The Late Northern Dynasties Buddhist Statues at Qingzhou and the Qingzhou Style

Liu Fengjun

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In recent years fragmentary Buddhist statues have been frequently unearthed in large numbers in Qingzhou and the surrounding area, including Boxing, Gaoqing, Wudi, Linqu, Zhucheng, and Qingdao. Especially notable are the large quantities of statues at the site of the Longxing Temple at Qingzhou. The discovery of these statues drew great attention from academic circles. The significance of these statues is manifold. I merely intend to undertake a tentative study of the causes and date of the destruction of the Buddhist statues and of the artistic features of the Qingzhou style statues.

I. Fragmentary Buddhist Statues of the Late Northern Dynasties Unearthed in the Qingzhou Area

The following discoveries of the Late Northern Dynasties Buddhist statues unearthed in the Qingzhou area, have been formally published: (1) In the autumn of 1976, seven stone Buddhist statues and one bronze Buddhist statue were excavated at Xujiacun, Gaoqing. On the bronze statue was an inscription identifying its date as the 19th year of the Taihe reign period of the Northern Wei period. Of the seven stone ones, only three bear inscriptions indicating their dates, all of which fall within the Northern Wei and Qi periods. (2) In March 1976, one statue stele, 42 stone images, 5 molded terracotta clay statues, 12 stone statue socles, and 2 molded terracotta clay statue socles were unearthed from the Longhua Temple site in Boxing County. Among them, nine pieces bear dates, indicating that they had been made during the Eastern Wei to Northern Qi periods. (3) In the winter of 1979, 40 small and large fragmentary statues and some lotus socles were discovered at the Xingguo Temple site in Qingzhou, mainly produced between the end of Northern Wei and Northern Qi period. There were also two Buddha head sculptures of the Sui and Tang periods. (4) In the 1970s, seven stone statues were discovered at He’an Village, Wudi County. Four of them bear Northern Qi dates. (5) In November 1987, one single round Bodhisattva stone sculpture of the Eastern Wei period and one round Buddhist stone sculpture of the Northern Qi period were discovered on the South Road of Qingzhou. Both works were painted colorfully and partly gilt. They were preserved intact and remained colorful. (6) From 1988 to 1990, over 300 fragmentary stone Buddhist images were discovered at Northern Dynasties temple sites in the southern suburb of Zhucheng County. Four of them bear dates from the Eastern Wei to Northern Qi periods. (7) In spring 1990, 53 pieces of Buddhist statues and statue socles were discovered at the Xiangyi Temple site in Boxing County, of which 5 bear dates of the Northern Qi period. (8) In October 1996, the Qingzhou Museum cleared a cache of Buddhist statues at the Longxing Temple site. Most of the statues are made of limestone, white marble, or granite, but a few are of pottery, iron, clay, or wood. According to a rough statistics, there are 144 Buddha heads, 46 Bodhisattva heads, 36 fragmentary statue bodies with heads, 10 other head sculptures, over 200 fragmentary statue bodies, and a lot of damaged statue fragments. Ninety percent of these Buddhist statues were made during the period from the late Northern Wei to Northern Qi, and statues of the Northern Qi period are in the majority. In addition, there are also near 20 Sui and Tang Buddhist and Bodhisattva...
images and Northern Song arhat images. (9) Other places where Buddhist statues were also discovered include: the neighborhood of Fahai Temple in Qingdao; the Qiji Temple site in Qingzhou; temple sites south of Guangrao County, and temple sites in Linqu County.

II. The Date and Causes of the Destruction of the Northern Dynasties Buddhist Statues in Qingzhou

The reports cited above reflect the following common features of the many fragmentary Buddhist statues unearthed in Qingzhou: (1) Their dates mostly fall within the late Northern Dynasties period. (2) All the fragmentary statues were discovered at or near temple sites. (3) All the fragmentary Buddhist statues had been destroyed deliberately by removing their heads, breaking their arms and hands, clipping the waist, and smashing the socles. This kind of radical destruction seems to have been especially prevalent in the Qingzhou area. (4) All the fragmentary Buddhist statues were buried in pits and arrayed in order.

As to when and why these statues had been destroyed, most scholars hold that they were destroyed after Emperor Wudi of the Northern Zhou annihilated the Northern Qi in the sixth year of the Jiande reign period (AD 577), an event that was followed by the suppression of Buddhism. I agree with this explanation.

In order to allay the political and economical crisis and unify the North, Emperor Wudi of the Northern Zhou (AD 561–578) took measures to suppress Buddhism in the third year of the Jiande reign period. In the sixth year “after seizing the land of Qi, the army was permitted to destroy it.” As a result, the suppression of Buddhism was very severe. The stele of the Longhua Temple in Boxing County, which has inscriptions written in the third year of the Renshou reign period of the Sui Dynasty, describes the gravity of the situation: “Disaster abounded under the reign of Zhou.” “The Heaven and earth trembled, columns and houses collapsed. [Buddhist followers] left the temples and were at the mercy of military people. The temple and the Buddhist halls underwent radical upheaval.” The fragmentary Buddhist statues unearthed in Qingzhou still evoke the radical suppression of Buddhism at that time, it could result in the destruction of Buddhist temples and their statues, and in the persecution of Buddhist followers.

In the late Northern Dynasties period, the power of Buddhism reached an astonishing degree. “A lot of well-wrought Buddhist statues were made, all the fertile land was owned by temples; the governments exhausted their revenues to buy land for temples.” Villainous monks and nuns robbed wealth from common people and lived a debauched life. Such was the situation in the political and cultural center of Luoyang during that period (Note that Luoyang was not the capital during Northern Qi and Northern Zhou), and the situation in Qingzhou, far away from the capital, was even worse. Although the many Buddhist statues found so far only constitute a small portion of the total number of Buddhist statues, their large quantity and fine craftsmanship are greatly admired by today’s viewers. The funds and human labor expended in their production were well beyond people’s endurance, if the feelings of the population of that period are taken into account. As a result, common people turned their worship of the Buddha to rage and hatred. Their desire for revenge would find a vent when an opportunity presented itself. The radical destruction of Buddhist statues of Qingzhou can be mainly attributed to this.

The worst damage done to Buddha statues in Qingzhou during the suppression of Buddhism during the Jiande reign period had another special cause. In the spring of the sixth year of the Jiande reign period, armies of the Northern Zhou attacked Yecheng. “The Qi emperor first sent his mother, wives, and children to Qingzhou. After the fall of Yecheng, he fled to Qingzhou under the escort of several dozen mounted warriors. The ruler of the Zhou ordered General Yuchi Qin to chase him with 2000 soldiers. In this battle the emperor of Qi was captured.” “Yuchi Qin captured the emperor of Qi and his Crown Prince Heng in Qingzhou.” Yuchi Qin then became Governor of Qingzhou. The war in Qingzhou between the Northern Zhou and Qi surely aggravated the annihilation of Buddhism. The Northern Zhou emperor even ordered the military force to take part in the suppression of Buddhism for the purpose of destroying the Northern Qi thoroughly. The description on the Longhua Temple stele “[the Buddhist followers] all left the temples and were at the mercy of the military people” illustrates this.

III. The Artistic Characteristics of Qingzhou-style Buddhist Statues

During the Sixteen Kingdoms and Northern Wei periods, Buddhist images in north China are preserved mainly in cave temples. The Buddhist statues may be divided into Xinjiang style, Liangzhou style, Yungang style, and Heaven and earth trembled, columns and houses collapsed. [Buddhist followers] left the temples and were at the mercy of military people. The temple and the Buddhist halls underwent radical upheaval.” The fragmentary Buddhist statues unearthed in Qingzhou still evoke the radical suppression of Buddhism at that time, it could result in the destruction of Buddhist temples and their statues, and in the persecution of Buddhist followers.

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style, and Longmen 龙门 style according to the date and structure of the cave temples, the theme and the combination of the statues, the shape and decoration of the statues, as well as differences in sculpture and painting technique. This classification approximately captures the phases and regional characteristics in the gradual spread of Buddhist cave temple art from the western frontiers to central China. In contrast, from the late Northern Wei period onward, the Buddhist statues in the Qingzhou area are mainly single statues in a singular artistic style.

1. Single statues

In the late Northern Dynasties, the worship of Buddha flourished in the Qingzhou area. This period coincided with the great development of single metal and stone statues in the whole country. In the Qingzhou area, the production of Buddha sculptures likewise focused on the sculpture of single stone Buddhas. As a result, numerous well-wrought works came into being and a distinctive local style was formed. In the single round stone Buddhas and Bodhisattvas in the Qingzhou area, the focus of attention is on the magnificence of the human body for the purpose of propagating Buddhism and converting the world. The stone Buddhas with haloes carved in the late Northern Dynasties reflect much concern with completeness in presenting Buddhist icons and with decorative effect. In the center of the middle and lower section of the halo is a carved Buddha in high relief, flanked to the left and right by Bodhisattvas. In the head section of the Buddhas or Bodhisattvas, shining jewel in the lotus flower is executed in line engraving or relief; in the upper register of the halo are Apsarases, deva-dancers, stupas, and dragons in relief or line engraving. The ripples of the Apsarases and deva-dancers are uniformly flowing upward and compose beautiful flame-like pattern. In the lower register of the halo, the Buddha is standing barefoot on the lotus socle. Between the feet of the Buddha and those of the Bodhisattva is a vigorous dragon in high relief with a lotus in its mouth, facing the Bodhisattva standing on the lotus socle. The dragon, the lotus in the lower register, and the Apsarases and the deva-dancers in the upper register echo each other, reflecting the special artistic beauty of the whole combination (Figs. 1 and 2).

In the Northern Qi period, the single round Buddha and Bodhisattva are mostly depicted in the standing position. Buddhas wear a light and thin kasaya with brief and plain ripples, under which one can get a glimpse of a vigorous body. The statues all have bright eyes and graceful eyebrows, broad shoulders, and raised breast, contracted waists, and plump hips, as well as long arms and legs. The portrayal of the natural beauty of human body distinguishes these Buddhas from the solemn and stately figures in other regions and expresses increasingly deep human emotions and conveys a lifelike aura (Fig. 3). The Bodhisattvas are colorful sculptures with complicated neck decorations, covered with net-like jeweled necklaces and strings of suspended bells and beads. Their transparent muslin robes and the overlapping ornaments together with their gentle and graceful posture render these statues sublime and elegant (Fig. 4).

2. Painting and gilding
The late Northern Dynasties stone Buddhist statues not only excel in their sculpting technique, but also in preserved colorful paintings and gilding. The colors are all mineral pigments. Red is the dominating color, comprising vermilion, deep red, chocolate red, purplish red, and incarnadine. It is usually applied to the face, dress, and decorations of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, as well as to the Apsaras and lotus petals on the halo. Cerulean blue and ruby blue are the next most frequent colors, mostly used to paint Buddhas’ topknots, Bodhisattvas’ dress, and the trellis patterns on the kasaya of the Buddhas. In some cases the facial features of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are also painted blue. Next come yellow, green, and black. The former two colors are mainly used to highlight the decorative patterns and some dresses of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas on the halo. Black is used to depict the faces of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas and the lines of their clothes. The cheeks, breasts, and the exposed part of the arms are usually colored in gold. Sometimes gilding is also applied to the topknot, necklace, and bracelet of Bodhisattvas and to the folds of the kasaya of Buddhas. At excavation, the whole body of some Buddhas and Bodhisattvas was painted in gold and appeared shinningly beautiful. Take one fragmentary stone Buddha of the Northern Qi period as an example. Its remaining height measures 112 cm. The craftsman first drew the trellis pattern on the robe with mercury sulphide and then carefully painted the human figures in the middle of the trellis. Painted within one trellis on the upper breast, with light green as the background color, is the seated cross-legged Buddha. This Buddha has a blue topknot, chocolate facial features, and a vermilion kasaya. Within one trellis on the right shoulder are three human figures on a vermilion background. They have upturned black hair, deep eyes, bulging noses, and dense black beards. As for their costumes, they wear long jackets with buttons down the front (colored respectively, green, blue, and yellow) and black leather top boots. The precise composition and the smooth, running lines render the image vivid.

3. The Buddha worshipped at Qingzhou is mainly Maitreya

According to statistics, the subjects of Buddhist statues are mainly Sakyamuni, Guanyin, and Maitreya, next is Amitabha. I also made a survey of the Northern Dynasties Buddhist statues in Shandong Province and found that Guanyin and Maitreya were most popular. As for the 14 statues bearing the late Northern Dynasties dates that have been excavated in the Qingzhou region, seven depict Maitreya (2 of Northern Wei, 2 of Eastern Wei, 3 of Northern Qi), four Vairocana and three Sakyamuni. The four statues of Vairocana were all sculpted during the Northern Qi period and surely have something to do with Emperor Wenxuan’s promotion of the worship of Vairocana. Worship of Maitreya is of a different nature. People worshiped Maitreya in order to be redeemed of their sufferings. Before becoming a Buddha, Maitreya as a Bodhisattva, who was said to be a “Buddha to be,” is destined to achieve Buddhahood in the mortal world after Sakyamuni. He lived in Tusita, where he achieved Buddhahood under a Dragonflower tree. He preached
three times under that tree, and those who attended his sermon all became arhats. The fervent worship of Maitreya in Qingzhou may be due to the following reasons: (1) his followers wished to be redeemed of their sufferings in real life and to become Buddhas after their rebirths in paradise. (2) Maitreya was worshiped as the “Buddha-to-be” after Sakyamuni. Once he was reborn into this world, the world would be bright everywhere, society would be peaceful and stable, and people would enjoy a happy life. In the late Northern Dynasties period, wars continued incessantly, and disasters fell upon men. It was only too natural for people to connect their longings toward future with the Buddhist realm into which Maitreya would be reborn, wishing that “a new Buddha will come to the world and expel the old demons.” (3) At that time many villainous monks and nuns degenerated into satisfying their desire for riches. They “exploited common people and seized their farms and dwellings.” People could hardly stand this any more and hoped that Maitreya would imminently become a Buddha, descend into the mortal world to purify Buddhism, and that consequently “all evils would be expelled and goodness would prevail everywhere.” (4) Many documents show that the sculptural art of Buddha statues in the late Northern Dynasties was influenced by that of the Southern Dynasties. Since the establishment of the Liu Song of the Southern Dynasties, the worship of Maitreya prevailed in the south both at the royal court and among common people. The derivation of Maitreya images in Qingzhou from those of the Southern Dynasties is an issue worth further exploring in the future.

References

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