

## On Recent Publications and Field-work Related To Religious Sculptures in the Province of Sichuan

Sichuan is one of the richest provinces in China in terms of religious sculptures and carvings. According to recent figures the province contains around sixty major locations containing Buddhist and Daoist sculpture groups. For some unknown reason scholarly interest in the religious sculptures in this part of China is a relatively new phenomenon, and even then there have only been a few scattered studies in Chinese, some articles, reports and summaries, as well as a number of picture-books and guides. However, with the exception of the excellent compilation *Dazu shike yanjiu*,<sup>1</sup> the vast majority of publications in Chinese are either too brief to offer substantial information, or else demonstrate a frightening ignorance of the history and doctrines of Chinese Buddhist culture. Furthermore, most Chinese articles have tended to concentrate on the two main locations in Dazu county, namely Bei Shan (North Mountain) and Baoding Shan (Precious Summit Mountain), with the unfortunate result that other equally interesting locations and their carvings have been ignored. In addition it has previously been almost impossible to find proper photographic material on other sites than the major Dazu locations. This last disadvantage to the study of the religious sculptures in Sichuan has now been somewhat remedied by the appearance of *Sichuan shiku diaosu* in the *Zhongguo Meishu quanji* Series.<sup>2</sup> This volume contains photographs from the majority of locations in question. The accompanying text is, however, extremely brief and nearly worthless.

Only within the last two years have articles and surveys appeared in a Western language. The only major article so far is Angela Falco Howard's "Tang Buddhist Sculpture of Sichuan: Unknown and Forgotten".<sup>3</sup> This study does not discuss all the Sichuan locations with Tang sculptures, but is in fact a survey of some ten of the more important locations. Howard's study is particularly noteworthy for the impressive amount of photographic material (143 plates) which it makes available. The material on which this study is based was compiled during September 1985 to June 1986. The author conducted her field-work while on a fellowship administered by the Committee on Scholarly Communication with the PRC, and it is evident that Chinese officials were involved to a considerable extent.

Interestingly there has not appeared a single study on the Dazu sculptures so far, with the exception of the survey article by Zhang Jiaqi, "The Splendour of the Grotto Arts of the Later Period in China: The Sculptures of Dazu".<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ed. by Liu Zhangjiu, Hu Wenhe and Li Yongqiao, Chengdu, 1985. English subtitle: *Collected Works of the Researches on Dazu Stone Carvings*.

<sup>2</sup> Ed. by Zhongguo meishu quanji biaryi weiyuan hui. See the Diaosu [Sculpture] section, Vol. 12, Beijing, 1988.

<sup>3</sup> In *The Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities*, Bulletin No. 60 (1988), pp. 1–164.

<sup>4</sup> See *Oriental Art*. Vol. XXXV, 1 (1989), pp. 7–21.

Its only merit lies in its photographs, charts, and line drawings. Being an extremely superficial work without any form of annotation or documentation it repeats the most obvious and banal assertions found in the various PRC publications.

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My own field-work in Sichuan took place during the Autumn of 1987 and the Summer of 1988. My field of activity included the sculptural sites in the counties of Dazu and Anyue only, and I was fortunate to be able to work independently of the Chinese authorities. The obvious benefits of this were a high degree of mobility (by local buses and rented car) and a large degree of freedom while working at the sites. Since there are usually great difficulties connected with making photographic documentation, on account of restrictions and fees (both legal and illegal), one has to conduct one's work with an optimum of discretion in the presence of guards and local visitors (except during the lunch break between noon and 2 p.m.). However, with the exception of the major locations, the majority of the other places are out of the way and virtually free of guards. In these locations one may even be given assistance by the local people. Contrary to standard opinions none of the locations is officially restricted. The only problem is how to get there, which is not always easy (in fact a place like Shizhuan Shan in Dazu county may be easy to reach, but difficult to get away from on the same day). Sometimes officials, university personnel, or people from the CITS (China International Travel Service)<sup>5</sup> may tell you that a certain group of carvings is not accessible; however, that is because they do not want you there for one reason or another, and not because the place is restricted as such. So by going there one is not doing anything illegal.

The purpose of my field-work in Anyue and Dazu was to collect photographic material and classical literary material (stele inscriptions, local records, etc.) on which to base my study of the iconography, sectarian affiliation and religious function of the cult sites and their carvings. I have given an account of my field-work in Anyue County in "A Survey of the Religious Sculptures of Anyue",<sup>6</sup> in which basic information on the major sculptural locations there can be found. Among the locations I visited, that of Pilu Dong (Vairocana Cave) situated on the top of Mt. Zhenta Zi was the most spectacular in terms of iconographic variety and state of preservation.<sup>7</sup> The main shrine here is that dedicated to Liu Benzun (852–907), a Sichuanese cultural hero and lay proponent of Esoteric Buddhism (*mizong*) in Sichuan during the late 9th century. This shrine is roughly one hundred years older than

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<sup>5</sup> The name has nothing to do with the functions of this bureau.

<sup>6</sup> *East Asian Institute Occasional Papers* 3 (1989), pp. 3–39.

<sup>7</sup> For photographs of some of these sculptures, see *Sichuan shiku diaosu*, Zhongguo meishu quanji, Diaosu 12, pp. 13–89, 157.

group No. 22 in Mt. Baoding, which is also dedicated to the same master, and therefore offers an interesting comparison. Also of major interest, but on a considerable smaller scale than Pilu Dong are the sculpture groups found at Xuanmiao Temple to the north-west of the town of Anyue. They date to the second half of the Tang Dynasty and include both Buddhist and Daoist carvings. Among the latter sculptures are carvings of San Jing (The Three Pure Ones) and a separate niche with the deified Laozi as Taishang Laojun.<sup>8</sup>

As for the sculptures in Dazu county, I visited most of the sites of importance, although I concentrated my work on Bei Shan and Baoding Shan. In the latter place I was fortunate in being able to gain access to the closed area called Shao Fo Wan (Little Buddha Bend), where Liu Benzun's stele is kept together with the sculptural models for the main groups in Da Fo Wan (Great Buddha Bend) and a fine *śarīrastūpa*. Characteristic of most of the carvings in Dazu is their function as narrative tableaux. This is not so evident in the Tang sculptures on Bai Shan, but it is a dominating feature in the carvings at Baoding Shan and in Shimen Shan (Mt. Stonegate). I did some work in Shimen Shan, twenty-five kilometres to the east of Dazu, where the sculptures, although of a later date, also represent a combination of Buddhist and Daoist faith much like the sculptures found in Xuanmiao of Anyue.

One of things which struck me while working with the Dazu and Anyue carvings was the large amount of sculptures and reliefs pertaining to Esoteric Buddhism. Nearly all the sites included statues of *vidyārāja* (Ch. *ming-wang*), *bodhisattva* and *buddha* with obvious affinity to Mi Zong; among the most frequently encountered are Vairocana Buddha, Mahāmāyūrī, the Four Heavenly Kings, and the various *vajrapāla*. This testifies to the rather great local importance and popularity of this brand of Buddhism during the latter half of the Tang and the Song Dynasties.

Recently I finished an article dealing with the sculptures of Mt. Yunju near the county capital of Anyue entitled, "Buddhist Sculptures in Anyue, Sichuan I: 'The Complete Enlightenment Cave' on Mt. Yunju",<sup>9</sup> which is to be the first item in a planned series of articles on each of the major sculptural sites in Anyue. Furthermore I am presently in the middle of a major study on the carvings at Baoding Shan under the tentative title, "A Study of the Sculptures at Mt. Baoding: Iconographic Language and Cultural Implications of a Major Buddhist Cult Centre".

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<sup>8</sup> See *Sichuan shiku diaosu*, Zhongguo meishu quanji, Diaosu 12, pp. 108–9.

<sup>9</sup> Forthcoming.