

A large, weathered stone Buddha statue carved into a cave wall. The Buddha has a serene expression, closed eyes, and a slight smile. The hair is styled in a traditional topknot. The statue is set within a circular niche. The surrounding rock surface is rough and textured. The text 'Longmen Grottoes' is overlaid in a blue, serif font across the middle of the image.

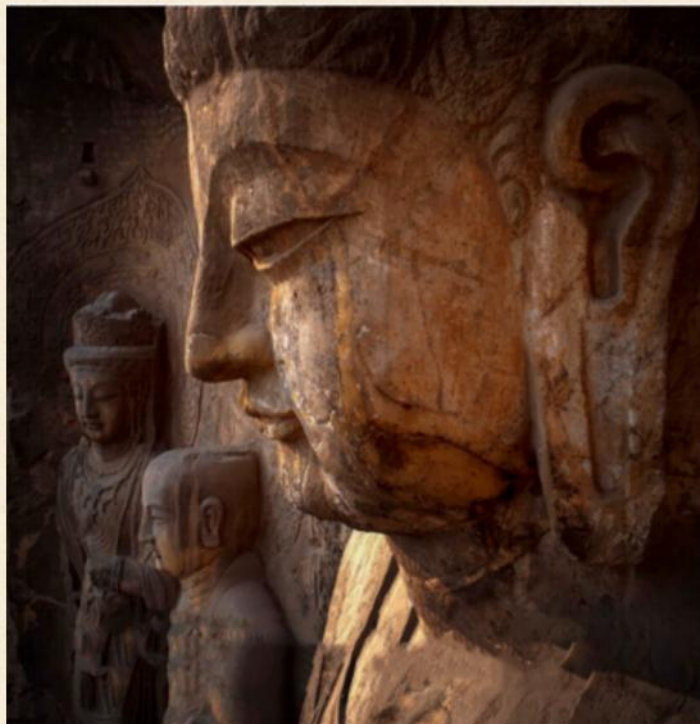
Longmen Grottoes

The origin of the cave

The grotto is a kind of religious architecture excavated in the cliffs by the riverbanks. In China, it is mainly built with the funds provided by Buddhists and used as a Buddhist temple, so it is called the Grotto Temple, or Grotto for short. Areas with a highly concentration of grottos are referred to as grotto complexes or the "Caves of the Thousand Buddhas," though they are commonly shortened to "grottos" as well.

The Grottoes originated in ancient India. The earliest grottoes in ancient India were built around the 3rd century BC. At that time, there were many religions prevailing in India. Among them, there was a religious sect called the Ajivikas. This sect was founded in the same period as Buddhism and advocated asceticism. Excavating grottoes was precisely to provide a place for ascetic practices. Buddhists adopted the practice of the Ajivikas of excavating grottoes in the mountains for cultivation, choosing secluded cliffs far away from the hustle and bustle of the world as places for cultivation, to meditate and contemplate in peace.

In addition, compared with civil buildings which made of wood and earth, grottoes are more sturdy and durable. Better able to withstand the attacks of the rainy season. Thus, around the 2nd century BC, Buddhist grottoes came into being.



Longmen Grottoes

The Longmen Grottoes were first carved around 494 AD During Emperor Xiaowen of the Northern Wei Dynasty relocated the capital to Luoyang, boasting a history of over 1,500 years. Over the subsequent four centuries, continuous large-scale construction persisted through the Eastern Wei, Western Wei, Northern Qi, Northern Zhou, Sui, Tang, and Song dynasties.

Stretching over 1,000 meters along the cliffs on both banks of the Yi River, the site comprises:

- 1,300 existing caves
- 2,345 niches
- 50+ Buddhist pagodas
- 100,000+ Buddhist statues

The sculptures range dramatically in scale, from the tallest standing Buddha at 17.14 meters to the smallest figure measuring just 2 centimeters. Additionally, the site preserves 3,600+ inscriptions and stele carvings from various dynasties, showcasing the extraordinary artistic achievements of ancient Chinese artisans. Among the most representative caves are:

- Central Binyang Cave
- Fengxian Temple
- Guyang Cave

The Longmen Grottoes also preserve a vast collection of historical artifacts spanning religion, art, calligraphy, music, costumes, medicine, architecture, and Sino-foreign cultural exchange. This extraordinary collection of tangible historical materials makes the site nothing less than a grand open-air museum of stone carving art.



Origin of the Name "Yique"

The Longmen Grottoes scenic area is located in the south of Luoyang, Which the ancient capital. Here, Xiangshan and Longmen Mountain stand in opposition to each other, with the Yi River flowing northward between them. From afar, the landscape resembles a colossal natural gateway, historically called "Yique" (Gate of the Yi River).

When the Sui Dynasty (581-618 AD) established its eastern capital in Luoyang, the Yique aligned directly with the Dingding Gate, the southern main entrance of the city's outer walls. This natural formation appeared like a celestial gate tower (Tianque) before the imperial capital. Since ancient Chinese emperors often symbolized themselves as "dragons". Emperor of Sui renamed Yique to "Longmen", giving the site its current name Longmen Where Mountains and Waters Meet in Splendor.

The breathtaking scenery of Longmen, where verdant peaks mirror in the flowing Yi River, has been celebrated since antiquity. Both "Yique Scenery" and "Longmen Mountain Views" topped the list of Luoyang's Eight Famous Views. The Tang Dynasty poet Bai Juyi praised: "Among all landscapes around the Luoyang region, Longmen stands supreme."

While its fine-quality limestone proved ideal for carving, making it the perfect site for grotto construction. The Longmen Grottoes, one of China's Three Great Buddhist Cave Complexes, The millennium-old Xiangshan Temple, The tomb garden of Bai Juyi, the iconic Tang poet.



King Yu's Pool (Yu Wang Chi)

This spring was built here to honor Yu the Great, the legendary hero who tamed China's floods long ago. The pool's water stays the same temperature all year—it's always around 20°C, warm in winter and cool in summer!

Yu the Great's tale is one of China's most famous ancient legends. Long ago, massive floods hit the land for years—rivers burst their banks, farmlands turned into lakes, and people lost their homes. Yu took charge, organized folks to dig new river channels and redirected the floodwaters to the sea.

He worked like crazy for 13 years, passing by his own home three times without going inside—even during his wife was giving birth to their child! When people asked why, he said: 'If I take a break, folks will keep suffering.'

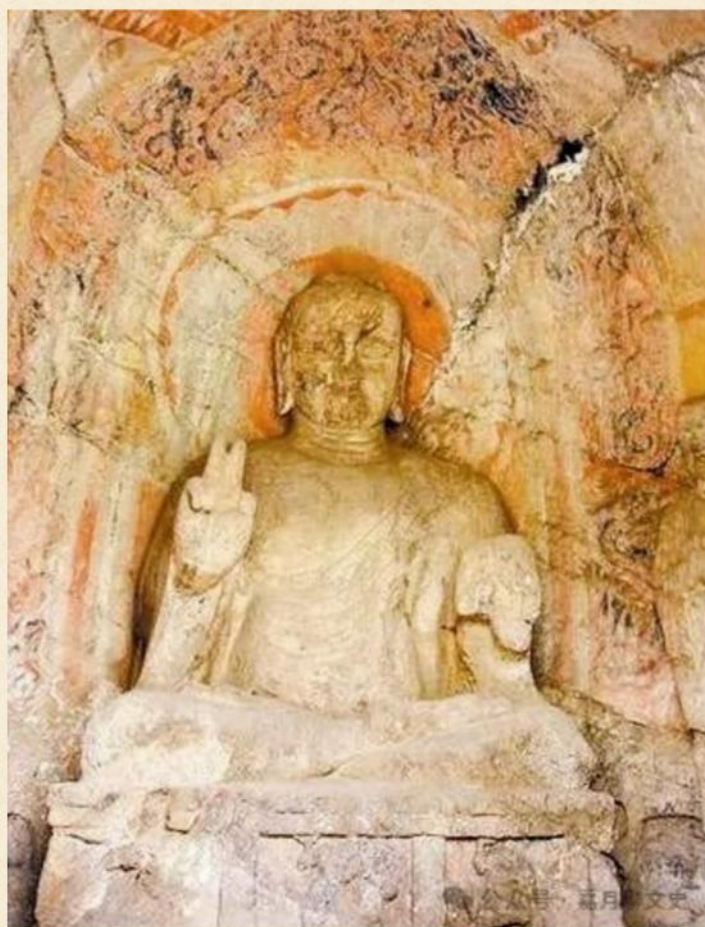
Finally, the floods were tamed, the land became fertile again, and Yu became a hero. Later, he even became emperor and founded China's first dynasty—the Xia Dynasty (around 2070 BC).



Binyang North Cave

The main Buddha statue on the central wall of Binyang North Cave displays a distinctive "scissors hand" gesture, which is actually an extremely rare Buddhist mudra (hand seal). Observing the posture of both hands: they are raised at chest level, with the right palm facing upward—its thumb, ring finger, and little finger bent, while the index and middle fingers remain straight. The left palm faces downward, with the ring finger and little finger bent and the other fingers extended. This mudra powerfully conveys a sense of strong will or determination.

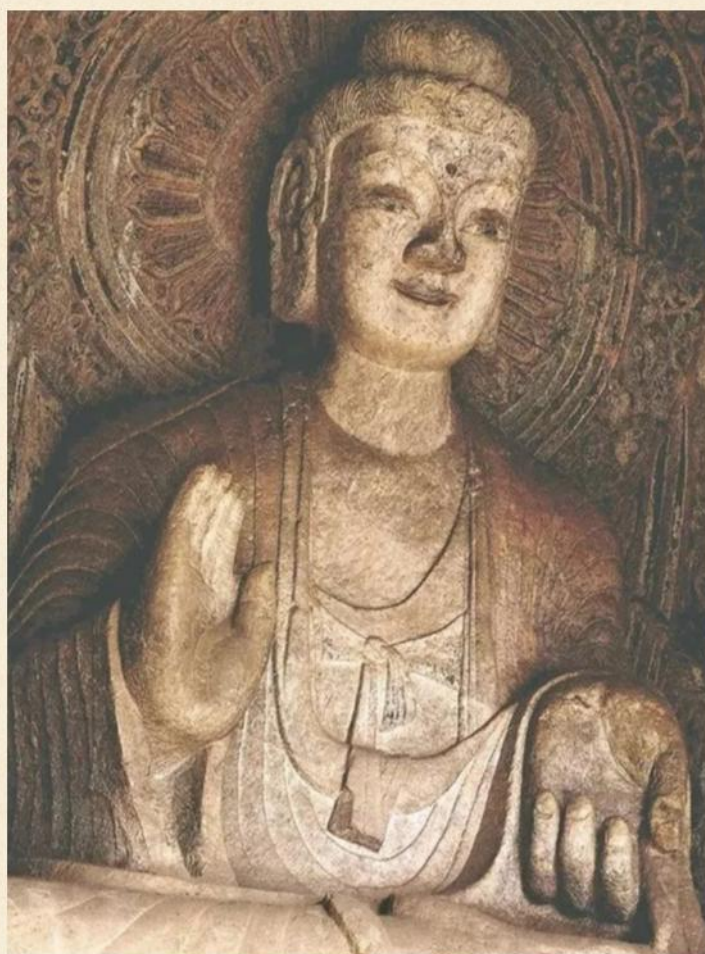
Over time, due to weathering erosion of the statue's thumb and an unusually wide gap between the index and middle fingers, the gesture has come to resemble the popular "scissors hand" pose people often mimic in photos. As a result, netizens humorously dubbed it the "Scissors-Hand Buddha."



Binyang Central Cave

Binyang Central Cave, the second major cave carved after the Guyang Cave in the Longmen Grottoes, is a representative masterpiece of the Northern Wei Dynasty after Emperor Xiaowen moved the capital to Luoyang. The walls of the cave are adorned with intricate statues and reliefs depicting Buddhist stories. Among them is the "Sacrificing Himself to Feed the Tiger" relief, which portrays the following story: Three princes ventured into the mountains to play and encountered a starving mother tiger on the brink of death at the foot of a cliff, alongside her seven newborn cubs crying for milk. It seemed that if the mother tiger could not find food, she might devour her own cubs. The two elder princes ignored the scene and continued their journey, but the youngest prince—Prince Mahasattva, a past life of the Buddha Shakyamuni—was deeply moved. He vowed to sacrifice himself to save the cubs.

After sending off his brothers, he took off his clothes and resolutely leaped off the cliff, landing beside the tiger. He offered his body as food, but the tiger was too weak to eat. So the prince used a sharp branch to pierce his skin and let his blood flow for the tiger to drink. Revived by his blood, the mother tiger regained strength and, with her cubs, consumed the prince's body. When the two elder brothers realized their sibling was missing, they searched the mountains and eventually found his remains and belongings among the tigers at the cliff's base.



Binyang South Cave

Though both the Binyang South Cave and North Cave were initially carved during the Northern Wei Dynasty, the primary Buddha statues inside the South Cave were actually completed in the early Tang Dynasty. The central statue, Amitabha Buddha, features a full, rounded face and broad shoulders, embodying the Tang Dynasty's iconic aesthetic that celebrated plumpness as a symbol of beauty. A comparison with the Binyang Central Cave highlights the striking differences in artistic styles and ideals of beauty across dynasties.



Wanfo Cave (Ten Thousand Buddha Cave)

The cave we're looking at now is the "Ten Thousand Buddha Cave" (Wanfo Cave), named after the 15,000 small Buddha figures carved in neat rows on its northern and southern walls. The cave has a front chamber and a rear chamber. The front chamber features two guardian warriors and two lions, while the rear chamber houses a central Buddha, two disciples, two bodhisattvas, and two heavenly kings—making this one of the most complete and well-preserved sculpture ensembles in the Longmen Grottoes.

On the ceiling, there's an exquisitely carved lotus flower. The project to create the cave's sculptures was overseen by two female patrons, who ensured the figures were designed with soft, graceful forms and delicate, lifelike details.

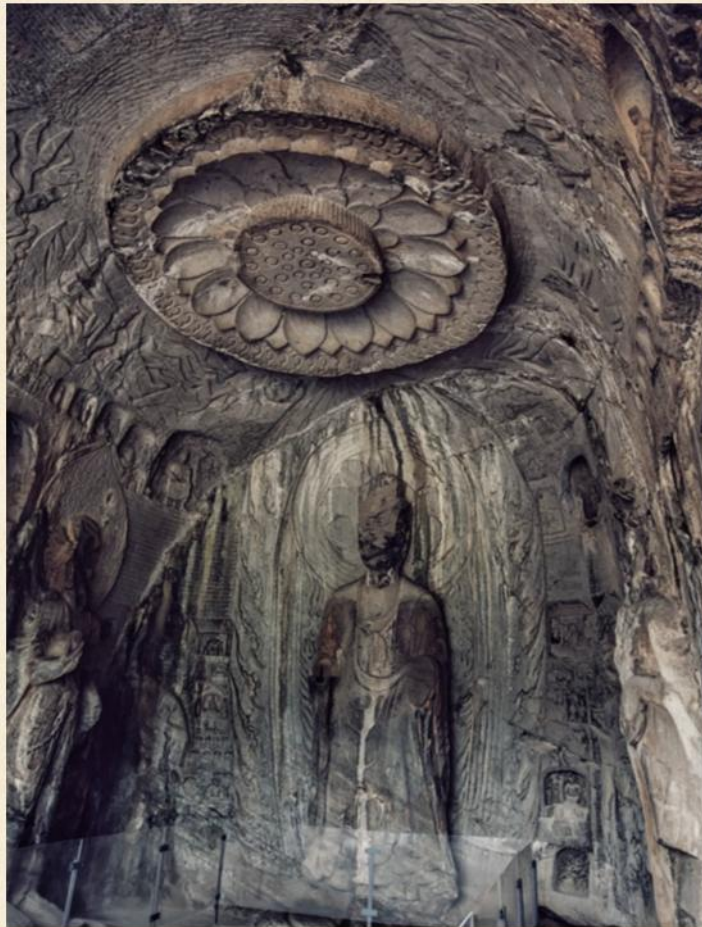
Notably, on the southern side of the cave entrance stands a statue of Avalokiteshvara (Guanyin), one of the finest examples of Tang Dynasty bodhisattva sculptures at Longmen. Though its face is damaged, the meticulously carved mouth, chin, and beaded necklaces remain striking. The bodhisattva's head tilts slightly to the right, and its body forms an elegant S-shaped curve. Today, 3D scanning and printing technologies have been used to digitally reconstruct its original appearance. In the past, the statue was even more stunning, as traces of vibrant pigments still hint at its former colorful glory.



Lotus Cave (Lianhua Cave)

The cave we see here is the Lotus Cave (Lianhua Cave), named after the large, exquisitely carved high-relief lotus adorning the center of its ceiling. The cave was likely excavated during the reign of Emperor Xiaoming of the Northern Wei Dynasty.

In China, the lotus has long been cherished by scholars, poets, and artists. While lotus motifs are common as decorative elements in Buddhist cave temples, a lotus as complete, grand in scale, and meticulously detailed as the one in this cave is exceptionally rare—not just in the Longmen Grottoes, but among all Chinese Buddhist caves.



Fengxian Temple (Fengxian Si)

What unfolds before us now is Fengxian Temple (Fengxian Si), the largest and most exquisitely crafted cliff-side group sculpture in the Longmen Grottoes. Anyone witnessing this monumental ensemble for the first time is sure to be awestruck! The shrine features nine colossal figures. The central statue, the 17.14-meter-tall Vairocana Buddha (Lushena), stands out for its artistic brilliance. Unlike other depictions of Vairocana across China, this one is uniquely celebrated for its ethereal beauty and subtle femininity, blending divine majesty with human grace.

To the Buddha's left stands his elder disciple Mahākāśyapa (Kasyapa), and to his right, the younger disciple Ānanda. Flanking them are the bodhisattvas Manjusri (Wenshu) and Samantabhadra (Puxian), sculpted with serene elegance and soft, flowing lines that embody idealized feminine virtues. In striking contrast, the Heavenly Kings and guardian warriors on either side are carved with dynamic, muscular postures, radiating power and movement.

Fengxian Temple's grand scale, masterful design, and artistic execution represent the pinnacle of Tang Dynasty sculptural achievement. Not only does it hold a revered place in Chinese art history, but it is also widely acknowledged as a monumental masterpiece of global stone carving artistry.



Guyang Cave

Next, we'll visit the Guyang Cave—the first cave ever excavated at the Longmen Grottoes. It is not only the oldest but also the most exquisitely carved and artistically refined cave in the entire complex. The cave's most renowned treasures are the "Twenty Inscriptions of Longmen" (Longmen Ershipin), a collection of dedicatory tablets accompanying the statues.

These Inscriptions record the names of donors, dates of creation, and reasons for commissioning the statues. Though originally seen as mere footnotes to the sculptures, they were likely carved spontaneously by artisans after completing their painstaking work—perhaps wiping sweat from their brows, sighing with relief, and etching their pride into stone. Over time, these inscriptions evolved into celebrated masterpieces of calligraphy, Which Known as "Wei-style steles," the "Twenty Inscriptions of Longmen" are now revered as pinnacles of Chinese epigraphic art, drawing global admiration for their bold, angular script and historical significance.



Yaofang Cave (Medicine Prescription Cave)

The Yaofang Cave (Medicine Prescription Cave) draws special attention for its passageways carved with over 140 ancient medical prescriptions, making it a unique blend of art and practical healing knowledge. While the cave houses Buddhist statues, its most captivating feature is the dense cluster of ancient texts etched onto the caves' entrance walls—time-worn prescriptions addressing ailments ranging from internal medicine, surgery, pediatrics, and ENT disorders to neurological conditions.

The remedies listed use ingredients like plants, animals, and minerals, and even everyday household items such as soy paste, oil, and vinegar. These prescriptions likely served as a lifeline for common people who could not afford medical care. It is believed that monks residing in Longmen's temples collected these remedies and carved them into the cave as an act of Buddhist compassion, enabling pilgrims and worshippers to "find a cure by matching their illness" to the prescriptions.

