

Study on the Thin Flesh Sculptures of Northern Zhou Dynasty in Maijishan Grottoes

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Abstract: The thin flesh sculpture of the Flying Sky mural in the Seven Buddha Pavilion of the fourth cave of Maijishan was created in the Northern Zhou Dynasty, which is the product of the fusion of Buddhist art and traditional Chinese culture. Among them, the mural uses the method of combining painting and sculpture, which is rare and novel, which not only fully reflects the intelligence and extraordinary creativity of ancient artists in China, but also has high artistic value for Buddhist sculpture art in China. Taking "thin meat sculpture" as the research object, this paper analyzes and elaborates on the historical development of Northern Zhou statues, the overview of thin meat sculpture murals, their characteristics and artistic achievements, explores the relationship between the artistic techniques of painting and sculpture and Chinese sculpture and murals, and studies the significance of thin meat sculpture in the development of Chinese Buddhist sculpture and mural art.

Keywords: Maijishan Grottoes; Seven Buddha Pavilions; Northern Zhou Dynasty; Thin Flesh Sculpture.

1. The Historical Background of Northern Zhou Statues in Maiji Mountain

The Northern Zhou was a feudal dynasty in Chinese history that ruled for only twenty-five years. It re-united the divided northern part of China by destroying Northern Qi in the east, clearing Jiangnan in the south, raising Ba Shu in the west and hitching a ride in the desert in the north. According to historical records, three emperors of the Northern Zhou were great believers in Buddhism, which indicates that Buddhism was quite flourishing at that time, and Mount Maiji was no exception. According to available information, during the Northern Zhou period, the Maiji Mountain Grottoes reached the peak of the construction of Buddhist caves. Among the numbered caves in the Maiji Mountain Grottoes, there are already forty-four caves belonging to the Northern Zhou period, accounting for about one-fifth of the total number of caves. There are more than 1,200 statues of the Northern Zhou Dynasty preserved today, and the mural paintings cover an area of more than a hundred square meters, including about dozens of square meters of thin-flesh sculpture type murals, which are all precious and rich artworks.

The clay sculptures in the Maiji Mountain Grottoes have survived countless fires, earthquakes, wars, smoke and fire, and even wind, sun and rain, but they have been miraculously preserved. The history of clay sculpture is very long, in the primitive society period, people began to use clay to knead and mold the figureheads and animal images. The "clay puppets" mentioned in the "Strategies of the Warring States" and the terracotta figurines unearthed in the Qin and Han dynasties have already possessed the characteristics of a simple, thick and vivid style. The Book of Jin records that Dai Daoan, a famous painter of the fourth century, was also able to make clay figurines.

In order to solve the problem of preserving the clay sculptures, the craftsmen used many effective methods of clay making process. They added sand, twine, cotton, wheat grass and other materials to the clay, and even egg whites and

glutinous rice juice. At the same time, they also used the "slurry stone" from the local river gully, which was ground into powder and slurry, and these mud-making techniques were verified in the Maiji Mountain Grottoes.

2. Overview of the Thin Flesh Sculpture Murals in Cave 4, Maiji Mountain

2.1. Introduction to the Shape of Cave 4 in Maiji Mountain

Cave 4 on Mount Maiji, also known as the "Pavilion of Seven Buddhas" or the "House of Scattered Flowers", is one of the largest caves built during the Northern Zhou Dynasty. It was built by Li Yunxin, the governor of Qinzhou in the Northern Zhou Dynasty, for his late father. It is located at the highest point of the east cliff, more than 50 meters above the ground. The Seven Buddhas Pavilion adopts the structure of a plan rectangular single-eaved hipped cliff pavilion, with the front porch and the back room connected. The front porch consists of eight eight-pronged stone carvings of flat chesses on the hilltop, while the back room is composed of seven parallel cut planar square quadrangular four-cornered save the tip of the roof of the imitation wooden structure, and the doors of the niches are made of relief carvings imitating the tent-like structure.

Inside the niches, a statue of Buddha, two disciples and six Bodhisattvas (or a statue of Buddha and eight Bodhisattvas) are enshrined. Between the niches there are also eight guardian statues molded in relief. In the upper part of each side of the front porch, there is also a small niche with the statues of Vimalakirti and Manjushri respectively, and at the bottom, there is a Vajrapani statue that is more than four meters tall.

The total height of this niche is 16 meters, the width is 30.8 meters, the depth is 8 meters, is the largest existing cliff pavilion type building in Maiji Mountain. It is also one of the few caves in the Maiji Mountain that has a clear record in ancient books. According to the Northern Zhou great writer

Yu Xin in the "Qinzhou Tianshui County, Maiji cliff niche inscription and preface" in the record: "Dudu Li Yunxin, the person who is registered at the plant, the deep understanding of the Dharma, is in the wall of the south cliff, ladder clouds chiseling road, for the deceased father to create a seven Buddha niche, like carving Floating sandalwood, such as attacking the water and jade. From the full moon, shine Yao Qinglian. Shadow of the Sumeru, the fragrance of the Example. Such as the dust field, but also open the Hall of the sayings; as if the incense mountain, more to the Buddha of the peace." From this description can be seen, in the first built, seven Buddha Pavilion is very majestic, gorgeous.

The inscription written by Yu Xin was originally carved on a rock stele and preserved in the rock wall. Unfortunately, the stele is now nowhere to be found, and may have collapsed and been buried under the mountain in a subsequent earthquake. After investigation, found that the seven Buddha Pavilion on the left side of the column base outside still preserved a regular vertical rectangular shallow niche, about 2.3 meters high, 1.5 meters wide, the four walls are flat, neither mural traces, nor traces of statue. There are three holes deeply cut into the back wall, and there is also a platform underneath, which is probably the place where Yu Xin's stele was originally placed.

2.2. Introduction to the Thin Flesh Sculpture

Mural images in Cave 4 of Maiji Mountain

In Cave 4, there are seven flying frescoes used to decorate the walls between the outer roofs of the seven niches. There is one mural above each niche, centered on the top of the niche, and there are seven units. The first is a scene depicting the Kabuki Flying Sky: in the upper left corner is a flying sky blowing a hu horn, with the face and arms mutilated; in the upper right corner is a flying sky manipulating a qin, with the face also mutilated; in the lower left corner is a flying sky holding a musical instrument, which is a bit blurred; and in the lower right corner is a flying sky striking a waist drum. The second is the scene depicting the Feitian offering: the upper left corner is a lotus Feitian; the upper right corner is a left-handed tray, tray full of fruit Feitian; the lower left corner and the lower right corner are two wearing robes holding a long-handled sparrow-tailed stove and scattered flowers Feitian. This mural is basically intact, only the lower left corner slightly damaged. The third panel also depicts scenes of kabuki flying skies: in the upper left corner is a flying skies playing a flute; in the upper right corner is a flying skies playing a zither; in the lower left corner is a flying skies playing a sheng; and in the lower right corner is a flying skies playing a ruanxian. Both of the upper flying skyscrapers in robes are somewhat mutilated. The fourth panel depicts Feitian holding incense burners: the two robed Feitian in the upper part are somewhat damaged; the two robed Feitian in the lower part are holding a sparrow-tailed burner for incense and a smoker for incense respectively. The fifth is a scene depicting kabuki flying skies: in the upper left corner is a flying sky playing a hu horn; in the upper right corner is a flying sky playing a gong; in the lower left corner is a flying sky playing a basket of chopsticks; and in the lower right corner is a flying sky holding a musical instrument but indistinctly. The muscular part of the relief carving of these four flyers is much mutilated. The sixth and seventh panels are both painted flat without relief. Among them, the sixth depicts a feeding scene: the upper part has two Feitian in robes with trays full of fruit offerings; the lower part has two Feitian

in robes scattering flowers, both relatively intact. The last panel depicts four kabuki scenes, namely, blowing, playing pazo, and ringing bells. Overall, this group of murals presents a basically complete picture.

These seven murals show the Northern Zhou period of the heavenly palace Kabuki scene, each area of about 6 square meters, each flying image is about 1.5 meters tall. These flying murals are presented in a square arrangement, flying towards each other. Its scale is amazing. These seven works are outstanding works of the Northern Zhou period, depicting the playing of stringed instruments, drums and music, beautiful dances, flowers and rain, as well as scenes of incense and smoke. These murals are basically the same in size, color and painting style, especially the first five "thin meat sculpture" flying sky murals are superb.

The images of Feitian in the wall paintings of Maiji Mountain are famous for their unique artistic expression. In the first five Feitian, including the five facial features, neck, half-chest, arms and hands and feet, the form of thin sculpture is used to present them. This technique uses high-quality fine clay to sculpt the image features in shallow relief on the wall, giving a strong sense of three-dimensionality and realism. The thinnest part is only about 1 millimeter and the thickest part is no more than 4 or 5 millimeters, with very subtle variations in thickness. The other parts of the Flying Sky, such as the crown ornament, the dress, the floating belt, the arm-robe, the neck-ring, the ink celluloid, the streaming clouds and the flying flowers, etc., are shown through paintings. This combination of sculpture language and painting language of expression by experts called "thin flesh plastic" Feitian, is the most representative of the art of Mecca Mountain murals a technique.

3. The Origin of Thin Flesh Sculptures in the Northern Zhou Dynasty

The unique feature of the fourth cave in the Maijishan Grottoes is its "thin meat sculpture" Kaburakumi murals. These murals were first introduced by experts and scholars in the 1950s. At that time, the Ministry of Culture sent a delegation consisting of Wu Zuoren, Luo Gongliu and Xiao Shufang to the Maijishan Grottoes to conduct a comprehensive investigation. They numbered the caves, made a large number of cave maps, and copied the important cave paintings. In 1954, the Social and Cultural Affairs Bureau of the Ministry of Culture published a book entitled "The Caves of Mount Maiji", which included the "Report on the Work of the Survey Mission to Mount Maiji" written by Mr. Wu Zuoren. In the report, he mentioned that there are seven complete frescoes, each depicting four Kabuto days, between the walls above the Seven Buddha Pavilions. One of the most special features is that the skin part of the Kabuto on the large-scale frescoes is represented by thin flesh sculpture with shallow carving, which is a very unique method of combining painting with relief carving. Wu Zuoren called this technique "thin flesh sculpture" and mentioned in the 1954 "cultural relics reference materials" No. 2. Subsequent experts and scholars have been quoting this term, which is also the earliest record of the first introduction of the "Thin Flesh Sculpture" murals in Cave 4 of the Maiji Mountain Grottoes to the world. This combination of relief and painting artistic expression in the Maijishan Grottoes of other dynasties in the mural paintings are not found in other grottoes in the country is also very rare. At present, only the Layou Temple in Wushan has

discovered one of the largest cliff reliefs in the country, contemporary with the fourth cave in the Maijishan Grottoes. These works are not only for the Northern Zhou Buddhist art research is of great significance, at the same time in China's Buddhist art history also occupies an important position. As a result, "thin flesh sculpture" became a concept widely used in later Maiji Mountain scholarship.

4. Characteristics of Northern Zhou Dynasty Thin Flesh Plastic

4.1. Characteristics of Northern Zhou Mural Painting Art

The Northern Zhou period was a period of creation of thin flesh molding murals. In this period, the content of the cave was enriched and developed, and the statue of Buddha's disciples appeared in the statue, while the painting of Buddha was influenced by the Western region, and the story painting continued the style of the Southern Dynasty. The main features of these murals are shown in the following aspects: firstly, the contents are more colorful, and the sutra change paintings began to appear, in which the story paintings added many forms such as the sutra change of the Blessed Sacrament; secondly, the picture compositions had a new development, and some of the story paintings reached more than 80 frames and showed different forms such as concave zigzags, waves and S-shapes; thirdly, the secularization began to enter into the caves of the world of the Buddha's Way, and added Thirdly, secularization began to enter the caves of the Buddhist and Taoist worlds, increasing the elements of people's life atmosphere; most importantly, the landscape as the background of the early character story paintings has got rid of the fixed pattern of the past, "the people are bigger than the mountains, and the water is not permitted to be flooded", and showed a new style of art. In terms of painting techniques, the late Northern Zhou Dynasty had gradually combined the Western-style haloing method with the traditional Chinese line drawing method, paving the way for the further integration of Sui Dynasty mural painting techniques.

The artistic characteristics of the wall paintings of the Northern Zhou Dynasty are manifested in the following aspects: firstly, the co-existence of the Central Plains style and the Western style. The image of Buddha in the Central Plains style is thin and clothed, and the picture is highly decorative, showing a dashing and clear style; while the image of Buddha in the Western Region style is plump and half-naked, and the picture has a three-dimensional sense and the atmosphere of solemnity and calmness. Secondly, people entered the world of Buddha in secular clothes, giving a strong atmosphere of social life. Thirdly, there is a large increase in the paintings of feeders, which is related to the fact that most of the rulers at that time were meritorious officials and nobles of the Northern Zhou. Fourth, in the Northern Zhou murals appeared nude flying art images, breaking the traditional Chinese Confucian and Taoist precepts binding. However, the nude flying skies disappeared rapidly in the following period. Fifth, on the basis of the previous more integrated into the local cultural characteristics. At this time, the approach to characterization became more mature and reached an innovative stage - the pearl and the jade.

Thin-flesh sculpture frescoes pursue the artistic realm of quiet and solemnity, focusing on the wholeness of the works and the coordination with the architecture and paintings while combining motion and static, rigorous but not rigid. In the

shaping of the artistic image has obvious writing and strong secularity, not only satisfied with the imitation of natural images, but also according to the sculptor's knowledge of real life and aesthetic concepts of artistic processing. As a result, the image of the work is generalized and concise, with a sense of haziness, which makes people think between likeness and unlikeness. The figures are robust and handsome, with delicate and subtle methods, and emphasize on the psychological portrayal of the characters, with vivid images and distinctive personalities. At the same time, the combination of color painting and relief carving is skillfully used to show rich and varied effects in unity and change. The figures are beautifully and naturally expressed, with a sense of sculpture, and make full use of the relatively single light source in the grottoes, highlighting the bright hues. Through the sculpture of reasonable forward leaning and the upper large and lower small tall image to solve the perspective changes generated when viewing the work.

The Northern Zhou Dynasty was of great significance in the development of ancient culture in China. It inherited the essence of the Wei, Jin, and North and South Dynasties and laid the foundation for the rise of Sui and Tang culture. At the same time, the Northern Zhou dynasty also promoted the development of Buddhist painting (including statues) in China to a new stage of more national characteristics, laying the foundation for the further nationalization of Buddhist art in the Sui and Tang dynasties.

4.2. Characteristics of the Image of Thin Meat Sculpture Murals

The mural paintings in Cave 4 of Maiji Mountain feature flying skies, which first originated in ancient India as the Sanskrit name "Qandapa" and the Chinese name "Xiangyin Shen", a kind of deity in the Dharma-protecting department of Buddhism. The role of the flying sky in Buddhism is to play music and scatter flowers, as well as to create a solemn atmosphere through incense smoke. In the mural paintings of Chinese Buddhist caves, the image of Feitian first appeared at the end of the Eastern Han Dynasty. At first, they were predominantly male, but later evolved into delicate female figures. They are good at dancing, music, and are perfumed with fragrance. Although the head wearing the crown of the modeling is relatively rough, but the posture is delicate and evocative.

In Buddhist mural paintings, Feitian mainly plays the role of "entertaining the Buddha". The flying skies that play music and dance are called kabuki flying skies, while the flying skies that scatter flowers and offer incense are called offering flying skies. Because they often appear as a companion to the Buddha, Bodhisattva and other figures, they are more free and flexible in their artistic expression to enhance the sense of movement in the picture.

The flying sky murals in the fourth cave of Maiji Mountain are divided into five groups, each with four flying skies. They rotate freely in the void, intertwining with flowers and auspicious clouds to form a unique picture. This unique form of expression is not only light and graceful, which increases the sense of flow of the figures, but also demonstrates the maker's excellent wisdom and rich imagination. The faces, senses, hands, feet and musical instruments of the figures are all finely drawn, fully demonstrating the beauty of the curves of the human body under various states of movement. Producers flexibly use scattered perspective and focus perspective composition method, and take into account the

people look up when the illusion of relationship, so that people from different positions and angles to watch these murals, can feel the flying sky different movement direction and momentum. This shows that the painters in the Northern Zhou period have mastered the principle of perspective and superior production skills.

The thin-flesh sculpture of the Flying Sky mural is very realistic and vivid, especially the face, arms, chest, neck and other parts of the figure are molded with thin fine clay, which creates a clear sense of concavity and volume. The exposed parts of the flying sky are drawn very finely with smooth lines. The flying ribbons, streamers and skirts are oriented in the same direction, adding a sense of rhythm and harmony to the picture. Each of the skyscrapers shows a beautiful face, and through the art of "thin sculpture" expresses a quiet and heartfelt smile. This sense of freedom, liberty and contentment has a strong impact on people.

4.3. Artistic Features of thin Flesh Plastic Murals

The fourth cave of the "thin meat sculpture" Kaburagi days murals, although in the color oxidation, lost the original bright color, but still well-preserved. This is mainly due to the skillful use of production techniques. At that time the craftsmen in order to fix a large area of mud skin on the cliff surface, first in the body of the cliff chiseled plane, and to retain the traces of carving; and then one by one to create a small stream, and will be inserted into the small square wood to be fixed; exposed between the square wood and then connected to each other with twine, and some also use a combination of iron nails and twine; and finally, on this basis to cover the mud skin. Wall mud skin is usually made of yellow clay, sand and fine hemp mixture, can enhance the adhesion, but not easy to fall off. In this way, the murals are firmly attached to the cliff body and are durable.

After completing the wall, the finish needs to be applied. When the paint on the wall dries to seventy to eighty percent, you can start the relief production. Wet walls are not conducive to the production of reliefs, because the wall of the mural has a two-layer structure, the bottom layer is softer, and the upper layer is more difficult to produce. Therefore, the humidity of the clay must be mastered in order to accurately represent the artisan's artistic conception, i.e., the final rendering of the thin-flesh molding effect. In order to form a contrasting relationship between the front and the back, when molding the head of the Flying Sky, it gradually becomes thinner from the forehead up until the hair bun is flush with the wall, avoiding the prominent lines above the forehead and making it more natural and smooth. On the whole, the mural painting of "Seven Buddha Pavilions" emphasizes on the treatment of the starting line, which is presented in different heights in a staggered manner. In shaping the face, the front relief is more difficult, in the existing several murals, only the second niche upper left corner of the Feitian and the third niche lower left corner of the moon zither holding Kabuki Feitian is a positive image, the other Feitian more than three-quarters of the side and the side of the image appeared to try to avoid a positive image. In the expression of the five senses, most of them adopt a smiling expression. The eyes are molded as single eyelids, and the nose, brow bone, eyes and mouth are molded according to the front and back and height relationship, using different thicknesses of clay to make the layers clearly visible. When molding the ears, the ears of the Buddha statues of the Northern Zhou Dynasty are used as a

benchmark, i.e., the ears should be large and plump, and the earlobes should be thick and rounded, with a slightly exaggerated technique. Whether the head of Feitian is frontal or three-quarter sideways, it is visually presented as a frontal view with no perspective effect. The hands and feet are vividly and interestingly molded, especially the hands. The clay on the fingertips is slightly thickened, giving them a rounded, bead-like and slightly upturned form that is agile yet light and soft. The arms, feet, and where the bodice meets the head are treated from thick to thin, similar to the forehead. This treatment can gradually transform the relief into the flat effect of a mural and make it integrated with the whole, avoiding a sense of disconnection. Through the use of the effect of nano-light and shadow, the relief part highlights the vivid facial expression and flexible and vivid posture of the characters, interlacing the real and the imaginary, as if vaguely visible, giving a feeling of wanting to detach from the wall. From the overall picture, the faces, arms and legs of the flying figures are still softened. The emergence of thin meat sculpture is inevitably related to the development of China's ancient large-scale inlay art, but also reflects the ancient art of China's painting and sculpture from the same source, painting and sculpture combination and complement each other's excellent traditional skills.

5. Artistic Achievements of Thin Flesh Sculptures in the Northern Zhou Dynasty

To summarize, thin flesh sculpture, as a unique artistic expression produced in the Maijishan Grottoes during the Northern Zhou Dynasty, was a very bold attempt at that time, and there is no other grotto in the country with similar works. Thin-flesh sculpture not only inherited the essence of the Six Dynasties period, but also opened up a new style for Tang Dynasty art. It was both a stage of development and transformation, and a process of mutual influence and creation of unique styles.

It was no ordinary person who was able to leave such magnificent and exquisite works in the Maijishan Grottoes during the Northern Zhou Dynasty. Only those artists who gathered a wealth of life experience and possessed great skill in modeling could create such amazing works. At that time, the Northern Zhou emperors had great faith in Buddhism and built many temples. Many of the famous temple sculptures and paintings were made by famous artists, such as Cao Zhongda during the Northern Qi Dynasty and Tian Xianliang during the Northern Zhou Dynasty. Because Buddhism was so prevalent at that time, many artists were engaged in Buddhist sculpture and painting, and the Maiji Mountain Grottoes were no exception.

Maiji Mountain is located in the eastern part of the Silk Road, about 300 kilometers away from Chang'an. Therefore, it was easy for artists to come here to work on cave art. However, due to the humid and rainy nature of the place, many of the murals have flaked off and it is impossible to leave the names of the artists of the time. Nonetheless, they created amazing works of Buddhist art and showed their talents through Buddhist art. The appearance of thin flesh sculptures brought the art works of the Northern Zhou period to an unprecedented height. As Mr. Zong Baihua said, "The six dynasties of the late Han, Wei and Jin dynasties were the most politically chaotic and socially bitter times in China, yet they were an era of extreme spiritual freedom and liberation,

the richest in wisdom and the most intensely passionate, and therefore the richest in artistic spirit."

6. Conclusion

The artists of the Northern Zhou period at Maiji Mountain used a unique combination of plasticizing and painting to fuse the two forms of artistic expression together, creating a novel and perfect overall effect. Through the expression of the flying sky front and side image, they let the viewer feel as if the flying sky is about to stand out from the mural, to the strong impact of the people pouncing. Thin meat sculpture is an original art form, between the plane mural and three-dimensional relief, in the plane and space to achieve the unity of the point, line, surface and body. Maijishan thin meat plastic flying frescoes in the composition is very rigorous and clever, by two pairs of four symmetrical echo of the image of the flying sky, highlighting the image of the wall of the square and round. The artists skillfully use relief expression to shape the rich skin and outline the smooth and dynamic lines, and at the same time give color to the fluttering belt and dress, creating a perfect overall effect. These works are extremely decorative, combining the real and the imaginary in setting each other off, producing a strong sense of formal beauty. It is amazing to see the skill of the artists who were able to create such beautiful and creative masterpieces in such a novel form of painting and sculpture more than fifteen hundred years ago. These works are still worthy of our in-depth study and learning and reference today, they are not only the embodiment of the ingenuity of the ancient artists, but also a major breakthrough in the process of artistic creation creativity.

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