

# The Visual Language and Spiritual Signification of Gupta-Style Buddhist Sculpture: A Case Study of Cave 169 at the Bingling Temple Grottoes

Jiuzhou Li<sup>1,2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Lanzhou Resources & Environment Voc-Tech University University, Lanzhou 730021, Gansu, China

<sup>2</sup>Graduate School of Language and Culture, Graduate University of Mongolia, Ulaanbaatar 14200, Mongolia

**Copyright:** © 2026 Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY 4.0), permitting distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is cited.

**Abstract:** This article investigates how sculptural conventions associated with the Gupta period were appropriated and re-signified in a Chinese cave-temple context, focusing on the principal images of Cave 169 at the Bingling Temple Grottoes (Gansu, China). Drawing on formal analysis and comparative stylistic reading, the study identifies a cluster of features often linked to the Sarnath idiom, smooth modelling, downcast half-closed eyes, the so-called “Gupta smile,” and a robe rendered as a thin, rhythmically folded surface. At the same time, these traits are shown to be selectively adapted through local workshop practices, iconographic programs, and material constraints. Interpreting the images as visual media for Buddhist devotion and instruction, the paper argues that their calm expression and idealized body proportions function not merely as aesthetic choices but as carriers of doctrinal values such as compassion, wisdom, and transcendence. By situating Bingling within broader transregional networks of artistic circulation, the article contributes to discussions on the cross-cultural transmission of Buddhist visual languages and the formation of shared regimes of sacred representation across Eurasia.

**Keywords:** Gupta style; Buddhist sculpture; Bingling temple grottoes; Cave 169; Silk road; Cross-cultural transmission; Visual theology

**Online publication:** March 18, 2026

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Research background

Buddhist sculpture produced during the Gupta period (c. 320–550 CE) is widely regarded as a turning point in South Asian art, noted for its refined modelling, balanced proportions, and the integration of bodily idealization with contemplative calm. Across major centres such as Sarnath and Mathura, sculptors developed a visual vocabulary in which smooth surfaces, gentle facial expression, and carefully organized drapery communicated both aesthetic restraint and spiritual presence <sup>[1]</sup>.

The Bingling Temple Grottoes occupy a strategic position within the historical corridors that linked North

China with Central Asia. As a node in transregional networks of exchange, the site provides a rich case for observing how foreign styles were received, transformed, and localized within Chinese workshop traditions <sup>[2]</sup>. Among the grottoes, Cave 169 is especially significant for discussions of chronology and style; studies based on inscriptions, textual materials, and stylistic comparison have repeatedly highlighted its importance for the history of the site <sup>[3]</sup>.

## **1.2. Research gap, objectives, and approach**

While existing studies have described the broader development of Buddhist sculpture across Eurasia and documented the historical value of Bingling, the micro-level mechanisms through which a “Gupta” idiom was visually translated in Cave 169 remain under-analysed. This article addresses that gap by asking: (1) which formal features in Cave 169 most plausibly resonate with Gupta-period sculptural conventions; (2) how these features function as carriers of spiritual meaning; and (3) how the cave’s images illustrate a process of regional adaptation rather than direct imitation.

Methodologically, the study combines formal analysis (proportion, facial modelling, drapery treatment, and carving technique) with comparative reading of relevant scholarship on Gupta-period images and on Chinese grotto sculpture. The aim is not to claim a single linear “source” for the Bingling images, but to clarify how transregional stylistic resources were selectively activated in a local religious and material setting.

## **2. The visual language of Gupta-style Buddhist sculpture**

### **2.1. Core formal characteristics**

In many Gupta-period images—especially those associated with Sarnath—bodily form tends toward an idealized slenderness and a quiet frontal poise. The head is proportionally balanced, the contours are softened, and the modelling emphasizes a calm interiority rather than dramatic movement. This restraint is reinforced by facial construction: arched brows, elongated eyelids, and a subtly parted mouth together create the impression of meditative absorption .

Drapery provides another key marker. Rather than heavy, deeply drilled folds, many Gupta images treat the robe as a thin layer that clings to the body, revealing the underlying anatomy while maintaining a rhythmic, orderly patterning. Such formal decisions work in tandem to present the Buddha not as a heroic actor but as a perfected, tranquil presence—an aesthetic solution that also serves doctrinal ideals of serenity and detachment <sup>[4]</sup>.

### **2.2. Gupta-resonant features in Cave 169**

The principal images in Cave 169 display several traits that resonate with this Gupta visual vocabulary. First, the overall bodily proportion tends toward elegance and vertical extension, producing an impression of composure and balance rather than muscular emphasis.

Second, facial modelling privileges softness: half-closed eyes, a lowered gaze, and a faint smile collectively create a calm, compassionate expression often associated with the “Gupta smile” <sup>[5]</sup>.

Third, the robe is treated with comparatively restrained relief, organizing folds into a coherent surface rhythm rather than sharp, fragmented lines. Although the Bingling sculptures are shaped by regional material conditions and workshop practices, these formal choices suggest a conscious preference for a contemplative idiom that aligns well with Gupta-period sculptural strategies.

### **3. Spiritual signification and visual theology**

#### **3.1. Compassion, wisdom, and transcendence**

In Buddhist visual culture, sculptural form is not a neutral container but a medium through which doctrinal values are made perceptible. The calm demeanour of the Biling figures can be read as a visual articulation of compassion and wisdom: compassion in the gentle, attentive facial expression, and wisdom in the inward-directed gaze that implies contemplative insight.

Transcendence is conveyed through formal restraint. Smooth surfaces and unified proportions reduce the sense of worldly agitation, producing an image of stability and equanimity that mirrors Buddhist ideals of liberation from suffering. Such visual strategies also support the didactic function of grotto sites, where images guide viewers toward disciplined attention and ritual engagement <sup>[6]</sup>.

#### **3.2. The symbolism of the “Gupta smile”**

The “Gupta smile” is best understood as a compositional device rather than a purely psychological portrait. Half-closed eyes reduce external distraction, signalling meditative concentration; the slight curvature of the lips suggests benevolence without emotional excess. Together, these elements construct a visual model of awakened tranquillity that invites viewers to mirror the Buddha’s calm state.

In Cave 169, this facial formula becomes a local statement about sacred presence. The smile is subtle enough to avoid theatricality, yet clear enough to function as an affective cue—an iconographic shorthand for compassion, self-mastery, and the promise of relief from suffering.

#### **3.3. Images, devotion, and the circulation of forms**

Sculptural images in cave-temple settings work simultaneously as devotional foci and as communicative instruments. Their portability as “visual formulas” across regions does not depend on exact copying, but on the repeatable recognizability of key features—such as calm faces and orderly drapery—that could be reinterpreted within new cultural environments.

From this perspective, Cave 169 can be approached as evidence of selective translation: Gupta-resonant traits were adopted because they effectively materialized a persuasive sacred presence, but they were also adapted to match local expectations and carving practices. Comparable processes of integrating Indic or Gandharan-derived elements into East Asian media have been observed in other contexts as well <sup>[7]</sup>.

### **4. Regional adaptation and evolution**

#### **4.1. Transmission routes and regional transformations**

Gupta-period sculptural idioms influenced a wide range of Buddhist art traditions across Central and East Asia. Along overland corridors, compositional conventions and facial formulas circulated through objects, itinerant artisans, and patronage networks, gradually blending with local styles.

Beyond the overland routes, transregional Buddhist visual languages also travelled through maritime and interregional networks, where local monumental programmes reworked Indic models for new historical settings. A recent comparative study of Buddhist monumental art highlights how distinct sites in Indonesia and China could participate in shared representational agendas while maintaining local specificity <sup>[8]</sup>.

## 4.2. Local workshop practice and material constraints at Bingling

At Bingling, regional material conditions shaped the visual outcome of sculptural production. The cliff environment and the properties of local stone affected carving depth, surface finishing, and long-term preservation, encouraging solutions that balanced legibility with material limits <sup>[9]</sup>.

These constraints help explain why Gupta-resonant traits at Bingling often appear as stylistic tendencies rather than literal replicas. What is transferred is a set of visual priorities—calm expression, unified modelling, and coherent drapery rhythms—recast through the technical possibilities of the site and the skills of local workshops.

## 4.3. From borrowing to re-signification

When foreign stylistic resources enter new environments, they are frequently reframed through local aesthetic and ideological concerns. Studies of Northern Dynasties material have demonstrated how external visual elements could be reorganized into regional artistic programmes rather than preserved as isolated “imports” <sup>[10]</sup>.

In Cave 169, the adoption of Gupta-resonant forms thus signals not only contact but also creative integration. The resulting images embody a hybrid visual language: they draw on transregional idioms of sanctity while expressing local workshop traditions and the social-religious needs of patrons and viewers at the Bingling site <sup>[11]</sup>.

## 5. Conclusion

Cave 169 at the Bingling Temple Grottoes provides an illuminating case for understanding how Gupta-period sculptural conventions were translated within a Chinese grotto context. Through formal analysis, this article has highlighted a set of Gupta-resonant features—idealized slender proportions, a calm facial formula associated with the “Gupta smile,” and restrained drapery treatment—and has argued that these features operate as carriers of Buddhist values such as compassion, wisdom, and transcendence.

Rather than treating the Bingling images as simple stylistic borrowings, the study proposes that they materialize a process of selective adaptation, in which transregional visual priorities were re-signified through local workshop practices, iconographic programmes, and material constraints. Future research could strengthen this argument by integrating higher-resolution documentation (e.g., systematic photographic comparison and 3D recording), broader regional sampling across neighbouring sites, and interdisciplinary dialogue between art history and heritage science.

## Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## References

- [1] Ko J-E, 2009, A Study on the Buddha’s Life Relief in the Gupta Period at Sarnath, India. *Suvannabhumi*, 1(2): 21–41.
- [2] van Aerde M, 2018, Revisiting Taxila: A New Approach to the Graeco-Buddhist Archaeological Record. *Ancient West & East*, 17: 203–229.

- [3] Wei X, 2018, Reconsidering Gandharan Aesthetic Elements in Chinese Grotto Art: Evidence from Bingling Temple Grottoes. *Hualin International Journal of Buddhist Studies*, 1(2): 174–190.
- [4] Meng S, Li P, 2023, From the Malay Peninsula to the Shandong Peninsula: The Transmission of Buddha Statues with Tight-Fitting Robe in the Sixth Century. *Religions*, 14(1): 84.
- [5] Kim J, 2020, Reading Time: The Sarnath Buddha and the Historical Significance of Donor Portraits in the Gupta Period. *South Asian Studies*, 36(2): 190–215.
- [6] Lin Z, Li Z, Xie M, 2024, Narrative Integration: An In-Depth Exploration of the Cultural Adaptation of Cave 169 of Maiji Mountain Grottoes. *Religions*, 15(3): 254.
- [7] Li J, 2016, The Eastern Transmission of Gandharan Cultural Elements and Its Influence on the Formation of Local Fine Arts. *Wenwu (Cultural Relics)*, 2016(5): 58–65.
- [8] Li Y, Hu L, Gao J, 2025, Towards an Integrated Approach for Assessing Scenic Aesthetic Value: A Comprehensive Review and Framework. *Cogent Arts & Humanities*, 12(1): 2576550.
- [9] Xia X, Guo H, Yang P, Li J, Cheng L, Luo S, 2024, Measurement, Mapping and Slope Stability Analysis of the Bingling Temple Grotto Group 169 Landslide, China. *Engineering Geology*, 343: 107767.
- [10] Chang Q, 2020, The Model of Buddhist Art from Northern Zhou (557–581 CE) Chang’an Area and Its Transmission. *Taiwan Journal of Art History*, (49): 1–94.
- [11] Xiong Y, 2023, Rediscovering the Textual Sources of the “De Dashizhi Pusa” in Cave 169 of Bingling Temple. *Religions*, 14(7): 915.

**Publisher’s note**

Bio-Byword Scientific Publishing remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.