



CLINGING DRAPERY AND CONVERGING COSMOLOGIES: RE-ASSESSING THE NORTHERN QI “QINGZHOU STYLE”

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Abstract:

The 1996 excavation of more than four hundred sixth-century Buddhist sculptures at Longxing-si, Qingzhou, Shandong, profoundly reshaped the study of Northern Dynasties art. A generation of research has illuminated their stylistic hybridity, yet tensions persist between morphological description, laboratory science, and socio-political interpretation. This article reevaluates the so-called “Qingzhou style” of the Northern Qi (550–577 CE) through an integrative approach that links form, materiality, and symbolic function. Based on a first-hand analysis of eighty-seven sculptures, supported by micro-Raman and X-ray fluorescence data, petrographic provenance studies, and donor inscriptional evidence, three key findings are presented. First, the distinctive *Cao yi chushui* (body-clinging) drapery was not a passive Gupta import nor a purely local innovation but the outcome of state-sponsored standardization that articulated Xianbei cultural legitimacy. Second, petrographic results reveal that most limestone was quarried from Cambrian outcrops within a 20-km radius, indicating tightly controlled networks of production and a sacred geography. Third, iconographic innovations—including robe-carved Huayan cosmograms, hybrid pleat structures, and Sogdian-inspired brocade motifs—mediated transregional vocabularies in ways that challenge linear models of Sinicization or Indianization. By contextualizing stylistic choices within devotional meaning, workshop economies, and imperial power, this article proposes a biocultural-materialist framework for interpreting Buddhist sculpture. The Qingzhou corpus thus emerges not merely as an artistic phenomenon but as cultural infrastructure embodying sixth-century religious piety, ethnic negotiation, and Eurasian artistic exchange.

Keywords: *Qingzhou Hoard, Northern Qi, Buddhist Sculpture, Material Culture, Visual Politics, Hybridity*

INTRODUCTION

The discovery of the Longxing-si Buddhist sculpture hoard in Qingzhou, Shandong, in 1996 was not merely an archaeological revelation; it profoundly reshaped scholarly understandings of Buddhist art during the Northern Dynasties. Unearthed were more than four hundred sixth-century sculptures, many remarkably preserved, that revealed an idiom at once sensuous, hybrid, and intensely local. Their hallmark traits—the rounded physiognomy and “Qingzhou smile,” the wet-clinging drapery (*cao yi chushui*), delicately lowered eyelids, and traces of gilded polychromy—prompted immediate comparisons with Indian Gupta prototypes and Gandharan legacies, while also raising fresh questions

about the politics of representation, the organization of workshops, and the devotional uses of sculpture in the Northern Qi dynasty (550–577 CE) (Brinker, 2002; Liu, 2004; Jin, 2002).

The Qingzhou sculptures must be understood as products of multiple intersecting forces: imperial policy, quarry logistics, aesthetic translation, and religious practice. Technical studies have revealed sophisticated paint layering and gilding methods that gave the images a luminous, almost performative quality in ritual contexts (Song et al., 2021). Chinese scholars such as Wang (2017) and the Palace Museum Research Group (2019) have emphasized that Qingzhou's "style" represented not only an aesthetic shift away from the "clear-bone, elegant-image" (秀骨清像) forms of the Northern Wei, but also a religious idiom grounded in themes of purity, transcendence, and cosmological visualization. The carved Huayan cosmograms and hybrid drapery patterns, for example, reveal a conscious intersection of Buddhist doctrinal imagination with Silk Road aesthetics (Singh, 2025).

Placing Qingzhou in a broader comparative perspective strengthens its significance. Gupta sculpture (4th–6th centuries CE), with its softly modelled bodies, inward gazes, and diaphanous robes, provided an important visual lexicon that traveled across Asia (Metropolitan Museum of Art, n.d.; "Gupta Sculpture," n.d.). At Yungang (5th–6th century), earlier Chinese Buddhist caves reveal more rigid monumental forms, establishing a contrast that highlights Qingzhou's shift toward corporeal fullness and supple transparency. At Tianlongshan (6th–8th century), sculptural programs further elaborated hybrid idioms that resonate with Qingzhou's emphasis on expressive drapery and spiritual luminosity ((Albustomi, 2025; University of Chicago, n.d.). On this broader network, Qingzhou emerges not as a derivative center but as an active participant in transregional flows of visual culture, translating Gupta sensuousness and Central Asian textile motifs into locally resonant forms of religious legitimacy (Nguyahambi & Rugeiyamu, 2025).

This article reevaluates the so-called "Qingzhou style" not as a discrete artistic school, but as the product of multiscale processes linking form, substance, and meaning. By integrating morphological analysis, petrographic provenance, pigment studies, and donor inscriptions with theories of visual politics, hybridity, and material agency, it advances a biocultural-materialist framework. Such an approach foregrounds the sculptures not merely as objects of artistic production, but as cultural infrastructures—simultaneously devotional icons, political instruments, and mediators of Eurasian artistic vocabularies.

This research is situated at the confluence of material culture studies, religious visibility, and political aesthetics. Three interrelated frameworks guide its analysis, here reinterpreted in dialogue with Chinese intellectual categories:

Visual Rhetoric, Power, and Zhengming 正名

Following Michel Foucault's notion of disciplinary visibility, the Qingzhou sculptures can be examined as instruments of power that regulate bodies and encode imperial ideology. The Northern Qi state, emerging from complex Xianbei–Han interactions, employed images to articulate legitimacy and ethnic integration. Dorothy Wong (2004) has shown how sacred images in this period were "instrumentalized" to fuse political and religious agendas.

However, in the Chinese context, the concept of zhengming (rectification of names), a Confucian principle revived during the Northern Dynasties, adds further depth. Just as political order depended upon the proper alignment of titles and realities, visual order relied on the correct alignment

of *xiang* (forms/images) with cosmic truth and imperial virtue. Sculptural features—drapery transparency, cranial angles, halo configurations—thus functioned not only as disciplinary visibility in the Foucauldian sense but also as a visual “rectification” that aligned images with political categories of legitimacy.

Biocultural Aesthetics, Hybridity, and *Xiang* 形象

Homi Bhabha’s concept of the “third space” highlights cultural hybridity, wherein conflicting traditions give rise to novel forms of expression. The Qingzhou corpus exemplifies such hybridity: Gupta drapery idioms, Sogdian textile motifs, and Southern-Dynasty elegance converge in forms that were re-signified under Northern Qi rule.

Chinese discourse on *Xiang* (form, image) further grounds this hybridity. In Buddhist texts and exegetical writings of the sixth century, *xiang* referred both to the external appearance of the Buddha and to the symbolic manifestation of inner truth. Wu (2012) has urged scholars to transcend dynastic boundaries in order to situate such images within transregional networks. Reading Qingzhou through the dual register of Bhabha’s hybridity and the Buddhist/Confucian semantics of *Xiang* clarifies how sculptures both embodied ethnic negotiation and conveyed transcendent meanings.

Religious Materiality, Iconic Agency, and Image Efficacy

Building on the theories of Freedberg (1989) and Davis (1997), the Qingzhou sculptures can be understood as “agents” that shaped religious practices and evoked affective responses. Polychromy and raised-paste gilding generated a luminous visuality that activated ritual efficacy, while robe-carved Huayan cosmograms functioned as visual mandalas mediating cosmological insight.

Chinese sources reinforce this view: in the *Xu Gaoseng Zhuan* (續高僧傳), Daoxuan describes images as efficacious intermediaries, whose form (*Xiang*) could generate merit and transform karmic conditions. Such notions align with Richard Kieschnick’s (2003) emphasis on Buddhism’s impact on Chinese material culture, where objects themselves were invested with ritual agency.

Toward a Biocultural-Materialist Approach

By bringing these perspectives together, this study advances a biocultural-materialist approach to Buddhist sculpture. The Qingzhou images are analyzed not as passive reflections of style or politics, but as co-produced entities—where form (*Xiang*), inscription, material, and ritual practice intersect with imperial power and ethnic negotiation. Such an approach recognizes that meaning emerges through the interplay of morphology, political economy, doctrinal visualization, and the embodied agency of images themselves.

Theoretical Framework for Qingzhou Sculptures

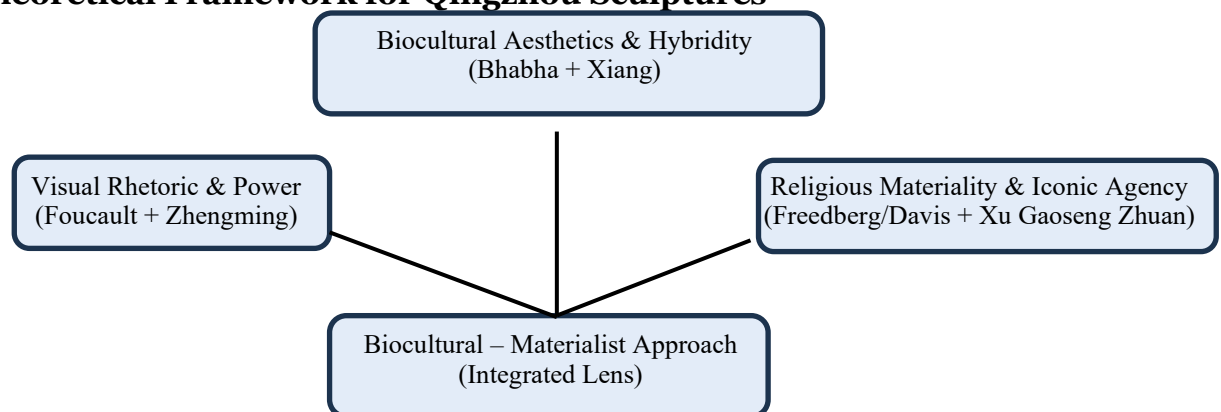


Figure 1: Theoretical Framework

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a multi-pronged methodology that synthesizes archaeological observation, scientific analysis, and historical documentation, while maintaining close attention to religious meaning and political context.

Fieldwork and Stylistic Documentation

Primary investigations were conducted at the Qingzhou Museum and the Longxing-si site. A corpus of 87 sculptures was recorded using high-resolution photogrammetry and morphometric analysis. Variables such as pleat density, cranial inclination, posture, and facial expression were systematically coded and compared with examples from the Yungang, Longmen, and Xiangtangshan sites. Beyond morphological typology, attention was directed to the symbolic resonances of form: lowered eyelids were interpreted in relation to meditative absorption. At the same time, drapery transparency (*cao yi chushui*) was analyzed both as a Gupta-inspired stylistic element and as a metaphor of purity and transcendence in Buddhist soteriology.

Petrographic Provenance and Quarrying Practices

Thin-section petrography of six limestone samples was undertaken to identify mineral composition and microfossil inclusions—results aligned with the Niushan member of the Cambrian Zhangxia Formation, confirming local extraction. Evidence of modular carving (independent production of heads, torsos, and pedestals) was observed in both unfinished blanks and mortise-joint construction. These findings are not treated as purely geological data: they are understood as evidence of a controlled “sacred geography,” where imperial oversight of quarrying and distribution reinforced political authority while ensuring standardized devotional imagery.

Pigment Analysis and Polychromy Reconstruction

Since specialized laboratory equipment was not available for the present study, the analysis of pigments and gilding relies on previously published technical reports. Most notably, Xia (2001) conducted a pioneering microscopic study of polychromy on Qingzhou sculptures, while Song et al. (2021) performed Raman and X-ray fluorescence (XRF) tests to reconstruct the pigment stratigraphy and determine gold purity. Their findings demonstrate a layered system of cinnabar and azurite over a gesso substrate, with raised-paste relief lines and exceptionally high-purity gold (up to 99.6%) applied through advanced gilding techniques.

Rather than replicating laboratory work, this study interprets these results within an iconological and ritual framework. The stratified use of pigments and luminous gilding is understood as a deliberate strategy to produce visual efficacy: by candlelight, the relief lines and reflective surfaces would have animated the figures, creating the impression of radiant, living presence. Such effects align with Buddhist doctrines of the Buddha’s luminous body (*xiangguang* 相光) and the ritual concept of “efficacious images” (*lingxiang* 靈像). Thus, while the technical data derive from existing reports, their integration into the present analysis highlights how Qingzhou artisans manipulated material optics to enhance religious experience and imperial authority.

Epigraphy and Historical Sources

Thirty-one donor inscriptions were documented through multi-spectral imaging, with cross-reference to dynastic histories such as the *Bei Qi Shu* (李百药, 636 CE) and the *Xu Gaoseng Zhuan* (道宣, 645 CE). Inscriptions were analyzed not only for patron identity but also for their symbolic deployment. Elite families inscribed their names alongside Pure Land imagery to accumulate merit, assert status, and align themselves with imperial cultural policies. These inscriptions provide crucial evidence for how patrons shaped iconographic choice, linking personal devotion with broader projects of ethnic integration and state legitimation.

Interpretive Framework

The interpretive framework integrates these empirical approaches through the lenses of visual politics, hybridity, and material agency. In practice, this means that geological findings are interpreted in terms of controlled resource economies, pigment data are linked to ritual luminosity and iconic efficacy, and donor inscriptions are read as acts of symbolic negotiation. To avoid overwhelming the reader, technical tables (e.g., pleat counts, cranial angle measurements, spectral values) are relegated to the appendix, while the main text focuses on the interpretive significance.

Through this combined methodology, the Qingzhou sculptures are studied not only as objects of style or craft but as multi-scalar cultural infrastructures where artistic form, material science, political economy, and religious meaning converge.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Stylistic Synthesis and Standardization

The Qingzhou sculptures are distinguished by a convergence of stylistic traits that reflect both aesthetic innovation and political intentionality. The drapery folds exhibit a consistent pattern of parallel U- and V-shaped lines, reduced to an average density of 2–3 folds per 10 cm in the period 555–570 CE, compared to 6–8 folds per 10 cm in Eastern Wei prototypes. This simplification of pleat density produced a smoother surface effect that emphasized corporeal fullness. Simultaneously, cranial morphology shifted: frontal inclination angles moved from 65 to 48 degrees, corresponding to Xianbei physiognomic ideals. These morphological changes are not accidental; they align with the edict of Emperor Wenxuan in 552 CE, which mandated visual conformity to the norms of the Ye capital (Li, 2014).

Beyond formal evolution, these features carried layered symbolic meanings. The “wet-clinging drapery” (*cao yi chushui*) has long been read as a Gupta-inspired device of sensuous naturalism (Jin, 2002). Nevertheless, within a Buddhist framework, such transparency may also signify the purity of the Dharma, in which the body is revealed not for sensual display but as a metaphor for truth unveiled. The drapery, simultaneously concealing and exposing, thus embodied both the political rhetoric of transparency under Northern Qi authority and the soteriological rhetoric of the Dharma’s accessibility to devotees.

Cranial proportions likewise served dual functions. The lowered cranial inclination, associated with Xianbei physiognomy, marked ethnic legitimacy in the visual lexicon of Northern Qi rule (Wang, 2010). At the same time, cranial form was a critical element of Buddhist iconography: the *ushnisha* represented the Buddha’s wisdom, while the balance of proportion expressed cosmic order. The standardization of cranial angles thus embodied both the imperial imperative

of ethnic unification and the religious imperative of manifesting the Buddha's perfected body (*fashen* 法身).

Halos and mandorlas, carved in pronounced high relief, further reinforced this synthesis. Their lotus-petal patterns simultaneously evoked Gupta aureoles and Chinese cosmological diagrams, functioning as both decorative motifs and symbols of the Buddha's radiant presence (*xiangguang* 相光). Donor inscriptions from the site indicate that patrons consciously identified with these forms, suggesting that conformity to standardized aesthetics was also a means of participating in a shared soteriological vision.

Thus, Qingzhou stylistics cannot be reduced to either political control or aesthetic borrowing. The standardization of pleats, cranial angles, and halo motifs reflects an integrated program in which the state codified visible norms to ensure political cohesion. At the same time, sculptors and patrons invested these forms with soteriological and ritual significance. The result was an art form that simultaneously communicated imperial authority, embodied transregional visual vocabularies, and provided devotees with an efficacious medium of devotion.

Material Provenance and Workshop Practices

Petrographic thin-section analysis has identified the Qingzhou limestone as correlating with the Niushan member of the Cambrian Zhangxia Formation. All specimens examined in published reports (Deng & Wang, 2018; Zhang et. al., 2016) exhibited a similar microfossil content and grain structure, confirming their extraction from quarries within a 20-kilometer radius of Qingzhou. The uniformity of the material indicates a highly controlled supply system. This tight geographical sourcing suggests not only logistical efficiency but also the existence of a regulated production network overseen by the state, ensuring standardization of devotional images.

Archaeological evidence further supports this conclusion. Quarry records and unfinished blanks from Tuoshan demonstrate a modular carving system in which heads, torsos, and lotus pedestals were produced separately and later assembled. Mortise-and-tenon joints and iron dowels attest to techniques that enabled rapid production while maintaining structural stability. Such practices resonate with broader traditions of modularity in Chinese art (Ledderose, 2001); yet, in the Qingzhou context, modularity facilitated both mass production and imperial control over symbolic form.

Beyond logistical concerns, the choice of stone and its geographical location carried significant religious and cosmological implications. In Chinese cosmology, mountains and quarries were imbued with sacred qualities as sources of transformative power. By restricting the supply to local Cambrian outcrops, the Northern Qi state effectively created a "sacred geography" of stone, where the material substrate of the Buddha's image was drawn from the earth surrounding Qingzhou itself. This local sourcing anchored the Buddha's presence to the political heartland of the dynasty, transforming stone into a medium of both spiritual resonance and territorial legitimation.

The modularity of production also had ritual implications. Donor inscriptions indicate that patrons often sponsored specific components—such as a head or pedestal—as a means of accruing merit (Qingzhou Archaeological Team, 2005). In this sense, the act of contributing to a modular system democratized participation, allowing aristocrats, monastics, and local elites to inscribe themselves into the larger project of sculptural production. The resulting images, while standardized in form, embodied a collective investment of

resources and devotion, making them both imperial symbols and communal icons.

Taken together, the evidence from petrography, quarrying, and modular production reveals that Qingzhou was not merely a site of artistic production but a nexus where material economies, political control, and religious symbolism intersected. The stone itself functioned as a cosmological mediator, its controlled extraction and transformation into images reinforcing both the imperial order and the devotional aspirations of the faithful.

Pigment and Gilding Technologies (Revised & Expanded)

Technical analyses of the Qingzhou sculptures' surface treatments have been conducted by specialists, including Xia (2001) and Song et al. (2021), whose microscopy, Raman spectroscopy, and X-ray fluorescence (XRF) studies have revealed remarkable sophistication in pigment application and gilding techniques. Their findings demonstrate that Qingzhou artisans employed a stratified polychromy system: cinnabar and azurite pigments were laid over a gesso base, with raised-paste relief lines executed using mixtures of lead white, gum arabic, and animal glue. These relief lines provided textured surfaces upon which high-purity gold (reaching 99.6%) was applied in a raised-paste gilding technique.

The material evidence indicates both technological ingenuity and aesthetic intentionality. The layering of pigments created depth and brilliance, while the reflective properties of gold generated an effect of radiance under flickering lamplight. Such radiance was not merely decorative. In Buddhist doctrinal discourse, the Buddha is described as possessing a luminous body (*xiangguang* 相光), radiating light in all directions as a sign of his enlightened state. The gilded surfaces of Qingzhou sculptures, particularly when activated by ritual lighting, embodied this doctrinal ideal by transforming carved stone into an image that glowed with a semblance of living presence.

Furthermore, the insertion of resin in *urna* sockets suggests the possible use of inlaid gemstones to represent the Buddha's "third eye," another material strategy for enhancing iconic efficacy. In the sixth-century religious imagination, such additions reinforced the *lingxiang* (efficacious image), an image not merely to be viewed but to be venerated as possessing real transformative power (Daoxuan, 2018/645). These technologies made the statues active participants in ritual life: glowing, glittering, and visually mediating the Buddha's salvific presence.

The choice of pigments also carried symbolic resonance. Cinnabar, associated with vitality and immortality in Chinese alchemical traditions, and azurite, prized for its celestial blue, aligned Buddhist imagery with indigenous cosmological values. Thus, the polychromy of Qingzhou did not only emulate Gupta prototypes but also localized Buddhist aesthetics within Northern Qi cultural symbolism.

In sum, while the pigment and gilding data derive from existing laboratory reports, their interpretive significance lies in demonstrating how Qingzhou artisans engineered material optics to create images that were both aesthetically striking and ritually efficacious. By fusing technological expertise with doctrinal symbolism, the sculptures embodied the Northern Qi synthesis of visual politics, spiritual charisma, and material agency.

Iconographic Hybridity and Regional Innovation

The Qingzhou corpus reveals an extraordinary capacity to synthesize diverse iconographic vocabularies into new visual idioms. Carved robe cosmograms are among the most striking examples. Etched directly into the folds of monastic garments, these intricate geometric patterns echo the cosmological schemata of the *Avatamsaka* (Huayan) Sūtra, in which the Buddha's robe is described as containing the universe. In this sense, the robe itself became a mandala-like surface, enfolding the devotee in a cosmological vision whenever the sculpture was approached in ritual contexts. Such robe-carved cosmograms exemplify how Qingzhou sculptors embedded doctrinal visualization into everyday devotional encounters, making cosmology materially present in stone (Wu, 2012).

Hybrid ornamental motifs further illustrate this creativity. Bodhisattva adornments incorporate floral scrolls reminiscent of Greco-Roman acanthus, while interlaced “warp–weft” pleat patterns resemble Sogdian textile designs. The use of such motifs is not simply decorative. In the cosmopolitan Northern Qi, where Sogdian merchants played central roles in Silk Road exchange, the incorporation of foreign textile patterns signaled both the dynasty's openness to transregional influences and its authority to domesticate them. These motifs thus functioned as visual mediators, integrating Central Asian luxury culture into the sacred idiom of Buddhist devotion.

Other iconographic borrowings, such as the triple-bend *lalitāsana* posture, align with Pāla Indian prototypes transmitted through maritime routes (Mitter, 2001). By adopting and transforming such poses, Qingzhou artisans localized foreign idioms within a framework of Xianbei-Han political negotiation. Donor inscriptions depicting patrons in Han-style garments but with Xianbei physiognomy underscore this hybridity: visual forms articulated dual identities, mediating between cosmopolitan aspirations and local legitimacy (Wang, 2010; Wong, 2004).

The significance of this hybridity extends beyond style. It demonstrates the agency of Qingzhou artisans and patrons in constructing what can be termed a “glocal Buddhist aesthetic”: rooted in local resources and political agendas, yet responsive to global flows of imagery. Such hybridity enabled the Qingzhou corpus to transcend a simple center–periphery dynamic, instead positioning it as a hub of innovation in the visual culture of sixth-century East Asia. The impact of these innovations is visible in subsequent Baekje and Asuka-period Japanese sculpture, where similar robe pleats and bodhisattva ornamentation appear, confirming Qingzhou's role as a conduit of transregional visual exchange (Rhie, 1999).

Political Legibility and Biocultural Hybridity

The Qingzhou sculptures exemplify how visual culture in the Northern Qi dynasty operated simultaneously as a medium of political legibility and a site of biocultural hybridity. Their formal characteristics—standardized cranial proportions, simplified pleat density, and carefully contoured halos—did more than establish an aesthetic idiom; they functioned as a visual grammar through which imperial power was codified. In Foucault's (1977) terms, these forms enacted a “disciplinary visibility,” ensuring that images conformed to prescribed norms of representation. Emperor Wenxuan's 552 CE edict mandating stylistic conformity at the Ye capital is a case in point: sculpture became a tool of governance, aligning bodily images with the political body of the state (Li, 2014).

However, this process cannot be reduced to authoritarian control. In the Confucian framework of *zhengming* 正名, the rectification of names required proper correspondence between designation and reality. Applied visually, the rectification of *xiang* 形象 (forms/images) meant ensuring that the Buddha's appearance embodied both doctrinal truth and imperial legitimacy. Thus, the *cao yi chushui* drapery was not merely a stylistic borrowing from Gupta India; it enacted a dual rhetoric of transparency—symbolizing both the Dharma's purity and the Xianbei state's visibility as legitimate rulers.

The hybridity of Qingzhou further complicates the picture. As Bhabha (1994) theorizes, hybridity produces a “third space” where cultural translation generates new meanings. In Qingzhou, the blending of Gupta drapery, Sogdian textile motifs, and Southern-Dynasty elegance produced forms that were neither purely foreign nor purely indigenous. Instead, they materialized a biocultural negotiation: the Xianbei rulers inscribed their ethnic physiognomy into Buddhist icons while simultaneously embracing Han stylistic conventions and Silk Road ornamentation. The result was a sculptural idiom that embodied both political integration and transregional connectivity.

This hybridity extended into the realm of soteriology. The robe-carved Huayan cosmograms inscribed the cosmos into the body of the Buddha, enabling devotees to encounter doctrinal universes in material form. Hybrid motifs thus functioned not only as political symbols but also as ritual devices, materializing Buddhist cosmology in a form accessible to local worshippers. In this way, Qingzhou art exemplifies what Wu (2012) has called a “transregional art history”: one in which images both absorbed external influences and rearticulated them within local religious and political systems.

In sum, the Qingzhou sculptures were neither passive borrowings nor isolated innovations. They were active agents in constructing Northern Qi political authority, while simultaneously giving material expression to Buddhist cosmology and transregional hybridity. Their political legibility lay not in their conformity alone, but in their capacity to reconcile imperial discipline, ethnic diversity, and devotional meaning within a single visual language.

Sculptural Production as Political Economy

The Qingzhou sculptural industry demonstrates a high level of organization that extended beyond technical workshops into the realms of political economy and social prestige. As petrographic and archaeological evidence has shown, the production of Buddhist icons in Qingzhou relied on state-regulated quarrying and modular carving techniques that enabled both standardization and efficiency (Deng & Wang, 2018; Ledderose, 2001). This infrastructure enabled large-scale production, but the interactions among the state, monasteries, aristocratic patrons, and local elites shaped its social dynamics.

Donor inscriptions provide crucial insight into this system. The *Corpus of Inscriptions from Longxing-si* (Qingzhou Archaeological Team, 2005) documents elite families, local officials, and monastic leaders contributing funds or sponsoring specific components of statues. These inscriptions were often prominently placed, linking the patron's name to the visual presence of the Buddha. In Bourdieu's (1986) terms, such acts constituted an investment in “symbolic capital”: patrons gained prestige and legitimacy by visibly associating themselves with Buddhist piety, while also accruing spiritual merit (*gongde* 功德) that reinforced their moral standing.

The modularity of production reinforced this dynamic. Because heads, torsos, and pedestals were produced separately, even modest patrons could sponsor a single component. This broadened participation, allowing aristocrats, monks, and townspeople alike to engage in the collective enterprise of statue-making. The completed icons thus embodied a layered social fabric, amalgamating contributions across class and status lines while still privileging elite inscriptions that commanded visual prominence.

The presence of Pure Land motifs within many Qingzhou sculptures further reveals the interplay between production and devotion. By inscribing their names alongside Pure Land imagery, patrons aligned themselves with promises of salvation, while simultaneously signaling loyalty to imperial religious policies that promoted Buddhist integration. In this sense, sponsorship was both a spiritual act and a political gesture.

Moreover, sculptural production served as an economic driver. Monasteries acted as mediators of labor and resources, employing artisans, distributing quarry stone, and managing donations. Elite families leveraged this system to demonstrate wealth and piety, while artisans accrued technical and symbolic expertise. Sculpture thus became a nexus of economic circulation and symbolic exchange, producing not only devotional icons but also networks of prestige, power, and communal identity.

In sum, Qingzhou's sculptural economy cannot be reduced to material production alone. It functioned as a political economy in which stone, labor, and artistry were harnessed to generate symbolic capital. Donor inscriptions, modular sponsorship, and standardized iconography all contributed to a system where Buddhist imagery mediated relationships between state authority, elite patronage, and local devotional communities.

Rethinking Sinicization and Transregionalism

Scholarly interpretations of Chinese Buddhist art have often been framed in terms of linear trajectories: the "Indianization" of early Chinese images through Gupta or Gandharan influence, followed by their "Sinicization" as they adapted to local cultural traditions (Ch'en, 1964; Huntington, 1985). While these paradigms remain useful in tracing broad historical flows, the Qingzhou sculptures reveal a more complex reality—one better captured by the notion of *glocal aesthetics* (Robertson, 1995), where global vocabularies are reworked through local contexts to produce innovative visual languages.

The Qingzhou corpus demonstrates that stylistic evolution was not a one-way process of cultural transfer. The incorporation of Persian lotus motifs, Sogdian textile patterns, and Pāla-inspired postures did not replace Chinese idioms; instead, they were folded into local aesthetic frameworks shaped by Xianbei-Han politics and Northern Qi devotional needs. For example, the robe-carved Huayan cosmograms materialize Buddhist cosmology on the body of the Buddha, yet their mandala-like forms were deeply integrated into Northern Qi ritual life. This illustrates a recursive dynamic: foreign forms were indigenized, while indigenous forms were simultaneously re-signified through contact with foreign vocabularies.

Such dynamics resist the center-periphery model. Instead of viewing Qingzhou as a passive recipient of Gupta influence, it is more accurate to understand it as a node in a network of transregional exchange. Wu (2012) has urged art historians to transcend dynastic boundaries in favor of a transregional art history, and the Qingzhou case substantiates this approach. The sculptures'

hybrid qualities exemplify what Bhabha (1994) calls the “third space”: a site where cultural negotiation produces new forms that cannot be reduced to their sources.

The repercussions of Qingzhou’s aesthetic reached beyond China. Stylistic features, such as interwoven drapery pleats and bodhisattva ornamentation, were prevalent in Baekje sculpture in Korea and Asuka-period Buddhist art in Japan (Rhie, 1999). This transregional circulation underscores Qingzhou’s role as an active transmitter, not merely an adapter, of Buddhist visual forms.

Thus, the Qingzhou sculptures prompt a reevaluation of art-historical paradigms. Rather than oscillating between Indianization and Sinicization, they exemplify a *glocal Buddhist aesthetic*: rooted in local political and religious contexts yet shaped by, and in turn shaping, broader Eurasian artistic vocabularies. Such an approach not only complicates conventional binaries but also underscores the agency of local workshops, patrons, and artisans in producing forms that were at once imperial, devotional, and cosmopolitan.

CONCLUSION

The Qingzhou sculptures stand as one of the most significant archaeological discoveries of late twentieth-century Buddhist art, transforming our understanding of the Northern Qi dynasty and of transregional artistic flows in medieval Asia. This study has demonstrated that their significance lies not only in stylistic refinement but also in the multi-layered intersections of politics, materiality, and religious meaning.

First, the distinctive stylistic features—*cao yi chushui* drapery, standardized cranial proportions, and luminous halos—were shaped by state-sponsored standardization. They exemplify how the Northern Qi utilized Buddhist images as tools of imperial visibility and ethnic integration, aligning with both Foucault’s notion of disciplinary visibility and the Confucian principle of *zhengming* (正名). The sculptures thus functioned as visual instruments of governance, simultaneously encoding political legitimacy and embodying the Buddhist Dharma.

Second, petrographic and archaeological analyses revealed a tightly regulated production system based on local quarries and modular carving practices. This evidence highlights Qingzhou as a “sacred geography,” where the very stone of the region was transformed into icons of devotion. Donor inscriptions further underscore how sculptural production became a complex political economy: patrons of varying status participated in modular sponsorship, accruing both spiritual merit and symbolic capital, thereby weaving social prestige into their devotional practices.

Third, the Qingzhou corpus embodies iconographic hybridity at its most dynamic. Robe-carved Huayan cosmograms translated doctrinal cosmology into material form, while Sogdian textile motifs and Pāla-inspired postures mediated global artistic vocabularies within a local idiom. These hybrids demonstrate that Qingzhou was neither a passive recipient of foreign influence nor a simple exemplar of Sinicization. Instead, it generated a *glocal Buddhist aesthetic*, rooted in Northern Qi politics yet deeply connected to wider Eurasian networks of exchange.

By synthesizing stylistic, material, and iconological evidence, this study advances a biocultural-materialist framework for analyzing Buddhist sculpture. Such a framework regards images not only as artistic expressions but as cultural

infrastructures—produced through the convergence of political power, material economies, devotional practices, and transregional encounters.

Looking forward, this approach has implications beyond Qingzhou. Comparative work on Baekje and Asuka-period sculpture, or on later cave complexes such as Tianlongshan, could illuminate how Qingzhou's innovations reverberated across East Asia. Digital technologies—such as 3D modeling, spectral imaging, and GIS mapping of quarry networks—promise to deepen analyses of production and circulation. Finally, broader theoretical engagement with concepts of hybridity, material agency, and religious efficacy can further enrich the study of Buddhist art as a dynamic participant in cultural and political life.

The Qingzhou sculptures are thus not only monuments of sixth-century devotion but also enduring witnesses to the entanglement of empire, religion, and art in the making of East Asia's visual heritage.

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