Longmen Grottoes

In 494 CE work began on the rock-cut cave temples at Longmen, located approximately 14 kilometers south of Luoyang on the Yi River. With more than 2,300 caves and 100,000 statues and reliefs carved over a 250-year period, Longmen holds some of the finest examples of large-scale Buddhist carvings in China.

In 494, when the Northern Wei (386–534 CE) capital was moved 482 kilometers south from Pingcheng (near modern-day Datong) to Luoyang, work began on the rock-cut cave temples at Longmen. The cliffs at Longmen reminded the Northern Wei rulers of the ridge at Yungang, just west of their former capital, where previously they had sponsored a program of cave-temple construction. However, the stone at Longmen—a hard, closely grained, and dense limestone—was quite different from the sandstone at Yungang and allowed for more detailed carving. With more than 2,300 caves and 100,000 statues and reliefs carved over a 250-year period, Longmen holds some of the finest examples of large-scale Buddhist carvings in China.

Longmen is located approximately 14 kilometers south of Luoyang on the Yi River. Cliffs line both sides of the river bank, giving rise to its full name, Yique Longmen (Dragon Gates of the Yi River). The majority of the cave-temples are found on the north side. Inscriptions at the site attest to the wide range of donors, including emperors and empresses, members of the aristocracy, imperial eunuchs, local officials, and monks and nuns. The largest statue is 17 meters in height.

Activity at Longmen began under Northern Wei ruler Xiaowen Di (reigned 471–499) and continued almost without interruption until Luoyang was sacked in 755 during the An Lushan Rebellion. The Guyang Cave, conceived in 493 when the emperor decided to move the capital, is the earliest cave, and it, along with the Binyang Cave (begun in 505 under Xuanwu Di, reigned 499–515), follows iconography that reflects the early sixth-century interest in the Lotus sutra (Fahua jing) as the main teaching text for this popular form of Buddhism.

The most impressive sculpture at the site is the group found at the Fengxian temple, also known as “Cave 19.” Commissioned by Tang dynasty (618–907 CE) emperor Gaozong (reigned 650–683), work was begun in 672 and completed in 675. The central image of Vairocana (the Great Illuminator or Supreme Buddha, one of the Five Great Transcendental or Wisdom Buddhas popular during the Tang dynasty) is 17 meters in height, including the 4.5-meter pedestal. Vairocana is flanked on each side by his disciples, Ananda and Kasyapa; a bodhisattva (deity) in each corner; and two guardian figures on each side wall. Wu Zetian (625–705), who would become China’s only female ruler, was a devout Buddhist and contributed a large sum of money to the construction of this temple. Some believe that the facial features of Vairocana were modeled after those of Wu. Originally a wooden canopy covered these figures but is no longer extant, and only the
square holes in the rock where the timbers would have been inserted remain.

The site has suffered from weathering, vandalism, and looting over the centuries, beginning with the violent anti-Buddhist persecution of 845 under Tang dynasty ruler Wuzong (reigned 840–846). The worst damage occurred in the 1920s and 1930s when the publication of photographs of the statuary attracted the attention of unscrupulous dealers and antiquities collectors worldwide. Even so, Longmen remains as one of the most spectacular examples of Buddhist stone sculpture in China, particularly of the Northern Wei and Tang dynasties, and was named a World Heritage Site by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 2000.

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Further Reading