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Angela Falco Howard

SUMMIT OF TREASURES: BUDDHIST CAVE ART OF DAZU, CHINA

Bangkok: Orchid Press, 2001; Trumbull, Conn.: Weatherhill, 2001

222 pp., 181 color illustrations, character list, bibliography, index. \$ 60.00 hardcover.

In her latest work, *Summit of Treasures*, Angela Howard continues her quest to bring Sichuan's Buddhist artistic heritage into the realm of mainstream Chinese art studies. Focusing largely on the visual aspects of Baodingshan, a twelfth-century site located in Dazu county, Howard begins and ends her work by emphasizing the Esoteric nature of the site's Buddhist imagery, envisioned as spreading outward from a central deity located within the Baodingshan grotto complex and encompassing sites up to 25 kilometers away in neighboring Anyue county. Howard sees the grotto at Baodingshan as the final destination in a local pilgrimage network, a three-dimensional mandala composed of various scattered regional components, all the brainchild of one man, Zhao Zhifeng (b. 1159).

Following a preface that defines the complexity of the task at hand, Howard opens with an overview of the Large Baodingshan, commonly referred to as Great Buddha Bend due to the large *parinirvana* image at one end. She argues that this grotto of thirty-one numbered sections served as a teaching ground, the "reliefs complimented by extensive textual explanation" (p. 1). As Howard moves the reader through the Large Baodingshan, she rightly notes how the imagery reflects the teachings of several Buddhist schools of thought including Chan, Huayan, and Pure Land, with a number of them having strong Confucian overtones as well. Howard gives preference to discussion of the sculpted works rather than the inscribed texts, only "offer[ing] a translation of inscribed text whenever its content facilitates the comprehension of the sculpture" (p. 3).

Her select translations are solid, leading one to wish that she had included more of them within her appendices. Instead, Howard includes mainly the later source materials available for Zhao Zhifeng, the site's creator, and for the man around whom she believes the entire site and pilgrimage circuit revolves, a Tang-dynasty layperson named Liu. Liu was given the title of "Chief Upholder and Patriarch of the Yoga School" by King Jian of Shu in 905 CE (p. 56). According to Howard, Liu's sculpted image within both the Small and Large sections of the site is what defines the Esoteric nature of Baodingshan. From the main grotto area, Howard postulates, a devotee would proceed to the inner sanctum of the Small Baodingshan, an area she argues was reserved for the consecration of adepts into Zhao Zhifeng's particular sect of Esoteric Buddhism.

Howard's description of the Small Baodingshan notes that this portion of the site predates the Large Baodingshan works, and that Small Baodingshan suffered extensive damage under the Mongol occupation of the area in the late thirteenth century, being heavily restored during the ensuing Ming. Although components of the Small Baodingshan can be construed to be Esoteric in nature, Howard provides little evidence for specifically Esoteric activity at Baodingshan, in spite of the abundance of carved texts. Zhao's "spiritual signature," carved next to his image on the Founder's Pagoda in Small Baodingshan, is in fact a stanza taken from a non-canonical work with strong overtones of filial piety.¹ Howard also does not explain the duplication of non-Esoteric imagery found in both the Small and Large Baodingshan. This duplication would seem to be unnecessary if Howard's premise were true that one moved from Large to Small Baodingshan as one grew more enlightened.

The final section of the first chapter is a discussion of the imagery found in outlying areas of the Baodingshan site – imagery perceived by Howard as functioning as a shield for the inner core of the mandala centered within the Small Baodingshan. While others have already noted the similarities between the image types found at these outlying sites and the works at Baodingshan, and also have argued for a pilgrimage network within the region,² Howard breaks new ground in her attempt to connect these very specific sites to a greater Esoteric construct.

After taking the reader step-by-step through the "vast mandalic layout" (p. 97) of the works surrounding the Baodingshan complex, Howard turns to an examination of the religious foundations of the site. Chapter 2 focuses mainly on Liu, whose cult, Howard argues, was engendered by Zhao Zhifeng's need for national recognition. A free-standing stele placed within the Small Baodingshan provides a lengthy yet fragmented biography of Liu, recording his self-immolating deeds in great detail. The inclusion of imagery related to Liu within both the Small and Large Baodingshan is clearly important to Howard's thesis, and she proceeds to link Zhao and Liu to scattered images throughout the region using mainly stylistic methods.

In the next section of chapter 2, Howard contextualizes Liu within the framework of the cult of extraordinary monks. This is an interesting segue, and one would like to read more about Liu's reputation outside of Sichuan, since

the majority of monks she compares him with were widely known during their lifetimes. Howard, however, moves on to a discussion of the life of Zhao Zhifeng, the only clear record of which is a stele located within the Large Baodingshan and dated to 1425. At this point, Howard argues that Zhao Zhifeng was a devout layperson akin to Liu, rather than a monk, basing this opinion largely on his name. This seems to contradict information provided in the stele itself, which refers to Zhao entering temple at a young age, and is further complicated by Howard's earlier assertion that Zhao is depicted in sculpted form within the various components of the extended Baodingshan network garbed as a monk. Throughout the work, Howard vacillates between Zhao as a man bringing Buddhism to the masses and Zhao as an Esoteric master emulating the Esoteric activities of his revered predecessor, Liu. On page 115, Howard states, "Zhao absorbed Liu's cult into his own teaching, and made it a springboard for his personal religious fame." While this may be true, Howard provides no evidence to support the notion that Zhao was even known outside of the Baodingshan complex, much less made famous for his deeds.

It is only within the following discussion of the chronology of the site that Howard finally defines Baodingshan's Esoteric elements: multifaced, multiarmed deities; images connected to *dhāraṇī* texts; Vairocana and his accompanying pantheon; a "mandala-like alignment" (p. 114). She suggests a direct transmission of Esotericism from Tibet, rather than from earlier Tang China, pointing to the resemblance of the "horrifying and protective deities" to images seen in Tibet (p. 115). This suggestion is problematic in that there is ample evidence within the region for earlier, Tang-dynasty carved imagery linked to Esotericism and similar to that utilized at Baodingshan.³ Furthermore, Esotericism is not a religious system that lent itself to being manipulated to serve individual goals; it is generally understood that this sect of Buddhism was iconographically more rigid and predetermined than many of the other Buddhist sects. Howard does not account for the iconographic anomalies one sees in the imagery at Baodingshan, although such a discussion might have reinforced her argument.

If Howard's thesis that Baodingshan was a thriving Esoteric center lacks concrete evidence within the complex itself, it gains little from her discussion of the network of Anyue sites located 25 to 35 kilometers distant from Baodingshan. Stating that these sites were "part of a pilgrimage circuit that led the pious to Baodingshan, the very heart of their devotional journey" (p. 121), Howard notes in her fourth chapter that she has found no known records to substantiate this claim, an omission potentially rectifiable by a

thorough search through later Ming and Qing pilgrims' accounts. Howard bases her theory largely on shared imagery, and in focusing so closely on imagery relevant to Baodingshan, she elaborates little on the numerous other unrelated works carved within the Anyue grottoes.

Howard is unique among Chinese and Western scholars in arguing that Baodingshan was the ideological and iconographic source for this area's extensive artistic production. Her contention that the Baodingshan complex is the apex of the mandala, hence the name "Summit of Treasures" (p. xiii), is complicated by the differences she herself notes in the quality of the works carved in Anyue and Dazu. The Anyue works are finer, more exquisitely rendered, and no less impressively sized. Although larger in overall scale, it is difficult to rationalize why Zhao Zhifeng and his patrons would have accepted lower quality works if the Baodingshan site was to serve as the epicenter of an extensive cult. Howard rightly argues that present-day geographic borders were irrelevant in the Song with the rise of a wealthy merchant class in Sichuan. Yet this does not help resolve the lack of any textual evidence to support the link between Baodingshan and the Anyue sites; rather, it appears illogical that Song-dynasty nouveaux riches patrons had supported a major regional carving campaign but left no trace of their contribution for posterity. Howard sees the lack of inscriptional evidence related to either a pilgrimage network or to Zhao Zhifeng as being a "deliberate choice, not an oversight" on the part of the site's creator (p. 134). This is a point that needs to be argued further if it is to be accepted within the same context as Zhao's purported efforts at self-aggrandizement through the cult of Liu.

The book concludes with a study of Baodingshan's overall effect on the regional sculptural tradition. Describing the Baodingshan imagery as "monumental," Howard proposes that a new style related specifically to local gentry patronage emerged in Sichuan at this time, referencing patronage inscriptions from nearby sites. With regard to image construction, these inscriptions refer to wealthy donors commissioning sculpted images for merit, a centuries-old tradition by the time of the Song dynasty. In this regard, they provide an interesting aside but little support for the gentry being the impetus for the creation of a new sculptural style. Howard's further discussion of the movement from monumental, heavenly-scaled imagery to smaller, more mundane "human-sized" works reiterates a theme proffered by a number of other scholars that the carved images at Baodingshan needed to accommodate people from all walks of life.⁴ A more complex analysis would have looked at why there was a need for this type of imagery

at this particular place and time when clearly religious indoctrination had been a concern of the Buddhist clergy for centuries.

Howard's approach is clearly art historical in nature, giving preference to the objects over the inscribed texts. *Summit of Treasures* is a tantalizing taste of all that Sichuanese Buddhist sculpture has to offer, and is a model of clarity with regard to maps, diagrams of tableaux, and sufficient accompanying images. The extensive bibliography should serve as a springboard for anyone hoping to come to grips with what is undoubtedly an extremely complex and understudied time and place within China's Buddhist artistic past.

KARIL KUCERA
St. Olaf College

NOTES

- 1 Taken from the *Da fang bian fo bao en jing*, as noted by Howard. She is not the first to recognize this as Zhao Zhifeng's spiritual signature; see Yang Jialuo, *Baoding meng you* (Taipei: n.p., 1966), 6, and Henrik Sorensen, "A Study of the 'Oxherding Theme' as Sculptures at Mt. Baoding in Dazu County, Sichuan," *Artibus Asiae* 51, 3/4 (1991): 227.
- 2 See Henrik Sorensen, "Buddhist Sculptures From the Song Dynasty at Mingshan Temple in Anyue, Sichuan," *Artibus Asiae* 55, 3/4 (1995): 281-283.
- 3 The easiest and closest example being the Great Peacock imagery found at the Tang-dynasty site of Beishan, located in nearby Dazu City.
- 4 My own work discusses the various theories related to audience at Baodingshan in greater detail. See Karil Kucera, "Cliff Notes: Text and Image at Baodingshan" (Ph.D. diss., University of Kansas, 2002).