

# An analysis of the aesthetic characteristics of animal imagery in the grottoes of the Central Plains during the Northern and Southern Dynasties

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**Abstract.** The grotto art of the Central Plains during the Northern and Southern Dynasties represents a critical period in the development of Buddhist art. The animal imagery featured in these grottoes not only served as carriers of religious symbolism but also functioned as a significant medium for artistic aesthetics. This study focuses on the animal representations in the grottoes of the Central Plains during this period and examines their formal language, spatial arrangement, symbolic meaning, and emotional expression. By doing so, it explores the unique aesthetic qualities of these animal images and decodes the underlying cultural connotations and artistic value. The results indicate that the aesthetic characteristics of animal imagery in Northern and Southern Dynasties grottoes reflect both the ethnically localized evolution of religious art and the foundational experiences in constructing the Chinese classical aesthetic system.

**Keywords:** Northern and Southern Dynasties, Central Plains, grotto animal imagery, aesthetic characteristics

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## 1. Introduction

During the Northern and Southern Dynasties (420–589 CE), the Central Plains served as a core hub for the eastward transmission of Buddhism. In the dynamic interplay of religious and cultural influences, a distinctive grotto art paradigm emerged. Grotto sculptures were not only material carriers of Buddhist faith but also visual testimonies of intertwined civilizations. Among these, animal imagery—an essential component of grotto art—embodied religious metaphors derived from Buddhist scriptures while simultaneously reflecting the aesthetic sensibilities of local Central Plains culture. As such, animal representations offer a critical lens through which to interpret the interaction between the sacred and the secular, as well as the local and the foreign, in the artistic history of the Northern and Southern Dynasties. With their rich formal language and symbolic connotations, grotto animal images construct a complex semiotic system that transcends religious, artistic, and social domains. However, existing research has largely focused on doctrinal interpretations of grotto sculptures or on their chronological classification, leaving systematic studies of the aesthetic characteristics and cultural formation mechanisms of animal imagery relatively underdeveloped. In response, this paper seeks to move beyond the singular perspectives of traditional art history research, re-examine the

aesthetic traits of animal imagery, and reveal its aesthetic value within the process of the localization of Buddhist art.

## 2. The formal language of animal imagery in the grottoes of the Central Plains during the Northern and Southern Dynasties

The formal language of animal imagery in the grottoes of the Central Plains during the Northern and Southern Dynasties represents a direct manifestation of the deep integration between Buddhist art introduced from the West and indigenous carving techniques and aesthetic concepts. It forms a distinctive expressive system across morphology, line work, and spatial arrangement. This system can be analyzed through three interrelated dimensions: the balance between realism and abstraction, the symbiosis of line and form, and the coordination of detail and overall composition.

### 2.1. The balance between realism and abstraction: the interplay of naturalism and symbolism

The formal language of grotto animal imagery achieves a dynamic equilibrium between realism and abstraction, essentially reflecting a dialogue and fusion between Buddhist art and local Central Plains aesthetics. Through the Buddhist principle of the equality of all beings, animal forms are rendered realistically to capture the essential characteristics of life, thereby promoting solemn Buddhist doctrines. Under this influence, the depiction of animals in Northern and Southern Dynasties grottoes pursued both faithful representation of natural creatures and symbolic elevation of spiritual significance.

This dialectical relationship manifests technically in a dual construction of form and spirit. The naturalistic tradition of Gandhara art, transmitted from the Western Regions, inspired the precise carving of lion images in the Yungang Grottoes (see Figure 1). Artisans depicted the lion's coiled muscles and outstretched claws with anatomical accuracy, and through the layering of the mane and the chest's bulge, conveyed the wild vitality of the grassland beast. Meanwhile, the local cultural pursuit of the Dao encouraged Yungang artisans to transcend biological prototypes in the depiction of golden-winged birds (see Figure 2), transforming natural traits into cloud-like wings and flame-shaped tail feathers. By using concrete patterns to symbolize ethereal spiritual meanings, these works expressed the Buddhist principles of species equality, spiritual inclusiveness, and universal salvation, resonating with Daoism's philosophy of "the Dao governs nature; all beings live in harmony" [1]. This approach—realism as surface, symbolism as essence—effectively uses finite natural forms to allude to the infinite nature of Buddhist teachings. Within a balanced aesthetic framework of reality and suggestion, it achieves an artistic realm where the sculpted object simultaneously embodies form and emptiness, attaining ultimate expression in the tension between likeness and unlikeness.



**Figure 1.** Yungang Grotto 9, lower north wall, western niche Sumeru base, twin guardian lions



**Figure 2.** Yungang Grotto 10, front chamber, western wall, upper roof niche, golden-winged bird

## 2.2. Aesthetic expression through line and form: the dialogue between linear beauty and mass awareness

Line, as a core element of formal language, carries both structural and expressive functions in Northern and Southern Dynasties grotto animal imagery. It not only forms the skeletal framework of the composition but also serves as a vehicle for emotional and spiritual expression. The sophisticated use of linear aesthetics represents a cross-media translation of calligraphic art into carving techniques, reflecting the Oriental wisdom of "writing with the brush in stone".

From the perspective of calligraphy, the guardian lions in the Yungang Grottoes (see Figure 3) exemplify this approach. Their manes are outlined using flowing, thread-like strokes reminiscent of the "Cao Yi" style, continuous and smooth like silkworm silk, yet their bends conceal the forceful precision of a stylus. These lines not only capture the fluffy texture of the lion's mane but also imbue the static stone with a sense of rhythm and vitality. Similarly, the golden-winged bird on the southern wall of Yungang Grotto 13, 4th layer, west side of the eaved roof ridge (see Figure 4), demonstrates an alternate application of iron-wire and dot-tail techniques: iron-wire strokes define the main wing veins and structural framework, while dot-tail strokes detail the feather branches, creating a three-dimensional spatial rhythm on a two-dimensional surface. Here, lines do more than outline forms; they refine the essence of the subject and project the artisan's emotional engagement.



**Figure 3.** Yungang Grotto 7, main chamber, upper north wall, guardian lion



**Figure 4.** Yungang Grotto 13, southern wall, 4th layer, west side of eaved roof ridge, golden-winged bird

In terms of form, the rhythmic quality of lines and the tension of mass achieve a symphonic interplay. When the "emptiness" of lines complements the "solidity" of mass, a distinctive modeling paradigm emerges. For example, the guardian lions of the Longmen Grottoes (see Figure 5) feature geometric contours constructed from simplified straight lines. The variation in line weight and rhythm articulates muscular undulations in the chest and abdomen, integrating the dynamic elegance of the Gupta-style triple-bend technique with the expressive abstraction of Central Plains art. This integration of line and mass achieves balance between likeness and unlikeness: lines convey spiritual character, while mass provides material substance, jointly embodying the philosophical principle of the I Ching, "Strength and gentleness interplay, transformation occurs therein".



**Figure 5.** Guardian lion, Longmen Grottoes

The aesthetic symbiosis of line and form is fundamentally a hallmark of the localization of Buddhist art. Buddhism, also known as "the religion of images", expresses its doctrines through tangible, visual language. As Buddhist art spread along the Silk Road, its sculptural forms continuously adapted to local aesthetic preferences, ultimately evolving in the Central Plains into a distinct style of Chinese Buddhist art [2]. When the three-dimensional traditions of Gandhara encountered the linear aesthetics of Chinese calligraphy, neither was negated; instead, they collided to form a new artistic language: lines capture the spirit and convey transcendental sanctity through abstraction, while mass establishes form and reinforces the presence of the sacred. This "line as soul, mass as skeleton" paradigm not only shaped the unique appearance of Northern and Southern Dynasties grotto animal imagery but also established an enduring standard for Chinese sculpture, bridging ritual and artistic expression.

### 2.3. Coordination between detail rendering and overall layout: the dialogue between micro craftsmanship and macro narrative

The aesthetic integrity of animal imagery in the grottoes of the Central Plains during the Northern and Southern Dynasties is grounded in the dialectical unity of *gewu* (investigation of things) and *zhizhi* (attainment of knowledge). Detail rendering reflects the artisan's meticulous pursuit of the Dao: the high-relief mane of the Yungang lions, combined with engraved lines, exemplifies not only technical mastery and material skill but also embodies the Buddhist cosmology of "a flower contains a world". Every direction of a hair strand, every interplay of light and shadow on a scale, concretely interprets the ultimate reality of all dharmas. This micro-level craftsmanship engages in intertextual dialogue with the macro-level religious narrative: as viewers shift their gaze from the fine details of the lion's mane to the spatial structure of the entire grotto, they realize that these meticulously carved animal forms constitute integral components of a mandala-like cosmic schema.

The coordination of overall layout reflects the compositional wisdom of "managing positions" in traditional Chinese art. Artisans treated animal forms as nodes within the grotto's narrative network. For instance, the scaled details of the dragon coiled around the column in the Guyang Cave at Longmen not only enhance the three-dimensionality of the dragon's body but also guide the viewer's gaze upward along the spiral, visually resonating with the lotus caisson at the ceiling, creating a cyclical interplay of earth, water, fire, and wind elements. This design logic—where local details serve the whole and parts mirror the totality—enabled

artisans, under the constraints of religious ritual, to imbue each element with narrative function. The micro craftsmanship and macro narrative achieve a dialectical unity, ultimately realizing, within the limited space of the stone wall, the aesthetic transcendence of "a miniature depiction that evokes vast landscapes".

These three dimensions of formal language—the philosophical interplay of realism and abstraction, the formal symphony of line and mass, and the narrative dialogue between detail and overall layout—together constitute the distinctive aesthetic character of Northern and Southern Dynasties grotto animal imagery. Under the influence of Confucian and Daoist thought, ancient artisans sought natural integration, pursuing the ideals of "harmony between heaven and humans" and "all things as one with the self", as well as the aesthetic state of "created by humans, yet seemingly opened by heaven" [3]. Within this historical context, grotto art not only provides a visual testimony to the localization of Buddhist art but also echoes the deeper logic of traditional Chinese aesthetics, emphasizing the unity of form and spirit. It thus offers a model for later artistic creation, demonstrating how freedom can emerge within constraints and ingenuity can flourish within normative frameworks.

### 3. The symbolic meaning and emotional expression of animal imagery

Animal imagery in grottoes is not merely decorative; it carries multiple layers of meaning, encompassing religious doctrine, secular sentiment, and philosophical reflection. Its system of symbolism and emotional expression weaves together the sacred and the secular, awe and approachability, the ephemeral and the eternal, creating a rich aesthetic dimension. This complexity can be analyzed through three interrelated aspects.

#### 3.1. The integration of religious symbolism and secular sentiment: symbiosis of signification and human projection

The symbolic system of animal imagery in the grottoes of the Central Plains during the Northern and Southern Dynasties essentially represents an overlapping encoding of Buddhist semiotics and local Central Plains symbolic conventions. From a semiotic perspective, animal forms function both as prescriptive symbols conveying Buddhist doctrine and as indexical signs activating indigenous cultural associations. Their meaning emerges dynamically through the interaction of religious texts and secular imagination. For example, the guardian lions in the Binyang Middle Cave at the Longmen Grottoes embody this duality. Their glaring eyes and bared fangs signify the Buddhist lion's roar that dispels ignorance, while details such as lotus-pedestal feet and coiled, cloud-like tails subtly encode a secular, auspicious-protector motif with political connotations. Similarly, in the eastern relief of Yungang Grotto 8 (see Figure 6), the ox serving as the mount for the triad of bodhisattvas turns its head in a gentle, composed manner. This posture aligns with the Buddhist metaphor of the ox in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*—representing Dharma—while also resonating with the ritual tradition described in the *Book of Rites* (Jiao Te Sheng), where the emperor presents an ox as a sacrificial offering. Here, the guardianship depicted carries both religious sanctity and secular authority. Through the tension between the sacred and the secular, an aesthetic paradigm emerges: "expressing the Dao through imagery, while the Dao remains inseparable from sentiment".



**Figure 6.** Yungang Grotto 8, eastern side, seated ox as mount

The underlying dynamic of this dual coding stems from Buddhism's strategy of adapting to worldly contexts and the Confucian philosophy of the inseparability of principle and function. When the Indian Garuda (the golden-winged bird) evolved into the Central Plains phoenix, its predatory habit of consuming dragons was diminished, replaced by the auspicious imagery of the Shan Hai Jing's "Fenghuang appearing in ritual", with the flaming patterns on its feathers transformed into cloud motifs. This resulted in a genetic recombination of Buddhist protective function and indigenous auspicious symbolism. Similarly, the Xianbei deer totem and the Han Chinese deer-broadcasting banquet ritual merged in the depiction of deer in Central Plains grottoes, making these animals simultaneously religious symbols and carriers of secular sentiment. This symbolic elasticity allows animal imagery to bridge faith and daily life, embodying the principle that "Buddhism exists within the world, inseparable from worldly awareness", and achieving an aesthetic construction of "conveying the Dao through imagery, with the Dao embedded in sentiment".

### 3.2. The dual aesthetic experience of awe and affinity: the dialogue between sublime beauty and everyday poetics

The intimidating and approachable qualities of decorative motifs represent relative characteristics in their vertical evolution. At the inception of the Longmen Grottoes, during the Northern Wei's relocation to Luoyang, the decorative style leaned toward that of the early Yungang Grottoes. Buddhism had only recently entered China and, influenced minimally by indigenous Han culture, retained traces of Gandhara and Mathura styles from the Western Regions. The decorative motifs were bold, archaic, and detached from reality, emphasizing functional efficacy over refined aesthetics. Such characteristics produced a sense of awe in devotees, evoking fear and voluntary submission to the Buddha. As Buddhism spread eastward, however, the gentle auspicious aura of traditional Chinese motifs subtly influenced Longmen's decorative patterns. Carving styles shifted from plain and robust to ornate and elaborate. Animal motifs, in particular, were transformed: no longer portrayed as fierce or brutal as in the Buddhist canon, they were endowed with nobility, authority, and auspiciousness—expressing sacredness, joy, and fearlessness—thus celebrating peace and friendship with

strong secular resonance. The grotto sculptures pursued grandeur and solemnity in form, expressing a passionate and uninhibited style, while simultaneously emphasizing internal states; spiritual internalization became the primary mode of expression, highlighting introspection and reflection [4].

The aesthetic tension of grotto animal imagery derives from the dialectical unity of religious function and human desire, manifesting in art as the concretization of Buddhist truth and worldly reality. For example, the Yungang Garuda (golden-winged bird) is depicted with three heads, six arms, and encircled by flames. Its head occupies one-third of the body's length, and its exaggerated wings block the sky, producing a sense of overwhelming force that compels viewers to comprehend the infinitude of Buddhist law through rational transcendence. This awe-inspiring effect aligns with Buddhism's teaching of impermanence: when observers face the taotie reliefs on the western brackets of the forechamber in Yungang Cave 12, the wide-open eyes and gaping, fang-filled mouths generate a solemn and terrifying beauty, guiding viewers from fear of worldly suffering toward aspiration for nirvanic tranquility.

Conversely, the affinity of realistic animal forms is rooted in Confucian moral analogies and Daoist egalitarian thought. The Analects' dictum "the wise delight in water, the benevolent delight in mountains" assigns the gentle nature of goats to filial virtue and the orderly flight of geese to ritual propriety, transforming these animals into ethical symbols. Similarly, Zhuangzi's philosophy of "living with deer" endows wild rabbits, oxen, and other animals with the poetic unity of heaven and humanity. In the Eastern Hills Caves of Longmen, a unique chamber features four flying birds carved on the inner ceiling: long-necked, long-legged, and sharp-beaked, two flying eastward on the southern side, two flying in opposition on the northern side. These are likely cranes, though previously misidentified as wild geese, hence the name "Four Geese Cave". Accompanied by surrounding celestial attendants, these cranes create a sky-like panorama, allowing viewers to project everyday experiences and establish an emotional connection with the sacred space.

This dual structure of awe and affinity reflects the artistic translation of Buddhism's complementary practices of fear and love. Analogous to the Buddhist path of cultivating both wisdom and compassion, the former breaks self-attachment while the latter generates bodhicitta, collectively achieving aesthetic salvation. Through oscillation between fear and delight, observers experience the union of emotion and reason beyond ordinary perception.

### 3.3. Artistic representation of the instant and the eternal: the dialectic of momentary ephemerality and nirvanic permanence

Northern and Southern Dynasties artisans, endowed with exceptional artistic insight, distilled dynamic temporal philosophy within a static medium. Their visual construction of temporality deeply resonates with the philosophical dialectic of impermanence (*anitya*) and the eternal nature of nirvana. In the southern wall relief of Yungang Cave 6 (see Figure 7), the horse's hooves are depicted three centimeters above the ground, with its tail and mane lifted at a 30-degree angle. This freezes the act of galloping into a synchronous moment, subtly implying both cause and consequence within a static medium. Such instantaneous representation captures not only motion but also visually interprets the impermanence of all phenomena, using fleeting material existence to symbolize the eternal essence of life.



**Figure 7.** Yungang Cave 6, south wall, horse-riding relief

Eternity, in turn, is constructed through both material properties and formal language. The natural durability of stone serves as a material metaphor for the permanence of nirvana, further reinforced by static composition. On the eastern wall of Yungang Cave 37, the elephant carving is vividly animated (see Figure 8): trunk extended forward, tail straight, four feet in mid-stride. The exaggeration of posture and the fluidity of line convey a cycle of birth and cessation transcending mere phenomena, reaching the ontological permanence. This temporal-spatial dialectic is fully exemplified in the eastern wall of Yungang Cave 13, where the pleated robes of two interacting cross-legged bodhisattvas and two small guardian lions coexist in the same relief (see Figure 9), juxtaposing the instant and the eternal; ephemeral birth and death become nirvana, the moment becomes eternity.

Here, animal imagery functions as a visual carrier of temporal-spatial dialectics: while corporeal life inevitably decays, the stone-carved Dharma remains eternally present. The artistic form itself pays the highest homage to the Buddhist principle of the wondrous void. Through the spatial and temporal shaping of animal forms, viewers are invited to perceive the tension between phenomena and essence, thereby internalizing the Buddhist wisdom of the Middle Way, transcending the duality of existence and nonexistence.



**Figure 8.** Yungang Cave 37, east wall, "Gallopig Elephant"



**Figure 9.** Yungang Cave 13, east wall, guardian lions

#### **4. The cultural connotations of the aesthetic characteristics of Northern and Southern Dynasties grotto animal imagery**

The aesthetic characteristics of animal imagery in the grottoes of the Central Plains during the Northern and Southern Dynasties are deeply rooted in the intellectual context of the convergence of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism, the political landscape of a divided north and south, and the social reality of ethnic integration. At the same time, they carry profound value in both the transmission of Chinese civilization and its contemporary revitalization. Their cultural connotations can be interpreted through three dimensions: localization and innovation, temporal and regional imprints, and the value of textual and civilizational inheritance.

##### **4.1. Localization of buddhist art and aesthetic innovation: symbolic reconstruction under the convergence of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism**

The aesthetic transformation of grotto animal imagery during the Northern and Southern Dynasties represents a microcosm of the Sinicization of Buddhist art. This cross-cultural symbolic reconstruction is not a simple grafting of images but a process of cultural integration. When the Indian Buddhist pantheistic tradition, which perceives sentience in all beings, encountered the Central Plains cosmology of unity between heaven and humanity, and underwent dual decoding through Confucian ritual symbols and Daoist natural symbols, a unique logic of symbolic reconstruction emerged.

Confucian ideals of refined ritual aesthetics transformed the mane of the guardian lions in Yungang Grottoes from the naturally drooping style of Gandhara into regular, spiraled patterns. Daoist notions of the interplay between emptiness and form allowed the hybrid beast-headed, human-bodied Feilian figures in the Longmen Grottoes to break free from biological prototypes, adopting feathered, transcendent postures that evoke freedom across the eight cardinal directions. This fusion combined the supernatural attributes of the Buddhist Dakini with Daoist traditions of riding dragons to ascend into the void, visually manifesting the interpenetration of Buddhist and Daoist thought. Such reconstruction extends beyond the grafting of image symbols to the reshaping of aesthetic values and the ethical orientation of imagery. For instance, the leaping deer in Yungang Grottoes preserves the dynamic rhythm of Sanchi reliefs while employing expressive line work to reconfigure spatial mood. Buddhist doctrine subtly integrates with Confucian ethics of benevolence and care for all living beings. Consequently, the animal imagery in Central Plains grottoes becomes a shared

semantic denominator of the three teachings, completing the aesthetic transformation from the Indian dharmalakṣaṇa to the distinctive Chinese artistic ethos, integrating Buddhist essence, human nature, and the Dao of nature.

#### 4.2. Temporality and regionality of aesthetic features: artistic innovation amidst a fractured era

The political fragmentation of the Northern and Southern Dynasties and the social reality of ethnic integration imparted distinctive temporal and spatial imprints on the aesthetic characteristics of animal imagery in Central Plains grottoes. From the perspective of art sociology, frequent regime changes and large-scale migrations and integrations made art an implicit arena for constructing cultural identity. Compared with the Gandhara realism of animal imagery in Kizil Caves in the Western Regions, Central Plains grottoes gradually evolved toward an expressive mode of "depicting the spirit through form", emphasizing symbolic representation. Essentially, this reflects the strategy of Han Chinese literati to adapt foreign forms to consolidate cultural subjectivity.

Meanwhile, the background motifs of Central Plains grottoes evolved from the stylized flames of Indian flying apsaras to the flowing tendrils of indigenous scroll patterns, reflecting shifts in aesthetic taste following the sinicization reforms of the Northern Wei. This regional differentiation was further amplified during the north-south confrontation. For example, the Xianbei-style hybrid beast-headed figures in Xiangtangshan Grottoes gradually shed their coarse steppe characteristics, integrating the Central Plains' "delicate-boned, refined visage" line rhythms, resulting in a strong sense of affinity. This marks an early stage in the stylistic evolution of grotto sculpture toward secularization and humanization [5].

Regional cultural differences also generated aesthetic divergence: in the northern Central Plains, grottoes such as Maijishan and Tiantishan often depict animals with a grand and majestic presence; their expansive forms and angular line articulation resonate with the northern literary trait described in Wenxin Diaolong as "magnanimity freely expressed through vigor". In contrast, southern grottoes—including Yungang, Longmen, and Xiangtangshan—favor delicate, subtle, and refined animal reliefs; the meticulous use of incised lines and the graceful handling of dynamic forms align with the literati aesthetics of the Southern Dynasties, exemplified in Xie Tiao's verse, "The evening glow disperses into splendid clouds". This "northern grandeur, southern refinement" stylistic divide is not a matter of mere regional preference but reflects how, in the turbulent era of the Five Barbarians' incursions, art became a spiritual vessel through which various ethnic groups sought cultural roots and constructed collective identity.

#### 4.3. The transmission of aesthetic features and contemporary value: cross-temporal activation of civilizational genes

The aesthetic paradigm of animal imagery in Central Plains grottoes during the Northern and Southern Dynasties provides a continuously evolving cultural gene pool for Chinese art history, with influence spanning over a millennium. In terms of vertical transmission, the full-bodied grandeur of the guardian lions at the Tang Dynasty Qianling Mausoleum can trace its origins to the volumetric presence of Yungang's guardian lions. Similarly, the lion-and-vine patterns in the Song Dynasty Yingzao Fashi preserved the basic composition of the Northern and Southern Dynasties lions standing on lotus pedestals while incorporating Confucian principles of order, producing more symmetrical and regulated animal postures and reflecting an aesthetic transition from grandeur to elegance. This transmission represents not merely formal imitation but a continuation of spiritual essence. For example, the unicorn-like Xiezhi standing vigil at the Ming Dynasty Nanjing Xiaoling Mausoleum still follows the compositional logic of using mythic beasts as moral embodiments, a tradition that originates with the Northern and Southern Dynasties' symbolic protective creatures.

In contemporary cultural contexts, these aesthetic features have become vital resources for activating tradition. For instance, the Palace Museum's cultural product series Tianlu Linlang transforms the swirling patterns of the Tianlu beast from Longmen Grottoes into modern geometric motifs, bridging traditional symbolism and contemporary design. Similarly, the Suzhou Museum's digital exhibition of the Deer King Bensheng story employs motion-capture technology to reconstruct the spatiotemporal narrative of the Nine-Colored Deer.

At a deeper level, the wisdom of Northern and Southern Dynasties artisans in negotiating the relationships between local and foreign, sacred and secular elements imbues the grotto animal imagery with an aesthetic meaning in which symbolism coexists with realism, and the sacred intertwines with the mundane. This provides a methodological reference for cultural identity construction in the era of globalization. In the interplay between traditional cultural genes and contemporary expressive vocabularies, a distinctly modern Chinese aesthetic discourse can be reconstructed. In an age of both civilizational conflict and dialogue, these stone-carved animals—dormant for millennia—stand as ancient witnesses to the multi-dimensional unity of Chinese civilization and as aesthetic codes awaiting activation in cross-cultural creative design.

## 5. Conclusion

This study employs symbolic aesthetics and formal analysis as methodological anchors, integrating iconography, archaeology, and comparative cultural studies to construct a threefold analytical framework of form, space, and meaning. First, formal analysis deconstructs the sculptural language of animal imagery, investigating the aesthetic principles embedded in line, proportion, and dynamic articulation. Second, through the lens of spatial narrative theory, the placement and visual hierarchy of animal imagery within grotto architecture is examined. Finally, by situating the analysis in its cultural context, the symbolic systems and mechanisms of emotional expression underlying aesthetic form are revealed. The research primarily focuses on representative Central Plains grottoes such as Gongxian and Longmen, supplemented by comparative references to Yungang and Xiangtangshan, aiming to establish a dialectical connection between micro-level empirical evidence and macro-level interpretation.

The aesthetic investigation of Northern and Southern Dynasties Central Plains grotto animal imagery not only expands the research perspective on Buddhist art history but also rediscovers the creative transformative capacity of Chinese civilization. These animal forms, frozen within stone walls, serve simultaneously as visual projections of the Buddhist cosmology and as poetic condensations of natural life by Central Plains artisans. Through a unique artistic language, they record humanity's spiritual journey between faith and aesthetics, the sacred and the mundane. In a globalized context, re-examining the aesthetic dimension of this cultural heritage provides theoretical resources for the contemporary transformation of traditional art and enriches the construction of a Chinese aesthetic discourse in cross-civilizational dialogue with historical depth.

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