

Article

Generating Sacred Space beyond Architecture: Stacked Stone Pagodas in Sixth-Century Northern China

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Abstract: A large number of stone blocks, stacked up in diminishing size to form pagodas, was discovered in northern China, primarily eastern Gansu and southeastern Shanxi. Their stylistic traits and inscriptions indicate the popularity of the practice of making stacked pagodas in the Northern dynasties (circa the fifth and sixth centuries CE). They display a variety of Buddhist imagery on surface, which is in contrast with the simplification of the structural elements. This contrast raises questions about how stone pagodas of the time were understood and how they related to contemporaneous pagoda buildings. This essay examines these stacked pagodas against the broader historical and artistic milieu, especially the practice of dedicating Buddhist stone implements, explores the way the stacked pagodas were made, displayed, and venerated, and discusses their religious significance generated beyond their structural resemblance to real buildings.

Keywords: pagoda; stūpa; miniature; China; Northern dynasties; Buddhism



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1. Introduction

During the twentieth century, a number of miniature stone pagodas and hundreds of fragmented pieces were discovered at monastic sites and hoarding pits located in northern China (Figure 1). Among them, a particular group comprises pagodas formed by a series of cubical or trapezoidal stone blocks that are once stacked up in diminishing sizes (hereafter referred to as “stacked pagodas,” or “stone blocks” if only a single block is under discussion). This group of pagodas is excavated primarily in the Nannieshui 南涅水 County of Shanxi 山西 province (Figure 2), and several sites in Gansu 甘肅 province (Figure 3). According to dedicatory inscriptions, as well as styles of relief carvings on these stone blocks, they were commissioned over the course of the sixth century, when northern China was successively reigned by the Northern Wei 北魏 (386–534), Eastern Wei (534–50), and Western Wei (535–57), Northern Qi (550–77) and Northern Zhou (557–81). Historically, eastern Gansu was named “Longdong” 隴東, meaning “to the east of the Mount Long”. Once a center of Buddhism, the region is home to several cave-temple sites and numerous Buddhist statues and steles that date to the Northern dynasties (Gansu Sheng Wenwu Gongzuodui, and Qingyang Bei Shiku Wenwu Baoguan suo 1987; Cheng 1998; Cheng and Yang 2003; Dong 2008; Song 2009; Wei and Wu 2009; Gansu Beishikusi Wenwu Baohu Yanjiusuo 2013; Zheng et al. 2014).¹ Nannieshui in Shanxi, although never a significant local center in history, is located on the path connecting major political centers in the sixth century (Guo 1959, 1979; Shanxi Sheng Kaogu Yanjiusuo 1994, pp. 313–18; Zhang 2005, pp. 51–68).

Besides excavation reports, and several catalog entries, there is almost no extensive scholarly discussion of the phenomenon of making pagodas by stacking stone blocks. These pagodas’ display of rich Buddhist imagery on the surface, in contrast to the simplification of structural elements, raises pointed questions about religion, imagery, and architecture. Why were stacked pagodas made? How to understand their regional flourish in Shanxi and Gansu? How were stacked pagodas understood in their production, consumption, and veneration? How did they relate to the construction of pagoda buildings and other pagoda-centered Buddhist activities of the time period?



Figure 1. Map of Eastern Gansu, Shaanxi, and Shanxi province.



Figure 2. A Nannieshui pagoda in display. Early sixth century, Northern Wei. Stone. Nannieshui Museum. Photograph taken by the author.

The pagoda is usually considered the reinterpretation of the hemispherical stūpa, but features a tall, multistory tower-like body instead. In the third century BCE, Buddhism adopted the mound structure to house the relics of the Buddha or to mark the places consecrated as sites of his acts, constituting the earliest presence of stūpa.² Despite the scarcity of material remains dated prior to the fifth century, literary sources record that the earliest stūpas were produced in China no later than the second century CE, along with the eastwards spread of Buddhism.³ From the third century, Buddhism rapidly filtered into Chinese society through increasing contacts with Central Asian Buddhist kingdoms,

translations of Buddhist texts into Chinese, and constructions of Buddhist monasteries (Zürcher 1972; Seishi 2017). The tower-shaped and multistory type of stūpa appeared and later became the predominant form in East Asia. Modern scholars usually referred to this type as “pagoda” in distinction from the hemispherical stūpa. Both types are generally referred to as *ta* 塔 in Chinese scholarship.



Figure 3. Zhuanglang Pagoda. Gansu Province. Early sixth century, Northern Wei. Gansu Provincial Museum. Photograph courtesy of Wang Xiaoshu.

The period in the following fifth and sixth centuries was marked by the conquest of northern China by non-Chinese regimes. Buddhism continued to flourish regardless of the political chaos and social upheaval. Both imperial and ordinary patrons sponsored the construction of pagoda buildings. Pagoda and stūpa imagery in reliefs and murals burgeoned in Buddhist cave-temples and on Buddhist statues and steles. Surviving historical texts from the time, especially *Luoyang qielan ji* 洛陽伽藍記 (A Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Luoyang) by Yang Xuanzhi 楊衒之, and *Shuijing zhu* 水經注 (Commentary on the Water Classic), compiled by Li Daoyuan 酈道元, record a myriad of Buddhist pagodas being erected within the precinct of Buddhist monasteries in Luoyang (*Luoyang qielan ji jiaoshi* 1963; *Shui jing zhu* 2007). An upsurge of archaeological excavations of pagoda foundations of the Northern dynasties since the second half of the twentieth century CE has brought to light information on pagoda constructions dated to this period, such as the *Siyuan fotu* 思遠佛圖 at Pingcheng 平城 (present-day Datong 大同, Shanxi Province), *Siyuan fotu* 思燕佛圖 at Chaoyang 朝陽, Pagoda of the Yongning Monastery 永寧寺 at Luoyang 洛陽, the Taihe Pagoda at Dingxian 定縣 County, Hebei, and pagodas in temples located at the City of Ye 鄴, Hebei (*Hebei Sheng Wenhujia Wenwu Gongzuodui* 1966; Xia 1966; *Dingxian County Museum* 1972; Du 1981; Xu 1994; *Zhongguo Shehui Kexueyuan Kaogu Yanjiusuo* 1996, 2010, 2013; Su 2011).

In comparison to their Indian predecessors, surviving Chinese counterparts exhibit much greater diversity in forms, functions, and contexts. The earliest surviving group of stone pagodas/stūpas includes the thirteen miniature pieces that were discovered in the last century in major Buddhist sites of northwestern China.⁴ They share an almost identical

design of domed top and three registers on body. There are six bear inscriptions dated to between 426 and 436, when the region was ruled by the Northern Liang 北涼 (397–439).⁵ However, the form of the Northern Liang group did not achieve currency in the following period. Instead, around twenty multilevel stone pagodas became predominant, which have a square, tower-like body of three, five, seven, or nine stories, adorned with roofs, brackets, and columns imitating wooden structures, and feature a central niche on each side of each story (Figure 4). For instance, the Cao Tiandu 曹天度 pagoda consists of a square pedestal, a nine-level tower-like body, and a top, with parallel roof rafters rendered on each roof tier beneath an imitation ceramic-tile roof.⁶ Other works similar to the Cao Tiandu Pagoda from the fifth and the sixth century were usually discovered near Pingcheng, Shanxi, and in western Gansu.



Figure 4. Cao Tiandu 曹天度 Pagoda. Shuozhou, Shanxi Province. 466, Northern Wei. Stone. H. 211.7 cm (with chattrā top). National Palace Museum, Taipei (*Chattrā* preserved in the Chongfu Monastery, Shanxi). Photograph courtesy of Tu Shih-yi.

In contrast to these typical multistory stone pagodas discussed above, stacked pagodas of the sixth century, which are formed by a series of cubical or trapezoidal stone blocks that are stacked up in diminishing sizes, become particularly intriguing in terms of the absence of any architectural elements (see Figures 2 and 3). On surviving stacked pagodas, there are barely any pieces that display components imitating wooden structures.⁷ However, we know that these sixth-century stone pieces were made as pagoda, according to inscriptions and the vertical rise of their multilevel structure. Several bear inscriptions that refer to themselves as *shi fotu sanjie* 石佛圖三劫 (three-story stone pagoda), or *shi futu sanji* 石浮圖三級 (three-story stone pagoda).⁸ *Futu* 浮屠/浮圖, and in some cases *fotu* 佛圖, are synonyms of *ta* in history.⁹ The emphasis of the three levels in these inscriptions, indicating the multilevel structure of the stacked pagodas, is universally used in epigraphs describing the dedication of pagoda buildings.

Furthermore, each surviving stone block of stacked pagodas displays rich Buddhist imagery on each of the four sides, revealing that imagery plays a quintessential role on these pagodas. However, the very act of adorning stacked pagodas with imagery and the arrangement of these images have not yet been discussed. Previous scholarship focused primarily on examining individual depictive scenes (Guo 1959; Guo 1979; Cao 2011). A comprehensive evaluation of the iconography and style of images depicted on stacked pagodas is much needed to better understand the mechanism of producing stacked pagodas.

The pondering of the mechanism of dedicating stacked pagodas is particularly important in view of the broader historical context of constructing pagoda buildings and commissioning stone pagodas in fifth- and sixth-century China. Miniature stone pagodas from the time, often studied only as imitations of actual wooden buildings, and as evidence to reconstruct the look of real buildings that barely survived, were rarely examined for their own instances. Major scholarship in art and architectural history has focused mainly on reconstructing a linear development based on formal analysis of the stūpa/pagoda's structure.¹⁰ This interest in an evolutionary narrative of pagoda buildings understands surviving visual materials of stūpas and pagodas, including miniature pieces and the pictorial representation in reliefs and murals, primarily as evidence for reconstructing monastic architecture, resulting in limitations in further inquiry of other valuable aspects. Despite the contribution to the advancement of the field, this evolutionary approach becomes problematic in two aspects in the study of non-built forms: the "origin" narrative, and a fabricated evolutionary scheme. Meanwhile, research in the field of Buddhist studies lends itself to abstract discourses in history and doctrine, rarely contributing to analyses of specific images or objects.

While I am indebted to the previous scholarship conducted on the architectural aspects of pagodas, this essay aims to further explore how stone pagodas, particularly stacked pagodas from sixth-century Gansu and Shanxi, display their function and significance beyond their architectural form. Why were they made in the first place? What do we make of the images lavishly adorning their surfaces? How were they situated in the artistic, historical, and religious milieu of the time? How were they related yet differentiated from the contemporaneous practice of building pagodas and dedicating Buddhist sculptures?

The first section of this study offers a survey on the style, iconography, and patronage of surviving stacked stone pagodas. The second section examines the regional feature of making stacked pagodas in eastern Gansu and Shanxi, respectively, and proposes an eastern Gansu origin given the historical context. It also highlights the local reception and promotion of hybridity, which is exhibited by the integration of styles, motifs, and pictorial programs of diverse origins in both regions.¹¹

The third section pinpoints the absence of architectural elements imitating wooden structures on stacked pagodas, which is in contrast with the rich Buddhist images covering every corner of their surface. In the fourth section, I further examine the broader historical milieus of producing stone pagodas in preceding periods, showing a successive tradition of communicating Buddhist teachings through imagery depicted on the surface of stone pagodas. On stacked pagodas, however, the well-configured pictorial programs featured on fifth-century stone pagodas are dissembled, with each individual image exhibiting independent significance. Such an abstraction and distortion of their shapes exhibits a tension between form and meaning.

The fifth section explores factors that shaped this new emphasis on individual images on stacked pagodas, arguing for the ignored correlation between the configuration of images and the organization of patronage, which deeply shaped the way how stacked pagodas were commissioned and venerated. According to surviving inscriptions, an individual image located on one side of a stone block from Shanxi, instead of the stone block or the stacked pagoda, becomes the targeted unit to be donated by a single patron. Following this emphasis on the perception of stacked pagodas among the local community, the sixth section studies the reference to pagodas in surviving inscriptions, and discovers a transition from *futu* 浮圖 (pagoda) to *xiang* 像 (image). I contend that it is the growing

emphasis on individual image, which was formed by the very making-process of these stacked pagodas in module, that gradually altered the perception of them from pagodas to images.

2. Stacked Pagodas from Gansu and Shanxi

2.1. Gansu

There are two primary geographical loci for the discovery of stacked pagodas: Pingliang 平涼 Prefecture in eastern Gansu province and Nannieshui at Qin 沁 County in southeastern Shanxi province.¹² Eastern Gansu in its modern administrative division includes two sub-areas: Qingyang 慶陽 and Pingliang. Once a center of Buddhism, the region is home to several cave-temples, such as the Northern and the Southern Cave-temples 南北石窟寺 at Qingyang, Wangmu Palace 王母宮, and Luohan Cave 羅漢堂, and numerous Buddhist statues and steles that date to the late fifth century.¹³ The development of Buddhist art in Pingliang relates closely to two centers at the time. The first is Chang'an 長安, Shaanxi 陝西 province, which is adjacent to eastern Gansu, and has been a political and cultural center since the fourth century. Another center is the Maijishan 麥積山 Cave-temples at Tianshui 天水, located to the southwest of Pingliang.¹⁴ Overall, Pingliang Buddhist art exhibits distinctive regional features but also possesses a blend of stylistic traits that had already circulated in the adjacent area of Chang'an and Tianshui, as well as Pingcheng, the Northern Wei capital city and art center of the fifth century.

Among the dated stacked pagodas in eastern Gansu, the earliest one was commissioned in 503 (Figure 5).¹⁵ A square stone block from this pagoda was discovered in 1982 among over forty similar ones, as well as Buddhist steles and statues, at the site of Chanfosi 禪佛寺 in the Caowan 曹灣 Village, Kongtong 崆峒 District, Pingliang. Three other stone blocks respectively bear dates of 514,¹⁶ 518,¹⁷ and 519. They are identifiable as parts of stacked pagodas, given their trapezoidal shapes, the varied sizes, and the traces of mortise and tenon on the top and the bottom. Each face of the stone blocks was carved with images of Buddhas, bodhisattvas, narrative scenes, or decorative motifs in recessed niches. On each side of the 503 block, there is a seated Buddha and two flanking bodhisattvas depicted within niche (See Figure 5). The Buddhas are dressed in monastic robes with symmetrical folds and sleeves with sharply defined edges splayed below the hands. The 518 Pagoda and other undated pieces from Chanfosi show a more diverse iconography. The Twin Buddhas motif (a pair of Śākyamuni and the Past Buddha Prabhutaratna), which was created in China based on the *Lotus Sūtra*, was becoming popular. Representing the Buddhas of the Present and the Past together, the motif underscores the notion that more than one Buddha can exist at the same time in the cosmos.¹⁸

Another group of Buddhist stacked pagodas was discovered in 1990 along with over 20 other pieces of statues in a hoarding pit located at Xiejiemiao 谢家庙, Huating 华亭 County.¹⁹ Three sets of stacked pagodas, each formed vertically by three stone blocks, are identified. All the three sets bear inscriptions: two sets were commissioned in the years 516 and 534 of the Northern Wei; and one set in 558, Northern Zhou (Figure 6).²⁰ The Northern Wei pieces exhibit hybridity of styles from different origins. On the 534 piece, the main Buddha image on one side dresses in a typical Han-style robe with sashes. The Buddha's right foot protrudes with the sole facing outside, representing a particular feature that is usually found in cave-temples of Longmen 龙门 and Gongxian 巩县 of the 520s near Luoyang.²¹ Another Buddha triad depicted on the same piece renders petal-like edges of draperies in symmetry, exhibiting the local style of Gansu. Pieces of the second half of the sixth century instead show a more simplified iconography echoing other contemporaneous sites across the north, while their style is distinguished from the squarish style of other Northern Zhou sites.

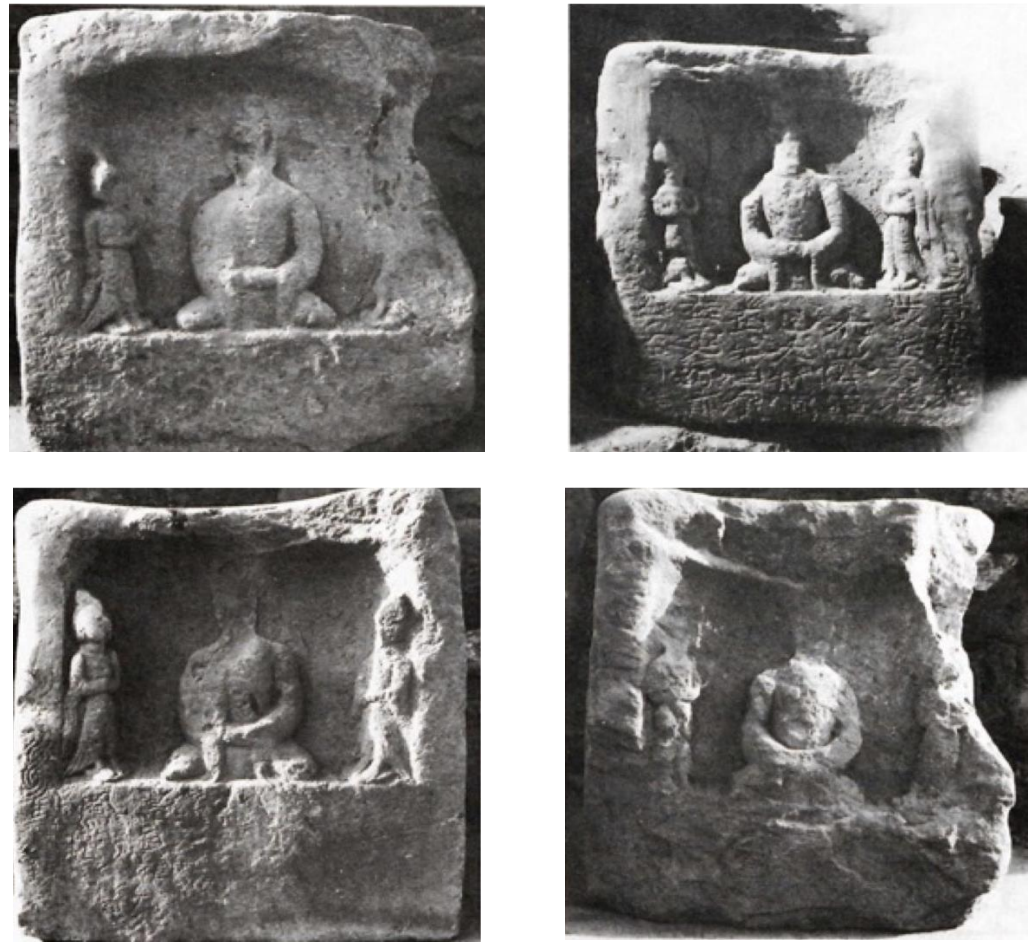


Figure 5. Stone Block from Chanfo Monastery, Kongtong District, Pingliang City, Gansu Province. 503, Northern Wei. H. 44 cm, W. 33 cm. Pingliang Museum. Reprinted with permission from ref. [Gansu fojiao shike zaixiang]. 2000, Zhang, p. 99.

A number of undated stone blocks discovered at Zhuanglang 莊浪 embrace dimensions and styles similar to the above-discussed cases.²² A specific group was excavated in the courtyard of a Northern Wei Monastery, Baoquansi 寶泉寺, including one individual stone block and five that form a stacked pagoda (see Figure 3, hereafter the Zhuanglang Pagoda).²³ There are also several pieces found scattered in cave-temple sites near Zhuanglang. At the Wangmugong 王母宮 Cave-temple, a stone block in trapezoidal shape was once found on display. This piece, together with six others in situ, was brought to the cave-temple in the 20th century without much information of its original recorded provenance.²⁴

2.2. Shanxi

At Nannieshui, Shanxi, cubical stone blocks used to form stacked pagodas also survived in large number.²⁵ They were discovered in 1957 from several hoarding pits (see Figure 2). In 1990, another excavation led by the Archaeological Institute of Shanxi and the County Museum at Nannieshui discovered the foundation of a temple dated to the Tang Dynasty, as well as over 100 pieces of stone Buddhist statues of the Song Dynasty (Shanxi Sheng Kaogu Yanjiusuo 1994, p. 313). The relatively well-preserved condition of all surviving pieces without any apparent pattern suggesting deliberate breakage, in contrast to the broken nature of statues discovered in some other hoarding pits discovered in Hebei and Shandong, suggests that the Nannieshui sculptures were not damaged before their interment in these hoarding pits. Nevertheless, the lack of records of the first excavation

in 1957 makes it difficult to explore the nature of the burial and the original deposit of these sculptures.²⁶



Figure 6. Pagoda from Xiejiamiao, Huating, Gansu Province. 558, Northern Zhou. Stone. H. 78.6 cm, W. (bottom) 26 cm. Huating Museum. Reprinted with permission from ref. [Gansu guta yanjiu]. 2014, Gansu Sheng Wenwu Ju, pp. 55–56.

Totalling 1373 blocks, each side of these cubic stones depicts Buddhist images, including Buddhas, bodhisattvas, guardian kings, narrative scenes from the Buddha's life story, as well as images of lay donors. Almost all the sculptures were carved from the grey, fine-grained sandstone that could be quarried locally. Based on surviving inscriptions, their execution dates range from 510, Northern Wei, to 1031, Northern Song 北宋. Most of the sculptures date to the sixth century, from the late Northern Wei through the Eastern Wei and the Northern Qi dynasties.

Previous scholarship on Nannieshui tends to introduce the materials among other Buddhist sculptures from southern Shanxi, highlighting the provincial style of the region but leaving space for more in-depth research. Yagi Haruo examines the depiction of intertwined dragons, the sun and the moon, and acrobatics among Nannieshui discoveries. Hinako Ishimatsu argues for a provincial style that has been shared by southern Shanxi and eastern Gansu and developed independently from the capital styles at the Yungang 云冈 Cave-temples near Pingcheng and Longmen 龙门 near Luoyang. Gao Meng's dissertation on Nannieshui pagodas provides a survey without much analytical discussion in connection to contemporary Buddhist art (Yagi 2004, p. 84; Ishimatsu 2005, pp. 185–86; Gao 2012). In *Shanxi kaogu sishinian*, a four-period chronology is provided as an overview of the Nannieshui materials (Shanxi Sheng Kaogu Yanjiusuo 1994). However, this chronology has failed to thoroughly recognize the complexity of Nannieshui materials that is shown by the hybridity of styles and images with various origins and arranged in an array of ways.

The current study suggests a relative chronology for the Northern Wei materials based primarily on style, in combination with an extensive discussion of the change in iconography over the sixth century at Nannieshui. The proposed chronology divides Nannieshui materials into three groups: the Northern Wei group, the Northern Qi group, and the Tang and Song group.²⁷ The complexity of the Nannieshui materials lies primarily in the Northern Wei group, with multiple styles and rich iconography carved. The later

Northern Qi group shows stylistic traits that echo the idiom of contemporaneous Hebei and Shandong, which features a fuller body of the Buddha and a dressing mode that features thin draperies clinging to the body tightly. Those of the Tang and Song dynasties only constitute a small portion; the very fact that they were discovered along with those dated to the Northern dynasties in the same pits suggests that these works could not have been buried earlier than the tenth century, and those of the Northern dynasties might have been venerated throughout the five centuries in between.

Among the Northern Wei group, Buddha figures are modeled with slender bodies, squarish heads, and thick robes with draperies cascading on the throne, appearing to be ramifications of the late Northern Wei style popular in other areas. Nevertheless, one finds apparent regional variations between Nannieshui and eastern Gansu in their craftsmanship, the richness of decorative details in the background, and specific details with various origins. For instance, image no. 742 employs a typical Han style in rendering the sash of the Buddha's inner robe, with a rarely seen flower-like edge, as well as the thickly folded draperies that were popular at Luoyang and Majishan (Figure 7). Meanwhile, in the same scene, the Buddha sitting on the right protrudes the left hand to the other Buddha, exhibiting an idiosyncratic way of depicting the twin Buddhas motif of which one finds no examples beyond the area. In addition, the niche is surrounded by floral petals supporting Mani jewels half of which is cut off, two beings symmetrically arranged in between the petals, and one climbing onto the petal on the right, forming a design that is not found in other areas. The broad variety of details exhibited by Nannieshui pieces dated to the first half of the sixth century shows the strong individuality of each piece of work. Their variations suggest the coexistence of various factors that are involved in modulating each individual work, and challenges the traditional approach that examines them as one group.



Figure 7. Twin Buddhas. On a Nannieshui Pagoda, scene no. 742. Early sixth century, Northern Wei. Shanxi province. Nannieshui Museum. Photograph taken by the author.

2.3. Between Gansu and Shanxi

It remains under-exploration about the relation between eastern Gansu and Shanxi in making stacked pagodas. While it is difficult to pinpoint the exact origin of the practice of stacking stone blocks to form pagodas, current evidence alludes to a greater likelihood of eastern Gansu origin. The earliest dated stone block is found in eastern Gansu, in the year 503, predating the Nannieshui pieces. Meanwhile, Lushui hu 卢水胡 (barbarians from Lushui), the ethnic group based at Jingchuan 涇川 (Anding 安定 County in Northern Wei), eastern Gansu, has gradually migrated eastward to Shaanxi since the third century,

constituting a major power in the area.²⁸ By the early fifth century, a series of rebellions were led by the Lushui hu residing in Shaanxi and eastern Gansu. Their fervent support of Buddhism is considered by scholars as a factor accelerating Emperor Taiwu's (r. 423–452 CE) decision of prosecuting Buddhism. Despite the failure of these rebellious actions and the elimination of the Juqu 沮渠 clan who was behind most of the revolts, ordinary Lushui hu retained their stay in eastern Gansu and Shaanxi. Meanwhile, the Xue 薛 clan of the Hedong 河東 Prefecture (present-day southeastern Shanxi), which lies in between the region where Nannieshui is located, Shaanxi, and eastern Gansu, maintained to be an ally of the Lushui hu through the fifth century, allowing for frequent traffic across Shanxi, Shaanxi, and Gansu (Liu 2005, 2008). The Xue Clan, originated from Shu 蜀 in present-day Sichuan, migrated to Hedong in the third century, and gradually became a predominating clan active in the area. The Xue clan retained its prosperity in the Hedong prefecture until the fall of the dynasty in 530s, and maintained contact with Lushui hu from the west along the way (Shanxi Sheng Kaogu Yanjiusuo 1994). Despite the absence of any stone blocks from the Hedong area, its geographical location at the crossroads connecting other parts of Shanxi with Shaanxi and Gansu, and the stability provided by the Xue clan during the Northern Wei, provided a path through which the practice of making stacked pagodas was transmitted in the north. Furthermore, numerous cubical stone blocks discovered in Shaanxi resembled the Gansu and Shanxi cases in size, style, and iconography (Abe 2001). The Shaanxi group's provenance in the Chang'an area—which is located right between eastern Gansu and southern Shanxi—connects Nannieshui and eastern Gansu, the two areas seemingly isolated from each other (Figure 8).



Figure 8. Stone block dated to 501, Northern Wei. Beilin Museum, Xi'an, Shaanxi province. Photographs taken by the author.

3. Architectural Elements in Absence, Buddhist Imagery in Presence

Among surviving stacked pagoda pieces from eastern Gansu and Shanxi, an intriguing phenomenon appears to be the lack of any structural components that imitate wooden building. In addition, the emphasis on adorning every side of pagodas with images is consistent of the fifth-century tradition. In the following discussion, I argue that the particular emphasis on pictorial programs adorning stone pagodas has already achieved prominence since the fifth century, showing the underlying mechanism of stone pagodas to generate significance and communicating with viewers beyond its architectural form. On stacked pagodas of the sixth century, structural components were further eliminated, leaving the veneration foci more focused on the images adorning pagoda surfaces, and showing a growing emphasis on images. Moreover, the relatively unified pictorial program of the fifth-century pagodas was also abandoned. Instead, images on stacked pagodas feature a more individualized and independent arrangement, constituting another piece of evidence to assert the importance of images.

To delve into the details depicted on stacked pagodas, a fallacy should be cleared at the outset. In several studies, a common approach is to study the vertical alignment of the images located on each of a pagoda's four sides, according to their current installation in museums (see Figures 2 and 3) (E 2011). It is natural to study a pagoda by looking into each of its facets, however, this approach is obviously not suitable for stacked pagodas, since the original sequence for arranging the stone blocks, if there is any, is lost. It is beyond any possibility to reach an affirmable reconstruction of the vertical connection among those cubic stone blocks as they were scattered even before being buried underground. The current logic of restacking these unearthed stone blocks relies primarily on their stylistic similarities. In other words, the way how stone blocks are displayed in museums should not be considered as their original arrangement, but an attempt to reconstruct. What we are certain about is the configuration of the four images located on the same cubic block. In the following discussion of images, any pictorial program is presented based on their content and their connection with the three other sides of the same block.

Taking the Zhuanglang pagoda as an example of the eastern Gansu group, images featured on each side of each story show a great variety of iconography, some of which enjoyed particular popularity (see Figure 4). In addition to Buddha triads, the most frequently depicted subject, scenes from the Buddha's Life Story (Ch. *fozhuan gushi* 佛傳故事), appears to be a preferred topic. The Buddha's Birth and Bath are combined on the same pictorial space on one side of the fourth stone (Figure 9a).²⁹ On the lower half of the side, the space on the right is occupied by the scene that represents the Buddha's Birth as it follows the contemporary convention that depicts the baby Buddha emerging from the right flank of Queen Māyā. Depicted in the middle of the space is the infant Buddha taking a bath; he stands naked on a three-legged stool, under a canopy formed by the nine-headed nāga (serpent divinity translated into Chinese as a dragon), with two attendants pouring water from a vase. On the left we see the infant Buddha held by an ascetic astrologer invited to the palace to tell the future of the prince. The similar grouping of episodes from the Buddha's Life Story has been popular since the mid-fifth century in Chang'an and Pingcheng area.

Another episode from the Life Story of the Buddha is the Great Departure, which represents Prince Siddhārtha departing the palace, acquiring importance for its highlighting of the historical Buddha leaving his princely life for a journey to seek enlightenment. In the scene on the first story of the Zhuanglang Pagoda, two standing figures and a horse in the foreground represent the moment when the prince is leaving with his steed (Figure 9c). Another figure raising hands in a building in the background shows the upset emotion of the prince's family in the palace.³⁰



Figure 9. (a–d) Five-story Pagoda from Baoquansi, Zhuanglang, Gansu province. Early sixth century, Northern Wei. Stone. H. ~45 cm, W. 28–34 cm. Gansu Provincial Museum. Reprinted with permission from ref. [Gansu fojiao shike zaoxiang]. 2000, Zhang Baoxi, p. 25.

The Parinirvāṇa scene is carved on the fourth story of the pagoda (Figure 9c). Referring to the Buddha's "death", the episode is represented with reclining Buddha with the head pointing to the left and feet to the right, and an accompanying group of mourners crying in the background.

An interesting question arises: why do the episodes of Parinirvāṇa and the Great Departure appear independently while the other scenes are clustered in the same scene? A contextualized survey of precursors of these scenes shows that the two have gradually achieved independence since the late-fifth century for their respective teachings that constitute self-sufficient importance. The earliest Parinirvāṇa image with a reclining figure in the center is found in Yungang Cave 11, reliefs within which dated to the 480s and 490s, as well as Phase III Yungang cave-temples.³¹ Although the scene at Yungang is not prominent given its modest size and marginal location below a small niche, it stands out because of its separation from the sequence of the life story cycle. Similarly, the Parinirvāṇa image on the Zhuanglang Pagoda is not aligned with other narrative episodes.³²

The particular independence achieved by the image of Parinirvāṇa and the Great Departure suggests a phenomenon of iconization, or the making of icons, which is also attested by the depiction of the Aśoka story. Located on the third story of the Zhuanglang Pagoda, the Aśoka story represents the teaching that good karmic practices will lead to favorable reincarnation (Figure 9a). In the narrative, the Buddha and his disciple Ananda

encounter several children playing outside during their trip. One of the children, in the hope of making offerings to the Buddha, takes a handful of soil and climbs upon another person's shoulder in order to reach the Buddha's alms-bowl. The Buddha accepts the earth and predicts that the boy would be reborn as King Aśoka. In China, this story is commonly represented by three children making offerings to a standing Buddha. The boy who stands closest to the Buddha will become King Aśoka. The story originally belonged to the category of *avadāna* tales that correlates the virtuous deeds of the Buddha's past lives to subsequent lives' events. The story was accounted in *Aśokāvadāna*, which was translated into Chinese by An Faqin 安法欽 (active at Luoyang from 281 to 306), at the turn of the fourth century as *Ayu wang zhuan* 阿育王傳, and later by Sanghapāla 僧伽婆羅 (460–524 CE) in 512 CE as *Ayu wang jing* 阿育王經.³³ The story was also found in *Xianyu jing* 賢愚經 (the Sutra of the Wise and the Fool), a collection of tales translated into Chinese in the fourth century.³⁴ Already shown in relief around the second century CE in Gandhāra, the Aśoka story began to be depicted in the Phase II Yungang Cave 12 of the 480s, and further gained wide popularity in Phase III Yungang cave-temples and steles of the early sixth century (Strong 1983; Behrendt 2003, 2007; Brancaccio and Behrendt 2006).³⁵ The story is also found depicted on some of the Chanfosi stone blocks and cave-temple sites in eastern Gansu (Zhang 2000, p. 104, Figure 109; Gansu Sheng Wenwu Gongzuodui 1987, pp. 11–15). The Aśoka story depicted on stone blocks follows the convention of depicting three children approaching a standing Buddha, while featuring additional elements including flying apsaras and two attendant bodhisattvas.³⁶

All these narrative scenes, the Aśoka story and those from the Buddha's Life Story, are also carved frequently among the Nannieshui group. The Aśoka story at Nannieshui shows the Buddha standing, with his right hand touched by a child who is supported by another one (Figure 10). The Great Departure includes all the major elements we see in contemporaneous examples: a horse at his feet, and a tilting tree behind the prince (Figure 10). The composition within the square space reveals a possible influence from Yungang, as indicated by the modeling of the horse in high relief. The pensive Buddha image is shown sitting below a tree in the background and additional decorative elements carved in low relief surrounding the niche, including thatched huts that are usually associated with the venue of meditation, and Brahminic figures shown with knotted hair, naked upper bodies, and sometimes holding staffs. The highlight of the Buddha sitting in pensive posture among the Nannieshui cases distinguishes it from the depiction of the Buddha riding a horse in eastern Gansu. This regional difference might result from a growing importance of the pensive figure in the sixth century.³⁷

The Parinirvāṇa image, meanwhile, is represented in a completely new idiom at Nannieshui, which combines the typical scene showing a reclining Buddha side by side, with another scene that depicts a coffin (Figure 11). Both scenes feature a pictorial space formed by two intertwined tree crowns in the background. Such a combination reminds us of the renowned stele preserved at the Art Institute of Chicago (Lee 2010, Figure 1.1). The top register of the stele's reverse side renders two Parinirvāṇa scenes almost identical to the Nannieshui case. This depiction of Parinirvāṇa in two images is only found in sculptural remains dated to periods from the late sixth century. In her case study of the stele, Sonya Lee argues that the introduction of the coffin helps expand the temporal scope of the actions of mourning in depiction and establish a relationship of symbolic equivalence with the reclining Buddha (Lee 2010, chp. 1). Due to the survival of sculptures by chance, we do not know what the source is for this provoking invention of a two-scene representation of the Parinirvāṇa. However, the provenance of the Chicago stele in southern Shanxi along the Fen River clearly indicates the circulation of this double depiction of a reclining Buddha and a coffin in the area.



Figure 10. Scenes no. 993–96, stone block from Nannieshui. Early sixth century, Northern Wei. Shanxi province. Photographs taken by the author.



Figure 11. Nirvāṇa. Scenes no. 430 and no. 431. Stone block, Nannieshui, Shanxi province. Mid-sixth century. Nannieshui Museum. Source: (Cao 2011, Figures 6 and 7).

Meanwhile, the Northern Wei group from Nannieshui shows some idiosyncratic traits. Although the most commonly depicted images on a stone block include the seated Buddha, Maitreya, and the Twin Buddhas, we find numerous new elements that are distinctive from

the traditions flourished in other places in late Northern Wei, as well as unidentifiable subjects. In addition, the arrangement of images on these Nannieshui pagodas is arbitrary to a degree. To better examine the vast number of stone pagoda blocks surviving from the area, Gephi, the network analysis tool that uses the direction and frequency of links between nodes, is employed.³⁸ The nodes of the tool in this survey refer to imagery depicted on each side of Nannieshui stone blocks. It reveals that the Aśoka story and the Great Departure usually are aligned horizontally with a seated Buddha, the Twin Buddhas, and Maitreya.

Overall, a survey of the narrative scenes in individual pictorial space on stacked pagodas from eastern Gansu and Shanxi reveals their prototypes developed in the late fifth century Yungang. The quick absorption of these individual narrative scenes on stacked pagodas shows recognition of their significance and popularity among the worshippers, and further alludes to a parallel correlation with steles and statues made around the same time. Each of these prototypes found at Yungang is also depicted independently from any other narrative scenes. This preference of Yungang tradition in eastern Gansu might relate to the historical context of the proliferation of Buddhist cave-temple sites at Longdong. An important site on the crossroads of trades and military campaigns connecting the Central Plains to the Hexi Corridor, the Longdong area has been kept close with the political center of Pingcheng. Dowager Empress Hu, who held the political whip in the early sixth century, has family origins in Jingzhou, Longdong ([Gansu Sheng Wenwu Gongzuodui 1987](#), pp. 19–20). Many of the cave-temple sites of Longdong also show a preference for depicting the Great Departure episode and the Aśoka story ([Gansu Sheng Wenwu Gongzuodui 1987](#), p. 95).

As briefly mentioned in the above discussion of Zhuanglang Pagoda, new questions also arise. Why were these scenes selected and why are they shown independently without connections to their surrounding images? A possible answer lies in the iconization of each of the three scenes. One notices that narrative scenes rely on the law of the series, which subordinates the individual image to the whole, or partial course of the narrative. This law is followed in images depicted on one side of the Zhuanglang Pagoda's second story, where the Buddha's birth, bath, and the prophecy with astrologers are grouped together in the same pictorial space. However, the Aśoka story, the Great Departure, and Parinirvāṇa episodes are shown individually, independently, and aligned arbitrarily with images of the Buddha triad on the other sides of the same stone block. Thus, the law of series is suspended as an individual scene becomes an independent motif in isolation from the narrative cycle.

In her study on Parinirvāṇa images, Sonya Lee points out the Parinirvāṇa image being adapted as a Buddhist icon at Yungang, best exemplified by the separation of the Parinirvāṇa scene from the life cycle of the Buddha in late Northern Wei. The final moment of the Buddha's demise shown in independent placement is also found in Cave 132 at Binglingsi of the early sixth century and in Cave 5 at South Xiangtangshan of the mid-sixth century ([Lee 2010](#), pp. 45–48). Lee attributes the independent depiction of the Parinirvāṇa scene to its inclusion into the new thematic setting of the Buddhas of Three Ages (Past, Present, and Future), which stressed the infinite, continuous presence of Buddhas. Her emphasis on the thematic setting of an image can be employed to interpret the iconization of the Aśoka story and the Great Departure. The Great Departure indicates the start of the journey that leads to the prince's enlightenment. The Aśoka story carries an unmistakable symbolic meaning of the future Buddhahood of the universal ruler. Despite their different narrative contexts, both scenes fit into the thematic setting about the infinity of the Buddhahood. This growing emphasis on each individual narrative further addresses an intentional selection of images to be depicted on stacked pagodas, as well as a recognition of the religious significance that can be communicated through the selected images.

4. Pictorial Programs on Stone Pagodas of the Northern Dynasties

Nevertheless, to better understand the particular emphasis on images over architectural elements on stacked pagodas from Gansu and Shanxi, it is also necessary to examine

a broader context of the production of stone pagodas at the time. This section addresses that the interest in depicting images that carry specific Buddhist teachings on stacked pagodas is a continuation of the fifth-century tradition in making single-piece pagodas (see Figure 4). The single-piece pagodas also comprise evidence for the crucial role played by pictorial programs of images in generating symbolic significance beyond architectural elements that imitate wooden buildings.

The single-piece pagodas of the fifth century are carved with Buddhist images popular at the time, including the Historical Buddha Śākyamuni, the Future Buddha Maitreya, the Fasting Buddha, narrative scenes from the Buddha's Life Story, and the Twin Buddhas motif. A comparative study of both the single pieces and the stacked pagodas showcases the exploration of how to embed meanings through the execution of images on pagodas.

One of the most representative examples of the single-piece pagodas, the Cao Tiandu Pagoda of 466, features a Buddha niche in the center on each side of the lowest story of the pagoda's main body. Clockwise, the four niches house images of Śākyamuni in dhyāna mudrā (meditation gesture) on two sides, Bodhisattva Maitreya with legs crossed at his ankles, and the Twin Buddhas motif (see Figure 4) respectively.³⁹ On the remaining eight stories, each of the upper six depicts two rows of seated Buddha images on each side, while the lower two depict three rows of seated Buddha images, representing the Thousand-buddhas motif (Caswell 1975). Another three pieces showcase a similar design. One is a stone pagoda preserved in the Daiwangcheng 代王城 Museum, in Yu County 蔚縣, present-day northwestern Hebei 河北 Province (Figure 12).⁴⁰ The body of the pagoda has eight stories; there should have been nine stories, as pagoda usually have an odd number of stories, and the top of this pagoda is severely damaged. The bottom story is also cut in half, with the lower half and pedestal missing. Each story of the pagoda features a roof with protruding rafters and brackets, suggesting its imitation of a wooden prototype. In the center of each side of each story, there opens a niche with a seated Buddha image, flanked by smaller Buddha images in two registers on either side. The space between brackets under the roof is further carved with a small, seated Buddha image. Despite the lack of epigraphic traces that bear an exact date, the Buddha image on the Daiwangcheng Pagoda exhibits a strong stylistic resemblance to those from Phase II Yungang cave-temples of the 480s (Chen 1996).⁴¹ Two other pagodas from Shanxi can be dated to the 460s and 470s. One is a three-story stone pagoda found in Datong (hereafter named the Datong Pagoda).⁴² The other five-story pagoda was found at the Nanchan Monastery 南禪寺 on Mount Wutai 五臺 in northern Shanxi province. On its second story, three sides depict seated Buddha images, while the fourth displays two Buddhas sitting side by side, representing the Twin Buddhas motif.⁴³ An approximate time range for these two works extends from the 450s to the 470s, slightly earlier or later than the Cao Tiandu Pagoda.⁴⁴

Examining the alignment of the various images pictured on these stone pagodas, one finds an arrangement that lines up the historical Buddha Śākyamuni, Maitreya Bodhisattva as the Future Buddha, and the Twin Buddhas motif horizontally or vertically, representing the concept of the Buddhas of the Three Ages theme. The Buddhas of the Three Ages theme was already developed in Gandhāran tradition, with the past Buddha commonly represented by Dīpaṅkara or the Seven Buddhas (including six Buddhas of the Past and Śākyamuni of the present era). Therefore, the fifth-century miniature pagodas represented the theme in a new form, which replaced the Gandhāran tradition, with the Twin Buddhas motif employed to indicate the Past. The particular significance of the Twin Buddhas motif in underscoring the timelessness of Buddhahood (coexistence of the present and the past) indicates a further emphasis on the Mahāyāna teachings in Chinese Buddhist art.⁴⁵ In addition to the theme of the Buddhas of Three Ages, the lowest story of some of these miniature pagodas further depict scenes from the Buddha's Life Story (Ch. *fozhuan gushi* 佛傳故事) in a sequence different from the sporadic depiction of similar scenes on stacked pagodas (see Figure 9).⁴⁶



Figure 12. (a–d) Daiwangcheng 代王城 Pagoda, late fifth century, Northern Wei. (Yuxian 蔚县, Hebei province. Stone. H. 150 cm, W. (base) 37.5 cm. Daiwangcheng Museum. Photograph courtesy of Zhang Jianyu. Diagram by the author).

In addition to single-piece stone pagodas discovered in the Pingcheng area, those found in another cultural hub, the Hexi Corridor in northwest China, exhibit variations that correlate to Buddhist teachings circulated regionally. While retaining the horizontal scheme in depicting the Buddha's Life Story on the bottommost story, surviving miniature pagodas

from the Hexi region display Maitreya Bodhisattva in combination with a Fasting Buddha image on the highest story (Figure 13). The Cao Tianhu 曹天護 Pagoda of 499 features narrative scenes from the Buddha's Life Story on its lowest story, resembling the Pingcheng tradition.⁴⁷ However, on its topmost story, two sides feature a seated Buddha image within a horseshoe-shaped niche (Figure 13a,d); the third side depicts Maitreya (Figure 13b), which is identifiable by his crossed ankles and the trapezoidal arch above; and the fourth side renders a skeleton-like Buddha sitting beneath twin trees, which is unmistakably the image of a Fasting Buddha (Figure 13c).⁴⁸ The combination of images of Maitreya and the Fasting Buddha is quite unique, without any similar specimen found in Indian and Central Asian traditions. However, a further inquiry of both textual and visual sources regarding the fasting image reveals that the significance of the combination of fasting Buddha image with Maitreya lies in its representation of the Buddha's enlightenment since its inception in Gandhāra.⁴⁹ Given the Fasting Buddha's Gandhāra lineage, and Maitreya's reference to future Buddhahood, the new configuration of the two on the topmost story of miniature pagoda attests a new emphasis on the attainment of enlightenment in fifth-century Buddhist practice in the Hexi Corridor.

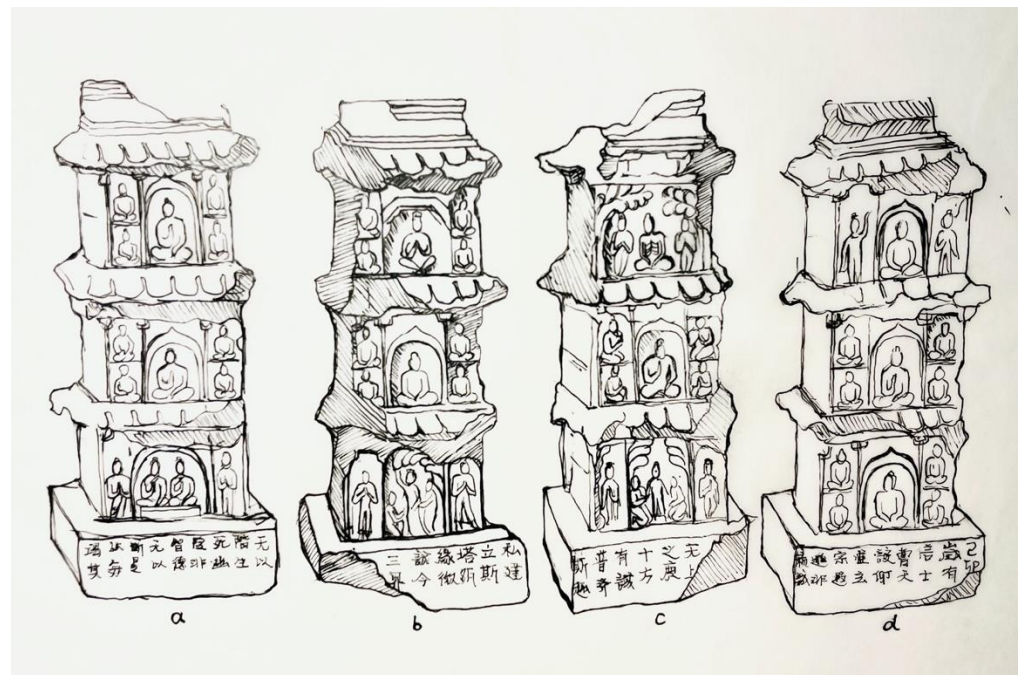


Figure 13. (a–d) Cao Tianhu 曹天護 Pagoda. Jiuquan, Gansu Province. 499, Northern Wei. (Stone. H. 38 cm, W. (base) 16 cm. Jiuquan Municipal Museum. Diagram by the author based on photographs in Chen 1986, Figures 1–4).

To conclude, the examination of stone pagodas made earlier than stacked pagodas in northern China shows a continuous tradition of depicting images on their surfaces. The images are imbued with Buddhist teachings popular at the time, echoing the development of the image worship found on other media, such as steles and statues. That being said, Buddhist images adorning the surface of stone pagodas have been central to the display of meaning since early on.

5. Individual Image, Collective Patronage

Despite the continuation of generating significance with images on pagodas through the fifth and the sixth century, on stacked pagodas of the sixth century we see a dissolution of pictorial programs that once organize every image adorning the surface of fifth-century single-piece pagodas, as well as a growing complexity and independence in individual

images. As examined in the third section, each image depicted on stacked pagodas is not particularly related in content with any adjacent ones. Factors shaping this growing independence of image include the trend of iconization of narrative scenes from the Buddha's Life Story and the growing importance of particular significance carried by individual narrative episodes. Nevertheless, based on surviving inscriptions at Nannieshui, we find that a stacked pagoda was often commissioned by a group of patrons. Usually, a single patron usually donates an individual image rather than a stone block or a stacked pagoda. In other words, patrons donated in unit of the individual image. To understand this specific way of dedicating stacked pagodas, this section examines the correlation between the production of stacked pagodas and the organization of patronage based on surviving epigraphical evidence. I contend that the very fact that these stacked pagodas being assembled by individual stone blocks further allows or responds to the way how they were commissioned by patrons.

The eastern Gansu and the Nannieshui material exhibit differences in terms of patronage. The eastern Gansu stacked pagodas were usually commissioned in whole by local donors. In several examples one also finds depictions of the deceased family members of the donor. For instance, the surviving character of 亡, which refers to "the deceased", on the 518 pagoda, suggests that the work was dedicated to gaining merits for the deceased family members.⁵⁰ Another stacked pagoda dated to 536 bears the images and inscriptions of a number of donors on the pedestal.⁵¹

On the Zhuanglang Pagoda, a procession scene of donors occupies the lower two of the three horizontal registers on one side of the bottom block (see Figure 9b). The upper register depicts a preaching scene that features a central seated Buddha. On the lower two registers, three male figures are pictured on each level riding on horses toward one direction, with cartouches indicating their identities as the donor's deceased family members.⁵² The procession scene depicting horses and carts is commonly found on sixth-century steles from Shanxi, Shaanxi, and eastern Gansu.⁵³ Donor figures began to be carved in an arrayed manner along the bottom of the statue and stele pedestals in the late fifth century, usually standing or kneeling towards the center. In the sixth century, donor figures usually appear in a standing position, sometimes within a frame.⁵⁴ A similar representation of horses and carts is found on several other pieces from the same region.⁵⁵ The tradition continued to be found on steles from eastern Gansu throughout the sixth century.⁵⁶

The rich corpus of donor images on the Zhuanglang Pagoda may relate to the fact that its donors are from the same family clan. Such a feature of organizing patronage exclusively by family ties is prevailing in works of eastern Gansu of the sixth century. It distinguishes from the contemporaneous practice in other regions, where the *yiyi* 邑邑 society became the dominant form of patronage. By the early sixth century in northern China, the collective patronage of Buddhist sculptures began to flourish, and it was usually organized through the *yiyi* society (Michihata 1967; Hou 1998, 2005, 2007; Lingley 2006, 2010). Referring to a form of Buddhist socio-religious organizations, *yiyi* is usually organized by lay Buddhists living in the same village in rural areas of northern China under the leadership of at least one monk or nun (called *yishi* 邑師), to fulfill the activities of building Buddhist steles or temples, copying or chanting Buddhist sūtras for mass circulation, or holding religious rituals together.⁵⁷ On statues from eastern Gansu, the *yiyi* society is not seen in inscriptions until the Western Wei, suggesting a relatively later absorption of the new collective patronage form in the region.

In comparison to the eastern Gansu tradition, stacked pagodas from Nannieshui intriguingly represent a new form of collective patronage, which allows each individual donor to claim ownership over one image or a stone block. First, we do not find any Nannieshui stone blocks that are inscribed with lengthy dedicatory texts that are usually common for single-piece pagodas as well as stacked pagodas from eastern Gansu. Instead, inscriptions on Nannieshui pagodas are located around the edge of each niche, comprising only several characters in a very short length showing the donor's name and title. The surnames of the patrons suggest that they belong to different family clans. However, little

historical documentation exists to identify more information on donors who have their names inscribed on the Nannieshui group.

Second, a stone block from Nannieshui usually features on each the four sides a separate inscription dedicated to different donors. An individual donor usually claims just one side of a stone block rather than an entire block or a pagoda. For instance, scenes no. 233, no. 234, and no. 236 on the same stone block are respectively accompanied by three patrons, Gao Wen 高文, Wang Daoqu 王道渠, and Li Xiao 李小. Each side of a stone block can be commissioned by more than one donor. Scene no. 673 is accompanied by the names of Li Hanren 李韓人 and Li Andu 李安都. Meanwhile, one person can be the donor of multiple scenes. Both scenes no. 174 and no. 175 are commissioned by Wang Niusheng 王牛生. The carving of the same donor's name twice on two scenes under his patronage still pinpoints the mechanism of patronage at Nannieshui; no matter how many donors are involved, the unit of donation is an individual scene out of the four sides on a stone block. This arrangement of inscriptions further speaks to the argument that the commissioning and making process of each stone block that constitutes stacked pagodas shows an image-centered system.

Although there is no sufficient written material regarding the local community at Nannieshui, the practice of inscribing a donor name by a specific image is not rare in contemporaneous Buddhist statues and steles that feature a complex pictorial program. Sixth-century patrons of Buddhist steles would inscribe the work with their own names or those of deceased family members in cartouches located right by a Buddhist niche or image. For instance, a mid-fifth-century stele discovered not far from Nannieshui features nearly two dozens of short donor cartouches directly below pictorial niches in addition to names of hundreds of donors that are listed on the bottom register on the stele (Lee 2010, chp. 1). The stele is also renowned for two niches picturing the Parinirvāṇa scene in the identical way to the Nannieshui tradition (see Figure 11).

In general, such a practice is understood on two levels. First, the inscription of donors' names and social affiliations by pictorial niches provides a chance for them to join the same league as those Buddhist deities. As addressed by Sonya Lee, with their names inscribed side by side to pictorial space, the patrons gained access to a sacred realm where they could communicate with Buddhist deities as well as their local society. Second, a correlation is constructed between these donors and the local community, in view of the way in which steles and statues were used after production—to be displayed in public space, most likely in monastic complexes or at the intersection of routes. The stacked pagodas thus become meaningful by providing the devotees with a platform, a space, to demonstrate their religious piety to a larger group of audience.

6. Dissolving the Structure: From Multilevel Pagoda to Stone Image

The image-centered making mechanism of stacked pagodas, as address above, further sheds light on underexplored issues regarding their perception and veneration among the local community. In previous studies, there is another strand of scholarship to define the stacked pagodas under discussion, which considers each individual stone block as stele, *simianxiang* 四面像 (four-sided image), or *zaoxiangshi* 造像石 (image stone), instead of pagodas.⁵⁸ The reference to these pagodas as *simianxiang* or *zaoxiangshi* is primarily a created appellation based on scholarly interpretation of the depiction of images on four sides of a stone block. Nevertheless, the discussion on the definition of stacked pagodas also echoes some inscriptions found on stone blocks, which intriguingly refer to themselves as *shixiang* 石像 or *xiang* 像.

Why are some pieces of stacked pagodas denoted as *xiang* 像 instead of *futu* or *ta*? What is the difference between *xiang* and *futu* in the context of making stacked pagodas? How do these different denotations relate to the perception and veneration of stacked pagodas? This section contends that the self-reference of *xiang* in inscriptions found on stacked pagodas is a later phenomenon that has not taken place until the later sixth century, replacing the earlier self-reference, *futu*. The primary factor that contributes to this shift

of denotation, lies in the specific emphasis on individual images or stone blocks, or *xiang*, which was fundamentally shaped by very making and commissioning process of stacked pagodas. Meanwhile, this shift also echoes with the broader historical context of the second half of the sixth century, when the growing popularity of the hemispherical stūpa form posed challenges to the dominance of the multilevel pagoda form. In addition, the growing understanding of the miraculous deeds of *xiang* might also contribute to the transformation from *futu* to *xiang* among stacked pagodas.

As discussed in the introduction, several stacked pagodas bear inscriptions that refer to themselves as *shi futu san jie* 石佛圖三劫 (three-story stone pagoda), or *shi futu san ji* 石浮圖三級 (three-story stone pagoda).⁵⁹ Both *sanjie* 三劫 and *sanji* 三級 mean “three-story.” The emphasis of the three levels in the inscriptions is almost universally employed in contemporaneous epigraphs that describe the construction of pagodas, therefore revealing these stacked pagodas’ formal resemblance to pagoda buildings. For instance, the inscription on the Quan Pagoda of 536 also records *sanjie shi yiqu* 三劫石一區 (a three-story stone).⁶⁰ The inscription of the Huisuisi 暉福寺 stele of Duke Dangchang 宕昌公 reads, “I commissioned two three-storied *futu* for the two emperors at my old houses, one in the south and another in the north in my hometown.”⁶¹ The inscription on the construction of *futu* by Chang Huan 常煥 and the others reads, “There is a five-story *futu* inside the temple yard.”⁶² The multilevel verticality of these stacked pagodas, as implied by their inscriptions, further reinforces the perception of them as pagodas. Wei-Cheng Lin, in his recent article on the vertical rise of Chinese pagodas in the Middle Period (10th–14th century) contends that the importance of the verticality of pagodas derives from their performative aim in drawing the attention of the faithful performative function (Lin 2016).

However, a few other inscriptions found on stacked pagodas feature the term *shixiang* 石像 (stone image) to refer to stone blocks that comprise these stacked pagodas. The Xiejiamiao Pagoda of 558 records *shixiang yiqu* 石像一區 (a stone image). Inscriptions located on the side marked as no. 392 of the Nannieshui pagoda of 553 mention the construction of *wu shixiang* 五石像 (five stone images), which might refer to five stone blocks including the one bearing the inscription. In addition to *shixiang*, we also find *zaoxiang* 造像 in some inscriptions. Yet a distinction between the two terms is rarely spotted. *Zaoxiang* is found frequently in inscriptions found on contemporaneous steles, highlighting the very act of commissioning an image. The term *shixiang*, distinctively, denotes the entirety of the three-dimensional sculpture.⁶³ In the case of the Xiejiamiao pagoda of 558, we know that *shixiang* (stone image) in its inscription refers to the sculptural entity, also according to the term *yiqu* 一區 (a piece). Inscriptions on the Nannieshui no. 392 emphasize its entirety by adding *wu* 五 (five) before *shixiang*, showing the number in total.

Comparing all surviving inscriptions, one finds that *futu* is found among the earliest pieces dated to the early sixth century, while *shixiang* is only spotted among those dated to the third quarter. This periodical gap reveals that the *futu* and *shixiang* might not be interchangeable, but successive. That being said, inscriptions reveal a transition of self-referral terms to these stacked pagodas from “three-story stone pagodas” to “five stone images” in the third quarter of the sixth century, although their stacked forms retain the same. The new term, “stone image”, pinpoints a shift in perception of these stone sculptures from pagodas to sculptural images.

How did this transition happen? An important factor lies in the way these pagodas were made with a series of stone blocks that are fully adorned with images, or the image-oriented system of commissioning stacked pagodas. In other words, the very making of stacked pagodas with richly adorned stone blocks gradually shaped, altered, and transformed the way they were perceived among the worshippers. From *futu* to *xiang*, the veneration foci shifted from the entire pagoda to individual images. From “three-story” to “five,” the emphasis on the vertical rise is replaced by the number of individual stone blocks. The purpose of stacking these stone blocks to erect pagodas was gradually fading away through the decades of the sixth century. The mechanism of making pagodas from individual stone blocks, instead, seized the decisive power of defining its ontological status.

The dissolution of the vertical rise of stacked pagodas might also echo a development which took place from the mid-sixth century—one-story stūpa images with the archaic hemispherical dome began to flourish, primarily in the territory of Eastern Wei and Northern Qi and the south.⁶⁴ Although the stūpa image never achieved currency in eastern Gansu or Shanxi, the flourish of the domed stūpa image from the mid-fifth century nevertheless indicates a shifted perception of the form and meaning of pagodas.

Meanwhile, another trend involved is the growing prevalence of image-making on free-standing stone surface through the fifth and the sixth century, and the awareness of image-making. *Xiang* 像, or image, became more recognized as the primary means of inscribing Buddhist teachings, displaying merits for patrons, and generating religious meanings. The growing importance of *xiang*, or images in the sixth century, on the micro level, is already pinpointed above by the emphasis, highlight, and iconization of individual images that carry specific meanings, such as the Parinirvāṇa scene. *Xiang*, or “image,” is usually distinguished from other forms in terms of their roles primarily as objects of worship (Wong 2004, introduction). The veneration of images in China has also developed over the course of centuries. The establishment of image making or the image cult and its correlation to the dissemination of Buddhism in China since the second century has been a key issue in debate in the field of art history as well as religious studies. Minku Kim, in his dissertation on the very topic, has combed through the historiography of the topic and provided a definition of Buddhist image worship in a Chinese context (Kim 2011, 2014). Following his scholarship, the essential factor defining image worship is related to whether there is any ritualistic Buddhist significance displayed. Furthermore, recent scholarship in Buddhist studies also shows an intentional construction of the image worship as a distinctly Buddhist practice since the late fifth century (Greene 2018). It was a gradual process for the image worship to be integrated into medieval Chinese society.

7. Concluding Remarks

This paper discusses the phenomenon of making stacked pagodas in sixth-century northern China. On the one hand, stacked pagodas were complementary in form and placement to real pagoda buildings. On the other hand, they feature their own peculiarity in terms of material, making, and venerating. Images on stacked pagodas have provided a wonderful outlet for the unbridled imagination of the artisan. Although there is a variety of delicate details to defy an attempt to impose a systematic classificatory scheme of arranging images on stacked pagodas, a survey of surviving images reveals a specific preference for certain images and allows further study of the context of their correlation with the broader artistic milieu. More importantly, an investigation of the relation between carved images and inscribed texts against the historical context of dedicating Buddhist statues and constructing pagodas sheds light on the making and perception of pagodas in non-built form in sixth century. In addition to the definition of sacred space with architectural forms, this case study pinpoints the quintessential role played by the adornment of images in generating sacredness. **Funding:** This research received no external funding. The APC was

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Notes

¹ Regarding the region’s history of Buddhism and the role played by ethnic groups, see Hou Xudong (Hou 2008); Wei and Wu (2009); Song (2009); Gansu Beishikusi Wenwu Baohu Yanjiusuo (2013); Zheng et al. (2014); Wang (2015). Eastern Gansu and the bordering Shaanxi has formed an important center since the fourth century, where Buddhism flourished during the rule of the non-Han Chinese dynasties, including the Former Qin 前秦 (351–394), Later Qin 後秦 (384–417), and Xiongnu Da Xia 匈奴大夏 (407–431) before the Northern Wei’s capture of Chang’an. For the area’s history and its non-Han culture, see (Ma 1985).

² The discussion on the initial appearance of stūpas is vast. See (Hawkes and Shimada 2009; Fogelin 2012, 2015).

³ Each of “stūpa” and “pagoda” has a broader reference and a more contested history of use in various research contexts. The terminological ambiguity has persisted through the field over the past century. To avoid ambiguity, this study uses pagoda to refer to multistory structures whereas stūpa refers to all other forms. The last section in this introduction will provide a more

detailed discussion of the terminology. For related discussion, also see Miu (2012), Miller (2014), Mukai (2020). Meanwhile, a second-century relief carving of a multistory structure from Sichuan is considered by scholars as one among the earliest depictions of pagoda. See Xie (1987).

4 They are usually named “stūpa” due to the hemispherical dome.

5 There is a number of studies on the topic. See, among other sources, (Wang 1999; Yin 2000; Abe 2002).

6 It has been preserved in the Chongfu 崇福 Monastery in northwest Shanxi, but was originally commissioned at Pingcheng, the capital city of Northern Wei. Its pedestal and tower body were taken to Japan during World War II and later returned to Taiwan after the war, while the ornamental top was preserved by a local person in Shuozhou. See (Shi 1980; Wang 2011b).

7 At the Nannieshui Museum, a stone piece with a roof imitating wooden structure is placed on top of a stacked pagoda. Yet it remains uncertain how universal this practice is, without any more similar pieces located.

8 For instance, the inscription found on a stone block from Xiejiamiao in eastern Gansu reads, “永熙三年太歲在寅八月十四日弟子/縣張生德為忘息大奴敬/造石佛圖三劫願上生天上/諸佛下生人間口王長壽若/三速令解脫善願從心” (On the fourteenth day of the eighth month, the third year of the Yongxi era [the year of the Tiger], Zhang Shengde from the county of ... dedicated a three-story stone pagoda for his deceased Danu for his ascension into the heaven ... Buddhas descend to the mundane world ... longevity ... achieve emancipation from ... to follow what the heart desires ...) The stacked pagoda that this stone block belongs to dates 534, Northern Wei. There is no archaeological report, but a general overview, on the group of statues found in the Xiejiamiao site ever published. Current studies weigh on the ethnic group of the donors for this group. See (Wang 2015, 2016; Zhang 2000, pp. 108–12).

9 The difference between the three words is generally attributed to the distinctive strategies of translation used between the third and the eighth century. Both *futu* 浮屠 and *futu* 浮圖 are used to refer to the Buddha in early Chinese historical texts, denoting an interchangeable relationship between the Buddha and the sacred structure. The usage is considered a result of phonetic confusion caused by the transliteration of Sanskrit phrases. In *Hou Han shu* 後漢書, *futu* is described as miraculous images that appear together with Laozi 老子, the indigenous saint who later became a quasi-deity of Daoism. Additionally, both *futu* and Laozi are housed in *ci* 祠 or *miao* 廟, which both refer to a ritual shrine in Chinese. See (*Hou Han shu* 1984, p. 16). For recent studies of the three terms’ literal meanings, see (Greene 2018).

10 Miniature pagodas and pagoda reliefs have been examined as evidence for the study of early Chinese architectural history in almost all major studies in the field. These studies contributed to many aspects, but their discussion on these miniatures and pagoda images is in the form of an overview. For major works, see (Liang 1961, 1962; Ledderose 1980; Seckel 1980; Sun 1984; Xiao 1989; Wang 2011a; Steinhardt 2011, 2014, 2019). In recent years, we have also seen discussions focusing on miniatures; however, the discussion is still confined in the scope of developing a typological system based on their structural traits (Wang 2006; Tang 2016; Xu 2016). Further studies in light of the study of Chinese miniatures in other forms and recent theoretical discussion of miniaturization is much needed. See (Ledderose 1983, 2000; Stein 1990; Steward 1993; Selbitschka 2005; Guo 2010; Hong 2015; Wu 2015; Luo 2016; Graves 2018; Martin and Langin-Hooper 2018; Davy and Dixon 2019; Elsner 2020).

11 To employ the term “hybridity,” some clarification should be made in response to recent scholarly discourse on the topic in the field of archaeology. Scholars have rectified the perception of hybridity by examining the issue of receptivity. See Stockhammer (2013), Andreeva (2018). To summarize within the scope of this footnote, this research confines the definition of hybridity within the scope of specific styles and motifs that have been developed and transmitted in northern China, as displayed by major Buddhist artworks. It agrees with the strand of scholarship that challenges the narrative of uninterrupted transmission of dominant styles and motifs in provincial areas. Rather, this study showcases the complexity about the way how styles and motif of various origins were combined unevenly in subordinate regions in sixth-century northern China.

12 From the east to the west, five of the seven counties of Pingliang are Lingtai 靈台, Jingchuan 涇川, Chongxin 崇信, Huating 華亭, and Zhuanglang 莊浪, all of which boast several Buddhist cave-temples as well. See (Gansu Sheng Wenwu Gongzuodui, and Qingyang Bei Shiku Wenwu Baoguan suo 1987; Zhang 1994; Cheng 1998, p. 41; Dong 2008).

13 See footnote 1.

14 A total number of 209 cave-temples are carved out of the cliffs, dated from the Later Qin and Western Qin of the Sixteen States to the Tang dynasty. See (Yan 1984; Wei 2005; Gansu Sheng Wenwu Gongzuodui 1987; Steinhardt 2014, pp. 90–92).

15 The 503 stone block’s inscription reads, “景明四年太/歲在癸未/太陰在/巳大將軍/在午白虎/在寅青龍/在子四月癸馬” (In the fourth month of the fourth year of the Jingming era, the year at Guiwei and the lunar cycle at Si, the Great General is in the year of the Horse, the White Tiger in the year of the Tiger, the Dragon in the year of the Rat, the fourth month ... Kui ... Horse ...) See (Zhang 2000, pp. 98–104; Gansu Sheng Wenwu Ju 2014, pp. 58–59).

16 Its inscription reads, “延昌三/年十五日/亥/涇州郡” (The third year of the Yanchang era ... the fifth day ... the year of the Pig ... Jingzhou Prefecture ...). See (Zhang 2000, p. 101).

17 Its inscription reads, “神龜元 ... 孫亡 ... 天上亡 ... ” (The first year of the Shengui era ... Sun ... deceased ... deceased in the heaven). See (Zhang 2000, p. 102).

18 The earliest identified Twin Buddhas motif is found in Cave 169 of the Binglingsi 炳靈寺 Cave-temples in Gansu. Cave 169 was commissioned during the Western Qin 西秦 Dynasty (385–431 CE) in the early fifth century. In the scene, two Buddhas are sitting side by side below a niche, above which three *chhatra*-like elements protruding upwards. It was thus considered the earliest

representation of the Twin Buddhas concept and of the “Jeweled Stūpa” chapter from the *Lotus Sūtra*. Yet the motif was not depicted frequently until the 470s. See, among many other sources, (Davidson 1954; Wong 2004, chp. 8; Wang 2005, chp. 1; Hurvitz 2009; Williams 2009).

- 19 Huating has been an important regional economic hub along the Silk Road. The pit’s location matches the historical site of a temple of the Northern dynasties. There is no archaeological report, but a general overview, on the group of statues found in the Xiejiamiao site ever published. Current studies weigh in on the ethnic group of the donors for this group. See (Zhang 2000, pp. 108–12; Wang 2016).
- 20 The inscription of the 516 piece reads, “熙平元年/太歲/在申/為張/何迴/張雙/清信士供養河門/大小/張永/奴//河門大小/者得” (On the first year of the Xiping era, the year of Shen, this ... is dedicated to Zhang Hejiong, Zhang Shuang, men of pure faith ... Zhang Yongnu of Hemen ... to follow what the heart desires ... from Hemen ...) See (Wang 2016, Figure 1). That of the 558 piece reads “二年歲次戊寅六月癸寅朔十七日己丑清/信弟子路夫功曹南/中敬造石像一區愿三涂地/愿一切生花三得成佛道所/所愿心/佛弟子安家大小常住三” (On the seventeenth day [jichou], of the sixth month [guiyin], the second year [wuyin], Lu Weifu, a man of pure faith ... dedicated a stone image ... Samadhi ... Wish all the beings achieve the Buddhahood ... to follow what the heart desires ... the Buddhist disciple ...) See (Zhang 2000, p. 110; Gansu Sheng Wenwu Ju 2014, pp. 55–56).
- 21 Su Bai has discussed this feature briefly. In addition to examples from Longmen and Gongxian, a statue from the White Horse Temple of Luoyang also features the Buddha’s right foot in the manner. It is on display in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. See (Su 1996, pp. 153–76).
- 22 For more Zhuanglang pieces that are not examined in this section, see (Zhang 2000, p. 107; Gansu Sheng Wenwu Ju 2014, pp. 48–49, 51–52; E and Yang 2014a, 2014b).
- 23 One of the five stone blocks was found in the first half of the twentieth century while the other four were discovered in 1974. See (Cheng and Ding 1997; Zhang 2000, pp. 113–24; Wang 2004; E 2011; Gansu Sheng Wenwu Ju 2014, pp. 49–50).
- 24 See (Ding 2016, pp. 68–69). Another piece, brought to the US by the expedition of Warner in 1923, is currently in the repository at the Fogg Museum, Harvard. On Warner’s expedition, see (Warner 1926; Jayne 1929; Liu 2000). Jayne’s work was translated into Chinese by Liang Xuping. See also (Wang and Mrozowski 1990; Ding 2016, p. 74).
- 25 See footnote 2.
- 26 A record of the original excavation is helpful in exploring the original purpose of these hoarding pits. For instance, the excavation of hoarding pits located in Qingzhou, Shandong, shows that the statues and steles had been deposited in the pit in several layers, with the well-preserved items in the center, and fragments in the surrounding area. See (Nickel 2002, p. 35).
- 27 The period of Eastern Wei is not specified here due to its short life. Works produced during the Eastern Wei are usually grouped with the Northern Wei or the Northern Qi based on stylistic affinity.
- 28 On the origin of the Lushui hu, see (Tang 1955; Zhou 1963, pp. 156–57; Wang 1985; Zhao 1986; Wang 1997; Hou 2008; Liu 2008, pp. 9–11).
- 29 This study does not agree with any absolute reconstruction of the way in which each side of the five stone blocks is aligned. However, for convenience of discussion, I refer to each side based on the way the pagoda is currently displayed.
- 30 The Gandhāran tradition depicts the horse at center with the prince standing aside in ordinary royal dress, while the prince of northern China is featured dominantly in the conventional look of a pensive figure, who has one leg pendant and the other raised and brought across to rest upon the knee of the pendant leg, and with one arm raised towards the face. The Great Departure scene appears first in reliefs at Yungang in the 490s among fifteen other narrative episodes of the Buddha’s life story. There are sixteen scenes depicting episodes related to the Buddha’s birth on the central pillar of the Yungang Cave 6, and another set of sixteen on the lower register of the interior walls in the main chamber.
- 31 The motif is noticeably absent from any other stone works in the fifth century, indicating intentional neglect of it. For a comprehensive discussion of the Parinirvāṇa scene in Chinese Buddhist art tradition, see (Lee 2010, introduction, pp. 38–42, Figure 1.15).
- 32 The Chinese examples are not depicted in association with any other events of the Buddha’s life, departing from the South Asian and Central Asian traditions, in which the Parinirvāṇa image is always represented together with other episodes of the Buddha’s life story.
- 33 John S. Strong has translated the text’s surviving Sanskrit version to English. See (Strong 1983).
- 34 According to Victor Meir, the original text that the *Xianyu jing* was translated from has a Central Asian origin. *Xianyu jing* 賢愚經 (The Sutra of the Wise and the Foolish), trans., by Hui Jue 慧 et al. T no. 4: 202.368c. See (Junjirō 1901; Mair 1993).
- 35 Caves 5–11, 5–38, 25, 28, 29, 33, 33–34, and 34. For an overview of the story depicted in Yungang cave-temples, see (Yi 2017, chps. 5 and 6). For an example, see (Yungang Shiku Wenwu Baoguan suo 1991, Figure 197).
- 36 Hu Wenhe has provided a comprehensive discussion of the story. See (Hu 2005; Yi 2017, chp. 3). Regarding the narrative scenes carved on figured steles, Li Jingjie proposed a different identification of the scene. He argues for a representation of the Dīpaṃkara *Jātaka* instead of the offering dust story, according to several surviving inscriptions that point out the connection between the Buddha Dīpaṃkara and the children (孺童). See (Li 1996).

- 37 There are a series of research examining the pensive Buddha image in the fifth and the sixth century. This essay will not go into details. See (Rei 1975; Leidy 1990; Lee 1993; Hsu 2002).
- 38 The study of Nannieshui materials with Gephi was undertaken by the author in the workshop “Social Network Analysis in Buddhist Studies,” organized by “From the Ground Up” project in August 2018, National Singapore University. A more detailed discussion is forthcoming. For more discussion about using Gephi in the study of Buddhism, see (Bingenheimer 2020).
- 39 The Cao Tiandu Pagoda is also known for its turbulent history of displacement. Its base and body were looted from China and brought to Japan; later it was returned to Taiwan, now in preservation at the National Museum of History in Taipei. The *chattra* top was saved by a local person during the war and returned to Chongfu Monastery in 1953.
- 40 The county borders with the Pingcheng area and, throughout history, has been included in the Northern Shanxi cultural sphere. The Yu county belongs to the Kingdom Dai 代 in the fourth century, the precedent of Northern Wei. See (Yuxian Difangzhi Bianzuan Weiyuanhui 1995; Huang 2015).
- 41 This claim is further affirmed by the absence of the Han mode of dresses that developed and entered the scene of the Pingcheng Buddhist art in the late 480s. The Han mode is a new dress style that features Sinicized traits, such as loose robes and wide girdles (*baoyi bodai* 褒衣博帶). It echoes the Sinicization reform in clothing promoted by Emperor Xiaowen 孝文 during the Taihe 太和 era (486–495). During the Taihe period, the “Era of Supreme Harmony,” Emperor Xiaowen and his court instituted a series of reforms that integrate intensively historical Chinese administrative institutions, rituals, urban design, etc. One of the defining features of this process is *Hanhua*, “becoming like the Han,” revealing the very nature of refashioning the Xianbei Northern Wei regime as an imperial Chinese dynasty. See (Bachhofer 1946, p. 66; Okada and Ishimatsu 1993, pp. 181–203; Abe 2002, p. 89).
- 42 The pagoda is preserved and on display in the recently founded Museum of Northern dynasties. It is said to be discovered at a local construction site. Yet no archaeological report is available at this moment.
- 43 It was first mentioned in the initial report on the discovery of the monastery in 1954. Yet it was reported stolen in 2000. See (Li 2008b).
- 44 For a proposed chronology of the three stone pagodas under discussion, see (Zhao 2020).
- 45 The Twin Buddhas motif signifies that more than one Buddha can exist at the same time in the cosmos. This is a new Mahāyāna theme, as early Buddhists believe there is only one Buddha in each age. See (Liu 1958; He 1992; Mizuno and Nagahiro 1951–1956, vols. 8 and 9, pp. 73–75).
- 46 For a detailed examination of narrative scenes on the miniature pagodas, see (Zhao 2020).
- 47 The Cao Tianhu pagoda was excavated in present-day Jiuquan 酒泉, Gansu province. The inscription on its pedestal records that it was commissioned in 499 by a local person named Cao Tianhu. Jiuquan is part of the east-west corridor of the Hexi region. The name exhibits a resemblance to Cao Tiandu of Pingcheng. Yet no further evidence shows connections between the two. Except for Chen Bingying’s description, the Cao Tianhu Pagoda has not been studied beyond a brief report. See (Chen 1988).
- 48 A similar arrangement is also found on a pagoda fragment preserved in the Palace Museum in Beijing. See (Li 1986).
- 49 The conclusion is based on the study of three types of texts on the Buddha’s austerity. For a detailed examination, see (Zhao 2020). For a topical study of the three types of texts, see (Rhi 2006).
- 50 However, the epigraphic inscriptions of the pagodas of 514 and 518 are severely worn, leaving the donors’ identities unrecognizable.
- 51 Another factor to be considered in the study of this statue is the ethnic background of the local laity. The surnames of most of the donors may indicate their “Hu” identity. Yet the scarcity of textual records is not sufficient to support further discussion. See (Wang 2016).
- 52 There are two on the upper register and three on the lower. From left to right, the upper two are “deceased father Bu Waitong” 亡父卜外通 and “deceased mother Le Baozhu” 亡母樂保朱, while the lower three are “general Bu yong” 上將卜永, “deceased brother Bu An” 亡雄卜安, and “deceased sister Bu Yonghe” 亡妹卜永禾.
- 53 For a discussion of the procession scene on steles from Shanxi, see (Wong 2004, chp. 5). Such a unique way nevertheless reminds us of a parallel tradition in Chinese funerary art, which depicts exactly the deceased, or the owners of the tomb, in ox carts or on horses. Appearing as early as the Eastern Zhou, and continued in later periods, a funerary procession was usually depicted on side walls in tombs, representing the escorting of the “soul carriage” of the dead from his mundane life to the otherworldly abode. The tradition continued to flourish in the following centuries in tombs located in various regions in northern China. One finds exactly the same juxtaposition of horses and an ox chariot on the Zhuanglang Pagoda as well as the two other steles from eastern Gansu. In the Central Binyang Cave at Longmen, and the Gongxian cave-temples in northern Henan, the procession of the emperor and empress still astounds visitors with magnificent craftsmanship. See (Wu 2010, pp. 60–70).
- 54 With attendants flanking or not, donor images are usually separated from each other by cartouches of inscriptions. Kate Lingley has written extensively on donors of Buddhist art in the sixth century. For instance, see (Lingley 2006, 2010).
- 55 For instance, the Wei Wenlang 魏文朗 Stele of 424, one of the earliest surviving Buddhist steles from Shaanxi, features a donor figure riding on a horse with an attendant and an ox cart following. See (Li 2008a, p. 33). Another stele of 546 from Pingliang depicts two registers of horse and cart riders on the lower part of its façade. See (Zhang 2000, pp. 172–74).

- 56 See the Quan Daonu 權道奴 Stele dated to 563, the third year of the Baoding era, Northern Zhou, and the Wang Lingwei 王令猥 Stele from Zhangjiachuan. See (Zhang 2000, pp. 205–6, 222–23).
- 57 Yizi 邑子, villagers who were members of *yiyi*, also perform charitable works for the benefit of the entire community. For more on the history of *yiyi* during the Northern dynasties, see (Twitchett 1957; Michihata 1967; Tanigawa 1985; Hou 1998, 2005, 2007; Gernet 1995, pp. 259–77).
- 58 For instance, Stanley Abe refers to the Shaanxi piece (see Figure 8) as a square stele. See (Abe 2001).
- 59 For full inscription, see note 7.
- 60 This is found on the Quan 權 Pagoda from Qin'an 秦安. It was discovered by locals in Wujiachuan 吳家川 in 1941, according to notes written on a rubbing of its pedestal. Without any other records of its discovery, it remains in debate whether other parts of the pagoda were unearthed at the same site. This study follows the theory of Wen Jing and Wei Wenbin, who argue that while the upper stone block of the pagoda is the original part dated 536, Western Wei, the lower two are from a separate set due to their display of a typical Northern Zhou style. This theory also draws evidence from the incompatibility between the three blocks and the three eaves. Meanwhile, the names of donors indicate its provenance in situ, since the clan of Quan 權, the surname of most donors, is among the most prominent families in the region since the fifth century. See (Wen and Wei 2012; Zhang 2000, p. 213).
- 61 “於本鄉南北舊宅，上為二圣造三級浮圖各一區。” See (Yen 2008, no. 1).
- 62 The inscription mentions the construction date of the second year of Xiaochang era, 526. “以寺內有五級浮圖一區，建自永昌，後因兵劫... ” (... for the reason that there was a five-story pagoda in the monastery. Built in the Yongchang era, and because of warfare ...) See (Yen 2008, no. 25).
- 63 The usage of “shi” (stone) highlights the choice of medium and material.
- 64 A number of scholars have examined the rich corpus of domed stūpa imagery of the sixth century. Among many, see (Tsiang 2000; Su 2006, 2010).

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