

# Heavenly bodies

Mystery surrounds a collection of stunning Buddha statues unearthed in one of China's greatest archaeological finds.

## EXHIBITION JOYCE MORGAN

CHINESE workers were levelling a school sports field a decade ago when they stumbled across an ancient burial pit. Within it were heads with gentle smiles, torsos carved with rich ornaments and feet that stood on lotus flowers. All had been ritually buried.

They were fragments of 6th-century Buddhist figures and no one had seen anything quite like them. They are distinct, not just for the traces of coloured pigments and gilding that still glows despite, or perhaps because of, their long entombment. But among them are figures that embody a paradox: they look unworldly yet sensuous, sublime yet human. Their gaze is turned to matters of the spirit while their robes cling to their slim, androgynous bodies. No wonder they're smiling.

The workers had unearthed one of the country's most significant recent archaeological discoveries: more than 200 torsos, 144 Buddha heads and nearly 50 heads of saintly attendant bodhisattvas. And they'd uncovered an enduring mystery. Why had such beautiful figures been buried? For unlike the better known Terracotta Army, the Buddhas from Qingzhou were not made to accompany the dead but to inspire the living. It is just one of the mysteries that surround the limestone figures, 35 of which will be on exhibition in *The Lost Buddhas* at the Art Gallery of NSW. It is the first time some of the figures have left China.

More than a decade after the physical pieces have been carefully put together, experts are still piecing together the puzzle surrounding their burial in the grounds of a long-vanished temple, the Longxing or Dragon Rise Temple in China's eastern Shandong province, about 400 kilometres south of Beijing. There's no shortage of theories, says Liu Yang, the gallery's curator of Chinese art.

"They were all [destroyed] before they were buried," Yang says. "But you can't imagine 400 works have been in a single temple. So they must have been collected." Yang says there are many theories on why they were destroyed but none of them convincing.

Some have suggested that the figures were damaged during a period of anti-Buddhist persecution. But their faces, although chipped in places, don't appear to have been willfully attacked as they typically would have been if iconoclasm had been the motive.

And although the figures were carved in the 6th century, they appear to have been buried about 600 years later, since among the fragments that were carefully buried in layers and covered in reed mats were scattered a number of 12th-century coins. This has prompted speculation that the figures might have been buried and later reburied.

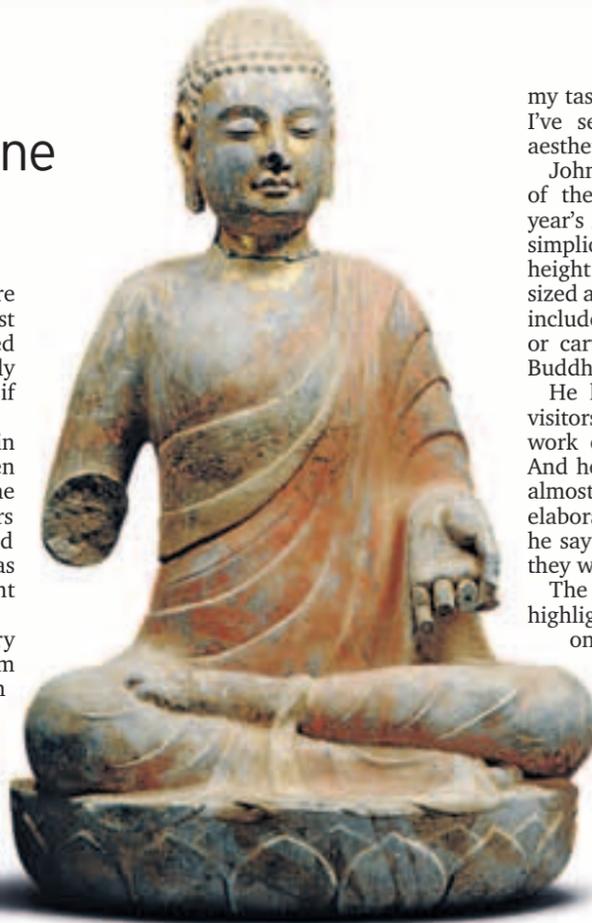
"But why bother to dig them up and bury them again?" Yang says. "Another problem which adds to the mysterious phenomenon is that most of the sculptures have no inscription. This is unusual because most Chinese Buddhist sculpture will bear inscriptions about the date and who created them and for what reason. Usually it's carved on a plinth."

A clue may lie 80 kilometres away from the site of the Longxing Temple, where an inscription was found in another pit containing Buddhist figures, says the London archaeologist Dr Lukas Nickel. The inscription refers to two travelling monks who, in 1004, came across the ruins of a temple where Buddhist figures lay abandoned in its grounds.

"They felt pity for these religious images, so they collected them and put them in a pit with a pagoda on top. And then they invited all the monks from all the towns around to attend a ceremony," says Nickel, who will speak today at an international conference held in conjunction with the exhibition. "So it's basically an act of reverence. The inscription tells us that the monks from the Longxing Temple in Qingzhou participated. So they should know about how to deal with broken figures."

What is not in doubt is the unique style and serene beauty of the figures. Gallery director Edmund Capon, a specialist in Chinese art, says that although he was aware of the archaeological find, nothing prepared him for the impact of standing before them when they went on show in Beijing about a year after their discovery.

"I was absolutely amazed because of their distinctiveness in the tradition of Chinese Buddhist sculpture. It was the same language



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but a different vocabulary," Capon says. "They are probably the most eloquent and beautiful sculpture out of the Chinese tradition. What took me aback when I first saw them was the degree of sophistication and abstraction."

Capon was impressed by the enigmatic smiles that hint at the inner contentment of beings who have reached nirvana, or spiritual enlightenment. "The smile evolved slightly and became a smile of immense self-satisfaction by the mid-6th century," Capon says. "It's almost supercilious, [as if] they say, 'Look, I've got to paradise, I'm sorry you're not joining me.'"

Part of what makes the figures so distinct is the dramatic change in style over just a few decades. They were created between about 500 and 577, during which time the stiff earlier icons transform into more human, approachable figures. It is as if the Buddha has loosened up and become less aloof. This change is most apparent in the way the robes are depicted, from garments that disguise the figure to robes that reveal it (see box.) For the later robes cling like wet T-shirts.

"We're talking about the 6th century when things moved very slow. Yet [the figures] went from this kind of formalism to conveying extraordinary human and sensuous sensibilities – and they did it over the space of a couple of decades. It is one of the great revelations," Capon says.

The figures were a revelation, too, to Sydney architect Richard Johnson, the exhibition's designer. He visited London's Royal Academy in 2002 when some were on display and was impressed by their timeless quality, as if they had been carved yesterday.

"They had an aura about them, unlike many Buddhas I'd seen," he says. "Many Buddhist sculptures are far too elaborate for

my taste ... this is the first group of Buddhas I've seen that affect me at that sublime aesthetic level."

Johnson – who has designed a number of the gallery's exhibitions, including last year's *Arts Of Islam* show – says his aim is simplicity, to give the works the space and height they need. Many works are almost life-sized and the largest is three metres tall. They include single freestanding figures and steles, or carved blocks, which typically feature a Buddha flanked by two bodhisattvas.

He has created a design that will allow visitors to see some of the unusually detailed work on the back of some of the figures. And he has placed the sculptures against an almost-black background. "It should not be elaborate because the works are so sublime," he says. "You could put them anywhere and they would command attention."

The simple setting is also designed to highlight the remarkable colours still evident on some statues. The enduring pigments

– extremely rare among figures of such antiquity – allow us to read some of the layers of meaning that an ancient devotee would have readily grasped, Liu Yang says. For the Buddhist sculptures were created not as works of art but as a way to convey philosophical ideas to the population.

The coloured patchwork design – originally vermilion – visible on a number of the statues is not just a reminder that the Buddha was a poor monk in patched robes, Yang says.

"It resembles the rice fields. The idea is that if a follower of Buddhism pays respect to the monks and everything related to Buddhism, he will get rewards. Just like a farmer working in a field. If you work hard you can expect a harvest."

The figures have been scrutinised not just for the ideas they convey but for what they reveal about the way Buddhism spread across China from its Indian birthplace, says Roderick Whitfield, emeritus professor of Chinese and East Asian Art at the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies.

Buddhism probably reached China overland through Central Asia via the so-called Silk Road, creating the great Buddhist cave temples at Dunhuang, Yungang and Longmen along the way. But the later Qingzhou sculptures show a remarkable similarity to the figure-conscious statues of India's celebrated Gupta period – from 320 to 550 – and this suggests another more direct route.

"The main thing about these sculptures – aside from their extraordinary beauty – is they give us the idea that there was a second avenue by which Buddhist imagery arrived in China," Whitfield says. "We have to look at Shandong and the possibility of a sea route."

There are accounts of monks travelling by sea, including a 5th-century Chinese monk named Faxian who returned from India and Sri Lanka with Buddhist scriptures. He landed in the coastal province of Shandong and travelled to Qingzhou. "This find from Qingzhou gives us the greatest wealth of evidence for that sea route," he says.

We know, too, that this part of Shandong had a flourishing Buddhist culture, says Whitfield, who will speak today on the making of Buddhist images in China at the Sydney conference. So why were so many images made?

"The idea was that because the Buddha lived a long time ago, unfortunately there was no opportunity to listen to his teaching," Whitfield says. "But it was held that if you make a statue of him, as long as it was a good likeness, it was the next best thing to listening to the Buddha himself."

*The Lost Buddhas: Chinese Buddhist Sculpture From Qingzhou* is at the Art Gallery of NSW.

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Slide show: unwrapping the lost Buddhas of China



Face to face ... gallery conservator Sun Yu examines a Buddha head.

Photo: Marco Del Grande

