

## CHAPTER IV

## THE FORMATION OF AN INDIGENOUS CHINESE SITE

The hell tableau at Baodingshan represents a truly Chinese work of art. It is based on a sutra of non-Indic origins, and the various real-life components are clearly meant to help the Chinese viewer more closely identify with the souls of the damned, hopefully inspiring them to take action to avoid a similar fate. In this final chapter, I would like to extend this idea of Chinese influence outward, to encompass the entire Great Buddha Bend grotto at Baodingshan.<sup>1</sup>

What the pilgrim or tourist encounters at the grotto is a virtually uninterrupted frieze of carvings, altogether comprising thirty scenes punctuated by two caves.<sup>2</sup> Several authors have likened Great Buddha Bend to “an illustrated storybook,”<sup>3</sup> but none have pursued this statement in an attempt to show exactly how this site is exceptional or what reasons may have prompted such a dramatic change. My purpose here will be to show how this type of site layout differs from previous Chinese grotto sites, and how Baodingshan’s Great

---

<sup>1</sup>I have consciously chosen to shift to a usage of “grotto” over simply “Baodingshan” as the latter refers to the entire site, including the monastic structures atop the hill, which are not relevant to this discussion.

<sup>2</sup>There are thirty-one scenes total; however, number thirty-one is placed on the path coming up the hillside from the river below, and thus cannot be counted among the continuous grotto works.

<sup>3</sup>Mainly, Paludan, 11, and Zhang, 17. Like Zhang and Paludan, this aspect of the grotto struck me upon my first encounter with photos from the site.

Buddha Bend grotto represents possibly the first major work to respond to the laity's needs with a format popularized in another medium.

### The Grotto at Baodingshan

The grotto follows the natural contours of the surrounding landscape, taking a semi-circular shape formed by the erosion of the rock by local springs. The scenes at Great Buddha Bend were probably meant to be viewed by a pilgrim approaching on foot by a path, no longer in use, which leads to the Juxue River below [figs. 60 and 61].<sup>4</sup> Thus, one would enter the grotto area at what is today scene number five, the depiction of the three Huayan saints [fig. 62].<sup>5</sup> The placement of these figures is quite appropriate as the philosophy of Huayan Buddhism hinges on the view that enlightenment was available to all those who chose to seek it.<sup>6</sup> This arrangement would have reinforced the idea that the grotto was for worshippers from all walks of life. To the right of them is a large carved inscription, bearing the name "Baodingshan," over which is a carved grouping said to represent the monk largely responsible for the work done at

---

<sup>4</sup>Further evidence to support an earlier river entry to the grotto lies in the fact that it was necessary to build an access road to the site "after Liberation." Zhang, 10.

<sup>5</sup>Dazu Grottoes, 7. Vairocana is viewed as the leader of the Esoteric sect.

<sup>6</sup>For a thorough overview of the principles of Huayan Buddhism, see Francis H. Cook's work Hua-yen Buddhism: The Jewel Net of Indra (University Park and London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991) and Jae-ryong Shim's essay "Faith and Practice in Hua-yen Buddhism: A Critique of Fa-tsang by Li T'ung-hsüan" in Buddhist and Taoist Practice in Medieval Chinese Society, ed. David W. Chappell, Asian Studies at Hawaii, no. 34 (University of Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 1987): 109-124.

Great Buddha Bend, Zhao Zhifeng [fig. 6]. Being so prominently placed, Zhao would then be on hand to personally and eternally welcome pilgrims to the sight.

Having entered the grotto, the pilgrim would have then proceeded to the left, walking along while a continuous story unrolled at his right hand, until he had come full circle, having crossed the Buddha-Bless-You Bridge.<sup>7</sup> At this point, he could then either choose to ascend to the monastic complex on the ridge of the grotto via another set of stairs, or complete the circuit by proceeding to what is now scene number three, the Revolving Wheel of the Six Paths [fig. 63], this reminder of the continuous nature of karma serving as a fitting end to the circle.

The most obvious difference between Great Buddha Bend and most earlier cave sites is the lack of caves, or even cave-like niches, in which the statues would normally be positioned [fig. 64]. The Buddhist rock-cut cave, evolving early on from pre-existing Indian traditions, emerged in China to include only remnants of the stupa and chaitya-hall traditions. One of the most apparent changes occurring in China was that of the stupa being replaced by a central pillar or icon. Another change can be seen in the dissolution of the chaitya-hall's horseshoe-shaped window into the outlines of the niches. These niches focused the worshipper's attention on the icon or iconic grouping while also serving to set the statue apart from its surroundings.

---

<sup>7</sup>Zhang, 2. It is not clear whether this bridge was always in place, or whether a pilgrim would simply have proceeded downward upon reaching the scene depicting Master Liu's asceticism. Given that such an abrupt ending would leave the circuit incomplete, it seems more likely that a bridge of some sort existed in Song times.

The caves which honeycombed the cliffs at sites such as Dunhuang and Yungang were a necessary part of the religious process [figs. 65 and 66]. They were places where the pilgrim or worshipper entered into a “Buddha-world.” There they continued to perform the rites of circumambulation or meditation on an icon.<sup>8</sup> Although today many of the caves at these sites appear open and exposed to the visitor, most art historians concur that these caves were generally faced with wooden superstructures which did not stand the test of time.

There are only two caves in Great Buddha Bend grotto and one constructed facade.<sup>9</sup> Of the two caves, the larger, known as the Cave of Complete Enlightenment, does not have as its focal point a central pillar or icon for circumambulation, as is the case at most other earlier sites, but appears more as a shrine, with three Buddha figures on the south wall flanked on both sides by groupings of bodhisattvas [figs. 67 and 68].

In a rare case of transposition, one of these bodhisattva statues has been brought down to the level of the viewer, and with back turned to the outside world, is depicted as praying to the Buddhas, much as worshippers would themselves do.<sup>10</sup> It must be noted that this cave appears to be naturally-

---

<sup>8</sup>Although many of these caves also included narrative scenes, I would have to agree with Wu’s analysis that they were not actively used for educational purposes as they would have been extremely hard to see. See Wu Hung, “What is *Bianxiang*?” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, vol. 52, no. 1 (June 1992): 133-134.

<sup>9</sup>This is the facade covering the 1000-Armed Goddess of Mercy, scene eight. Although it is difficult to ascertain whether this fronting was part of the original plan, the statue was recessed similarly to the others at the site, if not more so. The other wooden construction at the grotto covers the relief of the Herdsmen Taming the Water Buffalo; its functionality lies in question as the statuary has suffered from intense weathering despite the covering.

<sup>10</sup>This change in representing the bodhisattva as one seeking enlightenment, positioned with back turned to the worshipper on ground-level,

occurring, with some work having been done to standardize its shape. The cave is naturally lit from an opening above the entrance; this opening was created by the artisans, and differs from much of what is seen at other sites regarding the need for interior lighting.<sup>11</sup>

The second cave at Great Buddha Bend is a smaller cave, dedicated to the Buddha Vairocana [fig. 69]. This cave was chiselled out of the rockface, but has since been shored up by bricks,<sup>12</sup> and it follows the more standard format seen at earlier Chinese Buddhist sites. There is a pillar at the middle of the cave, upon which the Buddha sits. The interior space as well as the pillar are all intricately carved.

What is noteworthy here is the fact that the pillar is not truly central to the cave, being either attached to, or extremely close to, the back wall of the cave.<sup>13</sup> This would negate the possibility of circumambulation, the main purpose behind construction of a central pillar.

Since the central “pagoda” (which developed from the Indian stupa) was a chief symbol of Sakyamuni, circumambulation expressed the devotion to the historical Buddha. In practicing this ritual the worshipers accumulated good deeds.<sup>14</sup>

---

is a thesis unto itself, which I plan to consider at a later time within a more complete discussion of the Baodingshan complex.

<sup>11</sup>Wu, 133-4, discusses the darkness that pervades most caves. Most light was provided by lit candles or burning oil.

<sup>12</sup>Dazu Grottoes, 7.

<sup>13</sup>Visitors are not allowed access to this cave; therefore, I hesitate to say that the central pillar is not attached to the back wall, as my observations were entirely frontal ones.

<sup>14</sup>Wu, 125-7.

Even if the pillar in the Cave of Vairocana allows for some movement around it, the narrowness of the space would have allowed for a very limited number of participants in any ritual activity. Thus, the Cave of Vairocana can be seen as a mere echo of what was common at earlier Chinese sites, its functionality apparently lost.

Baodingshan's distance from most major Chinese cave sites may be perceived as one possible explanation for such discrepancies in the Great Buddha Bend's site plan. This theory is not viable, however, when earlier sites within Sichuan are considered. As noted earlier in chapter two, Dazu county had an extensive history of Buddhist sculptural work prior to the conception of Baodingshan.

As Angela Howard notes, "In contrast to the large cave sites in northern China, Sichuan cliff sculpture occupies niches and small chambers rather than large grottoes."<sup>15</sup> Ample evidence for these niches and chambers, which follow earlier Chinese traditional styles of site construction, can be seen at other sites within Dazu as well as at Baodingshan itself [figs. 70 and 71]. The work done at Little Buddha Bend also shows a clear knowledge of pre-existing Chinese cave formats, with a hollowed-out area and multiple carvings of the Buddha's image. The artisans at Great Buddha Bend can thus be seen as consciously moving away from known Chinese forms.

As was the case at earlier sites, at Great Buddha Bend one does not enter into a sacred space in order to view the Buddha and his array of attendants. Nor

---

<sup>15</sup>Howard, "Tang Buddhist Sculpture of Sichuan: Unknown and Forgotten," 8. However, Howard does not reflect on Great Buddha Bend's changed format from the niche and grotto style.

is the pilgrim confronted with niches “excavated as closely as beehives.”<sup>16</sup> Instead, he or she enjoys the company of the statues, many of which extend outward away from the rockface, as if to greet the viewer. There is a feeling of being watched over, an intimacy allowed by the proximity and size of the statuary. This feeling of closeness is further augmented by the incorporation of numerous images which the pilgrim could easily identify as common to daily life. Furthermore, the pathway which takes the pilgrim around the grotto is narrow, leaving little room for practical applications such as monks seated in meditation, or large groups of worshippers gathering for a ritual celebration.<sup>17</sup>

#### Issues of Text and Image

One of the most common features of medieval and later medieval vernacular narrative was the use of illustrated handscrolls as a popular form of entertainment.<sup>18</sup> Among these handscrolls, modified versions of sutras, known as transformation texts or bianwen, were specifically designed to propagate the religion to the uneducated.<sup>19</sup> Among such handscrolls, one of the most popular

---

<sup>16</sup>Zhang, 12.

<sup>17</sup>The pathway varies in width quite considerably, with some areas, notably those in front of the Parinirvana scene at the actual “bend” in the grotto and in front of the hell tableau and the Asceticism of Master Liu at the opening end of the grotto, reaching a depth where masses could be held and accommodate larger groups. The average width of the rest of the pathway is probably around ten to twelve feet.

<sup>18</sup>Victor Mair, Painting and Performance: Chinese Recitation and its Indian Genesis (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1988), 1.

<sup>19</sup>Chen, 251-2. For two different approaches to the intricacies of the term bian, see Mair’s T’ang Transformation Texts, 37-49, and Wu’s article “What is

subjects for presentation were transformation texts showing Mulian going to the underworld to rescue his mother, with detailed illustrations of hell's physical appearance and bureaucratic structure.<sup>20</sup> Numerous illustrated copies of this text were found in the cache of manuscripts at Dunhuang, with copies now scattered among the British Museum, the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris, and Peking.<sup>21</sup>

Transformation texts composed mainly of illustrations were known as transformation tableaux or bianxiang.<sup>22</sup> Transformation tableaux existed in a variety of media, including paper, silk, and wall-paintings. Bianxiang could also refer to sculpted works.<sup>23</sup> Both bianwen and bianxiang were considered to be essential for spreading the Buddha's message; both appear to date to the late Tang and Five Dynasties period.<sup>24</sup> A Central Asian precursor for the use of transformation tableaux can be found in a wall painting from Kizil [fig. 72], which depicts King Ajatasatru being educated in Buddhism by his minister who

---

Bianxiang?" In this work, Wu also gives a detailed analysis of specifically the term bianxiang versus that of bianxiang used within the context of bianwen.

<sup>20</sup>Chen, 25-6. Mair, in his work entitled T'ang Transformation Texts, 14, states unequivocally that, "Of all the Dunhuang popular literary texts, none more clearly qualifies as a bianwen than that relating Mahamaudgalyayana's rescue of his mother from the dark regions. This is a text for which there exist multiple related copies, most of which include titles specifying the work as a bianwen."

<sup>21</sup>Ibid, 26. Mair in Transformation Texts, 100-102, also refers to bianwen with text on the backside as well as manuscripts where text alternates with blank spaces, presumably left open for the inclusion of images.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 252.

<sup>23</sup>Victor Mair, "Records of Transformation Tableaux," Toung Pao 72.1-3 (1986): 3.

<sup>24</sup>Mair, Painting and Performance, 1. In this work, Mair traces the bianwen tradition back to its roots in India and Southeast Asia.

uses a painted cloth. This work provides evidence for the early use of mobile painted works in religious instruction.

The transformation texts and tableaux may be seen to derive from a heritage of oral transmission, with the emphasis originally placed on the pictures and less on the accompanying text. Evidence for oral transformation performances taking place in Sichuan province occur as far back as the eighth century.<sup>25</sup> Both *bianwen* and *bianxiang* would appear to have lost popularity at some point during the Song dynasty, although “storytelling with pictures persisted under other names.”<sup>26</sup> An early 20th century description of an oral performance using pictures may help in visualizing how a medieval event would appear to the viewer:

The pictures were large colored paintings on cloth that could be rolled up for easy transportation. The performer would hang them on the outer wall of a building facing the street and point to relevant spots on them as he told his tale. The most common paintings depicted the various tortures of hell. These could be used in conjunction with virtually any of the pao-chuan to show what happens to those who go against the moral lessons they proffered. The paintings were not divided by lines into sections but did portray a continuous sequence of narrative events.<sup>27</sup>

References to hell, and particularly the Buddha’s disciple Mulian and his descent into hell, are numerous in transformation tableaux and transformation texts. These are perhaps due to an earlier Indian work, the Divyavadana, where

---

<sup>25</sup>Mair, Transformation Texts, 216. Here Mair refers to passages found in the Tan bin lu [Records of talks about guests] compiled by Li Fang in Taibing guangji, chapter 269, 2109.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 3.

<sup>27</sup>Mair, Painting and Performance, 9. Baozhuan [pao-chuan] refers to the recitation of precious scrolls.

Mulian, in his capacity as magician, conjures up images with which he instructs the populace.<sup>28</sup> One of the earliest Chinese writings on this subject can be found in the Notes on the Origins of Events and Things, written in the eleventh century, which cites that during the late summer Ghost Festival “painted representations of Maudgalyayana saving his mother are displayed.”<sup>29</sup> Already dating from the Tang dynasty are references to theatrical productions which were based on the Mulian theme.<sup>30</sup> Interestingly enough, the Buddhist source from which the Mulian transformation works are thought to have been derived, the Scripture on Offering Bowls to Repay Kindness, is also of questionable authenticity.<sup>31</sup>

Mulian also figured prominently in the Yulan pen Scripture, a work devoted largely to ancestral worship and which played a pivotal role in oral performances employed during the medieval Ghost Festival.<sup>32</sup> This scripture was extremely popular among elite and villager alike, and was the basis for temple lectures in which the monks expounded the merits of filial piety to lay devotees.<sup>33</sup> Like the Scripture on the Ten Kings, and most writings dealing with

---

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 64.

<sup>29</sup>Mair, Transformation Texts, 12. Mair posits that these representations were derived from transformation tableaux.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 13. Mulian’s popularity as a subject for live entertainment did not diminish with time. See Berthold Laufer’s work, Oriental Theatricals.

<sup>31</sup>Teiser, Ghost Festival, 48.

<sup>32</sup>Yulan pen jing. Teiser, The Ghost Festival, 6. Teiser, 107, claims a Tantric precedence for the Ghost Festival, offering the Scripture of Dharanis for Saving Hungry Ghosts with Burning Mouths [Iiuba yankou egui tuoleni jing] as a possible precursor.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 7.

more sinicized subjects, the Yulan pen Scripture was also excluded from the orthodox Chinese Buddhist canon.<sup>34</sup>

Apart from the Mulian works, the ten kings were also a part of the oral performance tradition, appearing either individually or together. Their function was more varied, actively being used at services involving the ten memorial post-mortem feastdays as well as during any of the widely encouraged premortem services.<sup>35</sup> As statues, the carvings of the kings at Great Buddha Bend Grotto were fit to receive offerings, and probably were not used as meditation devices. Documentation to support the notion of monks engaged in memorial services involving the ten kings has been found in the Dunhuang texts.<sup>36</sup>

All of the above evidence would seem to support a theory that, by the late medieval period, depictions of hell in all of its various facets would not only be desirable, but actually necessary. With ceremonies specific to the well-being of the deceased widening their appeal, the Buddhist clergy either had to accommodate those needs, or allow themselves to be usurped by interlopers in the form of popular entertainers or Daoist priests.

Wu Hung argues that bianxiang paintings should not be considered as related to bianwen for two reasons: first, because works titled bianxiang are narrative in neither content nor format, and, secondly, because those bianxiang works found at Buddhist cave sites were not produced for edification, being too

---

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 20.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 10 -41.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 78.

incoherent to serve this purpose<sup>37</sup> Although his arguments are well-supported by his choice of evidence from Dunhuang, the grotto at Baodingshan would seem to uphold just such an impossible connection. The hell scenes are commonly referred to as *bianxiang*,<sup>38</sup> and if one considers the hell tableau alone, it is apparent that it is a pictorially-based work, one where the narrative is at least implied, if not strictly adhered to.

The hell tableau at Great Buddha Bend is divided into a series of bands, top to bottom, much like stacked sections of a scroll. The kings appear in chronological order, right to left, similar to how one would envision them appearing in an illustrated handscroll, with or without text. The main hells follow suit, and, if there is a breakdown seen in the ordering of the lowest strata, this is not necessarily to deny that there is no order, but simply that there was no room. Similar results can be seen in illustrated handscrolls where artisans were forced to make use of every available inch of space. Wu Hung further differentiates between narrative and iconic modes of representation, predicating this division on the interaction of the viewer. Wu stipulates that narrative formats engage the worshipper as a viewer, not as a participant, which is the

---

<sup>37</sup>Wu, 116 and 130. I agree with Wu's earlier statement on page 115 in that it does not necessarily follow that all paintings falling under the rubric "*bianxiang*" are therefore illustrations of *bianwen*. Wu also states on page 122 that "from the High Tang on, *bianxiang* were generally understood as a kind of two-dimensional, complex pictorial representation. Because they are two-dimensional, they are not sculptures." Part of his evidence lies in a general overview of catalogs, in which the word *bianxiang* occurs most frequently as a description of temple murals and picture scrolls. I perceive the grotto's works in many ways functioning as greatly enhanced temple murals. This idea, when combined with the fact that only a few of the works done at Great Buddha Bend can be classified as free-standing sculpture, I feel allows for the usage of the term *bianxiang* with regard to the site.

<sup>38</sup>Liu, 485.

main function of iconic works.<sup>39</sup> Although he notes that some bianxiang exist in which the central icon is surrounded by narrative-style scenes, Wu also points out that these are largely out of sequence, and, hence, cannot be viewed as narrative in the strict, linear sense of the word. The hell tableau at Great Buddha Bend would appear to represent a blending of these two types: Dizang Bodhisattva as central icon, to whom devotees can engage in direct worship, while below him the actions of the souls of the damned and their jailers remain to be witnessed from the outside. While not entirely ordered, a definite attempt has been made to sequence the events depicted.

I would not argue that the hell tableau was constructed solely for preaching; its surrounding space and lotus-shaped altar were obviously designed to accommodate a variety of types of worship by an equally diverse number of participants. The presence of the highly-detailed hymns and descriptions, however, does point to a more interactive style of worship. Wu Hung postulates that the bianxiang of the caves at Dunhuang were primarily the result of meritorious acts, their efficacy being muted by the placement of the bianxiang far from the viewer and the darkness of the cave itself.<sup>40</sup>

Neither problem exists at Baodingshan, and, therefore, one can surmise that meritorious act was not the sole purpose for the tableau's construction. The two widely-practised funerary rites centered on the Yulan pen jing and the Rites for Distributing Food to Burning Mouths from the Essentials of Yoga.<sup>41</sup> The latter

---

<sup>39</sup>Wu, 130.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 133-4.

<sup>41</sup>Yujia jiyao yankou shishi yi. For a thorough overview of the evolution of the shishi rites, see Orzech's article "Esoteric Buddhism and the Shishi in China." Julia K. Murray in "The Evolution of Buddhist Narrative Illustration in

was a more strictly Esoteric ritual, and as Baodingshan was promoted as an Esoteric center, it probably served as the focal point of any large-scale plenary masses. Both of these rituals dealt with the feeding of the hungry ghosts, a notion visually reinforced by the placement of the Hungry Ghost Hell directly behind the tableau's free-standing altar [fig. 73]. Depicted in such a fashion, the starving soul appears to be receiving the offerings, and serves as a close and constant reminder of the fate that awaits those who do not give willingly to the needy. Further evidence for rituals related to the Ghost Festival can be seen in the inscription placed immediately next to the statue of Zhao Zhifeng; it provides a gruesome description of the hungry ghost state, and refers directly to ways to protect oneself from their awful fate.<sup>42</sup>

If the rituals related to celebrations of death and the afterlife can be extrapolated from other ritual activities, then those involving Dizang and the ten kings probably included bowing, chanting, the use of prayers and hymns, along with the usual offerings of flowers, the burning of incense and the offering of money to be used by the Buddhist community.<sup>43</sup> The fact that the Scripture on the Ten Kings was not an orthodox work would have mattered very little, as the

---

China after 850," in The Latter Days of the Law: Images of Chinese Buddhism 850-1850, ed. Marsha Weidner, (University of Kansas: Spencer Museum of Art, 1994), 94, asserts that few Esoteric rituals survived after the persecution of the Tang dynasty, but of those that did "rituals that answered Chinese concerns for the well-being of the dead and for the prolongation of life eventually became a part of regular practice."

<sup>42</sup>This inscription is partially gone due to water damage, but what does remain has been translated in Appendix A, and is noted as letter "G" in the drawing of the hell tableaux.

<sup>43</sup>Teiser, Scripture on the Ten Kings, 10.

Buddhist appropriation of popular imagery was considered to be an “expedient device” [upaya] for educating lay audiences.<sup>44</sup>

Unlike the earlier caves of Dunhuang which served as the focus for Wu Hung’s analysis, those caves constructed in the Five Dynasties and Song periods, contemporaneous with the works at Baodingshan, also have longer inscriptions [fig. 74 and 75]. Several factors could account for this: a rising literacy rate among the Chinese populace, or a final sinicization of Buddhism with greater emphasis being placed on the written word.<sup>45</sup> These longer inscriptions could feasibly have been read by either a literate pilgrim or a monk engaged in edifying lay devotees. The same holds true for the hell tableau at Baodingshan [fig. 76]. Being fully exposed to the outside world, there is no darkness to impede legibility. There are no inscriptions placed too high to be read, given that the site was probably painted even more brightly than today’s restoration work allows for. Moreover, the closer to eye-level the carving, the more complete the inscribed texts become, implying that it was expected that a pilgrim or monk would at least attempt to read them.<sup>46</sup>

---

<sup>44</sup>Daniel Overmyer, “Buddhism in the Trenches: Attitudes toward Popular Religion in Chinese Scriptures Found at Tun-huang,” Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies 50.1 (June 1990): 197.

<sup>45</sup>Julia K. Murray, 135-138, discusses these two possibilities at greater length. Valerie Hansen notes that “the twelfth and thirteenth centuries witnessed an enormous increase in the number of people taking the [civil service] exams in any given year.”. She also indicates that, while overall literacy was still low, it was definitely on the increase among city dwellers, merchants and gentry, thanks in large part to the expanding wood-block print industry. See Valerie Hansen’s work Changing Gods in Medieval China, 1127-1276, 7.

<sup>46</sup>Teiser, “Growth of Purgatory,” 127, argues that the placement of Baodingshan’s scenes at eye-level implies an illiterate or semi-literate congregation. He obviously predicates this statement on the imagery, not taking into account the amount of text actually involved within each scene at the site.

Aside from the heavy use of very visible inscriptions in the hell tableau, other aspects of the work point to Buddhist propagation as a prominent focus. The figure of Zhao Zhifeng [fig. 20], placed slightly higher than the level of the viewer with hand held up as he gestures toward the inscribed sutras and sculpted carvings around him, furthers the notion that the scene was meant to represent an oral performance.<sup>47</sup> One can view the figure of Zhao as a surrogate guide for those literate individuals who chose to contemplate the texts and carvings which surround him on their own. Or, Zhao can be seen as a type of mnemonic aid for those who were not literate, evoking memories of popular oral performances of the Mulian genre that they had seen elsewhere.

The combination of text and image in a relatively balanced format supports the theory that the hell scenes fall clearly into neither the bianwen nor the bianxiang category, but in fact represent a blending of the two traditions. “Wherever texts exist at all, even if they are accessible only to a small minority, the two sorts of tradition [oral and written] are bound to infiltrate one another.”<sup>48</sup> The same could be said of the perceived separation of the written and illustrated traditions. Wu Hung himself asserts,

A general principle in studying religious art is that individual pictures and statues must be observed in their architectural and religious contexts: they are not portable objects that can be carried around and

---

Given the combination of the two, I would argue that Zhao Zhifeng was attempting to reach both lettered and unlettered devotees.

<sup>47</sup>This figure is not mentioned in the discussion on the hell scenes found in *Dazu shike yan jiu*. However, *Dazu xianzhi: Sichuan sheng*, np, specifically identifies this figure as “Standing sculpture of Zhao Zhifeng.”

<sup>48</sup>Mair, *Transformation Texts*, 111, quoting Confucius in *The Analects*, translated by Arthur Waley (New York: Vintage Books, 1938), 51.

appreciated independently but are components of a larger pictorial program designed for a particular ritual structure for religious worship.<sup>49</sup>

My purpose in placing the hell scenes back into the overall plan of Great Buddha Bend has been to reintegrate the individual tableau into its original setting. Such a reintegration was necessary to fully understand the work and its function within the whole. The question of bianxiang versus bianwen, therefore, provided a forum for debate which served to help clarify often ignored issues of synthesis and appropriation among works done at sites like Great Buddha Bend.

---

<sup>49</sup>Wu, 123-4.