

Article

# The Image Transformation and Literary Writing of Buddhist Temples in Northern Wei Luoyang

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**Abstract:** This article examines the functional transformation of Buddhist temples from religious edifices to elements of the political landscape in Northern Wei Luoyang, in order to elucidate the grandiose portrayal of these temples in geographical records. The proliferation of Buddhism significantly altered the spatial configuration of the capital city, previously dominated by imperial architectural complexes. Buddhist temples emerged as emblematic structures of Luoyang, surpassing palaces in prominence due to their extensive occupation of urban space, enhancement of the empire's international standing, and involvement in the political vicissitudes of Northern Wei. Yang Xuanzhi drew upon the literary techniques of Han *fu* 漢賦, particularly its elaborate descriptive style, to articulate the sentiments of the emperor's subjects and extol the ruler's virtue while subtly conveying criticism and advice. By shaping Buddhist temples into imperial landscapes, Yang Xuanzhi conferred on Luoyang a legitimacy comparable to that of the Han Dynasty. The evolving social functions and literary representations of Buddhist temples during the Northern Wei Dynasty reflect the profound integration of Buddhism, politics, and literature.

**Keywords:** Northern Wei; Luoyang; Buddhist temples; Yang Xuanzhi; imperial identity; rhapsodic presentation

## 1. Introduction

With the fall of the Northern Wei Dynasty 北魏 (386–534 CE), the city walls of the capital Luoyang 洛陽 crumbled, the palaces lay in ruins, and the temples fell into extensive disrepair. As recorded by Yang Xuanzhi 楊銜之, “There used to be over a thousand temples both inside and outside the city. However, those temples are now empty and deserted, with few bells ringing.” (Yang 2018, p. 2). The numerous temples not only bore witness to the flourishing of Buddhism in Luoyang during the Northern Wei period but also encapsulated the zenith of the dynasty's prosperity.

Following the Heyin 河陰 Rebellion in the first year of Wutai 武泰元年 (528 CE), the Northern Wei Dynasty began its gradual decline. Er Zhu Rong 爾朱榮 took control of the court and attempted to usurp the throne. Later, Gao Huan 高歡 replaced Er Zhu and installed Emperor Xiaojing 孝靜帝, relocating him to move to Yecheng 鄴城. During this relocation, Gao Huan not only moved 400,000 households from Luoyang to Yecheng but also mobilized 100,000 craftsmen to demolish the palace of Luoyang. Consequently, the former Northern Wei capital, Luoyang, was almost reduced to ruins, with “the wealthy abandoning their houses, the poor carrying their belongings, and nearly all fleeing, leaving less than one-tenth of the population behind” (Sima 1956, p. 4744). In the fifth year of Wuding 武定五年 (547 CE) during the Eastern Wei Dynasty 東魏 (534–550 CE), Yang Xuanzhi, a former courtier of Northern Wei, returned to Luoyang and was profoundly saddened by



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the desolation of the ruined City. The dilapidated palaces and temples served as poignant reminders of the passage of time. As Alain Schnapp noted, “ruins are material monuments fated to endure decomposition by the passage of time, but also quasi-immaterial constructions arising from the memory of human beings and from their influence on animals” (Alain 2018, p. 160). These ruins not only evoked the author’s sorrow for his homeland but also inspired him to revisit the historical site and leave a lasting memorial. Driven by his loyalty to the previous dynasty, Yang Xuanzhi decided to write *The Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Luoyang* (*Luoyang Qielan Ji* 洛陽伽藍記) to recreate the grandeur of the former capital and the imperial style of the Northern Wei Dynasty.

However, given Yang Xuanzhi’s strong dynastic reverence, why did he choose Buddhist monasteries (*qielan*<sup>1</sup> 伽藍) as a lens to showcase the dynasty’s heyday? Generally speaking, the palace is the quintessential symbol of kingship and the heart of a city or even a country, and no other kind of building can better reflect the main ideas, history, and traditions of society at that time. In contrast, Buddhist monasteries are primarily religious structures, with a construction history in China far shorter than that of Confucian architecture. Since the Eastern Han Dynasty 東漢 (25–220 CE), Buddhism has been extensively propagated in China. During the Northern Wei Dynasty, Buddhism flourished remarkably. To promote Buddhism, rulers constructed a substantial number of Buddhist temples. Although these temples were primarily responsible for disseminating Buddhism, their political status did not surpass that of Confucian ritual architecture. Yang Xuanzhi’s decision to convey political sentiments through descriptions of Buddhist temples suggests that the political function and social role of Buddhist temples in Luoyang during the Northern Wei Dynasty had undergone significant changes. This indicates that the political function and social role of monasteries, as well as the Buddhism they symbolized in Northern Wei Luoyang, had transformed considerably. Buddhism played a crucial role in legitimizing Northern Wei rulership. Buddhist temples became structures where commoners interacted on a daily basis (Ling 2024, p. 1). The rulers of Northern Wei politicized the height of temples, embedding symbolic meanings into it, equating the height of temples with the strength of power (Li 2020, p. 170). Finally, Tuoba Hong 拓跋宏 consolidated monarchical power through Buddhism by creating the impression that Pingcheng 平城 remained the regime’s center (Zhao et al. 2022, p. 11). Therefore, this article examines the functional evolution of Buddhist temples in the Northern Wei Dynasty and explores the mutual influence between Buddhism, politics, and literature by analyzing the special appearance of Buddhist temples in geographical records. We intend to explore not only the Buddhist manipulation of urban landscapes and the imperial identity of Buddhist temples, but also the relationship between Buddhist temples and literary writing.

## 2. Yang Xuanzhi’s Worship of Northern Wei Luoyang

### 2.1. Reasons for Yang Xuanzhi’s Admiration of Luoyang

In the third year of Yongxi 永熙三年 (534 CE), Gao Huan kidnapped the Northern Wei Emperor and moved the capital from Luoyang to Yecheng, marking the end of the Northern Wei Dynasty. Gao seized power by relying on the forces of the Six Towns (*liuzhen* 六鎮) soldiers, who were an armed group that had been Xianbeiized 鮮卑 and had an instinctive resistance to Sinicization. Consequently, when Gao came to power, he had to revive Xianbei culture to some extent to satisfy the political and cultural needs of the soldiers of the Six Towns. This led to a large number of Han scholars defecting to the highly ritualized and musically advanced Southern Liang 梁 (502–557 CE) regime. Gao Huan once expressed his concern: “There is an old man Xiao Yan 蕭衍 in Jiangdong who specializes in ritual and music, and the scholars in China’s central plain regard him as the legitimate figure. If I hastily enact laws to punish corrupt officials, fearing that the generals will de-

fect to the south and the scholars will flee to Xiaoyan, then all people will disperse. How can we govern the country?" (Li 1972, pp. 347–48).

The reason why Gao Huan's move of the capital caused Han scholars to rebel was that Luoyang had always been regarded by Chinese people as a legitimate capital. The Huaxia ethnic group had the tradition of building a capital in the center, and "center" specifically referred to the area of Luoyang. In fact, "Luoyang was referred to by historians as the center of everything below heaven (*tianxia zhi zhong* 天下之中). It obtained this appellation due to its strategic location and natural geographical advantages" (Ling 2024, p. 2). Dynasties such as the Western Zhou 西周 (1046–771 BCE), Han 漢 (202–220 BCE), Wei 曹魏 (220–266 CE), and Western Jin 西晉 (266–317 CE) all established their capitals in Luoyang, reinforcing the traditional concept of building a capital in the center. When Emperor Xiaowen moved the capital to Luoyang, he aimed to return to the "emperor's residence (*dizhai* 帝宅)" and the "royal lane (*wangle* 王里)". He said to Yuan Cheng 元澄, King of Rencheng 任城王: "Xiaohan 峯函 is the emperor's residence, and Heluo 河洛 is the royal lane. Therefore, I hope to occupy the center of the world through large-scale capital relocation. What is your opinion, Ren Cheng?" (Wei 1974, p. 464). Establishing the capital in Luoyang aligned with the legitimate expectations of the Han scholars for the regime. Han Yanzhi 韓延之 instructed his descendants to bury him in Heluo because it was "the capital of the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties" (Wei 1974, p. 880). Li Shao 李韶 also expressed deep admiration for Luoyang: "Luoyang is the ancient place where the nine tripods (*jiuding* 九鼎) were placed and the long-term reliance of the country's fortune. Due to its central location, tribute routes of various vassal states are balanced. There is no more suitable place for the emperor to establish a country than here" (Wei 1974, p. 886).

In addition to geographic dominance, the more important reason Han scholars identified with Luoyang was that after Emperor Xiaowen's reforms, Luoyang re-emerged as a place where Chinese culture flourished. As the former capital of several past dynasties, Luoyang precipitated a long history and rich cultural heritage. In the view of the Han people at that time, whoever could conquer Songluo 嵩洛 symbolized cultural legitimacy. After moving the capital, Emperor Xiaowen vigorously developed Han culture in Luoyang, continuing the cultural legitimacy of the Zhou and Han dynasties. *Biographies of Confucianism* (*rulin zhuan* 儒林傳) in the *History of Northern Dynasties* (*beishi* 北史) recorded the flourishing of culture and education in Luoyang:

及遷都洛邑，詔立國子、太學、四門小學... 於是斯文鬱然，比隆周、漢... 時天下承平，學業大盛，故燕、齊、趙、魏之間，橫經著錄，不可勝數。

As soon as the capital was relocated to Luoyi, imperial edicts were issued to establish Guozi, Taixue, and Simen elementary schools... As a result, Confucianism flourished, and its prosperity could be compared to that of the Zhou and Han dynasties... At that time, the world was peaceful, and academic studies were very prosperous, so the number of people with records of studying classics in the Yan, Qi, Zhao, and Wei regions was countless. (Li 1974, p. 2704)

The developed culture of Luoyang brought great identity and regime confidence to scholars of Northern Wei. This is why Xiao Luan 蕭鸞, the southern emperor, persuaded Cui Sengyuan 崔僧淵 to surrender by condemning his entering Northern Wei under indefensible reasons, and why Cui Sengyuan firmly took Northern Wei as being legitimate. Yang Xuanzhi recognized the Northern Wei Dynasty as being legitimate because it revived the etiquette and customs of the Zhou Dynasty. *The Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Luoyang* contains a dialog between the northern and southern scholars arguing about the legitimacy. Chen Qingzhi 陳慶之, a southerner, thought that although the Wei Dynasty

was very prosperous, it was still a barbarous branch of the five nomadic northern tribes (*wuhu* 五胡). Yang Yuanshen 楊元慎 refuted his view as follows:

我魏膺篆受圖，定鼎嵩洛，五山為鎮，四海為家。移風易俗之典，與五帝而並；禮樂憲章之盛，凌百王而獨高。

The Great Wei accepted the mandate of heaven and established a foundation between Mount Song and the Luo River, with the five mountains as our town and the four seas as our homes. The rules and regulations for changing customs and traditions were no different from those of the Five Emperors period. The prosperity of the ritual and music surpassed that of a hundred kings. (Yang 2018, p. 120)

Yang Xuanzhi expressed his political stance through the words of Yang Yuanshen, stating that the prosperity of Luoyang's ritual and music civilization rightfully represents the legitimate dynasty of China.

## 2.2. Reflections on Yang Xuanzhi's Veneration of Luoyang

Yang Xuanzhi's dissatisfaction with the Gao regime and his admiration for Northern Wei Luoyang are clearly manifested in *The Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Luoyang*. For major events during the late Northern Wei Dynasty, Yang generally provided a detailed account of the entire process. However, Yang did not elaborate on important events such as Gao Huan pacifying the rebellion of Erzhu Rong and helping Yuan Lang 元朗 and Yuan Xiu 元修 to become emperors, mere saying "during the difficult period of Yongxi, the imperial court relocated to Yecheng" (Yang 2018, p. 1). "The difficult period of Yongxi" refers to Gao Huan's conquest of Erzhu Zhao 爾朱兆 and entry into Luoyang, while "the imperial court's relocating to Yecheng" refers to the capital relocation led by Gao Huan. Despite these events being conducted by Gao, Yang did not mention Gao Huan's name in his account. Interestingly, Gao appeared only twice in *The Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Luoyang*. First, when Yang recorded the temples outside the capital, he mentioned that "on North Mount Mang (*beimang shan* 北邙山) there is the Temple of King Feng (*fengwang si* 馮王寺) and Temple of King Xianwu of Qi (*qi xianwu wang si* 齊獻武王寺)" (Yang 2018, p. 259). Second, when recounting the vicissitudes of Stone Classics (*shijing* 石經), he noted that "in the fourth year of Wuding 武定四年 (546 CE), the general moved Stone Classics to Yecheng" (Yang 2018, p. 144). As an important figure who influenced the political situation of Northern Wei and was in power during the Wei 北魏 and Qi 北齊 (550–577 CE) dynasties, Gao Huan was almost invisible in *The Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Luoyang*. When Wei Shou 魏收 compiled history, he defended Gao Huan, either concealing his faults or emphasizing his merits, in an effort to "destroy Wei by taking Qi as a fellow party" (Zhao 2013, p. 263). Yang Xuanzhi, who also served the Gao regime, chose to downplay Gao Huan's contributions, which was markedly different from Wei Shou's favorable stance towards Gao Huan.

Yongning Temple (*yongning si* 永寧寺), built for the Empress Dowager Ling (*ling taihou* 靈太后) who revered Buddhism, replaced Lingyun Tower (*lingyun tai* 凌雲台) as the tallest building in Luoyang, symbolizing the supreme imperial power of the Northern Wei Dynasty. Wei Shou embraced the Gao regime, so he viewed the collapse of Yongning Temple as a positive event. It was recorded in the *Book of Wei* 魏書 as follows:

永熙三年二月，永寧寺九層佛圖災。既而時人咸言有人見佛圖飛入東海中。永寧佛圖，靈像所在，天意若曰：永寧見災，魏不寧矣。渤海，齊獻武王之本封也，神靈歸海，則齊室將興之驗也。

In February of the third year of Yongxi, a fire broke out on the nine-layered pagoda of Yongning Temple. Afterwards, people on site said that someone saw

the pagoda fly into the East Sea. Yongning pagoda is where the figure of Buddha is located. It seems that the will of heaven is saying that a fire in Yongning indicates that Wei will not be peaceful. Bohai Sea was originally the fiefdom of King Xianwu of Qi. If the Buddha statue returned to sea, it would be a sign of prosperity for the Qi Dynasty. (Wei 1974, p. 2913)

The East Sea<sup>2</sup> is the birthplace of Gao Huan. The fact that the stupa flew into the sea implies that the destruction of Yongning Temple gave birth to the Qi Dynasty. Clearly the collapse of Yongning Temple had positive significance in Wei Shou's opinion. However, Yang Xuanzhi's view of this event was very different from that of Wei Shou:

其年五月中，有人從東萊郡來，云：“見浮圖於海中。光明照耀，儼然如新，海上之民，咸皆見之；俄然霧起，浮圖遂隱。”至七月中，平陽王為侍中斛斯椿所使，奔於長安。十月，而京師遷鄴。

In mid-May of that year, someone from Donglai County said, “I saw the pagoda in the sea, shining brightly like new. The people on the beach also said that they had seen it. Suddenly, the fog rose and the pagoda disappeared.” In July, King of Pingyang was held hostage by his attendant Hu Sichun and escaped to Chang'an. In October, Emperor of Wei moved the capital northward to Yecheng. (Yang 2018, p. 17)

In contrast to Wei Shou's use of the stupa flying into the East Sea as a sign of Gao's future prosperity, Yang's portrayal of the pagoda's disappearance implied the relocation of the capital to Yecheng. While Wei emphasized the positive impact of the destruction of the Yongning Temple on Gaoqi, Yang saw the collapse of Yongning Temple as a tragic end to the Northern Wei Dynasty. From this, we can see that Yang recounted the rise and fall of Luoyang from the perspective of a former courtier of the Northern Wei Dynasty and always respected the legitimacy of the Luoyang regime.

### 2.3. Yang Xuanzhi's Selection of Buddhist Temples in Luoyang

Gao Huan moved the capital to Yecheng, far away from the traditional territory of the Huaxia dynasties and undermined the cultural beliefs of the Han people. When Yang Xuanzhi returned to Luoyang, he could not help but feel a strong sense of revival. To preserve the memory of his former capital, he decided to “write this record for fear that there would be no biography in future generations” (Yang 2018, p. 1). The Qing 清 (1644–1911 CE) scholar Wu Ruozhun 吳若准 believed that Yang “used the name of Buddhist temples to record the affairs of the imperial capital” (Fan 1978, p. 366). This raises the question: why did Yang choose to write about “Buddhist temples” rather than imperial palaces to recreate the “imperial capital”? The palace is the heart of a city or even a country, and no building can better reflect the main ideas, history, and traditions of society at that time than the palace. Since the Han Dynasty, writing about the capital has often used palaces as symbols of the capital. For example, “the capital *fu* 京都賦 of Ban Gu 班固 and Zhang Heng 張衡 displayed palaces such as Weiyang 未央, Jianzhang 建章, Zhaoyang 昭陽, and Shanglin garden 上林苑 as iconic buildings of the Western Han Dynasty” (Cao 2006, p. 93). Yang Xuanzhi's choice of Buddhist temples instead of imperial palaces indicates that “Buddhist temples” had special significance for the Northern Wei Dynasty and the capital Luoyang. He noted in the preface of *The Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Luoyang* that the construction of Buddhist temples began with the White Horse Temple (*baima si* 白馬寺) during Emperor Ming 明帝's reign in the Eastern Han Dynasty. By the Yongjia era (307–311 CE) under Emperor Huai of Jin 晉懷帝, there were only 42 Buddhist temples. After the Northern Wei Dynasty relocated its capital to Luoyang, the number of Buddhist temples surged dramatically. At the zenith of Buddhism, there were as many as 1367 temples. However, after

Emperor Xiaojing 孝靜帝 moved the capital to Yecheng, only 421 temples remained. Yang Xuanzhi contrasted the former opulence and grandeur of the Luoyang Buddhist temples with their current dilapidated and desolate state, thereby expressing his reflections on the rise and fall of the nation. His observations also reveal a critical stance towards Buddhism.

### 3. The Evolution of the Functional Roles of Buddhist Temples in Northern Wei Luoyang

#### 3.1. Buddhist Temples' Encroachment on the Spatial Domains of the Northern Wei Capital

Unlike previous capitals, Buddhist temples in Northern Wei Luoyang became the most important spatial buildings reflecting imperial power. In ancient times, the Holy King built palaces to accommodate people who lived in caves, making palaces the foundation and an important symbol of the dynasty.<sup>3</sup> Generally speaking, representative buildings of the capital are imperial architecture complexes, such as palaces, temples, and the emperor's mausoleums. These buildings controlled the spatial landscape of the capital; for example, about two-thirds of the space in the capital Chang'an during the Western Han Dynasty was occupied by political buildings. However, with the flourishing of Buddhism, the space of the capital, Luoyang, in the Northern Wei Dynasty broke the traditional pattern dominated by palaces. After the capital relocation, Buddhist temples took over nearly one-third of the residential land. Some cities were filled with Buddhist temples, and some streets were dotted with them. The sounds of reciting scriptures and the noise of daily life echoed together. Buddha statues and pagodas coexisted with the pungent smell of livestock, and the Buddha's nature and spirit were intertwined with the greed for money, creating a mixed authenticity (Wei 1974, p. 3045).

The support of rulers for Buddhism led to the rapid spread of Buddhist temples throughout Luoyang City, resulting in the occupation of residential buildings. This phenomenon emerged more than twenty years after Emperor Xiaowen moved the capital during the reign of Empress Dowager Ling. In order to compensate for the lack of legitimacy brought about by her female dominance, Empress Dowager Ling shaped her image as a Buddhist Chakravartin (*zhuanlun wang* 轉輪王), promoted Buddhist beliefs, and strengthened the sanctity of her rule from both religious and political dimensions. With her support, Buddhist pagodas not only spread throughout the capital but also competed to be the tallest building in the city. Yang Xuanzhi depicted this scene:

王侯貴臣，棄象馬如脫屣；庶士豪家，舍資財若遺跡。於是昭提櫛比，寶塔駢，爭寫天上之姿，競摹山中之影，金刹與靈臺比高，講殿共阿房等壯。豈直木衣緋繡，土被朱紫而已哉！

Princes and vassals abandoned elephants and horses like taking off shoes, and the commoners and wealthy families gave up their assets as relics. Therefore, Buddhist temples were aligned like comb teeth, and pagodas were arranged in rows. Temples competed to depict the posture of the Buddha descending from the sky and imitated the form and shadow of the Buddha on Mount Lu. The monastery was as high as the Han's Lingtai, and the vast main hall was as magnificent as Qin's E-Fang Palace. It is not just about wearing embroidered clothes on wood and red and purple clothes on soil. (Yang 2018, p. 1)

Lingtai 靈台, as a medium of communication between heaven and humans, was created as the tallest building in the capital to observe celestial phenomena and judge demons and auspiciousness (Mao 2018, p. 373). The Buddhist temples in Luoyang were comparable in height to Lingtai, with King of Ru'nán 汝南王 even "building a stupa with bricks on top of Lingtai" (Yang 2018, p. 140). Although the foundation of Luoyang Lingtai was dilapidated, it was still over five *zhang* 丈 high, while Yongning Temple is "ninety *zhang* high,

with some pagodas reaching ten *zhang*, about a thousand feet above the ground” (Yang 2018, p. 11). The Buddhist temple, whose height surpassed Lingtai, had achieved control over the capital landscape. As Yang Xuanzhi said, “You can see it from afar a hundred miles away from the capital” (Yang 2018, p. 11). Buddhist temples, with their towering presence, completely overshadowed other buildings, replacing Confucian architecture as a symbol of imperial power.

### 3.2. The Role of Buddhist Temples in Enhancing the International Status of Northern Wei

Northern Wei Luoyang was not only the political center, but also a hub for Buddhism. When Emperor Daowu 道武帝 first settled in China’s central plain, he placed great emphasis on the development of Buddhism and issued a decree to “build decorative halls and renovate palaces in the capital so that believers can have a place to stay” (Wei 1974, p. 3292). Although Buddhism faced suppression under Emperor Taiwu 太武帝, it was soon revitalized during Emperor Gaozong 高宗’s reign, when “the temples destroyed in the past had been repaired, and the Buddha statues and scriptures had all been restored” (Wei 1974, p. 3298). After settling in Luoyang, the development of Buddhism reached its peak. By then, there were 13,727 monasteries in the states (Wei 1974, p. 3042). Wei Shou described the prevalence of Buddhism in the Northern Wei Dynasty in detail:

魏有天下，至於禪讓，佛經流通，大集中國，凡有四百一十五部，合一千九百一十九卷。正光已後，天下多虞，王役尤甚，於是所在編民，相與入道，假慕沙門，實避調役，猥濫之極，自中國之有佛法，未之有也。略而計之，僧尼大眾二百萬矣，其寺三萬有餘。流弊不歸，一至於此，識者所以歎息也。

From the establishment of Northern Wei until its abdication to the Qi and Zhou dynasties, Buddhist scriptures circulated widely, totaling 415 books and 1919 volumes. After the Zhengguang period, there were frequent disturbances and heavy labor led people from all over the country to flee to Buddhist sects, using the pretext of admiring monks to avoid taxation and labor. This resulted in an unprecedented proliferation of Buddhists, with approximately 2,000,000 monks and nuns and over 30,000 temples. The continuous stream of malpractices and the inability to return to the right path has caused wise people to sigh. (Wei 1974, p. 3048)

This grand occasion amazed Buddhist monks from the Western Regions 西域 who came to visit. Western Buddhists marveled at the grandeur of Yongning Temple, saying:

年一百五十歲，曆涉諸國，靡不周遍，而此寺精麗，閻浮所無也。極佛境界，亦未有此！

I am already 150 years old and have traveled extensively through various countries, but the exquisite beauty of this temple is something that India does not have, even in the realm of extreme Buddhism. (Yang 2018, p. 13)

Jingming Temple (*jingming si* 景明寺) held Buddhist rituals with exquisite statues and stunning Sanskrit music, attracting countless foreign monks to participate. Yang Xuanzhi described the grand scene:

時佛法經像，盛於洛陽，異國沙門，咸來輻輳，負錫持經，適茲樂土。

At that time, Buddhist scriptures flourished in Luoyang, where monks from different countries gathered, holding Zen sticks and scriptures, coming to this paradise. (Yang 2018, pp. 213–14)

The flourishing of Buddhism in Northern Wei Luoyang greatly enhanced the regime’s international influence. People hung thousands of Wei banners on the golden statues of

the large temple in Hanmo Cheng 捍磨城, more than 10,000 miles away from Luoyang, inscribed with dates such as the nineteenth year of Taihe 太和十九年 (495 CE), the second year of Jingming 景明二年 (501 CE), and the second year of Yanchang 延昌二年 (513 CE). The King of Wuchang Kingdom (*wuchang guo* 烏場國) reverently saluted the Buddha and asked the Northern Wei envoys about Buddhism. After hearing Song Yun 宋雲's and Huishen 惠生's description of the Buddha, the King longed for Luoyang: "If it is as you say, it is the land of the Buddha. When I die, I wish to be born in that land" (Yang 2018, p. 226). Based on a common religious belief, Northern Wei not only established good diplomatic relations with the Western countries, but also became an object of worship for Westerners. Yang Xuanzhi's use of Buddhist temples to link the historical events naturally shows the international influence of Luoyang.

### 3.3. Buddhist Temples as Testimonies to the Rise and Fall of the Northern Wei Dynasty

The special significance of Buddhist monasteries to Luoyang also lies in their deep involvement in the Northern Wei Dynasty's transition from prosperity to decline. These massive and beautifully constructed temples not only showcased the vigor and vitality of the capital Luoyang but also symbolized the strength of the Northern Wei Empire. They witnessed the flourishing and invigorating of Luoyang and then saw it wither away. Buddhist temples were the first to predict the end of Northern Wei's fate. For example, the vase at Yongning Temple being blown down by the wind foreshadowed events such as Erzhu Rong's entry into Luoyang, while the golden statue outside Pingdeng Temple (*pingdeng si* 平等寺) symbolized the auspiciousness of the country. Second, several key political events are closely related to Buddhist temples. In the first year of Jianyi 建義元年 (528 CE), Erzhu Rong launched a rebellion in front of Yongning Temple and proclaimed Yuan Ziyou 元子攸 as emperor. In the second year of Yong'an 永安二年 (529 CE), Yuan Hao, the king of the North Sea, attacked Luoyang and gathered troops at Yongning Temple. In the third year of Yong'an 永安三年 (530 CE), Erzhu Zhao attacked Luoyang, imprisoned Emperor Xiaozhuang 孝莊帝 in Yongning Temple, and later assassinated him on the third level the Buddhist temple in Jinyang. Emperor Jiemin 節閔帝 was deposed by Gao Huan in Chongxun Temple (*chongxun si* 崇訓寺). The rise and fall of the Northern Wei Dynasty were closely linked to monasteries. Therefore, it is extremely reasonable for Yang Xuanzhi to connect the developmental clues of Northern Wei with Buddhist temples.

Buddhist temples represent the supreme authority of Luoyang in both politics and religion, symbolizing its central position domestically and internationally. They replaced the palace as the iconic building of the capital. Judging from the title and style of *The Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Luoyang*, it appears to be a book primarily focused on Buddhism, leading researchers to concentrate on Yang Xuanzhi's attitude towards Buddhism. In fact, Yang did not write about the splendor and magnificence of Buddhist temples to criticize the ruler's sycophancy towards Buddhism but rather used these temples to show the grandeur of the former capital, Luoyang. Yang Xuanzhi's true purpose was to express nostalgia for the past glory, not to promote Buddhism. Driven by on his strong sense of mission for the former capital, Yang aimed to preserve the memory of Luoyang out of fear that it would not be passed on to future generations. His intention to document and preserve Buddhist temples was far greater than any intention to judge or critique them.

## 4. Writing About Temples Through Han *fu*: Literary Strategies in Imperial Landscape Depiction

Since Buddhist temples have special significance for Luoyang, Buddhist writing cannot be carried out in the usual way. Before *The Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Luoyang*, there were already a number of geographic records of the capital, Luoyang. These docu-

ments adhered to the principle of “factual evidence” and maintained a calm and objective tone, such as Yang Quanqi 楊佺期’s *The Map of Luoyang* (*Luoyang Tu* 洛陽圖), Lu Ji 陸機’s *The Record of Luoyang* (*Luoyang Ji* 洛陽記), and Hua Yanjun 華延儁’s *The Record of Luoyang* (*Luoyang Ji* 洛陽記). The writing style of *The Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Luoyang* differs from that of these geographic records. Modern scholar Wang Wentao 王文燾 pointed out that *The Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Luoyang* “reminisced about the grand events of that day, using beautiful and elegant strokes to record the strange and solemn stories” (Fan 1978, p. 379). Yang Xuanzhi’s literary strategies transcended the stylistic characteristics of geographic records by incorporating elegant narratives and rhapsodic presentations.

*The Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Luoyang* provides a comprehensive view of the capital, as Liu Zhiji 劉知幾 said: “All the affairs of the capital are recorded in this book” (Liu 2009, p. 68). The earliest writings about the capital can be traced back to the pre-Qin 先秦 period. Wenwang Yousheng 文王有聲 in *Book of Songs* (*Shijing* 詩經) depicts the spectacular scene of the completion of Haojing 鎬京, which set the precedent for writing about capitals. The *Strategies of Warring States* (*Zhan’guo Ce* 戰國策) portrays the bustling scene of the capital Linzi 臨淄, demonstrating the strength of the country. In these works, capital cities often appear as backgrounds, while the capital *fu* of the Han Dynasties passionately describes them as independent subjects, presenting the grandeur of political capitals centered around the palaces. In contrast, *The Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Luoyang* takes Buddhist temples as the center to demonstrate the glory of the capital city. Historically, Buddhist temples replaced palaces for the first time as the “imperial landscape” of the capital. Correspondingly, in the literary field, Yang Xuanzhi transformed Buddhist temples into an “imperial landscape” through rhapsodic performance.

#### 4.1. Drawing Inspiration from the Rhapsodic Presentation Techniques of Han *fu*

Yang Xuanzhi drew on the Han *fu* writing style, characterized by constant and extreme hyperbole, to highlight the grandeur of Luoyang’s Buddhist temples. Grand Han *fu* (*han dafu* 漢大賦) emphasized the presentation of physical objects within a certain spatial order, with Ban Gu’s *Fu on the Two Capitals* (*Liangdu Fu* 兩都賦) being a typical representative. Yang Xuanzhi laid out the spatial structure and then filled in the objects accordingly, achieving the same effect of “strengthening the internal spatial order and controlling the unity” (Liu 1996, p. 142) as seen in Han *fu*. Ban Gu wrote *Fu on the Two Capitals* with the aim of “dazzling the masses”, and the dazzling effect is inseparable from extravagant descriptions. Yang Xuanzhi showcased the beauty of Buddhist temples’ makeup, as seen in the description of Fayun Temple 法雲寺:

佛殿僧房，皆為胡飾。丹素炫彩，金玉垂輝，摹寫真容，似丈六之見鹿苑；神光壯麗，若金剛之在雙林。

Buddhist temples and monk rooms are decorated with red and white foreign elements, showcasing their brilliance with gold and jade radiance. The copied Buddha statues resemble the Buddha seen in Luyuan.<sup>4</sup> The divine light of the Buddha statue is magnificent, like the Buddha seen in front of Shuanglin.<sup>5</sup> (Yang 2018, p. 188)

Yang also described the capital city’s abundance of materials, such as in the north part of the city:

多諸工商貨殖之民。千金比屋，層樓對出，重門啟扇，閣道交通，迭相臨望。金銀錦繡，奴婢緹衣；五味八珍，僕隸畢口。

Residents were mostly engaged in business transactions. Wealthy families lived in houses connected to each other, with high-rise buildings facing each other, many doors open, and passages crisscrossing. They were adorned with gold,

silver, and brocade, and the maidservants wore gorgeous clothes. They enjoyed delicious food and luxurious living conditions. (Yang 2018, p. 190)

Yang Xuanzhi's writing deliberately incorporated the charm of Han *fu* to convey the exaggerated essence of a specific subject. (Cao 1995, p. 11)

#### 4.2. Drawing Inspiration from the Satirical Spirit of Han *fu*

Yang Xuanzhi not only described the objective objects to the utmost, but also embedded irony about the dynasty in his description. Ban Gu mentioned two functions that the *fu* had at the imperial court: "Sometimes it was for the purpose of expressing feelings of the emperor's subjects and conveying subtle criticism and advice, and other times it was for the purpose of proclaiming the ruler's virtue and demonstrating the utmost loyalty and filial obedience" (Martin 2011, p. 155). He emphasized that there should be the connotations of "criticism and advice" in the gorgeous rhetoric. Yang Xuanzhi's writing of Buddhist temples also contained these purposes proposed by Ban Gu. For example, Yang depicted scenes of people visiting Hejian Temple (*hejian si* 河間寺) in the capital:

入其後園，見溝瀆蹇產，石磴礁嶢，朱荷出池，綠萍浮水，飛梁跨閣，高樹出，咸皆唧唧，雖梁王兔苑，想之不如也。

Entering the backyard, one can see winding ditches, high stone steps, red lotus leaves emerging from the pond, green duckweed floating in the water, flying bridges spanning pavilions, tall trees rising from the clouds, and all chirping and admiring. Even the Tuyuan Garden of King Xiaowang of Liang cannot compare. (Yang 2018, p. 192)

Yang Xuanzhi's gorgeous rhetoric was full of admiration for Hejian Temple's exquisite shape and beautiful scenery. Hejian Temple was massive in scale and cost, its splendor surpassing even that of the Tuyuan Garden of King Xiaowang of Liang, which amazed the public. Yang also spared no effort in depicting the opulent lives of the rich and powerful. He described the mansion of King Gaoyang 高陽王 as follows:

貴極人臣，富兼山海，居止第宅，匹於帝宮。白殿丹檻，窈窕連互，飛簷反宇，轆轤周通。僮僕六千，妓女五百，隋珠照日，羅衣從風。自漢晉以來，諸王豪，未之有也。

Yuan Yong was one of the most prestigious officials, with wealth as abundant as mountains and seas. His residence can be compared to an imperial palace, featuring white walls and red columns connecting in a deep and secluded manner, soaring eaves, rising roof tiles, and crisscrossing roads. There were six thousand servants and five hundred concubines. Pearl shone in sunlight, and silk clothes swayed in the wind. Since the Han and Jin dynasties, none of the kings have been as luxurious and extravagant as him. (Yang 2018, p. 166)

These depictions of the "imperial palace" ultimately pointed to criticism of the rulers' extravagance. Yang's satirical criticism of the rulers in a glorifying tone is an inheritance of the ironic theme of Han *fu*. Ming scholar Mao Jin 毛晉 commented on *The Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Luoyang*: "it described Buddhist architecture with elaborate language and involved human affairs. Writing about gardens, songs and dances, ghosts and gods, strangeness, and the rise and fall of nations was not just a record of Buddhist temples but also a way to express his praise and ridicule" (Fan 1978, p. 360). These words deeply resonated with Yang Xuanzhi's intention.

Although Yang's exaggeration deviates from the objective reality to some extent, it creates an ultimate visual effect and esthetic experience. For example, Ban Gu's *Xidu Fu* 西都賦 describes the grandeur of the scene, stating that "there are thousands of houses

where the guards reside, and the roads traversed by the military patrols are crisscrossing” (Ban 1986, p. 16). Zhang Heng’s *Xijing Fu* 西京賦 describes the majestic palace, stating that “the round tower rises high into the sky, like two huge rocks facing each other” (Zhang 1986, p. 57). Grand *fu* uses extreme exaggeration to embellish the regime, as Zuo Si 左思 said, “it embellishes the great achievements of the regime by depicting precious and peculiar things” (Zuo 1986, p. 174). Yang Xuanzhi’s exaggerated description of Buddhist temples similarly embellished the Northern Wei Dynasty. The dazzle of Buddhist temples can be compared to the sun and the moon, such as “the red railings dazzle the sun, and the exquisite rafters face the wind” (Yang 2018, p. 63), and “the golden plates shine brightly like colorful clouds” (Yang 2018, p. 133). The Buddhist temples rise high into the sky, with “the big bell hanging in the clouds” (Yang 2018, p. 48). The Buddha statue is so astonishing that thousands of people flocked to Zongsheng Temple (*zongsheng si* 宗聖寺). “As soon as the Buddha statue appears, the streets are empty, and the fiery radiance is unparalleled” (Yang 2018, p. 81). The scenery was so luxuriant that it could cover the sky, such as Jingming Temple, where “the golden flowers reflect the sun, the precious covers float in the clouds, the pennant is like a forest, and the smoke like a mist” (Yang 2018, p. 133). Qing Dynasty scholar Liu Yunan 劉毓楠 was amazed by Yang Xuanzhi’s exaggeration and could not help but sigh: “At that time, it was magnificent and shimmering with glass, towering heights reaching the sky, eventually turning into a barren land of weeds” (Fan 1978, p. 368). Ban Gu tried his best to present the superiority of the Eastern Capital, making the people of the Western Capital wholeheartedly believe that the court’s management of the Eastern Capital was extremely wise. Similarly, Yang Xuanzhi boasted so much about Buddhist temples and demonstrated the superiority of the former capital, Luoyang, ensuring that the glorious Northern Wei Dynasty would exist forever in history.

#### 4.3. Quoting Sentences from Han fu

Using phrases from capital *fu* was the most direct method of Yang Xuanzhi’s rhapsodic presentation of Buddhist temples. A large number of complete sentences in *The Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Luoyang* come directly from grand Han *fu*, as seen in the following paragraphs:

##### I. 豈直木衣綈繡，土被朱紫而已哉！

It is not just about wearing embroidered clothes on wood and red and purple clothes on soil.

木衣綈錦，土被朱紫。（張衡《西京賦》）

Wearing embroidered clothes on wood and red and purple clothes on soil.  
(Zhang Heng’s *Xijing Fu*)

##### II. 芳草如積，珍木連陰。

Fragrant grass accumulates like a pile, and the shade of precious trees is connected together.

嘉木樹庭，芳草如積。（張衡《西京賦》）

Precious trees stand in the courtyard, and fragrant grass accumulates like a pile.  
(Zhang Heng’s *Xijing Fu*)

##### III. 圖以雲氣，畫彩仙靈。

Painting auspicious clouds and drawing supernatural immortals.

圖以雲氣，畫以仙靈。（左思《吳都賦》）

Painting auspicious clouds and drawing supernatural immortals. (Zuo Si’s *Wudu Fu*)

IV. 四門外樹以青槐，互以綠水。

Planting green locust trees outside the four gates surrounded by green water.

樹以青槐，互以綠水。（左思《吳都賦》）

Planting green locust trees surrounded by green water. (Zuo Si's *Wudu Fu*)

V. 並雕牆峻宇，比屋連甍。

The carved walls were magnificent, and adjacent houses were connected to the ridges of the roofs.

比屋連甍，千廡萬屋。（左思《蜀都賦》）

Thousands of adjacent houses were connected to the ridges of the roof. (Zuo Si's *Shudu Fu*)

These citations either directly copy phrases from capital *fu* or use similar imagery to create the same mood as found in capital *fu*. In the grand Han *fu* of Ban Gu and Zhang Heng, the palace was regarded as a symbol of the universe to demonstrate the magnificent scenery of the Han Dynasty, which unified the entire world. Yang Xuanzhi, on the other hand, regarded Buddhist temples as a representation of imperial identity and skillfully borrowed the writing style of the capital *fu* to display the splendid and magnificent scenery of the Northern Wei Dynasty.

Yang Xuanzhi used literary strategies to place the Buddhist monasteries in a textual structure similar to that of the capital *fu*. This not only accomplishes the transformation of Buddhist temples from religious buildings to an imperial landscape but also gives Northern Wei Luoyang a grandeur akin to the capital of the Han Dynasty. Fan Xiangyong 范祥雍 points out that *The Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Luoyang* "is a historical literature reflecting a period, a religion, and at the same time reflecting a capital and a dynasty" (Fan 1978, p. 17). Buddhist temples are not only symbols of religion, but also symbols of the capital and even the dynasty. Although Yang Xuanzhi seems to be recording Buddhist temples, he is actually composing a rhapsodic presentation and a hymn of praise for the Northern Wei Dynasty.

## 5. Conclusions

According to Confucian values, only a geographically centered capital can achieve the centralization of dynastic political power. Gao Huan's move of the capital to Yecheng and his revival of Xianbeiism not only moved the capital away from its geographic center, but also disrupted the Han cultural system that established in Luoyang since Emperor Xiaowen of the Northern Wei Dynasty. As a former courtier, Yang Xuanzhi was deeply attached to Luoyang and its political and cultural order. Due to the deep integration of Buddhism and kingship, Buddhist temples encroached on the space and controlled the height of Luoyang, replacing the palace as a political symbol of kingship. Additionally, the flourishing Buddhism in Northern Wei Luoyang attracted the worship of neighboring countries. Therefore, Yang Xuanzhi chose to associate the historical events of Luoyang with Buddhist temples in order to maximize the grandeur of the capital and portray Luoyang as the center of Northern Wei both domestically and internationally. In his writing of Luoyang Buddhist temples, Yang drew on the grand Han *fu* style of presentation and satirical admonition, even using phrases from Han *fu* to place Buddhist temples within a textual structure similar to that of the capital *fu*. This not only accomplished the transformation of the Buddhist temple from religious buildings to an imperial landscape but also gave Northern Wei Luoyang a grandeur comparable to that of the Han capital. Yang Xuanzhi's composition of *The Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Luoyang*, driven by his legit-

imate identification with Luoyang, ensured that Buddhist temples were more than mere religious architecture but also rich in cultural and political connotations.

Buddhist temples played a crucial role in the political and literary discourse of Yang Xuanzhi's works. Yang actually harbored strong political dissatisfaction with Gao Qi and developed a unique literary style to reminisce about the former capital. In the historical context of the Northern Qi overthrowing the Wei Dynasty, Yang Xuanzhi used Buddhist writings to showcase the grandeur of Luoyang's worship of Buddha and strengthened the legitimacy of the Northern Wei regime. The archaeological remains of Yongning Temple pagoda confirmed the extravagance of this temple, which witnessed the changes in the ruling order of the capital city. Regarding the collapse of Yongning Temple, the pro-Gao historian Wei Shou had vastly different political views and literary strategies from Yang Xuanzhi. Yang indeed preserved the historical memory of the Buddhist temples in Luoyang through his literary texts and dispelled the bias of historians. In this sense, religious writing has the power to dominate political discourse beyond physical buildings and historical records.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> *Qielan* was transliterated from Sanskrit Samgharama, meaning Buddhist temple.
- <sup>2</sup> "The East Sea" refers to "the Bohai Sea 渤海". According to Annals of Emperor Shenwu 神武帝紀 in Book of Beiqi 北齊書, "Emperor Shenwu of Qi, surnamed Gao and given name Huan, with the courtesy name Heliuhun 賀六渾, was from Xiu 蓼 county, the Bohai Sea province" (Li 1972, p. 1).
- <sup>3</sup> Mo Zi said, "When ancient humans first emerged without palaces, they lived by digging caves on hills. The sage was concerned about this practice, believing that although the caves provided shelter from the cold in winter, they could harm people's health in summer due to dampness below and heat above. Therefore, he built palaces and houses to better accommodate them" (Wu 2006, p. 256).
- <sup>4</sup> Sarnath (Luyuan 鹿苑), near Benares in northern India today, where Buddha preached his first sermon.
- <sup>5</sup> The Shorea robusta tree (Shuanglin 雙林) under which Buddha attained nirvana.

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