ABSTRACT

The caves at Yungang preserves to date, some of the most remarkable works of Buddhist Art in Northern Wei (386-534). It began with Emperor Wencheng's commissioning of five caves and since they were excavated under the charge of Tan Yao, they are conventionally known as the "five caves of Tan Yao". Not only is the cross-legged seated posture in question repeatedly represented in many areas within the caves but a particular emphasis is placed on the massive sculpture of the type in cave 17. Yet this was not the first occasion in which the cross-legged seated posture have appeared. This form of iconography had its origins in the Kushans (50-244) and made its first appearance in Dun Huang China during the Northern Liang (401-439).

The advent of archaeological studies in Buddhist Art since the beginning of the 20th century has brought forward the debate between numerous scholars with regards to the identification of the cross-legged seated posture. Many have proposed, with fragmentary reference to scriptures related to Maitreya and inscriptions found on sculptures, that this particular posture is to be identified with that of Bodhisattva Maitreya. Yet this has failed to provide conclusive answers.

There is in recent years however, a new proposition which suggests that the cross-legged seated posture should be identified as the distinct seating posture of a cakravartin. This argument is primarily based on the implementation of Buddhist political ideology and uses the idea of Dharmaraksa, the Sutra Spoken on Karuna-pundarika and other sutras as evidence.

This thesis is thus an attempt to provide a general overview of propositions by numerous scholars and finally a discussion on their credibility.