The limestone cliffs that flank the Yi River some twelve kilometers south of the modern city of Luoyang, Henan Province, are carved with 2,345 grottoes, which bear nearly 3,000 votive inscriptions and contain more than 100,000 individual Buddhist statues, ranging in size from a few centimeters in height to over seventeen meters. Longmen, the “Dragon Gate,” was considered an auspicious place for sponsoring Buddhist icons for about 250 years, from the time the Northern Wei (386–534) capital was relocated to Luoyang in 494 until the sack of the city in 755 during the An Lushan Rebellion, under the Tang dynasty (618–907). The people who paid to have the statues and grottoes produced are the focus of this reconstruction of the history of Longmen. My interest was not only in finding out who these donors were, but also in why they undertook the expense of a donation. Thanks to the proximity of the site to the capital, the donors of Longmen came from an extraordinarily broad range of society, including emperors, empresses, empress dowagers, other members of the royal family, the aristocracy, court eunuchs, women palace officials, imperial artisans, monks, nuns, lay societies, civil court officials, military officials, wealthy local men of influence, local government functionaries, and members of commercial guilds. The most remarkable thing about Longmen, however, is that many of these people wrote or commissioned dedicatory inscriptions that were engraved near their donations. Some are lengthy eulogies written in fancy parallel prose by famous literati, while others are merely a name, but many were composed by the donor and reveal his or her beliefs and motivations for commissioning an icon. Herein lies the unique suitability of Longmen for a case study in patronage. While other cave-shrine sites have had longer lives or their grottoes contain more elaborate programs of painting and sculpture, Longmen alone has preserved the voices of hundreds of medieval donors.

Long abandoned as a site of worship, Longmen was “discovered” at the very end of the nineteenth century by students of art from abroad. In 1894, on his return from a trip to China, the arts educator Okakura Kakuzo lectured with his lantern slides of Binyang Central Grotto, thereby introducing the site to other scholars in Japan. Sekino Tadashi surveyed the site in 1906 and again in 1918, documenting it in his multivolume Shina bukkyō shiseki (Buddhist monuments of China) of 1926–1931. A French mining engineer, F. Leprince-Ringuet, brought back photographs and ink rubbings taken at the site in 1899, inspiring Édouard Chavannes, the great Sinologist of the Collège de France, to spend twelve days surveying Longmen in the summer of 1907. Chavannes published his superb translations of 550 inscriptions, along with ink rubbings, photographs of the statuary, and his descriptive notes, in his multivolume Mission archéologique dans la Chine septentrionale (Archeological expedition in northern China, 1909–1915). The American industrialist and art collector Charles Lang Freer traveled to Longmen in 1910, and the glass photonegatives taken by the photographer Utai are now preserved in the Freer Gallery Archives, Washington, D.C. Continuing the nineteenth-century Chinese interest in Longmen as a site for epigraphy study, Guan Baiyi made ten research trips there in the 1920s and 1930s. In 1935, he published his list of over 2,200 inscriptions, with selected photographs and ink rubbings, as Yique shike tubiao (Charts of the stone inscriptions of Yique). In 1936, the Japanese archeologists Mizuno Seiichi and Nagahiro Toshio, professors from the Institute of Oriental Culture, Kyoto, spent a momentous six days at Longmen, under armed guard, producing photographs, notes, and ink rubbings,
all of which were published in 1941 as the three-volume *Ryūmon sekkutsu no kenkyū* (Research on the grottoes of Longmen), which was for many decades the authoritative work on the site.

The early-twentieth-century documentation of the site proved to be a two-edged sword, however. Publication of the sculptures was soon followed by the looting of the site in the 1920s and 1930s, a venture accomplished by local stonercutters, an unscrupulous antiquities dealer in Beijing, and Western collectors and museum curators. Portions of the early-sixth-century relief murals from Binyang Central Grotto are now found in the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Freer Gallery of Art, while all manner of fragmented hands, heads, and figures are displayed in museums in China, Japan, North America, and Europe. From the perspective of the twenty-first-century scholar, however, the irony is that the very photographs that inspired the mercenary pillaging of the site are now the only record of its earlier appearance.

After the Chinese regained control of their country, an initial inventory of the site was undertaken in 1954 by the newly instituted Longmen Caves Cultural Relics Management and Conservation Office. Its name was changed to the Longmen Grottoes Research Institute in 1990, and in 2002, it became the Longmen Grottoes Research Academy. The fruit of decades of work by the archeologists of Longmen includes a map book showing every grotto labeled by number (*Longmen shiku kukan bianhao tuce*, 1994), a two-volume compilation of all the inscriptions (*Longmen shiku beike tiji huilu*, 1998), a twelve-volume catalogue of the site, with each grotto described in words, drawings, and small black-and-white photographs (*Longmen shiku zonglu*, 1999), and a ten-volume color photographic record of all the statuary at Longmen (*Longmen shiku zaoxiang quanjी*, 2002–).

Interpretive studies by Chinese scholars began with Gong Dazhong’s detailed and knowledgeable book of 1981, in which he discussed the iconography, dating, and patronage of several major grottoes, and it continued with extensive archeological reports on individual grottoes, such as Wen Yucheng’s painstaking work on Guyang Grotto and the Paired Grottoes, which focused on identifying the iconography and determining the timeframe for production of undated statuary through typological and statistical data derived from large numbers of dated intrusive shrines. Chang Qing produced fine studies of the iconography of the Pure Land Hall of the Damask Silk Guild and of Yaofang Grotto and useful iconographical studies on spirit kings, Dizang bodhisattva, and Esoteric imagery at Longmen, while Liu Jinglong has written a thorough survey of the Great Vairocana Image Shrine.

Scholars from Japan and the West have focused more on issues of development of sculptural style posed by the site, especially the issue of the Sinicization of style during the Northern Wei. Important articles by Yoshimura Rei and Ishimatsu Hinako deal with the development of style at Longmen in the Northern Wei, especially with regard to the sculpture of Yungang and the art of the southern dynasties (317–589), and Alexander Soper and Emma Bunker have argued for influences from the south on both style and iconography during the late Northern Wei. Recently, Katherine Tsiang has described how the Sinicization of style formed a part of Emperor Xiaowen’s political policies, while Stanley Abe has analyzed the assumption of the superiority and dominance of southern Chinese culture on the part of modern scholars in Japan and the West.

Ink rubbings of the inscriptions at Longmen have been collected as art objects since the Qianlong period (1736–1795), and the Northern Wei inscriptions in Guyang Grotto have been taken as sources for creative interpretation in the stele studies (*beixue*) school of calligraphy from the nineteenth century to the present. As the Northern Wei inscriptions also contain a wealth of variant characters, they were studied by philologists in the late Qing (1644–1911). Deeper delving into their content only began in the twentieth century. The inscriptions have been mined for revelations concerning the development of Buddhism in the Northern Wei and Tang dynasties, notably in the work of Tsukamoto Zenryū and Li Yukun. Since many of the inscriptions are dated, they have also been used to reconstruct the history of the site, though this is not always a simple matter. As one example, various problems with the dates of the earliest inscriptions in Guyang Grotto have sparked considerable debate about the original date of the grottoes, and theories have been proposed by Katherine Tsiang, Zhang Naizhu, Liu Jinglong, Wen Yucheng, Sofukawa Hiroshi, and Long Hui. Li Yukun wrote several articles relating to the religious and political content of
the inscriptions, while Yan Wenru deciphered the inscriptions relating to the Great Vairocana Image Shrine and the forty-eight Amitābhas added to it. Sun Guanwen analyzed the inscriptions according to various categories, such as donor, beneficiary, and purpose.

In the West, the only work on patronage at Longmen was Alexander Soper’s 1960 article “Imperial Cave-Chapels of the Northern Dynasties: Donors, Beneficiaries, Dates,” in which he combined detailed information on the political situation in the Northern Wei with what little was known about Longmen then to offer his theory of the patronage of the Binyang grottoes. No one had yet investigated the donors of other major Northern Wei grottoes or the thirty or so substantial Tang grottoes, including the Great Vairocana Image Shrine. When I was in graduate school at the University of Chicago, participating in Father Harrie Vanderstappen’s seminar on Chinese Buddhist sculpture in 1983, I read Zhang Ruoyu’s groundbreaking 1980 article on the completion of Binyang South Grotto. Zhang combined a very close reading of Li Tai’s dedicatory inscription with an analysis of the grotto’s program of sculpture and knowledge of the political events of the time to argue that Li Tai’s motivation lay in the politics of his campaign to become heir apparent. Zhang’s persuasive methodology sparked my interest in the issue of patronage. As I pursued further study of the donors of Longmen, I also relied on Wen Yucheng’s work on patronage in his lengthy articles “Research on Guyang Grotto” and “Survey of Statues at Longmen by People Found in the Two Tang Histories.”

It is abundantly evident from the contents of this book that I could have written little of it without an unremitting reliance on the extraordinary body of scholarship on Longmen produced by the great Sinologists, archeologists, and art historians of Asia and the West. I owe a particular debt to three substantial surveys of the Tang sculpture at Longmen published between 1979 and 1991. The first was Ding Mingyi’s article “Periodization and Categorization of the Tang Dynasty Sculpture at Longmen Grottoes,” in which he classified dated Buddha and bodhisattva figures into seven stages of development by changes in such iconographic elements as robes, mudrās, and thrones, from which he postulated three phases of activity at Longmen in the early Tang and asserted that the schools of Buddhism represented there included Pure Land, Huayan, Three Levels Teachings, Chan, and Esoteric. Sofukawa Hiroshi’s book-length article of 1988, “Research on the Tang Dynasty Sculpture of Longmen Grottoes,” is a comprehensive study of most of the major Tang dynasty grottoes, in which he explored their patronage and iconography within the context of the political and religious trends of the time, based on his extensive knowledge of the Buddhist canon, the dynastic histories, the monastic biographies, and the writings of such medieval figures as the great pilgrim Xuanzang. Yen Chüan-ying of Academia Sinica, Taiwan, is to be commended for translating the entire work into Chinese. From 1987 to 1991, Okada Ken published a three-part article, “On the Early Tang Sculpture of Longmen Grottoes,” in which he carefully analyzed selected Tang projects such as the finishing of Binyang South and North and the making of Jingshan Monastery Grotto, the King Udayana figures, Wanfo Grotto, Qingmingsi Grotto, and the Great Vairocana Image Shrine, arguing for a continuing developmental relationship between the early Tang sculpture of Longmen and contemporaneous sculpture from the Western Capital at Chang’an. One of Okada’s most important contributions was to point out the relationship between the periodic presence of the imperial court in Luoyang and donations at Longmen.

My study differs in its emphasis on understanding the site through its donors. Every grotto at Longmen is unique and hence must represent a unique situation with regard to the beliefs, motivations, and choices of its patron. To understand the donor’s purpose in commissioning a shrine, I have worked to consider all factors, both intramural and extramural. Intramural factors include the choice of the primary icon, the style of the icon, the program of the grotto, the size of the shrine, the quality of the carving, the content of the dedicatory inscription, the placement of the shrine, and its proximity to commissions by related donors. Extramural factors include the donor’s beliefs, relationship to the beneficiary, role in society, and relationships with influential clerics, as well as the social and political events of the time, trends in religious belief, the presence of the court in Luoyang, and conditions among the population of Luoyang.

The structure of this book is narrative and chronological, beginning with the inception of the site at Guyang Grotto around 493 and concluding with the last major dated project, the forty-eight Amitābhas added to the Great Vairocana Image Shrine in 730. Chapter 1 intro-
roduces monk Huicheng, a member of the Northern Wei royal family who joined with several local men of wealth and influence to sponsor the opening of Guyang Grotto with a colossal Buddha triad on the back wall and eight large Buddha shrines on the side walls. This program was designed to generate karmic merit for the Northern Wei state and Emperor Xiaowen and, in particular, embodies the identification of the emperor with the Buddha. In the year 500, just after his accession to the throne, Emperor Xuanwu determined to dedicate a pair of grottoes for the karmic benefit of his late parents, Emperor Xiaowen and Empress Dowager Wenzhao. The social and spiritual functions of Binyang Central Grotto as a karmic gift are the subject of chapter 2. Chapter 3 discusses the actual cost of having a grotto produced and how it was paid for, as well as the rhetoric of expenditure used in the dedicatory inscriptions and how it was conditioned by gender and status. Here I describe the patronage of Empress Dowager Hu, the last effective ruler of the Northern Wei. After the forced evacuation of Luoyang in 534, donations at Longmen practically ceased until 637, when Emperor Taizong of the Tang dynasty returned to Luoyang. Though he was not a believer, many of his children and consorts were, and chapter 4 describes their donations at Longmen in the 640s and 650s, particularly Prince Li Tai’s finishing of the abandoned Binyang South Grotto in honor of his late mother in 641, in which he was supported by his sisters, the Yu-zhang princess and the Nanping princess, and the latter’s husband, Liu Xuanyi. As Zhang Ruoyu demonstrated, Li Tai’s purpose in dedicating the grotto to the late empress was largely to impress his father with his filial piety, in pursuit of the goal of being named to replace his brother as heir apparent. Chapter 5 examines a broad array of early Tang donors whose commissions reveal a reaction to notions of the disappearance of the Buddha’s teachings that arose in the sixth century. Their anxieties about the ability of their icons to survive the scourging of the world at the end of the age are expressed in their dedications, in which they extol the durability of the stone at Longmen, and in their decisions to reproduce specific Indian icons. The King Udayana image of Śākyamuni, “Amitābha and the Fifty-Two Bodhisattvas,” and the Śākyamuni figure from Mahābodhi Monastery in Bodhgaya were believed to be original, authentic artifacts of the Dharma, in addition to being of supernatural manufacture. The vogue for copying Indian icons reached its apogee in the Gandhāran-style Buddha at the center of the colossal Great Vairocana Image Shrine of Fengxian Monastery, sponsored by Emperor Gaozong and Empress Wu, which is the subject of chapter 6. Various theories concerning the iconography, dates, patron, and purpose of this monument are surveyed here, while I propose that the shrine was begun around 660 by order of the emperor only to be abandoned by the ailing ruler around 665, then taken up by the empress in 672, and completed in 676. In chapter 7, I describe how several large grottoes north of the Great Vairocana Image Shrine were produced at the same time, as satellite commissions. Known donors include Abbot Huijian, one of the clerical advisors for the Vairocana shrine, and the sponsors of Wanzuo Grotto: the female palace official Yao Shenbiao and the Palace Chapel nun Zhiyun. I propose that Qingmingsi Grotto was sponsored by Shandao, the other cleric credited on the Vairocana shrine, and argue that the Prince of Zhou, son of Emperor Gaozong and Empress Wu, donated the Paired Grottoes in honor of his parents. Smaller grottoes and shrines were also produced at this time by people associated with the throne, including a vice director for palace buildings, an illustrious general, a monastic imperial envoy to India, and an imperial artisan. Chapter 8 examines forty-eight life-size figures of Amitābha added to the Great Vairocana Image Shrine in 730. The donors were the court eunuchs who served Emperor Xuanzong, headed by Gao Lishi, the director of the Palace Domestic Service. The figures represent the forty-eight vows of Amitābha and refashion the Vairocana shrine into a Pure Land representation whose sole beneficiary was the reigning emperor. The statues may have been intended for worship, or they may have functioned as vows to effect the conversion and salvation of the unbelieving emperor.

More than once during the course of writing this book, I have been asked if such a study is “really art history.” While I could have simply replied that Buddhist icons are an important component of the visual culture of China and objects whose function is intimately tied up with religious practices of seeing and visualization, the answer I prefer is that this study demonstrates how the donors of Longmen made conscious decisions concerning the style of their icons to imbue them with meanings that were immediately comprehensible to their contemporaries. Analysis of meaning conveyed through style is the essence of
what I was trained to understand as art history, and in this book, I argue that the donors of Longmen made all manner of choices concerning the style of their icons. At the turn of the fifth century, in the period of transition between the Central Asian mode inherited from the earlier Yungang grottoes and the Sinicized style taken from the south, it appears that donors considered the older style to represent the past rulers of the dynasty, while the new Sinicized style represented the present and future rulers. Imitation of the style of a certain icon or program carved earlier at Longmen was likely done to associate the donor with the preceding, higher-status patron. Examples of this include the arriviste Huangfu Du’s imitation of the imperial program of Binyang Central Grotto and the deliberate reproduction of the distinctive facial features of the imperial Vairocana image on the Maitreya figure sponsored by the imperial cleric Huijian. Special spiritual efficacy was surely imputed to the icons at Longmen that closely replicate Indian sculptural modes, such as the Sārnāth-style King Udayana Śākyamuni figures and the Gandhāran-style Vairocana. Though the donors of Longmen never referred to their icons as works of art, they were quick to praise them as “marvelous” or “majestic,” suggesting that aesthetic effects, although unquestionably in the service of karmic function, were consciously sought.

Behind the meanings conveyed by choices of style are the issues of purpose and motivation on the part of the donors. By my estimation, the cost of a small sculpture grotto in the late Northern Wei was equal to half a year’s salary for an official in the central government, and the high level of expense for these projects reinforces my sense of a high degree of intentionality on the part of the donors. There is no evidence that any ritual activity other than offering worship before icons was performed in the grottoes of Longmen, indicating that the primary spiritual function of the site was the generation of merit through the making and worshiping of icons. Nothing suggests that large spaces were created for social or ritual activities or that grottoes were revisited by generations of clansmen of the original donors, as one sees at the Mogao Grottoes of Dunhuang. In short, it would appear that the main action performed by most donors at Longmen was to commission a statuary grotto that was dedicated and then left to operate in the spiritual realm as an engine of karma, fueled by the worship offered by later visitors. This idea that the statues were either meant to generate karma for the beneficiaries once, at the moment of their dedication, or that they operated on their own, in perpetuity, is found in the donors’ inscriptions, which reveal several different religious reasons why donors sponsored statuary grottoes.

The donors of Longmen believed their icons would function to transmit the Dharma, preserve the Dharma, serve as a repository for the dharmakāya (the Buddha-principle), edify the faithful, convert the unbelieving, galvanize the deities to rescue those reborn in undesirable paths, and generate karmic merit. They had faith that their dedicatory inscriptions would operate to transfer merit to the beneficiaries named therein, and they trusted in the limestone cliffs to endure through the world’s destruction at the end of the age. Equally clear is that many donors had specific social goals that were also met by the sponsorship of an icon or shrine. Longmen was a public place and easily accessible from the capital. Though the absence of intrusive shrines in the imperial grottoes (Binyang Central, Huoshao, and the Great Vairocana Image Shrine) suggests they were off-limits to other donors, the other large grottoes were open for people to enter and offer worship or to add their own shrines. Not only does the stream of dated inscriptions testify to the traffic out to Longmen, but we know from historical records that royal parties visited there repeatedly. Tang poetry describes literati and government officials stopping at the monastic establishments in the hills and tells of fashionable young people from the metropolis picnicking there at Qingming Festival time to enjoy the pleasures of springtime in a romantic natural setting.

The public nature of Longmen also made it a suitable venue for the traditional social purposes of mortuary stone monuments, and though they were expressed in the vocabulary of Buddhism, political messages of filial piety or loyalty to the throne could be easily conveyed through the dedication of a shrine. Self-serving exhibitions of loyalty to the throne are commonly seen among donors who were employed by the palace, such as the monks and abbots who were patronized by the emperor, the nuns of the Palace Chapel, and the court eunuchs. Although many donors dedicated the merit from their shrines to the emperor or their parents with simple statements of gratitude, the seeking of social credit for virtue is more apparent in those dedications where the donors emphasize their dāna,
or giving, by commenting on the expense of the shrine. A prince demonstrated his filial piety to all when he claimed he “opened his treasury and was liberal with tortoise shells and cowries” for his late mother, while two laymen recognized by the state for loyalty stated they had “exhausted our families’ wealth” on behalf of the imperial house, and an aristocratic young laywoman said she had “parted with half my hairpins and girdles” for her late father, recently executed for plotting against the prince-regent. Even in a case where no dedicatory inscription survives, a royal patron used imagery to claim credit for self-sacrificing expenditure on behalf of his late parents. Two jātaka tales are carved inside Binyang Central Grotto; in one, the prince gave away all his possessions as charity, while in the other, he offered his own body to save another being. One might expect this rhetoric of expenditure to be hyperbole, yet it would appear from surviving evidence that donors did indeed spend all they had. Both the evidence of ruinous expense and its description connect the donors of Longmen directly to traditional burial practices in which costly monuments were sponsored to display unimpeachable expressions of filial piety and loyalty.

I am convinced that these beliefs and motivations are embodied in the images and inscriptions of Longmen, but since a study such as this is necessarily interpretive, overreading or misreading evidence is an attendant danger. In the following pages, where speculation is involved, I have endeavored to make that clear, but the reader should be warned that I have chosen not to err on the side of caution. My intent is to allow the donors of Longmen to speak, but if my voice has misrepresented theirs, I welcome correction.