

Introduction

Compared to other subjects in Chinese Buddhist sculpture the Nirvāṇa Scene (i.e. the sculptural representation of Śākyamuni Buddha entering Parinirvāṇa, as in the Buddhist cliff carvings in Sichuan) is relatively rare. In the Qianfo Yan (Thousand Buddhas Cliff)¹ in Guangyuan there is one niche and one cave;² in the Wofu Si (Reclining Buddha Temple) in Anyue there is one niche.³ They are all works of art dating from the beginning of the High Tang. In the Shuifo Si (The Temple of the Sleeping Buddha) in Yuezhi county there is one cave shrine with a Nirvāṇa Scene dating from the late Tang dynasty. The Nirvāṇa Scene in Mt. Baoding in Dazu county was made during the early Southern Song period, and the Nirvāṇa Scene of the Reclining Buddha in Tongnan county was carved in the 20th year of the Republic, i.e. in 1931.

*The original article from which this translation was made is titled, “Sichuan moya zaoxiang zhong de niepan bian”, *Kaogu* 9 (1989), pp. 850–4, 9 plates.

¹ For a series of introductory articles on the carvings here, see “Guangyuan Qianfo Yan shiku diao chaji”, compiled by Guangyuan Shi Wenwu Guanli and Zhongguo Shehui Kexue Yuanhui Zongjiao suo Fojiao Shi, *Wenwu* 6 (1990), pp. 1–23; “Guangyuan Huangjiang Si shiku diao chaji”, *ibid.*, pp. 24–9; “Guangyuan xin faxian de fojiao zaoxiang”, *ibid.*, pp. 30–3; Luo Shiping, “Qianfo Yan Lizhou huagong nai zaoxiang niandai kao”, *ibid.*, pp. 34–6; Xing Jun, “Guangyuan Qianfo Yan chu Tang mijiao zaoxiang xi”, *ibid.*, pp. 37–40. For a general survey see also Angela Falco Howard, “Tang Buddhist Sculpture of Sichuan: Unknown and Forgotten”, *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities* 60 (1988), pp. 1–164.

² More than four hundred cave shrines from the Qianfo Yan in Guangyuan have still not been officially numbered.

³ The cliff carvings of the Reclining Buddha in Anyue and the caves with carved *sūtras* were classified as protected items of national cultural relics in March 1988 by the State Council. For a presentation of the sculptures in this site, see Wang Yizhu, “Anyue wofu he kanke fojing”, *Zhongguo fojiao yu Anyue shike yishu*, Zhongguo Luyi Chubanshe, Beijing, pp. 49–52, and *ibid.*, “Anyue wofu zoubi”, pp. 82–4. See also Henrik H. Sorensen, “A Survey of the Religious Sculptures of Anyue”, *East Asian Institute Occasional Papers* 3 (1989), pp. 6–8.

The Nirvāṇa scenes in the above mentioned locations differ somewhat in regard to materials and composition. As to the form and dimensions of these cliff carvings they cannot be compared to the Nirvāṇa scenes found in the cave temples in North China.

The Nirvāṇa scenes are usually created in accordance with the *Mahāri-nirvāṇa Sūtra*.⁴ This *sūtra* explains how Śākyamuni passed away at a place north-west of Kuśinagara lying on his side while using his right hand as a pillow and with his head facing north, after having made a rope-bed between the two *sāla* trees. Later most representations of the Nirvāṇa Scenes, although there are some exceptions, were made according to this image. For example the sculptures of the Nirvāṇa Scene from Gandhāra and those in the caves of Bamiyan in Afghanistan generally show the Buddha lying peacefully on his right side with his legs placed one on top of the other and his cheek supported by his right hand. Among the wall paintings of the Nirvāṇa Scene in the caves at Bamiyan there is furthermore the detail showing Kāśyapa stroking the Buddha's feet. In addition there are renderings of *bhikṣus* with big noses and deepset eyes among the Nirvāṇa Scenes at Bamiyan and in the grottoes at Kyzil in Xinjiang. Lifting their hands as if they are beating their heads, they are shown expressing their grief. This is the typical Nirvāṇa Scene as shown in the Western Regions.

During the Nanbei Chao Period there were among the small scale sculptures in the caves at Yungang, Longmen, and Mt. Maiji a few carvings with Nirvāṇa Scenes made in rather simple compositions and somewhat coarsely made.⁵ Among the Nirvāṇa Scenes found in the Mogao Caves in Dunhuang the greater part are murals, but there are also some in the combination of murals and painted statues. Now, how are the Nirvāṇa Scenes in the Buddhist cliff carvings in Sichuan depicted in relation to this?

1. The Nirvāṇa Scenes in Qianfo Yan in Guangyuan

In the upper part of the middle section of the Qianfo Yan in Guangyuan there is a cave shrine containing a large Maitreya statue, which was carved in the second year of the Shenlong period of the Tang Dynasty, i.e. AD 706. To the left of this shrine there is a niche containing a Nirvāṇa Scene. It is approximately 1m high, 1.5m wide and 0.6m deep. In this niche Śākyamuni is lying on his right side on a precious bed covered with silk. A square *vajrāsana* or *bodhimaṇḍa* (*daochang*) constitutes the bottom of the coach. Śākyamuni has his hair in the beehive hairstyle, and on the top of his head is the *uṣṇīṣa*. He is wearing the robes of a Buddhist monk with his right

⁴ This refers to the standard translation by Dharmakṣema between AD 414–21 in forty chapters. Cf. *Taishō Shinshū Daizokiyō* (hereafter T.) 374. However, I have generally based my observations on the translation by Jñānabhadra from AD 664–5 in two chapters; cf. T. 377.

⁵ See *Yungang shiku*, Wenwu Chubanshe, Beijing, 1980, plate 18; and *Longmen shiku*, Wenwu Chubanshe, Beijing, 1981, plate 106.

shoulder bared and both arms lying straight against his body. His legs are placed one on top of the other, his head points towards the north, his feet towards the south, his face towards the west and his back towards the east, in full agreement with the mode of resting according to the Buddhist Canon. In the first chapter of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*⁶ it is said,

At that time the World Honoured One had entered all the *samādhis* three times, and three times he had returned to instruct the assembly. Thereupon he sat down on the couch of the seven precious things, reclined on his right side with his head towards the north, his legs towards the south, his face towards the west and his back towards the east. . . . In the middle of the night he entered the fourth *samādhi* and peacefully passed away without a sound.⁷

Behind Śākyamuni's body are the two *śāla* trees, which show the twin Śāla trees as symbols indicating the Buddha's *nirvāṇa*. Under the trees are ten *bhikṣus* divided into two rows. In the front row six are shown in a sitting posture, while the four in the back row are standing, all of them crying and showing different expressions of grief. The third statue from the right in the back row is lifting his hands and beating his head. This particular gesture is often seen among the Nirvāṇa Scenes at Bamiyan and in Kyzil.

In front of Śākyamuni's body there is an image of a woman dressed in fine clothes. She is standing on the bud of a lotus, the stem of which is visible. The upper half part of her body is intact but the head and neck have been damaged. She is wearing a jacket and a skirt, which are still evident in the lower part of the sculpture. Reaching out with both hands she is grasping Śākyamuni's right hand, which he has extended towards her (Illus. 1, p. 63).

The sculpture of the woman is supposed to represent Śākyamuni's mother Queen Māyā. In the last chapter of the *Mahāmāyā Sūtra*⁸ it is told that after Śākyamuni's body was placed in the coffin, "Aniruddha ascended to the Tuṣita heaven to announce the death to Mahāmāyā"; having heard that her son had entered Nirvāṇa, she at once went to Kuśinagara,

...surrounded by innumerable celestial maidens and their relatives, who made wonderful and fine music, burned incense, scattered flowers, and sang songs and hymns, she descended from heaven and hurried to the twin *śāla* trees. When they came before the coffin they prostrated touching their heads on the ground.⁹

⁶ T. 377.

⁷ *ibid.*, ch. 1, p. 905a.

⁸ T. 383.

⁹ *ibid.*, ch. 2, p. 1012c.



Illustration 1

To the left and right of the carving there are the sculptures of two standing *bodhisattvas*. On their heads they wear flower garlands and they have their hair combed upward in a high rounded topknot with an “S” shape. Around their necks they have three-rowed jewel ornaments, and they wear the garments of *devas* with half sleeves. As undergarments they have *dhotis*, displaying layers of small symmetrical folds. Necklaces of precious stones criss-cross their exposed chests. On either side of the doorway there is a bare-backed *dvarapāla*. They wear short skirts in the form of long silk *dhotis* wrapped around their bodies. According to the tradition that describes Māyā hastening to the death-bed of her son, there is mention of a similar scene in the sixth chapter of the *Da Tang xiyu ji*¹⁰ [Records of the Western Regions during Great Tang].¹¹

In the southern section of the middle level in the Qianfo Yan there is another Nirvāṇa Scene. It is found in a cave on a central column. This cave and the Muni Pavilion next to it have a three-character inscription above the entrance which reads, “Shrine of the Sleeping Buddha”. In the center of the cave there is a pillar with carvings connecting the floor with the ceiling. The front of the pillar shows a reclining Buddha carved in the round with his head pointing towards the north. His back is facing towards the east, and his face towards the west. Unfortunately the head has been damaged and the torso has been somewhat effaced. Behind the body of the Buddha

¹⁰ T. 2087.

¹¹ *ibid.*, ch. 6, p. 903b.

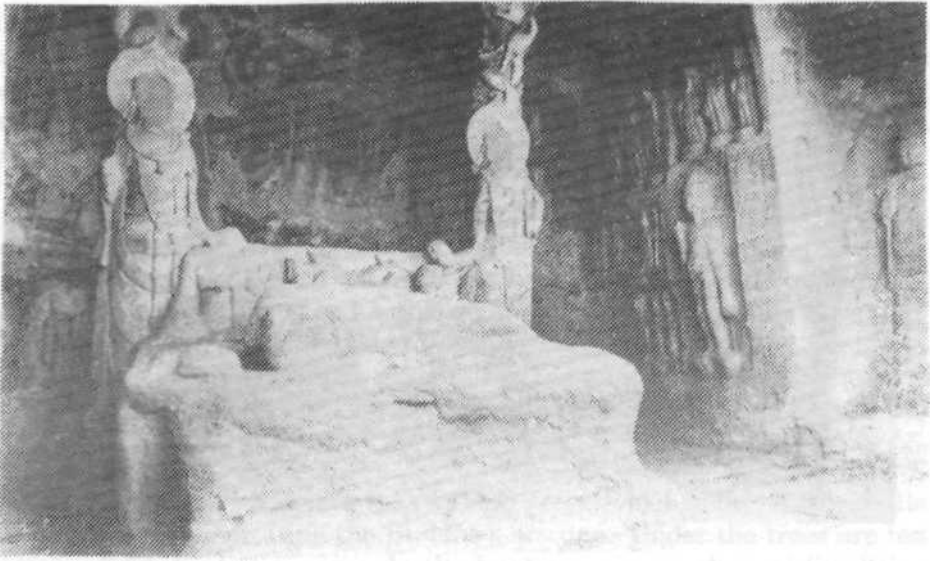


Illustration 2

are ten seated disciples with only half of their bodies visible. Some of them are beating their breasts, some are crying, some of them have the corners of their mouths turned down, some again have both eyebrows drooping, and everyone has a different expression. At each end of the reclining Buddha there is a *bodhisattva* wearing a flower garland on his head. They wear *deva* garments with half sleeves, and both are leaning back against a *śāla* tree. The branches and the leaves are linked with the ceiling of the cave. There is a dragon coiled round each tree trunk (Illus. 2, above).

According to the last chapter of the *Mahāmāyā Sūtra*, it is said that when Śākyamuni wished to enter Nirvāṇa his mother in heaven had five terrible dreams at the same time. The fourth terrible dream was as follows.

There was a *maṇi* pearl [i.e. the “wish-fulfilling pearl”, *cintāmaṇi*] situated on top of a high pillar, then a constant rain of precious things that fell all over. Then from the mouths of four poisonous dragons there issued forth fire, which blew down the pillar and swallowed the *maṇi* pearl, and a violent gale blew it into an empty abyss.¹²

It is in the light of this that we should understand why the twin *śāla* trees in carvings of this cave have the coiling dragons. Two further scenes relating to the Nirvāṇa Scene are carved in the cliff of this cave. Both are done

¹² T. 383, ch. 2, p. 1012a.

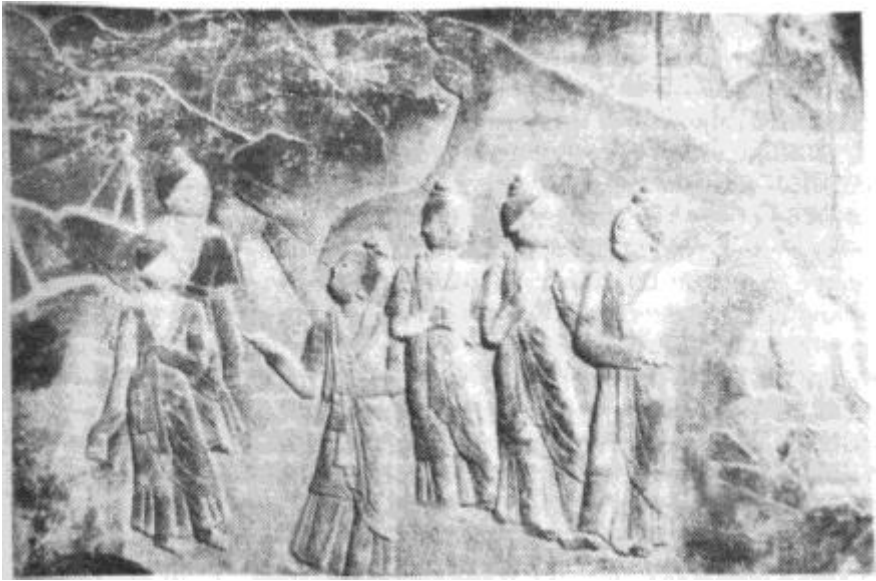


Illustration 3

in shallow relief. The tableau near the doorway in this cave represents a group of steep and lofty mountains. In the valley are seven maidens with their hair combed into a simple hairstyle. Six of them are standing, one inclines her head listening attentively, one turns her head looking around. Yet others are holding hands, and others are clapping their hands. Each of them is rendered in an individual manner. Exactly opposite Śākyamuni's head there is a statue of a woman. Her bearing is more noble and refined than that of the other six women, but her look is depressed and her clothes and ornaments plain. In the last chapter of the *Mahāmāyā Sūtra* it is said,

When Mahāmāyā heard Aniruddha had finished reciting his *gātha*, the grief caused her to faint. All the celestial maidens used cold water to wash her head while wailing for a long time before she recovered, pulling hair out of their heads.¹³

This is the background of the story of Mahāmāyā accompanied by all the celestial maidens descending from the palace in the Tuṣita Heaven in order to hurry to the death-bed of Śākyamuni (Illus. 3, above).

In the relief to the right of this scene are ten *bhikṣus* wearing cowl-like hats and monks' robes, with the upper part of their bodies revealed. They are depicted watching a violent raging fire on the mountains, all with individual

¹³ T. 383, ch. 2, p. 1012b.

expressions. In the middle of the flames appears the front part of a coffin. As the mountains are near and the fire far away the arrangement of the scene is distinctive. Consequently the result of the perspective is very powerful. This scene probably depicts the passage on the “Golden Coffin Burning by Itself”. According to the section “Divine Responses at the Cremation” in the last chapter of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* it is said that at that time the precious coffin of the Great Sage, the Tathāgata, was gradually moving in the air. When it arrived at the place of cremation it hung in the air and then calmly came to rest on the couch made of the seven precious things.¹⁴

Again and again the congregation placed the golden coffin on the fragrant pyre (on which the body of the Buddha was to be cremated). Various strong men tried to set fire to the fragrant pyre; however, the fire died out by itself. Thereupon the Tathāgata with his compassionate power in accordance with their wishes pushed the coffin wondrously into the fire. Gradually the cremation finished, and after seven days the wonderful and fragrant pyre had been completely consumed by the fire.¹⁵ The ten *bhikṣus* in this scene are Śākyamuni’s ten great disciples. In the sixth chapter of the *Da Tang xiyu ji* there is also a note concerning the tradition of “the golden coffin burning by itself”.¹⁶

On the right half of the cave wall is another scene in low relief. It shows the upper front part of the coffin. From the top, tassels hang down as ornamentation and under the coffin there is a group of figures. The relief on the left half part of the middle wall is, however, no longer distinct, but the whole scene seems to illustrate the account of “the golden coffin lifting itself”. According to the above mentioned *sūtra* it is said that after the corpse of Śākyamuni was laid in the coffin, virtuous men and women from Kuśinagara found eight *dvarapālas* within the city to carry the Buddha’s coffin, but although they used great efforts they were not able to lift it at all. When Śākyamuni (from inside the golden coffin) saw all the men lifting in vain, he showed compassion and by help of his “magical power” the coffin consequently lifted itself and rose into the sky. It entered through the western gate of the town of Kuśinagara and left through the eastern gate of the city, moving towards the cremation ground.¹⁷

This carving accords with the cardinal principles of the scripture, and is similar to the “Scene of Cremation” found among the wall paintings that illustrate the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* on the southern wall of Mogao Cave No. 332 in Dunhuang. This *sūtra* scene was made at the beginning of the Tang dynasty.

¹⁴ T. 377, ch. 2, p. 907c.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 909c.

¹⁶ T. 2087, ch. 6, p. 904b. See Illus. 4, overleaf.

¹⁷ Cf. T. 377, ch. 2, p. 907a.

2. The Reclining Buddha in Wofo Temple

The scale of the Nirvāṇa Scene of the Reclining Buddha Temple in Anyue is far larger than the two previously discussed Nirvāṇa Scenes from Qianfo Yan in Guangyuan. It may even be called the largest stone carving of the Nirvāṇa Scene found in the cave temples in China dating from the Tang period. This Nirvāṇa Scene is actually a combination of two scenes; one is Śākyamuni preaching just prior to his death and the other is Śākyamuni in Nirvāṇa.¹⁸

The group of sculptures, which shows Śākyamuni preaching, is placed high up on the rock above the upper half of the Reclining Buddha's body approximately five metres above the ground. In this scene of preaching there are altogether twenty-one figures, among which the central one is Śākyamuni sitting in the lotus posture. His hair is made in the beehive style with a pointed *uṣṇīṣa* on top of his head, and earrings hang from his ears. Behind his head there is a *mandorla* in the shape of a "precious pearl". He is wearing a monk's robes with a collar in the shape of a capital "U" underneath the *kaṣāya*, and he wears the *saṅghāṭi* with its ribbons hanging down. His right hand is held in the *dharmacakra-mudrā* and his left is resting on his left knee.



Illustration 4

¹⁸ See Illus. 5, overleaf.

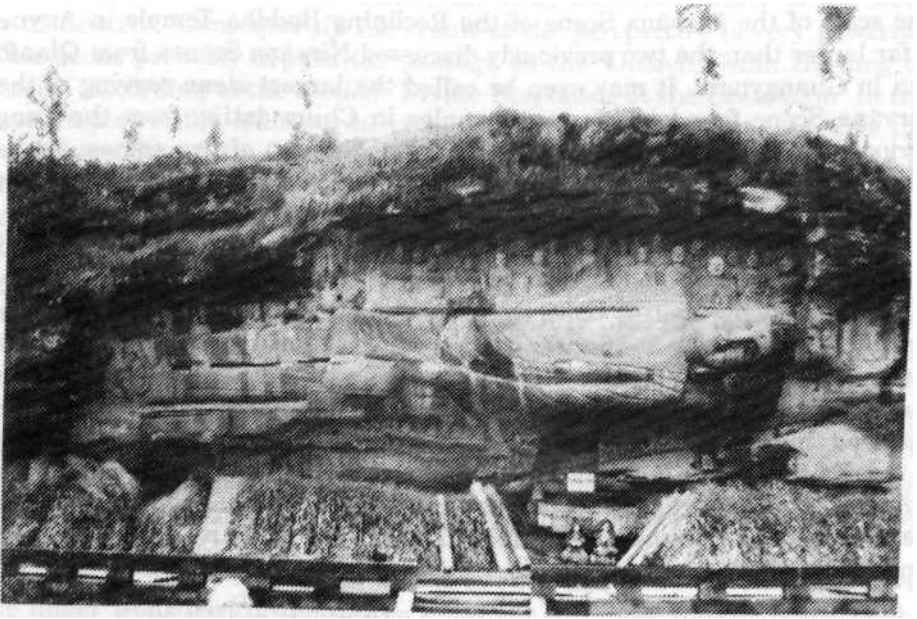


Illustration 5

According to another version of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*,¹⁹ the Buddha is said to have stated, “After I have entered *nirvāṇa*, you of the fourfold assembly should protect and hold on to my *Mahāparinirvāṇa [Sūtra]*.”²⁰ Of the other twenty statues nine are disciples dressed like *bhikṣus*. Each of them is shown in an individual posture, but they all seem to express a deep feeling of grief. The mood of the statue of the old *bhikṣu* sitting to the left of Śākyamuni is extremely touching indeed. Both of his eyebrows are hanging down and the corners of his mouth are turned downwards, and his face is emaciated. The two *bodhisattva* figures do not wear flower garlands or flower crowns, but have their hair combed into a chignon. They both wear earrings in their ears. The upper parts of their bodies are clothed in a garment with half sleeves. On the lower parts they wear *dhotis*. Pendants and precious jewels hang on their breasts, and from their shoulders gauzelike silk ribbons trail. The dress of the *bodhisattvas* is representative of the type of dress commonly seen in the Buddhist cliff carvings in Sichuan before the Tang. Besides, there is among the sculptures the group of the Eight

¹⁹ *Folin niepan ji fazhu jing*, T. 390. This shorter version (in one *juan* was translated by Xuanzang in AD 652.

²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 1113c. This is a paraphrase and not a direct translation.

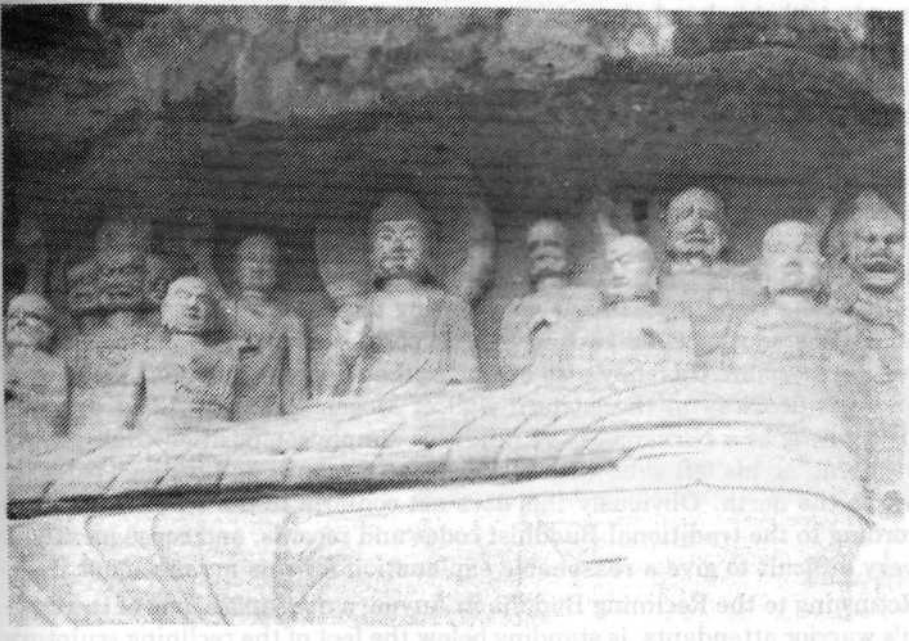


Illustration 6

Gods and Nāgas²¹ carved in high relief on the wall behind the sculptures of Śākyamuni, the *bodhisattvas* and the disciples. Apart from the emotional expressions of the *bodhisattvas*, who are somewhat ordinary, all disciples and the group of the Eight Gods and Nāgas express grief (Illus. 6, above).

The main figure of the scene below is the “Reclining Buddha” showing Śākyamuni in *nirvāna*. The whole body is 23m long, the head is 3.1m long, and the width of the body is 3m. The proportion of the body to the head is about eight to one, which is in accord with the proportion of the lengths of body and head of a reclining figure in classical Chinese painting. But as the width of the shoulders and the length of the body of the Reclining Buddha is somewhat out of proportion it makes the sculpture resemble the refined style of the Buddhist sculptures from the Northern Dynasties.

The Buddha has the beehive hair style with a tall and broad *uṣṇīṣa*, and a curl protruding between his eyebrows. In both ears he has earrings. He is wearing a *saṅghāṭi* over a long robe with wide plaits, as inner garment he has a *dhoti*, underneath which hang ribbons. The drapery hangs down from both shoulders, with the plaits and folds clinging to each other. Both

²¹ This is the traditional group of divine and semi-divine protectors of the Buddha’s Dharma and includes *deva*, *nāga*, *yakṣa*, *gandharva*, *aśura*, *garuḍa*, *kinnara*, and *mahorāga*.

arms are placed in a natural way along the thighs. He is reclining on his left side with his head towards the east and his legs placed one on top of the other, which is quite different from the normal manner of resting on his right side with his head towards the east. However, this is not because the planners and craftsmen violated the standard pattern of ancient Buddhist codes and records on purpose. The present writer holds the belief that this Reclining Buddha was carved in the northern slope of the cliff, according to ancient Chinese funeral customs, where the dead person was buried with his head towards east and his feet towards west in order to express the idea that the soul would return to Taishan. This is probably the reason why the Reclining Buddha has his head pointing towards the north and his face towards the south, while resting in this pose, quietly reclining on his left side. Furthermore this may also be due to the shape and sloping of the cliff. Above the doorway in the eastern wall of Mogao Cave No. 120 there is a wall painting of a Nirvāṇa Scene in a very simple composition. Śākyamuni is reclining on his left side, with his head facing south and his legs pointing towards the north. Obviously this does not conform to the traditional norm according to the traditional Buddhist codes and records, and consequently it is very difficult to give a reasonable explanation for this arrangement.²²

Returning to the Reclining Buddha in Anyue, a *dvarapāla*, one of the Buddha's warrior attendants, is standing below the feet of the reclining sculpture with the five fingers of his left hand spread open protecting the Buddha's feet (Illus. 7, overleaf). The right hand is in a tight fist, raised threateningly on a level with the shoulders. The sorrowful frowning and firmly closed lips turned downwards indicate a feeling of grief. According to the *Foshuo niepan miji jingang lishi ailuan jing* [The Sūtra [dealing with] Vajrapāṇi's Grief at the Buddha's] Nirvāṇa],²³ it is said that when the Buddha entered *nirvāṇa* in the *śāla* grove at Kuśinagara, Vajrapāṇi became so upset and sad at seeing that the Buddha had passed away that he beat his breast and stamped his feet in deep sorrow until his five organs nearly all burst. Vajrapāṇi adored Śākyamuni's feet, which were like *utpala* flowers, and therefore he would not leave them.²⁴ This is actually the reason why the *dvarapāla* (as a stereotype of Vajrapāṇi) is placed at the feet of the Reclining Buddha in this group of sculptures. The *dvarapāla* placed at the top of the head of the Reclining Buddha and the one below his feet constitute a corresponding pair when seen from afar. The two *dvarapālas* in the small Nirvāṇa Scene at the doorway to the cave shrine in the Qianfo Yan in Guangyuan are the same as these.

In the middle part of the Reclining Buddha there is a figure dressed as a *bhikṣu* with a round face, a round collar, and broad sleeves, sitting in

²² This type of Nirvāṇa Scene is the only exception among those found in the Mogao Caves.

²³ T. 394.

²⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 1116a–1117c.



Illustration 7



Illustration 8

meditation posture with his face turned towards Śākyamuni, who seems to be sleeping in a composed manner. With his index and middle fingers the sitting *bhikṣu* holds on to the wrist of Śākyamuni's left hand. The meaning of this is as follows: Śākyamuni had taught in the Śāla Grove just prior to his departure. The Buddha's disciples never say that the Buddha died, but that he entered into another spiritual realm, namely *nirvāṇa*. Who then is this disciple? According to the *Mahā-parinirvāṇa Sūtra*,²⁵ Chapter 40, it is related that when Śākyamuni was about to enter *nirvāṇa* he told his disciples that Ānanda was his favourite as he had followed him for more than twenty years, and that his wisdom (Skt. *prajñā*) was surpreme. Therefore he passed the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Scripture* on to Ānanda.²⁶

In Chapter One of the *Pusa chutai jing* [The Sūtra on the Bodhisattva Dwelling in the Womb]²⁷ it is said,

At the time when the Buddha was in the Śāla Grove to the north of the town of Kuśinagara, he wished to complete his life and enter *nirvāṇa*. In the middle of the night on the eighth day of the second month he personally folded the *saṅghāṭi*, the *uttarōsaṅga* and the *antarvāsaka*, and arranged all three in a bamboo basket

²⁵ T. 374.

²⁶ *ibid.*, ch. 40, p. 601 bc.

²⁷ T. 384.

inside the golden coffin. Resting himself he lay down with his feet placed one upon the other. The alms bowl and staff he handed over to Ānanda.²⁸

The second chapter of the *Dazhi du lun* [Mahāprajñā Treatise]²⁹ also mentions the story of Śākyamuni, who prior to his death transmitted the Dharma to Ānanda. In the light of what was said above, then, the sculpture of the *bhikṣu* in front of the Reclining Buddha would appear to represent the disciple Ānanda (Illus. 8, previous page).

In the Shuifo Temple the carving of the Reclining Buddha is 10.5m long and 1.85m broad at the shoulders. The composition and content of the whole scene is largely similar to the Nirvāṇa Scene of the Reclining Buddha in Anyue.

3. The Nirvāṇa Scene at Mt. Baoding

In the Nirvāṇa scene from Baodingshan in Dazu the sculpture of the Reclining Buddha is 31m long and 7m wide across the shoulders and has a refined touch similar to that of the Buddha in Anyue. This Reclining Buddha, whether from the point of view of form or of quality, can really be called magnificent, yet simple and vigorous (Illus. 9).

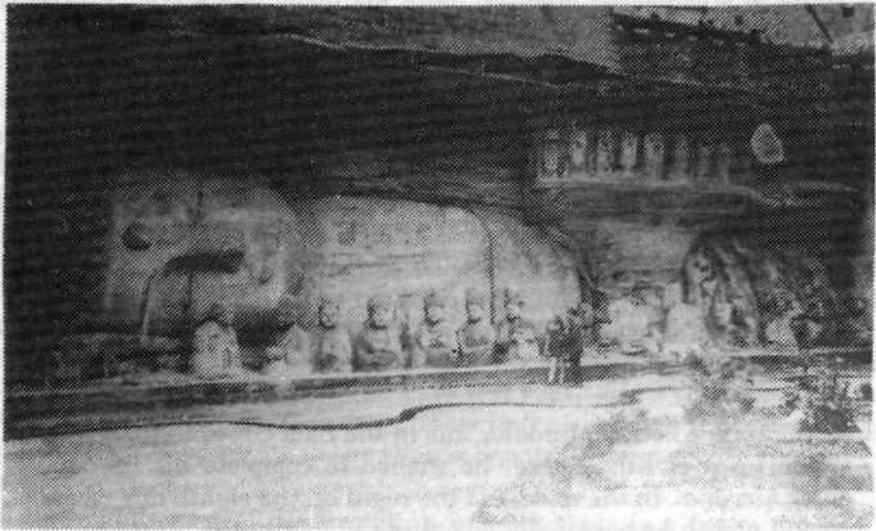


Illustration 9

²⁸ *ibid.*, p. 1015ab.

²⁹ T. 1509.

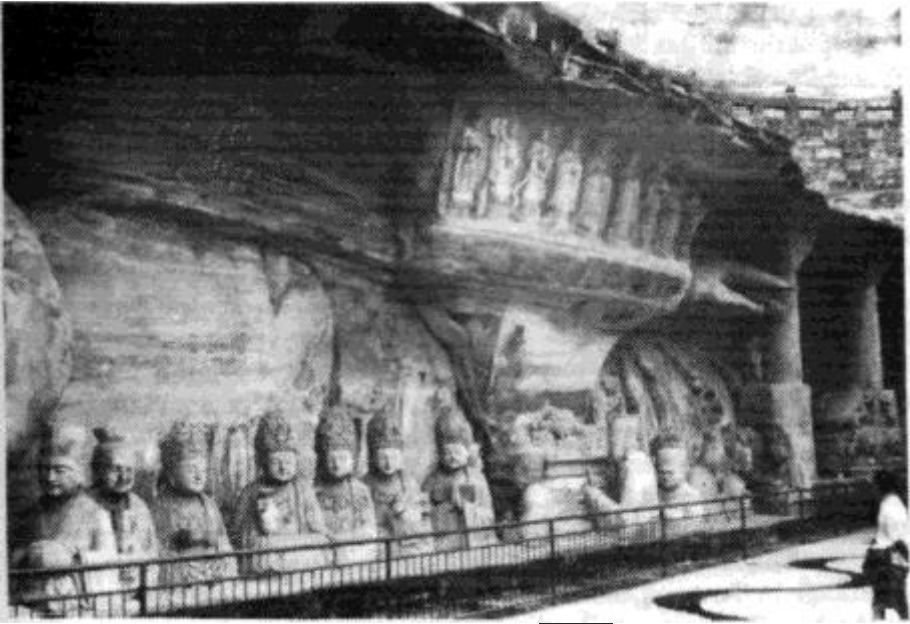


Illustration 10

The head of the Reclining Buddha is turned towards the north, his feet towards the south, his face towards the west and his back towards the east. However, the lower half of the body has not been carved in full accordance with the accounts in the Buddhist scriptures and historical writings. The Reclining Buddha also has his hair in the beehive hairstyle, but unlike Buddhist figures from Tang and the Five Dynasties Period, he does not have a high *uṣṇīṣa*. He has a serene expression with a round, mild countenance, and both eyes slightly open. In front of the sculpture of the Reclining Buddha there are fourteen disciples carved in the round with only the upper halves of their bodies visible. Among them Nos. 4–10 and No. 12 wear tall flower crowns with filigree work, and numerous gems decorate their bodies (Illus. 10, above). In front of the middle part of the Reclining Buddha is a sacrificial table on which peaches, pomegranates (= the Buddha's hands), and grapes, etc., are displayed. In front of the table stands the god Indra, who is wearing a crown of gems on his head. He is flanked by two *dvarapālas*. The scriptural source of this scene is the sixth chapter of the *Da Tang xiyu ji*, the section on Kuśinagara, where it is said,

After the extinction of the Tathāgata, men and *devas* grieved. They made a coffin out of the seven precious things, and wrapped

the [Tathāgata's] body in a thousand layers of cloth, placing fragrant flowers as well as canopies and coverings over it. Then the host of the Mallas raised it [i.e. the coffin] and proceeded forward, some leading and others following along.³⁰

The Sanskrit word “Malla” is both the name of a race and that of their kingdom. The Chinese word is *moluo*, “man of strength” or “warrior”. Consequently the Malla Kingdom is the same as the “country of men of strength”, situated in the northern part of present day India. After Śākyamuni's *nirvāṇa* and cremation, the Malla Kingdom participated in dividing the Buddha's relics (Skt. *śarīra*), which were being divided among the eight states of North India at that time.

Among the figures in the auspicious clouds carved above the main sculpture and the sacrificial table, the three in the middle are Śākyamuni's mother, his maternal aunt Prajāpatī and his wife Yaśodharā. Three celestial maidens stand on both sides. The women are dressed in shirts and short jackets with broad sleeves. The scene of this group and those earlier mentioned in the *Mahāmāyā Sūtra* and in the *Da Tang xiyu ji* correspond to each other. The length of the Reclining Buddha in the Nirvāṇa Scene in the Wofu Village in Tongnan county is 36m long. This group takes as its major ideal the Nirvāṇa Scene in Baoding, which is why that place has also been called the “New Baoding”.

4. Nirvāṇa Scenes Elsewhere in China

Although the Nirvāṇa Scene is an old and important theme in Buddhist art, the variations between the carvings from the Western Regions and those of the Central Plain with its Han population, as exemplified in the Buddhist carvings from Sichuan, differ very much from each other in their themes and artistic styles. The Nirvāṇa scenes from the Thousand Buddha Grottoes in Kyzil and Bāzaklik in Xinjiang mostly use the combination of painted sculptures with frescoes. A Reclining Buddha is typically moulded on the main wall of a given cave or in the middle wall of the back room, lying on his right side with his legs placed one upon the other, and his right hand supporting his head. On the wall behind the back of the sculpture and on the wall to the right and left there are many wall paintings showing the grief expressed by disciples and princes of the different states of the Western Regions. Included among those scenes we may find “The Spontaneous Burning of the Golden Coffin”, and “The Division of the Buddha's Śarīras by the Eight Kingdoms”, in caves such as the Kyzil Caves, Nos. 8, 17 and 34, and in the Bāzaklik caves, No. 33. Only eleven Nirvāṇa Scenes and other scenes from the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* have been preserved until today in the Mogao Caves in

³⁰ T. 2087, ch. 6, p. 904b.

Dunhuang. Among them only one Nirvāṇa Scene combines painting with sculpture. This is found in Cave No. 158, which was made in mid-Tang during the Tibetan occupation of Dunhuang (c. AD 792–848). In this cave the statue of Śākyamuni entering *nirvāṇa* is 15.8m long. The Buddha is resting on his right side with his feet placed one upon the other, and with his cheek in his right palm. On the western mural of the cave are *bodhisattvas*, *arhats*, *dharmapālas*, and the group of the Eight Gods and Nāgas, all wailing in grief. The left side of the southern mural shows Kāśyapa hurrying to the cremation, and on the mural situated at the feet of the Reclining Buddha is a painting of kings from various kingdoms, who express their grief. In the very front row of the tableau a Tibetan king (Tib. *Bod btsan-po*) is seen with a three-leaved crown on his head.³¹ To the right side of the Tibetan king is a Chinese emperor wearing a crown with gems. The other figures are kings or princes from the Western Regions. They are all expressing their grief over the demise of Śākyamuni. One of them can be seen cutting his ears with knives. Another is cutting open his breast, one cuts his nose, yet another uses a sword to penetrate his heart, etc. These figures vividly reflect the special mourning customs among the non-Han peoples living in Central Asia and in the Western Regions within the borders of Tang China.

In Cave No. 6 in the Yungang Caves below the southern wall is a niche with a small Nirvāṇa Scene dating back to the Northern Wei Period. Here Śākyamuni's cheek is resting in his right palm, his head is facing towards the east, his feet towards the west. He is resting horizontally on his right side on an adorned bed. Six figures are sitting on the ground below the adorned bed, with their knees bent, and weeping. Two of those sitting at the feet of Śākyamuni, who have their hair combed into topknots, are dressed in robes and jackets with narrow sleeves. The one in front is stroking the Buddha's feet, while the other behind him is clasping his hands in grief. The concept behind this Nirvāṇa Scene appears to show lamenting disciples and Māyā hastening to her son's cremation.

In Cave No. 50 in the northern wall there is a niche with a scene showing Śākyamuni preaching. Outside the opening of this niche on the central part of the right wall is a niche with a small Nirvāṇa Scene, which also dates from the Northern Wei Period. In the upper level of this niche there are carvings of five *bhikṣus*, of whom one is holding an incense burner; the four others are in the state of mourning. The middle level consists of a scene depicting Śākyamuni entering *nirvāṇa*. The Buddha figure is lying on his right side with his feet one upon the other on the precious couch, his head is facing

³¹ For this picture, which was taken by Paul Pelliot's team, cf. *Zhongguo shiku: Dunhuang Mogao ku*, Vol. 4, ed. Dunhuang Wenwu Yanjiu, Wenwu Chubanshe, 1987, pls. 63–5. Unfortunately this mural is not intact, and the head of the Tibetan king has been somewhat damaged. For another painting of a Tibetan king or dignitary, which is in cave No. 159, see *ibid.*, pl. 91. For a description of the “Tibetan kings”, see Heather Karmay, *Early Sino-Tibetan Art*, Aris and Phillips, Warminster, 1975, pp. 15–16.

east, and his feet west. At the Buddha's head there is a *bhikṣu* kneeling. At the Buddha's feet another *bhikṣu* is holding the Enlightened One's feet in his hands. This appears to show the story of "Kāśyapa Stroking the Buddha's Feet" as it appears in the Nirvāṇa Scene of Bamiyan. Five mourning disciples are seen behind the Buddha's body with only half of their bodies visible. One of them is beating his head with both hands, another is beating his chest while wailing, and yet another lowers his head in depression. At the lower level six musical entertainers are depicted. One is playing the lute, another is playing the flute, yet another beats time with a clapper, while one is beating a deer-skin drum. According to the first chapter of the *Si tongzi sanmei jing* [The Scripture of the Samadhi of the Four Youths], it is said that when the Buddha entered Nirvāṇa, the sky rained down heavenly flowers and all kinds of fragrances, and there sounded heavenly music of innumerable kinds, all kinds of sounds and tones were offered to the World Honoured One in such a way that the mood and the rhythm were mutually harmonious.³²

The niche with the Nirvāṇa Scene in the Putai Cave in the Longmen Grottoes is one of a relatively small size. The width of this niche is about 25cm and it was made during the Northern Wei Dynasty. In this niche Śākyamuni is shown lying on his back with his head placed high on his adorned bed. Behind the couch is a protective screen with the representation of the heads of four *bhikṣus*, which appear as if the heads had been cut off. They all express sadness. Before the head of the Reclining Buddha there is a *bhikṣu*, i.e. representing Ānanda, stroking Śākyamuni's head with his hand.

Conclusion

Above I have presented a general discussion of some of the cave temples containing Nirvāṇa scenes, with the purpose of making a brief comparison between them and the Nirvāṇa scenes in the Buddhist rock carvings in Sichuan, including different aspects such as subject matter, composition, styles of sculpting, etc. If we are to make a conclusion concerning the Nirvāṇa Scene according to the above presentation, then the common themes are, (a) "Śākyamuni entering *nirvāṇa*, while his disciples are wailing"; in addition this theme may also have the "The last Sermon"; (b) Māyā hurrying to the cremation; (c) the golden coffin rising by itself; (d) Ānanda holding the Buddha's hand.

Compared to the very rich and diversified contents of the Nirvāṇa Scenes in the temple caves of the Western Regions, those in Sichuan seem to be somewhat more simple. This is due to the fact that the sculptures are normally more limited by space and location than those with wall paintings.

³² T. 379, ch. 1, p. 931c.

Besides, at Kyzil, Bāzaklik, and the Mogao Caves at Dunhuang the subject matter of the Nirvāṇa Scenes bears a strong local flavouring characteristic of the Western Regions, such as stories about heavenly kings and demons who make final offerings to the Buddha, “Kāśyapa Hastening to the Cremation”, kings from different countries and nationalities wailing in mourning, “The Division of the Relics by the Eight Kingdoms”, etc. These themes cannot be found in the Nirvāṇa Scenes in Sichuan, because the subjects of these scenes have been influenced by the Nirvāṇa Scenes from the cave temples in Central China, i.e. the Central Plain.

According to the composition and appearance of the sculptures, those from the Western Regions (including Dunhuang) almost all use a combination of sculptures and paintings in displaying the Nirvāṇa Scene. This is one of their characteristics. The sculpture of “Śākyamuni Entering Nirvāṇa” is placed in a significant position with murals with further scenes from his *nirvāṇa* on the walls behind the sculpture and on the surrounding walls. Additional sculptures may even portray the disciples in mourning. By using this combination of three-dimensional sculptures and two-dimensional paintings, which provide balance to the layout of the scene, they add shade and prominence to the *Leitmotiv* in a dynamic manner.

The Nirvāṇa scenes from Sichuan basically follow this layout. The sculpture of “Śākyamuni Entering Nirvāṇa” is usually carved in the round and placed centrally in the cave shrines, matching the stories of the other Nirvāṇa Scenes carved on the walls to the left, centre, and right. Most of the secondary figures and scenes are carved in the high or low relief in order to serve as a visual support to the central Nirvāṇa sculpture.

In respect to the plastic arts the Nirvāṇa Scene and the Buddhist sculptures based on this theme from both the Central Plains and the Western Regions including Dunhuang, almost all follow the iconographic style found in the Gandhāra examples, which means that the figure of Śākyamuni is shown reclining on his right side with one leg resting on top of the other, and with his right hand under his head. This is evidence of the strong influence which this sculptural style had in Central Asia and in China. Sculptures of the Buddha all have round faces with fair and open expressions, and with the hair usually tied in a knot, mostly curled in form of whorls. Most of them wear monks’ robes with round necklines as outer garments. Some have their right shoulders bared with the drapery in the form of round convex folds. The sculptures reveal the grace of female forms, for instance the full breasts, the lithe waists, and the broad but delicate feet. How could this possibly be an image of an old man more than eighty years old with a fragile body! The Nirvāṇa sculptures in Mogao Cave No. 158 may be called a representative work of this kind of art.

At the same time, in order to highlight the sad atmosphere, the movements of the disciples are rendered in a dramatic manner, being greatly exaggerated. Especially the portrayals of the people from Central Asia, exemplified

in the customs of the Tibetans appearing in the frescoes, possess a strong artistic and influential power.

The few Nirvāṇa Scenes in Sichuan, regardless of their shape and skill of artistic expression, have very few points in common with the above mentioned style. All the Nirvāṇa sculptures have both their hands hanging straight down, and recline on their right side with their legs one on top of the other.³³ However, the form of the sculptures is normally not feminine; nor do they portray an old man, they rather show a middle-aged male. The two Buddha sculptures in Guangyuan both have their right shoulders bared. Those in Anyue and Dazu wear a long undergarment with broad ribbons. These are styles from the central parts of China. In the two Nirvāṇa Scenes in Guangyuan, apart from the Reclining Buddha, the *bodhisattvas* look like “palace women”, and the *dvarapālas* with their muscles are expressions of artistic exaggeration. It is obvious at just a single glance that they are very similar in style to those in the Longmen Caves dating from the High Tang.

The Nirvāṇa Scenes of Anyue and Dazu are somewhat different from those in Guangyuan, not only from the point of view of style: there are great differences in regard to other aspects as well. In terms of accuracy and proportion the Reclining Buddha in Anyue is inferior to the Reclining Buddha in Dazu, which is mainly because the shoulders are too narrow. The general technique of expression used in sculpting the Anjoie Reclining Buddha has been achieved by carving out the whole body, providing it with a slender form, which makes it look somewhat flat. Caused by the dominance of the angular type of carving (Ch. *lidao*) the curves seem slightly stiff. On the other hand the form of the Buddha’s head is both precise and clear. For instance the two eyebrows are shown in a geometric form carved as inward curving arc shapes. Both the lips and the philtrum are somewhat exaggerated. However, the spectator, when facing upwards, does not get the impression that the sculpture is deficient in proportions. Apart from that, the artisans have clearly paid more attention to the depiction of the facial expressions of the disciples, and have furthermore added Ānanda sitting cross-legged in front of the body of the Reclining Buddha. By doing this they have made the whole tableau vivid in a unique way.

In contrast to this, the proportion of the Reclining Buddha in Mt. Baoding in Dazu is appropriate. The bodily form is round and strong, something which is caused by the frequent use of the round carving technique (Ch. *yuan-dao*). Therefore the lines of each part appear more simple, vigorous, and mild. The Reclining Buddha and the host of disciples, although the latter lack the lower halves of their bodies, provide an aesthetic feeling of being both hidden and revealed at the same time, a visual trick which leaves room for the imagination of the spectator. This is something rarely found in other stone carvings. Furthermore, among the disciples that stand silent and wear

³³ Apart from the large sculpture at Wofu Temple in Anyue, which reclines on its left side.

crowns on their heads we find the famous folk religious personality from Sichuan, Liu Benzun (852–907)³⁴ as well as the initiator and master-mind of the sculptures at Mt. Baoding, namely Zhao Zhifeng (1159–c.1225).³⁵ This feature is obviously something that runs counter to the Buddhist scriptures. The reserved and distressed expressions of the disciples, however, fill the whole tableau even further with a solemn and sublime atmosphere.

*Translated and adapted by
Anna Elisabeth Grønvald*

List of Characters

| | |
|------------------------|--------|
| Anyue | 安岳 |
| Baoding | 宝頂山 |
| Dazhi du lun | 大智度論 |
| Dazu | 大足 |
| Da Tang xiyu ji | 大唐西遊記 |
| Dunhuang | 敦煌 |
| Guangyuan | 廣原 |
| lidao | 立刀 |
| Liu Benzun | 柳本尊 |
| Longmen | 龍門 |
| Qianfo Yan | 千佛崖 |
| Maiji Shan | 麥積山 |
| Mogao | 莫高 |
| Pusa chutai jing | 菩薩處泰經 |
| Putai Dong | 普泰洞 |
| Shuifo Si | 睡佛寺 |
| Si tongzhi sanmei jing | 西童子三昧經 |
| Taishan | 泰山 |
| Tongnan xian | 潼南縣 |
| Wofo Si | 臥佛寺 |

³⁴ Liu Benzun is a historical figure, who gave a great impetus to the spread of esoteric Buddhism (*mijiao*) in central Sichuan at the close of the Tang Dynasty. For a discussion of him and the type of Buddhism he propagated, see Wang Jiayou, “Liu Benzun yu Mijiao”, *Dazu shike yanjiu*, ed. Liu Zhangjiu, Hu Wenho, and Li Yongqiao, Chengdu, 1985, pp. 168–74.

³⁵ No official biography is extant. For some biographical information, cf. *Dazu shike yanjiu*, *op. cit.*, pp. 260–1.

Yungang
Yuexhi xian
yuandao
Zhao Zhifeng

雲岡
樂至縣
圓刀
趙智賒