



## Enlightenment on the Calligraphy Education: Feature Description of the Longmen Twenty Statues Inscriptions Image Symbolism

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### ABSTRACT

According to established patterns in calligraphy practice among novices, beginners are more suited to static calligraphy exercises during their initial stages of learning. To establish a foundation in regular script, it is essential for students to study Weibei calligraphy. The Longmen Twenty Statues Inscriptions represent the pinnacle of Weibei calligraphy, renowned for their high cultural and artistic value. However, previous research has not adequately defined the symbolic imagery of the Longmen Twenty Statues Inscriptions, resulting in an incomplete understanding of their

calligraphic characteristics and the neglect of crucial elements. Therefore, it is imperative to review and summarize the key features of the Longmen Twenty Statues Inscriptions and explore the symbolic meaning of their calligraphic images to enhance learners' grasp of the essential elements. This qualitative study employs focus group interviews to analyse the symbolic imagery of the Longmen Twenty Statues Inscriptions, categorizing it into four distinct components: brushwork style, structural character, writing technique, and latent meaning. The study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the inscriptions' symbolic significance, classify them into types, and integrate these findings to facilitate a deeper understanding of Weibei calligraphy among students.

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## Introduction

The Longmen Twenty Statues Inscriptions are exemplary works of Weibei calligraphy located in the Longmen Grottoes, Luoyang City, Henan Province, China. These inscriptions possess significant artistic, cultural, and historical value. The Longmen Grottoes, which were constructed over a span of more than 400 years, encompass nearly 110,000 statues and over 300,000 characters of inscriptions. The development of Weibei calligraphy during the Northern Wei Dynasty can be attributed to the Sinicization reforms implemented by Emperor Xiaowen, which influenced the socio-historical context of the era (Shu, 2014). This development also reflects political reform ideologies within the realm of calligraphy (Li, 2009). Weibei calligraphy emerged from the confluence of various ethnic cultures and aesthetics in the Northern Wei Dynasty, representing a product of evolving social forms (Song, 2019). The Weibei calligraphy can be divided into Peicheng period and Luoyang period (Zheng, 2007). The calligraphy of the Pingcheng period is the result of the collision, exchange and assimilation of the three cultures of Hu, Han and Buddha (Wang, 2023). Initially, the distinct nature of Weibei calligraphy compared to traditional Chinese calligraphic styles led to a delayed recognition of its aesthetic value. It was not until the Qing Dynasty that calligrapher formally defined and further promoted this calligraphic style. They gave new life to the Weibei calligraphy. They put forward the new idea of study calligraphy through stone carving (Lee, 2005).

It was Ruan Yuan in Jiaqing Dynasty who initially affirmed the value of Northern Wei's book art, but he only put forward the broad concept of "Northern tablet" including the inscription of Northern Wei Dynasty (Forte, 1994). Ultimately, Kang Youwei provided a comprehensive definition of Weibei calligraphy (Yue, 2014). Panofsky delineates the interpretation of art works into three tiers. Identify and interpret the themes represented in visual art works and the deeper meanings they may convey. Therefore, it is necessary to analyse the symbolic meaning of images (Baroncini, 2024). Nonetheless, prior research on the Longmen Twenty Statues Inscriptions has frequently concentrated on describing artistic style features without offering detailed interpretations of their symbolic meanings. For instance, Yang Shoujing identified 13 stylistic characteristics of Weibei calligraphy, while Kang Youwei delineated 3 brushwork attributes and 16 aesthetic features of the style. Consequently, students often struggle to comprehensively understand the symbolic imagery of the Longmen Twenty Statues Inscriptions when learning calligraphy (Niu, 2010). Many beginners usually find it difficult to learn calligraphy because of the lack of control of the brush and the lack of understanding of the structure, which makes them lose confidence and patience (Jian, 2019). This challenge is particularly significant for beginners, as a lack of understanding of the symbolic aspects of calligraphic works can impede their learning progress. To address this issue, the present study will employ a qualitative research approach, utilizing focus group interviews and integrating relevant previous research to develop a detailed definition of the Longmen Twenty Statues Inscriptions' symbolic meanings.

## Methodology

Focus group interviews are a qualitative research method where participants are purposefully selected from a specific population to engage in a structured discussion on a

common topic. This approach provides a more in-depth and nuanced data collection compared to individual interviews (Thomas et al., 1995). Participants in a focus group typically share similar social characteristics, which facilitates the exploration of diverse perspectives on the subject matter. According to Wilkinson (1998), focus group interviews are instrumental in phenomenology, as they capture not only participants' attitudes, opinions, knowledge, and beliefs but also their experiences, meanings, and understanding. This method enables researchers to gather individual insights while also revealing variations in viewpoints among different groups (Rabiee, 2004). The researcher selects individuals who fit the topic or problem being studied. Purpose sampling helps researchers find informative cases that are most likely to produce the desired data (Dilshad, 2013).

### ***Sampling Criteria***

The size of the group is also important. Too few members may limit interaction, while too many may inhibit introverted members from sharing their views (Stewart, 2014). Krueger (2014) suggests selecting 6 to 8 interviewees to ensure quality discussion and expression of opinions.

In the study, four focus groups were formed, each comprising 6 to 8 participants. All interviewees were required to meet the following criteria:

- i. The participants should possess a minimum of 5 years of experience or knowledge related to Weibei calligraphy.
- ii. The participants should be Chinese language educators with the ability to articulate their perspectives clearly.

### ***Research Design***

In this study, focus groups were utilized to achieve the research objective of elucidating the symbolism within the Longmen Twenty Statues Inscriptions. To ensure the reliability of the findings, at least two rounds of interviews were conducted until responses from participants became consistent. Each round involved four focus groups and lasted between one to two hours, as depicted in Figure 1.

### ***Research Procedure***

The research question guiding the focus group interviews was: What constitutes the image symbolism within the Longmen Twenty Statues Inscriptions? Each round of interviews followed these procedural steps:

### ***Organization Members***

The respondents comprised calligraphers, members of calligraphy associations, educators or professors specializing in Chinese calligraphy, and researchers involved in calligraphy projects. In addition to the interviewer, a recorder was present to document the proceedings. A key role is the leader of the research team, sometimes called the Principal Investigator (PI), who assumes overall leadership of the study (Krueger, 2015). The interviewer began by providing a brief overview

of the interview's primary objective and gathering personal background information from the participants, including age, gender, professional position, and subject-related experience. This information was meticulously recorded to facilitate the grouping of participants with similar qualifications. To address gender bias, each group was composed of an equal number of male and female respondents.

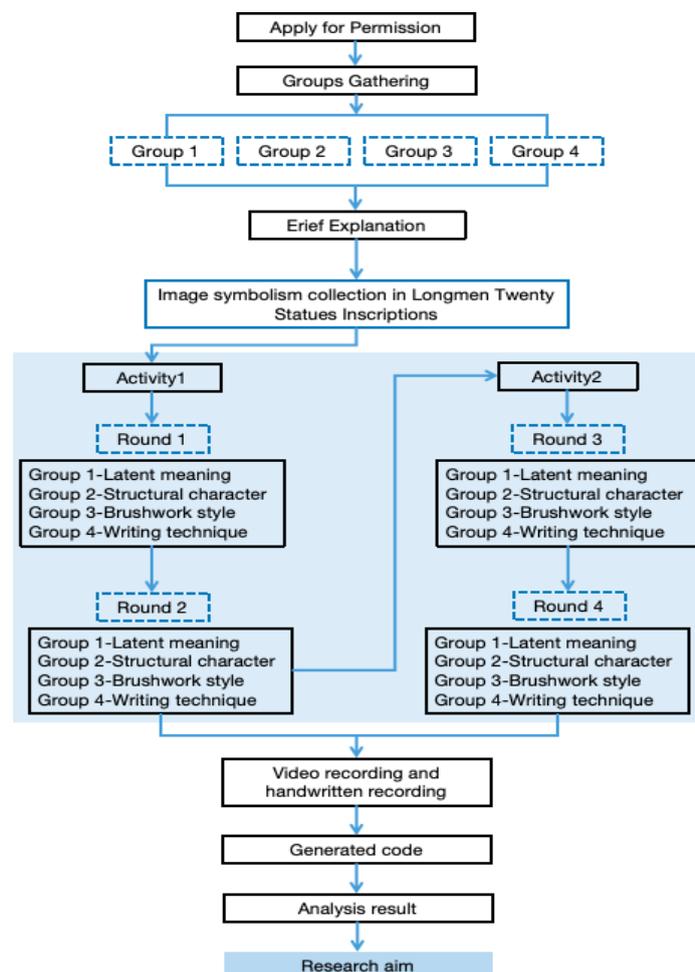


Figure 1: Research Design.

### Interview Format

This interview employs a semi-structured format. The advantage of a semi-structured interview is that it allows the interview to be focused while still giving the investigator autonomy to explore relevant ideas that may arise during the interview (Adeoye & Olenik,

2021). In semi-structured interviews, interviewers follow a predefined list of topics that each group of participants must address (Phellas, Bloch, & Seale, 2011). However, they retain the flexibility to modify the sequence and phrasing of questions based on the flow of the discussion (Power et al., 2010). This methodology facilitates the exploration of emergent questions and topics that arise during the interview process (Lune & Berg, 2017).

### *Documents Provided During the Interview*

Prior to beginning the formal questioning, the interviewer provided each participant with an image of the Longmen Twenty Statues Inscriptions. The discussion during the interview focused on these images, which were obtained from publications, scholarly literature, and the official website of the Longmen Grottoes.

### *The Interview Questions*

Questions vary in form, and the first question is usually a prologue or introductory question. The following questions may be exploratory or specific, and they can explain and help construct the interview. These questions stem from familiarity with the topic, which is based on the researcher's previous experience and pre-understanding, as well as conceptual and theoretical knowledge about the topic (Pedersen, 2016).

Initially, the interviewer began with an icebreaker question, such as, "How did you feel when you first saw the Longmen Twenty Statues Inscriptions?" Subsequently, at least four broad open-ended questions were posed, each addressing one of the four sub-themes related to the image symbolism of the Longmen Twenty Statues Inscriptions: latent meaning, writing style, text structure, and writing techniques. The number of specific questions was adjusted according to participants' responses. For example, if answers were ambiguous, additional questions were posed for clarification. Additionally, if participants struggled to understand the questions, the interviewer provided detailed explanations until clarity was achieved. To ensure data accuracy, interviewers were instructed to avoid leading questions.

### *Record the Interview.*

Throughout the interview, video recordings were used to capture the entire process, providing a reference for subsequent data induction and analysis. Additionally, a manual recording method was employed by the recorder to transcribe each question and response verbatim. This raw data was subsequently used to generate codes and validate the analysis results in the later stages.

### *Data Analysis*

The central goal of analysing focus group interview data is to reduce the data. Data analysis consists of several stages, namely examining, classifying, and tabulating or otherwise recombining evidence to address the initial objectives of the study (Yin, 2009).

Initially, the researcher organizes the data by source and reviews all collected information. The data are then coded using MAXQDA software. This process includes

grouping related topics, assigning abbreviated codes, selecting descriptive terms, and organizing these into categories. Each category is subsequently labelled alphabetically. The codes capture diverse perspectives of the interviewees, supported by concrete evidence. Additionally, narrative paragraphs may be employed to clarify the analysis results, elaborating on sub-topics and reflecting respondents' viewpoints.

### Findings

Based on the focus group interview data, the brushwork style section produced 2 secondary codes and 14 tertiary codes. The structural character section yielded 4 secondary codes and 23 tertiary codes. The writing technique section resulted in 3 secondary codes and 21 tertiary codes. The latent meaning section generated 2 secondary codes and 14 tertiary codes (see Figure 2).

	No.	Style Description	Frequency
Brush Work Style	1	Majestic Style	4
	2	Delicate Style	2
	3	Tensile Style	3
	4	Distinctive Style	3
	5	Flexible Style	5
	6	Degage Style	1
	7	Orderly Style	9
	8	Rhythmical Style	1
	9	Fun Style	4
	10	Simple and Unadorned Style	1
		<b>Lines Description</b>	
	11	Thick of Lines	5
	12	Thin of Lines	5
	13	The Thick Lines are Combined with the Thin Lines	7
14	The Lines are of Uniform Thickness	6	
Structural Character		<b>Size of Character</b>	
	1	The Characters are Varied Size	2
	2	The characters are the same size	4
		<b>The structure of single character</b>	
	3	The centre of the font to be vertical	5
	4	The centre of the character slants to the left or right	12
	5	The structural character is stretching	5
	6	Characters are high on the left and low on the right	2
	7	Characters are low on the left and high on the right	3
	8	The left half is smaller than the right half	6
	9	The left part is compact, and the right part is loose	1
	10	The upper part is bigger than the lower part	3
	11	The upper part is loose, and the lower part is compact	1
	12	The upper part is compact, and the lower part is loose	1
	13	Small internal structure and large external structure	2
	14	Each part of the character is the same size	1
		<b>Character shape</b>	
15	The character has a square shape	6	
16	The character has a rectangle shape	8	
17	The character has a trapezoidal shape	2	
18	The character has a round shape	2	
19	The character shape is thin and tall	2	
20	Each character has a different shape	3	
	<b>Arrangement of characters</b>		
21	A neat arrangement of characters	7	

	22 Not neat arrangement of characters	9
	23 The distance between characters is small	4
	<b>Brushstroke description</b>	
	1 The brushstrokes are hard and powerful	5
	2 The brushstrokes are in straight lines	1
	3 The brushstrokes are square	9
	4 The brushstrokes are triangular	2
	5 The brushstrokes are round	2
	6 The brushstrokes are the wave	3
	7 The brushstrokes are varied	10
	8 The brushstroke is tilt	2
	<b>The relationship between brushstrokes</b>	
	9 The structure between brushstrokes is sparsely distributed	5
	10 The structure between brushstrokes is compact	6
<b>Writing Technique</b>	11 Stretch structures are combined with compact structures	3
	<b>Manifestation mode</b>	
	12 The brushstroke has a pause around the bend (turn)	2
	13 The brushstroke does not have a noticeable pause around the bend	1
	14 The brushstroke turning point is sharp	1
	15 The brushstroke turning point is round	3
	16 Short brushstrokes form triangles or squares	1
	17 The end of the brushstroke is picked up	2
	18 The end of the brushstroke is a drop-down	1
	19 The distance between characters is inconsistent	4
	20 The distance between characters is consistent	2
	21 Leave some white space in the work	3
	<b>About event</b>	
	1 Religious culture	3
	2 Record the major historical events of the time	1
	3 A record of how the statue was built	1
	4 Reflect the social background of the time	1
	5 State the reason for the statue	1
	<b>About personage</b>	
<b>Latent Meaning</b>	6 Praise the achievements of officials	1
	7 Praise the great deeds of the emperor	1
	8 The wife built it for her official husband	1
	9 Pray for the relatives who are still alive	1
	10 Pray for the departed juniors	2
	11 Pray for the departed eldership	3
	12 A noble memorial to his family	1
	13 Reflect the social status of the owners of different statues	1
	14 The description of the owner of the statue	2

**Figure 2:** Coding Results of the Longmen Twenty Statues Inscriptions' Image Symbolism.

Initially, the Brushwork Style section is categorized into two distinct groups: Style Description and Lines Description. The Style Description comprises 10 features, derived from Group 1 respondents' assessments of the various stylistic types of the Longmen Twenty Statues Inscriptions. This category outlines the overall impression these calligraphic works convey to the viewer, focusing on the general stylistic traits shared across the 20 inscriptions, rather than those of individual works. The Lines Description pertains to the characteristics and utilization of lines within the calligraphic works.

The analysis of character structure encompasses several aspects: size of the character, structure of individual characters, character shape categories, and

character arrangement. The size of the character refers to the font size used in the calligraphy works. In the Longmen Twenty Statues Inscriptions, the variation in font size influences the visual perception of the calligraphy. The structure of a single character is examined at the individual character level, where respondents provided a detailed layout and morphological analysis of each component of the characters after structural dissection. This approach helps elucidate the most significant font features. Character features pertain to the physical attributes of characters as written according to specific styles and schools (Hu, 2017). Chinese characters can be segmented into various components, and their structures are composed in diverse ways. During the process of calligraphy creation, artists subjectively manipulate these structures according to different schools, styles, and aesthetic principles. The recombination of these various structures ultimately shapes the overall form of a Chinese character. The Character Shape category provides a detailed summary of the shapes of characters appearing in the Longmen Twenty Statues Inscriptions. Instead of exact shapes, this categorization groups characters based on their general outline into similar geometric forms. Concurrently, the Arrangement of Characters category addresses how these individual characters collectively form a complete calligraphic work. Unlike strict rules, the arrangement of characters in Chinese calligraphy is often flexible. Based on the interviewees' discussions, the font arrangement in the Longmen Twenty Statues Inscriptions is predominantly free form. Consequently, the characteristics of font arrangement are assessed in terms of character spacing and the density of arrangement.

Additionally, writing techniques are categorized into three areas: Brushstroke Description, the Relationship Between Brushstrokes, and Manifestation Mode. Brushstroke Description involves a detailed analysis of the shapes and characteristics of the strokes within the calligraphy works. Since strokes are the fundamental units of Chinese characters, their specific features profoundly influence the various forms and styles of calligraphy (Liu & He, 1994). This category offers an in-depth examination of the stroke characteristics and stylistic features in the Longmen Twenty Statues Inscriptions, which is essential for understanding the symbolic meanings of these calligraphic images. The Relationship Between Brushstrokes explores how the interaction between individual strokes affects the overall expression of the calligraphy. Experts noted that even subtle variations in this relationship can impact the entire work's expression. Manifestation Mode pertains to the distinct treatment of individual strokes and typefaces during the writing process. Interviewees indicated that some techniques in this category are like those used in the official script, suggesting that Wei stele calligraphy has preserved certain elements of the official script to some degree.

The final section, Latent Meaning, focuses on the underlying content of the Longmen Twenty Statues Inscriptions, specifically addressing what these calligraphic works convey. Experts suggest that understanding the content's meaning aids learners in grasping the historical context behind the inscriptions, thereby enhancing their appreciation of the cultural value of Weibei calligraphy and increasing their interest in the Longmen Twenty Statues Inscriptions. This content can be broadly categorized into two types: events and personages.

The importance and significance of qualitative data can be more precisely assessed through the frequency ranking of the data. During the interviews, respondents discussed and analysed photographs of the calligraphy works, and the importance ranking was determined based on the frequency with which experts mentioned specific features and emphasized calligraphy attributes. Analysing the total frequency across the four categories, the significance of the Longmen Twenty Statues Inscriptions is ranked as follows: Structural Character is deemed the most important, followed by Writing Technique, Brushwork Style, and Latent Meaning, in decreasing order of significance.

Through focus group interviews, experts identified 11 categories across the four units and categorized 72 distinct features. The final determination of feature importance is based on the frequency with which these categories were mentioned. The resulting rankings of feature significance are illustrated in Figure 3.

No.	Section	Category	Frequency
1	Structural Character	The structure of single character	42
2	Writing Technique	Brushwork description	34
3	Brushwork Style	Style Description	33
4	Brushwork Style	Line description	23
5	Structural Character	Character shape	23
6	Structural Character	Arrangement of characters	20
7	Writing Technique	Manifestation mode	20
8	Writing Technique	The relationship between brushstrokes	14
9	Latent Meaning	About personage	13
10	Latent Meaning	About event	7
11	Structural Character	Size of character	6

**Figure 3:** Main Category Frequency of Longmen Twenty Statues Inscriptions' Image Symbolism.

Additionally, four expert groups provided detailed descriptions of features within the four units and 11 categories. Based on the coding results from the interview data, the frequency of specific feature descriptions related to the image symbolism of the Longmen Twenty Statues Inscriptions was analysed, leading to a final ranking of their importance. The results are illustrated in Figure 4.

No.	Feature Attribute	Frequency
1	The centre of the character slants to the left or right	12
2	The brushstrokes are varied	10
3	Orderly style	9
4	Not neat arrangement of characters	9
5	The brushstrokes are square	9
6	The character has a rectangle shape	8
7	The thick lines are combined with the thin lines	7
8	A neat arrangement of characters	7
9	The lines are of uniform thickness	6

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10	The left half is smaller than the right half	6
11	The character has a square shape	6
12	The structure between brushstrokes is compact	6
13	Flexible style	5
14	Thick of lines	5
15	Thin of lines	5
16	The centre of the character is upright	5
17	The structural character is stretching	5
18	The brush strokes are strong and power	5
19	The structure between brushstrokes is sparsely distributed	5
20	Majestic style	4
21	Fun style	4
22	The characters are of different size	4
23	The distance between characters is small	4
24	The distance between characters is inconsistent	4
25	Tensile style	3
26	Distinctive style	3
27	Characters are low on the left and high on the right	3
28	The upper part is bigger than the lower part	3
29	Each character has a different shape	3
30	The brushstrokes are the wave	3
31	Stretch structures are combined with compact structures	3
32	The brush stroke turning point is round	3
33	Leave some white space in the work	3
34	Religious culture	3
35	Pray for the departed eldership	3
36	Delicate style	2
37	The characters are varied size	2
38	Characters are high on the left and low on the right	2
39	Small internal structure and large external structure	2
40	The character has a trapezoidal shape	2
41	The character has a round shape	2
42	The character shape is thin and tall	2
43	The brushstrokes are triangular	2
44	The brushstrokes are round	2
45	The brushstroke is tilt	2
46	The brush stroke has a pause around the bend (turn)	2
47	The end of the brush stroke is picked up	2
48	The distance between characters is consistent	2
49	Pray for the departed juniors	2
50	The description of the owner of the statue	2
51	Degage style	1
52	Rhythmical style	1
53	Simple and unadorned style	1
54	The left part is compact, and the right part is loose	1
55	The upper part is loose, and the lower part is compact	1

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56	The upper part is compact, and the lower part is loose	1
57	Each part of the character is the same size	1
58	The brushstrokes are in straight lines	1
56	The brush stroke does not have a noticeable pause around the bend	1
60	The brush stroke turning point is sharp	1
61	Short brush strokes form triangles or squares	1
62	The end of the brush stroke is a drop-down	1
63	Record the major historical events of the time	1
64	A record of how the statue was built	1
65	Reflect the social background of the time	1
66	State the reason for the statue	1
67	Praise the achievements of officials	1
68	Praise the great deeds of the emperor	1
69	The wife built it for her official husband	1
70	Pray for the relatives who are still alive	1
71	A noble memorial to his family	1
72	Reflect the social status of the owners of different statues	1

**Figure 4:** *The Frequency and Importance Ranking of Feature Attribute of Longmen Twenty Statues Inscriptions' Image Symbolism.*

### Conclusion and Recommendation

The earliest known instances of writing are prehistoric symbols, whose relationship to words is well established. These symbols can be directly translated into expressive patterns, serving as the foundation for text creation. Despite this, a definitive understanding of these symbols remains elusive (Zhang, 2013). The lack of a systematic definition and explanation of the Longmen Twenty Statues Inscriptions has impeded learners' comprehension of Weibei calligraphy. Drawing on previous research, this study utilized focus group interviews to provide a detailed definition of the image symbolism within the Longmen Twenty Statues Inscriptions across four key dimensions. By categorizing and prioritizing the calligraphy images based on their significance, the study aims to enhance learners' understanding of Weibei calligraphy. The brushwork style of these inscriptions was examined in detail by Qing Dynasty calligraphers and subsequently summarized by modern experts, highlighting features such as heavy, powerful strokes, harmonious and unified character shapes, sharp edges, and a natural stylistic approach (Dou, 2016). The brushwork style reflects the writer's spiritual temperament, imbuing the calligraphy with a distinct spiritual quality that allows viewers to abstractly perceive the author's creative intent through artistic symbols.

Carved in stone, the Longmen Twenty Statues Inscriptions exhibit a rugged, natural simplicity that aligns with the character of northern China. The structural characteristics of Weibei calligraphy, particularly the evolution of stroke shapes from triangular and angular forms to more stable and square configurations, mirror the process of ethnic minorities adapting to Chinese characters during the Northern Wei Dynasty (Yue & Li, 2020). During the early Northern Wei Dynasty, stone calligraphy was marked by distorted structures and disorderly character arrangements. However, by the middle and late periods, the font structure stabilized, with significant developments in stroke combinations and the

prominence of square strokes, which required forceful writing to replicate the carved marks (Zhao, 2020). Regarding writing techniques, the fonts are characterized by a square outline, a steady centre of gravity, and a slight inclination rather than strict horizontal or vertical alignment. This inclination, while not uniform for each character, requires the writer to balance the overall composition. The latent meaning of the inscriptions reflects the period's socio-political context, marked by frequent wars and a yearning for spiritual solace. The rapid adoption of Buddhism and the proliferation of cave statues during this era underscore the social backdrop against which Weibei calligraphy matured into a comprehensive system. The Longmen Twenty Statues Inscriptions serve as a testament to this historical and cultural development, with meanings related to the creation time, the identity of the maker, subject matter, motivation, votive aspects, and prayer content (Hou, 1998). This study recommends that calligraphy education for Chinese youth incorporate the symbolism of these inscriptions, focusing on brushwork style, structural character, writing technique, and latent meaning. Future research could involve developing questionnaires based on these characteristics to assess students' expectations and satisfaction with the Longmen Twenty Statues Inscriptions, potentially leading to a framework that enhances their interest in learning calligraphy.

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