

THE QINGZHOU SCULPTURE FIND

In 1996 one of the most significant archaeological finds of the 20th century was made by chance in the city of Qingzhou (pronounced *ching-joh*) in Shandong province, one of the cradles of ancient Chinese civilisation.

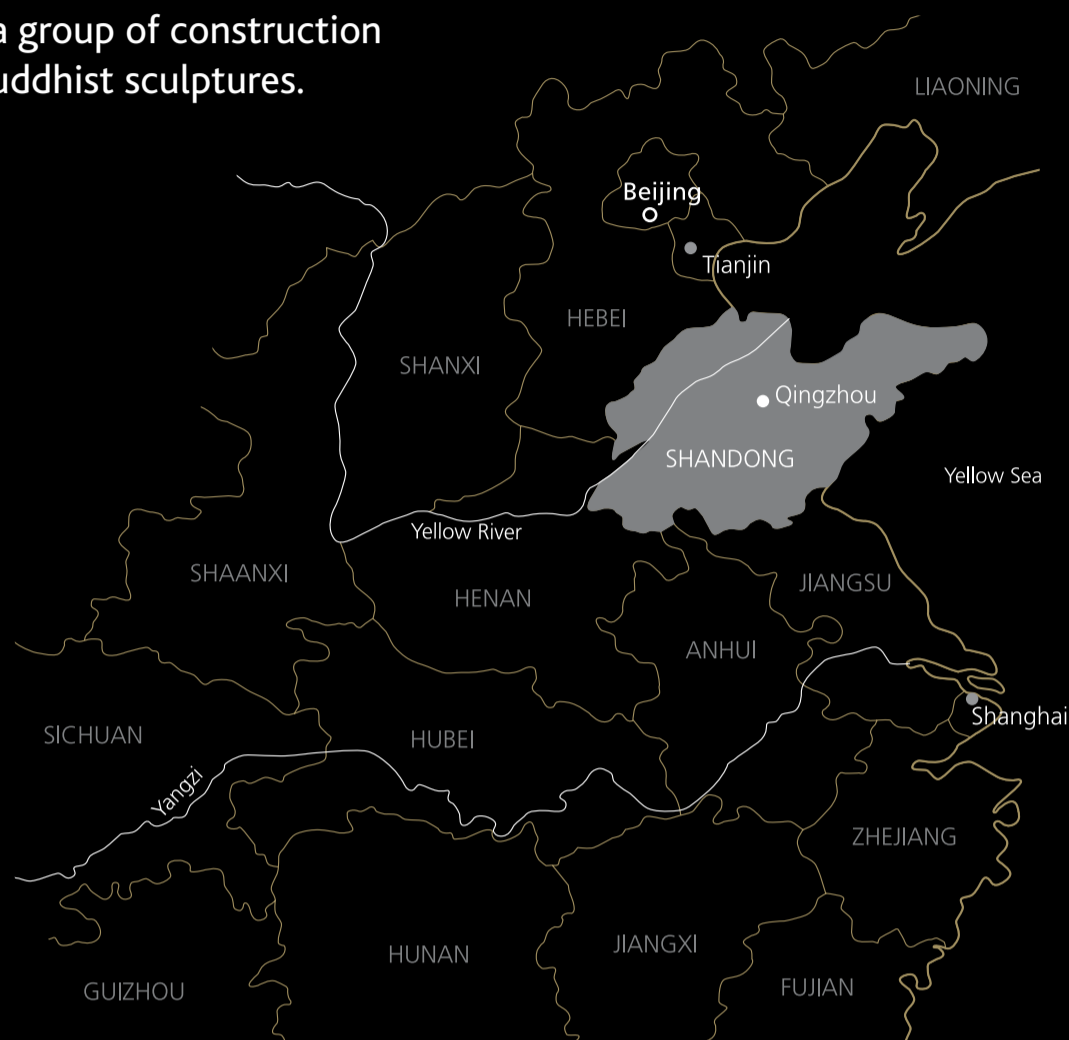
While levelling a sports field in Shefan primary school, a group of construction workers discovered a pit filled to the brim with stone Buddhist sculptures.

The exact number of figures buried in the pit remains unknown, as most were already broken at the time of their burial, although estimates suggest a total of from 320 to over 400. A number of the figures are monumental in size; one in particular (cat no 9) measures 312 cm high and, weighing over a tonne, it is the largest stele in existence.

Almost all the figures were made locally, carved from the fine-grained grey limestone that is still quarried around Qingzhou. A few fragments of Tang dynasty figures were made of granite, presumably imported from northern Shandong. The marble figures, also dating from the 6th century, were imports from the neighbouring province of Hebei.

The sculptures were probably commissioned by Buddhist monks or by members of the local Buddhist community, an act that was believed to accrue merit and contribute to a favourable rebirth. Some of the sculptures bear inscriptions which indicate who commissioned them and when they were made; the earliest inscription is dated 527. In the first sculpture in the exhibition (cat no 1) the donor himself is portrayed in the sculpture.

When the sculptures were first uncovered, archaeologists were surprised to find so much of the original pigment and even gilding had survived. While we know that all such works were originally enhanced with painted detail, very little remains on the thousands of other images which survive from this early date. Together with their refined yet sensual naturalism and almost abstract conception, this gives the Qingzhou sculptures a unique and extraordinary beauty, and an important and distinctive place in the history of Chinese art.



WHY WERE THE SCULPTURES BURIED?

Although we still do not know the exact reasons why the sculptures were buried, the evidence suggests that the burial of the figures was carefully planned.

Scholars now agree that the figures are almost certainly a random group of images brought to this site and accorded a ritual burial. One theory suggests that they were damaged in raids carried out by the Northern Zhou emperor Wu (r561–78), who believed the temples had become too rich and powerful. This theory, however, does not explain why the Qingzhou hoard also contained Buddhist sculptures from the Tang to Northern Song dynasties period.

Another theory argues that the figures were damaged during war in Qingzhou in 1127–29 and were buried thereafter. But this overlooks the fact that the pit contained almost exclusively items dating from the 6th century. Buddhist sculpture flourished during the subsequent Sui, Tang and Song dynasties and works of these periods would certainly have existed at Longxing Temple and been included in the burial.

A further theory proposes that the figures were destroyed in iconoclastic raids following an anti-Buddhist edict issued in 1119 by the Song emperor Huizong, the fragments collected and buried by monks to protect them from further violence. However historical records do not document any such purge, nor do the figures themselves support the view that they were broken in iconoclastic attacks: these typically focus on the face to rob the image of its religious efficacy. Rather, the condition of the figures suggests that many were harmed accidentally.

Most of the figures found in the pit were damaged or incomplete at the time of their interment. Many had been repaired several times. Perhaps then, the damaged images were gradually withdrawn from their religious contexts and, in the early 12th century, gathered together by the monks of Longxing Temple and reverently laid to rest.



ICONOGRAPHY

THE 32 PHYSICAL SIGNS OF THE BUDDHA

- 1 He has feet with level soles
- 2 He has the mark of a thousand-spoked wheel on the soles of his feet
- 3 His heels are broad, round and smooth
- 4 He has long fingers and toes
- 5 His hands and feet are soft-skinned
- 6 He has net-like lines on his palms and soles
- 7 He has high insteps
- 8 He has taut calf muscles like an antelope
- 9 He can touch his knees with the palms of his hands without bending
- 10 His sexual organs are retracted
- 11 His skin is the colour of gold
- 12 His skin is so fine that no dust can attach to it
- 13 His body hairs are separate, with one hair per pore
- 14 His body hair is blue-black
- 15 He has a firm and erect posture
- 16 He has the seven convexities of the flesh
- 17 He has an immense torso, like that of a lion
- 18 The furrow between his shoulders is filled in
- 19 The distance from hand-to-hand and head-to-toe is equal
- 20 His neck is round and smooth
- 21 He has sensitive tastebuds
- 22 His jaw is like a lion's
- 23 He has 40 teeth (humans generally have 32)
- 24 His teeth are evenly spaced
- 25 His teeth are without gaps in-between
- 26 His teeth are white
- 27 He has a large, long tongue
- 28 His voice is deep, resonant, pure and strong
- 29 His eyes are very (sapphire) blue
- 30 He has eyelashes like an ox
- 31 He has a soft white wisp of hair in the centre of his brow (the urna)
- 32 His head is like a royal turban (the *ushnisa*)

The 32 physical signs of the Buddha – along with a further 80 minor, or auspicious, features – are listed in various Buddhist texts or scriptures but vary considerably among sources



- pagoda
- apsara
- musician apsara
- devotee apsara
- aureole (head nimbus)
- ushnisha
- lotus halo
- hair clip
- necklace
- body nimbus
- undergarment
- abhaya mudra
- varada mudra
- mantle
- lower garment
- dragon
- lotus pedestal

GLOSSARY

ABHAYA MUDRA
gesture of dispelling fear

APSARA
supernatural being associated with clouds and the heavens

MANDORLA
an almond- or leaf-shaped background which frames the figures and signifies their holiness

MUDRA
a 'seal' or gesture made with the hand

NIMBUS
a halo or cloud surrounding the Buddha which indicates his holy state

PAGODA
a building designed to house Buddhist relics and a symbol of the faith. They are often seen floating in the clouds above the Buddha

STELE
an upright stone slab or tablet carved in relief

USHNISHA
bulge or bump on the Buddha's head symbolising his wisdom and supreme enlightenment

VARADA MUDRA
gesture of munificence