The Fifth Century A.D. Buddhist Cave Temples
At Yün-Kang, North China

A Look at Their Western Connections

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The Yün-kang caves belong to a string of early Buddhist cave temples that stretches across northern China from Kansu in the far west to Manchuria in the east (Fig. 1). The caves lie above the Wu-chou River, about 15 km. west of the modern industrial city of Ta'-t'ung, in the north of Shansi province, and right next to a pass leading into Inner Mongolia (Fig. 2). Since about the 5th century B.C. this city had been of some strategic importance. In Han times (202 B.C.—A.D. 220) it was known by the name of P'ing-ch'eng, and it sits between two stretches of the Great Wall.

This area being remote until fairly recently, these caves were less well known than others, like Tun-huang in western Kansu or those of Lo-yang, further south in Honan. Japanese scholars worked at Yün-kang between 1938 and 1945 to document what was to be seen then. We owe to them a most thorough photographic record and description (Mizuno and Nagahiro). In the last decade, an extensive program of excavation and restoration has been in operation. Though not yet complete, the results are impressive.

Truncated mud-brick pyramids, the remains of watchtowers to guard the important pass, appear on the hillcrest before the amber colored cliffs of Mount
Wo-chon, honeycombed with dark orifices, come into sight. A screen of old trees keeps the industrial horrors out of view. The entrance is guarded by the obligate pair of bronze lions, the male with an arb., the dam with a cub (Fig. 3). They and the brightly tiled and painted wooden structures—the gate, the multistoried courtyard of monastic buildings glued, as it were, to the perpendicular cliffs—are of the Ch'ing Dynasty [17th century] (Fig. 4). The remains of the mud-brick fortress tower overhead. It was constructed against a Tatar chief in the mid-16th century.

**HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

Before moving into the caves let us briefly remember a few facts. After the first unification of China under Ch'in-shih-huang-ti in 221 B.C. there followed the Han Dynasty (202 B.C.—A.D. 220). Ch'in-shih-huang-ti was the emperor who burned Confucian books and whose tomb is guarded by those famous and uncom portably life-like terracotta warriors. In the arts a lively, imaginative and fairly homogeneous style prevailed during the 400 years of the Han Dynasty. Han civilization was dominated by a resurgent and somewhat syncretistic Confucianism, a moral system based on filial devotion, social duties toward one's fellow men, and ancestor worship. The art which has come down to us is mainly funerary in character.

By the 1st century A.D., Buddhism reached China from India and central Asia (present-day Sinkiang) along the so-called Silk Routes. While it co-existed with Confucianism and Taoism as a creed, Buddhism brought radically new elements into the iconography of Chinese art. The Yün-kang caves are the earliest comprehensive and grandiose document of the new religion in China to have been preserved.

Something should be said about the patrons and creators of the caves. It is fortunate that the Chinese have been obsessed with recording and bookkeeping of every kind from very early on. Thus we have not only a number of dated inscriptions in the caves themselves but, most important, fairly detailed accounts on the historical period in which they came into being; for instance the Wei-shu—the Northern Wei Annals—chapter 114 (excerpted in Mizuno and Nagashiro). This covers the last four decades of the 6th and the first quarter of the 8th centuries A.D., of which the earlier part is by far the more important for us here.

Early in the 4th century A.D. the Toba Tatars, a branch of the Hsien-pi tribes, had asserted themselves as masters of groups who had earlier belonged to the Hsiung-nu federation, occupying large territories north of the Yellow River. Like those other nomad peoples the Toba had previously come from lands west of the upper Amur River and then roamed the Mongolian steppes. They first began to settle, in the middle of the 3rd century A.D., near Ho-in-ko-erh in Inner Mongolia and finally in China as the powerful Northern Wei Dynasty, which lasted from A.D. 386 to 535.

This pattern has repeated itself throughout China's history: nomads, attracted by the wealth of a highly developed sedentary civilization, came in as conquerors and were assimilated within a short time. Adapted to the local ways of life, they quickly lost their national identity and were absorbed into the mainstream, or even by another dynasty, whether native [Han?] or intrusive like themselves.

One remembers the Yüan [Mongol] and the Ch'ing [Manchurian] Dynasties. And yet they have all enormously enriched China's racial and cultural heritage. It has been shown that this recent process has less to do with any alleged inferiority of those 'barbarians' than with the very different cultural and economic structure of such nomadic tribes. The wealth of their warrior nobility consisted of enormous herds of horses and other livestock which they not only raised themselves but replenished by continuous warfare and raids. Once settled in a primarily agricultural society with a highly developed administrative, the nomad nobility, cut off from the sources of their customary revenue, were unable to compete for lucrative high administrative posts, even if they were qualified. Rather, these positions would be occupied by the native Han Chinese) gentry, educated landowners with a stable income. Since the invaders could not rule China without an efficient administrative system, foreign dynasties rose and fell rapidly.

In A.D. 398 Toba Kuel (Emperor Tai-tsze/Tsao-wu) moved the Northern Wei capital from Inner Mongolia to Ping ch'eng/Ts'ung-p'ing. But since not all of the rivals of the Toba had yet been eliminated, no concentrated palace building activity started there before about A.D. 440. However, a monastery was soon constructed.

Yün-kang, the 'Cloud Ridge,' is the highest elevation of the sandstone range of Mount Wu-chon on the north bank of the river of the same name. We learn that early in the 5th century the Wei rulers went there to pray for rain to the gods of heaven and earth. The location must have been considered a sacred spot and thus have appealed to the architects of the caves. The Northern Wei were shamanists like most of the Turok or Mongolian tribes. That went together with a certain religious tolerance, an attitude well attested from the later Mongol empires in western Asia.

The Northern Wei Annals provide us with much information about this period. The first Northern Wei emperors respected and furthered Buddhism, and the increase of the monastic population of the realm rapidly became such that an edict of A.D. 438 forbade people below the age of fifty to don the monk's garb. Social and fiscal problems had arisen from the depletion of the workforce in favor of a life in the ever richer and more powerful monasteries. A distinction must be made, however, between the state church—Buddhism as an instrument of the ruling house—and 'free' communities of Buddhist monks. The latter frequently headed local revolts of impoverished peasants. The Administrators of Monks, or head of the 'church,' had a decree, before 416, declared the first Wei emperor Tsoo-wu a Buddha of the present, a reincarnated Tahsgata, because of his ardent belief in and great support of Buddhism. Emperor Shi-tsui/Ts'ai-wu who, by 439, had finally defeated the remaining rival powers in north China, had also shown great reverence for Buddhism. But through the influence of his minister he was later led to favor Taoism. Following a revolt which he blamed on the ever more licentious Buddhist 'church' he ordered the destruction of statues, temples and monas teries, and the persecution of the believers, an ordeal which lasted from 448 to 452.

Rewards for devotion, the type of
Buddhism taught by the monk Tan-yao, the spiritus rector of the cave project as we shall see, appealed as much to the nobility of the warlike nomads as the physical splendor of temples, pagodas and images. When Emperor Tai-wu was murdered in 452, apparently repentant of his cruel persecution, his grandson and successor, Yet the move had its logic since Lo-yang was infinitely better suited to the vital needs of the empire. Unlike the barren and inhospitable north, it lay in a rich agricultural region connected through canals with south China. The splendor that was to be short-lived. Forty years later Lo-yang lay in ruins, the victim of the wrath of yet another.

Emperor Wen-cheng (452-466), a devout believer, restored Buddhism in 454. He had the excavation started at Yin-kang as an act of expiation. Five caves were opened with gigantic Buddha statues, likenesses of the five Northern Wei emperors, for the greater glory of the dynasty and as proof of the regnal authority of their religion (caves 16-20 on the plan, Fig. 5). There is wide but not complete agreement among scholars as to the apportioning of the names to the caves.

It was the head of the 'state church,' the Overseer of the Monks Tan-yao, who directed the work from about 460 onwards to his death around 485. Work was continued until Emperor Kao-tsu/Hsiao-wen ordered the move of the capital south to Lo-yang, the old residence of the Eastern Chou, the Han and the Chin Dynasties. In 494. The emperor himself was deeply sinicized. He attempted to revive the city's glorious past, claiming the legitimate inheritance of a hopefully soon-to-be reunited China. The hardships to the people were of as little matter to him as the alienation of his nobility who had their roots and grazing grounds in the North.

The Northern Wei emperors adopted and perfected the administrative structure as developed under the Han Dynasty and offered the country some peace and stability after more than a century and a half of political turmoil and deprivation. The insecurity of the age seems to have favored a religion of personal redemption. Mahayana Buddhism, a strong new creed, provided just that and the Wei conquerors made effective use of it against the traditional systems, Confucianism and Taoism. Buddhism had been made the state religion and, as mentioned before, the emperor as the living Buddha was honored accordingly.

This will account for the remarkable fact, noted above, that the five grand Buddha statues in the earliest group of the Yin-kang caves bear the likenesses of five successive Wei emperors. Their features are far more 'European' than Chinese (Fig. 6). Paying reverence to the Buddha for one's personal salvation thus coincided with paying reverence to the deceased and living monarchs. The spiritual satisfaction provided by Buddhism was successfully grafted onto the deep-rooted Chinese tradition of ancestor worship. The inscriptions at Yin-kang show that it was not only the imperial family—foremost the ruthless empress dowager Feng (died A.D. 498)—and high court officials who paid for the excavation of the subsequent caves, but also commoners and simple monks and nuns. The latter enumerate all those they wished (besides themselves) to benefit from the rewards of such pious donations—mostly either deceased or still living family members.

Which were the models the architects of the caves followed, since there is nothing remotely comparable to be found in the artistic heritage of pre-Buddhist China? Here again the Annals of the Wei Dynasty provide the answer. Among the last of the rival states that the emperor Tai-wu defeated in 439—as we heard—was that of the Northern Liao in north Korea west of the Yellow River. In this border region with Chinese Turkestan, present-day Sinkiang, lie the famous Tun-huang grottoes. Some of these Buddhist cave temples slightly antedate the ones in Yin-kang. They are, however, much smaller, and the earliest Tun-huang grottoes, which are known to have been constructed in the mid-4th century A.D., have never been identified. They were probably destroyed. Preserved are many splendid ones from the later 5th century A.D. The ravages of time are more obvious in Tun-huang since the caves had to be excavated in the conglomerate cliffs of the semi-desert. The sculpture is made of clay over cores or frameworks of sticks and straw, and is thus very friable.

Tun-huang was an important entrepôt on the Silk Road, the system of caravan routes first opened up in a more permanent way during the 2nd century B.C. between China and the West, at that time represented by the Parthian Empire (see Fig. 1). This quite regular exchange of goods had developed from tributes, gift-giving, and other status-enhancing practices among the central Asian tribes and their sedentary neighbors (Klinburg-Salter). 'International' trade peaked through the Roman Imperial Period and again during the early Middle Ages. It continued, with fluctuations, through succeeding centuries, and declined only after the Portuguese opened the sea-routes to the Far East in the early 16th century. Goods and ideas travelled in both directions and it was the inroad for Buddhism. Indian monks wandered to China, Chinese monks to India, either as members of official embassies or as hardy individuals, to learn Sanskrit, to bring back the treasured silken rolls, portable altars, banners, and small images.

Monastic communities sprang up at the fringes of the oases along the Silk Roads, both north and south of the Tarim basin. These monasteries served as hostels, warehouses, and banks, and were patronized by wealthy merchants. Religious settlements earlier than those at Tun-huang and Yin-kang have been found in the later region.
Of the northern foundations, for instance, the slightly later ruins of the 6th-7th century A.D. city of Yarkhoto, just west of Turfan, are at present open to tourists (Fig. 7). Perched on a cliff between two arms of a river it consisted almost exclusively of mud-brick stupas and monasteries. Today they are sadly reduced to dusty stumps with an occasional image preserved. Open to visitors, too, are the caves at Bezeklik, northeast of Turfan, famous for their wall paintings but also much ravaged because of the ephemeral quality of the material and the activity of the iconophobic Muslim population (Fig. 8). Both places have yielded a wealth of material during excavations early in this century. The 1982 exhibition at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York came from the rich collection of the West-Berlin State Museums, gathered at those sites. This show has already stimulated fresh discussion about the dates of the various settlements, in view of more recent research and copies. None of the sites in Chinese Turkestan, however, can compete with the sheer size of the sandstone caves at Yulin-kang.

The Wei Annals tell us that Emperor Tai-wan, after his victory over the Liang in A.D. 439, transplanted, in the fashion of those days, three thousand captive monks with their religious equipment and thirty thousand families from Kansu to Pingcheng-Ta-Tung. Devout Buddhists and skilled artisans they were. Their technical expertise was invaluable to the monk Tan-yao—who also a "westerner"—who supervised the work from a building above the cliff, the remains of which have recently been excavated. The iconographic program of the caves was apparently based on translations of certain sutras done by Tan-yao himself as well as on other writings of his. The dhyanic type of Buddhism which he advocated seeks to attain perfection through silent meditation. There was to be room for thousands of monks in the caves. Their imagery is thus deeply imbued with Central Asian concepts.

When, in A.D. 494, Emperor Hsiao-wen moved the capital to Lo-yang, the vigorous and slightly gauche grace of the earliest sculpture had already given way to the somewhat dry elegance and sophistication of the later. This change had been brought about through contacts, both peaceful and warlike, with the highly civilized southern court at Nanking. The late Yulin-kang art is thus sharply divergent. At the time of the move to Lo-yang the court banned the use of the "rough" Hsin-pi language—apparently a member of the Atthic language family—in favor of Chinese. The nobility had already been discouraged from wearing the ancestral garb, the age-old costume of the mounted nomad: girt coat, trousers and boots. It is faithfully pictured in the donor reliefs of the caves. The dress of the females, the same sleeved and piped coat, closed at the left, over a full-length striped skirt (Fig. 9) (which finds parallels in the wall paintings of Chinese Turkestan) would cause a fashion fad some time later in Japan. But in 494 an imperial edict banned the wearing of Hsin-pi costumes in general. China had once again won her way.

Before the downfall of the dynasty in 534, the Northern Wei court had commisioned the excavation of the Lung-men caves, near the new capital of Lo-yang: here there is barely a sign of the old mood. The delicate art of Lung-men is well on its way to the later masterpieces of Sung and Tang. The Metropolitan and the Kansas City Museums each owns one of the finest reliefs from Lung-men, depicting the emperor and empress respectively, with attendant (P’an-yang cave, about A.D. 523). The move to Lo-yang caused most of the monks to follow their patrons south, though—as we heard—most cave excavations at Yin-kang continued for about three more decades.

It seems as if, with few exceptions, the Yin-yang caves had been deliberately left to public oblivion, especially after Confucianism asserted itself again. In our case this was certainly furthered by the remote position. Characteristically it was the Liao, another "barbaric" dynasty (of Khitai nomads) from the north, who embraced Buddhism and saw to the repair of the wooden structures in front of the caves and the careful reconstruction of damaged images. This was in the 11th and 12th centuries. Nearby Ta-tung still harbors jewels of Liao architecture and sculpture. The cult lingered on in Yin-kang, as proven by later repairs and the 17th century monastic buildings of the Ch’ing Dynasty.

It remained for the authorities of the People’s Republic of China to restore the complex as best they could. Though they naturally analyze it as the product of a society of feudal exploiters they are certain not imperious to its aesthetic appeal. We must be grateful to them.

THE CAVER

Let us now turn to the caves themselves. The cliff had first to be prepared, to be made perpendicular, and a terrace created (Fig. 10). Work began at the highest elevation of the hill for the five big caves, 16 to 20. An unsuitable streak of crumbly sandstone in that location made it necessary to work from the west toward the east. The numbers on the plan (Fig. 5) run west-east, and have nothing to do with the sequence in which the caves were created. Caves 1 to 4 are not yet restored and are inaccessible for the time being. Caves 21 to 42—west of the main group—are much smaller. They are the latest in the sequence and had to be excavated from a higher ground level in order to avoid the faulty stratum. These caves are mostly es votos of simpler people and were made only after the court had moved to Lo-yang at the end of the 5th century.

The plan shows that the caves of the earliest group (20 to 26) are of irregular elliptical design compared to caves 5 to 13 which are more "architectural" in appearance. These latter caves, moreover, are often paired and have antechambers, partly with pillars in front; they seem to have been destined for the cult of imperial couples. The present aspect of the mountainside is utterly misleading, for two reasons. First, the whole front was originally covered with multistoried buildings like the ones preserved in front of caves 5 and 6 near the present entrance to the complex.

Female donors on east wall of cave II; cr. A.D. 482-494. (From The Yulin-kang Caves, 1977, pl. 63.)
10 The cliff at Yün-kang (caves 5 to 12). Note the faint traces of "Thousand Buddha" niches around the left.

11 Detail of seated Buddha in cave 20, ca. A.D. 460–465. Note the halo, a lotus blossom framed by a band of meditating Buddhahs and a band of flames. The edge of his monk's robe has a beaded border. The folds are strongly stylized. Unlike the Indian models which leave the Buddha's right shoulder bare, the Buddha of the early caves at Yün-kang—see Fig. 12—has the robe just lightly covering the right shoulder also. For an over-all view of this Buddha in cave 20 see Fig. 6.

12 Standing Buddha from cave 16. This is the only one of the main images in the early caves to have been left unfinished until the late 460's. By then, Chinese-style robes had become obligatory and the late Yün-kang style had set in. Note the slender proportions, the carved hair and wrist, the heavy folds of the garment and the bow on the chest. (From The Yün-kang Caves, 1977, pl. 76.)

(Figs. 3, 4, 10)—a fact proven by the many square holes in the cliff designed to anchor wooden beams. Second, the 14 meter-high seated Buddha of cave 20, meditating in the dhyanaprakosa position, gives an accurate impression, for the image was never meant to be seen in this way; the front wall of the chamber has come down and thus exposed it (Fig. 6).

This Buddha is assumed to represent the son of the persecutor T'ai-wei. This son, devout and peace-loving, died of a broken heart, unable to prevent his father's atrocities, and was posthumously accorded the title of emperor (King-mu huang-ti) [Fig. 11]. The detail shows his non-Chinese features and the inland pupils (replaced at a later period). The inland spot-like eyes—a hairy writh between the brows, one of the thirty-two distinguishing marks of the Buddha—is missing. A carved mustache is faintly visible. The Wei Annals report that a life-size Buddha statue was made in 452 (i.e., before work on the caves was started), which miraculously grew black moles exactly at those spots where the ruling emperor Wen-chron had them. This was taken to be a sign of the monarch's outstanding piety. It rather seems to reflect the attempts of the 'church' to rationalize and make acceptable the then apparently still unusual step of endowing an image with the features of a ruler, those of the 'Living Buddha.' Later Eastern art provided many such examples.

The largest cave is 19, to the right of 20. The main image is flanked by two Buddha seated in the 'European posture' (i.e., on a stool) in two smaller side caves. The front walls of the caves are largely intact, with entrances and windows. Through these the pilgrims could worship the images from the wooden galleries in front. The Buddha of side-cave 19B (on the left) was only completed about 25 years later, just before the move to Lo-yang in 494. Already he wears Chinese robes as does the main Buddha of cave 16 [Fig. 12]. The awe-inspiring main statue of cave 10, a seated Buddha, is over 19 meters high and is supposed to be a portrait of T'ai-wei, the persecutor [Fig. 13]. He may have been shown intentionally in the sikhara model, the 'no feet' gesture, to abate painful memories.

DISCUSSION

Though we hear of a wooden Maitreya image, about 27 meters high, at Dazhén in Kashgar about A.D. 490, the only extant parallels to such ambitious enterprises in the realm of Buddhist art are the two standing Buddhas (98 and 93 meters high) in rock niches at Bamiyan in Afghanistan [Fig. 14]. They have as often been acclaimed as disclaimed as the models for Yün-kang. The date of the Bamiyan Buddhas is still being debated. They may be roughly contemporary with and a little later respectively than Yün-kang. What is different, however, is that they were meant to be seen from afar—there was never a wall (i.e., screen of remaining rock) in front. Yet I believe that both the Bamiyan and the Yün-kang Buddhas share a common heritage, and I suggest that the sudden urge to 'go big' can be traced back to those sanctuaries at the fringe of the classical world where local Hellenistic dynasties, like for instance Antiochus I of Commagene in the 1st century B.C., tried to reconcile both worlds [Fig. 15].

Antiochus I built himself a tomb in the Taurus mountains in eastern Anatolia near the great bend of the Euphrates, and had himself represented together with the main gods revered in his realm. Gigantic statues sit on terraces at two sides of the tumulus, and reliefs near altars for the cult of his ancestors—partly Persian and Parthian, partly Greek—show the king shaking hands with the gods. His eastern ancestors wear nomad dress. The notion of ancestor worship and delification of the ruler thus seems to be prefigured here. For example, I would like to see one of the missing links between...
this monument in eastern Turkey and Yün-kang, the terraced dynastic sanctuary of the Kusans at Surkh Kotal in northern Afghanistan, built by their greatest king, Kanishka—probably about A.D. 100 (Figs. 16, 17). Of nomad stock, he created an empire from the ruins of the Graeco-Bactrian and Graeco-Indian kingdoms—the politically short-lived but, in cultural terms, enormously consequential heritage of Alexander's campaign. The Kusian empire lasted from about the 1st to the second half of the 3rd century A.D. It was one of the four world empires existing at that time, the others being the Roman in the far west, the Parthian (replaced by the Sassanians in the mid-3rd century A.D.) in the Middle East and the Chinese in the Far East. Soon the Gupta empire in India would assert itself as another one in the chorus (A.D. 320-550). Kanishka was a great propagator of Buddhism, and within his realm there took shape what is known today as Gandhāra art. Its influence on the early Buddhist art of China, via the trade routes, has long been recognized.

Returning to the ancestral sanctuary—cum-tomb of Antiochus I of Commagene as a well-preserved 1st century B.C. specimen of its kind: that ruler of a petty kingdom may have looked to Egypt for models as colossal in size, as well as for the exorbitant tradition to defy rulers. The syncretic mood of the late Hellenistic world favored such developments, for Alexander the Great's successors did not hesitate to assume the surname Theos (God). But Antiochus I of Commagene also stressed his eastern (i.e., nomad) heritage. And it is within the realm of such hellenized peoples as the Parthians that we find ancestral sanctuaries featuring far more than life-size clay or stucco statues, even earlier than the Kusian dynastic shrine of Kanishka at Surkh Kotal referred to already. Sites like Nysa, the first Parthian capital near Ashkabad in Turkmenistan, Khalchayen in eastern Uzbekistan, and Toprak-kale in Khorasan, among others have become known through the intensive archaeological exploration of Soviet Central Asia over the last three decades. Here we find again more than life-size ancestral portraits in tribal dress. The salient feature is the blend of Hellenistic artistic traditions with the nomad heritage. This mixture is scarcely surprising in view of the fact that those nomad empires of the Parthians, the Sakas and the Kusans were formed between the third century B.C. and the 2nd century A.D. on territory hallowed by the campaigns of Alexander and his successors. It comprised all the lands from eastern Iran to Soviet Central Asia, Afghanistan, Pakistan and northern India.

Only recently has the first truly Hellenistic city south of the Oxus emerged: at Al-Khanum in northern Afghanistan, 2nd century B.C. remains of more than life-size clay statuary were found in the administrative quarters. They or their like may still have been visible in the 2nd century A.D. when, nearby, Kanishka built his dynastic sanctuary at Surkh Kotal with its clay and stone ancestral portraits in nomad garb and its gigantic Buddha statue (Schlumberger). The creation of images of clay in regions devoid of stone, so familiar from the later Gandhāra period in Afghanistan, from Pakistan and from the Buddhist sites along the Silk Roads as far east as Yün-huang, seems to have its roots in the Hellenistic art of western Central Asia.

But let us return to Yün-kang, there remains yet another unexplained feature. We have traced the deification of rulers, living and deceased, and their monumental portraiture to late Hellenistic western Asia. Why, then, did not the artists at Yün-kang carve their Buddha-like emperors out of the cliff like the colossal images at Bītāmān—visible from far away? Why were they hidden in caves, dimly lit, revealing their awe-inspiring presence through rock-cut windows accessible only from wooden galleries? One answer may lie in the fact that—like Buddhism itself—the Buddhist cave-sanctuary was taken over from India. Yet this tradition seems to have merged with another, indigenous to the Turic tribes to which the Toha belonged, namely the excavation of rock-cut sanctuaries for their dynastic rulers (see Widengren: 62). One may recall in this context the report of Al-Bīrūnī, the 11th century Central Asian historian, on the first pre-Islamic Turic ruler of Kabul, Vahālīgī or Bāhrāhān (late 7th century A.D.), who is reported to have emerged from a cave near Kabul where he had hidden, to reveal himself to the populace as of superhuman descent and as their future king (Sachau: 10). He wore Turkish dress, a short tunic open in front, a high hat, boots and arms.
perched on scaffolds, worked in rows from top to bottom, each at two adjacent niches at a time, which they could just reach easily.

Cave 13 belongs to the group created in the 480s. The image has suffered and was obviously restored later. All the sculpture was painted—some of the original coloring is preserved—but in the majority of cases colors have been 'freshened up' several times in the course of the centuries. Another giant sits in cave 5, which is the first of the coupled caves; the pair, caves 5 and 6, are the only ones lying behind preserved wooden galleries (Figs. 3, 4, 10). Again the image is clearly affected by later restoration. Though of the older oval plan, the walls of this cave have been given some kind of 'architectural' structure. This is even clearer in its neighbor, cave 6 (Fig. 20). Note the tall wooden pogo at crowded niches; this is one of the structurally most advanced examples of the many pictured at Yün-kang. The Indian style, the mound containing relics of the Buddha and considered and revered as an aniconic representation of Sākyamuni himself, has here already found its classical Chinese shape, the pogo. Miniature models of high wooden 'watchtowers' are known already from Han period tombs; some of them clearly had religious and symbolic functions. These types seem to have been adopted for the Buddhist cult structure in China. With its splendid tradition in carpentry, resulting from a formerly rich supply of timber, China retained the shape till modern times. It is interesting to follow the intermediary steps in Gandhara art which may have given the Chinese the idea of transforming the Indian mound into a tower. In one of the many western versions, the 5th-6th century stūpa of Gilādar in Afghanistan (Fig. 21), the mound has been given an architectural shape, but it is still recognizable by the dome. A small schist relief from a stūpa in Peshawar (Pakistan), and typical of Gandhara art, shows scenes from the Buddha's life framed by attendants in storted niches between classical pilasters (Fig. 22). Objects like this can must have travelled east along the Silk Routes. In Yün-kang such models were transformed into the multistoried edges of a square core or pillar in the center of the cave chamber (Fig. 23). That kind of core occurs in many of the coupled caves (5 and 6, 9 to 11, 39, 51). This central pillar of cave 11, for example, assumes as a whole the shape of a pogo with storted image-niches on its four sides. In some of the very latest caves the core finally becomes an absolutely regular pogo
Principe Siddhārtha’s encounter with an ailing man, relief on the east wall of the back chamber of cave 6 from Yün-k'ang, ca. A.D. 460-484. (From The Yün-k'ang Caves, 1977, pl. 22.)


Buddha and worshipers in tripartite ‘trebeasted’ niche, cave 6, ca. A.D. 460-484. Note the curvatures and festoons at the pilaster’s entablature. The animals adoring the Three Jewels of Buddhism refer to the Deer Park at Sarnath where the Buddha delivered his first sermon.

Royal couple and interlocutors from a wall painting from Ming-Oi, near Kizil, Sinkiang. Note the ‘tabulated’ niche and the arches above. (From A. Griswold, Kizil-Kumtura, fig. 56. Berlin, 1923.)

Ivory dipych: Pud and Muse. Cathedral Treasure. Monza, Italy, ca. A.D. 560. Note the curvatures at the ‘best’ architrave and compare the arches above to the arches on Fig. 28. Similar features can be observed in the architectural stucco frames in the Baptistry of the Oratorio de Ravenna from the mid 5th century and on the Stilicho dipych, also at Monza. (From postcard, Basilio S. Giovanni Bottetis, Monza, 1978.)

Ivory casket from Samigher, near Pula, Yugoslavia, ca. A.D. 430. In the Museo Archeologico, Venice. There are currents at the ‘foreboding’ sculptural. Note the formal likeness of the hands adorning the breast with the deer in Fig. 26. (From M. Marsinelli, Cattedrali e Basiliche, fig. 29, 1 print Cristiani a Roma, Firenze, 1981.)

Late antique sarcophagus, 2nd century A.D. Rome, Villa Collonciniana. The motif originated in Roman triumphal art and was taken over into the sepulchral realm for the apotheosis of the private citizen, finally to be adopted by early Christian art.

Sinkiang (Fig. 26). Many other Yün-kang examples are enriched with draped cur- tains. We find similar ‘distortions’ in late antique and early Christian ivories of about the same period: a dipych from the cathedral treasure at Monza (Italy) and a casket from Samigher (Istria) (Figs. 29, 30). There are other traits in parallels in western art. Fig. 31 shows a late Roman sarcophagus of the 3rd century A.D. Two putti (baby angels) with curiously ‘trailing’ legs held up a fende (roundel) with the portrait bust of the deceased. An early Christian version has Christ in the roundel carried by angels (Fig. 32), or a circular flowerlike star between two angels above the enthroned Madonna. Both types occur on the famous Monza ampulla dated about
At Yün-kang some of the many instances of this concept include flying celestial holding and adorning the lotus blossom—Buddha’s symbol (Figs. 33, 34). Objects which travel easily, like the 4th century A.D. Sassanian silver plate, with putti holding a flowered tendril below the feasting Dionysos (Fig. 35), may have transmitted the concept to the East.

Let us trace two more sets of cognate formulae. A pillar-shaped Roman monument of the 2nd century A.D. shows the portraits of a boy and a girl in the midst of flower-studded tendrils (Fig. 36). From the blossoms there emerge putti. Compare a Gandhāra version (Fig. 37): celestial spirits attend a bodhisattva. They all emerge from lotus calyces. And here, finally, the Yün-kang rendering (Fig. 38). From the tendrils of a flat floral frieze plastic lotus blossoms stand out, containing busts of little children—self-born souls, symbols of the promise of re-birth.

Lastly, let us look at this stout booted bodhisattva—one of the many in these caves—in sanctifying dress, who lifts up a censer and stands with his legs pronouncedly turned outward on a somewhat wilted lotus blossom (Fig. 39). It is tempting to compare this Yün-kang figure to the Iranian god Mithra standing splay-legged, booted and turreted, on a ‘wilted’ lotus in the 4th century A.D. Sassanian relief from Taq-i-Bustan (Iran), which depicts the investiture of King Ardashir II (Fig. 40). Now, deftly on lotus flowers is a concept of venerable age known from early on in Egypt, and later from India (Morenz and Schuhert). But it is the stance of our examples which is noteworthy. A link between these parallels from the eastern and the western end of the Silk Road is provided by the famous inscribed statue—probably of the early 2nd century A.D.—of the Kushan emperor Kanishka, whom we had occasion to mention already (Fig. 41). It was discovered in another dynastic sanctuary of the Kushans, at Mathurā in northern India (and is on exhibit in the Museum there). Kanishka shows the same characteristics. So already do the late 1st century B.C. ancestral portrait statues from Khaibachayn in Uzbekistan (see p. 36, above).

I believe that both the Parthian and the Kushan artists, and also their Sassanian successors, all with related animal backgrounds, considered frontality with such outward-turned booted feet greatly imposing, thinking it a real ‘imperial’ stance and the hallmark of true rulers. This must have appealed to the Northern Wei of cognate heritage. In Buddhist iconography gods and bodhisattvas are modelled on the appearance of secular rulers. So, the Yün-kang version can be explained. An impressive though sadly fragmentary array of such surefooted figures in clay, apparently from the later Kushan period, has come to light in recent years in Buddhist
sanctuaries in Afghanistan, the heartland of Gandhara art: donors in Kushan busts next to colossal Buddha figures (Hadda/Tapa Shotor and Ghanzi/Tapa Sardas).

We saw that it is in this cross-roads region of Central Asia, the ever-renewed and fruitful encounter of creeds and artistic currents took place over many centuries. In Yîn-kang there can be no doubt about the western connections being very strong—a fact demonstrated by the many recorded embassies which, for decades, arrived at the Northern Wei court. They were sent by the rulers of the cities and principalities along the Silk Routes, from as far west as Afghanistan and Soviet Central Asia—Gandhara, Bactria and Sogdiana, to give those regions their ancient names.

But what of Indian influences at Yîn-kang—certainly among the most important one would expect to find? They are indeed apparent, but on a comparatively modest scale. Here (Figs. 42, 43) are the many-handed and many-armed Kûmanakadeva/Indra on an eagle and

Maheshvaradeva/Siva on a bull—apparently a Tantric emblem of the Buddha’s supreme spiritual power—above a royal guardian figure with trident and winged cap (Vaiśravana), both from the reveals of the entrance of cave 8. The figures are clearly related to early 5th century models of the Gupta period, such as those from caves at Udayagiri near Bhopal in north-central India (Figs. 44, 45). There is kinship in style as well as in subject-matter.

The whole concept of the cave temple is, of course, Indian. This is very obvious in the facade of the coupled caves 9 and 10, with their octagonal pillars (Fig. 46). Here, by the way, the large reliefs of wooden beams are particularly noticeable. Yet, when stepping under this seemingly ‘Indian’ porch, one is suddenly confronted
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