

# An Analysis on the Aesthetic Characteristics of the Sculptures in Maijishan Grottoes

Pengxiang Wang<sup>1\*</sup>, Yingying Pan<sup>2</sup>

1. College of Fine Arts, Northwest Normal University, Lanzhou, Gansu, 730070, China

2. Xixian Senior High School Affiliated to Central China Normal University, Xinyang, Henan, 464300, China

\*Corresponding author: Pengxiang Wang

**Copyright:** 2026 Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY-NC 4.0), permitting distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited, and explicitly prohibiting its use for commercial purposes.

**Abstract:** Maijishan Grottoes, one of the four major grottoes in China, hold a vital position in the history of Chinese grotto art with their distinctive system of clay sculpture, acclaimed by scholars as the “Oriental Sculpture Gallery.” This paper attempts to systematically examine the artistic characteristics of the Maijishan Grottoes sculptures from the aesthetic perspective, proceeding from such dimensions as the textural qualities of clay as a material medium, the secular undertones embodied in its sculptural styles, and the transcendence and ethereality reflected in its aesthetic conceptions. It aims not only to offer a distinctive interpretative framework and exemplary case for the study of ancient Chinese sculpture but also to establish a bridge for interpreting the aesthetic essence and humanistic core of traditional Chinese culture, thereby enabling a deeper appreciation of the irreplaceable and unique value of this treasure trove of Oriental art.

**Keywords:** Maijishan Grottoes; Sculptures; Aesthetic Characteristics

**Published:** Apr 29, 2026

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.62177/chst.v3i2.1308>

Located in the southeast of Maiji District, Tianshui City, Gansu Province, China, the Maijishan Grottoes are situated on an isolated peak within the Xiaolongshan Forest area at the western section of the Qinling Mountains. Standing at a total height of 142 meters, the site derives its name from its resemblance to a wheat stack. Presently, the Maijishan Grottoes encompass 221 caves and niches, housing 10,632 statues of various types and covering 979.54 square meters of murals. First constructed during the Later Qin period of the Sixteen Kingdoms, the grottoes have undergone more than 1,600 years of excavation and renovation, forming an artistic pattern dominated by clay sculptures (including wooden-core clay sculptures and stone-core clay sculptures), supplemented by stone carvings, shadow sculptures, bas-reliefs, thin-flesh sculptures and other forms. It comprehensively presents the development and evolution of ancient Chinese clay sculpting techniques and Buddhist culture. Distinct from the Mogao Grottoes known for mural halls, the Yungang Grottoes noted for frontier stone carvings, and the Longmen Grottoes famed for imperial stone inscriptions, the most distinctive artistic feature of Maijishan Grottoes lies in its role as a spiritual sanctuary for folk clay sculptures. The aesthetic characteristics of Maijishan Grottoes are deeply rooted in its unique geographical location—built on steep cliffs and surrounded by towering mountains, which objectively promoted the adaptive selection and flexible application of sculptural materials according to local conditions. Meanwhile, deeply influenced by Buddhist culture during the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties, it profoundly shaped the formal paradigms, thematic contents and aesthetic orientations of the statues. Eventually, these factors condensed into an artistic character with “clay as the bone and humanity as the spirit,” presenting a unique form of Chinese freehand sculpture. It dissolves the solemn

austerity of divinity through vivid and perceptible secular smiles, and weakens the spiritual distance of religious spaces with narratives close to human warmth.

## 1. The Textural Properties of Clay as a Material Medium

### 1.1 Clay Sculpture Materials Adapted to Local Conditions

Maijishan is composed of Tertiary glutenite, which is coarse and loose. Restricted by this geographical condition, it is impossible to carry out delicate Buddhist statue carving directly on the native rock. Artisans inherited traditional Buddhist statue-making techniques and integrated the local Tianshui folk craft—"clay sculpture"—to create Buddha statues. On this basis, they developed various sculpting techniques such as stone-core clay sculpture and wooden-core clay sculpture. Wooden-core clay sculpture uses wood and bamboo strips as the internal framework, on which hemp ropes and straw are wrapped to form a straw base, followed by applying clay on the surface for modeling<sup>[1]</sup>. This technique is suitable for small and medium-sized clay sculptures, such as the "Whispering" Bodhisattva and his disciple in Cave 121, where the wooden frame supports the intimate posture of leaning heads and shoulders touching. Stone-core clay sculpture involves chiseling the original glutenite into a base shape, then covering it with clay for modeling and painting. Most of the stone-core clay sculptures are large-scale works, such as the Great Buddha on the Eastern Cliff in Cave 13. The main Buddha is approximately 16 meters tall, with the flanking Manjushri and Samantabhadra Bodhisattvas each about 13 meters high, making it the largest group of cliff-side shallow niche sculptures in Maijishan Grottoes. The clay sculptures of Maijishan generally exhibit a warm and jade-like skin texture, a material characteristic not possessed by stone carvings and sculptures in other grottoes. The locally sourced loess clay is malleable and flexible, and its gentle texture makes clothing folds and body skin of these statues more realistic, narrowing the emotional distance between the viewers and the artistic connotations of the statues.

### 1.2 Artistic Breakthrough in Thin-Flesh Sculpture

The beauty in forms of art contains the rich emotions and thoughts of artists, and often manifests as beautiful artistic images through the connection with content of art, endowing art with profound significance<sup>[2]</sup>. A major breakthrough of the clay sculptures in Maijishan Grottoes in the history of art lies in their innovative practice of the expressive form integrating sculpture and painting. Combining bas-relief and painting, this artistic method was given the new name "thin-flesh sculpture" by the renowned painter Wu Zuoren, and was first discovered in the Northern Zhou Dynasty. To address the defect that thick clay layers applied to vertical walls for base coating tend to fall off and are difficult to preserve for a long time, artisans creatively developed the "complementary sculpture and painting" technique. The clay mixture is added with hemp, wheat straw, animal hair, rice paste, etc., which can prevent cracking, enhance delicacy, and resist corrosion in rainy and humid environments. Fine bas-relief is used to sculpt the exposed parts of figures' bodies with thin clay layers no more than 5 millimeters thick, and then colored painting is applied to present decorative elements such as flying scarves, flowing clouds and blooming flowers. The flying apsaras have smooth lines and fluttering garments, like flowing clouds and running water, possessing both the three-dimensional texture of thin sculpture and the vividness and splendor of colored painting. Though static, they bring a visual impact of dynamic movement across the wall, demonstrating the extraordinary artistic expression of the artisans. This technique also fundamentally reduces the weight of clay layers on the wall, facilitating the preservation of "thin-flesh sculpture" murals for thousands of years. Created during the Northern Zhou Dynasty, Cave 4, also known as the "Upper Seven Buddha Pavilion," ingeniously adopts the "integrated sculpture and painting" technique for both the flying apsaras on the upper outer walls of the seven halls and the murals inside the halls. Over time, after thousands of years of natural erosion, parts of the colored paintings on the clay sculptures have peeled off, though the "beauty of imperfection" has also strengthened the spiritual existence of the statues.

## 2. Secular Flavor in Stylistic Expression

### 2.1 The Aesthetic Shift from Divinity to Humanity

In the early stage, the sculptures of Maijishan Grottoes were greatly influenced by Indian Gandharan statue art and foreign cultures. With the joint participation of some educated intellectuals and sculptors, successive artistic styles emerged in the creative process: the vigorous and solid style of the Later Qin, the slender and elegant style of the Wei and Jin dynasties, and

the plump and graceful style of the Sui and Tang dynasties. The evolution of sculptural styles is not only a manifestation of the conscious pursuit of religious art forms and their in-depth integration with local Central Plains culture but also stems from the personal life experiences and emotional expressions of artistic creators. Essentially, the statues of Maijishan Grottoes are carriers for the dissemination of the spiritual ideas of religious art. As two forms of human culture, art and religion directly and distinctly penetrate into human life experience<sup>[3]</sup>. As a symbolic form of human emotional expression, sculpture art reflected the social reality of the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties, when the feudal ruling class was busy fighting for political power and the lower class were trapped in hardship. Du Mu, a poet of the Tang Dynasty, wrote in his poem *Spring on the Southern Rivers*: “Four hundred eighty splendid temples still remain. Of Southern Dynasties in the mist and rain.” This poem profoundly expresses the unprecedented development of Buddhist culture and Buddhist statues, thus reflecting that the statues of Maijishan Grottoes were the emotional sustenance and aesthetic ideal of the local people, who placed their hopes, beauty and ideals on them<sup>[4]</sup>. With strong expressiveness in outlining contours, describing structures, and depicting shadows and folds, the brushline is the lifeline of Chinese painting, conforming to people’s aesthetic tendencies—bold and rigid lines show the majestic manner of Heavenly King statues, while delicate and soft incised lines present the plump and smooth skin of Bodhisattvas. For example, known as the “Oriental Smile,” the statue of Yifu in Cave 44, was carved by the King of Wudu in memory of his mother, modeled after her appearance and posture during her lifetime. From the half-closed eyes showing sorrow and compassion to the faint smile on the lips, it preserves the mother’s beautiful image with “unity of form and spirit” in the Buddhist world, free from suffering. The smile is not an unrestrained joy but implicit, introverted, warm and serene, integrating the subtle and balanced beauty of Eastern aesthetics and the compassionate charm of Buddhist statues. It not only conforms to the aesthetic pursuits of “interdependence of emptiness and solidity” and “artistic conception through blank space” in traditional Chinese aesthetics but also breaks away from the constraints of secular concrete forms, achieving an aesthetic balance between tranquility and agility, solemnity and gentleness.

## 2.2 The Life Sentiments of Ancient People

Changes in artistic taste and aesthetic ideals are not determined by art itself but ultimately by real life<sup>[5]</sup>. Most of the Maijishan Grottoes were excavated by the common people, so they naturally integrated the joys and sorrows of the local people, reflecting the perfect Buddha statues in the eyes of the locals—those vivid, interesting and humanistic Buddha and Bodhisattva statues. Whether in facial contours, body shapes or clothing details, they all embody the typical images of the local people. The sculpture works of Maijishan Grottoes are an outstanding example of the organic integration of regional culture and Buddhist art. In the process of statue making, people used superb clay sculpting techniques to endow each Buddha statue with human nature from ordinary life through unique techniques and styles, thereby conveying the longing for a better life and spiritual comfort. For example, in Cave 142, there is a shadow sculpture of “Mother and Son Donors” on the west side of the main wall. The mother holds a lotus-shaped offering lamp in her right hand, leads a young child wearing a bellyband with her left hand, and faces forward with a focused and pious expression. The young child turns his head to one side, showing a curious look of looking around. This statue vividly depicts the sense of novelty and curiosity exhibited by the child in the solemn Buddhist site filled with incense and chanting. In addition, the gestures and expressions of many statues are full of earthly charm: some Bodhisattvas hold pure bottles in their hands, with gentle postures like neighboring women; some disciples wear simple smiles, with sincere eyes. These details are not imaginary but the result of artisans extracting and integrating the life states of people around them into the statues, endowing the cold clay with warm life temperature.

## 3. The Ethereal Transcendence of Aesthetic Intention

### 3.1 Unity of Form and Spirit in Statue Art

Zong Baihua believed that the highest realm of Chinese art is artistic conception, which he defined as “the unity of nature and the inner mind” and “the integration and infiltration of objective natural scenes and subjective life sentiments”<sup>[6]</sup>. The Sui and Tang statues in Maijishan are not merely realistic in form but pursue spirit through form, constructing an ethereal yet substantial artistic conception through rounded contours and soft lines, as well as an aesthetic charm combining static and dynamic elements—solemn postures as static and flowing clothing folds as dynamic, fully displaying the unique life rhythm of Chinese art. Artistic beauty is deeply rooted in social and historical practice and is a perceptual manifestation of the spirit

of the times. Statues in Northern Wei Dynasty are characterized by slender bones and elegant features, and their wise smiles imply contempt for the terrible reality, understatement of honor and disgrace in life, and freedom and ease after transcending the mundane world.; statues Western Wei and Northern Zhou Dynasties show a gentle and sincere style, indulging in the pursuit of real life and longing for the Buddhist world; statues in Sui and Tang Dynasties fully display the plump and graceful aesthetic fashion, demonstrating the majestic bearing of the prosperous dynasty and the inclusive cultural mind; while statues in Song Dynasty have realistic clothing folds and solemn faces, reflecting the life-oriented realistic interest and rational and introverted aesthetic pursuit. The sculpture “Sakyamuni Meeting His Son” in Cave 133, also known as “Prediction for Rahu-la,” freezes the precious moment when Sakyamuni Buddha confers a prophecy of future Buddhahood upon his son, Rahula. In terms of shape, Sakyamuni is sculpted with his head bowed and looking down and his right hand hovering in the air, wanting to touch his son but not doing so; Rahula stands with palms joined respectfully, looking up to his father with a shy and pious expression. The hovering hand condenses the complex connotations of paternal love, guilt and restraint, possessing more eternal artistic appeal than touching directly. One static and one dynamic, one bowing and one looking up, the overall artistic conception is profound and distant, revealing infinite emotions within the limited form. The hovering hand also implies the philosophy that enlightenment needs self-realization and cannot be sought externally. The Viennese psychologist Egon Brunswik said: “Any slight change in the distance between the eyes will affect the expression of a portrait”<sup>[7]</sup>. Using natural light to create emotional changes, the Buddha’s eyes seem to contain tears, divinity and humanity shifting instantly. It breaks the barrier between divinity and humanity, perfectly integrating the image of the compassionate Buddha who saves the world with the secular warmth of father and son. Chinese Buddhist statue sculpture attaches great importance to the detailed depiction of clothing. Through the direction and folds of clothing, it vividly interprets the solemn posture and inner spirit of the statues. Dense parallel incised lines simulate the effect of silk clinging to the body when damp, and the clothing folds fall naturally along the body contours. This not only reflects the transformation of Gandharan art to Central Plains style, but also integrates the realistic spirit of Central Plains painting, forming the aesthetic paradigm of “Cao’s clinging drapery style”.

### 3.2 Spiritual Transcendence of Cultural Integration

Due to its geographical location, Maijishan Grottoes has become an important hub for the integration of Central Plains culture, Western Regions culture and northern ethnic minority cultures. The spread path of grotto art in China follows the geographical and cultural route from the Western Regions through the Hexi Corridor to the Central Plains, then spreading to the southeast and southwest regions. Far from political centers, Maijishan is less subject to a single imperial aesthetic discipline. Meanwhile, the integration of natural landscapes highlights the harmonious beauty of nature and humanity under the philosophical concept of “harmony between heaven and humanity”. And the spatial artistic conception of interdependence of emptiness and solidity and hierarchical progression in its layout has exerted a profound influence on the gardening ideas of classical Chinese gardens. During the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties, Buddhism was introduced to China and prevailed on an unprecedented scale and depth, exerting a far-reaching impact on the social structure, historical process and cultural ideological system of the time, and injecting new themes, expressive contents and formal languages into the development of Chinese sculpture art. The Indian grotto temple architectural form was extensively excavated and constructed in China during this period and Maijishan Grottoes is an important representative among them. The sculpture system of Maijishan Grottoes did not form in isolation. Its formal paradigms, expressive languages and spiritual core originated from the integration of the widespread Buddhist culture and Chinese civilization, gradually forming a localized and nationalized transformation of sculpture art. Influenced by the literati’s seclusion and cultivation, statues in Wei and Jin Dynasties present an elegant style of “Xiugu Qingxiang” (lit. ‘elegant bones and refined likeness’) in Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and donors. During Tang Dynasty, when the country was strong and prosperous, while the culture was open, the statues displayed grace and national confidence. The Chinese nation inclusively absorbed and reinterpreted foreign statue art, endowing it with profound local cultural connotations. On the basis of absorbing statue elements from the Western Regions and India, Northern Zhou statues integrated Central Plains Confucianism, interpreting the local cultural spirit of moderation, harmony, gentleness and sincerity. Xie He, who was a famous painter of the Southern Dynasties, proposed “Six Principles” in his handed-down work *The Record of the Classification of Ancient Painters*, forming a complete system in painting techniques, among which

“vitality and spirit resonance” is the overall requirement and goal for paintings, and the highest realm in artistic creation. Therefore, Chinese painting and sculpture art do not focus solely on the expressive form and vividness of the works but emphasize “artistic conception” as a whole. When creating statues and paintings, artisans sculpt Buddha images with different characteristics according to their own understanding of Buddhist doctrines and personal wishes.

#### 4. Conclusion

Chinese sculpture is a kind of three-dimensional calligraphy. Combining sculpture and painting, the unique grotto art often skillfully integrates Buddhist themes with local culture through background depiction and pattern decoration, presenting the lofty, profound and ethereal artistic conception of traditional Chinese landscape painting. The unique charm of the sculpture art in Maijishan Grottoes is rooted in the textural properties of clay as a material medium and the humanistic warmth of its stylistic expression. Its aesthetic shift from divinity to humanity injects secular warmth into religious statues, making the “Oriental Smile” an emotional resonance spanning thousands of years, and achieving the spiritual transcendence of aesthetic intention. From the slender and elegant style of the Wei and Jin Dynasties to the grace and prosperity of Tang Dynasty, the artistic evolution of Maijishan Grottoes is not only a perceptual manifestation of the spirit of the times but also a vivid witness to cultural inheritance. Sorting out and interpreting its aesthetic characteristics not only provides a unique perspective and example for the study of ancient Chinese sculpture art but also builds a solid link for exploring the contemporary value of traditional culture and promoting the inheritance and innovation of civilization. Standing for thousands of years, this art treasure will continue to tell the depth and splendor of Chinese aesthetics in the long river of time.

#### Funding

This work was supported by the 2025 Northwest Normal University Graduate Research Funding Project “Research on Integrating Maijishan Grottoes into High School Art Teaching from the Perspective of Core Literacy” (Project No. KYZZ2025-LXB019).

#### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

#### Reference

- [1] Yue, Y. Q., Pei, Q. Q., Li, W. J., et al. (2025). Structural analysis and classification of the sculptures in the Maijishan Grottoes. *Journal of Northwest Normal University (Natural Science Edition)*, 61(6), 34–43, 52.
- [2] Wu, W. Y., & Gu, P. F. (2022). On Zong Baihua’s hermeneutic thought in literature and art. *Journal of Northwest University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)*, 52(5), 131–136.
- [3] Zhao, J. (2023). The consciousness of life and aesthetic spirit in the Northern Dynasties sculpture art of the Maijishan Grottoes. *Western Literature and Art Studies*, (1), 136–144.
- [4] Li, Z. H. (2024). *The path of beauty*. Yuelu Publishing House.
- [5] Li, Z. (1999). *Three books on aesthetics*. Anhui Literature and Art Publishing House.
- [6] Zong, B. H. (2008). *Complete works of Zong Baihua (Vol. 2)*. Anhui Education Publishing House.
- [7] Lin, F. S. (2018). *Masterpieces on the left, science on the right*. Shanghai Science and Technology Education Press.