

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The T'ang dynasty is definitely the pinnacle of the crest line. After then, and stretching over nearly a thousand years, comes a decline that, despite certain attempts at colossal results rather than grandeur, is to become more and more pronounced. The works of the Sung dynasty disfigured those of the T'ang. The Ming ran out of inventiveness. And, finally, the Ch'ing consummated the decadence.¹

The Buddhist persecution of 845, which laid waste to a vast majority of that community's holdings in China, has long been viewed as the turning point in Chinese Buddhist art. It is seen as the defining moment that began the downward spiral of Buddhism in China. Buddhist artistic production in the post-persecution period, considered by many scholars to be a mere shadow of its former glorious self, has merited little historical attention. The subsequent Song dynasty evokes images of gentleman-scholar painters; it is a time of re-grouping and re-assessing, a time of longing for past glories and former, more peaceful, times. Buddhist artistic production during this period did not cease, yet no longer was it seen to hold the rank of "high art," perhaps due to perceived formulaic devices and overproduction.² Some scholars have even gone so far as

¹Victor Segalen referring to Chinese works in stone in The Great Statuary of China trans. Eleanor LeVieux (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), 26.

²The iconography associated with the vast pantheon of Buddhism, while by no means stagnant, was clearly established. This fact, combined with the popularity of printed words and images, made possible the mass distribution of

to label the Buddhism practiced in the 12th century “a folk-religion with little profoundness and much ritual.”³

If later Buddhist art is perceived as generally inferior, art produced in the peripheral areas of the kingdom is also viewed with scepticism. Provincial art is seen as being of secondary quality, quaint, not of the caliber of works found in more cosmopolitan centers. Sichuan is one peripheral region which had, until recently, fallen victim to such preconceptions. Angela Falco Howard, in her work cataloging Tang dynasty Buddhist artistic production in Sichuan, has done much to bring this problem to light.⁴

For this project, I have chosen to look at one site in Sichuan province - Baodingshan, in Dazu county. Baodingshan consists of a monastic complex and two grotto areas, Little Buddha Bend (Xiaofowan) and Great Buddha Bend (Dafowan) [fig. 1]. Located on a remote, rocky outcropping fifteen kilometers north of Dazu City, Baodingshan was an active pilgrimage site into at least the late Ming dynasty.⁵ Primary construction at the site dates from the later Song

Buddhist literature and imagery. For more on the historic changes taking place during the Song period, see Peter N. Gregory and Patricia Buckley Ebrey, “The Religious and Historical Landscape,” in Religion and Society in T’ang and Sung China, eds. Gregory and Ebrey (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1993), 1-35.

³H. A. Van Oort, Iconography of Chinese Buddhism in Traditional China, 2 vols. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1986), 1.

⁴Angela Falco Howard, “Tang Buddhist Sculpture of Sichuan: Unknown and Forgotten,” Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities, n.s., 60 (1988): 1-164. In her introduction to this article, Howard notes that cliff sculpture exists in 49 counties of Sichuan province, with over 63 known Tang dynasty sites, many of which have not been thoroughly researched.

⁵There is some question as to when Baodingshan was last in active use. Zhang Jiaqi, “The Splendour of the Grotto Arts of the Later Period in China,” Oriental Art n.s., 35 (Spring 1989): 19, states that the Yuan invasion of Sichuan

period, but the complex has until now received limited attention, partly due to its relatively recent arrival on the public scene.⁶

A brief treatment of an entire, largely undocumented, site could not reasonably be attempted in a project of this kind, and thus I have restricted this work to only one aspect of Baodingshan, namely, the hell scenes. I was first drawn to the hell relief because of its uniquely Chinese flavor. The hell scenes' combination of Buddhist and indigenous ideologies reflected Buddhism's flexible nature while highlighting local Chinese tastes. This characteristic was accentuated by the dynamic quality of the sculpted works, with energy drawn in

resulted in termination of the work done on the grottoes. Other sources, such as Dazu Grottoes (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1984), discuss later visits by Ming dynasty officials and royalty. Photos taken of the site during the excavations carried out in the 1940s would also seem to suggest that at least parts of the site were in use during the Qing dynasty [fig. 63]. Changjiu Liu, ed., in Dazu shi ke yan jiu (Chengdu: Sichuan sheng shehui kexueyuan chubanshe, 1985) provides evidence for continued carving activity in the dating of reliefs numbered 23, 24, and 26 to the Qing dynasty, with relief 25 being added in 1915.

⁶Baodingshan was put on the register of important cultural sites in 1961, and only opened to the general public as of 1981. Mention of Dazu county, and of the site at Baodingshan, occurs in passing in various larger works, most notably Victor Mair's T'ang Transformation Texts, Harvard-Yenching Institute Monograph Series, no. 28 (Cambridge and London: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University Press, 1989), Susan Naquin and Junfang Yu's work Pilgrims and Sacred Sites in China (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992) and Stephen Teiser's article "The Growth of Purgatory" in Religion and Society in T'ang and Sung China, eds. Patricia B. Ebrey and Peter N. Gregory (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1993). Naquin and Yu place Dazu in the realm of such monumental sites as Dunhuang, Yungang, and Longmen, but do not elaborate on why they have chosen to do so. Teiser provides a brief two-paragraph overview of the ten kings tableau, along with mention of the site and its history. Only two articles devoted to Baodingshan specifically, one by Ann Paludan entitled "Enlightenment in stone: The buffalo carvings of Baodingshan," Apollo (February 1994): 11-14, and Zhang Jiaqi's "The Splendour of the Grotto Arts of the Later Period in China," have appeared in Western journals.

large part from the more secular portions of the hell tableau. After I began my study of hell within its historical context and within the site, I came to recognize that the religious and aesthetic values that necessitated the sculpting of the hell scenes at Baodingshan also helped form the final overall configuration of the Great Buddha Bend grotto site.

A brief outline of the method used within this work is as follows. Chapter two will be divided into two main parts. The first will comprise a synopsis of the development of the Chinese belief system that came to equate Sichuan with hell, and how those beliefs were in turn reflected back onto orthodox religious values. The second section will deal with historical developments specific to Dazu County, with the focus being an overview of Baodingshan's creation.

Chapter three will be focused on the hell tableau at Baodingshan, and the historical and literary constructs surrounding hell in the late medieval/early modern eras. This thesis will not attempt an exhaustive study of comparative hell iconography as such a study would not necessarily serve to further the main argument.⁷ Few depictions of hell dating to this period or earlier remain extant, and fewer still are of the size and medium of those seen at Baodingshan. Comparative material will thus be included primarily in conjunction with the discussion surrounding the formal aspects of the tableau.

Lastly, the hell scenes at Baodingshan will be returned to their place within the entire complex. Here I will discuss how the site characterizes a final break from earlier Buddhist sites based on Indic models, representing a truly

⁷For a thorough discussion of the development of hell imagery through the Tang dynasty in China, see Stephen F. Teiser's article "'Having Once Died and Returned to Life': Representations of Hell in Medieval China," Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies 48.2 (December 1988): 433-463.

remarkable Chinese Buddhist artform based on another widely distributed artistic form, the illustrated handscroll. Since hell was a popular theme among non-literate as well as literate audiences, I will look at the use of transformation tableaux [bianxiang] and transformation texts [bianwen] within later Buddhist liturgical practice as a source for the uniquely Chinese layout of the grotto at Baodingshan.

As Sherman E. Lee notes in the introduction to The Latter Days of the Law: Images of Chinese Buddhism 850-1850,

The subject [of later Chinese Buddhist painting] is fascinating not only in itself but also in terms of its artistic devices and development, notably the transformations and absorptions of Indian, Central Asian, and Tibetan Buddhist painting by the ever-ingenuous and dominating Chinese and the adaptation of earlier Chinese pictorial solutions to the assumptions and demands of later Chinese culture.⁸

The established construction dates of Baodingshan place it within a later transitional phase of China's history. The growth of a money-based economy along with increasing urbanization prompted changes throughout the empire, including the rise of a middle-class and a broadening incidence of literacy.⁹ If Buddhism was to survive these changes, it had to adapt to the changing needs of its practitioners. It is my contention that these transformations, absorptions, and adaptations can be seen in a variety of ways and on a variety of levels in the

⁸Sherman E. Lee, preface to The Latter Days of the Law: Images of Chinese Buddhism 850-1850, ed. Marsha Weidner (University of Kansas: Spencer Museum of Art, 1994), 9.

⁹Valerie Hansen, Changing Gods in Medieval China, 1127-1276 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 5. Hansen cites Sichuan, particularly the area around Chengdu, as one of the main metropolitan areas during the late Song period.

work done at Baodingshan, resulting in definitive changes within what was once considered a borrowed ideology and borrowed art. These ideas and their artistic forms denote redefined liturgical needs as they responded to the changes occurring in Chinese society as a whole.