

Yungang Grottoes (China)

No 1039

Identification

<i>Nomination</i>	Yungang Grottoes
<i>Location</i>	Datong City, Shanxi Province
<i>State Party</i>	The People's Republic of China
<i>Date</i>	29 June 2000

Justification by State Party

An early masterpiece of Chinese cave art, the Yungang Grottoes are an important component of cave art not only for China but for the world. They belong to the period between the mid 5th and early 6th centuries (the early years of the reign of Emperor Heping and the era of Emperor Zhengguang of the Northern Wei Dynasty). The cutting of the grottoes started in 460 CE; it was intensively carried out till 490, and lasted until 520 CE. The exquisite carvings cover a large surface area and deal with a rich variety of themes. The statues are made in a typical Imperial style. The Yungang grottoes are different from other grottoes cut earlier in China and are characterized by their integration in the distinctive processes of nationalization across China, developing a style of their own in Chinese cave art. The large number of images and written records in the Yungang Grottoes are key elements in showing the development and changes of style in Chinese cave art and the religious beliefs in northern China during the mid 5th and early 6th centuries CE, and made major contributions to the innovation and development of Chinese cave art. They have a historical, artistic, scientific, and appreciative value irreplaceable by any other grottoes cut earlier in China.

The Yungang Grottoes are one of the great treasure houses of ancient statuary in the world. The site has 252 caves and niches, containing over 51,000 statues, the over 18,000m² of carved surface extending for 1km. The grottoes are the most important testimony of the highest quality of artistic achievement of Chinese Buddhist carving art in the second half of the 5th century CE. Various caves contain majestic statues or have decorations that are world-famous in their bright colours and in their important and even rare themes.

The Yungang Grottoes have made important contributions to the reform and development of cave art, regarding laws of aesthetics in religious art in the language of carving. They are an excellent example of the development and transition of the Buddhist art of India and Central Asia (the Gandhara and Mathura art of ancient India) into the Buddhist art of China in the short time-span of thirty years. These transitions

include various aspects of forms, themes, and concepts that reflect the aesthetic and ethical values of Chinese culture. So far as their artistic style is concerned, they reveal a marked revolution of localization of the styles of foreign statuary.

The Yungang Grottoes stand as a special evidence to the great blending of the Chinese nation in the 5th century CE, and an outstanding representative of the rooting of early Buddhist art in the central areas of China. Datong was not only one of the biggest metropolitan centres in the world of the 5th century CE, but also a hub for the absorption of culture and art from India and other Central Asian countries, and the blending of the cultures and arts of the various states in the Western regions and those of the various nationalities living in various Chinese regions with a highly developed economy and culture.

The Yungang Grottoes are the best works produced during the second period of the prosperity of Buddhist cave art in the world. The Five Caves, cut by Tan Yao, an eminent monk, to symbolize Emperor Dao Wu, Emperor Ming Yuan, Emperor Tai Wu, Emperor Jingmu, and Emperor Wen Cheng of the Northern Wei Dynasty have tried to bring out, in artistic form, the magnificent, simple, and vigorous appearance of the statues, and to impart, in religion, thinking about the perpetuity of Buddhist law.

Criteria i, ii, iii, and iv

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 *monument*.

History and Description

History

Datong, known as Pingcheng in ancient times, became the capital of the Northern Wei Dynasty between 398 and 494 CE, and thus the political, economic, and cultural centre of their kingdom. It kept its importance up to 523, when it was deserted following a revolt. The statues of the Yungang Grottoes were completed in sixty years (460–525 CE); this period marks the peak of development in Buddhist cave art of the Northern Wei Dynasty. When the first emperor assumed the throne, Buddhism flourished and in 460 the monk Tan Yao started the carving of the Five Caves; since then, these grottoes have become the centre of Buddhist art in North China. Between 471 and 494 the worship of Buddha was diffused among the imperial members and nobles. Thus, as many as twelve large caves and as many as 70% of the total number of the big caves were dug and Chongfu Temple was built. By 525 CE the initial project, sponsored by the court, was mostly completed, but low-ranking officials and monks continued to dig more caves and carve statues. These caves number more than 200; although they are relatively small, some are of excellent quality. During the Liao Dynasty, wooden shelter structures were built in front of the caves, turning the grottoes into temple buildings, such as the Ten Famous Temples. In 1122 CE, these temples were destroyed in a war. Four-storeyed wooden-structured garrets, each with five rooms, were constructed in front of Caves 5 and 6, and three-storeyed structures with three rooms each were in front of Cave 7 in

1651 CE. Since the foundation of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the major caves and the wooden structures in front of them (caves 5, 6, and 7) have all been conserved. The grottoes are protected and are open to the public.

Description

The Yungang Grottoes, known as Wuzhoushan Grottoes in ancient times, are located on the southern foot of the Wuzhou Mountains, in the Shi Li River valley, 16km west of Datong City. They consist of 252 caves of various sizes housing more than 51,000 statues; the site extends much as 1km east–west. Three main periods can be identified in the construction: the early period (460–65 CE), the middle period (c 471–94 CE), and the late period (494–525 CE). The nominated area is about 350ha and the buffer zone is 850ha. Apart from the grottoes, the nominated core area includes the remains of a castle, a defence wall, and a beacon tower of the Ming Dynasty on the plain above the grottoes. In front of the grottoes, in the river valley, there are some recent constructions, including offices and tourism facilities. To the east of the core area (within the second protection zone) there is a workers' village. In the north-western part of the buffer zone there are the Wuguantun coal mines. Other mines and villages exist to the east outside the protection area.

The grottoes of the *early period* (460–65 CE) are composed of five main caves (16–20); these magnificent and simple caves were dug under the direction of the monk Tan Yao and are named after him. For the layout of the grottoes, large caves were dug to house the giant statues, 13–15m tall. They have a U-shaped plan and arched roofs, imitating the thatched sheds in ancient India. Each cave has a door and a window. The central images have tall bodies and occupy the major part of the caves, while on the outer walls a thousand Buddhist statues are carved, a feature rarely seen in the tradition of Chinese history of grotto carving. Buddhas of the past, present, and future, a thousand Buddhas standing together, are the dominating subject matter. The styles of the statuary reflect some of the characteristics of the Liangzhou Grottoes and the Gandhara and Mathura statues, demonstrating a strong foreign flavour, especially in clothing and jewellery. For the human forms, features of the ethnic groups (tall, robust, powerful) living in northern China at that time may have been imitated, thus creating a new model for Buddhist statuary.

The grottoes of the *middle period* (c 471–94 CE) are located in the east and in the middle of the grotto area. They form the essence of the Yungang Grottoes, consisting of large caves, including four groups of twin caves (caves 1 & 2; 5 & 6; 7 & 8; 9 & 10) and one group of triple caves (caves 11–13). Cave 3, the biggest cave of the site, was mainly carved in this period (with the exception of the three statues of the Tang Dynasty). In this period there was a rapid development of the Han style and many new subject matters and combinations of statues were introduced, shifting the attention to creation of law-enforcing images and various kinds of adornment; thus the Buddhist cave art of Indian origin developed into a local art. These caves are square in plan, usually with chambers both in front and in the rear. Some caves have so-called *stupa* pillars, carved out of rock, in the centre and others can have ritual passageways carved in the rear wall. In caves with a square plan, carvings on the walls are divided into upper and lower bands and right and left sections. Level caisson ceilings are carved on the roofs in most cases. On both sides

of the outer walls there are high double-floored attics, and monuments stand high in the centre of the courtyard. The shelters in the style of wooden structures are supported by octagonal pillars, each carved with a thousand Buddhas. The walls inside the caves are covered by long rolls of paintings divided into different layers and columns. All these reflect the layouts and traditional arrangements of halls in vogue in China during the Han Dynasty. The themes of the statues are varied: prominence is given to Sakyamuni, Maitreya, Prabhutaratna, Manjusri, and Vimalakirti and various moments of the life and activities of Buddha. Much attention is given to vestiary: there are thousands of statues of dignified and amiable Buddha, elegant deities, heavenly kings, powerful warriors, and lively flying *apsaras*, all reflecting the social background and characteristics of the period, and also gradual maturing in the style and skill of carving.

The grottoes of the *late period* (494–525 CE) are located in the west of the grotto area, mainly Caves 21–45, Cave 4, those in the Dragon King Temple Valley between Caves 4 and 5, the small niches in the cliffs of Caves 11–13 and also Caves 14 and 15. In total, over 200 caves and niches were cut in this period. These caves are of medium and small size with varied and complicated irregular shapes. Decorations were also carved on the cliff around the door of the caves. There is a tendency towards simplification of the contents of the statuary and stylizing the forms, but with a new look of delicacy and gracefulness. Apart from Buddha in seated position, Buddhas were carved sitting face to face and warriors were carved at the cave door.

After the completion of the construction of the grottoes, there were various events that affected the site. At the time of Emperor Chongxi and Emperor Qingning of the Liao Dynasty (1049–60) there was an important project including the construction of the so-called Ten Temples of Yungang, in front of a series of caves, but these were destroyed by fire in 1122. In the period of Emperor Shunzhi of the Qing Dynasty (1651 CE), funds were raised for the construction of wooden garrets in Caves 5 and 6, resulting in the creation of the Ancient Temple of the Grotto Statues. During the same dynasty, several efforts were made to rebuild the shelters of some caves, to carve and re-paint some statues. The period also includes some inscriptions.

Management and Protection

Legal status

The Yungang Grottoes are owned by the People's Republic of China. In 1961 the Grottoes were declared a major cultural heritage site to be protected at the national level. The site was listed as a special place open to overseas tourists in 1983 (like the Imperial Palace, the Great Wall, and the Dunhuang Grottoes) and was included in the State plan on tourism.

In 1997, the municipal government promulgated the Regulations of Datong City on the Protection and Management of the Yungang Grottoes, the first local regulations in China for the protection of major cultural heritage areas, making an important contribution to the protection and management of the Yungang Grottoes.

The site has different degrees of protection: a. the key area, including the grottoes, the Ming structures on the plain, and

an area in front of the caves in the river valley; b. an outer protection area, including an area of controlled reconstruction; and c. a buffer zone surrounding the area, which includes parts of the plain north and south of the river. Each area is protected according to various civic, cultural, environmental, and urban planning laws and regulations. The regulations concern density, height, content, form, and size of the buildings and settlements.

The boundary of the site has been identified both above and below ground, taking into account the fact that Datong is a major coal-producing area and there are mines around the site. In an area of 300m from the outer protection area, any mining is banned with a collapse angle of 70 degrees.

The rural villages and buildings near the site have a total of 1700 inhabitants, and there are some 2300 employees. The villages do not present a hazard to the protection of the site, but the general policy is to encourage removal of population to other areas and to ban any new arrivals. All buildings in the neighbourhood which could be considered to disturb the setting of the site will eventually be removed.

Management

In 1952 a special organization was set up for the conservation of the grottoes, now known as the Yungang Grottoes Institute of Shanxi. This institute has organized a systematic survey and documentation of the site and the statuary between 1973 and 1999, and has set up an office for reception and publicity for the site, together with the necessary staff and professionally trained guides. Tourist facilities have been set up in various key areas of the site, as well as other services such as offices, a laboratory, a projection room, and guest rooms. The Yungang Grottoes Institute of Shanxi pays special attention to promoting the coordinated development of tourism in order to prevent unfavourable influences on the cultural heritage. The number of visitors has varied from year to year: it has been above 200,000 per year since 1980. Safety precautions are taken to avoid any damage caused by visitors in peak periods. The Grottoes are open to the public and the government promotes the site in the media. In the past decade, a highway and a coal transportation road have been re-routed to avoid pollution to the site.

Conservation and Authenticity

Conservation history

There are records indicating that some of the grottoes were rebuilt in 640 CE during the Tang Dynasty. According to another source, the monk Yan restored the old statues every time he went to Heng'an. A massive project was launched between 1049 and 1060 CE and the so-called Ten Temples of the Yungang were built in the areas linking the front of the caves with the cliffs. These temples were destroyed in a fire in 1122 CE. An inscription discovered in Cave 13 indicates the restoration of 1876 statues during the Liao Dynasty. There are indications such as holes on the cliff or stylistic clues that some restoration works were carried out during the Liao and Jin dynasties. In 1651 CE funds were raised to rebuild wooden attics with four storeys and five rooms in Caves 5 and 6, as well as some side halls, passageways, and gates in order to create the Ancient Temple of the Grotto Statues. During the Qing Dynasty efforts were made to rebuild the shelters of some caves and re-carve and repaint

some statues. The bright colours in Caves 5, 6, and 9–13 indicate such repainting.

A few of the caves have suffered damage, such as collapse of the rock of the front walls, weathering of the carved details, or damage to the limbs of statues. Because of being built in sandstone, there has been weathering due to water erosion, and there are cracks in the ceilings and back walls of most caves. These have been sealed, but seepage continues to occur in some caves in rainy seasons. Problems exist in particular in the northern part of the caves, ie against the hillside. In spite of many efforts, new technology needs to be developed to solve this problem, which is due to a multiplicity of causes. An additional problem on the site is caused by pollution from the industrial areas of Datong, an industrial city using coal as a fuel as well as from the truck traffic from the coal mines, which used to pass in front of the caves. As a result, coal dust has deposited on the statues. Measures have already been taken in order to correct this problem and a new road has been built elsewhere, thus considerably reducing the dust in the area. The nearest mine to the north-west of the caves has been closed.

From 1950 to 1973 conservation work concentrated on monitoring the climatic conditions in the caves and their study, survey, and documentation. There has been some rescue work on various statues and caves, as well as grouting and solving problems related to water infiltration. From 1974 to 2000 work focused on reinforcing the caves, re-attaching fallen parts, filling and consolidating the cracks, and controlling and monitoring climatic changes. The area is subject to great changes in temperature (–25 +37°C), and the average relative humidity is 50–90%. Datong is in a seismic area and it is exposed to Mongolian sandstorms. In fact, planting trees has been useful in reducing the sandstorm damage. There has been collaboration with the Getty Conservation Institute and the Geology Institute of Giessen University, Germany, in the studying and monitoring the climate.

The Plan for the Development of the Yungang Grottoes, implemented in 2000, and the Ten-Year Programme for the Development of Yungang Grottoes have aimed at strengthening the management structures and improving the protection, study, presentation, promotion, and conservation of the site. The programme also includes raising awareness of the local people. The protection of cultural heritage and the environment and the development of the local economy have been considered as parts of a coordinated management effort of the site. Taking into account the various problems of the context, the grottoes are in a fairly good condition and can be considered to be some of the best preserved examples of Chinese cave art.

Authenticity and integrity

The caves and statues of the Yungang Grottoes have retained their historical authenticity, although they have been subject to repairs and restorations in the centuries subsequent to their construction. These include the construction of wooden temple fronts, such as the Ten Temples in the 12th century, destroyed in fire soon afterwards, and other structures in the 17th century. The more recent works have mainly focused on the conservation of the statues, consolidation of the grottoes, and the improvement of management. Nevertheless, most of the statues and grottoes date from the original construction in the 4th and 5th centuries. Most of the statues have retained their original colour scheme, though some statues were

repainted in the 17th century. Subsequent interventions have not made substantive alterations to this heritage. The site can therefore be considered to satisfy the requirements of the test of authenticity and integrity.

Evaluation

Action by ICOMOS

An ICOMOS expert mission visited the site in February–March 2001.

Qualities

Buddhist art was introduced from India to China in the 3rd century CE, and it reached its greatest development here in the period from the 5th to the 7th centuries, during the Northern Wei and Tang Dynasties. The Yungang Grottoes are considered to be the classical masterpiece of the first peak in Chinese history, and an outstanding example of the second period. The statues of the Five Caves built by Tan Yao (Caves 16–20), the first to be carved in Yungang, including the statue of "Buddha in the Open," represent the integration of the Gandhara and Mathura art of ancient India with Chinese concepts. This is the first large group of grottoes cut under government control, in part reflecting Chinese imperial policies and in part representing an acceleration of the process of integrating Buddhist art into Chinese heritage.

Comparative analysis

Three sites of Buddhist cave art have so far been inscribed on the World Heritage List in China: Mogao Caves (inscribed 1987: criteria i, ii, iii, iv, v, vi), Longmen Grottoes (2000: i, ii, iii), and the Dazu Rock Carvings (1999: i, ii, iii). Buddhist cave sites have also been inscribed in India: Ajanta Caves (1983: i, ii, iii, vi), Ellora Caves (1983: i, iii, vi), and Elephanta Caves (1987: i, iii); others are in Sri Lanka – the *Golden Temple of Dambulla* (1991: i, vi) – and in the Republic of Korea – *Sokkuram Grotto* (1995: i, iv).

The Chinese caves are distinguished from the other Asian sites because of their particular qualities, resulting from integration with Chinese culture and local characteristics. The earliest caves are those in Mogao, which range from the 4th to the 14th centuries, integrating influences through the Silk Road connections. The Longmen Grottoes start in 495 and continue till the mid 8th century; they perpetuate the style of Yungang, though the sculptures are stylized, showing a hierarchical verticality, and the bas-reliefs are softer in character. The Dazu caves represent a relatively late period from the end of the 9th to 13th centuries.

The Yungang Grottoes represent a turning point in Chinese cave art, due to numerous new factors. They differ from the other Chinese regions, such as Mogao, which have strong influences from India and Central Asia. While developing a century later (starting in 460) than the Mogao caves, Yungang distinguishes itself by being the first imperial commission in China, and thus clearly reflects the political ambitions of the time. The decoration represents one of the first manifestations in China of the Buddhist art that the Tuoba tribe (who founded the Northern Wei Dynasty and chose Datong as their capital) brought from Central Asia and India through Gandhara. The first period of Yungang represents the classical representation of cave art in China,

and the middle period is also an outstanding example of that particular epoch.

ICOMOS recommendations for future action

The State Party is encouraged to monitor the situation within and around the site of the Yungang Grottoes, particularly regarding mining activities, pollution, and the development of tourism. It is recommended that a long-term comprehensive preservation programme should be prepared with clearly formulated objectives to eliminate and mitigate the hazards caused by deterioration.

Brief description

The Yungang Grottoes, in Datong, with their 252 caves and 51,000 statues, represent the outstanding achievement of Buddhist cave art in China in the 5th and 6th centuries. The Five Caves created by Tan Yao are a classical masterpiece of the first peak of Chinese art, with a strict unity of layout and design.

Statement of Significance

The Yungang Grottoes were built in a relatively short time (460–525 CE) and constitute a classical masterpiece of the first peak of Buddhist cave art in China. The site integrates influences from southern and central Asian regions with Chinese culture. It is distinguished by being the first Imperial commission in China, reflecting the political ambitions of the time. Yungang also gives this art a clearly Chinese and local spirit, which was important for the later artistic developments in the country.

ICOMOS Recommendation

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

Criterion i The assemblage of statuary of the Yungang Grottoes is a masterpiece of early Chinese Buddhist cave art.

Criterion ii The Yungang cave art represent the successful fusion of Buddhist religious symbolic art from south and central Asia with Chinese cultural traditions, starting in the 5th century CE under Imperial auspices.

Criterion iii The power and endurance of Buddhist belief in China are vividly illustrated by the Yungang grottoes.

Criterion iv The Buddhist tradition of religious cave art achieved its first major impact at Yungang, where it developed its own distinct character and artistic power.

Bureau Recommendation

That the Yungang Grottoes be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of *criteria i, ii, iii, and iv*.

ICOMOS, September 2001