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An Analysis of the Fusion of Chinese and Foreign Elements in the Animal Motifs of the Yungang Grottoes from an Iconographic Perspective

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Abstract: The Yungang Grottoes are a prime example of imperial cave temples from the Northern Wei period and a precious testament to the eastward transmission of Buddhist art and its integration with the cultures of northern ethnic groups. Their animal motifs serve as a quintessential visual record of the cultural and artistic fusion between China and the outside world during the Northern and Southern Dynasties. Core motifs such as elephants, lions, and dragons are distributed across the grotto ceilings, lintel, Buddha thrones, and halos, embodying multiple values including Buddhist narrative, spatial decoration, and cultural symbolism. This paper adopts iconography as its core research method, combining stylistic analysis with typological comparison to trace the artistic characteristics and evolutionary trajectories of these three major animal motifs, and to analyze the nature of cultural fusion between China and the outside world. The study aims to fill the gap in systematic research on animal motifs in the Yungang Grottoes and to enrich the body of research on the art of the Yungang Grottoes.

Keywords: Iconography; Yungang Grottoes; Animal Motifs; Sino-Foreign Fusion

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

Cultural heritage represents the culmination of human civilization and serves as a vital repository of a nation's cultural memory. As a form of cultural heritage that embodies religious, artistic, and historical value, cave temples constitute an integral part of traditional Chinese culture. Inscribed on the World Heritage List in 2001, the Yungang Grottoes are the earliest surviving large-scale grotto complex in northern China commissioned by the imperial court. They constitute a history of dynasties and ethnic groups carved in stone, featuring unique regional characteristics, distinct historical features, and rich ethnic traits [1]. With 252 major surviving caves and over 51,000 statues, the Yungang Grottoes have established their classic status as the "first golden age of Chinese Buddhist art" through their grand scale, exquisite carving techniques, and unique artistic style. They possess exceptional academic research value, artistic and aesthetic value, and tourism development potential. The Yungang Grottoes feature a "four-tiered" protection structure (see Figure 1) , arranged from the innermost to the outermost as follows: the Statue Protection Zone, the Key Protection Area, the Protection Zone, and the Buffer Zone.

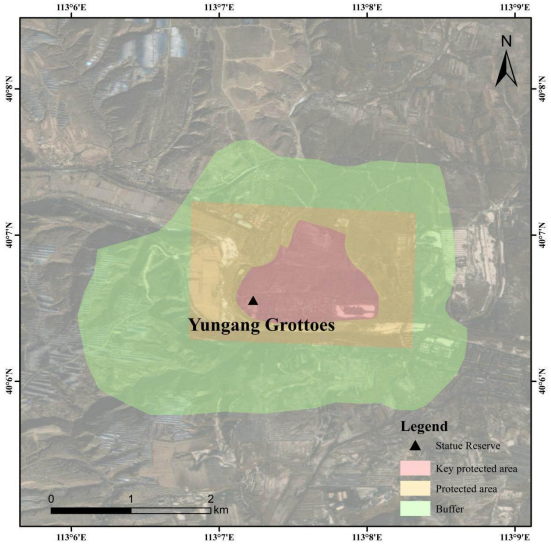


Figure 1. Map of the Research Area of the Yungang Grottoes

(Created by the author)

The decorative motifs and sculptural system of the Yungang Grottoes complement one another, forming a complete visual system of grotto art. Based on their themes, these decorative motifs can be divided into four major categories: plant motifs, animal motifs, human figure motifs, and geometric motifs. Existing research on the

Yungang Grottoes has largely focused on the chronological classification of sculptural styles, the provenance of plant motifs (such as honeysuckle and lotus patterns), and the interpretation of the grottoes' overall religious and cultural significance. In contrast, research on animal motifs has remained marginalized and fragmented; they are often mentioned only in passing as ancillary elements of Buddhist narrative paintings. There is a lack of iconographic analysis that systematically examines the form, content, and significance of major animal motif themes. Consequently, this paper employs iconography to explore the core value of animal motifs in the Yungang Grottoes and, through an analysis of their forms, elucidates the characteristics of their evolution.

1.2 Research Methods

"Tu" refers to a graphic image, while "xiang" refers to the meaning within that image; together, they constitute a metaphysical cultural concept expressed through the medium of "tu" [2]. Based on this, this paper focuses on the three core animal motifs-elephants, lions, and dragons-found in the Yungang Grottoes. These three motifs are widely distributed across the various spaces of the grottoes and possess rich, multifaceted symbolic meanings; they fully embody the core thread of the fusion between foreign Buddhist culture and indigenous Central Plains culture. Employing iconographic research methods and following a "description-analysis-interpretation" research logic, this paper systematically examines their stylistic details, semantic connotations, and essential significance, and elucidate the stylistic evolution across the early, middle, and late phases.

2. An Overview of Animal Motifs in the Yungang Grottoes

The Yungang Grottoes are located on the southern slopes of Mount Wuzhou in Datong City, Shanxi Province. Commissioned by Emperor Wencheng of the Northern Wei Dynasty and overseen by the monk Tan Yao, they are a product of the fusion between Buddhism and the political power of the Northern Wei. Their construction coincided with the Northern Wei's Sinicization reforms, and their artistic style can be divided into three periods: early, middle, and late. The early "Five Caves of Tan Yao" were influenced by Gandharan art, featuring a vigorous and unadorned style; the middle period blended foreign styles with Central Plains aesthetics, resulting in rich forms and a strong narrative quality; the late period, influenced by the relocation of the capital, shifted toward a style characterized by slender, refined figures, with ornamentation tending toward stylization.

The animal motifs of the Yungang Grottoes exist in conjunction with the architectural and sculptural spaces of the grottoes, serving as a vital component of the grotto's decorative system. They are interwoven with plant motifs, human figures, and geometric patterns to form a comprehensive visual decorative system (see Table 1).

Animal motifs, featuring typical themes such as elephants, lions, and dragons, serve as distinctive decorative elements. They are distributed across the cave ceilings, lintels, cornices, Buddha thrones, and border decorations, maintaining a close connection with the architectural structure. The choice of motifs varies depending on their decorative location [3]. In Buddhist narratives, they serve the important function of highlighting the theme and symbolizing Buddha-nature. Their stylistic features and semantic connotations evolved continuously alongside the Sinicization reforms of the Northern Wei dynasty and the evolution of artistic styles, forming distinct characteristics of the era and regional traits. Animal motifs are predominantly concentrated in the mid-period caves, while they are less common and relatively simplified in the early and late caves. Key distribution sites include Caves 6, 9, 10, and 48, among others. The spatial distribution of different motif themes exhibits distinct purposefulness: Elephant motifs are predominantly found in the central visual areas-such as the central pillar, the Buddha's throne, and the lintels of niches-where they serve a central narrative function in depicting the life of the Buddha; Lion motifs typically appear in pairs on either side of the Buddha's throne, as well as on door lintels and the edges of niche lintels, serving both as guardian deities and as spatial decorations; Dragon motifs have the widest distribution, appearing in virtually all decorative spaces-including cave ceilings, coffered ceilings, halos, and Buddha thrones-and serve as the core element of the cave's ornamentation.

From a thematic perspective, animal motifs in the grottoes fall into three categories: first, mythical creatures used to promote Buddhist culture, such as dragons, elephants, lions, deer, tigers, and Garudas; second, animals from everyday life,

including camels, oxen, sheep, horses, eagles, snakes, fish, pigs, and leopards [4]; and third, those appearing as decorative fillers. These three core motifs, on the one hand, promote the doctrine that all sentient beings possess Buddha-nature-even the "icchantika," whose roots are severed, can attain Buddhahood-and since animals are sentient beings, they too can attain Buddhahood [5]; on the other hand, they integrate the auspicious cultural traditions of the Central Plains with the nomadic culture of the Xianbei, serving as a vivid manifestation of the cultural fusion in the Northern Wei dynasty.

Table 1. Major Decorative Motifs and Their Characteristics in the Yungang Grottoes

Pattern Types	Central Theme	Main locations	Key Features	Artistic Characteristics
Animal motifs	Elephants, lions, dragons, garudas, and deer	Central pillar, Buddha throne, niche lintel, cave ceiling, aureole	Buddhist narratives, the protection of the Dharma, spatial decoration, and auspicious symbols	Styles have evolved with the times, blending Chinese and foreign elements to combine realism with ornamentation; the middle period is characterized by a strong narrative quality, while the late period is marked by stylization.
Botanical Motifs	Honeysuckle pattern, lotus pattern	Coffered ceilings, lintels, moldings, and Buddha thrones	Buddhist symbols, spatial accents, and decorative elements	The most numerous and widely used, their designs range from simple to intricate, blending foreign and Central Plains aesthetics
Figurative Motifs	Flying Apsaras, Musicians, Child Deities, Devotees, and Deva Donors	Ceiling, coffered ceiling, and decorative friezes above niches	Buddhist symbols, setting the mood, decorative accents	Often combined with floral and animal motifs, these designs are dynamic in form and reflect the evolution of the Northern Wei aesthetic style.
Geometric patterns	Bead pattern, triangle pattern, swastika pattern, checkerboard pattern	Borders, backgrounds, and dividing lines	Defining spaces, dividing the frame, and coordinating decor	With their simple design, these patterns are often used as secondary motifs; beaded patterns frequently reflect cultural exchanges between China and other countries.

Table 2. Comparison Table of Basic Characteristics of Animal Motifs in Similar Cave Temples in China and Abroad

Name of the Grotto	Region/Period	Core Animal Motifs	Cultural Significance	Artistic medium	Key Features
Yungang Grottoes	China Northern Wei	Elephants, lions, and dragons	Buddhist Narratives + Imperial Authority + Auspicious Signs of the Central Plains	Focusing on stone carvings	Distinctively regal, blending Eastern and Western elements, and highly narrative
Longmen Grottoes	China Northern Wei–Tang Dynasty	Lion, Dragon	Buddhist Protectors + Secular Blessings + Royal Authority	Stone carvings, bas-reliefs	Distinctly folk in character, with Central Plains aesthetics taking the lead
Mogao Caves	China Northern Dynasties – Tang Dynasty	Lion, Deer, Garuda	Buddhist Symbolism + Central Asian Nomadic Culture	Murals, clay sculptures	Cultural Diversity and Integration Along the Silk Road
Maijishan Grottoes	China Northern Dynasties	Lions, Dragons, and Mythical Beasts	Buddhist Guardian Deities + Local Auspicious Symbols	Clay sculpture	Unique materials with distinct folk aesthetic characteristics
Gandhara Grottoes	Pakistan/ Afghanistan The Kushan	Elephants, lions	Buddhist Protectors + Persian Royalty	Stone Carving	A fusion of Hellenistic and Indian styles, with a singular religious

	Dynasty				focus
Bamiyan Caves	Afghanistan Kushan–Sassanid Period	Birds, lions, pigs, horses	Buddhist Guardian Deities + Central Asian Culture	Stone carvings, murals	Characteristics of the Silk Road as a Transit Route

A comparison with the Longmen Grottoes, the Mogao Caves, and the Maijishan Grottoes in China, as well as the Gandhara and Bamiyan grottoes abroad (see Table 2), reveals that the animal motifs in the Yungang Grottoes combine imperial characteristics with syncretic elements. They preserve the forms of foreign Buddhist art while incorporating local cultural connotations, thereby forming a unique artistic style.

Overall, the animal motifs of the Yungang Grottoes not only preserve the artistic heritage of foreign Buddhist traditions but also deeply integrate Central Plains culture and imperial aspirations, forming a clearly defined trajectory of localization. They stand as a quintessential example of cultural exchange between China and the outside world. The stylistic evolution of these animal motifs not only reflects the process of localization in Buddhist art during the Northern Wei period but also embodies the aesthetic preferences and cultural needs of the society at that time.

3. An Iconographic Analysis of Key Animal Motifs in the Yungang Grottoes

3.1 Elephant Motifs: The Core Visual Medium of Buddhist Narratives

Since the introduction of Buddhism to China, the elephant has been regarded as a sacred beast in Buddhist tradition; as we know, the mount of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva is a white elephant [6]. Elephant motifs are the most narrative-driven theme among the animal decorations found in grottoes, appearing predominantly in mid-period caves, where the overall style shifted from a realistic, heavy-handed approach to a more stylized and graceful one.

Mid-period elephant motifs are divided into two categories: the stupa-bearing type and the mount type. The stupa-bearing elephants (see Figure 2) have sturdy bodies and are depicted in compositions where the elephant carries a stupa or a lotus throne, corresponding to the Jataka tale of the Elephant King and symbolizing the Buddha's patience and compassion. The mount-type elephant motifs (see Figure 3) are combined with human figures to depict scenes from the Buddha's life, such as "the Prince's Conception" and "the Return to the Palace," exhibiting distinct narrative characteristics.

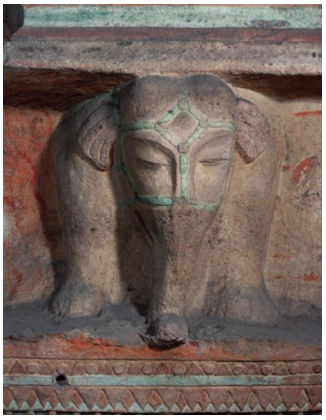


Figure 2. Elephant Beneath the Third-tier Stupa Base at the Western End of the South Wall of Cave 5

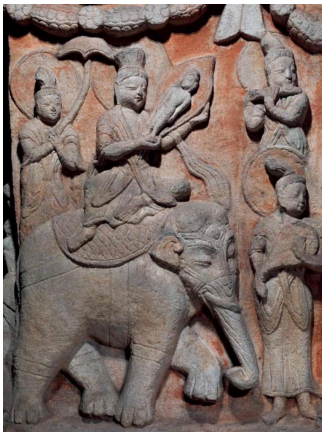


Figure 3. Cave 6: The Prince Returns to the Palace

In the late period, the elephant-pattern motifs became simplified and less dynamic, with a distinct emphasis on delicate, ethereal forms. The narrative function depicting the life of the Buddha diminished, while the secular connotations of auspiciousness and blessings were strengthened, transforming these motifs into decorative accents within the cave spaces (see Figure 4).

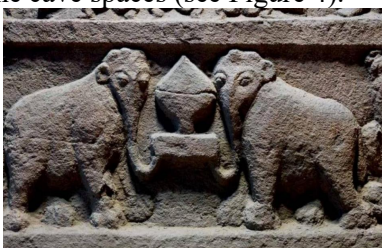


Figure 4. In the Center of the Plinth on the West Wall of Cave 35-1, Two Large Elephants Support a Bho-shan Incense Burner

Table 3. Comparison Table of Elephant Motifs in the Yungang Grottoes and Those in Chinese and Foreign Grottoes

Comparison Group	Cultural Origins and Influences	Form and Technique	Functions and Meaning	Artistic Characteristics
Gandhara Grottoes	Ancient Indian Buddhist Art, Influenced by Hellenistic Culture	Realistic sculpture with defined muscle lines, featuring relatively few narrative or dynamic elements	Focuses on religious expression, with no connotations of royal authority	The style is realistic and strongly religious.
Mogao Caves	Rich in the characteristics of Western Region Buddhist art	The designs tend to be decorative and are often paired with auspicious creatures such as deer and garudas.	Primarily decorative	Highly adaptable, but lacks the ability to stand alone
Longmen Grottoes	During the Tang Dynasty, Central Plains culture dominated, and Buddhist art became secularized.	There are very few elephant motifs, and their designs are simplified.	It serves primarily as a decorative element representing the Dharma protectors, with limited narrative function in the Buddha's life story.	Limited functionality, low visibility
Yungang Grottoes	The Foundations of Gandhāra Art + Northern Wei Imperial Culture	Maintaining realism while embodying a bold and majestic style, with dynamic forms integrated into the scene	A central medium for Buddhist narratives, embodying religious significance, auspicious blessings, and the protection of royal authority	The Trinity of Narrative, Religious, and Secular Elements

A comparison of Chinese and foreign grottoes (see Table 3) reveals that Gandhāra elephant motifs emphasize realism and religious expression, whereas elephant motifs in other Chinese grottoes either serve a single function or have a relatively weak presence. The elephant motifs in the Yungang Grottoes, while inheriting Gandhāra's realistic sculptural techniques and unique stylistic approach [7], also incorporate Northern Wei imperial culture, integrating religious narratives, secular auspicious symbols, and emblems of royal authority into a single form, making their artistic characteristics highly representative.

3.2 Dragon Motifs: A Central Element of the Yungang Grottoes' Decorative Art

Dragon motifs are the most widespread and stylistically diverse decorative elements in the Yungang Grottoes. Evolving from the traditional dragon culture of the Central Plains, they fully preserve the traditional "nine resemblances" of dragon form. Their style has undergone an evolution from rustic solemnity and spirited grandeur to ethereal fluidity, embodying multiple layers of meaning, including ascension to immortality, blessings, the protection of Buddhist teachings, and the symbolism of royal authority. For example, the image of a dragon-shaped necklace preserved in the Yungang Grottoes (see Figure 5) is believed to carry two layers of meaning: first, it highlights the protective role of the Dragon King; second, it emphasizes the Dragon King's devout act of offering a jewel to the Bodhisattva [8]; The specific "intertwined dragon" motifs found in the Yungang Grottoes serve not merely as decoration, but reflect the artists' deliberate effort to depict the grotto scenes as a celestial realm, thereby endowing the Buddhist statues with divine status. These motifs reveal a distinct Sinicized manifestation of the divine status of early Buddhist statues [9]; Furthermore, the "looking-back dragon" is the most common dragon motif in the Yungang Grottoes. The use of the looking-back dragon form as a niche lintel decoration represents an innovation of the Yungang Grottoes and is also a result of cultural exchange between China and the outside world. The creative inspiration for this design stems from jade ornaments in the shape of a huang (a type of ceremonial pendant) featuring twin dragon heads, which date back 5,000 to 6,000 years to the Hongshan Culture[10].



Figure 5. Dragon-shaped Ornament on the Chest of the Principal Figure on the North Wall of Cave 17

Early dragon motifs primarily featured chi-headed dragons and dragons looking back, characterized by simple forms, bold lines, and a distinctly static quality. These designs were used to evoke a celestial atmosphere and symbolize imperial authority (see Figure 6). During the middle period, dragon motifs reached their artistic peak, featuring dynamic and varied forms. They were often combined with flying apsaras and plant motifs, seamlessly integrating the themes of divine protection, blessings, and the assertion of royal authority (see Figure 7). In the late period, dragon motifs featured more fluid lines and a diminished sense of grandeur, primarily serving functions of spatial decoration and secular blessings.

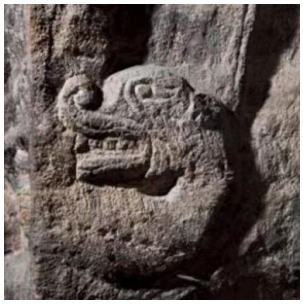


Figure 6. On the Left Side of the Third Niche on the Eastern End of the South Wall of Cave 17, a Dragon's Head at the End of the Arch Looks Back

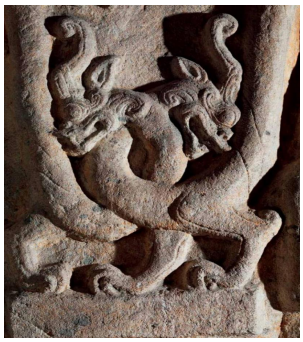


Figure 7. Two Niches on the Third Level of the West Wall in the Rear Chamber of Cave 7, Featuring Dragons with Intertwined Heads and Tails

Table 4. Comparison Table of Dragon Motifs in the Yungang Grottoes and Those in Chinese and Foreign Grottoes

Comparison Group	The Foundations of Dragon-Motif Culture	Stylistic Characteristics	Functionality	Artistic Characteristics
outside the territory	There is no indigenous dragon-pattern culture; only a few serpentine and animal-shaped mythical creatures remain.	There is no dragon-inspired design in the true sense of the word	Cultural Significance of the Absence of Dragon Motifs	No established artistic tradition of dragon motifs
Mogao Caves	Infused with Buddhist culture and rich in Western Regions characteristics	Distorted and exaggerated shapes	Used solely as a decorative element; it is not a symbol of royal authority.	The evolution of the style is relatively limited
Longmen Grottoes	Fully assimilated into Central China	Graceful lines and a delicate figure	The symbolic significance of Buddhist guardian deities and royal authority has diminished, transforming them into secular symbols of good fortune	A strong emphasis on secular aesthetics
Maijishan Grottoes	Based on folk aesthetics	The design is simple yet dynamic	Distinctive folk aesthetic characteristics	Primarily clay sculptures, simple and rustic
Yungang Grottoes	Rooted in the dragon culture of the Central Plains, it incorporates Buddhist culture	It features the signature design of the Central Plains Dragon, exuding	Retaining the concepts of ascension to immortality and royal authority, while incorporating elements of	Local culture and Buddhist culture blend seamlessly and give rise to

		grandeur and a sense of depth.	Buddhist dharma protectors	innovation

Cave temples outside China lack a fully developed system of dragon motifs, while dragon motifs in other domestic cave temples either exhibit a pronounced Western Region style or are overly secularized. The dragon motifs at Yungang are rooted in the dragon culture of the Central Plains and incorporate Buddhist elements, achieving a deep fusion of local culture and foreign artistic traditions (see Table 4).

3.3 The Lion Motif: From Guardian Beast to Local Symbol of Good Fortune

Lion motifs appear throughout the early, middle, and late phases of the grottoes, often appearing in pairs on Buddha thrones, lintels, and other locations. Their overall evolutionary trajectory is clear: starting as realistic guardian beasts from foreign cultures, they gradually underwent a process of localization, ultimately evolving into traditional auspicious beasts of the Central Plains, with their style shifting from robust realism to delicate stylization.

Early lion motifs were deeply influenced by foreign art, featuring bold, angular forms and serving solely as guardian deities (see Figure 8). In the middle period, lion motifs incorporated Central Plains decorative elements, such as necklaces and honeysuckle patterns, retaining their guardian function while adding connotations of auspiciousness and blessings (see Figure 9). In the late period, lion motifs became smaller in scale with simplified details; their guardian attributes were diminished, and they fully transformed into decorative auspicious beasts (see Figure 10).

A comparison of cave art from China and abroad (see Table 5) reveals that lion motifs from outside China tend to have a narrow range of meanings and a fixed style, while those in other domestic caves lack sufficient localization. The lion motifs at Yungang underwent a gradual artistic transformation, serving as a prime example of the localization of Buddhist motifs during the Northern Dynasties.

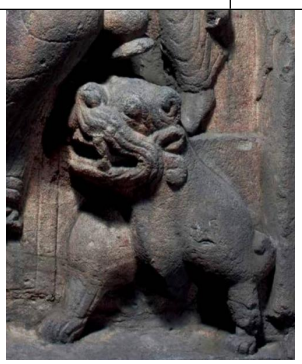


Figure 8. The Lion to the Left of the Principal Figure in the Right Niche of the Third Tier of the Three-niche Unit on the Central Section of the South Wall of Cave 16

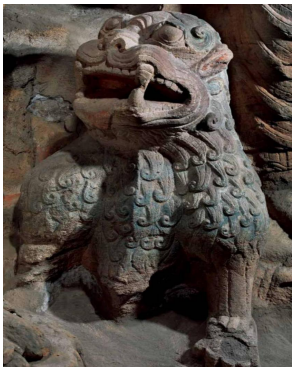


Figure 9. The Lion to the Left of the Principal Bodhisattva's Throne in the Upper Niche on the North Wall of the Rear Chamber of Cave 7

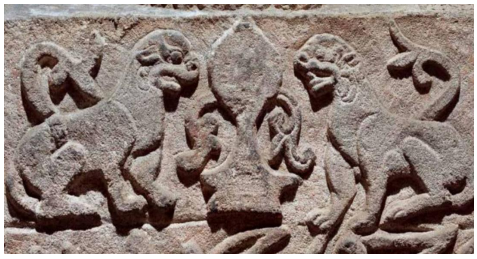


Figure 10. The Decorative Band in the Central Panel of the Second Row on the First Level of the West Wall of Cave 15 Features a Pair of Supporting Lions

(Note: Figures 2–10 are taken from Complete Works of Yungang Grottoes, Edited by Zhang Zhuo)

Table 5. Comparison Table of Lion Motifs in the Yungang Grottoes and Those in Chinese and Foreign Grottoes

Comparison subjects	Origins and Style	Functionality	Levels of Evolution	Artistic Characteristics
Gandhara Grottoes	The Early Core Origins of Yungang	A Single Buddhist Guardian Beast	Lacks local integration; style is rigid	Realistic, muscular, and imposing
Bamiyan Caves	Rugged and powerful, with distinct	Auxiliary Decorations in Cave	Lack of a sense of progression	Western Regions Tribal Style

	characteristics of Western Region tribal culture	Architecture		
Mogao Caves	Rich in Western Region characteristics, with a dynamic design	Highly decorative, but offers limited protection	No complete history	Western-style decor is highly decorative
Longmen Grottoes	Fully influenced by Central Plains art, with flowing lines and a graceful form	The transformation into a mythical beast is complete, and the ritual is rich in secular blessings.	Complete Sinicization	Highly urbanized
Maijishan Grottoes	Soft and minimalist, with a distinct folk aesthetic	It has a strong focus on secular, folk-based blessings	The Royal Grottoes have relatively few distinctive features	Characteristics of Folk Clay Sculpture
Yungang Grottoes	Gradual localization, bold and majestic, blending strength and grace	Preserving the essence of the guardian deities while incorporating the auspicious symbolism of the Central Plains	Early-stage transplantation → Mid-stage modification → Late-stage transformation into a mythical beast, progressing step by step	The most striking blend of Chinese and foreign elements, and the most typical path of localization

4. Conclusions and Outlook

Using iconography as its core research method, this study examines the artistic characteristics and cultural context of the Northern Wei imperial grottoes at the Yungang Grottoes. It systematically surveys the overall profile of animal motifs in these grottoes, clarifying the artistic trajectory of these motifs across the early, middle, and late phases as they evolved alongside the Northern Wei's Sinicization reforms and the process of Buddhist localization. Focusing on the three core motifs-elephant, lion, and dragon-the study conducts a comprehensive iconographic analysis ranging from formal description and stylistic analysis to the interpretation of cultural significance, thereby filling a gap in systematic research on animal motifs in the Yungang Grottoes.

The study confirms that the animal motifs of the Yungang Grottoes represent a visual crystallization of the deep integration between the eastward transmission of Buddhist art during the Northern Wei period and the culture of northern ethnic groups. From the early transplantation of motifs from foreign art such as Gandhara, to the mid-period transformation of forms and the superimposition of cultural connotations, and finally to the late-period development of localization and stylization, these motifs not only retained the core characteristics of foreign Buddhist art but also integrated the aesthetic connotations of Central Plains Han culture and the symbols of imperial power of the Northern Wei royal family, forming a unique artistic style that blends Eastern and Western elements, is highly narrative, and prominently features imperial authority. Among these, the elephant motif, serving as the central visual vehicle for the narrative of the Buddha's life, achieved a trinity of religious, secular, and imperial authority; the dragon motif, rooted in the indigenous culture of the Central Plains and fused with the Buddhist concept of protective deities, became a core element of cave decoration; and the lion motif underwent a gradual transformation from a foreign guardian beast to a local auspicious creature, representing a quintessential manifestation of the localization of Buddhist art. The stylistic evolution and conceptual development of these three core motifs collectively reflect the shifts in socio-political structures, religious beliefs, and aesthetic orientations during the Northern Wei period, while also affirming the cultural significance of the Yungang Grottoes as a pivotal hub for the eastward transmission of Buddhist art along the Silk Road.

This study conducted a systematic iconographic analysis of core animal motifs but still has certain limitations: it focuses solely on the three motifs of elephants, lions, and dragons, with insufficient exploration of other animal motifs; the analysis of the connection between these motifs and

Northern Wei society, culture, and foreign exchanges requires further deepening; and it has not conducted in-depth verification of the motifs' backgrounds and transmission pathways using multidisciplinary empirical materials.

Future research can be further deepened and expanded from multiple dimensions: First, the scope of research should be expanded to conduct a systematic iconographic analysis of all animal motifs in the Yungang Grottoes, establishing a comprehensive research framework to clarify the internal connections and overall artistic characteristics of various motif types. Second, interdisciplinary research should be strengthened by integrating perspectives from archaeology, history, and folklore to deeply explore the socio-cultural implications of these motifs within the Northern Wei period, and to clarify their transmission pathways and patterns of localization. Finally, we will strengthen empirical research by combining archaeological excavation data with Northern Wei textual records to accurately verify the creation dates and artisan groups associated with the motifs, thereby enhancing the objectivity and persuasiveness of our research conclusions.

The animal motifs of the Yungang Grottoes embody the artistic wisdom and cultural memory of the Northern Wei dynasty and represent a precious legacy of China's outstanding traditional culture. Conducting systematic iconographic research on these motifs will allow for a deeper exploration of the artistic value of the Yungang Grottoes and elucidate the process of ethnic cultural integration and the localization of Buddhist art during the Northern Dynasties. By analyzing and interpreting the core animal motifs, this study provides insights and references for future research, thereby contributing to the interpretation and preservation of the cultural charm of the Yungang Grottoes.

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