

THE YUNG-KAN CAVES

One of Buddhism's Earliest Manifestations in China

by

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Some five hundred miles, or a journey of twelve hours by train, northwest of Peking lies the ancient city of Tatung, today an overgrown village of about 200,000 inhabitants, but once, for more than sixty years, the capital of the short-lived kingdom of Northern Wei (*Chinese*, Pei Wei).

The history of Tatung goes back some two thousand years to the beginning of the great Han dynasty which ruled over most of what we today know as China (206 B.C. to 221 A.D.). The original city of Tatung lay about ten miles east of the present town and was called Ping Tsen — the City of Ping. All that remains of Ping Tsen today is a large mound, unexplored and untouched for nearly 2000 years, a mound which very probably contains untold treasures of archeology, a veritable gold mine for future research.

When the Great Han fell in 220 A.D., North China was divided into three separate states during a period known in Chinese history as The Three Kingdoms. Wei, Shu Han and Wu were these three Kingdoms. Tatung belonged to the Wei, and for a few years, of which history tells us little, it was the capital of the northern part of the kingdom. All we know is that the Wei was swallowed up by the Western Kingdom of Tsin which conquered most of Northern China. For nearly two hundred years Tatung disappeared from the pages of history, to re-emerge in 556 A.D., under the name of Huan-An Chen as the capital of the new kingdom of Northern Wei.

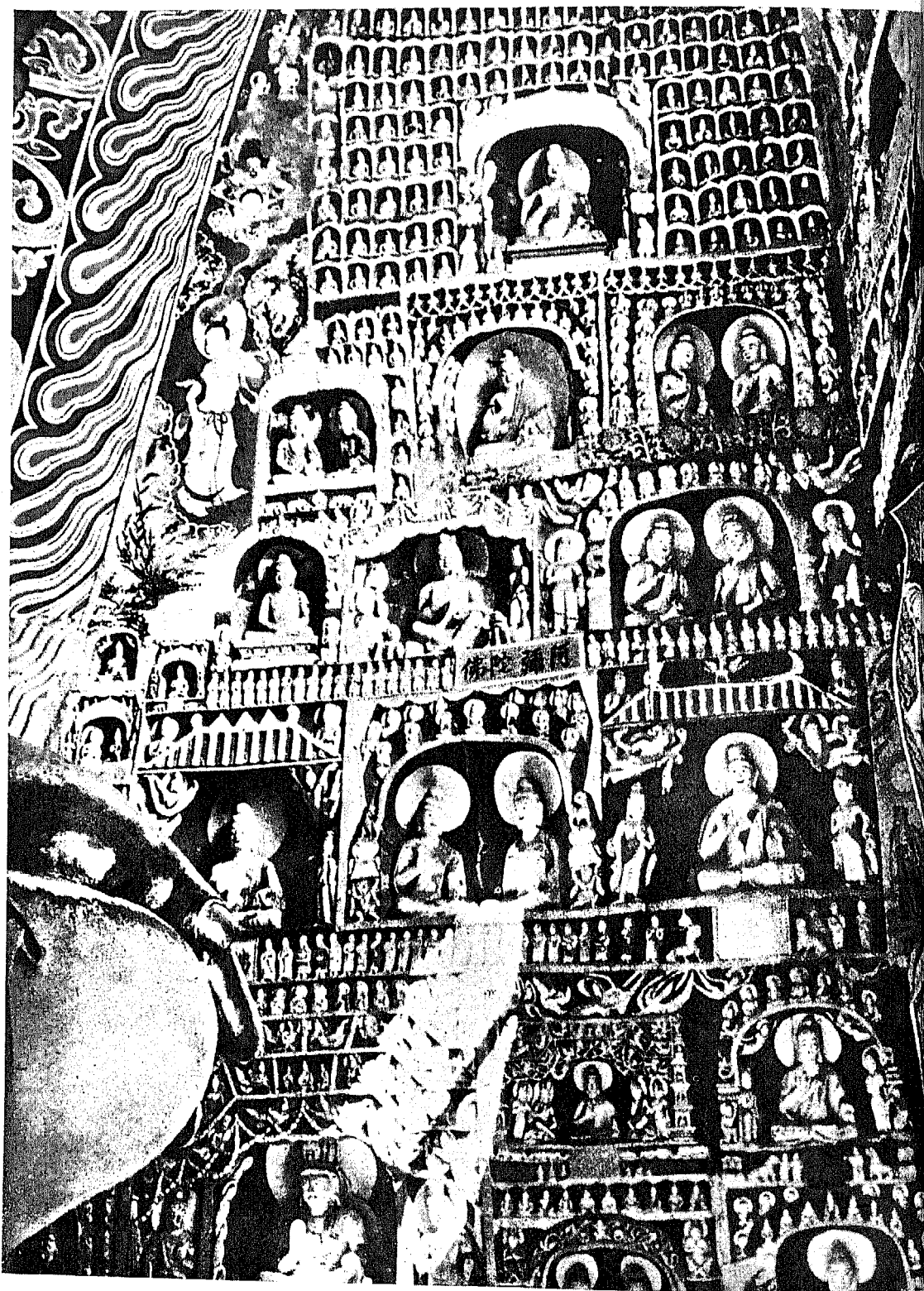
Persian and Arabic travellers have left glowing descriptions of the glory and riches of Huan-An Chen, where streets were paved with gold and terraced gardens alternated with palisades of glimmering white marble. This is probably a poetic exaggeration; there is no marble anywhere near Tatung and the climatic conditions are not particularly conducive to pleasure gardens.

In 494 A.D., the capital was moved to Loyang in the province of Honan, a little to the southwest of Tatung. The Northern Wei succumbed to the short-lived Sui dynasty which in turn gave way in 618 A.D. to the Great Tang (618-906 A.D.). The Tang once more reunited China, and Wei disappeared forever. During these five centuries Tatung slumbered away as a provincial capital under changing names, such as Pei-hun Chou, Yun Chu, and Yun-chung.

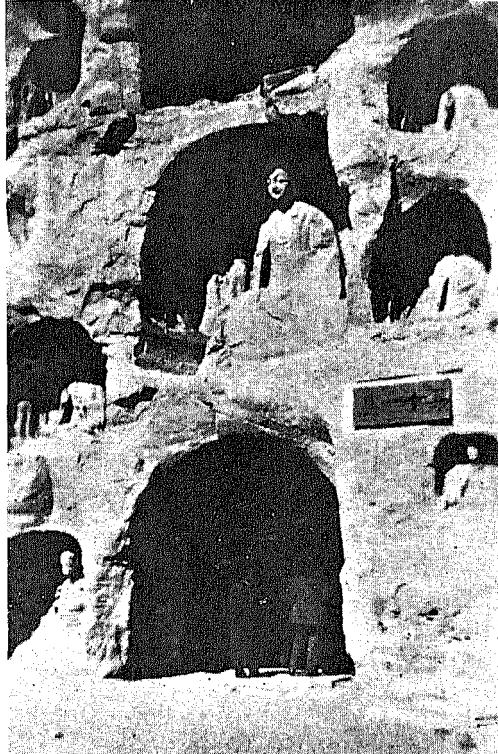
After the fall of the Great Tang, or Tang Dynasty, in 907 A.D., China disintegrated into a number of small, warring states, during a period that was known as that of the Five Dynasties and the Ten Kingdoms. In the year 937 A.D., Emperor Shih Chin-tang of the Late Tsin Dynasty gave up sixteen administrative areas of North China, including Tatung, as a bribe to the Khitan for its support to his short-lived reign. Sung Tai-tsu founded his new great dynasty, Sung (or Soong), in 960 A.D., and reunified China except for the sixteen northern administrative areas which still remained in the Khitan's possession. The Khitan's period of rule, known as the Liao Dynasty, was once so powerful that it threatened the very existence of the Sung by a large-scale invasion in 1004. But the invasion was frustrated by the Sung Emperor, Chen-tsung, and a peace treaty was signed. Then a new nomadic tribe in Manchuria, Nü-chen, became strong enough to launch a powerful attack on the Khitan's rear. A military alliance between the Sung and Nü-chen rulers eventually brought about the downfall of the Liao Dynasty in 1125. While the alliance of Sung and Nü-chen was still effective, the sixteen areas were temporarily returned to the Sung emperor. Tatung was named Yung-chung Fu during that period. After the fall of the Liao Dynasty, the first period of the Sung Dynasty, or what is generally known as the Northern Sung Dynasty, came to an end in 1126 A.D., when the Nü-chens, assuming a new name, Chin, or Kin, for their dynasty, turned their spearheads against the Sung. Pien-ching, the present-day Kaifeng, the Sung capital, fell into the hands of the Chin, who afterwards again changed the name of Tatung to Hsi-Ching Tatung Fu.



The great figure of the Buddha outside cave no. 21, with the vaulted dome framing the head.
The most beautiful and probably the oldest of the sculptures.



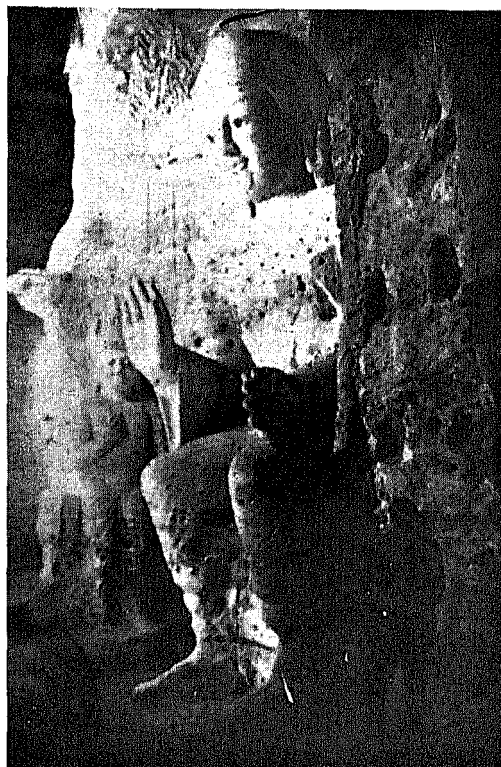
Statues of Buddha and Bodhisattvas in cave No. 13.



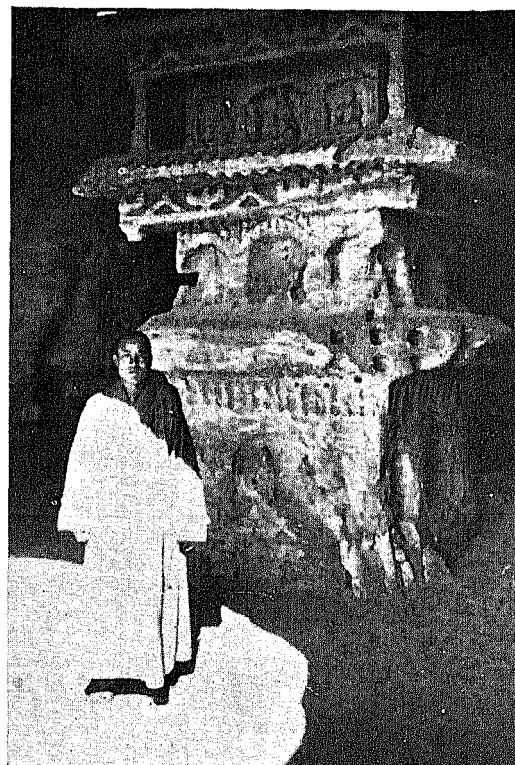
The entrance to cave No. 6, the so - called "Sukhyamuni - cave."



Dancing figures on a pillar in the unfinished cave No. 3, a curiously secular contrast to the devout figures behind.



The newly discovered giant figure in one of the corridors. Compare its size with the author standing in its shadow.



A decorated stone pillar supporting the roof of cave No. 3, all carved out of the living rock.

Tatung today lies in a broad and sparsely populated valley some 1,000 metres above sea level. The air is dry and sharp, and visitors usually find breathing a little difficult during their first few days there. The fertile plain is green and lush during spring and summer, but after the harvest the yellow, sandy soil, stretching in great waves between the low and rugged hills into which the ocher, mud walls of the villages seem to melt, creates an atmosphere of consummate emptiness, broken occasionally by a black-clad peasant leading a heavily-laden donkey into what appears to be the back of beyond.

But there is one great and abiding reason why Tatung will remain alive in the memory of men. About sixteen miles west of the city lies a range of low, sandstone hills called the Yung-kan, the Cloud Hills, and one of the projecting arms of this range contains the cave temples which have made Tatung famous.

A narrow, winding road climbs through rugged gorges, past rambling streams and great stretches of barren sand to a height of nearly 1,300 metres, or 5,000 feet, above sea-level. On a projecting plateau towards the western end of the range lie the Yung-kan caves, twenty-one cave-temples cut out of the living rock and filled with more than 100,000 representations of the Buddha, ranging from figures over twenty yards in height to great numbers of tiny reliefs measuring less than an inch and covering the sides of the caves like printed wallpaper.

The origin of these caves is somewhat different from that of the other known historical monuments of this type. The oldest collection of Buddhistic cave temples in China, the Tunhuang caves, originated in the third century A.D., as a resting place for pilgrims on the way to Buddhism's holy shrines, and for travellers along the western trade route between the great empires of India and China. For well over a thousand years the Tunhuang caves grew in number as travellers left money there in gratitude for the health-giving rest and comfort afforded them on their strenuous journey. The number of monks who settled there increased until the development of modern

means of transport reduced the importance of caravan routes. This occurred at the time that the policy of the Chinese emperors isolated the great empire and cut it off from the rest of the civilized world. Gradually the Tunhuang caves became dilapidated. They were virtually forgotten until they were rediscovered by archeologists in recent years. Today in Tunhuang over 400 cave temples have been opened. They are filled with glorious frescoes, images, reliefs and sculptures, a veritable treasure house of ecclesiastic art. And there are in all probability still numberless caves which have not yet been opened and examined.

The Lungmen caves in Honan province, about 300 miles due south of Peking, have similar origins. They were built about 200 years later than the earliest caves in Tunhuang and very probably were inspired by them.

But the Yung-kan caves remain different from all others. They did not grow out of a manifestation of practical life like the Tunhuang and the Lungmen caves, nor out of a desire for religious seclusion like the hermit cave-retreats in the deserts of Asia Minor and Africa. The Yung-kan caves are the somewhat exhibitionist expression of the piety of one man, a piety which gradually developed into a religious mania, if not a megalomania.

It was the Emperor Wen Ch'eng Ti of the Northern Wei, who was a son of the great Emperor T'ai Wu Ti, and who, perhaps inspired by the Tunhuang caves which were then a hundred years old, and of which he as a devout Buddhist must have had knowledge, conceived the idea of acquiring merit by cutting places of worship into the mountains, thereby fashioning temples on a gigantic scale for his own personal use. The work was begun in 453 A.D., and 10,000 men laboured for forty years on the cutting and decoration of the caves. In 494 A.D., after the death of Wen Ch'eng Ti, the capital was moved to Loyang and the main volume of work was transferred to the Lungmen caves. But judging from the style of some of the figures in the Yung-kan caves, work must have continued there for about another hundred years. After that the caves seem

to have been abandoned and forgotten until the Ming Dynasty restored them after a fashion, during one of the resurrections of Buddhism in China in the 15th and 16th centuries. As the power of Buddhism waned, the caves were again forgotten until once more they were restored in the 18th century by the Manchus, who succeeded unfortunately in almost entirely effacing the original beauty of the sculptures. In later times much damage was done by local warring hordes who used the caves as ammunition dumps, and by souvenir-hunting Japanese soldiers who carried away more than 600 heads of Buddhist statues. Now the caves are being cared for and they contain a number of relics that are sufficiently intact. Yung-kan today stands as one of the world's great religious monuments.

The whole temple-complex consists of twenty-one caves. For the convenience of visitors, the caves are numbered consecutively from east to west, although they were not built in that order. Records in the few historical annals that remain from the Northern Wei have helped to identify the individual caves, and their construction has been divided into three periods of approximately thirty years each, as follows:

1. The earliest period: Caves No. 16 to 20 were built and decorated under the leadership of the monk Tai-yao, and they are artistically by far the most inspired part of the temple.
2. The middle period: Caves No. 1 & 2 and 5 to 13, of which No. 6, the so-called Sukhyamuni cave, is the most beautiful and most richly decorated.
3. The later period: Caves No. 3, 14, 15 and 21, of which No. 3 is perhaps the most ambitious in conception though not in artistic design; it has remained unfinished.

The tragedy of the Yung-kan caves is that the hills into which they are cut and from which the statues and reliefs are carved

consist of a soft, porous sandstone which has not been able to withstand the ravages of sun, wind and water. Much of the decoration has eroded and is lost forever. But so great was the power and religious fervour of the Emperor Wen Ch'eng Ti that the work continued, although he as well as everyone else must have been fully aware of the ephemeral nature of the material on which a century of labour was being expended. Total erosion has destroyed numberless statues and reliefs, especially in the more open caves on the eastern side of the temple, but in the better protected and deeper caves of the center much of beauty and grandeur remains.

At the western end of the temple-complex stands the great statue of Gautama seated on a lotus bloom, seventeen metres high and fourteen metres broad, originally deep inside a cave, but now, because to the erosion of 1,500 years, it is in the open air. The upper part of the body is swathed in light draperies which remind one of the Indian Gupta style. In fact, the whole statue, with its finely chiselled features, its tender, meditative smile and its beautifully modelled hands in the gesture of "bringing the earth to witness," shows an unmistakable Indian influence which was probably derived from the Tunhuang caves. The statue is flanked by those of two disciples, and the vaulted canopy behind them, half of which must have been a great dome, frames their heads with a background of low reliefs depicting other positions of the Buddha and scenes from his life and teaching. Erosion has destroyed the contours of these reliefs, but the lines of the framework remain and add a gentle, curving flow to the entire complex of figures. The artist who created the figures is anonymous, and the date of his creation is not definitely known, but we can guess that it belongs to the earliest period. One may well imagine that this statue of the Buddha was the first inspired expression of the devout emperor's religious fervour. Possibly it was the success and beauty of this first attempt that spurred him on to produce the fantastic enlargements, which seem to have ended in complete megalomania for the colossal, but artistically much weaker statues, and for the extensive wallpaper-like reliefs of the later period.

In the unfinished cave No. 3, there is another colossal statue of Buddha, but it does not possess the meditative beauty of the earlier work. The walls of this cave are plastered with countless figures, many of which are in curious dancing postures. There seems to be no central purpose or meaning in the conception of the work in this cave.

But each cave, no matter how odd, contains many details of interest to the scholar. One curious detail is the scroll-like ornamentation found in several of them. It is definitely secular and unlike anything seen in other Buddhist shrines. It is so unlike anything Chinese that one is tempted to attribute it to Persian influence, although there is no documentary evidency of any contact with Persia at the time they were being created. This difference is particularly noticeable in cave No. 12, the so-called "Cave of Music," the entrance to which is decorated with a frieze depicting a complete orchestra playing on instruments, some of which are not of Chinese origin. On the other hand, Indian influence, probably through the Tunhuang caves, is clear in all the caves of the second period. Flying apsaras, angel heads, and other figures of a type which does not belong to Chinese mythology are found throughout many of these caves. They add a touch of exuberance to the otherwise rather austere conception of the decorations. Of particular interest is the Sukhyamuni cave (No. 6), where the main figure of the Buddha is guarded by four disciples, whom Chinese tradition calls the four brothers of Buddha, yet which in all probability depict four of the Buddha's incarnations. The main group stands under a palanquin of stone on which are depicted in high relief the life story of the Buddha's mother, the Buddha's birth, and his early childhood as an Indian prince. The story continues round the walls, cut in a strongly impressionistic manner, and some of the scenes are of striking force and beauty.

The restoration of the caves which was carried out during the Ming period (16th century) appears to us today as sheer vandalism. Little bits of wood were fixed in holes cut into the statues, which were used as a sort of skeleton on which new figures of clay and rags were built, figures in bizarre colours and with expressionless faces. Where possible, this superstructure is now being carefully removed, but in many cases there is little else but an eroded block of stone underneath. The restoration accomplished during the Ch'ing dynasty two hundred years later left less damage. It consisted mainly in crude painting of the figures' draperies and of the backgrounds in the reliefs and friezes. The colours are mostly rust-red, bright blue and green, and in a way they have a certain charm because they bring the uncoloured soft grey figures into stronger relief. While restoration work was being carried out recently a colossal figure of the Buddha was discovered after tons of rubbish had been removed from one of the passages between two caves. Standing in a narrow corridor, it is in almost complete darkness, but a hole in the roof of the cave allows a few rays of the sun to touch the face and hands and lend to the statue a hazy, unreal beauty.

During recent years of war and revolution many peasants fleeing the fury of marauding soldiers sought refuge in the caves and made fires in the carved laps of the sitting figures. Although this damaged the sculptures, it added a touch of human tragedy to the caves which gives a special effect of its own.

Rising in front of caves Nos. 5, 6, 7 and 8, there is a shallow temple built of wood and fixed to the side of the mountain. It soars many storeys high, and several of its platforms have the caves themselves as their backdrops. The dramatic effect of depth that this produces is extraordinary. It may have been here that the emperor surveyed his creation and performed his

devotions. The present temple is probably of a much later date; the original is said to have been burnt down and rebuilt several times. A typically Chinese compromise with religion is revealed in the figures of Chinese gods which are placed at vantage points in this temple. One particularly beautiful statue of the Goddess of Mercy, Kuan Yin, for example, is almost hidden by a hideous staircase. There are even two figures here that look very much like those of the Virgin and Child.

From the temple balustrades of these caves there is a splendid view of the surrounding plain. Sixteen miles to the east lies the present city of Tatung, nearby which the ancient Han city sleeps beneath its earthen mound. We are greatly indebted to this city for the legacy it has left to us in the Cloud Hills. In the Yung-kan Caves there remains, in spite of the ravages of wind and weather, one of the world's great religious monuments.

