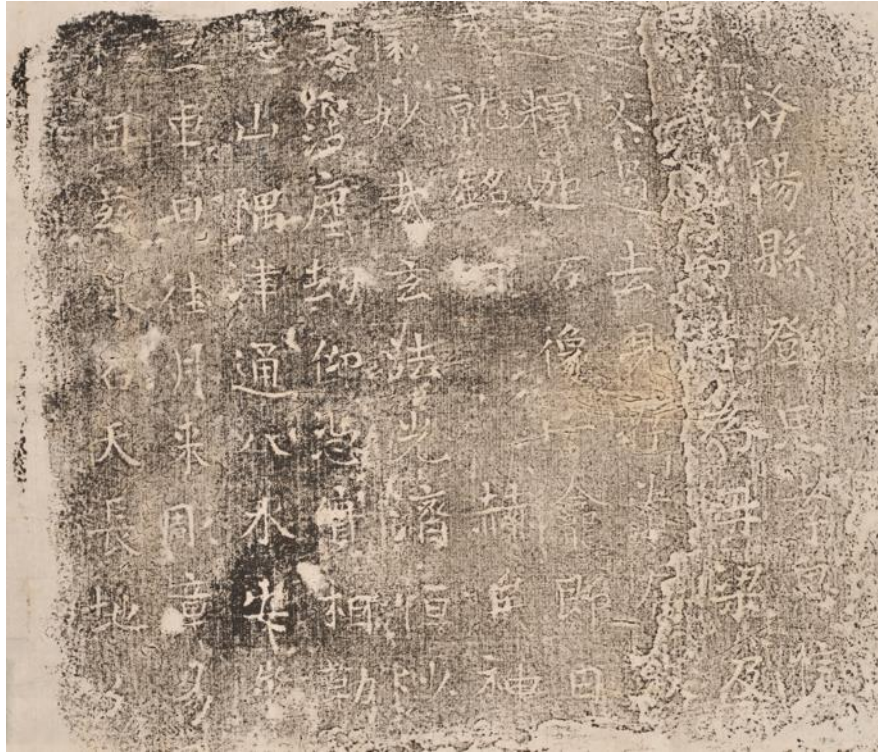


Fig. 5-5 Rubbing of Inscription No. 1467 (LGRA Collection)

Except for excavating caves and making images for late parents, other Buddhist practices such as copying Buddhist scriptures or sponsoring public facilities, were sometimes conducted by the donors in parallel. In the inscription of Guanyin images made by the daughter of Wang Deren 王德仁 (Cave 159-N66), Xiaoniang 小娘, she indicated that in addition to the image dedicated to her late father, she also “make a whole copy of the Lotus Sutra 造法華經一部” and then “relinquished clothes to build a stone bridge (*she yi zuo shiqiao* 捨衣作石橋).”³¹ Relying on these projects of merits, she hoped all the living and the dead could receive benefit and support

³¹ In addition to making Buddhist images, sponsoring the construction of bridges was also regarded as a “blessed work” in medieval Chinese Buddhist scriptures. Please refer to the *Sutra of the Field of Merit* 佛說諸德福田經, in which the bridge-building was included in the “Seven Types of Great Donations,” “佛告天帝：「復有七法廣施，名曰福田，行者得福，即生梵天。何謂為七？一者、興立佛圖、僧房、堂閣；二者、園果、浴池、樹木清涼；三者、常施醫藥，療救眾病；四者、作[17]牢堅船，濟度人民；五者、安設橋梁，過度羸弱；六者、近道作井，渴乏得飲；七者、造作圍廁，施便利處。是為七事得梵天福。」” See T16no. 683_p777b2-8. Also, please refer to the discussion on monastics and bridge-building in Kieschnick 2003, 199–219.

to attain the supreme awakening (*yinguo ziyi cunwang*, 因果資益存亡，成無上覺 (No. 0097).

Similarly, a woman of pure faith, Chang Feng 常奉, for her deceased parents, reverently made an image niche of the Amitābha Buddha on the cliff at Longmen (Cave 669-N159) in 658 CE. She wished her parents could be reborn to the pure land together, listen to that profound teaching and perceive the true permanence and bliss, conduct the practice of the bodhisattva together with all sentient beings in the Dharma Realm and arrive at the shore of nirvana 願二親齊生淨土，聞甚深法，悟真常樂，共法界蒼生修菩薩行，登涅槃岸 (No. 1007).

Another concept related to ancestral worship and the performance of filial piety among medieval Chinese Buddhists is “the parents of seven generations” (*qishi fumu* 七世父母 or *qidai fumu* 七代父母). As a common idea that prevailed in Chinese Buddhism since the Northern dynasties,³² however, its interpretation is still ambiguous and varied. Previous scholarship summarizes that this concept could be unfolded into two layers of meanings³³: on the one hand, it refers to one’s natural parents and ancestors that gave birth to one and bestowed one with the family lineage, according to traditional values, or Confucian ideology in Chinese culture; On the other hand, this concept should be understood within the Buddhist context, in which people interrelate with each other driven by their karma, so the “seven generations” should refer to parents (and masters) in one’s seven previous lives.

There are about 161 donative inscriptions at Longmen that mention the beneficiaries

³² According to Chen Zhiyuan 陳志遠, the earliest example in surviving materials is dated to around 426 CE, in a written vow found on the “Dunhuang *jide* stone stupa 敦煌口吉德石塔發願文.” See Chen, “Shi ‘*qishi fumu*’ 釋‘七世父母,’” presented at the 2019 Conference on “Production, Preservation and Perusal of Buddhist Epigraphy, Oxford: the University of Oxford, unpublished, p1.

³³ Chen Zhiyuan 2019, 2–7.

extending to the parents of seven generations (*qishi fumu* 七世父母). Among these, 98 inscriptions include dates: 48 are from the Northern dynasties, and 50 are from the Tang era.

There are around 161 donor inscriptions at Longmen containing the beneficiaries of the *qishi fumu*/parents of seven generations, of which 98 preserve the dates: 48 were dated to the Northern dynasties, and 50 were made in the Tang.

Both layers of meaning, previously mentioned, of “the parents of seven generations” are reflected in the contents of Longmen inscriptions: For the first meaning of natural parents and ancestors, in the inscription of Yang Zhenzang 楊真藏 (Inscription No. 1035 and Cave 669, 658 CE), he patronized a niche for Amitābha Buddha for the “previous spirits of seven ancestors or seven generations of ancestors (*qizu xianling* 七祖先靈)” and hoped they could be reborn in the Buddha’s land in the superior class (*shangpin wangsheng* 上品往生) and listen to the dharma there. I am inclined to interpret the concept as ancestors within his biological family. The interpretation arises from his selection of the term “previous spirits (*xianling* 先靈)” to name the beneficiaries since the term usually pertains to the spirits of deceased people, not in some remote universe but in one’s immediate living society.

55 inscriptions out of 161 inscriptions show a separation of the concepts of parents who gave birth (*suosheng fumu* 所生父母) to the donors and the parents of their previous lives, in which we can see nuance in the terminology adopted by donors in different periods. Donors of Northern dynasties, about 34 people (one is dated to the Tang), preferred to use the expression “parents who gave birth” (*suosheng fumu*) to refer to their natural parents, while 21 Tang donors chose to describe the conditions of their parents, such as “living [parents]” (*jiancun* 見存) or “previously deceased” (*xian wang* 先亡) to distinguish the concept of parents of seven

generations (*qishi fumu* 七世父母). For example, in the inscription of a collective project (No. 0699) patronized by Daipo 戴婆 et al. from the Yong Prefecture 雍州 in Cave 557 (the project completed in 687 CE), they indicated the beneficiaries include all beings in the dharma realm (*fajie zhongsheng* 法界眾生), parents of seven generations (*qishi fumu* 七世父母), living parents (*jiancun fumu* 見存父母), and all the family members (*heia daxiao* 合家大小).

In numerous family-backed projects intended to honour their parents, particularly those supported by donors with esteemed titles who served in the Tang court, a distinct pattern emerged. These donors meticulously outlined the beneficiaries in a specific order, emphasizing the utmost importance of the imperial family while placing their own families in a secondary position.

For example, in the dedicatory inscription of Zhou Yuan 周遠志 et al. (Inscription No. 2537), who served as the Court Gentleman for Manifesting Rightness (ranked 7a2) 宣議郎, he set an order of priority of beneficiaries received merits from his projects, “to serve the Heavenly Emperor and Empress, Crown Prince, all princes, masters passing through endless kalpas, parents of seven generations, we reverently made a niche of the stone image of Amitābha Buddha 奉為天皇天后、太子諸王、遠劫師僧、七代父母敬造阿彌陀石像一龕 (completed in 675 CE).”

Meanwhile, in the image niche made by Han Wenya 韓文雅 and his wife (Cave 159-N71, completed in 646 CE), the couple emphasized the efforts they poured into the project and also clarified that they did this not only for their own benefits but also for the well-being of the state and emperor:

A husband and wife dedicated their wealth to reverently create a stone niche and two bodhisattvas at Yique Monastery, adorning them with golden ornaments to furnish as is an auspicious achievement. With the hope of enduring prosperity for the emperor and the salvation of their deceased ancestors for seven generations, as well as the well-being of their living family members and all sentient beings, we aspire for all to attain the Pure Land and cultivate supreme causes forever. To commemorate this noble act, we commissioned paintings and engravings, and made offerings to express their devotion. 夫妻二人抽捨淨財，於伊闕寺敬造石一龕並二菩薩，裝嚴今[金]飾成就如然。上為皇永隆，³⁴ 下為去失[世]亡七世父母，並見存親眷，及一切眾生，俱沾淨土，永作勝因，圖寫刊□[刻]，□□供養。

To sum up, these examples of donors who emphasized the supremacy of the emperor and the state in their Buddhist projects indicate the impact of state control on constructing the social identity of families and individuals. The donors who built their projects at Longmen clearly understood that their projects were not only a reflection of their Buddhist thoughts, but also a reflection of their social status, which would promote by associating their filial piety with loyalty to the state since these two factors were closely connected³⁵.

5.3 The Rhetoric of Remembrance

Compared to the solemn and customary expression of grief by filial children for the loss of esteemed parents, wishing for their elevation to ideal Buddha lands, a distinct pattern emerged

³⁴ There should be a missing character after the “Huang 皇” in the original inscription, probably “祚” by referring to other inscriptions.

³⁵ Choo 2022, 63–64.

among some donors at Longmen. These individuals, assuming various family roles, exhibited profound anguish not only for their parents but also for other family members. Particularly, men grieving the loss of their wives displayed intense emotions. Longmen, functioning as a religiously sacred space accessible to all and situated along the main route connecting to Luoyang city, transformed the expansive cliff into a public platform. Here, not only did it showcase devout practices and prevalent religious customs of the time, but it also served as a space for individuals to release their emotions and find solace in their yearning for loved ones while pursuing their religious aspirations.

5.3.1 Weeping Husbands

Let us return to the example of Shen Bao in Cave 440, the husband of Lady Lou, who conducted a cave burial for his late wife and engraved a long inscription (No. 507) that includes the detailed procedures of this funerary practice. In the closing part, he pointed out the great loss his family had to bear and expressed his misery as a widower. Affected by those desolate scenes on the riverbank in winter (the burial ceremony is in February), he could not help but weep and say:

The jackdaws cried along the riverbank, echoing the sorrow of heartbroken children, while a lone goose lamented, adding to the melancholy of a widower (refer to the scene in Fig. 5-6). (Shen Bao) grieved... at the azure cliffs, and reverently made a shrine for a King Udayana image. 寒鴉岸叫，痛悲稚之斷腸；旅雁孤鳴，助鰥夫之郁鯁。悼□青巖，敬造優填王一龕。



Fig. 5-6 West Hill at Longmen, from the East Hill (Lan Li, February 2015)

Restrained from mourning and returned to the routine format of a donative inscription, Gentleman Shen then described the elegant appearance of the Buddha image he dedicated as well as expressed a universal blessing that would benefit all beings in the universe to cultivate merits for Lady Lou:

Between the eyebrows, a distinctive curl mark graces the visage,

Its brilliance vying with the sun of wisdom's radiant blaze.

其像【眉】間毫相，共慧日而爭輝。

Beneath the chin, pearls and gems in splendor gleam,

Their radiance rivaling the myriad stars' celestial beam.

頤下珠瓔，與眾星之競耀。

Majestic and unconstrained, with radiant light adorned,

威嚴自在，光相具足。

This image for His Majesty the Emperor, whose sagacious reign with heaven and earth aligns, while for all beings in the dharma realm it shines.

上為皇帝陛下，聖化與天地同界。下為法界蒼生。

Through countless ages, as sun and moon endure, ... May all sentient beings true awakening. □□共日月等歲，□□□□，俱登正覺。

For Shen Bao, only a few words must not be enough to convey all his emotions towards losing his spouse and demonstrate his remembrance. However, as an inscription composed in the early Tang (661 CE), it seems he was more likely to stick to the conventional style. He followed the pattern passed down from the Northern dynasties, which did not include too much individual emotion. Furthermore, by referring to the epitaphs of contemporary tombs, the inscription written by Shen partly follows a similar structure and rhetoric.³⁶

Compared to Shen Bao's constrain of personal feelings in public space, another donor at Longmen, Xu Qian 許乾 (d.u.), revealed stronger emotions and details when recalling the death of his wife and how he reacted to this great loss in his dedicatory inscription (No. 1129), which was engraved on the niche including a life-size image of Avalokiteśvara (Cave 689) (Fig. 5-7). He chanted poems and deeply yearned for his wife and sang solemn songs while weeping tears when facing the house and manor where they used to live together □□咏以長懷，對莊歌而泄涕， which he described as the spontaneous behaviours comparable with “the fabulous bird laments in front of the treasured mirror, the crane resents the precious Qin (a traditional string instrument) 鸞傷寶鏡，鶴怨瑤琴.” He then bewailed how regrettable it was that she passed

³⁶ See the analysis of borrowing the genre of contemporary epitaphs in Chapter 1, 31–35.

away shortly after their marriage at such a young age, “Alas! She possessed such graceful and elegant charm, radiating in the prime of her youth. She had recently learned to play the xiao (bamboo flute) and mastered the art of delicately drawing her eyebrows. 嗟乎！盈盈綺質，灼灼芳年，試學吹簫，新工點黛” and all of a sudden, made him a miserable widower by “going to the land of dead and shut her bones (in the tomb) for nothing, and all at once, she discarded the fragrant hall and abandoned her husband in the extravagant house 奄從蒿里，空閉骨於□□；忽棄蘭堂，罷齊眉於華屋.” Every time this solitary husband walked on the path towards his beloved wife’s tomb and touched the soil on the road, resonating with the fish swimming alone in the river and the bird flying in the forest without any companions, he could not suppress grief and assert that this is an unbearable loss, as well as how deeply mourned for this late wife and desired to reach her again but in vain 遂使川魚獨泳，林鳥孤飛，撫荒隴而何堪，慟幽魂而靡及。

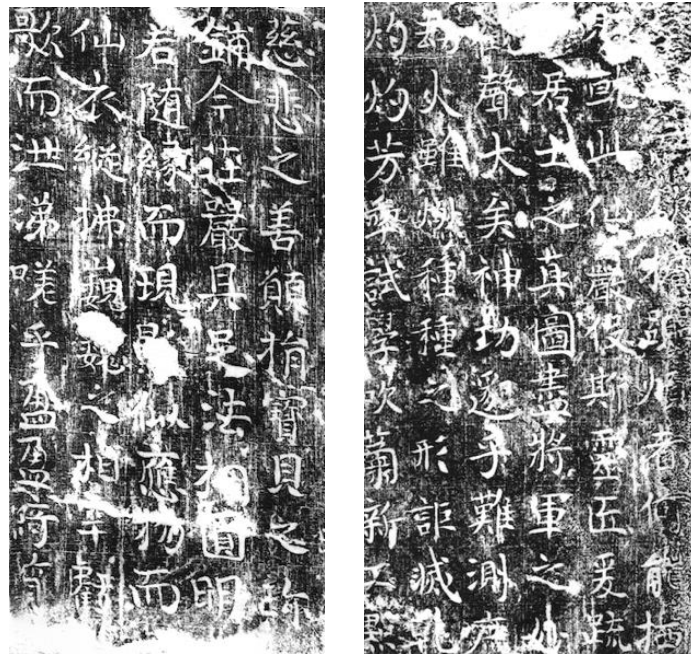


Fig. 5-7 Rubbings of Inscription No. 1129 (LGRA Collection)

Meanwhile, in another inscription (Inscription No. 0778) written by a husband who lost his wife as well, the author even recalled the specific scenes when his wife was still alive, as a very personal way to commemorate the deceased and reveal his affections. Zuo Zhongfu 左中孚, the District Defender of the Linhuan District in the Bo Prefecture 亳州臨渙縣尉, made an image niche of Amitābha Buddha (Cave 562³⁷) for his late wife, Lady Xue 薛氏, who was native to Fenyin District of Hedong Commandery 河東汾陰人 and from a renowned family, as she was the granddaughter of Xue Fang 薛昉, the Director of the Bureau of General Accounts 皇朝度支郎中, and the daughter of Xue Gui 薛珪, the Vice Director of the Ministry of Works 冬官員外郎 (Fig. 5-8).³⁸

Apart from a prestigious family background, many elegant qualities of Lady Xue were engraved in her husband's mind. He praised her as “She possessed a beautiful appearance, graceful manners, and tender affections. She adhered to female education and upheld the Way of a wife. Her manners influenced those around her, and guests respected her like the rising sun. 淑質閑華，柔情婉孌。率由女教，聿脩婦道，從隨風靡，賓敬日躋。” The rhetorical technique employed by Zuo Zhongfu to highlight the virtuous behaviours of her wife parallels the figurative language found in contemporary epitaphs. Terms like “the education for women 女教” and “the way of wife 婦道” are not rare to be seen in epitaphs to praise female occupants. Beyond that, similar descriptions such as “proclaimed her feminine merit that harmonized the family 宣陰德以宜家 (TMH Linde 043)” and “manifested the way of wife when she was young

³⁷ The *Zonglu* recorded this donative inscription in Cave 562 and the image within the cave was gone, see vol.4 (Record), 33.

³⁸ According to the title of Dongguan 冬官 (The Winter Official) was used to name the Gongbu 工部 (The Ministry of Works) during the Wuzhou period (684-705 CE), we can infer that the father of Lady Xue, Xue Gui served in the Ministry of Works during this period. Therefore, it is possible to speculate the completion of this image niche should be after the Wuzhou period, probably during the reign of Emperor Xuanzong, from 712 to 756 CE.

and consistently exemplified herself as a model of women 幼彰婦道，夙稟母儀” (TMH Lingde 021). Nevertheless, small scenes in their happy lives recalled by Zuo still show his strong yearning of Lady Xue, as they once “admired the bright moon through the window and played the *se* (a plucked stringed instrument), mocking the solitary goddess (Chang’e). We witnessed the falling flowers under the eaves and encountered a pair of swallows while savouring wine. 明月窗中，笑孤娥而調瑟；落花簷下，偶雙燕而攀滋。”

Soon afterwards, Zuo lost his beloved wife, and their happiness in the past became unreachable. He exclaimed how ceaselessly the time flies and hopes to see the graceful posture and light postures (as walking over ripples) (*lingbo zhi tai* 凌波之態) of his wife again, which turns out to be a fantasy of illuminating the whole beam in a house with a small flickering light (*kongxiang zhaoliang zhi hui* 空想照梁之暉). Like other widowers who shed tears, Lord Zuo also immersed himself in the sorrow of loss and “looked at the remaining osmanthus and felt distressed, stroked on the loom then wept and mourned (my wife) 覽遺桂而載傷，撫殘機而流動。”

Also, from the writing of Zuo Zhongfu, we can still see a glimpse of his Buddhist thought, which helped him to overcome the hard times and cultivate merits for the dead. Relying on the Supreme Tamer (the Buddha) to tame the gain and loss, through which the outstanding causes and conditions will exist alone forever, and the evil karma/deeds could (completely disappear) 敬憑調御敢事，調御得失，勝因永永而獨存，惡業巍巍而□□…

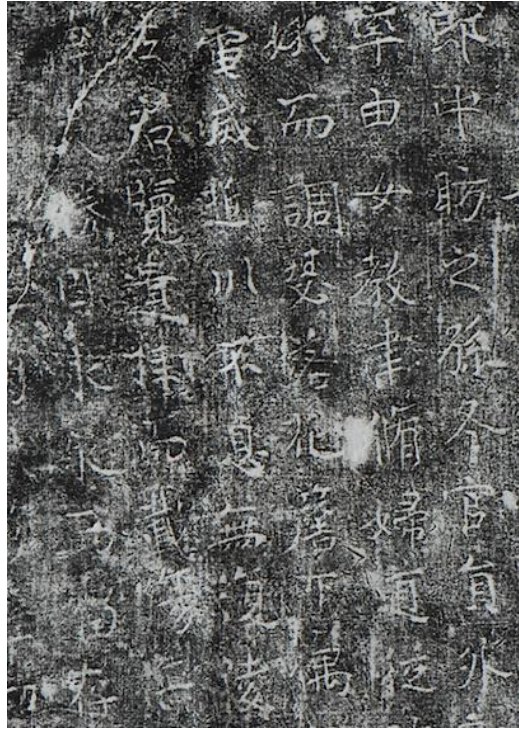


Fig. 5-8 Rubbing of Inscription No. 0778 (LGRA Collection)

In the Tang dynasty, displaying weeping in public spaces, especially for men, was not a negative action that would be criticized. In contrast, Tang people regarded these behaviours as a common performance to show one's ties to social responsibilities as a son, husband or father. The category of "Human" 人部 of the Tang encyclopedia (completed in 624 CE), *Yiwen leiju* 藝文類聚, included a section of "Weeping 泣³⁹," in which the compiler collected the texts indicating the weeping of men in the classics. One quotation from *Liji* 禮記 says when holding the mourning for his parent, Gao Zigao wept with blood for three years without displaying his teeth (to smile), and the gentlemen thought it was difficult 高子皋執親之喪，泣血三年，未嘗見齒，君子以為難矣. Therefore, weeping, as a spontaneous expression of one's true emotion, was

³⁹ *Yiwen leiju* 藝文類聚, vol. 35, 623-5.

an “illocutionary”⁴⁰ way to promote one’s social image as a sincere and trustworthy person.

5.3.2 Crying children

In addition to donors who claimed to cry for the loss of spouses, it is also common to see donors who patronized Buddhist projects for their late parents, indicating the strong affection between parents and children as well as the great sorrow they must face, to manifest them as sons or daughters of filial piety. For example, in the inscription of the Amitābha image niche made by Wei Liqi 韋利器 and his brother (No. 1112, 715 CE), sons of Lady Zhao, all “wept with blood” since they knew there was no hope to fetch her back 泣血無追. Similarly, the daughter of Lord Lu, the wife of Li Jingyou, who initiated an image shrine for her late father (Cave 1917), underlined that she “weeping blood” when recollecting the memory of her father on the southern terrace 想南陔而泣血 in her inscription (No. 2730).

In the project dedicated to her late mother, Lady Lu 盧氏, the wife of Cui Yuanjiu (No. 0775), expressed her deep regret at having no chance to serve her late mother every morning and evening so her wish to feed her parent in return, like crows, would never be fulfilled 烏志未申. A feeling of deep regret is also expressed in the inscription of Wei Muqian (Inscription No. 1399 and Cave 964), who patronized a family cave for his late parents. He described his reaction when hearing the death of his parent(s), not only “wailing bitterly and stamping his feet 攀慕號踴” but also “feeling as if his heart and liver were shattered 肝心圯裂.”

Meanwhile, for the beneficiaries who received those emotional expressions from their living descendants, how were their portraits depicted in a public space, demonstrating them as

⁴⁰ Moore 2004, 193, the Chapter “Ceremony of Gratitude,” in *Rituals of Recruitment in Tang China*.

embodiments of virtue, either in alignment with the Buddhist principles or the societal norms?

Some donors at Longmen stated that their intent behind initiating projects there was to honour the wishes of the deceased parents. For instance, the husband of Lady Lou (No. 0507 in Cave 440) cited his wife's devout Buddhist beliefs, mentioning her commitment to “cultivating an enlightened Chan mind” and her desire for a Buddhist cave burial. Wei Muqian, while not explicitly stating that patronizing a family cave was his parents’ original idea, emphasized his late father's Buddhist ideals by respecting the principle that no one can attain liberation without converting to Buddhism (Inscription no. 1399).

In the first year of the Shengli reign period 聖歷元年 (698 CE), the daughter of Duke Weijian 魏簡公 and Lady Li 李氏 (i.e., Li Guanding 李灌頂, see TMH Guangzhai 006), made the images of Maitreya and his attendants to accumulate merits for her late mother (Unnumbered inscription and Cave 1059). Not far from her endeavor and earlier in time, in the second year of the Yongchun reign period 永淳二年 (683 CE), Lady Li sponsored a niche for the Maitreya image (Cave 1049, the images have gone) and expressed wishes to “ascend to the Tuṣita Heaven and descend with the Maitreya Buddha to contemplate under the dragon-flower tree 願希昇兜率之天隨佛下生，思止龍華之樹 (No. 1443).” It’s evident that sixteen years later, the daughter of Lady Li created a cave with the same theme nearby, honouring her late mother. This offers insight into the prevalent Buddhist beliefs among high-status women like Lady Li and their religious aspirations. Such family-led projects might be interpreted as efforts to “support the effects in the nether world 用資冥果 (No. 1112),” “secretly protect and support (those who are in) the nether world 潛祐資冥 (No. 1129),” or “establish merit and support the nether world 樹福資冥 (No. 1506).”

5.3.3 True Appearance

In the first year of the Wansui Tongtian reign period (696 CE), as “a disciple of pure faith,” Xu Qian initiated a Buddhist project to commemorate his late wife, Lady Xu, since he aroused “a good vow of compassion (*cishan zhi shanyuan* 慈悲之善願).” To achieve the project on this “cliff of immortality (*xian yan* 仙巖),” he donated “treasures of jewels (*baobei zhi zhen* 寶貝之珍)” and hired “skillful artisans (*ling jiang* 靈匠)” to excavate (a niche) on the cliff and then reverently made a “golden appearance (*jin rong* 金容),” which is a “Life-Sized Image of the One who Observes the Sounds of the Word and Saves from Suffering (*dengshen jiuku Guanshiyin pusa* 等身救苦觀世音菩薩),” the Avalokiteśvara image.

The cave (Cave 689) excavated by Xu Qian is located on the West Hill at Longmen, on the top row among a complex of densely arranged and similar-sized projects, adjacent to the large cave of Cave 669 (Fig. 5-9 & 5-10). The cave has a simple layout showing an arched roof, with a height of 220 cm and a width of 136 cm, and houses only a sole-standing statue. However, it is not very common to see an image of Guanyin in such a large size,⁴¹ which is about 200 cm high, as a sole image other than arranged as the attendant bodhisattva in the large caves (e.g., South Binyang Cave, Great Vairocana Buddha Shrine, etc.).

In addition to indicating the identity of the statue as the Avalokiteśvara/Guanyin bodhisattva, Xu Qian described the image through a series of rhetorical devices, from the majestic and elegant look of the bodhisattva presented to the audience. He said,

⁴¹ There are a number of large-sized Buddha images at Longmen, either set up as a single image or in combination with other images, which requires further explorations.

Adorned in all their splendour, the sacred images radiate with perfect brilliance, capturing the true essence of the Layman (Vimalakīrti) and embodying the exquisite model of the General (Skanda/Weituo). 今莊嚴具足，法相圓明，□居士之真圖，盡將軍之妙範。

Like constellations scattered across the vast expanse of the sky, the niches gleam like distant stars. The moon, casting its luminous glow, begins to unfold [as if mirroring the Buddha's reflection]. 星豪迴闕，即映星龕，月□□開，還臨□□。⁴²

In response to the conditions of the world, the image manifests, and his sound resonates in harmony with the needs of all sentient beings. Oh, how magnificent it is! 若隨緣而現影，似應物而觀聲，大矣！



Fig. 5-9 Location of Cave 689; Fig. 5-10 Cave 689, sponsored by Xu Qian (Lan LI, 2023)

⁴² Referring to the Stele of the Yique Buddhist Niche 伊闕佛龕之碑 (Inscription No. 0074), in which it compares the shrines on the cliff as the stars in the sky, “疏絕壁於玉繩之表而靈龕星列，雕□石於金波之外而尊容月舉。”

Xu Qian's portrayal of the Buddhist images and the grotto complex follows a literary style found in dedicatory inscriptions at Longmen during the Tang dynasty. For instance, the comparison drawn between the cliff's scattered caves and niches to stars and the moon in the sky resembles similar descriptions found in the inscription on the Stele of Yique Buddha Shrine 伊闕佛龕之碑 by Prince Wei (No. 0074). In this inscription, author Cen Wenben likened the spiritual aura of the Longmen cliff to constellations and likened the awe-inspiring appearances of a Buddha/bodhisattva to the moon. While it remains uncertain if Xu Qian or other writers were influenced by earlier inscriptional styles, the shared terminology and rhetorical strategies across different periods at Longmen should not be ignored.

In Tang inscriptions, another term frequently used to describe the Buddha's image is *zhenrong* 真容 “true appearance” or a variation like “golden appearance” (金容), as seen in Xu Qian's inscription.⁴³ For instance, in the inscription by Wei Liqi's family (No.1112), they declared using their resources to aid their mother in the afterlife by carving on the cliff to reveal the “true appearance (of the Buddha)” 用資冥果，坎巖壁現真容. Similarly, Wu Muqian (No. 1399), in describing his family's endeavour, mentioned carving on the eastern side of the expansive cliff to depict the “true appearance (of three Buddhas)” seated on thrones amidst the clouds 座真容兮半雲空.

Moreover, Yang Sixu 楊思勗 (663–740 CE), the Supreme Pillar of State and Duke of Guo State 上柱國虢國公, made a cave (Cave 1255)⁴⁴ to accommodate the images dedicated to his

⁴³ For more discussion on *zhenrong*/true appearance, see Choi, Sun-ah. n.d. “Quest for the True Visage: Sacred Images in Medieval Chinese Buddhist Art and the Concept of Zhen.” Ph.D. dissertation (Illinois: The University of Chicago, 2012).

⁴⁴ About the accurate location of Cave 1255, please refers to the survey map drawn by the Longmen Grottoes Research Academy, or refer to the map in Peng Minghao's paper about the reconstruction of the exterior construction of the Great Vairocana Buddha 大盧捨那像龕 (Cave 1850), in *Kaogu* 考古, No. 2 (2020): 114. Also, see Wen Yucheng 1992, 203.

late mother, Lady of Xu State 徐國夫人, for which he described as “just the same as the true appearance 真容儼然 (No. 1633).” As the inscription indicates, his project contains the theme of “Supreme Two Bodhisattva,” the Guanyin (Avalokiteśvara) and Dizang (Kṣitigarbha), which is a popular theme at Longmen in the Tang.⁴⁵ What Yang related to the “true appearance” should be the features of these two bodhisattvas.

Considering the contexts within inscriptions mentioning the “true appearance,” most readers would readily interpret this term as an alternative reference to the Buddha or the depiction of a Buddha/bodhisattva. Yet, it is plausible to extend the interpretation of this term to include the countenances of the beneficiaries, based on some obscure expressions. For instance, in the inscription honouring Li Yichen 李義琛 (?—ca.685 CE) and his family (No. 1506), the text delves into the steps involved in creating caves and crafting images while emphasizing the social role of Buddhist caves. The donors said:

On towering cliffs that rise nine *ren* (about 22 meters) above the Yi River, stretching for a thousand *xun* (approximately 2,400 meters), we have carved these sacred images. With skilled craftsmanship in metal and stone, we have faithfully restored the divine forms of celestial beings. Envisioning a pearl crosspiece adorning their moon-like faces, we have captured their true essence. How could these enduring creations compare to the fading spiritual essence of ancestral temples that decline with the passing of generations, or the fleeting reflections of palaces and eunuchs that rise and fall with the changing tides of

⁴⁵ No statues or any decoration left in Cave 1255 at present. Many inscriptions included the title of Er Pusa 二菩薩 (two bodhisattvas), among which at least five inscriptions dated to the Tang clearly indicated the combination of Dizang and Guanyin. The actual quantity of this combination should be more. See Yü, Chün-fang, and Yao Chongxin. 2016, 757–96..

dynasties? 於是鑿闕巖之九仞，俯伊溜之千尋，式憑金石之工，即繕天人之相。擬珠衡於月面，記如在於真容。寧比宗廟之靈，隨親盡而遷貿，宮閣之影乘兩朝而廢興。

The children of Li Yichen expressed their reverence for their late father through this project, inscribing phrases like “as being present” 如在 and “true appearance” 真容. I interpret these phrases as having dual meanings: they signify both the presence and visage of the Buddha and the departed beneficiaries. Furthermore, the subsequent paragraph draws a comparison between the impermanence of ancestral halls and palaces, contingent upon the fluctuating fortunes of family and state, and the enduring nature of the rock. As rock remains steadfast, Buddhist images, texts, and engravings depicting the deceased on a Buddhist cave possess the potential for eternal existence, in stark contrast to the transience of ancestral halls and palaces.

In addition to the epigraphical materials, strong evidence from contemporary non-Buddhist literature shows that Tang donors sometimes blurred the boundaries of making images for the Buddha or for a human. In an ode written by Zhang Yue 張說 (667–731 CE), a famous scholar and official who served as a chancellor during the reign of emperor Ruizong and Xuanzong, *Longmen xikan su hegong dengshen guanshiyin pusa xiang song* 龍門西龕蘇合宮等身觀世音菩薩像頌 (The Ode of the Body-sized Image of Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva made for Su Ting of Hegong District at Longmen), he praised the noble virtues of the beneficiary of the project, Su Ting 蘇頲 (670–727 CE), and elucidates the causes and conditions behind making the Avalokitesvara image. Furthermore, he described the extraordinary characters of this majestic image and pointed out that it is a visualization of the appearance and manners of the chancellor as well as a manifestation of the great marks of the wheel-turning king 立宰官之形儀，現輪王之相好.

Hence, a Buddhist cave or niche could function not only as a religious space to cultivate merit for the beneficiaries but also as an extended space beyond traditional social frameworks to commemorate deceased family members or revered individuals by engraving Buddhist images resembling the countenances of the beneficiaries. This concept of a “true appearance” holds dual meanings, symbolizing both the authenticity of Buddhist images and expressing the donor’s deep remembrance.

5.4 Buddhist Ideas Reflected in Inscriptions

5.4.1 Celestial Garments and Kalpa Fire

Even though “divine efficacy 神功” is profound and unpredictable, Xu Qian expected the mountain that conveys the image he engraved would not collapse so that his words of remembrance would last forever (*kanshan buxiu, keshi changchun* 刊山不朽，刻石長存).

Compared to the average human lifespan, stone possesses a quality that is equal to eternity, so it has been regarded as the best medium to preserve and protect religious texts and images.

Buddhists in medieval China reached a consensus that the Buddha’s teaching, including merits generated from their projects, would never fade away if they were preserved on the rock (i.e., cliffs and mountain caves) so that the dharma could be transmitted generation by generation.

Examples from earlier periods can be observed in places such as the Central Cave at the Xiaonanhai Grotto 小南海石窟中洞, a cave dedicated to the eminent Chan master Sengchou 僧稠 (481–560 CE) and was completed during the Northern Qi dynasty (550–577 CE).⁴⁶ His

⁴⁶ Henansheng Gudai Jianzhu Baohu Yanjiusuo 河南省古代建築保護研究所, “Henan Anyang Lingquansi shiku ji Xiaonanhai shiku 河南安陽靈泉寺石窟及小南海石窟,” in *Wenwu*, no.4 (1988): 4.

disciples engraved the selected Buddhist canon and inscriptions,⁴⁷ on the façade, to honor their master and indicated the reason for choosing the stone as a medium to transmit his teaching. They said, “We as a group respected on our late master and followed his meditative practice. Thereafter, we carved the stone and inscribed texts related to his practice, ensuring the eternal transmission of his teachings. 眾等仰惟先師依准觀法，遂鏤石班經，傳之不朽。” Meanwhile, from 568 to 572 CE, a patron of the Northern Xiangtang Grottoes 北響堂石窟, Tang Yong 唐邕 (d.u.), engraved several Buddhist scriptures and his inscription (573 CE) in the South Cave 南洞, in which he compared the quality of four traditional materials for writing, such as silk scrolls 縑緗, bamboo documents 簡策, metal tables 金牒 and parchment paper 皮紙, neither were easily destroyed or difficult to preserve and are not qualified media to pass down the Buddha’s teaching.⁴⁸ Eventually, he “ordered the trace of the silver chisel 命銀鈎之跡” to engrave Buddhist texts on a renowned mountain, Mount Gushan 鼓山 (i.e. the mountain on which the Northern Xiangtang Grottoes are located).

Another eminent monk Jingwan 靜琬 (?–639 CE), under the impact of the *mofa* theory 末法 (End of the Dharma), worried about the transmission of Buddhism and then initiated the huge project of carving sutra in the caves of Fangshan 房山 during the early Tang.⁴⁹ In one of his colophons for carving the Huayan Sutra 華嚴經, he highlighted the significant function of the stone chambers is to prevent the Buddhist texts are “burnt by the kalpa fire 劫火,” so that “the

⁴⁷ The chapter on Shengxing 聖行品 “Sagely Practice” in the *Nirvana Sutra* 大般涅槃經, T12n0374_p0432a07—p0433c18.

⁴⁸ See the transcription in Zhang, Lintang 張林堂 2007, 117; Katherine Tsiang 1996, 237.

⁴⁹ Luo Zhao 羅炤 pointed out that Jingwan belongs to the lineage of Master Lingyu 靈裕 (518–605 CE), a scholar-monk of the Dilun School 地論宗 in the Sui dynasty, who excavated a cave and engraved Buddhist (i.e., Dazhusheng ku 大住聖窟) scriptures at Baoshan to prepare for the *mofa*, Decline of the Dharma 末法. Therefore, Jingan followed his master’s instruction and initiated the projects of carving Buddhist scriptures at Fangshan, to preserve the Buddha’s teaching in the time of the *mofa*.

torch of dharma would illuminate permanently 法炬「恆」明。”⁵⁰

Let us return to the case at Longmen in the Tang dynasty, where Xu Qian cited two specific analogies from the Buddhist canon to emphasize the enduring nature of his project, “Even if a great rock were brushed by celestial garments (once every thousand years) until it wore away, the dignified appearance (of the Buddha or bodhisattva) would scarcely diminish. And even if the flame of the kalpa were to burn down (the universe), the diverse forms (of the Buddha) would not be extinguished 仙衣縱拂，巍巍之相罕虧；劫火雖燃，種種之形詎滅。”

As the *Zengyi ahan jing* 增一阿含經 (the Incremental Agama) records, when the Buddha preached in the Jetavana Garden, a *bhikṣu* consulted him about the length of a Kalpa, and the Buddha explained it by referring to a metaphor. He said, “Imagine a vast rock mountain, one *youxun* 由旬 (Skt. *yojana*) wide and one *youxun* high. If someone were to sweep it with a celestial garment every hundred years, even after the rock has worn away, a kalpa would still not have passed. 猶如大石山縱廣一由旬，高一由旬，設有人來手執天衣，百歲一拂，石猶磨滅，劫數難限。”⁵¹

Compared to the metaphor of the celestial robes, “the flame of the kalpa 劫火 (or the kalpa fire)” refers to a broader category of meanings, representing three major calamities that occur at the end of a kalpa and destroy the whole universe. In the *Chang ahan jing* 長阿含經 (Longer

⁵⁰ The original text is “The Inscription of Carving the Huayan Sūtra 鑄華嚴經題記,” “[Jingwan] said reverently: In the future world, both religious and secular (principles) and the stone pillar for inscribing sūtras will be lost. People who live in the six destinies do not possess wise eyes, and it is hard to expect them to attain nirvana. Every time I think about this, I feel grief and sorrow. I have engraved a *Huayan Sūtra* on this mountain, and I want to preserve it in this stone chamber forever and without being burnt by the fire of the kalpa. For after a thousand years, the lamp of kindness will be lightened up constantly, and ten thousand years later, the torch of dharma will illuminate permanently. [靜琬]敬白，未來之世，一切道俗，法幢將沒。六趣昏冥，人無惠眼，出離難期。每尋斯事，悲恨傷心。今於此山鑄鑿華嚴經一部，永留石室，劫火不焚。使千載之下，惠燈常照；萬代之後，法炬[恆]明。” See *Compendium of Colophons of the Stone Sūtras at Fangshan* 1987, 1–2. See Lothar Ledderose, ‘Changing the Audience: A Pivotal Period in the Great Sutra Carving Project at Cloud Dwelling Monastery near Beijing’, in John Lagerwey (ed.), *Religion and Chinese Society*, vol. 1, Ancient and Medieval China (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press and Paris: Ecole française d’Extrême-Orient, 2004), 385–409.

⁵¹ T02n125_p825c12–15.

Agama Sutra), the Buddha told a *bhikṣu* that there are three calamities (*sanzai* 三災) in the world: fire, floods and storms, without indicating the time of their occurrence.⁵² Chapter 12 of the *Apidamo juse lun* 阿毘達磨俱舍論 (Skt. *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya*) gives a specific description of the scenes when the fire calamity happens at the end of the kalpa of annihilation (*huaijie* 壞劫), in which even the celestial palace and the realm of Brahma 梵天 would be burnt down.⁵³

In the Tang era at Longmen, Xu Qian was not the sole believer in the lasting endurance of Buddhist images and inscriptions carved into mountain caves/niches against erosion or natural disasters. Other patrons shared this belief, expressing similar sentiments in their inscriptions. As in the case of Wei Liqi and his brothers (No. 1112 and Cave 670), they said, “May this stone without deteriorating, and this mountain stand eternally firm. May it endure for countless kalpas of the Buddha, impervious even to the sweep of celestial garments (a metaphor for the immense passage of time, where a celestial garment brushes a rock only once every kalpa, eventually wearing it away). 斯石不朽，茲山永固，窮佛劫以長存，拂天衣而無盡。”

Similarly, Lady Li, the consort of Duke Weijian (魏簡公), articulated her aspiration for the perpetuity of the Mountain of Compassion (*cishan* 慈山) at Longmen, which housed her endeavor featuring a Maitreya image (*Mile xiang* 彌勒像). Employing reminiscent rhetoric, she referred to the celestial garments (*tianyi* 天衣) and the kalpa's conflagration (*jiehuo* 劫火) to emphasize the enduring nature of the stone images and the rocky terrain. She envisaged their

⁵² Three Calamities in Buddhist scripture: 《長阿含經》卷 21 〈9 三災品〉：「佛告比丘：「世有三災。云何為三？一者火災，二者水災，三者風災。有三災上際。」 T01no. 1_p137b11–13.

⁵³ The description of fire calamity in *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya*, vol.12: 「餘十方界一切有情，感此三千世界業盡，於此漸有七日輪現，諸海乾竭眾山洞然，洲渚三輪並從焚燎，風吹猛焰燒上天宮，乃至梵宮無遺灰燼。自地火焰燒自地宮，非他地災能壞他地，由相引起故作是言。下火風飄焚燒上地，謂欲界火猛焰上昇為緣引生色界火焰。餘災亦爾，如應當知。如是始從地獄漸滅乃至器盡，總名壞劫。」 T29no1558_p63a1—9.

resilience “even after being swept by celestial garments and enduring the fires of the kalpa 天衣拂而恆存，劫火燃而不滅。” Likewise, the Stele of the Yique Buddha Niche (伊闕佛龕之碑, No. 0074) echoed a parallel analogy, underscoring the adamantine resilience of the stone images, asserting their endurance despite the celestial garments wearing down the rock over the kalpa 衣銷劫石.

In addition to employing analogous metaphors, some benefactors followed a strategy akin to that of Tang Yong, comparing diverse materials used for preserving writings. They emphasized the exceptional attributes of stone, presenting it as a symbol of enduring permanence. For instance, in the inscription of Deng Sixiao and his family (Inscription No. 1467 and Cave 1069-Niche 65), they expressed disdain for perishable ornate writings (recorded on paper/books), highlighting their vulnerability 雕章易朽. Instead, they wished for their stone images inscribed on the rocky formations by the river (i.e., Longmen mountain and Yi River) 泉石 to endure as long as the heavens and earth, signifying everlasting existence 天長地久.

Furthermore, donors of the Maitreya image niche of the Sishun Ward (Inscription No. 0077) gave a more specific comparison, “The vibrant hues of paintings will soon fade, their brilliance fleeting. Gold and jade, though precious, are easily scattered and lost. Only this mountain stands steadfast, enduring like the heavens and earth. Upon its solid face, we carve this upright stele. How could the mountains and valleys ever change? 彼丹青徒煥，旋見銷毀，金玉雖珍，易以零落。豈若因山成固，同乾坤之可久，刊石為貞，何陵谷之能貿？”

During the Northern and Southern dynasties, the prevalent belief in the theory of *mofa*, signifying the Decline of the Dharma, notably contributed to an increase in the engraving of

Buddhist images and scriptures on rock surfaces.⁵⁴ This trend arose from the primary intent of practitioners to safeguard the dharma from extinction following the potential demise of the present world. Undoubtedly, the preservation and transmission of Buddha's teachings are pivotal. However, it's plausible that for donors sponsoring Buddhist projects in commemoration of family members or designated beneficiaries (e.g., the life-sized Guanyin image dedicated to Su Ting), this might not have been the sole motivation.

The concepts of everlasting rock and the indestructible mountain became a universal rhetorical tool among the donative inscriptions at Longmen during the Tang dynasty. Among these expressions, however, many lay patrons gave priority to conveying their affection and remembrance for their loved ones. They also focused on accumulating merits for their beneficiaries as their primary motivations, replacing the concerns about the extinguishment of the dharma. Believing that the wooden structures in the ancestral halls and palaces were unpredictable in their endurance (No. 1506), these donors assumed their projects would last indefinitely, ensuring everlasting and unchanging merits for their families and clans.

5.4.2 Changing the Paradigm of Buddhas of Three Periods

In the affiliated inscription of his family cave (No. 1399), Wei Muqian gave a brief introduction about his project, “I respectfully crafted a niche on the northern cliff of Fengxian Monastery at Longmen for my late father and mother. Within it, I placed three statues of Amitābha Buddha, Śākyamuni Buddha, and Maitreya, all together in one niche. This project was completed on the fifteenth day of the eighth month in the fifth year of the Kaiyuan reign (September 24, 717 CE),

⁵⁴ For the discussion on the origin and development of *mofa* (Decline of Dharma) or Buddhist eschatology during the Southern and Northern dynasties, please refer to Zürcher (1982), 12–22. Also, for the description of the *mofa* ear by contemporary monks during the Southern and Northern dynasties, see the 南嶽思大禪師立誓願文 (T1933) by Huisi 慧思 (515–577 CE).

which commenced on the first day of Wuchen. 乃於龍門奉先寺北，敬為亡考妣造阿彌陀像、釋迦牟尼像、彌勒像合為三鋪，同在一龕，以開元五年龍集丁巳八月戊辰朔十五日壬午功畢。”

This excerpt delves into the theme chosen by Lord Wei, focusing on the Buddhas of Three Time Periods (*sanshi fo* 三世佛). Through an examination of the seated positions and hand gestures of the three Buddha images, it becomes apparent that the primary Buddha situated on the rear wall is Maitreya Buddha, depicted in the form of descending to the human world. The other two Buddhas, depicted in a leg-crossed sitting posture, are identified as Śākyamuni and Amitābha Buddhas. The main image on the western wall stands at about 123 cm in height, seated on a square pedestal with feet placed on small lotus-shaped supports in front.⁵⁵ Adorned in a Han-style robe⁵⁶ fastened at the chest, this Buddha exhibits a specific *mudrā*, potentially with the back of the left hand resting on the knee and the right hand raised towards the chest,⁵⁷ interpreted by LGRA scholars as the preaching *mudrā* (說法印) (see Fig. 5-11).⁵⁸

The Buddhas on the northern and southern walls, both approximately 110 cm in height, don Indian-style robes⁵⁹ and sit in a similar leg-crossed posture. However, their hand gestures slightly differ from the main image: one hand is placed palm up in front of the abdomen, resembling a meditative *mudrā*, while the other hand rests on the knee with the palm facing

⁵⁵ This is a universal sitting posture and pattern of Buddhas with pedant legs in the Tang dynasty, and also a representative sitting position of Maitreya Buddha in the Tang at Longmen. Also seen in big projects related to the imperial family and high-ranked officials, for instance, Cave 565 惠簡洞, Cave 522 雙窟南洞, Cave 1955 極南洞, etc.

⁵⁶ See the explanation in Li 2014, 455, note 1.

⁵⁷ The left hand had been badly eroded by wind and water, so it is difficult to distinguish the details on the hand. By referring to similar seated Buddhas in the same period, such as Cave 1955, we can recover the original posture of the mudra.

⁵⁸ *General Record*, vol.6, 38–39.

⁵⁹ This is the wearing style of covering the shoulders (*tongjian* 通肩). See the description by Yijing 義淨, *Nanhai jigui neifa zhuan* 南海寄歸內法傳 (A Record of Buddhist Practices Sent Home from the Southern Sea), vol.2: 「若欲帶紐，即須通肩披已，將紐內向迴向肩後勿令其脫。以角搭肩衣便繞頸，雙手下出，一角向前，阿育王像正當其式。」 T54, no. 2125, p. 215a28-b2.

inward. This gesture is identified as the *mudrā* of touching the earth (觸地印), also recognized as the *mudrā* of subjugating demons (降魔印) (see Fig. 5-12 & 5-13).



Fig. 5-11 Cave 964: Façade (Xinglong Li, 2016)



(Left) Fig. 5-12 Cave 964: Elevation of the Northern Wall;

(Right) Fig. 5-13 Cave 964: Elevation of the Southern Wall (Xinglong Li, 2016)

The categorization of the "Buddhas of the Three Periods" has stirred debate, particularly due to Amitābha Buddha's initial absence from this classification in earlier times. This theme gained

prominence at Longmen since the Northern Wei dynasty and extended to other cave temples in China.⁶⁰ For instance, it's evident in the imperial family-funded project, the Central Binyang Cave 賓陽中洞 (Cave 140). Early Buddhist scriptures, such as the Lotus Sutra, predominantly refer to the past Buddha as Kāśyapa Buddha 迦葉佛 or Dīpaṅkara Buddha 燃燈佛.⁶¹

There has been a noticeable evolution in the conceptualization of the Three Period Buddhas, gradually emphasizing Amitābha and the Western Pure Land from the Northern dynasties through the Sui-Tang period. This shift is evident in various instances where Amitābha Buddha is included among the Three Buddhas, emerging towards the conclusion of the Northern dynasties and the Sui era.⁶² Notably, one such example exists in the Central Cave at the Xiaonanhai Grottoes, dated to the Northern Qi dynasty (550–577 CE).⁶³

In a notable instance and among the earliest occurrences in a cave temple, the Dazhusheng Cave 大住聖窟 at the Lingquansi Grottoes in Anyang stands out.⁶⁴ This cave was sponsored and designed by the esteemed monk Lingyu 靈裕 (518–605 CE) during the Sui dynasty, completed in

⁶⁰ Also seen in the large caves made in the Northern Wei at Longmen, such as the Huangfugong Cave 皇甫公窟 (Cave 1609), the Lotus Cave (Cave 712) and Weizi Cave (Cave 1181), etc. See the analysis of “Three Buddhas” in the cave temples of the Northern Wei dynasty by Liu Huida 1958, 96–101.

⁶¹ For the introduction of the Buddhas of Three Periods in the Lotus Sutra, see the Lotus Sutra 妙法蓮華經, vol.1, Chapter 1: 「我念過去世，無量無數劫，有佛人中尊，號日月燈明。世尊演說法，度無量眾生，無數億菩薩，令入佛智慧。」 T09, no. 262, p. 4b21-24; Lotus Sutra, vol. 1: 「最後天中天，號曰燃燈佛，諸仙之導師，度脫無量眾。T09, no. 262, p. 5b2-3; and 「亦行眾善業，得見無數佛，供養於諸佛，隨順行大道，具六波羅蜜，今見釋師子。其後當作佛，號名曰彌勒，廣度諸眾生，其數無有量。彼佛滅度後，懈怠者汝是；妙光法師者，今則我身是。」 T09, no. 262, p. 5b9-15.

⁶² See He Shizhe 1994, 79–80.

⁶³ Henansheng Gudai Jianzhu Baohu Yanjiusuo 1988, 4.

⁶⁴ Some scholars proposed that the earliest example that includes the Amitabha into the Three Buddha is the Daliusheng Cave 大留聖窟, excavated by Daoping 道憑 during the Eastern Wei dynasty (546 CE), at the Lingquansi Grottoes. See Tokiwa and Sekino 1939, vol. 5, p75; Ding Mingyi 1988, 16; and He Shizhe 1993, 5. However, Li Yuqun suggests that the theme of Daoping's cave should be the Three Buddhas of the past, present and future following the pattern of the Lotus Sutra according to the 卍 marks on the bodies of the Buddha images. See Li 2012, 80. Since no concrete epigraphical or textual evidence indicates the theme of Daliusheng Cave, I am inclined not to regard it as the earliest example. For the scholarships on the Dazhusheng Cave 大住聖窟, please refer to the previous descriptions and discussions on the Dazusheng Cave in Howard 1996, 20–24; Tsiang 1996, 234–236; Sonya Lee 2010, “Transmitting Buddhist,” 59–65; Adamek 2023, 51–80, 256–300.

the ninth year of the Kaihuang 開皇 reign period (589 CE). In Lingyu's donative inscription,⁶⁵ he designated the three niches of Buddha images as the Vairocana Buddha 盧舍那世尊 (rear wall), the Amitābha Buddha 阿彌陀世尊 (western wall), and the Maitreya Buddha 彌勒世尊 (eastern wall) (Fig. 5-14).



Fig. 5-14 The Dazhusheng Cave at Lingquansi Grottoes (western, rear and eastern walls),
(Lan LI, 2018)

In various contexts beyond Lord Wei's project at Longmen, there were more configurations in which Amitābha Buddha replaced the conventional past Buddha, forming a new paradigm of the Buddhas of Three Periods during the Tang dynasty and later eras. This shift was not confined to the central region but was widely adopted in peripheral areas such as Dunhuang and Sichuan. Texts relevant to this subject indicate a lack of clear evidence that Amitābha Buddha should be classified as a Buddha of the past or as residing in the present, but rather existing in another Buddha land. In fact, defining him within either category would conflict with the Buddhist canon.⁶⁶

The reason for Lord Wei's substitution of the Buddha of the past with Amitābha Buddha

⁶⁵ Lingyu said in his inscription, “大隋開皇九年己酉歲敬造窟，用功一千六百廿四像，世尊用功九百。盧舍那世尊一龕，阿彌陀世尊一龕，彌勒世尊一龕；三十五佛世尊三十五龕，七佛世尊七龕，傳法聖大法師廿四人……” See Henansheng Gudai Jianzhu Baohu Yanjiusuo 1988, 3.

⁶⁶ He Shizhe 1994, 78.

remains an intriguing question. A passage from the “Commentary to the Sutra of the Contemplation on the Buddha of Immeasurable Life” (*Guan wuliangshou jing yishu* 觀無量壽經義疏) may present an alternative perspective on Amitābha Buddha's status in Buddhist cosmology.⁶⁷ It delineates the definition of the Three Period Buddhas as the “Seven Buddhas in the Past,” “Śākyamuni Buddha in the Present,” and “Maitreya in the Future,” illustrating the vertical progression (豎化) of Buddhas. Simultaneously, this commentary elucidates the horizontal progression (橫化) of Buddhas in ten directions (十方佛化), particularly by observing the pure land of the Buddha of Immeasurable Life, Amitābha Buddha. This includes understanding the “defiled land (i.e., human world) transformed by Śākyamuni Buddha” and “the Western pure land transformed by the Buddha of Immeasurable Life.” Buddhist patrons may have amalgamated these two categories to perceive multiple Buddha lands in temporal and spatial dimensions. This likely contributed to the adaptation or creation of conceptions regarding the Buddhist universe and karma's mechanism, aiming to accumulate merit for themselves or their deceased family members.

Evidence from other inscriptions at Longmen might support this hypothesis: In the inscription of Wei Liqi and his brothers (Inscription No. 1112), they say:

Amitābha attained awakening prior to the four kalpas; To adorn the path to the netherworld, one must first cultivate numerous merits. The Dharma body remains immortal in the solid mountain rock; In the boundless and clear sky, hangs the Sun of the Buddha. 彌陀得道四劫前，莊嚴幽路百福先，法身不朽山石堅，昊天罔極佛日懸。

Why did Wei Liqi address the time when Amitābha Buddha attained awakening before the four

⁶⁷ According to *Guan wuliangshou jing yishu* 『觀無量壽經義疏』：「無量觀辨十方佛化，彌勒經明三世佛化。十方佛化即是橫化，三世佛化即是豎化。言彌勒經三世豎化者，過去七佛、現在釋迦、未來彌勒，明三佛化，故是豎化也。言無量壽觀十方橫化者，此方穢土釋迦化、西方淨土無量壽化，明十方佛化，故是橫化也。」 T37no1752_p236a19-25.

eons?⁶⁸ Associated with the inscription of Wei Muqian, in which he refers to Amitābha Buddha as the Buddha of the past 過去佛, the Wei brothers probably have the same understanding of Amitābha and West Pure Land. Since the projects of Wei Muqian and Wei Liqi were both dedicated to the deceased family members, the donors wanted to ensure the efficacious power of their projects so the dead would be successfully reborn to the Western Pure Land by changing the old paradigm. This change as an innovative combination of the Buddhas of the Three Time Periods has been universally accepted by the Tang Buddhists at Longmen. Meanwhile, scholars have identified not less than three inscriptions of stone carving sutra of the Amitābha Sutra 佛說阿彌陀經 at Longmen, during the Wuzhou period and after, which demonstrate the popularity of the Amitābha.⁶⁹

5.5 Summary: A Family Cave at Longmen

What does a family cave look like on the site? In this section, I want to summarize the main characters of representative family-sponsored projects at Tang Longmen,⁷⁰ as well as unveil any supplementary functions of the family caves in addition to caves or niches that accommodate

⁶⁸ The concept of Four Eons 四劫 is explained in detail in Abhidharmakosa, composed by Vasubandhu 世親, and translated by Xuanzang 玄奘. See 《阿毘達磨俱舍論》卷 12: 「頌曰: 應知有四劫, 謂壞成中大, 壞從獄不生, 至外器都盡, 成劫從風起, 至地獄初生, 中劫從無量, 減至壽唯十, 次增減十八, 後增至八萬, 如是成已住, 名中二十劫, 成壞壞已空, 時皆等住劫, 八十中大劫, 大劫三無數。」 T29no1558_p62b28-c6. Again see 《俱舍論疏》卷 12: 「頌中初明四劫, 有壞劫、有成劫、有中劫、有大劫。此先釋壞劫。壞劫謂地獄有情不復生, 至外器都盡, 皆是壞劫。」 T41no1822_p621a16-18. 《俱舍論疏》卷 12: 「明住劫後有壞劫也。」 T41no1822_p. 621a21-22. 《俱舍論疏》卷 12: 「大文第二明成劫也。從空劫後方有成劫, 空、成二劫皆等住劫二十劫也。」 See T41, no. 1822, p. 621b18-20. According to Buddhist scripture, the sequence of the Four Eons are: Eon of Nothingness (*kongjie* 空劫)—Eon of Formation (*chengjie* 成劫)—Eon of Existing (*zhujie* 住劫)—Eon of Destruction (*huaijie* 壞劫).

⁶⁹ Archaeological researchers have identified three caves or excavated site include the stone carving inscriptions of the Amitabha Sutra (T0366) at Longmen, Cave 1497 (by Zhou Yuanzhi 周遠志), Cave 2055 (Central Leigutai Cave 擂鼓台中洞) and the attached niche of the burial cave WFG-K1. Moreover, Kuramoto pointed out there are several caves containing inscriptions that could be associated with Shandao 善導 and his propagation of the belief of the Amitabha at Longmen, such as Inscription no. 1427 in Cave 1038, Inscription no. 1490 in Cave 1074 (sponsored by Huishen 慧審, a disciple of Shandao). All these references indicate the popularity of the cult of Amitabha and West Pure Land in this region. See Kuramoto 2017, 378—385.

⁷⁰ The representative caves I selected: Cave 670 (Wei Liqi, 715 CE), Cave 689 (Xu Qian, 696 CE), Cave 964 (Wei Muqian Cave, 717 CE), Cave 1058 (685 CE) and Cave 1063 (Li Yichen family, 694 CE), Cave 1049 (683 CE) and Cave 1059 (Weijian Gong, 698 CE), and Cave 1995 (Jinan Cave, 705 CE).

Buddhist images.

5.5.1 Location

The project patronized by Lord Wei (Cave 964) is located in the middle part of the West Hill at Longmen, about 100 metres to the north of the Great Vairocana Buddha Niche (Cave 1280) (Fig. 5-14 & 5-15), among a complex of large and medium-sized projects mostly completed in the Tang dynasty.



Fig. 5-15 Cave 964: Location (Lan LI, 2023)



Fig. 5-16 Cave 964: Location (from below) (Lan LI, 2018)

In his inscription, Wei Muqian highlighted the specific location he chose for his intentions, situated "in the outskirts where King Cheng of Zhou settled the Ding (a three or four-legged ancient cooking vessel symbolizing the state), on the way where Great Yu of Xia dredged among the mountains 余其周成定鼎之郊，夏禹疏山之路." This spot, characterized as flat as a whetstone, aligns precisely with the description as it was carved into a sheer cliff, perched about 15 meters above the riverbank. The excavation of the cave on such a "whetstone-like" wall, on a lofty cliff inaccessible to most, mirrored the inscription's depiction. Wei Muqian's decision to engrave the inscription outside the main chamber suggests an intention to protect it from potential disturbance by future visitors.

Not only Cave 964, but also other family caves like Cave 670, Cave 689, and Cave 1058, and 1063 belonging to Li Yichen's family, are positioned on a vertical cliff, elevated between 10 and 15 meters above the river surface (Fig. 5-17). These caves seemed originally designed with an apparent intention not to be revisited or modified by subsequent generations, judging by the current conditions on-site. However, the inscription in Cave 1063 (completed in 694 CE) revealed that Li Xiong, a grandson of Li Yichen and Lady Zheng, revisited his grandmother's dedicated cave and added an inscription twenty-six years later (No. 1442, 720 CE). How he accessed the cave and initiated this subsequent project remains a question. Examining the surface of West Hill, primarily composed of sedimentary rocks, we find distinct parallel lines and patterns visible on the cliff, along with remnants outside other caves, suggesting the presence of a natural pathway across the hill. Nevertheless, signs indicate that this pathway might have suffered partial collapses in the past (Fig. 5-18).



Fig. 5-17 Locations of Cave 1058 and 1063, Cave 1049 and 1059, and Cave 964 (Lan LI, 2023)



Fig. 5-18 Traces of Pathway Outside Caves at the Southern End of the West Hill (Lan LI, 2016)

In addition, Cave 1955 presents an alternative approach to accessing caves positioned at higher elevations. Its inscription suggests that the cave was intentionally created for visitation by future generations, allowing them to conduct memorial ceremonies for their ancestors. The inscription reads, “(We) hope for future generations and their families to ascend this... The lofty

niche...descendants in later years climb this secluded pavilion, (and perform) memorial music in the ancestral hall...冀後代子孫，他年眷屬登此.....高龕.....之後裔登此幽閣，□祠音□...”

A plank path has been constructed from the foot of the hill leading to the cave, presumably marking the former route. This suggests that the patrons deliberately facilitated access to the cave as part of their project and sustained it as a pathway connecting to their family undertaking.

To sum up, a family cave patronized by Tang donors might have been situated at an elevated position above the road and river, likely to avoid flooding and minimize disturbances caused by future visitors. Additionally, the whole project of a family cave also involves establishing an entrance that enables descendants to access the cave, allowing them to maintain, renovate, and perform relevant rituals on the site.

5.5.2 Layout and Theme

Most family caves introduced in this chapter are medium-sized caves at Longmen, between 1 and 3 metres in height or width. For example, Cave 964 is a medium-sized cave, including an anterior space and a main chamber, which could be regarded as a particular characteristic of the cave layout⁷¹ at Longmen during or after the Wuzhou reign period (i.e., after 705 CE), similar to the Huideng Cave (Cave 1336). The main chamber has a square plan, with a height of 140 cm, a width of 138 cm and a depth of 98 cm, in which three Buddha images were set up against the three walls. However, unlike most Buddha images of a similar size at Longmen that were designed in combination with attendant figures, including paired disciples, bodhisattvas, heavenly kings and even donors and lions, no evidence shows that there once were any attached

⁷¹ For the evolution of the cave layout at Longmen during the Tang dynasty, please refer to the chronological study of Li Chongfeng 2014, 446–448.

figures, nor any decorative patterns carved in the cave.

Two caves sponsored by children of Li Yichen 李義琛, Cave 1058 and 1063, are located in close proximity, only 2 metres apart. They shared identical sizes and were designed with a layout similar to Cave 964, including an anterior space and a main chamber. The main chamber of Cave 1058 measures 185 cm in height, 193 cm in width, and 101 cm in depth, with an altar set up encircling three walls. Similarly, the main chamber of Cave 1063 has a height of 180 cm, a width of 174 cm and a depth of 140 cm, and also features a similar altar to that in Cave 1058 (Fig. 5-19–21).



Fig. 5-19 Cave 1058: Northern Wall (Xinglong LI, 2016)



Fig. 5-20 Cave 1063: Southern Wall (Xinglong LI, 2016)



Fig. 5-21 Cave 1063: Rear Wall (Xinglong LI, 2016)

Even though the inscriptions of Cave 1058 do not explicitly state its themes, it is evident that both projects shared the same theme, which is discernible from the inscription of Cave 1063 and

their adoption of a combination of nine images with a high degree of resemblance in artistic styles and patterns. The images likely represent the Amitābha Buddha and his attendants, including two disciples, two bodhisattvas, two heavenly kings and two Vajrapāṇi guardians (Cave 1058 additionally contains a pair of lions).

Next to Cave 1058, the wife of Duke of Weijian 魏簡公 Lu Chengye, Lady Li, made an image of the Maitreya in Cave 1049 (683 CE), and after fifteen years, her daughter patronized another cave for her late mother on the other side of Cave 1058. Similar to the family caves of Li Yichen, both projects of the Duke of Weijian's family were designed in identical sizes (171 cm and 166 cm in height) and with the same theme of Maitreya, which displayed consistency in Buddhist practice within the same family.

Although the data reveals a prevalence of images of the Amitābha Buddha and Avalokiteśvara in the Tang dynasty, family caves at Longmen still manifest a wide acceptance of diverse Buddhist ideas, and there were no established rules dictating the themes for family projects. Located in a Buddhist sacred site, a family cave can offer Buddhists, especially the laity, more freedom and flexibility to practice Buddhism and pursue their religious goals on the site.

5.5.3 Location of Inscriptions:

In the project of Wei Liqi and his brother (Cave 670), they engraved the inscriptions on a stele-shaped relief on the southern wall inside the cave while carving the title of their project outside the cave. By doing so, travellers who come and go under this cave would be able to know about their project of filial piety without carefully reading the content (Fig. 5-22).



Fig. 5-22 The Stele-shaped Relief and Inscription in Cave 670 (Lan LI, 2023)

Meanwhile, Wei Muqian engraved a shallow relief of a stele on the north cliff outside the cave complex, about 100 cm in height and 50 cm in width, on which he carved the dedicatory inscription. Undoubtedly, Wei regarded this stele-shaped relief the same as an independent stele erected on the ground and composed his inscription by following the same writing format. He put the prominent title of “The Inscription of the Family Images (Niche) of Wei Muqian’s Family 魏牧謙家像銘” on the top, in enlarged font and a different calligraphic style (*Lishu* 隸書) while the main content was written in the *Kaishu* 楷書 style. This writing format also corresponds with those steles erected in the monasteries and temples, with which the key content of the project could be immediately grasped by the audiences (Fig. 5-23).

Donors of Cave 1049, 1058 and 1059 all chose to place their inscriptions outside the cave, ensuring they were easily readable for passersby who walked on the road below without climbing on the cliff. It is crucial to highlight that the Tang donors focused on not only the image

themes and contents within the inscriptions but also the format of dedicatory inscriptions.



Fig. 5-23 Cave 1058: Façade (Xinglong LI, 2016)

To conclude, by meticulously arranging the location of a family cave, designing its layout and theme, and deciding on the inscription format, donors at Longmen transformed their family projects into a means of conveying their religious thoughts and social identity to the public.

Chapter 6 Ritualization of the Buddhist Sacred Site at Longmen

6.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I want to explore the concept of “ritualization” proposed by Catherine Bell as an approach to examining the primary sources:¹

Ritualization is a way of acting that is designed and orchestrated to distinguish and privilege what is being done in comparison to other, usually more quotidian, activities. As such, ritualization is a matter of various culturally specific strategies for setting some activities off from others, for creating and privileging a qualitative distinction between the ‘sacred’ and the ‘profane,’ and for ascribing such distinctions to realities thought to transcend the powers of human actors.

In summary, Bell’s definition of “ritualization” encompasses three core ideas: 1) a distinction between the “sacred” and the “profane”; 2) to apply culturally specific strategies; and 3) to transcend the powers of human agency. By associating these three core ideas with relevant epigraphical, historical and archaeological sources, I aim here to interpret the stages of the ritualization by Tang donors to transform Longmen into a sacred site and how they conduct their religious practices there.

Firstly, as Bell explains “Ritualization appreciates how sacred and profane activities are differentiated in the performing of them, and thus how ritualization gives rise to (or creates) the sacred as such by virtue of its sheer differentiation from the profane.”² Elements reflected in the inscriptions reveal the donors’ tactics for distinguishing the site where they established Buddhist projects as a “sacred space” from the mundane world (the city) where they resided, while also

¹ Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 74.

² Bell 1992, 91.

underlining their involvement in “sacred” activities that are different from daily routines.

Next, I will attempt to analyze multiple culturally specific strategies adopted by Tang donors in creating a new Buddhist sacred site within “the Central Region.” Throughout this analysis, I intend to employ the concept of the “borderland complex,” initially proposed by Forte³ and developed by Chen Jinhua, as well as to integrate these insights into the discussion on the “Indo-Sinitic bipolar world model” proposed by Felt.^{4 5}

Finally, by incorporating these culturally specific strategies at various phases of construction, the donors held the belief that they could progressively transcend themselves into the Buddhist realm, where they would uncover their own agencies and establish an interactive connection to the Buddha (or Bodhisattva) to whom their projects were dedicated.

Donative inscriptions, serving as the primary sources in my research, align with the gradual tendency of Tang China to emerge as a new Buddhist centre impelled by its emerging role on the global stage. I want to point out that these epigraphical materials play a pivotal role, not only as a validation of the new tendency of relocating Buddhist sacred sites in the Sinitic world but also as a reflection of the development of Buddhist concepts among ordinary practitioners, especially those who needed to cope with conflicts arising from the fusion of Buddhist teaching and traditional Chinese values, and how they navigated towards satisfying resolutions to achieve their religious goals.

6.2 Sacred and Mundane Realms

³ Antonino Forte, “Hui-chih (fl. 676–703 A.D.), A Brahmin Born in China,” in *Estratto da Annali dell’Istituto Universitario Orientale* 45 (1985): 105–134.

⁴ Chen Jinhua, “Borderland Complex and the Construction of Sacred Sites and Lineages in East Asian Buddhism.” In Victor Mair ed. *Buddhist Transformations and Interactions: Essays in Honor of Antonino Forte* (Amherst, New York: Cambria Press Inc, 2017), 65—106.

⁵ Jonathan Felt, *Structures of the Earth: Metageographies of Early Medieval China* (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 211.

All visitors, on their first visit to Longmen, are sure to be left with a lasting impression of the majestic landscape created by two mountains flanking the Yi River, framing a natural river valley where the cliffs were honeycombed with thousands of caves and niches of various sizes. In addition to the dedicatory inscriptions written by donors that elucidated the unique geographical features, contemporary literature also preserved the distinctive beauty of Longmen while further extending its ties with the capital city of Luoyang (Fig. 6-1).

Let us start with a poem about visiting Longmen and describing the scenes that could be seen at the site. This poem was authored by a renowned poet of the High Tang, Wei Yingwu 韋應物(737?–791 CE),⁶ most likely during his service as the Aide of Luoyang 洛陽丞 (763–769 CE),⁷ “Sightseeing at Luoyang 龍門遊眺”:⁸

Great Yu carved mountains to channel the Yi, cleaving them as though the heavens were rended. 鑿山導伊流，中斷若天辟。

Before the distant capital gate, splendid scenes arise at dawn and dusk. 都門遙相望，佳氣生朝夕。

My heart has long yearned to leave the dusty world; how fortunate to find companions eager to join. 素懷出塵意，适有攜手客。

Temples nestled amidst cascading peaks, a thousand niches carved into the soaring cliffs. 精

⁶ See Wei Yingwu’s biography in his epitaph, “Datang Jingzhao Wei fujun zhi mu/ Tang gu shangshu zuosi langzhong Suzhou cishi Jingzhao Wei fujun muzhiming bing xu 大唐京兆韋府君之墓/唐故尚書左司郎中蘇州刺史京兆韋府君墓志銘並序,” in Zhao Wencheng 趙文成, Zhao Junping 趙君平, *Xinchu Tang muzhi baizhong* 新出唐墓志百種 (Hangzhou: Xiling yinshe chubanshe 西泠印社出版社, 2010), 256. Also, see Fu Xuancong 傅璇琮, *Tangdai shiren congkao* 唐代詩人從考 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局, 1980), 276–279.

⁷ See Fu, 1980, 282–286. After Wei Yingwu left Luoyang for Chang’an in 769 CE, he never returned to Luoyang, according to his chronology, and passed away in Su Prefecture 蘇州 in 791. Therefore, it is probably he visited Longmen and wrote this poem during his appointment as a local official.

⁸ *Quntang shi* 全唐詩, 192/1973.

舍繞層阿，千龕鄰峭壁。

Ascending through clouds, the path seems endless; resting by the stream, monastery bells
fall silent. 緣雲路猶緬，憩澗鐘已寂。

Flowers and trees shimmer with ethereal light, cascade scattering across the rock's arteries.
花樹發煙華，淙流散石脈。

A long whistle summons distant winds, by the deep pool we cleanse ourselves of worldly
riches. 長嘯招遠風，臨潭漱金碧。⁹

At sunset, we gaze back on the city; how the mortal world toils! 日落望都城，人間何役
役。

In his poem, Wei Yingwu views the Longmen area and the city of Luoyang as two separate worlds in which the former, containing majestic natural landscapes scattered with divine Buddhist images, caves and monasteries, embodies the sacred realm; while the latter, filled with busy people and everyday business, symbolized the secular world. Many Tang patrons like Wei Yingwu, who resided in urban areas and engaged in varied social activities, shared a similar perspective toward the Longmen Buddhist site. They regarded it as a “sacred” domain, encompassing not just splendid natural scenery but also a deep Buddhist ambiance. Importantly, they delineated a boundary between these two realms and built up a connection that enabled them to transition from ordinary life into the sacred realm.

⁹ The same phrase of “zhao yuanfeng 招遠風 (to summon the distant wind)” was seen in a poem of the earlier period, in “田南樹園激流植援” by the famous landscape poet Xie Lingyun 謝靈運 (385–433 CE), in which he stated, “中園屏氣雜，清曠招遠風” to describe the serene and spacious environment.

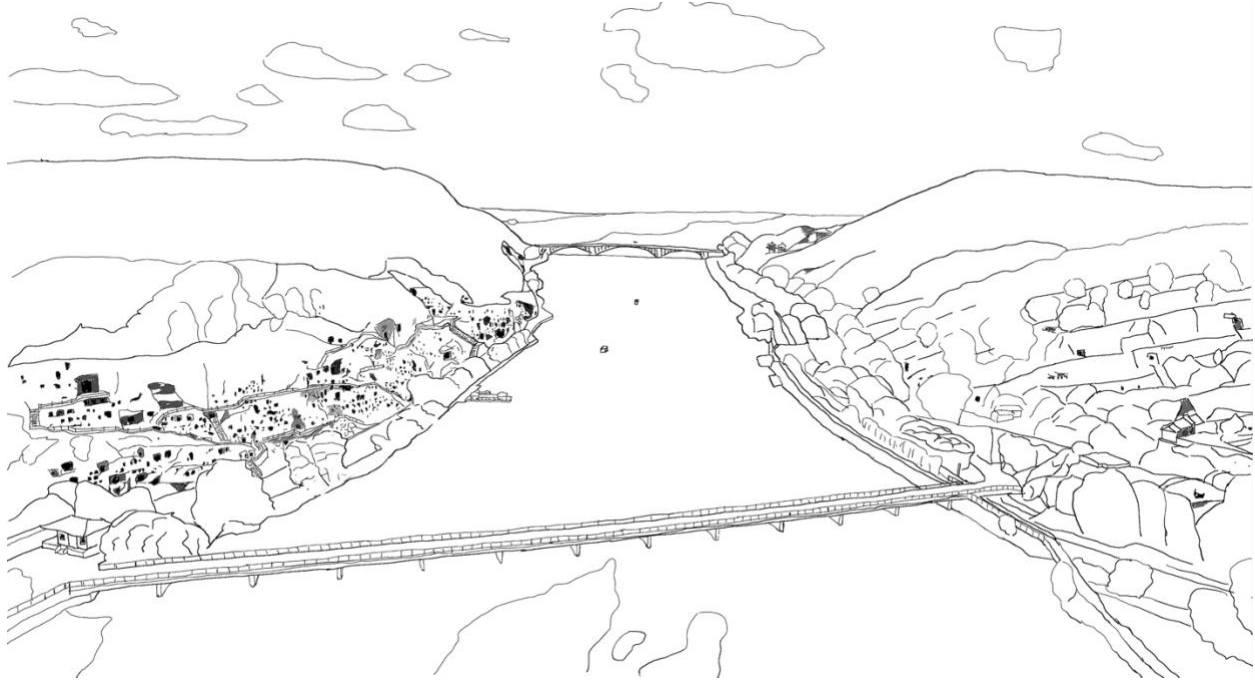


Fig. 6-1 Imaginary Scenes of Longmen Based on the Aerial View Photo, from South to North
(Lan LI, 2024)

6.2.1 Natural Landscapes

a. The Yi River

Before delving into a detailed recounting of the secluded Buddhist ambiance at Longmen and the cherished memories of his journey with old friends,¹⁰ Wei started with an introductory glimpse of the surrounding environment, including the natural landscape and the relative spatial distance between the site and Luoyang city. He first recounted a myth about the creation of the natural scenery formed by two mountains flanking the Yi River: According to the myth, the Great Yu 大

¹⁰ Wei Yingwu wrote another poem to express his feeling of missing friends who accompanied him to Longmen on a previous trip when he visited the same site in a later period, “再遊龍門懷舊侶”: “兩山鬱相對，晨策方上干。靄靄眺都城，悠悠俯清瀾。邈矣二三子，茲焉屢遊盤。良時忽已周，獨往念前歡。好鳥始云至，衆芳亦未闌。遇物豈殊昔，慨傷自有端。” The peers he used to travel together with were 竇黃州，洛陽韓丞，灑池李丞 and 密鄭二尉. *Quntang shi* 全唐詩, 192/1974.

禹, in his efforts to control a flood, separated the mountain into two parts on either side of the river, resembling two watchtowers, which is believed to be the source for the name of *Yique* 伊闕 (Watchtowers of Yi River).¹¹

b. Mountains

Apart from highlighting the Yi River, Wei also gave a depiction of the mountain scenery to align with the first sentence, as corresponding to traditional aesthetics of natural landscape, including both the mountain and the river (i.e., *shanshui* 山水). In the fourth and fifth sentences, the poem reveals lofty cliffs and towering peaks of the mountains they climbed, on which the path extended beyond clouds. Meanwhile, he gave another detailed vignette to the scenes on the mountains, which were adorned with dense trees and flowers 花樹 and clear streams 淙流.

Just like the narrative of the grand topography in contemporary literary compositions, a number of inscriptions also incorporate descriptions of natural landscapes at Longmen, simultaneously resonating with these prevalent rhetorics in the Tang. The descriptions of caves in No. 0074 paralleled the serene natural environment and made the human projects perfectly fuse into the landscape, “The arched roof soars, nearly reaching the sky, while the mountain peak, rugged and high, cuts off the view. A tranquil forest beckons hermits to dwell, and the hidden cave holds treasures within. From verdant valleys, clouds rise and form a canopy above the stone chamber. Colorful mist unfurls from crimson peaks, like banners waving near the pinewood gate. 穹隆極天，崢嶸無景，幽林招隱，洞穴藏金。雲生翠谷，橫石室而成蓋，

¹¹ About the original text of the myth of the Great Yu and the formation of the *Yique* 伊闕, please refer to the chapter “*Yi shui*/ *Yi River* 伊水” in *Shuijing zhu* 水經注 2013, vol. 15, 361.

霞舒丹嶺，臨松門而建標。”

Additionally, there are inscriptions underlining the rugged terrain to underscore the challenges for the donors to excavate their projects on these cliffs. In No. 1129 (Cave 689), it is mentioned, “Scaling the perilous peak, one encounters a densely tangled forest. Descending to the vast valley below, uneven slopes come into view. 上岑崑而鬱嶺，下嶠崿以【陂】陀 ... The sheer cliff face seems to stretch for thousands of *xun* (1 *xun* \approx 2.4 meters), its four sides as though meticulously pared. 千尋若盡，四面如削。”

The two Longmen hills are composed of limestone, with the West Hill reaching an elevation of 263.9 metres and the East Hill at 303.5 metres.¹² Despite their relatively modest height, visitors were consistently impressed by the nearly vertical and lofty cliffs formed of layers of sedimentary rocks (Fig. 6-2). For instance, No. 0077 depicts a vivid panorama of the river and mountains in stark contrast, while exaggerating the towering cliff that appears to soar to a height of thousands of metres, “Land rises like towering gates on either side, cliffs mirrored [in the Yi River] reaching a thousand *xun*. Clear waters flow before the bank, while the scene leans against a pair of imposing peaks. 地聳雙闕，壁映千尋，前岸清流，卻倚重岫。”

¹² See Wang Dong, *Longmen's Stone Buddhas and Cultural Heritage: When Antiquity Met Modernity in China* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2020), 3–4.



Fig. 6-2 Vertical and Lofty Cliffs of the West Hill (Lan LI, 2023)

6.2.2 Buddhist Architectural Complex

One common element found in most literary works about Longmen is the depiction of the Buddhist architectural complex (i.e., caves and niches) built on the mountains or in nearby areas (i.e., wooden-structured monasteries). In Wei Yingyu's poem, he also portrayed Longmen as adorned with monasteries (*jingshe*, 精舍) and thousands of niches (*qiankan*, 千龕). Additionally, his mention of hearing bells suggests that these monasteries were likely situated not far away from the mountains, probably somewhere near the base of the hills.

Another Tang poem unfolds a more specific picture of the integration of Buddhist architecture and natural landscapes at Longmen. The poet aimed to present a harmonious sacred ambiance that is set apart from the secular world, within which he also embedded his own Buddhist

ideas.

“Inscribed in the monastery at Longmen 題龍門僧房” was written by Liu Cang 劉滄 (d.u.), who was appointed as the District Magistrate of Longmen during the Dazhong reign period (847-860 CE).

The quiet chamber gazes afar, upon the Yi River's eastern shore; who can fathom the solitude within its core? 靜室遙臨伊水東，寂寥誰與此身同。

From Yu Gate's peaks, a bleak *qing* sighs; through Xiao Temple's groves, bamboo whispers rise. 禹門山色度寒磬，蕭寺竹聲來晚風。

Monks reside in stone niches as snow remains; geese return to the sand bank as sunset paints the vast sky (*kong*).¹³ 僧宿石龕殘雪在，雁歸沙渚夕陽空。

At times, I seek wisdom from a recluse (i.e., Buddhist master); with a seated gesture, he unveils that we were all in a dream among fleeting existences. 偶將心地問高士，坐指浮生一夢中。

Liu Cang selected specific natural elements as Wei Yingwu, but in a different style. To reinforce his theme of “solitude 寂寥,” he incorporated natural scenes, such as the grottoes covered by snow and the evening sun accompanied by flying geese (Fig. 6-3). These scenes were seamlessly interwoven with obviously Buddhist settings, including the monasteries (i.e., quiet chamber 靜室 and the Xiao Temple 蕭寺) erected along the riverbank or perched on the hillside, the ascetic monks seated inside the stone niche, as well as the moment when the poet sought guidance from a Buddhist monk (i.e., a sage 高士).

¹³ About the definition of *kong* 空 in this poem, I am inclined to understand that the poet included two layers of meanings due to the context, which are the description of the scene of the sun hanging in the sky; on the other hand, it refers to the emptiness in Buddhist teaching.



Fig. 6-3 Longmen Grottoes Covered with Snow (Lan LI, 2016)

Additionally, the prestigious Tang poet Bai Juyi 白居易 (772–846 CE) also developed a deep connection with the monasteries and monastics at Longmen during his last two decades in Luoyang (829–846 CE).¹⁴ He renovated the Xiangshan Monastery in the East Hill and organized Buddhist societies with monks from the monasteries in Luoyang and Longmen. In his “Record of the Renovation of the Xiangshansi Monastery 修香山寺記,”¹⁵ he indicated the existence of more than ten monasteries in the Longmen area during his era.¹⁶ He also underscored the great

¹⁴ *Jiu Tangshu*, 166/4355–56.

¹⁵ *Quan tangwen* 全唐文, 676/6906–6907.

¹⁶ He was also buried in the southern end of the East Hill at Longmen. See Verardi, Giovanni, Liu Jinglong eds. (1998) *Report on*

reputation of both natural and cultural landscapes that Longmen held among all the scenic attractions in Luoyang, “Among all the landscape scenic spots in the four surrounding areas of Luoyang, Longmen holds the top rank. Within the ten monasteries of Longmen, the Xiangshansi Monastery is recognized as the predominant sightseeing spot. 洛陽四野，山水之勝，龍門首焉。龍門十寺，遊觀之勝，香山首焉。” His other poem provided more evidence about the monasteries scattered in the Longmen area. In “On the top of the Puti Monastery, I looked at the Xiangshan Monastery from afar in the evening and gave this poem as a present to the Supernumerary Gentleman Shu. 菩提寺上方晚望香山寺寄舒員外,” he narrated that he climbed to the western monastery (the Puti Monastery) in the evening and overlooked the eastern temple (the Xiangshan Monastery) under fine weather. 晚登西寶刹，晴望東精舍. It is easy to infer that the Puti Monastery should be situated on the south end of the West Hill, on the opposite side of the Xiangshan Monastery, with the site has been accurately identified by modern scholars.¹⁷

Seeing monks climb up to the specific building of the Xiangshansi Monastery, the Stone Pavilion 石樓, a landmark that was closely associated with him, Bai Juyi noted the contrary ambiances in the two Tang capitals: “The West Capital (i.e., Chang’an) is hustling in the markets, whereas the East Luo (i.e., Luoyang) is at leisure in (Buddhist) societies 西京鬧於市，東洛閑如社.”¹⁸ Finally, the poet recalled his past journeys together and reflected on his feeling

the 1997 Excavations at Weiwan, Longmen (China). *Annali dell’Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli* 58, 409-62. Napoli. Testa, Aurora (1998) Appendix. “The Fengxiansi and Other Buddhist Monasteries of Longmen,” in Verardi, Liu Jinglong (1998), 452–59.

¹⁷ According to Wen Yucheng’s investigation, the location of Puti Monastery 菩提寺 in the Ming Dynasty (Huangjue Monastery 皇覺寺 in the Qing Dynasty) is located in the present Guozhai Village, 3 kilometres to the southeast of the Longmen Grottoes, where the natural landscape matches the description in Bai Juyi’s poem. See Wen 1992, 228. However, its connection to the Puti Monastery under the Tang and Song remains indeterminate.

¹⁸ The stone pavilion, 石閣 or 石樓, located on the southern hillside of the East Hill at Longmen, is an impressive stone building sponsored by Bai Juyi, as part of his project to renovate the Xiangshan Monastery in “Xiu Xiangshansi ji 修香山寺記,” “……自寺前亭一所，登寺橋一所，連橋廊七間，次至石樓一所，連廊六間，次東佛龕大屋十一間，次南賓院堂一所……” *Quan Tang Wen* 全唐文, 676/6906–6907.

of being “futile” with “recalling the night with the brilliant moon we encountered at Mount Xiangshan 曾憶舊遊無，香山明月夜。”

6.2.3 A Connection to the City

The second and last sentences of Wei Yingwu’s poem indicate the spatial distance from Longmen to Luoyang city, from where one can overlook “the gate of the capital.”¹⁹ The construction of the Sui-Tang city of Luoyang was initiated in the first year of the Daye 大業 reign period of the Sui dynasty (605 CE).²⁰ The Tang court later inherited the complete layout of the city from its predecessor. The main entrance to the Luoyang from the south is the gate known as Jianguo Gate 建國門 (The Gate of Founding the State) in the Sui. It was changed to the Dingding Gate 定鼎門 (The Gate of Establishing the *ding*/Foundation) in the Tang.²¹ According to the survey map of the Tang city of Luoyang and the evidence from other inscriptions at Longmen, the capital gate cited by Wei Yingwu is highly like the main southern gate of the city, the Dingding Gate.

¹⁹ The site of the Dingding Gate has been excavated by the Luoyang Archaeological team, who published the survey maps and unearthed cultural relics in 2004, see The Institute of Archaeology, CASS, Tangcheng dui 中國社會科學院考古研究所洛陽唐城隊, et al., “Dingdingmen yizhi fajue baogao 定鼎門遺址發掘報告,” *Kaogu xuebao* 考古學報, no.1 (2004): 87–130.

²⁰ The original text is, “大業元年，敕有司於洛陽故王城東營建東京，以越國公楊素為營東京大監，安德公宇文愷為副……” See *Daye zaji jijiao in Liangjing xinji jijiao* 兩京新記輯校/*Daye zaji jijiao* 大業雜記輯校 2006, 1–2.

²¹ 3-footed or 4-footed bronze ritual vessel, cauldron.

Archaeologists identified and excavated the gate site in 2004, so the distance (5km) may be easily measured (Map 6-1). Wei clarified that they ascended to an elevation that was above the clouds, probably an observatory spot at the top of the hillside, so it was not difficult for them to see the residential wards and city walls in the southern part of Luoyang from such a distance, especially in clear weather (former Fig. 6-4).

In addition, a number of inscriptions at Longmen include the “Dingding gate 定鼎門” as one representative landmark of Luoyang city and enhance the outstanding location of their project. For example, No. 1399 describes the location of Longmen as a place located on the periphery of the place where King Cheng of Zhou 周成王 (r. 1042/35–1006 BCE), the second ruler of the Zhou dynasty, established the ritual vessels (*ding*) 爾其周成定鼎之郊.”²²

Meanwhile, several inscriptions include the Dingding Gate as a crucial reference point to recognize the locations of their project. No. 1112 highlights its location as “to the east, it faces the ten billion bridges and fords of the Yi River, and to the north, it follows a major chiliocosm of expedient paths through the Dingding Gate 東臨伊水百億津梁，北走鼎門大千方便.” Also, the inscription of the nun Lingjue’s Cave (Inscription No. 1336) indicates the location of her burial site by using the Dingding Gate as a relative guide spot: “Second, to the north of the Que fortress (i.e., Longmen), and in the south of (Dingding) Gate (i.e., the South Gate of Luoyang City)...under the deep pool of ...其二【闕】塞之北，【鼎】門之南，□□□潭下□□□石.”

Apart from emphasizing the prominent positions of their project through emphasizing their

²² The sacred tripods (*ding*) were a collection of nine bronze cauldrons that symbolized the authority and legitimacy of the Chinese rulers. They were first cast by Yu the Great or his son Qi of Xia and passed down from dynasty to dynasty. King Cheng moved the sacred tripods to his new capital of Luoyi (later Luoyang). He also performed a ritual installation of the tripods in the ancestral hall, which was a sign of his respect for the previous kings and his claim to the mandate of heaven. See *Chunqiu Zuoquan* 春秋左傳 1990, vol. 2, “Third Year of the Duke Xuan 宣公三年,” 671.

connection with the Dingding Gate and the capital Luoyang, inscription No. 2730 confirms that an essential element in the selection of a site is graceful scenery, from where one could “look to the bamboo isle in the south, which is encircled by green water; to overlook the Ding Gate in the north, where white clouds linger from morning to night 笙州南望，綠水縈迴，鼎門北臨，白雲朝夕.” The description of the landscape in Lady Lu’s inscription corresponds with Wei’s portrayal of the distance between the city and the Buddhist site, which is facing the capital gate in the distance and creating “magnificent scenes 佳氣.”

Despite regarding the Dingding Gate as the most representative structure of Luoyang city, most donors at Longmen, who spent their daily life in the city and joined in varied social activities, were familiar with the layout and could easily recollect streets and famous buildings within the city, building a connection between the sacred site and secular realm.

Inscription No. 0465 (Cave 403 敬善寺) depicts the location of Longmen as a crossroad that “controls the road along the Luan River (i.e., Yi River) to the south,²³ and extends it to connect the streets inside the city gate (i.e., the Jianchun Gate 建春門, the central-eastern gate of the Tang Luoyang) to the north.²⁴ The ten thousand (Buddhist) halls glow in the sunlight, and (the Buddhists) are suspended by giving donations to the four necessities (to the monasteries.) 南控鸞川，北馳春路；萬室回曬，四依輟步.” The ten thousand halls/chambers depicted in the inscription might refer to the myriad caves and niches at Longmen, accompanied by the busy scenery of numerous patrons giving offerings to the surrounding monasteries.

²³ Luanchuan/ Luan River 鸞川 is the same as 樂川, which is an alternative name for the Yi River. See *Shuijing zhu* 水經注, vol. 15, “Yi River 伊水”: “世人謂伊水為鸞水，茲水為交水，故名斯川為鸞川也,” p.357.

²⁴ See the introduction of the gates of Luoyang in *Tang Liangjing chengfang kao* 唐兩京城坊考 1985, vol.5, “東京城……南面三門，正南曰定鼎門，東曰長夏門，西曰厚載門。東面三門，北曰上東門，中曰建春門（本書註：隋曰建陽，唐初改。薛懷義於建春門內敬愛寺別造殿宇，改名佛授記寺。），145–147.

In a way akin to the donors at Longmen, Wei Yingwu, in the concluding line of his poem, looked back to the city and exclaimed about the busy scenes of daily life there to reiterate his theme of two distinct realms, the “sacred” and the “mundane.” Wei also expressed his desire to escape from worldly chaos and indicated his transcendental experience at Longmen, including following the cloud and hearing the monastery bell, inviting the distant winds and rinsing the luxurious colours (painting pigments), which allowed him to be temporarily liberated from his daily routine with friends.

Similarly, Bai Juyi’s writings concerning the Buddhist atmosphere and his visits to Longmen consistently showed his perception of Longmen as a tranquil and sacred site set apart from the bustling capital city. In Liu Cang’s poem, he developed a further comprehension of Buddhism as a consequence of feeling the sacred ambiance at Longmen. Ultimately, Liu unveiled the idea that worldly life is only a dream among those “fleeting existences (*fusheng*, 浮生),” possibly taught by a Buddhist master who engaged in meditations in the caves at Longmen. All these depictions elevated Longmen as a space capable of transcending profane experience into a divine sphere.

6.3 Creating A Buddhist Sacred Site in “the Central Region”

Tang people not only initiated the “two realms” system to separate Longmen from the everyday world, elevating it as a sacred site, but they also formulated a distinct two-world concept. This concept aimed to cast Longmen as a novel Buddhist centre by drawing parallels between its characteristics as the “centre” and those of distant Buddhist sacred sites in India.

6.3.1 Between “Central Prefecture 中州” and “Borderland 邊地”

During the Northern and Southern dynasties, Chinese Buddhists, particularly monastics, had already widely acknowledged the cultural dichotomy between India as the “Central Kingdom (*Zhongguo*, 中國)” and the Sinitic world they resided in as “Borderland (*biandi*, 邊地).” They perceived India, especially Central India 中天竺 (Skt. *Madhyadeśa*), as the cosmic centre, contrasting it with their birthplace, the Sinitic realm, which was defined as the marginal region. In Faxian’s 法顯 (ca. 338–423 CE) biography, he and his peer, Daozheng 道整 (d.u.), “felt grieved over being born in a peripheral land 自傷生在邊地.”²⁵ Until the early Tang, this similar theory still dominated and had been reinforced in Buddhist literature. For example, the biography of the renowned Buddhist master Xuanzang 玄奘 (602–664 CE) recounts that he collapsed in agony upon arriving at Bodhgaya. He then expressed his sorrow not only on his birth in the peripheral land (Ch. *bianbi*, 邊鄙) but also on living at the age of the decline of the Dharma (*moshi*, 末世), so he was unable to attend the Buddha’s teaching and witness his true

²⁵ See the biography of Faxian in 『高僧法顯傳』：「法顯道整初到祇洹精舍。念昔世尊住此二十五年。自傷生在邊地。共諸同志遊歷諸國。」 See T51no2085_p860c1-3.

appearance.^{26 27} Another eminent monk, Daoxuan 道宣, systematized the theory of Buddhist geography and then gave a specific interpretation of the “Central Kingdom.”²⁸ In the *Shijia fangzhi* 釋迦方志 (Records on the Spread of Buddhism in the Regions), he said,

“The kingdom of Kapilavastu city, where the Buddha was born, should be considered the centre of the world, situated within the four concentric ranges of iron mountains (Skt. *Cakravāla*). As the scriptures state, “This represents the centre of three thousand suns and moons and twelve thousand realms of heaven and earth.” The Buddha’s power would not manifest in peripheral regions, for the earth would tilt towards him. Beneath the Bodhi Tree in Central India, where the Tathāgata attained enlightenment, lies the diamond throne upon which the Buddha was seated. According to this opinion, one can identify this place as the center of the entire world. 以佛所生國迦毘羅城應是其中。謂居四重鐵圍之內。故經云。三千日月萬二千天地之中央也。佛之威神不生邊地。地為傾斜故。中天竺國如來成道樹下。有金剛座用承佛焉。據此為論，約餘天下以定其中。”²⁹

Daoxuan first explained the relationship between Central India and Tang China by highlighting the priority position of the former in the transmission of Buddhist doctrines because the people in India (*Da Xia*, 大夏) could “personally present their respects to the Buddha’s voice and body 親奉音形.” He then pointed out that the logic of the transmission is from the centre to the

²⁶ The original text is seen in Xuanzang’s biography in the *Xu gaoseng zhuan*, “奘初到此，不覺悶絕。良久蘇醒。歷觀靈相。昔聞經說。今宛目前。恨居邊鄙。生在末世。不見真容。倍復悶絕。 See T50no2060_p451a7-9.

²⁷ For the reactions of Faxian and Xuanzang when they arrived in India, see Barrett, T. H., “Exploratory Observations on Some Weeping Pilgrims.” In *The Buddhist Forum*, edited by Tadeusz Skorupski (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1990) 1:99–110.

²⁸ Also see the discussion in Janine Nicol’s dissertation, “Daoxuan (c. 596-667) and the Creation of a Buddhist Sacred Geography of China: An Examination of the *Shijia Fangzhi* 釋迦方志.” (PhD dissertation, London: SOAS, 2016), 144–185.

²⁹ See T51no2088_p949a5–10.

peripheral area, so the “Eastern Hua 東華 (i.e., China)” would open the traces of Buddha’s teaching in a later period 晚開教迹, which is the natural principle 理數然矣.³⁰ Moreover, he criticized the residents in the realm of China for “reversely identifying the Luoyang as the Central Kingdom 別指雒陽以為中國,” which was obstructed by the Confucian ideology 滯於孔教 without including penetrating views.³¹

Additionally, Kuiji 窺基 (632–682 CE), a disciple of Xuanzang and also a renowned scholarly monk, in his *Yujiashidilun lüezuan* 瑜伽師地論略纂 (Commentary on the *Yogacārabhūmi-śāstra*), clarified that the Central Kingdom pertains to the Five Regions of India. He asserted that Buddhists residing in the Central Kingdom held a superior status due to their adherence to correct actions 正行 and proper etiquette 威儀, which followed the right principle 順正理故.³² It is noteworthy that Kuiji underscored the noble qualities of people in India by contrasting them with the inappropriate behaviours of those born in peripheral lands, reinforcing the viewpoint that being born in the Central Kingdom is preferable to peripheral regions 處中國不生邊地. Kuiji’s interpretation conveys a clear sense of inferiority for Chinese Buddhists, as they were not born in India and thus missed the chance to receive the Buddha’s teaching in person. In a word, a clear sense of inferiority of being born in the peripheral region, which is outside of the centre of Buddha’s realm, was conveyed in mainstream Buddhist literature until the early Tang. Previous scholarship has already defined this feeling of inferiority (and anxiety)

³⁰ T51no2088_p949a21–23.

³¹ The original text is, “此土諸儒滯於孔教。以此為中餘為邊攝。別指雒陽以為中國。乃約軒轅五岳以言。未是通方之巨觀也。” See T51no2088_950b22–24.

³² The original texts is, “又處中國不生邊地者，依俗間釋，唯五印度名為中國。中國之人，具正行故。餘皆邊地，設少具行，多不具故。佛法所傳，唯中印度。名為中國，威儀禮則，順正理故。苾芻等具正行故，具正至故。餘雖少具，多乖儀則，行不純故，皆名邊地。” See T43no1829_p106a4–9.

as the “Borderland Complex.”³³

Nevertheless, in accordance with the growing knowledge of global geography and maps along with more Buddhist monks travelling to and bringing new translations back to China, how did Tang Buddhists shape their perspective on the status of traditional Chinese culture in the world and understand this “Central kingdom” and “Borderland” dichotomy? Did they still retain the sense of inferiority in front of people from India as they were born in a borderland? Or, instead, did they work out another technique to modify (or reverse) the conventional view of “China as a peripheral region” and then create an innovative interpretation of the Sinitic realm as equal to India in multiple aspects?

To respond to the feeling of inferiority, Chinese Buddhists employed multiple strategies, as examples raised by Chen, among which one method is reconstructing new Buddhist sacred sites locally by imitating their prototypes in India.³⁴ Tang Buddhists, particularly lay Buddhists who received Confucian teaching as their educational background (as Daoxuan pointed out), attempted to work out schemes to transform feelings of inadequacy into a sense of equality. This strategy is also reflected in the donative inscriptions of their projects at Longmen.

6.3.2 Making a Sacred Site in the Sinitic Realm

One specific solution Tang donors adopted was to highlight the extraordinary features of their selected site, which were not only in accordance with their Indian counterparts but were also accepted by locals as they met the criteria of a traditional Chinese sacred site. In inscription No. 0074, the composer Cen Wenben described Prince Wei’s diligent search for an ideal location for

³³ See Forte 1985, 105–134; Chen 2017, 75 and 96, Note 6.

³⁴ Chen 2017, 76–83. Also, please refer to Sen’s analysis of how China turned into a new Buddhist centre, 55–101.

the Buddhist project dedicated to his late mother, aiming “to repay the kindness 報恩.”

Throughout this process, he put painstaking efforts into “going through and selecting all the regions of concentrating the numinous (power) 歷選集靈之域.” Finally, the prince chose the cliff on the western bank of Yi River at Longmen, for he believed that:

A hundred kings who established their states and aspired for greatness must govern from the Central Region, and a thousand Buddhas seeking rebirth and enlightenment will not descend to borderlands. It is here, where the three rivers – the Huang, Luo, and Yi – converge and the six directions (the entire universe) come together, that the royal city (Luoyang) was strategically built.³⁵³⁶ This is where King Cheng of Zhou laid the foundation for the nine sacred ritual vessels, the ding, establishing the capital.³⁷ The Yi River Valley, surrounded by suburbs, is where the Great Yu channelled the flood. 以為百王建國圖大，必揆於中州，千尊託生成道，不降於邊地。惟此三川寔總六合，王成設險，曲阜營定鼎之基，伊闕帶垆，文命辟襄陵之□。

Let us first analyze the definitions of *Zhongzhou* (or similar terms as *Zhongguo* 中國) and *Biandi* according to its contextual contents:

Non-Buddhist literature before the Tang, such as Chinese historical records, already gave

³⁵ “Three Rivers (*sanchuan*, 三川)” refers to the Huang 黃, Luo 洛 and Yi 伊 Rivers. The area where these three rivers meet and share common basins was initially designated as the Sanchuan Commandery 三川郡 by the Qin State in 249 CE, which roughly corresponds to the present-day extent of Luoyang. See the “Qin Chronicle 秦本紀”: “(莊襄王元年)……秦界至大梁，初置三川郡。” And the note by Wei Zhao 韋昭, “有河、洛、伊，故曰三川。” See *Shiji* 史記, 1975, vol. 5, 219–220.

³⁶ “Six Directions (Ch. Liuhe, 六合)” includes the zenith, nadir, and four directions, which refer to the whole universe.

Monk Tanning 曇寧 in the preface of Bodhiruci’s 菩提流支 translation of the *Shenmi jietuo jing* 深密解脫經 (*Samdhinirmocana-sūtra*) says, 「大魏皇帝總六合以統天、包百王以馭宇，道邁羲唐、德超古哲，而每遊神覺典、妙斷大乘，思在翻演、鴻宣遐代。」 T16, no. 675, p. 665a18-21. Also, the “Record of Rituals 禮儀志,” in the *Jiu tangshu* 舊唐書, explains the definition of Liuhe as “司馬彪注：天地四方為六合。……所以模範二儀，包羅六合……”, 22/860.

³⁷ The definition of “Dingding 定鼎” refers to establishing the capital for a dynasty, which originated from the myth of the Great Yu, founder of the Xia dynasty, who cast nine *ding* (a 3 or 4-foot ritual vessel) that symbolized the nine regions under his rule and settled them in the capital. It is a universal expression of initiating the capital. For example, in *Zuoquan* 左傳, it says, “成王定鼎於郊 (i.e., Luoyang).” See *Chunqiu Zuoquan* 春秋左傳 1990, vol. 2 “Third Year of the Duke Xuan 宣公三年,” 671.

the determined meaning of *Zhongzhou* 中州 as it should be the central region in the China/Sinitic realm, but with two slightly different ranges: One is the central region of the Nine Regions (Ch. *Jiuzhou*, 九州), the earliest territorial system that is supposed to have been used during the Xia 夏 and Shang 商 (1600–1045BC) dynasties and was recorded in “Yu gong 禹貢 (Tribute of Yu),” which is the Yu Region 豫州.³⁸ According to the description of river-basin areas where the Great Yu once channelled water in the Yu Region, previous studies identified the geographical extent of the Yu Region as stretching from the southern area of the Yellow River to the northwestern portion of (present) Hubei province,³⁹ and from the southwestern border of Shandong to the northwestern corner of Anhui.⁴⁰ This region approximately aligns with present-day Henan province, with its centre located in the western part, specifically in Luoyang.

According to other historical records, the second definition of *Zhongzhou* narrows the scope to Luoyang and its surrounding areas,⁴¹ which roughly overlaps with the Eastern Capital (*Dongdu*, 東都) and the Henan Prefecture (*Henan fu*, 河南府) in the Tang dynasty.⁴²

Specifically, in the biography of Wang Dao 王導 (276–339 CE) in *Jinshu* 晉書, the author used

³⁸ The chapter of “Yu gong 禹貢” in *Shangshu* 尚書 preserves the earlier record of the system of administrative divisions in China, which was divided into Nine Regions 九州. According to its description, *Zhongzhou* (the Central Regions) should refer to the Yu Region 豫州, of which the location is in the middle of the nine regions. See *Shangshu zhengyi* 尚書正義 1999, 132–171.

³⁹ It says in “Yu gong”: “荊、河惟豫州，伊、洛、瀍、澗既入於河……導洛自熊耳，東北，會于澗、瀍；又東，會于伊，又東北，入于河。” Again, in the *Shangshu zhengyi* 尚書正義 (Commentaries on Books of Documents), the commentary supplements Yu’s process on dredging rivers as “荊、河惟豫州，西南至荊山，北距河水……導洛自熊耳，在宜陽之西。東北會于澗瀍，會于河南城南。又東會于伊，合於洛陽之南。又東北入于河。合於鞏之東。鞏，恭勇反，縣名，屬河南郡，” which equals the area to Henan Prefecture in the Tang dynasty. See *Shangshu zhengyi* 尚書正義 1999, 151–152.

⁴⁰ Li Min 李民, “Yugong ‘yuzhou’ yu xia wenhua tansuo— jianyi xiandai de zhongxin quyuan ” 《禹貢》“豫州”與夏文化探索——兼議夏代的中心區域, in *Zhongzhou xuekan* 中州學刊, no.1 (1985): 117.

⁴¹ For example, the biography of Quan Cong “全琮傳”: “是時中州士人，避亂而南依琮者以百數。” See *Sanguo zhi* 三國志, 60/1381. Also, see the biography of Gao Lu 高閭, “閭對曰: ……「臣聞《詩》云「惠此中國，以綏四方。」臣願陛下從容伊瀍，優游京洛，使德被四海，中國緝寧，然後向化之徒，自然樂附。」高祖曰: 「願從容伊瀍，實亦不少，但未獲耳。」閭曰: 「司馬相如臨終恨不見封禪。今雖江介不賓，小賊未殄，然中州之地，略亦盡平，豈可於聖明之辰，而闕盛禮。齊桓公霸諸侯，猶欲封禪，而況萬乘? 」” See *Weishu*, 54/1208.

⁴² See the explanation of the administrative divisions in *Jiu Tangshu*, 38/1420–1425.

Zhongzhou as an alternative name for the capital of Luoyang (*Luojing*, 洛京).⁴³

In Buddhist scriptures circulating in the Tang or before, as in the interpretations by Daoxuan and Kuiji I have cited above, the location of *Zhongzhou* refers to Central India, where all the Buddhas were born or would be born, like *Bianzheng lun* 辯正論 states, “When all the Buddhas manifest in the world, they would be born in the central region rather than borderlands. If born in the borderlands, the terrain would tilt for them. 諸佛出世皆在其中州，不生邊邑。若生邊地，地為之傾。”⁴⁴

As a result, two contradictory definitions of the cosmic centre had placed Chinese Buddhists in a dilemma:⁴⁵ either admitting that China is the centre under heaven or defining the place where the Buddha was born as the “Central Kingdom.” In 650 CE, Daoxuan, representing Buddhist monastics, reiterated his view of Tang China as a peripheral realm (*Shijia fangzhi* was completed in the first year of the Yonghui reign period). Meanwhile, as Daoxuan’s contemporaries, Prince Li Tai (and Cen Wenben) quoted the term “Central Region” in their dedicatory inscription, to which territory they were aiming to refer?

In my understanding of Li Tai’s inscription, the term “Central Region” should refer to the capital of Luoyang, which functions as a political and cultural centre within the traditional Sinitic realm, in contrast to a place identified as a borderland. Cen Wenben incorporated a comparison between “*zhongzhou*” and “*biandi*” to support the argument that Longmen (and Luoyang) is the ideal place, owing to its significant position in the Sinitic realm, not only for its pivotal role in

⁴³ The original text is, “俄而洛京傾覆，中州士女避亂江左者十六七，導勸帝收其賢人君子，與之圖事。” See *Jinshu* 晉書, 65/1746.

⁴⁴ T52no2110_p525b11–12.

⁴⁵ See Chen, “Borderland Complex and the Construction of Sacred Sites and Lineages in East Asian Buddhism.” In Victor Mair ed. *Buddhist Transformations and Interactions: Essays in Honor of Antonino Forte* (Amherst, New York: Cambria Press Inc, 2017), 70–71.

politics but also its strategically advantageous military position during times of the wars. For instance, he employed terms such as “Three Rivers 三川” and “Six Directions 六合” to elucidate that Luoyang is the unique convergence point where the three rivers meet and the six directions in the whole universe join together. Furthermore, he referenced tales of the Duke of Zhou (and King Cheng) founding the capital of the Zhou dynasty in Luoyang, as well as the Great Yu, who dredged the flood waters of the Yi River at Longmen.

Through recollecting the glorious history of Luoyang and Longmen, where the legendary heroes and virtuous monarchs in Chinese history once governed, this particular technique aims to highlight the sanctity of this location. These grounds bore witness to the great achievements conducted by the iconic figures in Chinese history, such as the Duke of Zhou and the Great Yu. Meanwhile, other patrons show a preference for including these two tales when introducing their decision on selecting the site.

For example, No. 1399 (Cave 964) describes the Longmen valley as a place “located on the outskirts of where the King Cheng of Zhou settled the *ding*, on the way where the Great Yu of Xia dredged among the mountains 周成定鼎之郊，夏禹疏山之路” and highlighted that the formation of two hills/mountains at Longmen are the achievement of the Great Yu 禹之功. Meanwhile, some inscriptions at Longmen only included this story of the Great Yu to address the remarkable origin of this site. Inscription No. 1129 (Cave 689) says:

In ancient times, Yu dredged and excavated the Yi River, which is why it is called Yique, "watchtowers of the Yi." Here, the grandeur lies in the multitude of jagged and steep peaks, and the terrain is characterized by winding streams and encircling valleys. 昔禹疏鑿伊川，是名伊闕也。爾其巔【劣？】紛亂之壯，溪谷縈迴之地。

Furthermore, in the last part of the *Yique fokan zhi bei* 伊闕佛龕之碑, Cen Wenben referenced

the terms the “Eight Difficulties 八難” as a validation of Prince Wei’s righteous virtues:

Thus, by beholding the wonder of the dharmakāya, the Eight Difficult Circumstances [Skt. *aṣṭavakṣaṇāḥ*] dissipate on its own accord, and upon hearing the sounds of great awakening, one can ascend to the six heavens (of the desire realm). How could someone lacking uprightness and honesty participate in this? 是以睹法身之妙而八難自【宛】，聞大覺之風而六天可陟。非正直者，其孰能與於此也?⁴⁶

The “Eight Difficult Circumstances,” also named “Eight Kinds of Lack of Leisure (*Ba buxian*, 八不閒)” in *Chang ahan jing* 長阿含經 (*Longer Āgama-sūtra*),⁴⁷ include birth in the borderlands that prevents one from receiving the Buddha’s teachings, along with other miserable births in the hells, the realms of hungry ghosts and animals, etc. Even though Daoxuan claims that “the category of Eight Difficulties signifies that borderlands are unreachable areas (for the spread of Buddhist dharma) 八難所標邊地非攝” and highlights the superior position of the central region, India, in spreading Buddhism, lay Buddhists in the Tang interpreted the concept in a reverse way.⁴⁸ Cen Wenben emphasized that the achievement that Prince Wei had already made in Buddhist practices would dispel the eight difficulties and addressed again that by initiating his Buddhist project at Longmen, a sacred site located in the centre of the Sinitic realm, he could also achieve the same religious goal as people who lived in India. His statement rejects the idea that Luoyang and Tang China are borderlands and contradicts Daoxuan’s viewpoint.

⁴⁶ The *Huilu* transcribed this character as “宛,” while the Japanese scholars identified it as “殄 (variant character),” which includes the meaning of “exterminate.” See Liu and Li 1998, 20; Mizuno and Nagahiro, 1941, (No. 803), 322.

⁴⁷ Eight Difficult Circumstances, 八難, See 《長阿含經》卷 9: 「云何八難解法? 謂八不閒, 妨修梵行。云何八? 如來至真, 出現於世, 說微妙法, 寂滅無為, 向菩提道, 有入生地獄中, 是為不閒處, 不得修梵行。如來至真, 出現於世, 說微妙法, 寂滅無為, 向菩提道, 而有眾生畜生中、餓鬼中、長壽天中、邊地無識、無佛法處, 是為不閒處, 不得修梵行。……如來、至真、等正覺不出世間, 無有能說微妙法, 寂滅無為, 向菩提道, 而有眾生生於中國, 彼諸根具足, 堪受聖教, 而不值佛, 不得修行梵行, 是為八不閒。」 See T01no1_p55c5–21.

⁴⁸ See *Shiji fangzhi* 釋迦方志 (*Reports on the Spread of Buddhism in the Regions*), vol. 1, in T51no2088_p949a21–22.

Moreover, donors of concurrent projects, such as Xu Qian (Cave 689), also made comparisons between the Longmen site and a Buddha land to underline the extraordinary scenery and its sacred nature. As an example, Xu Qian associated peaks at Longmen with the landscapes in Tuṣita Heaven and correlated the sounds of pines and bamboo to the celestial music in the heavens.

Gazing down from above... Then, the peaks... reflect the towers and terraces of Tuṣita Heaven; pines and bamboos sing in chorus, echoing the celestial flutes and pipes. Who but the light-hearted and ambitious, seeking to soar beyond the heavens, would dare to climb and dwell here? Who but the weary and troubled, yearning to escape the din and turmoil, could find solace and refuge here? 俯控……既而峰□□映，竦兜率之樓臺；松竹群吟，韻諸天之簫管。非夫輕□□欲凌霄漢者，焉肯攀陟而宅之？非夫□□□欲擯囂煩者，何能栖託之？

Given that Longmen possesses the main characteristics of a traditional sacred site in the Sinitic world, described as a place “where numinous power is concentrated,” it may have been difficult for a large proportion of lay Buddhists during the Tang dynasty who took pride in the glorious position of their traditional culture, to accept that the central region of the empire is considered equal to those unfortunate borderlands in the Buddhist realm, where the inhabitants lack the consciousness to practice Buddhism. As a result, Tang patrons utilized culturally specific strategies to promote the historical sacred site within Chinese history to a level equivalent to the prestigious Buddhist sites in India, as well as to align it with the Central Kingdom in Buddhist cosmology.

6.3.3 Building A Connection to the Indian Realm

The people before the Tang had come to accept the existence of parallel realms, each with its own centre beyond the boundaries of the Tang territory, as a universal reality. Felt raises this example in *Shuijing Zhu* 水經註 (*Commentaries on the Water Classic*, a book on ancient Chinese geography through the descriptions of waterways and canals, compiled by Li Daoyuan)⁴⁹ and points out that the purpose of Li Daoyuan 酈道元 (?–527 CE) to depict the territory of the Northern Wei dynasty as a parallel world to Central India is “making India a parallel rather than superior land.”⁵⁰ Moreover, we see that Tang donors took one step further in attempting to build up a connection between sacred sites in two distinct realms. In addition to elevating Longmen as a traditional sacred site in Chinese culture, they intended to raise it up further as an extraordinary Buddhist sacred site, enabling adherents to link themselves to the places where the Buddhas were once present. Hence, a second approach adopted by Tang donors involved highlighting similarities in natural landscapes and cultural characteristics in both realms and subsequently establishing connections between these parallel territories.

The motive for Tang Buddhists to construct a new sacred space at Longmen may have been influenced not only by the spreading of Buddhist teachings and the increasing population of Buddhists but also by more comprehensive reasons. As Chen Jinhua pointed out, Tang China began to exceed India in economics and culture. It became a new centre that “created a new world order,⁵¹” which helped Buddhists in the Sinitic world, to some extent, to overcome their sense of inferiority when confronting the Indian culture. Inscription No. 0465 exhibits some nuance in describing the traces of the dharma transmission and addresses the spread of Buddha’s

⁴⁹ *Shuijing Zhu* 水經註, compiled by Li Daoyuan and collated by Chen Qiaoyi (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2007).

⁵⁰ Felt 2022, 244.

⁵¹ Chen (2017), 76.

teaching in two directions, West and East, without specifying any chronological sequence.

The Great Hero (the Buddha) descended into the world, thus the mysterious ford was revealed. The auspicious stream flowed clear and pure, and the auspicious mountain split open, forming towering peaks. The youth of the Himalayas (the Buddha in a previous incarnation) emerged victorious, and the sandalwood forest (the sangha community) supported his virtue. The Revelation of Meaning was proclaimed in the West, while the marvelous Wheel of the Law turned in the East. 大雄降跡，玄津斯演，瑞浦澄流，祥山關巘，雪童戰勝，檀【林】翼善。了義西宣，妙輪東轉。

Since the Buddha had already turned the dharma wheel to the East, Tang Buddhists presumed that past Buddhas could have been present in the East in an earlier period and must have left traces. It was their responsibility to rediscover these traces. Therefore, they attempted to relocate Buddhist sacred sites in the Sinitic world according to the “new discoveries” of the relics and traces of the Buddhas⁵².

Jonathan Z. Smith, the American historian of religions who studied various topics such as ritual theory, Christian origins, and sacred space in "Constructing a Small Place," discussed how different religious groups created replicas or representations of their sacred sites in new locations. He identified three strategies for transposing sacred space: metaphoric project, metonymic project, and synthetic project.⁵³ The metaphoric project involved creating a symbolic equivalence between the original and the new site, often by making a scaled-down copy of the former. For example, some European churches built miniature models of Jerusalem or

⁵² See James Robson, “Buddhist Sacred Geography,” in John Lagerwey and Lu Pengzhi, eds, *Early Chinese Religion, Part Two: The Period of Division (220–589 AD)*, 2010, 1359. Chen also points out that the case of Mount Wutai is a representative example of Chinese Buddhists relocating Indian Buddhist sites in China. See Chen 2017, 81–83.

⁵³ Jonathan Z. Smith, “Constructing a Small Place,” in Benjamin Z. Kedar and R.J. Zwi Werblowsky, eds, *Sacred space: shrine, city, land* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 20.

Bethlehem within their walls. The metonymic project involved transferring a part of the original site to the new one, such as a relic, a stone, or soil. For example, some Islamic shrines incorporated stones from Mecca or Medina in their structures. The synthetic project involved combining elements from different sacred sites into a new one, creating a hybrid or eclectic space, like some Hindu temples incorporated images or symbols from various sacred places in India or abroad.

Smith's study is relevant for understanding how Tang Buddhists in China created new sacred sites that were inspired by Indian Buddhism. They used the metaphoric project strategy but with some modifications. Instead of making exact copies of Indian sites, they selected the most distinctive or salient features of them, such as mountains, rivers, caves, or statues. They then looked for similar features in their own environment, such as at Longmen, and associated them with the Indian ones. By doing so, they aimed to recreate the same sacred space and evoke the same religious feelings.

Take the analogy of landscapes in Inscription No. 0077, for instance, it shows that the relative location between Longmen and Luoyang City is similar to the situations of Vulture Peak and the city of Rājagṛha, Anāthapiṇḍada's Grove and Śrāvastī, to confirm its connection to the geographical distribution of Indian sites:

Encircled by dense forests, Longmen lies close to the capital (Luoyang), just as Gṛdhra-kūṭa (Vulture Peak) adjoins the royal city of Rājagṛha (capital of Magadha), and the Anāthapiṇḍada's Grove is nestled near (the capital) Śrāvastī. 縈帶林薄，密邇京華，似耆山之接王城，給園之依衛國也。

Similar rhetoric of relocating the Buddha's traces to the natural landscapes at Longmen may be seen in the same inscription:

Crimson peaks rise in layers, a clear river ripples and gleams. Pines and osmanthus trees grow densely, a sacred place for holy beings to come and go. (The Buddha's) shadow frightens the pigeons (from landing), and his hand tames the wild elephant. This wondrous scene is profound and serene, a sight revered for countless kalpas. 丹巘重疊，清川滉漾，松桂攢叢，聖仙來往；影留怖鴿，手威狂象，妙色湛然，歷劫瞻仰。

The mountains and river are also essential elements that Longmen and its Indian counterpart share in common. Inscription No. 0074 compares Mount Song 嵩山 in Luoyang to the Himalayas and juxtaposes the Yellow River with the Nairañjanā River that flows through Bodhgaya:

The majestic base of the mountain stands face-to-face with Mount Song, resembling the snow-capped peaks of the Himalayas. A clear stream flows and pours into the Virtuous River (Yellow River), like the holy Nairañjanā River (near Bodhgaya). This is truly a renowned site for both the religious and the secular, a paradise shared by humans and deities. 崇基拒於嵩山，依希雪嶺，清流注於德水，仿佛連河，斯固真俗之名區，人祇之絕境也。

Another inscription (Inscription No. 1467) asserts that through the waterway at Longmen, which is the Yi River, one could reach the river system in India,

By the waterways, one can traverse eight rivers, strolling serenely as if riding in three carriages (a goat-drawn cart, a deer-drawn cart, and an oxcart mentioned in the Lotus Sutra).⁵⁴ 津通八水，安步三車。

⁵⁴ Eight rivers 八水, also named as 八大河, eight major rivers in India. See Nirvana Sutra: 《大般涅槃經》卷3〈4長壽品〉：「佛告迦葉：「善男子！如八大河：一名、恒河，二名、閻摩羅，三名、薩羅，四名、阿夷羅跋提，五名、摩訶，六名、辛頭，七名、博叉，八名、悉陀。是八大河及諸小河悉入大海。」 T12no375_p621b9-12.

Inscription No. 2730 gives a more specific description of the landscapes integrated with the Buddhist structures and connects them to the sacred sites in India, for example, naming the stupas at Longmen as the Hawk Stupa in the *Jātaka*, as well as comparing the serene and reclusive circumstance to the Heaven of the Thirty-three gods and the Vulture Peak:

Lush pines blend with the mist, encircling the Hawk Stupa in serene shade. Indigo and orange smoke congeal, cloaking the Longmen [mountains in a spiritual] haze. Golden [temples] gleam [magnificently], the mountains stand still, the ocean [vast]. Shining like a lotus flower, resembling the [magnificent palaces] and [sacred grounds] of the Trāyastriṃśa Heaven and Vulture Peak. 蒼松霧合，環鷹塔而陰深；黛橋烟凝，繞龍[門][而][靈]靄。金□爛□，山靜海□，爍兮蓮花，宛如忉利之□□□祇闍□境。

In Inscription No. 1129, the donor compared the Buddhist structures at Longmen to the palace of the Brahman King (Sovereign Śakra) (*Fandi zhi gong* 梵帝之宮) on Mount Sumeru (*Xumi... shangkong* 須彌□上空), and the caves to the Cave of Tathāgata 如來之窟 on Mount *Gr̥dhrakūṭa* 闍崛山, featuring a metaphoric method to highlight the sacredness of the site and his project. He then commented “This can truly be considered a majestic landmark within the imperial domain, a marvel wrought by the very hand of nature itself. 蓋亦寰區之勝躅，造化之奇功” to reinforce the outstanding position and extraordinary characteristics of the site, for both the Buddhist and Sinitic world. Hence, Tang Buddhists at Longmen indeed employed particular strategies to connect the site of Longmen with sacred places in India, but not by means of disparaging themselves. Instead, they viewed the remarkable landscapes at Longmen and the crucial geographical position of Luoyang as advantages that are comparable to the centre of the

Buddhist cosmic system.

6.4 A Process of Transcendence: The Ritualization of the Sacred Site

In referring to Bell's theory of ritualization, I argue all the actions conducted by the donors, from cave-cutting and image-making to the practices and rituals after the completion of the project, should be treated as a complete process of "ritualization." Since Tang donors distinguished Longmen as a sacred site from the mundane world and cast it as a new Buddhist sacred site in the Sinitic world by employing culturally specific strategies, I want to trace the whole process of their constructions as a particular way to find their agencies as well as to transcend their powers.

6.4.1 Pre-Construction

How did donors of caves and images initiate their projects at Longmen? Were all the projects meticulously planned before the construction, or did they originate from spontaneous inspiration? The actual situations encompass both possibilities. In the story of Lady Liu led the whole family to excavate the Jinan Cave (Cave 1955), her project was to fulfill a vow made forty years earlier, reflecting a reciprocal relationship between Buddhist practices and individual benefits. On the contrary, a number of donors indicated that their actions of cave-cutting and image-making were driven by some provisional ideas, such as an inspiration that arose during tours passing by the site, being impressed by either the magnificent landscapes or the numinous powers generated by Buddhist images.

The depiction of natural landscapes had not yet become popular in the Longmen inscriptions of the Northern Wei dynasties, but traces of such descriptions can still be found. The

Pingxi General, Yao Zun 姚尊 (ca. 513–520 on this position) (Inscription No. 0940),⁵⁵ claimed that every time he climbed mountains and stood in extraordinary places, he would develop a profound appreciation for awe-inspiring scenery, inspiring his creative expression (仰真妙而造軀). “Traveling southward by carriage and following the Yi River, witnessed the towering, rugged peaks of the lofty cliffs and the clear, swiftly flowing currents of the river. 至乃方軌南陸，逕途伊川，睹崇崖之崢嶸，臨清流之滂衍。” Witnessing this spectacle, Yao Zun was deeply moved and made a vow. He then “carved into the sacred rock, engraving a magnificent design to embody this divine wonder. 遂鑄敬靈石，雕神妙軌。”

During the Qianfeng 乾封 reign period (666–668 CE) in the Tang dynasty, Li Shoude 李守德, District Commandant of Songyang District of Luo Prefecture 洛州嵩陽縣, passed by the Longmen valley and expressed the vow of reverently making a niche of stone images 去乾封年中於此過，發心敬造石像一龕. However, due to some unrevealed reason, Li did not fulfill his wish at that time 比來不遂本意. About twenty years later, on the thirteenth day of the third month in the second year of the Chuigong 垂拱 reign period (April 11, 686 CE), he passed this place⁵⁶ again and made a big niche on the site, “In devotion to the well-being of my masters, parents of seven generations, and my family members, I also wish that all sentient beings in the dharma realm may together transcend the river of suffering and attain Buddhahood (Inscription

⁵⁵ I also refer to the updated version of this inscription that transcribed by Yao Chaojie. See Yang Chaojie’s 楊超傑, “Longmen shiku yaozun zaoxiang laolve 龍門石窟姚尊造像考略,” in *Dunhuang Research* (2004) no.1, 20–22.

⁵⁶ The original inscription says he “passed by this temple 於此寺過.” No further information indicates which temple he refers to, I infer it could be the Qianxisi Cave 潛溪寺窟 (Cave 20) since this is the largest cave named as a temple in this area with remnants of structures outside the cave, indicating the existence of a wooden building before. However, Mizuno and Nagahiro recorded the name of Cave 20 as “Zhaifu Cave 齋祓洞” or “Luogu Cave 羅鼓洞” in their survey report, 1941, 10–11. Therefore, the name of the Buddhist temple close to Li Shoude’s project required further investigation.

No. 0010). 奉為七代師僧父母及家口平安，□還□□，並願法界有情，俱□離「苦」河，齊登佛果。” This inscription was engraved on May 27, 686 CE, which was the thirtieth day of the fourth month in the second year of the Chuigong reign period. Based on this date, we can estimate that Li Shoude’s project took approximately forty-six days to complete. Nevertheless, the specific theme and size of its affiliated project remain unknown (Fig. 6-5).



Fig. 6-5 Cave 23: Location and Size (Lan LI, 2023)

Another donor, Su Juan 苏鋁, who was native to the Gongcheng District of the Wei Prefecture 衛州共城縣, travelled with his father in 682 CE and patronized Cave 501 at Longmen.⁵⁷ Su Juan’s father served as the magistrate of Biyang County in Tangzhou. He (the speaker)

⁵⁷ *Zonflu* 總錄, vol. 3, identifies it as Cave 501. In *Huili* 彙錄, it has been mistakenly identified in Cave 503.

mentioned that he was about to go to the court and pay his respects at Huangchi 父任唐州比陽令，言將覲省潢池。⁵⁸ They travelled southward, in the opposite direction to the northern area of the Yellow River.⁵⁹ Along the way, they passed through Longmen and looked into the distance 背河朔而行，途經龍門而極目, to where they saw “the verdant cliffs reaching a height of thousands of *ren* (*ren* is a unit of measurement, 1 *ren* ≈ 8 feet), while the honourable visages (of the Buddha) were carved in ten thousand niches 翠巖千刃尊儀萬龕. He then stated their motivation for making Buddhist images: “Gazing upon the Pure Land, we turned our thoughts inward. Looking up at the numinous images, we felt a surge of sincerity and reverence. Thus, we made our first vow to respectfully create a niche for an image of Śākyamuni Buddha. 睹淨城以歸心，仰靈相而誠懇，遂發第一願敬造釋迦牟尼像一龕 (No. 0514) (Fig. 6-6).”

⁵⁸ Here, I understood the character *jin* 覲 as the 朝覲, which means to pay respect to the emperor, the palace according to his duty.

⁵⁹ The original text is 背河朔而行, which means to travel in the opposite direction of the northern part of the Yellow River. The geographic location of the designated district is to the south of the Yellow River, the Biyang District in the Tang Prefecture (Biyang County in Henan Province nowadays, is close to Hubei), and the native place of Su Juan is in the Gongcheng District, which is in the northern area of the Yellow River, the Heshuo 河朔 region. To travel from his native home to the place of designation, Su’s father needs to cross the Yellow River and then walk toward the south. The Yi River and Longmen are located in the southern area of the Yellow River. Therefore, Su Juan described their trip as travel in “the opposite position,” that is, to the south.



Fig. 6-6 Rubbing of Inscription No. 0514 (LGRA Collection)

By the Tang dynasty, Longmen became “a hub for travellers coming and going” (*xingli zhi wanglai* 行李之往來) since it was “positioned overlooking the main road (from the Luoyang city) in the front” (*qianlin dadao* 前臨大道) (Inscription No. 1399). Meanwhile, because this place is “adjacent to the renowned capital (Luoyang), it became a dual sacred site that can “redirect merits for all beings.” (*mier mingdu, zhongsheng zhi suo huixiang* 密邇名都，眾生之所迴向). Visitors who travelled through the Longmen Valley would be struck by the breathtaking sight of numerous caves and niches scattered along the cliff, each featuring Buddhist images with diverse themes and varying sizes. The combination of holy visages of varied Buddhist figures and astonishing natural scenery forms a celestial palace within the human realm. Meanwhile, the river in the foreground was said to connect to the Indian realm

where the Buddha once manifested himself and taught the dharma. All these elements created an experience of transcendence for donors and visitors every time they pass by this site, evoking a sensation of attending the Buddha’s preaching in his Buddha land and achieving their religious goals.

6.4.2 The Completion of A Project:

How long would a project take to complete? A large number of inscriptions at Longmen preserve both the initial and completion dates of the projects. For example, Li Shoude spent forty-six days finishing the construction of his project in Cave 23 (probably a niche in the cave) from April 11 to May 27 in 686 CE. The location where Li Shoude chose to accommodate his project is inside Cave 23, which is an arched-roof niche with a height of 224 cm, a width of 265 cm and a depth of 175 cm. Within the cave, there are three vacant niches and the No. 0010 inscription on the southern wall. It is uncertain whether this inscription is affiliated with the entire cave or only with a specific niche inside it. The likelihood of Li Shoude excavating one single niche within an existing cave in a span of forty-six days seems more plausible.

Another Buddhist disciple, Fan Qing 樊慶, for his late beloved elder brother, Xuandao 玄道, a former Administrator of the Yang Prefecture 前兗州參軍事, proclaimed his intention to make “a figure of a life-sized Avalokiteśvara who saves the world from suffering (*dengshen jiuku Guanshiyin xiang yiqu* 等身救苦觀世音像一軀)” in Cave 669 (Niche 222). He expressed in the inscription (Inscription No. 0947) that he wished his late brother could be reborn in the pure land by relying on this merit (*jieci gongde, wangsheng jingtu* 藉此功德, 往生淨土). He also indicated the clear dates of the beginning and completion: “This project was initiated on the fifth day of the fifth month in the second year of Yonghui reign period (May 29th, 651 CE) and

completed on the thirtieth day of the ninth month of the second year (October 19th, 651 CE) 大唐永徽二年五月五日起造，二年九月卅日功畢。”

The niche patronized by Fan Qing remains in good condition within Cave 669, with a height of 283 cm, a width of 140 cm and a depth of 46 cm. A singular image of Guanyin was made in the niche, with a height of 202 cm. The entire process of making both the niche and life-size image took four months and twenty-five days, from which we might be able to estimate the daily workload of a project in the Tang dynasty (Fig. 6-7 & 6-8).

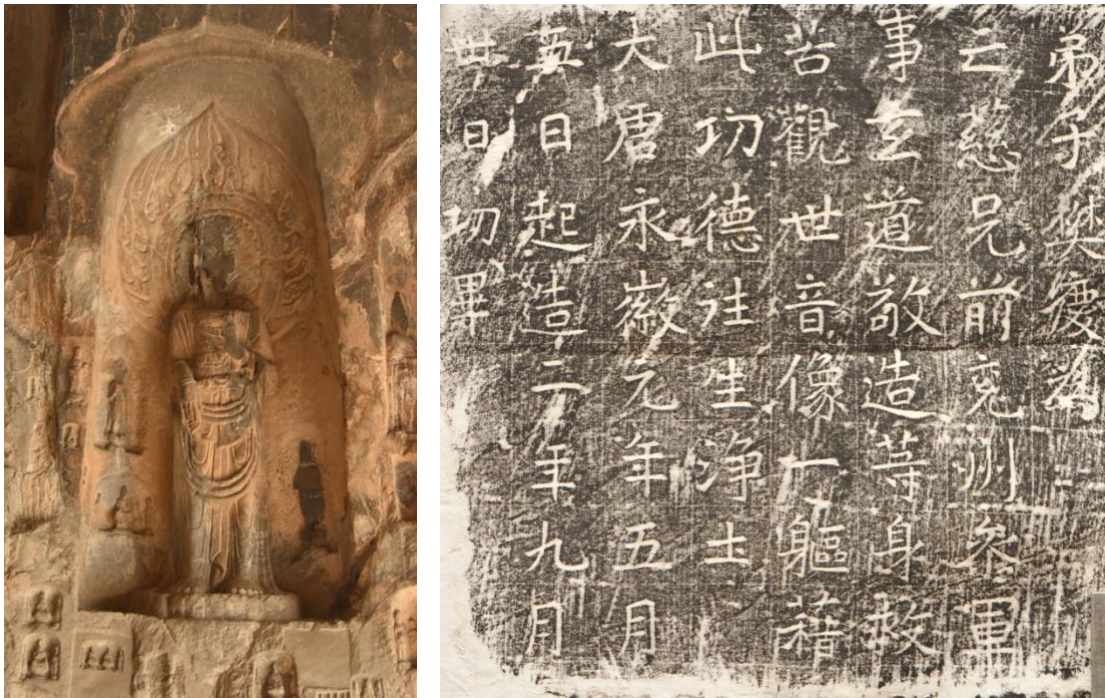


Fig. 6-7 Niche 222 (Fan Qing’s niche) in Cave 669 (Lan LI, 2017)

Fig. 6-8 Rubbing of Inscription No. 0947 (LGRA Collection)

However, the specific circumstances could vary for different projects. The inscription of Su Juan and his father’s project (No. 0514) records the beginning day of their project as December 15, 682 CE, and it was completed on October 3, 683 CE. Compared to Fan Qing’s project, Cave 501 is small-sized, measuring 71 cm in height, 77 cm in width, and 26 cm in depth. The donors made

a combination of three images inside the niche: the central figure of Sakyamuni Buddha, accompanied by flanked by two attendant Bodhisattvas on either side (Fig. 6-9).



Fig. 6-9 Cave 501 (*Zonglu*, vol.3)

To supplement, two additional projects located in the adjacent area could be credited to Su Juan, which were all completed on the same date as Cave 501:

[No. 0636 and a niche on the doorway of Cave 543] Su Juan, for his late wet nurse, Lao po (old woman), made (an image) on the eighth day of the ninth month of the second year of the Yongchun reign period (October 3, 683 CE).⁶⁰ 蘇錡為亡乳母老婆，永淳二年九月八日造。

[No. 0791 and a niche in Cave 566] Su Juan, for his late younger brother Yuejin, (made an image and) completed it on the eighth day of the ninth year of the second year of the

⁶⁰ By referring to the other two projects sponsored by Su Juan, the date in this inscription should indicate the day of completion, which is the same day as the other two.

Yongchun reign period (October 3, 683 CE). 蘇錫為亡弟越金，永淳二年九月八日造成。

The construction of Cave 501 took nine and a half months to complete, a period that might be longer than expected compared to the project scales of Li Shoude and Fan Qing. Since Su Juan might have initiated three projects simultaneously, there could be a shortage of craftsmen and a need for a sequence of work for all the projects. It is possible that Su Juan intentionally waited for the completion of all the projects and chose the same date to engrave three inscriptions.

Unlike the examples mentioned above, many caves at Longmen were completed without engraving inscriptions, not due to the reason of erosions or collapses. Some donors left their projects completed without inscriptions for unclear reasons, even for a few years. For example, there is a four-year gap between the burial of the nun Huideng in the cave, which is 731 CE, and the engraving of the affiliated inscription by Wu Chongzheng in 735 CE:

On the tenth day of the first month of the nineteenth year of the Kaiyuan reign period (February 20, 731 CE), (Huideng) passed away while sitting at the age of eighty-two... immediately made a niche on the western cliff at Longmen to place (her body)...Engraved and written on the eleventh day of the first month of the twenty-third year of the Kaiyuan reign period (February 8, 735 CE). 以開元十九年正月十日.....坐而便化，于時春秋八十有二.....遂於龍門西巖造龕安置.....開元廿三年正月十一日鑄書。

Similarly, Cave 1063 was completed on the fifteenth day of the fifth month of the third year of the Changshou reign period (April 14, 693 CE), with the inscription unwritten for twenty-six years (*gongcheng weiti* 功成未題). On March 28, 720 CE, the grandson of Lady Zheng (the beneficiary), Li Xiong, visited his family cave and “recalled the former traces of (Buddhist

images) (*mianxiang qianzong* 緬想前蹤),” and engraved his inscription (No. 1442).

6.4.3 Steps of Making Images: The Transcendent Experience

Apart from integrating the mountains and the Yi River, as well as the numerous caves and niches along the cliffs, into a harmonized Buddhist atmosphere from a macro perspective, we can also approach the same sources on a small level by focusing on the elaborate descriptions of the images. This micro perspective allows us to capture the key ideas of making Buddhist images as a means to cultivate merits and transcend individual capabilities. We can take a look at a specific portrayal of Buddhist images crafted by Cen Wenben in Inscription No. 0074:

The spiraling white curl (*ūrṇa*) radiates brilliance, veiling the essence of the lotus flower. The indigo hair (*keśa*) emits radiant light, distinguishing the Buddha from his disciples amidst the incense-filled grove. Upon close observation, the precious marks appear as if the Buddha's entire form is present; from a distance, the divine light shines clear, leaving an enduring impression. We scoff at the inferior quality of carved jade and disdain the crudeness of engraved sandalwood. Brightly, this stone image surpasses the sun's radiant disk and connects to the vast expanse of the Milky Way. Loftily, its majesty exceeds that of the golden Mount Sumeru, reflecting the colossal ravines of the oceans. Vulture Peak stands before our eyes, and the Buddha's Shadow Cave can be vividly imagined.⁶¹

Precious flowers descend auspiciously, obscuring the hues of the five clouds; celestial

⁶¹ *Qishe* refers to *Gr̥dhra*, the Vulture Peak. *Najie* could be matched to the *Nagarahāra* city, where the Buddha Shadow Cave 佛影窟 exists. See Faxian's description in his biography 『高僧法顯傳』: 「慧景慧達道整先向那竭國。供養佛影佛齒及頂骨。」 T51no2085_p858c4-5. 「那竭城南半由延有石室博山。西南向佛留影。此中去十餘步，觀之如佛真形。金色相好，光明炳著，轉近轉微，髣髴如有。諸方國王遣工畫師摹寫，莫能及。彼國人傳云。千佛盡當於此留影。」 T51no2085_p859a3-7. Zhang Ruoyu asserts that *Qishe* refers to vultures (*gr̥dhra*), and *Najia* refers to snakes (*nāga*), and he interpreted this sentence as a description of the divine kings' images that represent the vultures and dragons on the bottom of the eastern walls, see Zhang 1980, 20. However, by referring to Chavannes's reading, McNair pointed out that the *Qishe* should refer to Vulture Peak and *Najie* refers to the Shadow Cave of the Buddha, see McNair 2007, 79.

music vibrates and resonates, surpassing the myriad sounds of the world. 白毫流照，掩蓮花之質，紺髮揚暉，分檀林之侶。是故近瞻寶相，儼若全身，遠鑒神光，湛如留影。嗤鏤玉之為劣，鄙刻檀之未工。杲杲焉，逾日輪之麗長漠；峨峨焉，邁金山之映巨壑。耆闍在目，那竭可想。寶花降祥，蔽五雲之色，天樂振響，奪萬籟之音。

By contemplating the Buddha's vivid visage and those elaborate decorations, pilgrims who worshiped the Buddhist figures in the cave cannot help but imagine themselves reaching the sacred sites beyond time and space, listening to the Śākyamuni Buddha's teachings at the Vulture Peak and observing the Buddha's shadow image in the cave in *Nagarahāra*.⁶²

Not only did Longmen practitioners describe the details of the images, but they also highlighted the procedures of making the niches/caves and images. The inscription No. 0077 specifies the four steps of their construction, including four types of techniques:

Depending on this wonderful location, we commissioned craftsmen with divine skills to excavate into (the cliff), cut (the niche), carve and engrave (images) to include all the subtlety and marvellousness completely. 既資勝地，又屬神工，疏、鑿、彫、鑄，備盡微妙。

An experimental construction aimed at replicating the cave and image-making processes carried out by contemporary archaeologists could provide additional insights into understanding the

⁶² The identification of the main images' theme in the South Binyang Cave is still controversial. Mizuno and Nagahiro identified the main Buddha image as the Amitabha Buddha since one of his attendant Bodhisattvas wears a jewelled vase on his crown, a symbol of the Samantabhadra Bodhisattva 普賢菩薩. See Mizuno and Nagahiro 1941, 27. However, Sofukawa pointed out that no words related to the cult of the Amitabha and his pure land were mentioned in the *Yique foka bei* 伊闕佛龕碑, so it is debatable to specify the main images as the Amitabha and his attendants. Furthermore, the inscription includes the term *fashen* 法身 (dharmakāya) and *dajue* 大覺 (great awakening) of the Buddha, which he inclined to associate with the theme of the Sakyamuni Buddha. See Sofukawa 1988, 246–247.

techniques referenced by these four characters.⁶³ After selecting an ideal location for the project, artisans would initiate the project by excavating the cliff and then polishing the location to obtain a smooth surface—this is the step of *shu* 疏 (Step Two and Five according to Peng). In the second step, *zao* 鑿, they would remove substantial rock chunks within the cave or niche, revealing the foundational shape and layout of the project (Step Six according to Peng). Subsequently, during the *diao* 彫 step, artisans would carve the contours of the images and the decorative patterns in a rudimentary form (Step Seven according to Peng). The final step, *juan* 鐫, involves engraving all the details of the images and decorations, demanding the expertise of high skills to depict the faces, hands, and draperies of the Buddhist figures (Step Eight according to Peng).

Apart from giving an illustration of the project procedures, the donors recorded in Inscription No. 0077, who have dedicated this project to the Maitreya Buddha, anticipate a transcendent experience of visiting Tuṣita Heaven by participating in the image-making project. They said:

Thus, the majestic form began to manifest, as if descending from the celestial palace of Tuṣita Heaven. The marvelous marks had just reached completion, like sitting beneath the Bodhi tree. The white-curved ūṛṇa reflected the soft moonlight, the indigo hair resembled a gathering mist, the lotus-like eyes seemed to move, and the fruit-like lips appeared to speak. Those who reverently prostrate themselves at the Buddha's feet and gaze upon his venerable countenance cannot help but feel [a surge of] respectfully, their hair standing on

⁶³ See the report on the simulation of the construction processes of niche-making, which was conducted in 2014. Peng Minghao 彭明浩, “Shiyan kaogu—moni kaikan guocheng 實驗考古—模擬開龕過程,” in *Yungang shiku de yingzao gongcheng* 雲岡石窟的營造工程 (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 2017), 266–273.

end and their minds suddenly opening wide. This is the embodiment of refuge for Indra and Brahma, the object of protection and veneration for the Dragon Kings and Devas. 於[是]尊儀始著，似降兜率之宮，妙相初成，若在菩提之樹。白豪月照，紺發烟凝，蓮目疑動，果脣似說。其有禮拜佛足瞻仰尊顏者，莫不肅[然]毛豎，豁爾心開。寔釋梵所歸依，龍天所衛護。

Yearning to behold the sacred visage, we carved a niche here in this mountain recess. The engraving is now complete, and we stand with lingering steps, both ready to depart and reluctant to leave. Unseen aid came from Indra and Brahma, while mysterious spirits became hidden companions. It seems as if we might encounter the Buddha at the Dragon Flower Assembly and wander upon the slopes of Kukkuṭapāda (Cock's Foot Mountain). 思睹聖容，龕茲巖曲；既雕既就，將起將躅；[釋]梵冥感，靈祇幽屬；似會龍華，如游雞足。

A miraculous tale recorded in an inscription from the late Tang dynasty (791 CE) depicts another unique transcendent experience of the donor, Lu Zheng 盧征, who patronized a niche (Cave 2169) to repay Guanyin's assistance to his career. In his dedicatory inscription (No. 2830), he described a supernatural encounter he experienced while en route to his demoted position during his stay at Longmen:

Spending the night at Xiangshan Monastery in Longmen, found myself surrounded by countless heavenly eyes (depictions of Buddhas) within the numinous niches. These divine eyes, numbering in the hundreds of millions, all gazed upon one another. Bowing my head in reverence, a profound silence overwhelmed me. It felt as if the Buddhas themselves were momentarily descending near me. 夜宿龍門香山寺，靈龕天眼，億萬相對，稽首

悲嘿，如暫降臨。

In the latter part of the story, Lu Zheng credited his promotion as the result of his unwavering devotion to Guanyin and the consistent recitation of the associated dhāraṇī, leading to the manifestation of Guanyin through the stimulus-response mechanism:

From my childhood, I have consistently upheld the *Greatly Compassionate Avalokiteśvara Dhāraṇī of the Wish-Fulfilling Wheel* (T1080) as my original teacher and aspired that it endures throughout the eons.⁶⁴ I have carved and engraved this image with the hope that it will serve as a constant source of refuge. The image, adorned with exquisite marks and embellished with flower garlands and jewelry necklaces, embodies the principles of the sacred scriptures. How could this endeavour not elicit a response? 復以小子童丱已來，常□持《大悲菩薩如意輪陀羅尼》，即我本師，願敦永劫；今所鑄刻，常為依怙。其莊嚴相好，花鬘瓔珞，悉憑經教，豈無感通？

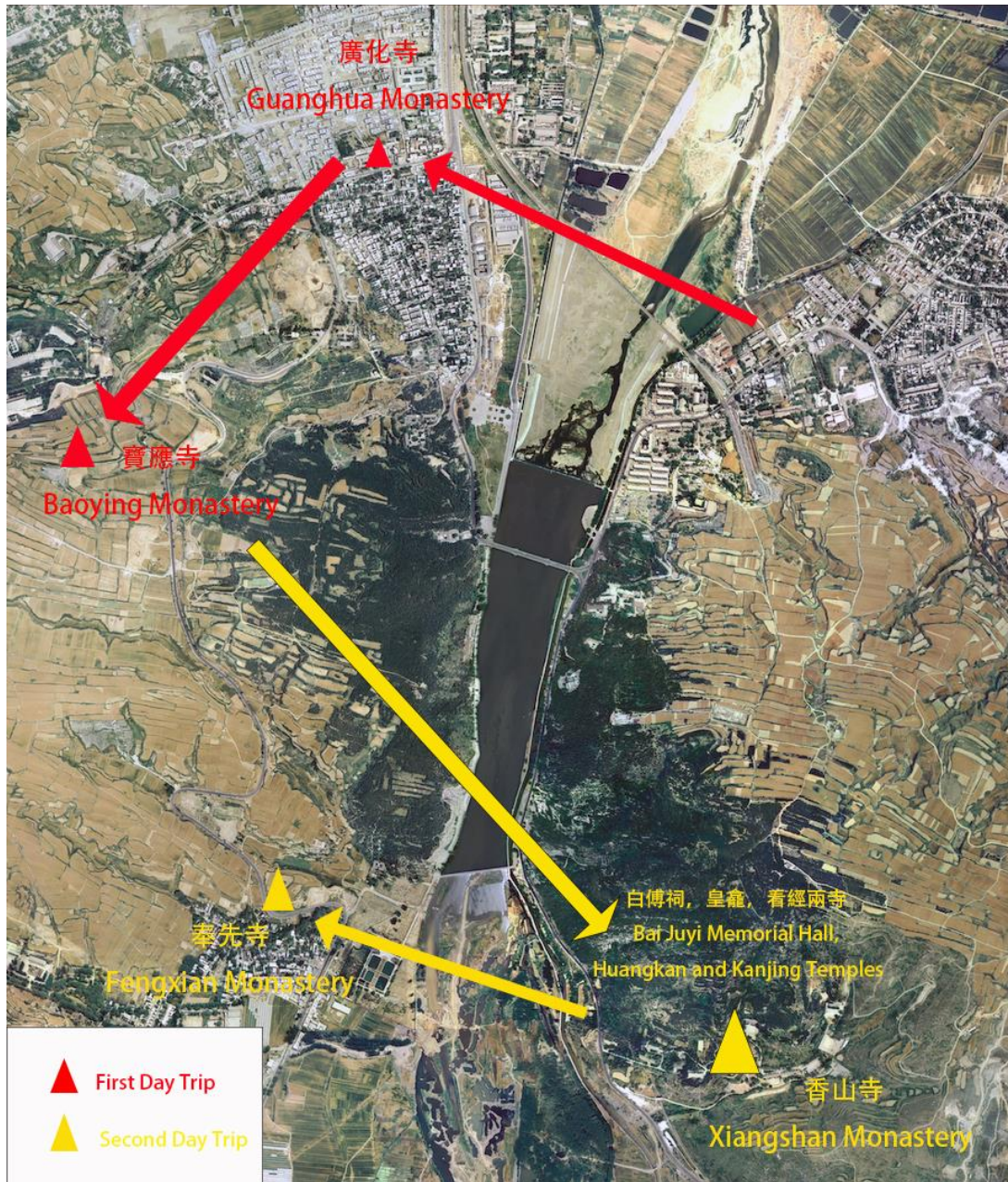
6.5 Epilogue: Ritualization Beyond Time

Following the peak era of cave and image creation at Longmen in the Tang Dynasty, at some point in the Song Dynasty, the poet Su Guo 蘇過 (1072–1123), whose father was the well-known poet Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037–1101 CE), paid a visit to Luoyang for personal reasons. He then returned home by passing through the Longmen Valley and lodging for a night, probably in a monastery akin to Lu Zheng's experience. He then wrote a poem to express his feelings about witnessing the splendid natural landscapes and serene Buddhist monasteries while also sharing

⁶⁴ The name of this dharani is 如意輪陀羅尼經, which does not exactly match the name cited in Lu Zheng's inscription, translated by Bodhiruci 菩提流支 around 709 CE.

his itinerary of exploring major tourist attractions in this area. He said in the titles, “From the Yaoliao (crossing the river) to the *Guanghua* Monastery (on the western bank), then from the *Qianxi* (Monastery) to the *Baoying* (Monastery) (two monasteries located on the West Hill at Longmen). I crossed the river the next day to the east to pay homage to the memorial temple of Master Bai (Bai Juyi), then visited the *Huangkan* and *Kanjing* two temples and climbed to the Bajie (tan) shoals,⁶⁵ which I especially loved. Again, we visited the *Fengxian* Monastery (on the western bank). 自藥寮度廣化、潛溪入寶應，冀日過水，東謁白傅祠，遊皇龕、看經兩寺，登八節，尤愛之，復至奉先。” I marked his two-day itinerary at Longmen as below (the first day’s visit is marked by red arrows, and the second day is marked in yellow) (Map 6-2):

⁶⁵ It is a scenic shoal of the Yi River that was famous for its precipitous topography to the south of the Longmen Valley, which is also dangerous for the ferry to pass through. About the description of the Bajie tan and its related project, see the two poems of Bai Juyi, “開龍門八節石灘詩” (844 CE): “東都龍門潭之南有八節灘，九峭石，船筏過此，例反破傷。” However, Su Guo used the verb “*deng*/climbing” to describe his way to visit this site, which means it should be somewhere in an elevated location.



Map 6-2 Su Guo's Itinerary at Longmen (the satellite map by LGRA and edited by Lan LI)

Su Guo gave this poem as a present to his companion, the monk Chaohui 超暉, and he specified the profound and sacred atmosphere in the monasteries at Longmen in the last two sentences:

Two mighty mountains rise, forming a natural gate, together framing the magnificent river's

flow. 崢嶸兩山門，共挹一水秀。

The roaring of the rapids resembles a thousand battle drums, while the stone cliffs hold ten thousand niches, carved like precious jewels. 灘聲千鼓聲，石壁萬龕竇。⁶⁶

Who planted these verdant cypresses, where a hidden path transcends the mundane world? 何人植翠柏，幽徑出塵囿。

Ancient monasteries of gold and silver stand, where the night echoes with the music of *sheng* and *yu*. 金銀佛寺古，夜籟笙竽奏。

Similar to many Song literati who visited Longmen and left poems, Su Guo was neither a donor of Buddhist images on the site nor a confirmed follower of Buddhism.⁶⁷ His journey to Longmen was probably motivated by taking the main road from Luoyang city to return home⁶⁸ rather than any specific religious inclination. His stay at Longmen and visits to the Buddhist monasteries and historical monuments might be caused by the purpose of tourism. In contrast to Tang Buddhists, who regarded Longmen as a sacred site on which they accommodated their projects to cultivate merits and to fulfill their vows, Song poets like Su Guo seem more like outsiders. They focused on the descriptions of landscapes and historical sites (e.g., the temple dedicated to Bai Juyi) instead of incorporating Buddhist thoughts in their writing about Longmen.

Nevertheless, Song tourists recorded the situation of the Longmen area during their era, leaving behind an abundance of tourist inscriptions on the cliffs of two mountains flanking the

⁶⁶ See *Su Guo shiwen biannian jianzhu* 蘇過詩文編年箋注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2012), 476.

⁶⁷ According to *Quan songshi* 全宋詩, there are more than 100 poems about Longmen. I have done a collecting work on these poems.

⁶⁸ Su Guo is native to the Mei Prefecture in Sichuan, and he was once assigned to the official position in Yingchang fu 穎昌府 (set up in 1080) in Henan, which is close to Luoyang. It is possible he visited Luoyang and Longmen during his designation in this position.

Yi River.⁶⁹ These inscriptions have become valuable resources for understanding the development of the site after the ritualization completed by Tang donors, presenting Longmen as a popular destination that attracted both Buddhist and non-Buddhist visitors. Descriptions found in the poems of Song poets show that most monasteries established in the Tang dynasty continued to thrive in the Song period, and the monks residing in these monasteries often appear in the poems (e.g., Wen Yanbo’s 文彦博 poems on monasteries at Longmen). Consequently, the ritualization of the site persisted in the Song dynasty, but in a diverse form.

6.6 Summary

In this chapter, I primarily incorporate Catherine Bell’s theory of “ritualization” while also referring to other theories like the “borderland complex.” I associate these theories with epigraphical sources and archaeological evidence collected from the site to reconstruct the process of “ritualization” undertaken by Tang donors through three main techniques.

Through the first technique, Tang patrons at Longmen gradually embraced a new approach to crafting their dedicatory inscriptions. They included specific descriptions of extraordinary landscapes and religious atmosphere surrounding their projects, throughout which they aimed to delineate a distinct boundary between the sacred site where they housed their meritorious projects and the everyday society where they resided.

In addition to distinguishing the sacred realm from the secular world, Tang donors employed a second technique to transform Longmen into a dual sacred site that not only held a renowned status integrated into traditional Chinese historical narratives but also emerged as a

⁶⁹ We can refer to the archaeological discoveries of wooden structures and cultural relics dated to the Song dynasty. See archaeological reports on the Leigutai area (2018) and the Wanfogou area (2021).

novel Buddhist centre in the Sinitic realm, equivalent to those prestigious Indian sacred sites. To achieve this, they adopted the parallel world systems of India and China developed in the Northern Wei dynasty and bridged connections between these two realms. Through these efforts, they sought to strengthen the sanctity of Longmen, aligning it with counterparts in distant India.

The last phase of this process featured a strategy that transcended the capabilities and powers of the donors through actively participating in the construction of caves and images at Longmen. We can unveil how these practitioners progressively embodied their religious agencies into every detailed step of the construction process, which allow them to build up a connection with the Buddhist figures they dedicated their endeavours in pursuit of their religious goals as ultimate awakening.

Chapter 7 Conclusion

7.1 The Story of Lu Zheng

On the eighth day of the second month of the seventh year in the Zhenyuan 貞元 reign period (March 17, 791 CE), a life-sized stone image of Avalokiteśvara (Guanshiyin 觀世音) was completed on the northern cliff of the Wanfo Ravine 萬佛溝 (Ravine of Ten Thousand Buddhas) in the southern end of the East Hill (Cave 2169), primarily sponsored by Lu Zheng 盧征 (ca 737—800 CE), the Vice Minister of the Ministry of Avenue 戶部侍郎, and his family.

According to the donative inscription engraved on the northern wall of the niche (No. 2830), we can know about the cause and effect of this project, as well as be able to sketch the life experience of the donor, both as a devout Buddhist and a governmental official during the Mid-Tang period.¹ Meanwhile, the example of Lu Zheng also corresponds with a couple of themes reflected in stone inscriptions at Longmen, which we have already unfolded and analyzed in previous chapters, such as the social networks between Tang Buddhists, the family-sponsored projects and the mechanism of stimulus-response in Buddhist practices.

Having an official career that was full of ups and downs, Lu Zheng encountered two major relegations for being involved in political disputes related to his superiors and was banished to low-ranked positions in remote southern regions.² The first relegation occurred in the first year of Jianzhong reign period (780 CE); he was demoted from the Palace Censor to a small position in Yelang 夜郎 District (Today's Tongzi 桐梓縣 County in Guizhou Province 貴州省 in

¹ In addition to *Huilu*, I also refer to the latest transcription of Inscription No. 2830 by He Zhijun 賀志軍 and Li Xiaoxia 李曉霞, in “Longmen shiku luzheng zaoxiangkan yu tangdai bianzhe xianxiang 龍門石窟盧征造像龕與唐代貶謫現象,” *Zhongguo guojia bowuguan guankan* 中國國家博物館館刊, 2018, 178 (no.5): 86–96.

² In Lu Zheng's first demotion, he was implicated in a case that falsely accused his superior, Liu Yan 劉宴 (716–780 CE), who was finally forced to commit suicide by imperial order. In Lu Zheng's second demotion in 786, his referee Yu Xiu 元琇 (d.u.), faced a guilty charge, which also affected Lu's situation.

Southwestern China). When setting out on his journey to the south (probably from Chang'an), he passed by the Longmen Valley and made a vow to make a life-size image of Avalokiteśvara “The One who Observes the Sounds of the World” (*Jiuku guanshiyin* 救苦觀世音像) in this place if he were promoted and able to return to the two-capital region. In 784, Lu Zheng was recommended for the position of Record Keeper in Capital 京兆司錄.³ However, this position did not hold him for long, and he was embroiled in another political dispute and encountered a second demotion, as he called the “Relegation of Zhenyuan 貞元之黜.” After the first transcendent experience in the Xiangshan Monastery in his first demotion (see Chapter 6), he travelled by Longmen again in his second relegation and encountered a more mysterious phenomenon. As he described:

Leaving the cart driver behind, I walked alone along the mountainside. A white-robed traveller walked beside the horses, sometimes in front, sometimes behind. He called out in a loud voice, “As you depart, flowers bloom; upon your return, fruits reach ripeness.”

僕夫在後，獨行山側。有白衣路人隨馬先後，因唱言曰：去日花開，來時果熟。

The prophecy told by this stranger was fulfilled soon: Lu Zheng left Luoyang in the third month due to demotion to the Aide of the Xin Prefecture 信州長史 (today's Shangrao 上饒 City in Jiangxi Province) but was quickly elevated to the Bureau Director of the Right Office 右司郎中 in the eighth month and made his way back to the capital region. He interpreted his swift promotion and safe return not just as a consequence of Buddhist cause and effect but also as the safeguard of his “original master,” the Avalokiteśvara. He assumed the intervention shielded him from danger according to the mechanism of “stimulus-response”:

Once again, with family's children and vulnerable [members], we embarked on a perilous

³ See Lu Zheng's biography in *Jiu tangshu*, 146/3966—3967.

journey of tens of thousands of *li* to the distant south. The path was fraught with hardship and danger, and few travellers emerged unscathed. Yet, the young among us remained full of life, and miraculously, our family alone encountered no [harm]. I knew then that this was due to the protection of a compassionate hero, whose intervention was demonstrably effective. With a renewed sense of gratitude and alertness, how could I dare forget this in such a short time? 復以闔門幼弱，萬里訟訴，畏途炎裔，鮮克保全。勝衣含氣，我獨無□[害]。即知慈雄覆護，匪無顯效，心形裒惕，焉敢暫忘？

Scholars inferred that Lu Zheng's project could have commenced after his first return in 784 CE or upon his second departure in 786 CE, and it took approximately five to seven years to complete. By the time the image was finally finished in the spring of 791 CE, Lu Zhang had ascended to the position of Vice Minister of the Ministry of Avenue (4a rank in the Tang).⁴ His inscription indicates that he is not the only patron but with his family members, including his brother, Lu Cong 盧從 (d.u.), and his nephew, monk Chuchang 處常, as two other major sponsors. In addition, as a monastic resided in a prestigious Buddhist monastery in Luoyang, Shengshan Monastery 聖善寺, Chuchang probably played a crucial role in designing and supervising the whole project process by employing his knowledge in Buddhism, as “planned and established from its inception to its completion, selected skilled artisans and donated properties, ensuring it is elaborate and exhausted. 圖終創始，選功舍財，罔不精竭.”⁵ There

⁴ He and Li 2018, 91.

⁵ Shengshan Monastery 聖善寺 in Luoyang was built to commemorate Empress Wu by Emperor Zhongzong in 709 CE, see *Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑑, 209/6631: 「(景龍)三年春正月丁卯，制廣東都洛陽聖善寺，按西京已有聖善寺，東都亦有聖善寺，皆帝所建，為武后追福。居民失業者數十家。」 Also, in *Fozu tongji* 佛祖統紀, vol. 40: 「二月勅造聖善寺。沙門慧範，補正議大夫，封上庸郡公。法藏、慧珍九人，並朝大夫，封縣公，官給奉祿，一同正員」 T49 no2035_p372b21–23.

are also several junior generations in the family⁶ who participated in this project and listed their names by the end.

In the section of *ming* 銘, Lu Zheng again articulated his deep gratitude to the Great Compassion 大悲 (i.e., Avalokiteśvara) and revealed another motivation as “becoming a dependable legacy for our children and grandchildren. 庶為依怙，子子孫孫。” Furthermore, as those donors believed that their project excavated into the cliffs of Longmen would stand the test of time, Lu Zheng also expressed his faith in “as the mountain stands eternal, the image will also endure forever... How could we not have full faith in it and revere this great statue? 山既不朽，像亦常存.....豈無深信，共仰丕尊。”

The image niche sponsored by Lu Zheng is a medium-sized project at Longmen, featuring a simple design that includes a dome-shaped arch façade and a square plan. The niche is 233 cm high and 131 cm wide (according to the rear wall), which accommodates only one standing image with a height of 207 cm.⁷ When compared to the representative Avalokiteśvara images from the early Tang and Wuzhou periods at Longmen, Lu Zheng’s image, on the one hand, retains some elements of earlier features in its body gesture and clothing, demonstrating a more mature aesthetic; on the other hand, the art level reflected in this project shows a noticeable decline by showing a chunky and rigid appearance (Fig. 7-1).⁸

⁶ These donors listed their titles and names at the end of the inscription: The nephew (of Lu Zheng), who is the former District Defender of Nanyang District in Deng Prefecture, Shiyong, juxtaposed with names of brothers: the former District Defender of Ye District in Ru Prefecture Shimu, Shiji and Shiyi. 侄前鄧州南陽縣尉師嬰口，並列兄弟名字：前汝州葉縣尉師牧、師稷、師益。

⁷ LGRA 2021, vol.1, 169—170.

⁸ Li Lan, 2018.



Fig. 7-1 Cave 2169: Lu Zheng's Project (Lan LI, 2016)

The story of Lu Zheng interweaves several themes about Buddhist patrons explored in previous chapters, including the social networks they were involved in, the specific Buddhist texts or practices they upheld, the family-sponsored projects they participated in, and the strategies they employed to ritualize the Buddhist image they made as well as the sacred site they selected for initiating their projects. All these narratives, provided from an insider's perspective, depicted a vivid portrait of a devout Buddhist who encountered sufferings in his life, so he put his earnest trust in the protective guidance of the bodhisattva, who affirmed the merits he cultivated through his practices of Buddhism. Based on his own account, it is clear that Lu Zheng received Buddhist teaching from an early age and recited the *dhāraṇī* related to Avalokiteśvara (*Dhāraṇī of the*

Wish-Fulfilling Wheel (T1080)) in daily practice. This suggests that his family might have maintained a tradition of practicing Buddhism and positioned them within the Buddhist laity.

Furthermore, similar to the case of Cen Wenben discussed in Chapter 2, who possesses more facets beyond his role as a governmental official, reflected in epigraphical sources and contemporary Buddhist literature, presenting a specific vignette that deviated from his characters described in the official historical records. Take Lu Zheng, for instance, in his biography in *Jiu Tangshu*, he was commended as an exceedingly greedy and corrupted official known for his “close association and flattery of the influential courtiers 深結托中貴.”⁹

Which portrayal of Lu Zheng reveals his authentic character? Or could we say that all these conflicting pieces of information, conveyed in different mediums and various forms, collectively reconstruct a complex individual who once engraved his trace in history? The process of assembling all the puzzle pieces together to unveil the true voice and image of historical figures has always captivated me, serving as the principal motive for me to delve into the realms of history and religious studies.

7.2 Self-Reflection

Identifying myself as a scholar with a foundation in archaeological materials and trained in the theories and methodologies of religious studies, I study stones, an essential but also unique material. To be more specific, my study focuses on traces left on stones in Buddhist cave temples, particularly stone images and inscriptions created by Buddhist practitioners in the Tang dynasty.

The process of how I came to this topic seems simply a matter of time. I worked as an

⁹ *Jiu Tangshu*, 1975, 3966–3967.

archaeological researcher at Longmen Grottoes for eight years before I joined my doctoral program at McMaster, focusing on visible and touchable materials such as Buddhist images and architecture on the site and conducting chronological and typological studies in the field of archaeology.

During my career as an archaeological researcher, I frequently conducted investigations in caves. Every time I faced those varied images and devotional words left on the walls, I felt as if I were having a dialogue with the Buddhist donors who left their words and thoughts, passing through time and space. More than once, I faced the numerous images and niches on the cliffs at Longmen, with a similar feeling to what Lu Zheng described his experience in the same place: “surrounded by countless heavenly eyes (i.e., Buddhist images) within the numinous niches. These divine eyes, numbering in the hundreds of millions, all gazed upon one another. 靈龕天眼，億萬相對。”

Upon paying attention to the donors behind these stone images and inscriptions, I was compelled to connect with the people who left their traces and stories on these lifeless stones, seeking to be heard or seen by audiences they might never have known. It seems an urgent task for me to grasp theories and methodologies, other than merely analyzing the dates and patterns of objects, to interpret the motivations and religious thoughts of these donors.

Thus, the systematic training I received during my doctoral program, including the theories of religious studies and translating and interpreting religious texts, equipped me with the skills to solve all my questions. I am inclined to recover an insider’s perspective, unveil the religious lives and thoughts of the people behind these lifeless stone relics, and reconstruct the dynamic reality of Chinese Buddhist practices. Among more than 2800 inscriptions, a large number of them expressed their yearning for deceased family members; some of them presented sincere

hopes for the health and safety of the living people, while the majority should be regarded as Buddhist projects since they all arose vows to dedicate Buddhist images and believed through these practices, their religious goals would be achieved. Although being empathetic to the study object is not a requirement for academic research, in my opinion, it is indispensable for me to approach further these Buddhists who lived in medieval China, for they were humans like us, who were once alive and emotional, and wished to be heard from that distant past.

Jessey Choo claimed herself as “a speaker for the late medieval dead, telling their stories to whoever is listening, keeping them alive in our memory.”¹⁰ I would like to position my study as a bridge that connects the voices from the past and makes them heard by modern audiences, as well as allows these voices to speak to each other.

7.3 Prospective Research

1. The Establishment of the Database

Even upon completing this dissertation, the goal to fully comprehend donative inscriptions and Buddhist practices in the Tang dynasty remains distant. I recognize it is essential to proceed gradually while prioritizing fundamental tasks such as gathering and translating primary sources for future research. Therefore, I aim to continue building the database of donative inscriptions in medieval China, aligning with my ongoing research. My ultimate goal is to turn it into an open-access project that can serve as a valuable primary source for future research and education. Each entry in the database includes the original text (Literary Chinese) and its translation of an inscription (English and Japanese), photos and rubbings, as well as basic information about the image and cave it belongs to. I have collected rubbings and photos of over 2000 inscriptions at

¹⁰ Choo 2022, 196.

Longmen, sourced from previous publications or gathered through my on-site investigations. I am enthusiastic about initiating projects that integrate theories of historical studies, textual documents, archaeological evidence and forefront digital technologies to study Chinese history. For example, I aspire to create 3D models depicting historical sites and the social scenes that unfolded within them.

2. Longmen and Luoyang Buddhism

Longmen represents a critical piece of the broader puzzle of Buddhist practices in the Tang dynasty and plays an essential role in the development of Luoyang Buddhism. A considerable amount of inscriptions at Longmen related to the monasteries and monastics, as well as lay patrons from Luoyang, still demand in-depth study to deepen our understand the complete historical context. For example, monks and nuns from specific monasteries in Tang Luoyang and their connections to the monasteries and patrons at Longmen need further investigation, such as the Shengshan Monastery 聖善寺, Anguo Monastery 安國寺, and Ningcha Monastery 寧剎寺. The tendency to bury family members in the mountains in the south of Luoyang, close to or on the outskirts of the Longmen Valley, might have more connection and interrelation with Buddhist projects initiated at Longmen. Furthermore, as a travelling hub from the West to the East and from the North to the South, Longmen played multifaceted roles, spanning from being a Buddhist sacred site but also a tourist destination and transportation junction to the dissemination of the Buddhist teaching.

Archaeological findings during recent decades have uncovered a wealth of epigraphic materials, including epitaphs and stele or stupa inscriptions, shedding new light on the

dissemination of Buddhism in Luoyang during the Tang dynasty.¹¹ These newly discovered primary sources not only enriched our understanding of dominant Buddhist thoughts and scriptures circulated in the capital areas like Luoyang but also offered fresh insights into Buddhist practices associated with practitioners from diverse social and religious contexts. Consequently, in the next phase of my research, I intend to expand my scope beyond the Longmen inscriptions to a broader examination of epigraphic materials related to Buddhist practices and practitioners in Luoyang and its vicinity, exploring these sources from a perspective of regional Buddhism.

¹¹ Song Ting and Wang Yuanlin, “Stone Inscriptions as Mirror Images: Historical Details of Tang Dynasty Buddhism in the Luoyang Region,” in *Religions* 14, no. 12 (2023): 1493.

Appendix I: Overview of Donative Inscriptions at Longmen

Total numbered inscriptions identified at Longmen: 2862¹

1. Data of Donors

Donors	Total Amount	Dated Projects	Northern Dynasties	Tang Dynasty	Ratios of ND	Ratios of Tang
Female Donors (Only) ²	601	191	59	132	31%	69%
Collective Donors	125	77	19	57	25%	75%
Monks	154	69	38	31	55%	45%
Nuns	101	43	28	15	65%	35%
Laywomen	500	148	31	117	21%	79%
Family-sponsored Projects	846	385	135	250	35%	65%

¹ According to *Huilu*, there are 2852 numbered inscriptions plus 9 supplementary pieces, see Liu and Li, 1998, 648—650. In addition, I add a new discovered inscription from the Wanfogou area in 2017, which makes the latest total amount to 2862.

² Identifying male donors through inscriptions and projects is a more complex work without further information on their identities and social statuses, which requires much longer time to recognize their genders or distinguish them from those of other patrons. For this program, I focused on refining those female donors and their projects, as they offered relatively more critical data to shed light on Buddhist practices at Longmen during the Tang dynasty. I intend to explore male-exclusive projects in the next step of my research.

2. Data of Projects

Themes of the images	Total amount ³	Female donors (only)	Male donors (only)	Collective or Unknown	Ratio of female donors	Ratio of male donors
Amitābha Buddha	302	94	161	47	31%	53%
Maitreya	79	23	52	4	29%	65%
Avalokiteśvara (Guanyin)	239	86	121	32	36%	51%
Śākyamuni Buddha	124	43	74	7	35%	60%
Kṣitigarbha (Dizang)	43	13	29	1	30%	67%
Medicine Buddha	24	7	13	4	29%	54%
Burial Caves ⁴	6	4	2	0	67%	33%
Unknown and Other Themes	2112	359	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

³ With clear identification in the inscriptions, including the titles of the images or referring to the content according to the remaining characters.

⁴ For the donors of burial caves, I refer to the occupants who used the caves rather than those who excavated the caves as the primary donors of the projects to indicate the gender difference.

Appendix 2: Practices of Cave Burial in *Biographies* and *Continued Biographies*

	Name	Date	Teaching/School/Practice			Deathbed Ritual				Burial Methods			Affiliated Building	
			Scriptures (textual practice)	Mental cultivation (i.e., Austerity, Seclusion)	Rebirth Place (M: Maitreya; A: Amitabha; O: Others)	Predication and Preparation	Divine Visitors: Celestial Figures, Animals, Music and Fragrance	Wills of Cave Burial (or <i>Shituo lin</i>)	Incorruptible Body (Intact Body)	Existing (E) or New (N) ¹ Cave/Shrine	Sealed (S) or Open (O)	Position (S: sitting; L: lying down)	Stele	Stupa
1	Shan Daokai 單道開	? –359 CE (more than one hundred years)		√				√	√		O			
2	He Luojie 訶羅竭	? –291 CE		√					√	E	O	S		
3	Zhu Tanyou 竺曇猷	? –396 CE (approximate)		√					√	E	O	S		

¹ Usually refers to “鑿穴處之” or “鑿窟處之”

		time)												
4	Jizang 吉藏	549–623	Lotus Sutra 三論			√		√	√	E		S	√	
5	Zhilin 智琳	544–613	Lotus Sutra, Vimalakirti, Tattvasiddh i-śāstra and Vinaya		M (?)	√		√					√	√
6	Fakan 法侃	551–623	Shidi lun 十地論; Pusa dich jing; She dacheng lun 攝大乘 論	√						E (?) ²				
7	Sengfeng 僧鳳	562–638	Lotus Sutra		M	√				N			√	√
8	Huijun 慧頽	564–637	Vinaya	√		√				N			√	
9	Zhizheng 智正	559–639	Huayan							N			√	
10	Sengbian 僧辯	568–642	Shelun 攝 論, Zhongbian						√	N				

² The Matou Cave 馬頭穴 has already existed as a burial site in Tang, see Liu Shufen's discussion about the location (2000).

			中邊, Weishi 唯 識, etc.											
11	Faren 法忍	d.u. (67 yrs)	Lotus Sutra, Vimalakirti	√		√				E		L ³		
12	Zhiyi 智顛	538– 597/598	Lotus Sutra	√	A&M	√				N	S	S	√	√
13	Zhikai 智鑄	533–610	Nirvana Sutra, Lotus Sutra, <i>Shisong lü</i> (Sarvastiva da Vinaya)	√		√		√		E	S	S		
14	Fachun 法純	519–603	<i>Shidi lun</i> 十地論; Diamond Sutra, etc.	√	O ⁴	√	√		√(?) ⁵	N	O		√	
15	Daolin 道林	?–624		√		√	√		√	N		S		
16	Zhixi 智晞	556–628		√	M	√	√		√			S		

³ Lying down on his right side “右脅而終.”

⁴ Fachun wished to be reborn to the place where the Buddhist dharma has not covered yet “常願生無佛法處教化眾生”

⁵ The flesh of the body had been eaten by the birds and beasts, while the skeleton is undisturbed “身肉皆盡。而骸骨不亂”.

17	Huichao 慧超	(545- 554)– 624		√		√	√		√	N	O to S	S	√	√
18	Faxi 法喜	563–623	Lotus Sutra	√		√	√	√ ⁶	√ ⁷	N	O	S		
19	Dao'ang 道昂	594–663	Huayan, Di lun 地論	√	A	√	√		√	N	O	S		
20	Shiyu 世瑜	583–645	San lun 三 論	√		√	√		√	N	O	S		
21	Sengche 僧徹	d.u. 77 yrs		√		√			√		O	S	√	
22	Huikuan 惠寬 ⁸	584–653		√	A	√	√		√		O	S		
23	Jietuo 解脫	? –(650- 655)		√							O	S		
24	Fashun 法順	557–640	Huayan; She lun 攝 論	√		√	√		√	N	S ⁹			
25	Sengzhen 僧珍	d.u.		√		√	√	√						

⁶ Faxi's original wish was to expose his body to feed the animals. However, his disciples disobeyed his will and accommodated his body in a cave instead. “初平素之日歷巡山嶮。行見一處幽隱可為栖骸之所。命弟子示之。及其終後，寺僧屬其儀貌端峙。不忍行之。鑿山為窟將欲藏瘞。”

⁷ Faxi's body was partly eaten by the animals, with the part below his neck only has bones left. “遂舉其納衣，方見為物所噉，頭項已下枯骨鮮明。”

⁸ It does not say the burial method of Huikuan is cave burial. According to the description in his biography, we could infer he was buried on the top of a mountain, probably in the way of cave burial or exposing the body.

⁹ It seems the body of Fashun was first placed in a cave with the door opening, and then his disciples afraid that the body would be damaged from outside and hid it in a shrine. Therefore, it is probably Fashun was finally buried and sealed in a mountain shrine. See “鑿穴處之……恒有異香流氣屍所。學侶等恐有外侵。乃藏于龕內。”

26	Tongduli 通闍梨	d.u. (died after 659)				√		√		N	S	L		
27	Huixian 慧顯	ca. 570– 627	Lotus Sutra	√						E	O	S		√ ¹⁰
28	Huida 慧達	? –634	Lotus Sutra	√					√	E		S		
29	Huizhen 慧震	576–641	San lun 三 論			√	√					S		√
30	Zhenguan 真觀	538–611	Lotus Sutra; Nirvana Sutra	√		√	√		√		S ¹¹	S		
31	Huitong 會通		Self- Immolation											
	Burial Cave at Longmen	Date											Set up a Stele	Stupa Or Image
	Cave 1850 Lady Zhang	the beginnin g of the 8th							√ ¹²	N	S	L	√	

¹⁰ Huixian's body had been eaten up by the tiger, with only his tongue left. Afterwards, monastics and laity buried and sealed his tongue in a stone stupa. “虎噉身骨並盡，惟餘體舌存焉，經于三周其舌彌紅赤，柔軟勝常，過後方變紫鞭如石。道俗怪而敬焉，俱緘閉于石塔。”

¹¹ This meditation niche (禪龕) could be opened for his follower giving offerings in the fast. “隨次大齋開龕瞻奉而色相光潔。”

¹² The donor expressed the wish for Lady Zhang's body would not corrupt and become immortal. “載此靈龕，庶使幽容，長垂不朽”

		century												
Cave 159, N53, Lady Xiao	648 CE				A			√		E			√	√ ¹³
Cave 440, Lady Lou	661					√		√				S ¹⁴	√	√
Cave 1336, Nun Huideng	735		√			√			√	N	S (?)		√	
Cave 887, Nun Lingjue	732		√		A	√				N		L	√	
Cave 1 at Wanfogu, 萬佛 溝第 1 窟	Early Kaiyuan reign period				A						S	L	√	

¹³ Lady Xiao donated an image niche of the Amitabha Buddha and two bodhisattvas on the norther wall in the South Binyang Cave (Cave 159), “清信女蕭為亡兒孝子敬造阿彌陀佛一軀并二菩薩。願當來往生無量壽國，從今身見佛身，己業永斷生死業，不復為怨家眷屬。”

¹⁴ Zhang argues that according to the layout and interior space in Cave 440, Lady Lou should be buried in the sitting position. However, there is no other on-site evidence supports this inference. See Zhang, 1991, 161. I think this cave might be a similar cave as Shrine N53 in Cave 159, which is only an image shrine dedicated to the dead, but the body might have been buried on other place at Longmen, such as the East Hill 東山.

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