

Longmen Grottoes (China)

No 1003

Identification

<i>Nomination</i>	Longmen Grottoes
<i>Location</i>	Luoyang City, Henan Province
<i>State Party</i>	People's Republic of China
<i>Date</i>	27 July 1999

Justification by State Party

The Longmen Grottoes, which line the banks of the Yihe River to the south of the ancient capital of Luoyang, constitute an extremely important part of the Chinese art of stone carving and a glorious chapter in world stone carving. This developed when Emperor Xianwen moved the Northern Wei capital to Luoyang in 493 and continued for more than four centuries, into the Ming Dynasty. The most intensive period of carving was from the end of the 5th century to the mid 8th century.

The grottoes are masterpieces of the later phase of the early period of Chinese carving and the middle period. The Buddhist rock shelters are recognized internationally for their profusion, their massive scale, the variety of the subjects depicted, the delicacy of the carving, and their profound spiritual significance.

The site is sometimes known as the "Forest of Ancient Stelae" because of the great number of carved and inscribed stelae there, more than anywhere else in the world. It is very unusual because its subject matter extends over all the sects of Buddhism and even Taoism.

The Longmen Grottoes occupy a site of great significance and with a superb natural environment. The wealth of sculptures reflect, in differing ways, the development and modification of the politics, economy, religion, and culture of China over a long and significant period of its history. They are at the same time masterpieces of the stone art not only of China but also of the world.

Criteria i, ii, iii, iv, and v

Category of property

In terms of the categories of cultural property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, this is a group of *sites*.

History and Description

History

Work began on the Longmen Grottoes in 493, when Emperor Xiaowen of the Northern Wei Dynasty moved his capital to Luoyang. Over the next four centuries this work continued; it can be divided into four distinct phases.

The period between 493 and 534 was the first phase of intensive cutting of grottoes. The first cave to be carved was Guyangdong (also known as the Shiku Temple); records show that more than two hundred people were involved in the work. This marked the beginning of a major programme of grotto carving by the Northern Wei rulers. Emperor Xuanwu cut three, two in memory of his father, Xiaowen and one for his mother, Wenzhao. These are the three caves now known as the Three Binyang Caves (*Binyangsandong*), and the work took more than 24 years to complete. A number of other caves of all sizes were cut during this period on the West Hill: they account for some 30% of the total.

This phase of intense activity was followed by a period between 524 and 626 when very few caves, and those all relatively small, were cut. This is attributable principally to the civil strife between different regions of China that persisted through the Sui Dynasty (581-618) and the early part of the Tang Dynasty (618-907)

It was not until 626 that the third phase began, during the height of the Tang Dynasty, when Chinese Buddhism had begun to flourish again. This was once again a period of intensive cutting of grottoes; it was the highpoint artistically of Longmen, especially during the reigns of Emperor Gaozang and Empress Wuzetian, who lived permanently at Luoyang. The group of giant statues in Fengxiansi Cave are most fully representative of this phase of Chinese art at Longmen; they are generally acknowledged to be artistic masterpieces of truly global significance.

Many other grottoes of all sizes were cut at this period on both the West Hill and the East Hill. They make up some 60% of the grottoes at Longmen. In addition, a number of fine Buddhist temples were built there during the Tang Dynasty against the magnificent natural landscape. Most of these only exist now in the form of ruins, but they are still an important component of the overall Longmen cultural complex.

The final phase, from 755 to 1127, during the later Tang through to the Northern Song Dynasty, saw a steep decline in the carving of grottoes at Longmen. This began with the capture of Luoyang in the mid 8th century during a rebellion, an event from which the area never recovered. It was the outbreak of warfare during the Jin and Yuan Dynasties that brought grotto carving to an end.

In the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1912) Dynasties, the great artistic and cultural achievement represented by the Longmen grottoes gradually received national and then international recognition, and were the subject of much scholarly study. During the 1940s some of the stone carvings were stolen and sold abroad, but since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 they have been protected and conserved.

Description

The Longmen Grottoes lie 12km to the south of the historic Chinese city of Luoyang. Two hills flank the Yishui river at a

place that combines considerable strategic importance and great natural beauty. The slopes of the West and East Hills become very steep and clifflike as they approach the river valley, and it is here, over a 1km stretch, that the easily worked limestone of which the hills are composed was carved to produce the Longmen Caves.

In total 2345 niches or grottoes have been recorded on the two sides of the river. They house more than 100,000 Buddhist statues, nearly 2500 stelae and inscriptions, and over 60 Buddhist pagodas. On the West Hill cliffs there are more than 50 large and medium-sized caves cut in the Northern, Sui, and Tang Dynasties (316-907); the caves on the East Hill cliffs are exclusively from the Tang Dynasty (618-907).

The nomination dossier gives descriptions of 42 of the most important caves at Longmen. The following are examples selected to demonstrate the diversity and wealth of the entire complex.

The oldest and largest of the Longmen Caves is *Guyangdong*, in the middle of the southern floor of the West Hill. The work of Emperor Xiaowen, it attracted carvings sponsored by many of his nobles and officials and religious dignitaries, who approved of his reforming policies. On the main wall there are three over-lifesized statues erected by the Emperor. In the centre is the Buddhist patriarch Sakyamuni, flanked by two *bodhisattvas*. They are in the Northern Wei style, with slender figures and emaciated features. There are Buddhist niches all over the walls and ceiling, and more than 800 inscriptions, the largest number in any Chinese cave.

Binyangzhongdong (Middle Binyang Cave) is on the northern floor of the West Hill. It was cut by Emperor Xuanwun in memory of his father Xiaowen in the early 6th century. It is recorded that the work lasted no fewer than 24 years. On the main wall there are five very large Buddhist images: the central one, of Sakyamuni, is flanked by four *bodhisattvas*, all in the Northern Wei style. Each of the two side walls has a Buddha figure flanked by two attendant *bodhisattvas*. The three groups symbolize the Buddhas of the past, the present, and the future. The ceiling of the cave is a canopy in the shape of a lotus flower. Two exquisite large reliefs depicting the Emperor and the Empress worshipping the Buddha were stolen from the cave in the 1930s and are now in museums in the USA.

Huangfugong (also known as *Shikusi*) is located to the south of the West Hill. An inscription shows it to have been completed in 527. In front of the cave a roof has been carved imitating wooden construction, with seven Buddhas inside the lintel. The main wall is decorated with seven larger than lifesize statues: a Buddha flanked by two *bodhisattvas* and two disciples. There is a number of other Buddhist groups in niches within the cave. The ceiling of the cave is a dome with a large lotus flower surrounded by eight musical *apsaras* (water spirits). This is one of the best preserved of the major caves at Longmen. Much of its importance lies in the fact that it was designed and completed as a single entity rather than being added to over a period by different donors.

The name of *Yaofangdong* (Prescription Cave) derives from the 140 inscriptions recording treatments for a wide variety of diseases and conditions carved on the walls on either side of the entrance. It is of special typological interest, since work on the sculpture began in the late Northern Wei period and continued until the early Tang Dynasty. Its contents

therefore illustrate the changes in artistic style over that period of more than 150 years.

This cultural transition is better illustrated in *Binyangnandong* (South Binyang Cave). It is recorded that the group of five giant statues were carved by Li Tai, fourth son of Li Simin, first of the Tang Emperors, in memory of his mother, Empress Zhangsun. They were completed, according to documents, in 641. The large main statue, of Buddha Amitabha, is set on a square seat. The figure, and the accompanying *bodhisattvas*, have serene features, between the ascetic solemnity of the Northern Wei and the lively naturalism of the Tang Dynasty.

The first large cave on the northern tip of the West Hill is *Qianxisi* (Hidden Stream Temple Cave), carved during the reign of Tang Emperor Gaozong (653-80). The main group of Buddha Amitabha flanked by *bodhisattvas* are fully representative of the developed Tang style, with well proportioned symmetrical bodies, plump features, and refined expressions. This group of three (Amitabha, Avalokitesvara, and Mahasthamaprapta) represents the three saints from the west worshipped by the Pure Land Sect of Buddhism.

Li Zhi of the Tang Dynasty cut *Fengxiansi Cave*, on the southern floor of the West Hill. Completed in 675, it is the largest and most typical example of Tang stone sculpture at Longmen. There are nine colossal statues in the cave, dominated by that of Buddha Vairocana 17.14m tall, with plump features and a compassionate expression. This form of naturalistic representation is shared by the other large statues – of *bodhisattvas*, heavenly kings, warriors, and demons – the expression of each being clearly differentiated according to the characteristics of the subjects.

Management and Protection

Legal status

Article 22 of the Constitution of the People's Republic of China (PRC) lays down that "The state protects sites of scenic and historic interest, valuable cultural monuments and relics and other significant items of China's historical and cultural heritage." Under the provisions of the Law on Protection of Cultural Relics, the Longmen Grottoes were designated for protection in the first group of properties approved by the State Council of the PRC.

In addition, the properties are protected by a series of other statutes, stemming from the Constitution of the PRC and including the Environmental Protection Law, the Urban Planning Law, and the Penal Law. The Cultural Relics Protection Law operates through a number of sets of regulations at national level, reinforced by and interpreted through regulations issued by Henan Province and Luoyang City.

The protected areas are surrounded by substantial buffer zones, defined in 1983 by the People's Government of Henan Province.

Management

The Longmen Grottoes are owned by the People's Republic of China.

They are managed by the Longmen Relics Care Agency, established by the Ministry of Culture of the PRC in 1953. It

works with the Longmen Grottoes Research Institute set up in 1990 by the People's Government of Luoyang City.

Specialist scientific and professional advice is provided by the China Institution of Cultural Relics Protection Technology and the China University of Geology working with the Longmen Cultural Relics Care Agency. These three bodies collaborated in 1987 in the production of the first Five-Year Plan for the Maintenance of Longmen Grottoes. Revised Five-Year and Ten-Year Plans were approved by the People's Government of Luoyang City in 1999. These take into account scientific research on conservation and protection, data collection, academic research, publicity and promotion, improvement of visitor facilities, and upgrading of staff provision for the Longmen Grottoes Research Academy (formerly Institute).

Funds for maintenance and conservation work derive from the State Administration of Cultural Heritage and the People's Governments of Henan Province and Luoyang City.

There are interpretational and infrastructural facilities on-site for the large number of visitors (in the neighbourhood of one million per year).

Conservation and Authenticity

Conservation history

Between 1951 and 1970, efforts concentrated on intensive investigation of the state of conservation and the natural environment of the grottoes. Considerable recording was carried out and protection zones were defined and demarcated. A weather monitoring station was set up to examine the environmental conditions at the monuments.

The period from 1971 to 1998 was one of planned maintenance and protection. Actions taken during this period included efforts to reinforce the rock bases of the grottoes, to tackle the problems of water infiltration, and to install physical protection such as railings, steps, and walkways. No major civil engineering projects were needed in order to deal with the problems of water infiltration: ancient systems were cleared and brought back into use, vegetation was removed, and crevices were sealed using modern materials.

Authenticity

Despite deliberate damage over the centuries and destruction by natural forces, the major niches and grottoes at Longmen have retained their authenticity to a high degree. Since the establishment of the PRC there has been scrupulous attention to modern conservation principles in all conservation and restoration projects.

Evaluation

Action by ICOMOS

An ICOMOS expert mission visited the property in February 2000.

Qualities

The Longmen Grottoes contain an exceptional collection of Chinese sculpture from the late period of the Northern Wei Dynasty to the Song Dynasty which were of immense influence in the subsequent development of the plastic arts in China.

Comparative analysis

The immediate comparisons are naturally with the rock art of the caves at Mogul and Dazu, both already inscribed on the World Heritage List. However, the former are notable for their painted sculpture and murals. The Dazu corpus is also significantly different from the Longmen material, in that it is later and the subject matter of its carvings is more secular.

Brief description

The grottoes and niches of Longmen contain the largest and most impressive collection of the plastic art of China in the late period of the Northern Wei Dynasty to the Tang Dynasty (493-907). This art, depicting entirely religious subjects from Buddhism, represents the apogee of the Chinese art of stone carving.

Recommendation

That this property be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of *criteria i, ii, and iii*:

Criterion i The sculptures of the Longmen Grottoes are an outstanding manifestation of human artistic creativity.

Criterion ii The Longmen Grottoes illustrate the perfection of a long-established art form which was to play a highly significant role in the cultural evolution of this region of Asia.

Criterion iii The high cultural level and sophisticated society of Tang Dynasty China is encapsulated in the exceptional stone carvings of the Longmen Grottoes.

ICOMOS, September 2000