

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS

Buddhist concepts of hell changed in various ways upon arrival in China. One was the appearance of the ten kings and the incorporation of Confucian-style bureaucracy into the administration of the underworld. Another change was that of location, hell being moved from the remote realm of India to the more familiar reaches of Sichuan. Yet another change can be seen in the widespread number of depictions of hell found in China.¹

Notions of hell had existed in China prior to the arrival of Buddhism, but never with the scale or intensity found within the medieval and modern periods. I see this change as a religious response to sociological demands. Several factors support this theory. One very important piece of evidence is the spread of the Scripture on the Ten Kings, and its incorporation into religious life, despite the fact that it was widely known to be a non-canonical work.² Clearly, the educational value inherent in depictions of hell was not lost upon the clergy,

¹Although descriptions of the hells are clear within early Indian Buddhist doctrine, they were not a popular subject for depiction. Bimala Charan Law in Heaven and Hell in Buddhist Perspective (Varanasi: Bhartiya Publishing, 1973), appendix ix, points out the absence of hell in early Buddhist textual and artistic works, noting that any mention of hell is absent from the Asokan inscriptions, as well as being isolated to a single representation on the railing at Bharhut.

²Teiser, Scripture on the Ten Kings, 9, points out that there is no evidence for the scripture in the early Buddhist catalogues, and, although copied, first by hand and later mass-produced in print, from the 10th century onward, the Scripture on the Ten Kings was not allowed into the Buddhist canon until 1912.

nor among the bureaucratic elite: “Penalties are messages, messages to those who suffer, to those who observe, to those who execute, and to those who know of them only by rumor.”³

The bureaucrats may have been seeking a method to alleviate criminal activity, but the clergy was looking for a way to convince the laity of the severity of repercussions in the next life for karmic disobedience in the here-and-now. Buddhism’s flexible nature allowed for a broad interpretation of what constituted hell; orthodox doctrine held that man ultimately had the power to create for himself his own personal hell. Relying on tortures real as well as imagined, unique representations of hell were produced in response to an individual’s, or perhaps a community’s, fears and concerns for their deceased loved ones as well as for their own future well-being.

Thematically, the composition of Great Buddha Bend varies widely: jataka tales and scenes from the historic Buddha’s life are intermingled with reliefs depicting local dignitaries along with works which would now be construed as relating to a variety of religious affiliations.⁴ Such a wide range

³McKnight, *Law and Order in Sung China*, 4 and 351. McKnight notes on several occasions that the Confucian ideal of educational transformation through power of example was the basis for the legal system. Eberhard, 26, correlates the rise in morality books to an increase in crime related to the urbanization trends taking place in the late Song dynasty.

⁴Aside from the tableau devoted to Master Liu, Zhao Zhifeng is depicted several times in a relief placed at the entrance to Great Buddha Bend grotto. Indigenous gods appear in the forms of the gods of wind, thunder, lightening and rain. The birth of the Buddha shows the infant being bathed by a water-spouting dragon. Regarding the Great Buddha Bend’s somewhat unorthodox appearance, Paludan, 11, is quick to point out the influences of Confucianism and Daoism, which by the Southern Song would appear to have been firmly blended with Buddhism in the minds of both laity and clergy. Unfortunately, many of the more apparent of such works, such as the carving of the Taoist Sages and the depiction of the Jade Emperor, were actually carved after Zhao’s death, and, therefore, cannot be considered part of the original site design.

may be reflective of Zhao's efforts to widen his monastic community's appeal by melding together diverse orthodox and heterodox traditions. Upaya, or expedient means, was a doctrine preached by the Buddha specifically to aid in the dissemination of Buddhism. Buddhism's original use of Daoist terms to translate abstract ideas from Sanskrit or Pali into Chinese was seen as upaya. It was done in order to make these ideas more accessible to a suspicious public. Zhao Zhifeng's work at Great Buddha Bend can also then be viewed as upaya. By using imagery and texts which were accepted throughout all levels of society, his religious efforts could then achieve the greatest success.

Factors such as patronage would conceivably have played a major part in what was carved. Beishan was constructed largely as a meritorious undertaking; yet Zhao Zhifeng developed Baodingshan for the edification of both laymen and clergy. The earlier works at Beishan were funded by General Wei Junjing, with later works known to have been commissioned by gentry, monks and nuns as well as local officials. Clear evidence for funding of Baodingshan is not available. One knows for certain, however, that this was not an imperially-sponsored undertaking, as was the case at other sites. Zhao Zhifeng undertook this project himself, his main source of income presumably those local patrons who had sponsored work at Beishan, as well as visiting wealthy pilgrims. Both Zhao's religious vocation and the demands made upon him by his patrons may explain the wide variation of imagery chosen for depiction at the Great Buddha Bend grotto.

The works at Great Buddha Bend follow a continuum from largely iconic works to varying degrees of narrative storytelling. Some scenes within the grotto

area could be argued as being solely bianwen in that they are largely textual in content. These include the various steles interspersed throughout the site. Others, such as the Guardians of the Law [fig. 77], the Taming of the Water Buffalo [fig. 78] and the Parinirvana scene [fig. 79], may be argued to be bianxiang in the stricter sense of the word, pictorial works without accompanying text. Such scenes would have required outside interpretation, and probably functioned in a variety of ways, either as icons for worship or as backdrops for ritual services.⁵ The hell tableau is only one of many that combines a considerable quantity of both text and image.

The overall layout of the site at Great Buddha Bend may differ from earlier Chinese site precedents, but one could view it as a sculptural representation based on a normally two-dimensional format, i.e. the handscroll. This is not to say that the artisan actively referred to an illustrated handscroll in order to produce the carvings at Great Buddha Bend, but rather, that their popular appeal made for a source commonly known to both craftsmen and clergy. As discussed earlier, the handscroll was a format popularized by the clergy as a transportable means by which they could reach a larger lay audience, while the development of the handscroll industry is considered by some scholars to have been based in Sichuan province.⁶ Therefore, it is not impossible to

⁵Murray, 129, states that the “grand iconic tableaux for Mahayana sutras reflect the importance of contemplation and visualization rituals in Tang Buddhist practice” without specifying which rituals were involved, or who was involved in their practice. For many of the more iconic statues at Great Buddha Bend, contemplation and visualization would have been difficult given the relative lack of space for this type of meditative exercise.

⁶Ho, xxxi. According to Ho, Dasheng ci Monastery, home to the monk who wrote the apocryphal Scripture on the Ten Kings, was known nationwide as a center of Buddhist art and Buddhist propagation, handscrolls forming a large part of both.

theorize that the design of Great Buddha Bend grotto developed from handscroll prototypes, be they bianwen or bianxiang.

Zhao Zhifeng was responding to a need for edifying works to portray specific scenes from Buddhist sources. In order to do so effectively, Zhao chose a format that complemented the rocky grotto area, a format that was suitable for his purpose of spreading the Buddhist doctrine. This format also happened to be one which was widely popularized, appealing to all classes of society. The populace preferred entertainment to education, and beginning as early on as the Tang dynasty, the clergy sought to accommodate this fact. Documentation shows that on festival days, when spectators and worshippers were gathered on the monastery grounds, the monks themselves would stage dramatic performances for their edification as well as enjoyment.⁷ It has also been determined that, beginning in the Tang, bianwen and bianxiang came to be utilized by entertainers outside of the Buddhist community.⁸ Zhao Zhifeng's construction of a permanent, large-scale bianwen/bianxiang site may have been an attempt by the clergy to regain control of the oral performance tradition.

Time and distance had made the grotto system seen at earlier sites unnecessary. Education, not circumambulation, was the key to reaching the laity in the 12th century.⁹ India was faraway, and Song Dynasty China had a long-standing religious tradition based on various apocryphal scriptures. Their

⁷Chen, 272.

⁸Mair, Painting and Performance, 32.

⁹Chen, 251-2, notes that extremely abstruse texts had to be modified in order to propagate the religion to the uneducated.

popular appeal made them vital portions of a site like Great Buddha Bend. The apocryphal Scripture on the Ten Kings, upon which the hell tableau is based, is not the only such work in the grotto. Another apocryphal Chinese scripture, the Scripture on the Kindness of Parents,¹⁰ serves as the source for scene number fifteen. Both works are based heavily upon the Chinese concept of filial piety, and both can be found among the illustrated bianwen scrolls found at Dunhuang.¹¹

Other non-Indic elements lace the entire site. A carved tiger figure guards the entrance to the monastic complex; a carved lion stands watch over the Cave of Complete Enlightenment. The gods of cloud, wind and thunder, along with the numerous representations of secular life scattered among the Buddhist stories, helped to place the worshipper firmly in China.¹²

How was it possible for such disparate themes and so many controversial scenes to be depicted in lieu of more customary, canonical works? Valerie

¹⁰Bao fumu enzhong jing. Although I have not as yet had the opportunity to fully study this area of the site, it does appear to closely mirror the main aspects of the scripture, i.e. the hardships of pregnancy and childrearing. Whether or not the texts inscribed there exhort the worshipper to make yulan ben offerings on behalf of his or her parents as suggested in the scripture remains to be studied.

¹¹Mair, Transformation Texts, xvii. It is interesting to note how accommodating the Buddhist faith can be, its initial failure to incorporate notions of filial piety being one of the main reasons given for the Buddhist persecutions of 446 CE and 574-577 CE.

¹²See Wu, 152. Murray, 141, refers to these three as “indigenous Chinese folk deities.” Discussion of the many secular scenes incorporated into the Buddhist imagery at Great Buddha Bend deserves further attention. Virtually all of the available sources make reference to at least one of the many mundane events depicted, yet no one, to my knowledge, has done an exhaustive study of how this secular imagery responds to or reflects the Buddhist imagery which surrounds it.

Hansen notes that officially sanctioned works of the late medieval period were strictly regulated, forced to mold to rigorous standards implemented by the orthodox Buddhist church.¹³ Creating a site dependent more on private donations than official monies, Zhao Zhifeng was allowed greater latitude in what he chose to include in the construction at Great Buddha Bend. The donors, assembled from a broad spectrum of backgrounds, also had differing reasons and demands for works to be included at the grotto. The monks and nuns sought meditative aids, or works that they may have felt were necessary for the edification of the populace. Landed gentry and visiting pilgrims were looking for themes common to their daily life, themes centered on family and the life hereafter. Great Buddha Bend can then be seen as a work constructed under the direction of one man, but devoted to a myriad of concerns from a diverse congregation.

¹³Hansen, 24-5. Although Hansen is here focusing on textual works, I see no reason why this sort of control would not have been extended into the artistic realm as well.