

Longmen Grottoes

On land | China | 493-1127 CE | Grades 3-5

Name _____ Date _____

The Longmen Grottoes hold over 100,000 statues, from one as small as your thumb to one over 17 meters tall.

Read the story

Starting around 493 CE, when the Northern Wei dynasty moved its capital to nearby Luoyang, people began carving Buddhist caves into the limestone cliffs at Longmen, which means Dragon Gate.

Emperors, empresses, officials and ordinary families paid for carvings, hoping to gain good fortune. Over about 400 years, workers carved more than 2,300 caves and niches and over 100,000 statues.

The most famous is the giant Vairocana Buddha, finished around 675 CE during the Tang dynasty. It is said that Empress Wu Zetian gave money for it, and some say its peaceful face was modeled on her.

How it ended

Carving slowed after the Tang dynasty and stopped by around 1127. Weather and time wore down the stone, and in the early 1900s, many heads and carvings were stolen and sold. Today the site is carefully protected.

Key words

- grotto: a small cave, often decorated
- niche: a shallow space carved into a wall to hold a statue
- donor: a person who gives money or gifts

Wow facts

- Some statues are only about 2 centimeters tall.
- The Vairocana Buddha is about 17 meters tall.
- One cave has inscriptions describing medical recipes, called the Prescription Cave.

Talk about it

1. Why do you think so many different people paid for carvings?

2. Should stolen art be returned to where it came from? Why?

Try this

Draw a map of Longmen Grottoes as it looked at its busiest. Label three things people did there.

Quick quiz

Circle the best answer.

1. About how many statues are at Longmen?

- A. 100
- B. 1,000
- C. Over 100,000
- D. 10

2. What does Longmen mean?

- A. Dragon Gate
- B. Tiger Hill
- C. Golden River
- D. Sky Palace

3. Which giant statue is the most famous?

- A. Vairocana Buddha
- B. Statue of Liberty
- C. Sphinx
- D. Moai

Go further

Open ruinscape.live/longmen-grottoes/ for photos, the Then and Now picture where there is one, and links to museum collections and research. On the globe, Lyra Kael can fly the class there and answer questions.

Answer key (for teachers)

1. C. There are more than 100,000 statues.
2. A. Longmen means Dragon Gate.
3. A. The Vairocana Buddha is about 17 meters tall.