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A Canon of Oriental Incomplete Beauty: The Exquisite Colored Sculptures Unearthed at the Yongning Temple Pagoda Site of the Northern Wei Dynasty in Luoyang

Gong Dazhong

Abstract

The artifacts unearthed from the site of Yongning Temple of the Northern Wei Dynasty in Luoyang, Henan, are most representative of colored sculptures and architectural components. Among them, the small figurine sculptures are the most exquisite, often displaying graceful, serene expressions, with a delicate elegance and tranquility. Their expressions, embodying joy that arises from within and a subtle, wordless smile, leave a powerful visual and emotional impact, transporting one to a serene and transcendent state of mind. The wooden pagoda of Yongning Temple is also a model of Northern Wei Buddhist architecture. Inspired by this pagoda, Empress Wu Zetian of the Wu Zhou Dynasty later commissioned the construction of the Heaven (Maitreya's Tusita Palace) in the capital Luoyang, creating two of the world's most astonishing ancient wonders. Though the colored sculptures and the wooden pagoda base unearthed from Yongning Temple are incomplete, they still allow us to glimpse the exquisite craftsmanship of the sculptures and the unparalleled architecture.

Key Words

Yongning Temple, Luoyang, colored sculptures, Buddhism, beauty of incompleteness

After Emperor Xiaowen of the Northern Wei Dynasty relocated the capital from Pingcheng (modern-day Datong, Shanxi) to Luoyang, the trend of excessive Buddhist worship and temple construction flourished, with over a thousand Buddhist temples constructed within the city of Luoyang during the reigns of Emperors Xuanwu, Xiaoming, and Empress Dowager Hu. Among those, the imperial Yongning Temple stood as the national temple of the Northern Wei Dynasty. The main structure at the heart of the Yongning Temple was a nine-story wooden pagoda adorned with exquisite clay sculptures of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, disciples, monks, nuns, and secular figures of men and women offering donations, their craftsmanship and their beauty.¹ However, after standing tall for eighteen years in the heartland of China, the wooden pagoda of Yongning Temple was destroyed by lightning and fire. Excavation of the ruins of the wooden pagoda, which has weathered over 1,480 years of storms and trials, has yielded colored sculptures buried after the fire. Although incomplete, with heads separated

from bodies and hundreds of shadow puppet-like head sculptures, these excavated clay figures often presented an “ancient style” smile, brimming with vibrant artistic



Figure 1. The remains of the Yongning Temple pagoda base before excavation (east-west).



Figure 2. The excavated Yongning Temple pagoda base (south-north).

vitality. Suppose the stone sculptures unearthed from ancient Greek and Roman ruins represent the solemn and grandiose Western beauty of incomplete forms pursuing a sense of volume—in that case, the colored sculptures of the Yongning Temple embody the intoxicating Eastern beauty of incompleteness, overflowing with soul-stirring charm.

This begins with the Yongning Temple and its wooden pagoda. Fujun Sima Yang Xuanzhi of the Northern Wei Dynasty recorded in the *Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Luoyang* under the section “Within the City” (《洛陽伽藍記·城內》): “Yongning Temple was established by Empress Dowager Hu of the Ling Dynasty in the first year of Xiping (516 AD). It is located one mile south of the Changhe Gate in front of the palace and to the west of the imperial road. To the east of the temple lies the Taiwei Fu, and to the west lies Yongkang Li, bordered by Zhaoxuan Cao to the south and adjacent to the Yushi Tai to the north... In its center stands a nine-story floating pagoda constructed of wood, towering ninety Zhang (丈) high. The top of the tower above is another ten Zhang high, totaling up to a thousand Chi (尺) above the ground. The tower could be seen from a hundred miles from the capital...at its apex is a golden treasure vase capable of holding twenty-five Shi (an ancient Chinese unit of volume). Below the treasure

vase are thirty layers of golden plates, each adorned with hanging gold bells and four iron chains connecting the pagoda to the floating structure. At each corner of the floating pagoda, there are also gold bells, each the size of a stone urn. The pagoda has nine levels, with gold bells hanging at every corner, totaling one hundred and twenty bells. It has four faces, each with three doors and six windows painted in vermilion. The window frames have five rows of gold nails, and the twelve doors and twenty-four windows together have five thousand four hundred pieces. Additionally, gold rings are adorning the roof corners. The labor and craftsmanship involved were extraordinary. The Buddha’s affairs were exquisite and unimaginable. Embroidered pillars and gold paving were stunning to the eye. Even in the high winds of eternal night, the harmonious sound of the bells could be heard for over ten miles. To the north of the pagoda is a Buddha Hall, resembling a Taiji Hall. Inside is a standing golden statue eight feet tall, ten medium-sized golden statues, and three embroidered pearl statues...the craftsmanship was exceptional, surpassing all others of the time.” “When the decoration was completed, Emperor Ming and the Empress Dowager ascended it together. From the top, the palace appeared as if in the palm of one’s hand, and the capital city resembled a household. Because the pagoda was high enough to peer into the palace, the emperor

ordered that unprovoked ascents of the pagoda were forbidden. Yang Xuanzhi once ascended it with the Prefect of Henan, Hu Xiaoshi. They looked down upon the clouds and rain from the top, a sight truly not in vain. At that time, there were monks from the Western Regions, such as the Bodhidharma and Hu people (traditionally considered to be from South India). They arose from barren lands to travel through the Central Plains. They saw the golden plates shining under the sun, illuminating the clouds, the treasure bells carrying the wind, producing sounds beyond the heavens. They sang praises, marveling at what seemed to be divine craftsmanship. Bodhidharma said, ‘I am one hundred and fifty years old and have traveled through various countries. There is almost no place I have not visited. But this Yongning Temple is exquisite and magnificent, unrivaled in the world, and I am afraid that even the Elysium has nothing like it.’” “They then continuously chanted ‘na mo’ (a gesture of respect and submission to the Buddha) with joined palms for days.” The phrase “Yongning Floating Pagoda, where the divine images are enshrined” in *Wei Shu-Linghui Zhi* (《魏書·靈徵志》) indicates that Buddha statues were enshrined inside the wooden pagoda niche. Zen monks “must first contemplate the statues before meditating, as entering the pagoda is necessary.”

This royal project brought together elites from various fields to collaborate. The *Wei Shu-Zhangyi Zhuan* (《魏書·張熠傳》) states: “The Yongning Temple Pagoda was greatly built, with extensive operations. Empress Dowager Ling once visited there, and whenever there were consultations, Zhangyi would eloquently explain and illustrate without omission, which pleased the Empress Dowager.” The *Wei Shu-Shuyi Zhuan* (《魏書·術藝傳》) mentions: “During the reigns of Emperor Xiaozong and Emperor Suzong, the people of Yuzhou, Liu Jian, General of the Palace Guards Guan Wenbei, and Guo Anxing were all skilled craftsmen. In Luoyang, they constructed the nine-story floating tower of Yongning Temple, with Anxing as the craftsman.” The *Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Luoyang* under the section “Within the City” also states: “The imperial secretary Chang Jing was appointed to inscribe the temple stele.” From these records, it is known that Empress Dowager Ling personally supervised the project, Zhang Yi served as the chief engineer, Guo Anxing designed the wooden pagoda, and Chang Jing wrote the inscriptions.

In the third year of Yongxi during the reign of Emperor Xiaowu (534 AD), the wooden pagoda was struck by lightning and burned down. “The fire lasted for three months without extinguishing, and smoke rose from the ground even after a year.” The once grand pagoda

collapsed and disappeared from the world.

The structure of the wooden pagoda of Yongning Temple is a combination of Indian-style Buddhist stupas and traditional Chinese multi-story wooden architectural buildings, belonging to the category of square multi-story wooden structures. The *Wei Shu-Shilao Zhi* (《魏書·釋老志》) states: “In the first year of Tian’an (476 AD), ...that year, Emperor Gaozu (Xiaowen) was born. Then, Yongning Temple was built, with seven levels of Buddha figures, over 300 Chi tall, with a spacious base, ranking as the first in the world.” Li Daoyuan, the Supervisor of the Imperial Censors of Northern Wei, in his *Shui Jing-Gushui Zhu* (《水經·穀水注》) pointed out that the Yongning Temple Pagoda in Luoyang “was modeled after the seven levels of the capital (Pingcheng) but made even taller and broader.” In the first year of Tian’an, Cao Tiandu imitated the seven-level floating Pagoda of Pingcheng to create a small-scale stone-carved Thousand Buddha square pagoda,² which served as a reference for the design of the Yongning Temple wooden pagoda. There are various calculations for the total height of the Yongning Temple Pagoda. Fan Xiangyong, in his annotated edition of *Notes to the Book of Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Luoyang* (《洛陽伽藍記校注》) believes that in *Shui Jing-Gushui Zhu* “from the Golden Dew Plate down to the ground, forty-nine Zhang” and in *Wei Shu-Shilao Zhi* “the nine-level Buddha figure of Yongning Temple is over forty Zhang tall” are reliable. Mr. Yang Hongxun designed a restoration drawing of the Yongning Temple wooden pagoda, and also believes that the records in *Shui Jing Zhu*, “not only provide specific numbers, but also specify the beginning and end of this



Figure 3. In the first year of Tian an of the Northern Wei Dynasty (466 AD), Cao Tiandu built a nine-story stone pagoda.

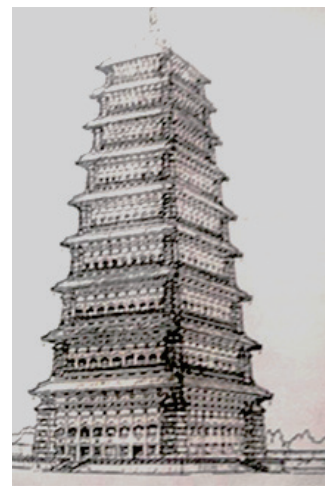


Figure 4. Mr. Yang Hongxun designed the restoration drawing of the Yongning Temple pagoda.

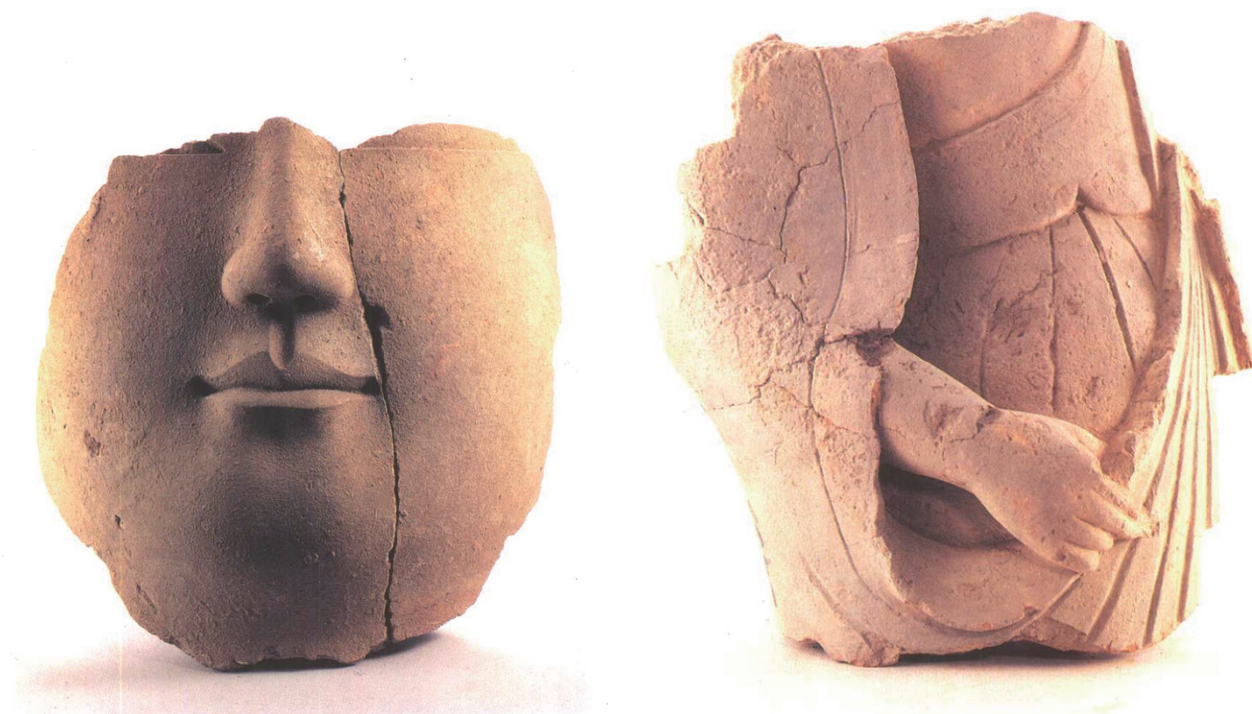


Figure 5. Large and medium-sized sculptures: fragments of female facial features and partial body statues.

height range, suggesting that it was measured.” *Yongning Temple of the Northern Wei Dynasty in Luoyang* also suggests that “*Shui Jing Zhu* may be more reliable.” If calculated according to 1 Wei Chi being 27.9 cm, 49 Zhang equals 136.7 m, plus the tower spire according to Mr. Yang Hongxun’s 5 Zhang totaling 13.95 m, the total height of the wooden pagoda could reach 150.65 m.

The ruins of the Yongning Temple pagoda were identified by Gong Songlin, the magistrate of Luoyang during the Qing Dynasty, as the mausoleum of Emperor Zhidi of the Eastern Han Dynasty, and a mausoleum stele was erected. In the twenty-fourth year of the Republic of China (1935), Li Jianren, an instructor at the Luoyang Seventh Branch of the Central Military Academy of the Kuomintang, wrote in *Discussions on Ancient and Modern Luoyang* (《洛陽古今談》): “It seems that Gong Songlin’s assessment was mistaken, and the shape of the mausoleum suggests it belongs to the Song Dynasty.”³ In the spring of 1963, drilling began at the site of the Yongning Temple. Between March and May 1979, the base of the wooden pagoda was excavated, revealing tunnels dug by tomb raiders who mistakenly believed it to be an imperial tomb. The wooden pagoda was built on a rammed earth foundation measuring approximately 100m square, with a square base measuring about 38.2m on each side and 2.2m high, filled with rammed earth and lined with green stones on all four walls. Mandao stairs

were placed on all four platform sides for access. The bottom layer of the wooden pagoda consisted of 124 square pillars measuring 0.5m each, arranged in five rings to form a square pillar network. Three stone bases, each 1.8m thick, were stacked beneath the square pillars to enhance stability. The outer ring of eave pillars consisted of ten pillars on each side, with earth walls 1.1m thick between them. Based on the current condition of the remaining walls and white lime floors, the arrangement of “three gates (or doors) and six windows” mentioned in the annotated edition of the *Notes to the Book of Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Luoyang* was found. Inside the fourth ring of bright pillars, mud bricks were used to form a solid body mixed with wooden pillars. A corridor style hall was formed between the eave pillars and the bright pillars. The solid body was 20m wide, with a remaining height of 3.7m. Five arched niches for Buddhas were built on the solid body’s southeast, southwest, and northwest walls. The innermost ring consisted of sixteen central pillars, arranged in four groups, forming a strong central pillar network. The central pillars were charred and collapsed under the high temperature of lightning strikes, causing the collapse of the pagoda layer by layer.

The artifacts unearthed from the Yongning Temple site are extremely rich, including various colored sculptures, fragments of murals, building materials, and other cultural relics. Among them, the colored sculptures and



Figure 6. Medium-sized sculpture: fragmented head of a woman with a traditional bun hairstyle.



Figure 7. Small-sized sculptures: busts of disciples Mahākāśyapa or Ānanda.

architectural components are significant discoveries in the archaeology of Northern Wei Dynasty art. A total of more than 1,560 colored sculptures were unearthed from the site, mainly around the base of the pagoda, almost all of which are fragments or pieces, and are mostly made of clay. Due to the destruction of the wooden pagoda by fire, many colored sculptures were burnt into shades of brick red or grayish-blue, becoming terracotta sculptures. A few were burnt into nodules; the original bright colors have severely faded, making it impossible to see their

original appearance. There are many types of colored sculptures, including Buddha statues for the niches in the core of the pagoda, relief sculptures on the walls of the core, donor figures, pedestals, niche decorations, and other ornaments. Buddha and Bodhisattva statues and donor figures can be categorized into three types: large, medium, and small, with the smallest relief sculptures being the most exquisite.

Large-sized Buddha, Bodhisattva, and disciple sculptures, including life-size and larger-than-life-size



Figure 8. Shadow relief sculpture: bust of a woman donor with a traditional bun hairstyle.



Figure 9. Shadow relief sculpture: bust of a woman with a traditional bun hairstyle.



Figure 10. Shadow relief sculpture: bust of a crowned man.

statues, are all fragments of heads, bodies, hands, feet, and clothing patterns. Among them, there are fifty-four

head pieces, twenty body pieces, and forty-five clothing items; medium-sized Bodhisattva and donor sculptures,



Figure 11. Shadow relief sculpture: bust of a crowned man.



Figure 12. Shadow relief sculpture: bust of a crowned man.



Figure 13. Shadow relief sculpture: bust of a crowned man.

ranging from 1.3m to 1.4m in height, with shorter ones around 1 m, all consist of fragments of heads, necks,

torsos, hands, feet, shoes, and clothing patterns. Among them, there are sixty-nine head pieces and 209 clothing



Figure 14. Shadow relief sculpture: standing statues in bodhisattva and secular clothing.

items. Small-sized Buddha, Bodhisattva, disciple, and donor sculptures, mostly around 50cm in height, all consist of fragments of heads, necks, torsos, hands, feet, shoes, and floral patterns. Among them are fifteen head pieces, ninety-one body pieces, and eighty-eight clothing items; the smallest shadow puppet-like figures, around 20cm in height with separated heads and bodies, include 104 head pieces and 338 body pieces. The shadow puppet heads depict disciples (monks), women with hair buns as donors, elderly and young male donors wearing various types of hats (such as small hats, Jinxian hats, cage hats, tall hats, triangular hats, cup-shaped hats, helmets, etc.), as well as figures with small hats and tied turbans resembling Hu people styles. The clothing of the sculptures is mainly in a sinicized style with robes and belts, which can be summarized as seated statues (sitting or kneeling, with the hems of the robes tucked under the knees and buttocks), standing statues (Buddha, Bodhisattva, donors, and various figures wearing Liangdang or Hu clothing), and unconventional statues (bare-chested, wearing long skirts, with slightly curved

bodies resembling the “乙” character, likely representing flying apsaras); The sculptures are adorned with accessories such as halos, pedestals, niche decorations, lotus leaves, lotus buds, lotus flowers, tree trunks, leaves, and various animal fragments, totaling 270 pieces. Additionally, there are over 250 fragments of murals. Among them, the colored sculptures of figures are particularly gentle, elegant, and serene, with expressions of joy and silent smiles, giving viewers a strong visual impact and spiritual resonance, as if entering a realm of tranquility and transcendence. I remember thirty-six years ago when I accompanied Professor Luo Gongliu, vice president of the Central Academy of Fine Arts (my alma mater), and Professor Hou Yimin, a renowned oil painter, to the Archaeological Research Station of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Luoyang to admire the unearthed colored sculptures from Yongning Temple; Xu Jingyuan, the station master, made an exception and allowed us to enter the warehouse. My two mentors were so excited to see the room full of fragments of colored sculptures and hundreds of various types of heads that they were reluc-



Figure 15. Shadow relief sculpture: standing figure of a man in secular clothing.

tant to leave. Mr. Hou humorously said “I am on a ‘pilgrimage’ to Luoyang” (the holy city of Luoyang, along with Jerusalem, Mecca, and Athens, is one of the world’s four holy cities). Seeing the group sculptures of Yongning Temple, he was deeply moved and said emotionally “The terracotta sculptures of Yongning Temple are refined and beautiful. The sincerity of the artists embodies the personality of the era.”⁴ Among the fragments is a large-sized sculpture with the face partly damaged, the forehead and eyebrows missing. Still, the cheeks, nose, mouth, and chin are partially preserved, with a remaining height of 24.5cm and a width of 23cm. The sculpture has a full face, a straight nose bridge, clear and gentle lips, and a serene and benevolent smile, exuding the unique beauty of femininity and sparking the viewer’s imagination. Another fragment features a medium-sized sculpture with a missing head, a raised hair bun, and missing ears, with a total height of 27.3cm and a width of 14cm. The face is oval-shaped, with slightly open eyes, upturned corners, a straight nose, small lips, flat cheekbones, and a subtle and reserved expression,

portraying a middle-aged woman who is intelligent and subtly smiling.

The elderly disciple in the headpieces measures 14.6cm in remaining height, with relaxed facial muscles, prominent cheekbones, multiple wrinkles around the corners of the mouth, prominent veins on the neck, and a laryngeal prominence. The young disciple, with a remaining height of 13.7cm, has a rounded head shape, full facial features, and a bright and clever expression, indicating that he is either Mahākāśyapa or Ānanda, the two attendants of Śākyamuni Buddha. A Bodhisattva standing statue, with a remaining height of 14.8cm, is depicted with the upper body bare and wearing a narrow strip-like skirt, still fashionable by today’s standards. There are thirty-eight head sculptures of female donors with hair in relief style, mostly depicting graceful and dignified images of young maidens with clear eyes and fine eyebrows. The hair buns come in various styles, such as multiple braids, side buns, low buns, double buns, and ya (丫) buns, all relatively intact. One with a ya bun measures 6.1cm in height, with a delicate and



Figure 16. Shadow relief sculpture: standing statue of a man wearing Liangdang and Hu clothing.

youthful appearance resembling a child's. The double buns on the head, resembling horns, are called "crown horns." There are forty-two headpieces of male donors wearing hats, ranging from old to young, some intact and some damaged. One wearing a small hat has a total height of 7.5cm, with sideburns, indicating a relatively older age. Those wearing cage hats usually have a small hat inside and a cage hat outside. One with a total height of 8.2cm has a square face, clear facial features, and slightly upturned mouth corners. One wearing a helmet is mostly intact, with a head height of 5cm, a square-shaped face, prominent cheekbones, fluctuating facial muscles, raised eyebrows, wide-open eyes, a prominent nose, upturned corners of the mouth, and a beard resembling a porcupine, portraying a strong and dignified warrior. There are twelve pieces of figures wearing hats or tied turbans, and those wearing wind hats are mostly intact. The top of the head is sculpted into a small chignon, while those with a turban wrapped from the forehead to the back mostly depict Hu people. Among the seated figures, there are sixty-five pieces; among the standing figures, 175 depict various figures, including Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, donors, and those wearing Liangdang or Hu clothing. One shadow puppet-like figure depicting a figure in secular clothing, without a head, measures 22.7cm in remaining height and is facing backward, wearing a wide-sleeved garment on the upper body and a wide pleated skirt on the lower body with tassels on the hem with a wide belt around the waist, appearing to be stepping with the right foot, with smooth clothing lines and a dynamic posture.

The production of colored sculptures for the Yongning

Temple wooden pagoda involves two major processes: figurative sculpture and applying colored makeup.

Five characteristics can summarize the figurative sculpture technique: Firstly, apart from Yingluo (瓔珞) and lotus flowers which are molded, all sculptures are created using manual clay sculpting. Secondly, regardless of size, sculptures are crafted with separate head and body parts, with the neck end inserted into the chest cavity and then smoothed over with clay to conceal the joint, leaving no trace. Thirdly, the body of the sculpture is constructed using varying thicknesses of wooden sticks and other auxiliary materials as the framework, layered with clay. The inner layer is mixed with straw or general clay, the middle layer has slightly finer clay, and the outer layer is entirely fine clay. Fourthly, according to the needs of the process, metal materials such as square iron bars, thin iron wires, copper wires, or small iron and copper pieces are widely used as skeletons to ensure firmness and flexibility. Fifthly, the sculpture's clothing integrates various techniques, including clay sculpting on the body and pasting and attaching. Applying colored decorations leans towards warmer tones, with a relatively light and elegant color palette, using mineral pigments like those used in murals. However, due to the burning of the colored sculptures, they have mostly turned into terracotta, resulting in severe color fading, and their original appearance is now irretrievably lost.

The Yongning Temple wooden pagoda and colored sculptures have had a profound impact: the restoration of the Yongning Temple wooden pagoda led to the construction of "five-tier floating towers in various other provinces." Empress Wu Zetian of the Wu Zhou dynasty

was inspired by the Yongning Temple wooden pagoda and followed suit by constructing the lofty paradise (the Maitreya's Tusita Palace) in the sacred city of Luoyang, together creating two everlasting wonders that amazed the world. The colored sculptures of the Maijishan Grottoes also share production techniques like those of the Yongning Temple wooden pagoda. Traces of influence from temples like the Yongning Temple can also be observed in the early Buddhist temple sites on the Korean Peninsula and the Japanese archipelago.

At Luobin Shangyang on April 19, 2024

GONG DAZHONG (1939-), was born in Mengzhou, Henan Province. He is a senior member and researcher at the Henan Provincial Institute of Cultural and Historical Research, and an adjunct professor at Zhengzhou University. He graduated from the Department of Art History of the Central Academy of Fine Arts in 1966. He is a researcher, art historian, China Art Association member, and Provincial Text Society vice president. He has long been engaged in the study of the Longmen Grot-

toes art, archaeological research on art in the Central Plains, art education and art criticism. He has been the director of Luoyang Ancient Art Museum and Luoyang City Museum; the honorary director of Longmen Grottoes Research Institute; the director of Luoyang Heluo Culture Research Institute; the person in charge of the preparation of the art department, the master's degree tutor, and the director of the art department of SIAS International University, Zhengzhou; director of the first theo-retical committee of the Provincial Calligraphy Association; and deputy director of the theoretical committee of the Provincial Art Association. He is a senior curator of the Henan Provincial Research Center for Literature and History, a deputy to the 8th National People's Congress of Henan Province, and a member of the Standing Committee of the 9th and 10th National People's Congresses of Luoyang City. He was included in the biographical section of the 1991 edition of *Meng County Records*. Monographs: *The Art of Longmen Grottoes*, *Longmen*, *The Art of Longmen Grottoes* (Updated Edition), *Historical Signs of Luodu Fine Arts*, *Zhongyuan Zhenshi Graphite Shadows* (Upper and Lower Volumes), and *Han Wengong, Township Sage of Mengzhou*.

Translator and editor: Gao Pengfei

ENDNOTES

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东方残缺美的典范：洛阳北魏永宁寺塔遗址出土的精绝彩塑

宫大中

摘要：河南洛阳北魏永宁寺遗址出土的遗物以彩塑品和建筑构件为最具代表性，彩塑品以小型人物彩塑最为精美，多温婉嫣然，典雅静谧，那种喜从心生，无言一笑的神态，给人以强烈的视觉冲击和心灵震撼，仿若顿入淡定、超然之净土境界。永宁寺木塔也是北魏佛教建筑的典范，武周女皇武则天受永宁寺木塔的启发而步其后尘，在神都洛阳营造与之比高的天堂（弥勒的兜率天宫），共同创造了两个震惊世界的千古奇观。永宁寺出土的彩塑和木塔基址虽然残缺，但是我们仍然可以窥见永宁寺彩塑造型的精美和建筑的绝伦。

关键词：永宁寺；洛阳；彩塑；佛教；残缺之美