

CHAPTER ONE

NARRATIVE/ICONIC

Within the field of Chinese art history, several attempts have been made to quantify and qualify the term “narrative”. Some have been more successful than others, but all have been hindered by the lack of an analogous categorization per se within indigenous Chinese art-historical texts, which are arranged with regard to subject matter rather than mode of presentation.¹ Even the briefest foray into narrative within the context of Chinese art serves to underline the inadequacies and inconsistencies of the term’s usage in the Asian art-historical field.² Relying on contemporary literary theory, recent scholarship presents new thoughts and terminology with which to move the narrative debate forward by drawing analogies between the oral format of a story and its visual representation.³

Following a brief clarification of the term “iconic”, the goal of this chapter will be to consider the applicability to Chinese art history of narrative as it is understood within Western literary traditions. This discussion will be followed by an examination of narrative specific to Chinese Buddhist art and

¹This was also the case with regard to traditional Chinese literature. See Andrew H. Plaks’ discussion of narrative within the literary realm in “Towards a Critical Theory of Chinese Narrative”, Chinese Narrative: Critical and Theoretical Essays, Andrew Plaks, ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977): 310.

²Julia Murray has done a wonderful job of synthesizing and critiquing all the various constructs used within the Chinese art historical field over the past twenty-odd years in her article “What is Chinese Narrative Illustration?”, Art Bulletin vol. LXXX no.4 (Dec. 1998): 602-615.

practice. Although in general I refrain from imposing Western theory on Asian subject matter, in this instance I must concur with Julia Murray's observation that in doing so one does not supercede or detract from indigenous Chinese theories regarding narrative since none existed prior to the present.⁴ Employing Western parameters allows for an analysis of the subject of narrative in a constructive and consistent manner, creating a new dialogue with regard to objects which in the past may have been largely overlooked due to their unusual or unwieldy mode of representation.

The subsequent discussion of narrative within a Buddhist construct will begin with an overview of the storytelling tradition within the realm of Buddhist discourse and the impact oral presentation had upon the development of visual imagery within the monastic community. The scope will then be narrowed to focus more specifically on China and Chinese Buddhist practices involving narrative imagery. Lastly, the chapter will conclude with a look at the audience for the imagery created at Great Buddha Bend at Baodingshan, and their role in the use of the narrative format.

Modes of Representation: Narrative in Theory

Before launching into a thorough discussion of narrative within a pictorial context, a brief explanation of the term "iconic" is in order. For this I defer to Wu Hung, whose work on both Confucian and Buddhist subject

³Ibid. Murray has also published an earlier work, "Buddhism and Early Narrative Illustration in China" *Archives of Asian Art* vol. 48 (1995): 17-31, which will be considered within the later discussion of narrative and Buddhist practice.

⁴Murray, "What is Chinese Narrative Illustration?", 605.

matter allows for an expansive vision of the term “iconic”.⁵ In his project on the carved tableaux found at the Wu Liang shrine, Wu Hung separates the imagery into either iconic or episodic.⁶ “Iconic” is defined as frontal and symmetrical; “episodic” as asymmetrical, presenting a profile or 3/4 view as well as an action and a reaction, i.e., the episodic works are narrative in content. From a purely formalistic frame of reference, the works at Great Buddha Bend can all be seen to incorporate large-scale iconic imagery.

Functionally, the icon is perceived by Wu as transcending time, facing outward and interacting with the viewer.⁷ Episodic works do not engage the viewer in Wu’s opinion, the viewer acting in the role of witness to the scene rather than as participant:

The picture formed by such interacting humans describes a narrative. This type of composition is, thus, self-contained; the significance of the representation is realized in its own pictorial context. In contrast to an iconic representation, the viewer is a witness, not a participant.⁸

Outwardly Wu’s distinction of the two formats makes for an easy rule of thumb to follow, yet I will argue that Wu’s viewer versus participant dichotomy does not hold true for the six tableaux at Great Buddha Bend. The works at Baodingshan are largely composed of tableaux in which narrative vignettes are closely linked to iconic imagery, all existing within one larger

⁵Ibid., 604, notes that Wu Hung’s purpose in creating a rather open-ended definition of narrative is to highlight the new iconic mode brought into China with Buddhism in the second century CE.

⁶Wu Hung, *The Wu Liang Shrine* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989): 132-141.

⁷Ibid., 133.

⁸Ibid.

overall sculptural program. I do not deny that the iconic imagery at Baodingshan was designed to interact with the viewer as an object of reverence and devotion; however, I will attempt to demonstrate that the dominant icons, which are components of the six tableaux to be discussed, also draw the worshipper into a given tableau. In this fashion, the iconic imagery prompts the viewer to participate not only in a discourse with the Buddha, for example, but also in a sympathetic exchange with the various individuals in the separate stories surrounding the central iconic image. Although it is important to keep “iconic” and “episodic” as endpoints, the following chapters will discuss how many of the images found at Great Buddha Bend should not be defined in such black and white terms, but rather as one of the varying shades of gray found somewhere in between.

Turning now more specifically to a consideration of narrative, Julia Murray’s recent article outlines the underlying differences between several Western theorists’ positions with regard to the defining fundamentals of narrative.⁹ Citing “action which produces change” and “time” as the two keys to pictorial narrative, Murray proceeds to construct her own set of criteria based upon these two aspects. The three tenets she arrives at, content, function, and mode of presentation, are little more than a synthesis of art-historical ideology applied specifically to narrative. The last of these, mode of presentation, incorporates the formalistic variables of format, composition,

⁹Murray, “What is Chinese Narrative Illustration?”, 605.

and conceptual approach.¹⁰ In Murray's view, what differentiates a narrative from other types of imagery is content ("something happens bringing change in a condition to a specific character") and function ("narrative illustrations record, affirm, instruct, indoctrinate, proselytize, propagandize, or even entertain the viewer"). For Murray, mode of presentation is extremely varied, from singular compositions in which a narrative is summarized, referred to as "emblematic monoscenes", to fully sequenced narratives.¹¹

The tableaux under consideration at Baodingshan all fit within these two basic defining parameters. All six involve a change in a condition of a specific character, and all have content that functions to serve at least one of the identified purposes cited above. Each of the tableaux, however, shows a markedly different approach in mode of representation. The six works at Great Buddha Bend to be discussed contain iconic imagery with narrative episodes variously arranged around the iconic figures like so many individual diamonds in a crown. Only one of the six, the Taming of the Wild Buffalo tableau, can be regarded as solely narrative, and even that distinction remains open to question.

Vidya Dehejia's¹² study of early Indian Buddhist narrative sculpture also allows for a useful theoretical crossover to the sculpted works found at Baodingshan. Dehejia equates the range of visual narrative to that found in

¹⁰Ibid., 608.

¹¹Ibid., and Murray, "The Evolution of Buddhist Narrative Illustration in China after 850" in The Latter Days of the Law: Images of Chinese Buddhism 850-1850, ed. Marsha Weidner, 125-150 (University of Kansas: Spencer Museum of Art, 1994): 126.

¹²Vidya Dehejia, "On Modes of Visual Narration in Early Buddhist Art", Art Bulletin vol. 72 no. 3 (September 1990): 374-392.

oral narrative, defining three major components as crucial: having a protagonist, utilizing a consideration of space, and incorporating the critical element of time.¹³ There are only two aspects to visual narrative according to Dehejia: the story and its expression.¹⁴ Variations on how these two aspects are wed are termed “modes”, with five different combinations outlined: monoscenic, continuous, synoptic, conflated, and linear.¹⁵ All of these terms will be utilized and further defined as the various types of imagery are encountered within the works at Great Buddha Bend.

Dehejia is quick to point out that several types of modes can easily coexist within one area, perhaps in response to space restrictions.¹⁶ She also creates an über-mode of sorts, termed “narrative network”, which attempts to define possible overarching movements in time and space based on elusive relationships, the two examples given being those of geographical and thematic relationships.¹⁷ Large-scale programs exist at Baodingshan similar to those that necessitated Dehejia’s positing of the narrative network theory. Therefore, an assessment will be made of how the individual components of the six tableaux at Great Buddha Bend work together as well as how they can be viewed within the larger framework of the whole site. Dehejia’s various modes will be discussed within the context of the individual Baodingshan works, dependent upon their applicability.

¹³Dehejia, 374.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid., 378-388.

¹⁶Ibid., 375.

¹⁷Ibid., 388-390.

Since time is a factor deemed highly relevant to narrative, historical Chinese views on time need to be briefly addressed.¹⁸ From as early as the second century BCE, the Chinese had a very clearly defined concept of time, as seen in the term “*yu zhou*”. *Yu zhou* is often translated loosely as “universe”, but a more accurate term would be “space-time”. Needham translates the definition of *yu zhou* from an early Daoist work, the 120 BCE text *Huai nan zi* (Master Huainan), “All the time that has passed from antiquity until now is called *zhou*; all the space in every direction above and below is called *yu*.”¹⁹ Another early text, *Mo zi* (Mozi) furthers this definition by noting that “movement in space requires duration.”²⁰ As a corollary to this, the Chinese from very early on conceived of time as compartmentalized. Granet notes that time for the ancient Chinese was divided similarly to space, time existing insofar as it reflected specific circumstances, duties, or opportunities.²¹ This compartmentalization of time with regard to the actions of people within a continuous chronological framework is also seen in the approach taken by the Chinese to history writing, an early form of narrative. Materials were loosely linked by common features, not by temporal order, and in this sense the earliest texts could be seen to be associative rather than

¹⁸For a very readable overview of time and narrative within the Western literary tradition, see Paul Ricoeur, “Narrative Time” in *On Narrative*, 165-186, W.J.T. Mitchell, ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

¹⁹Joseph Needham, *Time and Eastern Man*, Royal Anthropological Institute Occasional Paper no. 21 (Glasgow: The University Press, 1965): 1.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 2.

²¹Marcel Granet, *La pensée chinoise* (Paris: La Renaissance du Livre, 1934): 88.

chronological.²² A Song dynasty form of history writing, considered by literary scholars to be one of the most highly evolved forms of the genre, still continued to compartmentalize history into separate topics which were then followed through from beginning to end.²³

Such a compartmentalization can be seen at Baodingshan. In an effort to make the “story” intelligible to the Chinese viewer, Zhao Zhifeng had to order and arrange the tableaux at Great Buddha Bend. The works are systematically arranged by theme, i.e., the works relating to mother and father coming first, followed by heaven and hell, with the two works related to lineage coming last. Granted this arrangement may have been necessitated by Buddhist rituals involving the use of the tableaux in a given order, but with the exception of the heaven and hell works, there is no evidence to support this assumption. It is just as likely that Zhao placed the works in order to loosely link material with certain common features, a system with which he and his public would have been familiar because that was the approach utilized by scholars to record historical events.

Within the works themselves chronology is more closely adhered to when it is necessary, as seen in the Kindness of Parents tableau which follows the child from birth to old age, or the self-immolations of Master Liu which are placed in correct time-sequence as they progress from minor to major acts of self-sacrifice. This is also in keeping with the Song dynasty approach to

²²Jaruslav Prusek, “History and Epics in China and the West,” Diogenes 42 (Summer 1963): 22-23.

²³Needham, 13-14.

historical narrative as first written by Yuan Xu in 1190 CE, in which separate individual topics were given equal treatment from beginning to end.²⁴ Thus, although the tableaux are thematically grouped, be it due to ritual or secular rationale, within each of the works another dimension of time is at work, that of continuous time, which allows for a chronological reading of the carvings. As the viewer moves through the grotto, he or she would be confronted by this compartmentalization of time and space, at the same time as he or she would be participating in the “space time” or universal aspect of the stories being told.

Narrative in Buddhist Practice

Buddhism has a long-standing tradition of oral narration, which must be taken into consideration when addressing issues of narrative within a pictorial context. The prefatory phrase, “Thus have I heard”, followed by a thorough description of the situational context surrounding the historical Buddha’s preaching of a given text, forms the prologue to the large majority of Buddhist scriptures. This type of oral quality frames the narrative as a dialogue between the Buddha and one of his major disciples, providing a pretext for the Buddha to tell a story or an extended parable. Such a format was one of the earliest genres found within the Pali Buddhist literature, and as the works were translated into Chinese, the narrative component was

²⁴Ibid.

maintained, with the texts “continuing to find (their) authority in the voice of the Buddha.”²⁵ An example of this type of narrative format can be found at Great Buddha Bend in the tableau depicting The Buddha Preaches the Mahayana Scripture on the Skillful Means for Repaying Kindness.²⁶

Another genre of narrative with very early roots within the Indic oral storytelling tradition is that of jataka tales. Unlike the format discussed above, the protagonist of the jataka tale, the Buddha in one of his 547 previous lives, maintains an internal discourse on the rationale for the action being taken. In this case, the audience “is privileged to overhear, as it were, the thoughts of the Buddha.”²⁷ Examples of this type of storytelling also can be found at Great Buddha Bend, forming sub-components of the larger narrative of the dialogue seen in the Scripture on Repaying Kindness tableau mentioned above.

Lastly, a format of Buddhist narrative that is illustrated at the Great Buddha Bend grotto is the “parable” or *avadana*, literally “heroic act or tale”. The parable differs from the earlier jataka tale in that the narrative does not involve the Buddha as the main protagonist, but rather other beings meant to symbolically represent complex Buddhist beliefs.²⁸ The most obvious example of this type of narrative found at Baodingshan is that of the buffalo

²⁵Judith A. Berling, “Bringing the Buddha Down to Earth: Notes on the Emergence of *Yu-lu* as a Buddhist Genre”, History of Religions (1987): 65. For a comparison of various redactions of Pali and Chinese texts and their utilization of the dialogue format, see Sylvain Levi, “Sur la récitation primitive des textes bouddhiques,” Journal asiatique (Mai-Juin 1915): 401-447.

²⁶Hereafter referred to as the Scripture on Repaying Kindness.

²⁷Berling, 64.

and herdsman in the Taming of the Wild Buffalo tableau, with the duo exemplifying man's struggle for enlightenment. Yet several other tableaux at Great Buddha Bend need also be considered "parables", namely the mother and son imagery found in the Scripture on the Kindness of Parents tableau, and the souls depicted within the heaven and hell tableaux.

Buddhism had the effect of elevating and expanding the appreciation for and production of narrative within the upper classes of Chinese society, so that by the Song dynasty narrative was a highly evolved literary form.²⁹ One of the most common features of medieval vernacular narrative was the use of illustrated handscrolls as a popular form of entertainment.³⁰ Alongside these vernacular works could be found modified versions of sutras, referenced by their vernacular counterpart as "transformation texts" or *bian wen*, which were specifically designed to propagate the Buddhist faith to the uneducated.³¹ *Bian wen* were for the most part textual rather than pictorial in

²⁸Helmut Brinker, Zen in the Art of Painting, trans. George Campbell (London and New York: Routledge, 1987): 103-104.

²⁹Kenneth DeWoskin, "On Narrative Revolutions", *CLEAR* 5, no.1 (July 1983): 44. In this article, DeWoskin argues that narrative arose from indigenous Chinese sources, and can be found in China prior to Buddhism's arrival. Elsewhere others have argued that narrative and narrative illustration was a product of a need among the Chinese to come to grips with a large body of unfamiliar stories, which came into China with Buddhism. See Murray, "Buddhism and Early Narrative Illustration in China," 19, and Victor Mair's lengthy discussion in Painting and Performance: Chinese Recitation and its Indian Genesis (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1988). I will not pursue this discussion here as it is not relevant to the study at hand.

³⁰Victor Mair, Painting and Performance : Chinese Recitation and its Indian Genesis (Honolulu : University of Hawaii Press, 1988): 1.

³¹Kenneth K.S. Chen, The Chinese Transformation of Buddhism (Princeton : Princeton University Press, 1973): 251-2. For two different approaches to the intricacies of the term *bian*, see 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): 37-49, and Wu Hung's article "What is *Bianxiang*?". In this work, Wu Hung also gives a detailed analysis of specifically the term *bian xiang* versus the use of the term within the context of *bian wen*.

emphasis. Two tables showing the recovered *bian wen* texts as well as *bian xiang* relevant to the following discussion of the Great Buddha Bend tableaux has been prepared in an effort to highlight the wide variety of recensions this type of format included (fig. 15a and b).³²

Transformation texts composed mainly of illustrations were known as “transformation tableaux” or *bian xiang*.³³ These existed in a variety of media, including paper, silk, and wall paintings. *Bian xiang* could also refer to sculpted works.³⁴ Both *bian wen* and *bian xiang* were considered to be essential for spreading the Buddha’s message, and both appear to date from the late Tang and Five Dynasties period.³⁵ Although Murray argues that *bian xiang* were “grand iconic tableaux...reflect(ing) the importance of contemplation and visualization rituals”. But not all of the *bian xiang* imagery was fully iconic in content.³⁶ A wall painting from Kizil depicts King Ajatasatru being educated in Buddhism by his minister who uses a painted cloth depicting various scenes from the life of the Buddha. This work is considered early evidence for *bian xiang* in the form of mobile painted

³²Victor Mair notes that the number of extant *bian wen* is relatively few – 200 at most – although some sources list as many as 8000. According to Mair, the inflated numbers are the result of a lumping of sutra lecture texts (*jiang jing wen*) and seat-settling texts (*ya zuo wen*) in to the *bian wen* category. See Mair’s article “Lay Students and the Making of Written Vernacular Narrative: an Inventory of Tun-huang Manuscripts,” Chinoperl Papers 10 (1981): 5-96.

³³Mair, T’ang Transformation Texts, 252.

³⁴Victor Mair, “Records of Transformation Tableaux,” Toung Pao, 72 no. 1-3 (1986): 3. For a listing of the *bian xiang* that are extant at Dunhuang, see Tonko Bakuko kutsu 3:177 and 4:174.

³⁵Victor Mair, Painting and Performance, 1. In this work, Mair traces the *bian wen* tradition back to its roots in India and Southeast Asia.

³⁶Murray, “The Evolution of Buddhist Narrative Illustration”, 129.

works,³⁷ and for our purposes, highlights the narrative possibilities of the *bian xiang* genre (fig. 16). Elsewhere I have argued for a reading of the narrative tableaux at Great Buddha Bend as examples of carved *bian xiang*.³⁸

Both *bian wen* and *bian xiang* would appear to have lost popularity at some point during the Song dynasty, although “storytelling with pictures persisted under other names.”³⁹ Several extant Southern Song dynasty texts provide evidence for professional storytellers serving as narrators of Buddhist works, their specific function being described as “discussing the scriptures, which means the unfolding and narrating of Buddhist books.”⁴⁰ These texts enumerate the storytellers by name and category of storytelling, but provide little more information. Many of the names of the narrators of Buddhist texts have a distinctly Buddhist tone to them, and these individuals

³⁷Robert Jera-Bézar and Monique Maillard, “Le rôle des bannières et des peintures mobiles dans les rituels du bouddhisme d’Asie centrale,” *Arts Asiatiques* 49 (1989): 57. Evidence for oral transformation performances taking place in Sichuan province occur as far back as the eighth century. See Mair, *T’ang Transformation Texts*, 216, in which he refers to passages found in the 8th-century text *Tan bin lu*, compiled by Li Fang in *Tai bing guang ji*, ch. 269, 2109.

³⁸Kucera, 56-66.

³⁹Mair, *T’ang Transformation Texts*, 3. For more on the early traditions of Buddhist storytelling in China and the development of oral prosimetric form for sutra recitation see V. Hrdlickova, “The First Translations of Buddhist Sutras in Chinese Literature and Their Place in the Development of Storytelling,” *Archiv orientální* 26 (1958): 114-144.

⁴⁰Jaroslav Prusek, “The Narrators of Buddhist Scriptures and Religious Tales in the Sung Period,” *Archiv orientální* 11 (1938): 376. The texts cited by Prusek include the 1235 CE work *Du cheng ji sheng* along with the later *Meng liang lu* and *Wu lin qiu shi*, which Prusek sees as copies of the former. Such storytellers were not new to the Song dynasty per se, but had existed earlier in the Tang in the form of those monks who gave popular sermons in which they “read and sang sutras” as alluded to in the *Gaoseng zhuan* chapter on *Chang dao*, fascicle 13, p. 78. See V. Hrdlickova, 135-139, for more on this early trend in popular Buddhism in China.

were most likely affiliated with monasteries, with some even referred to as *he shang* or “monk”.⁴¹

These storytellers, be they monks, nuns or lay people, had to ensure that their stories were understood by a fairly broad-based public. Eugene Eoyang notes that most narratives found within both the secular and religious traditions can best be described as repetitive, with an elasticity of structure that allowed the various components of any story to stand by themselves as well as be strung together to create a larger unit.⁴² This was done in order to accommodate the comings and goings of the listeners, a facet of public erudition that could not be avoided.⁴³ Hence, the compartmentalization of time mentioned earlier as a mainstay of Chinese thought and history-writing also manifested itself in the oral narrative tradition, with stories being parceled out into individualized vignettes, which were still logical and coherent if heard out of order or out of context.⁴⁴

Clearly the oral tradition of utilizing pictures to preach to the public did not die out in China, but continued to evolve over time.⁴⁵ An early

⁴¹Ibid., 377. It should be noted that a number of women’s names were also recorded, and it would appear that the storyteller profession was a hereditary one similar to other guilds active in China at the time.

⁴²Eugene Eoyang, “A Taste of Apricots” in Chinese Narrative: Critical and Theoretical Essays, Andrew Plaks, ed., 53-69 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977): 60.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴It must be noted that the compartmentalization of narrative is not unique to Chinese oral traditions. India, for example, utilizes the repetitive, compartmentalizing technique within oral performances of such epics as the Ramayana in order to allow for viewers to come and go without losing the overall thread.

⁴⁵Drège convincingly argues that it was during the latter part of the Song dynasty that the “eye” came to take precedence over the “ear” in reading as rote memorization of texts through oral repetition was replaced by silent reading among the literate class. This new approach to the pedagogy of reading was based on Chan Buddhist models,

twentieth-century description of a 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.⁴⁶

In this description, the conjunction of oral narrative and visual imagery becomes obvious, and the theatrical quality inherent in many a proselytizing effort, apparent.⁴⁷

Whether or not one wishes to apply the term “*bian xiang*” to the works carved at Baodingshan, it is important to assess the various ways in which text and image function within the narrative tableaux at Great Buddha Bend. It may seem that my own definition of narrative presented earlier was fairly unrestricted. This was done intentionally in order to maintain flexibility while

promulgated by the Neo-Confucian Zhu Xi (1130-1200 CE). See Jean-Pierre Drège, “La lecture et l’écriture en Chine et la xylographie,” *Études chinoises*, vol. X no. 1-2 (1991): 94-103.

⁴⁶Mair, *Painting and Performance*, 9. “*Pao-chuan*” refers to the recitation of precious scrolls, considered by Mair to be the product of earlier *bian wen* works.

⁴⁷For studies of the convergence of religion and entertainment in China, see David Johnson, “Mu-lien in Pao-chüan: The Performance Context and Religious Meaning of the Yü-ming Pao-ch’uan” in *Ritual and Scripture in Chinese Popular Religion* Chinese Popular Culture Project 3 (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, 1995): 55-103, and Barbara Ward, “Not Merely Players: Drama, Art and Ritual in Traditional China”, *Man* n.s. 14.1 (1979): 18-39. One commonly cited example of the conjoining of the two are the references to theatrical productions dating back to the Tang dynasty (618-906 CE) which were based on the Buddhist story of Mulian saving his mother from the tortures of hell. Mulian’s popularity as

still highlighting the differences between narrative and iconic imagery found at Baodingshan. For example, one could argue that the core section of the Great Buddha Bend, which is centered on the large reclining Buddha image, comprises a narrative sequence unto itself (fig. 17). Beginning with the two images to the left of the *parinirvana* tableau, the viewer is confronted with the Buddha's life story in sequence. First, the bathing of the young Shakyamuni by the dragons descending from the sky, which is followed by the small grouping of the young Shakyamuni with his mother and sister, a reminder of the sacrifice of home and family undertaken by the Buddha on behalf of all. These small vignettes are then followed by the monumental representation of his extinction, placed next to a largely eroded representation of men and devas bearing witness to the event. The entire sequence ends with a pagoda, a clear reference to the Buddha Shakyamuni as relic, the final page in his life story.

Although this grouping of imagery within the horseshoe-bend could be considered narrative in composition, it will not be discussed here due to lack of original accompanying textual inscriptions. In this respect, I have consciously chosen to look at narrative within a somewhat narrower framework, asking how the narrative at Baodingshan functions in relationship to both text and image. While it is possible that a twelfth-century worshipper would "read" the Parinirvana grouping as a continuous narrative, the works lack the evidence for narrative of the sort found in the

a subject for live entertainment did not diminish with time. See Berthold Laufer, [Oriental](#)

inscribed passages accompanying the six tableaux which will be discussed. Although clearly “action which produces change” has taken place in this sequence, and there is an element of “time” incorporated into the grouping as the young Shakyamuni passes onto enlightenment and sacred relic, proof that these were “read” as a narrative, and not as separate iconic images, is unavailable. As Peter J. Holliday points out, “An image becomes a visual narrative, i.e., an object of narrative reading, only when the intention of such a reading exists”. With regard to this particular sequence of images at Great Buddha Bend, there is no way of knowing the audience’s actual or artist’s intended reading.⁴⁸

Yet when image is combined with text, ascertaining the artist’s intended reading and an audience’s actual reading of a work becomes more conceivable. “Language can specify, images cannot.”⁴⁹ Pictures inevitably must be made intelligible in words; they cannot be read in the same way as, or as fully as, texts.⁵⁰ It is in this sense that my analysis will focus on the conjoining of the two at Great Buddha Bend, i.e. how did the texts work with the images in order to allow for the narrative works to be understood and utilized. When text is combined with imagery, the inherent meaning of both is changed. Text totalizes, manages, or restrains the symbolic receptive aspects of the visual components of the tableau; it also subjects the imagery to

Theatricals (Chicago : Field Museum of Natural History, 1923).

⁴⁸Peter J. Holliday, ed., Narrative and Event in Ancient Art (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993): 3.

⁴⁹E. H. Gombrich, “Image and Word in 20th Century Art”, Word and Image vol. 1 no. 3 (July-September 1985): 220.

certain linear analytic processes, with viewing proceeding in sequences similar to reading or hearing.

No longer is the audience simply privy to the Buddha's inner thoughts within the jataka tales, they are physically present to witness his actions. With regard to the dialogue construct, the audience is now present at the conversation, eavesdropping as it were, and then joining in with the ahistorical masses to hear the Buddha tell his story. The dimension of narrative can be manipulated by the artist or the patron by consciously choosing which moment or moments of the story to depict in two or three-dimensional form. With this in mind, the possibility of the stylistic disparities between the various tableaux as having been deliberately chosen on the part of Zhao Zhifeng in order to convey moral or didactic messages to the worshipper needs to be discussed in conjunction with each work.

Lastly, yet most importantly, the audience for the texts and images found within the Great Buddha Bend grotto at Baodingshan must be taken into consideration. Who was the viewing public for these works? Gombrich notes that "There is no such thing as 'an innocent eye', all perception occurring within the context of memory and expectation."⁵¹ If such is the case for the human condition, within what context did the twelfth-century worshipper encounter the monumental carved tableaux at Great Buddha Bend? What, if any, information exists to help the 21st-century scholar

⁵⁰ Lawrence C. Duggan, "Was Art Really the 'Book of the Illiterate'?", Word and Image vol. 5 (1987): 244.

⁵¹Gombrich, 221.

understand how these works may have been perceived and utilized within their own time?

Outside of the copious inscribed scriptural texts found at Great Buddha Bend, there are seven extant Song dynasty inscriptions.⁵² Of the seven found in the grotto proper, all can be effectively dated to the Southern Song period (1127-1278 CE), either by an included date, or by a date arrived at based on time-specific usage of place names or characters within the inscriptions. Six of the seven are works in which the author's name and office is at least partially extant. Of the seven, six of the inscriptions can be classified as designatory placards, i.e., large character inscriptions that simply name a given area within the Great Buddha Bend grotto. The seventh is a free-standing stele whose inscription documents activities at the grotto, and which is placed between the three looming figures of the Huayan school found adjacent to the entrance to the grotto. A translation of the text of this stele was utilized in the introductory chapter to substantiate Zhao Zhifeng's presence at the site.⁵³

In response to the question of "who" the audience for the Great Buddha Bend tableaux was, it should be noted that five of the six authors of these inscriptions come from Sichuan province; hence the appellation "local gentry" so commonly used when discussing the audience and supporters of

⁵²Furthermore, Little Buddha Bend has two stone stele that also date to the Song dynasty. DZSKMWL, 230-234 and 207-211 respectively. The Little Buddha Bend works will be discussed in the fourth chapter with regard to Zhao Zhifeng's presence at Baodingshan and his lineage claims to Reverend Master Liu's religious mantle.

⁵³See page 7 and Appendix B for a complete translation of this stele's text.

the Baodingshan site.⁵⁴ The most prominent individual among these is Wei Liaoweng, whose dates of 1178-1237 CE make his life virtually parallel with the period of the site's construction.⁵⁵ Wei is fairly well represented by a posthumous body of works, including a group of collected writings as well as mention in the *Song shi*.⁵⁶

The text accompanying all six inscriptions is non-canonical and extremely brief, effectively listing the author's positions and titles and ending with "...X wrote this."⁵⁷ Wei is the only individual having more than one inscription at the site, perhaps in response to monastic demands for calligraphy that was certain to be of benefit to the community at large (figs. 18 and 19). Mark Halperin notes that "even scholars of the time noticed that the monks, no matter how 'rustic', still knew the importance of acquiring an inscription for their cloister."⁵⁸ The overall generic quality seen in the style of

⁵⁴Most of the English language sources use the term "local gentry". See Zhang Jiaqi's article "The Splendour of the Grotto Arts of the Later Period in China," *Oriental Art* n.s., 35 (Spring 1989): 7-10, for one example.

⁵⁵DZSKMWL, 230-231 and DZSKYJ, 320, n. 76.

⁵⁶Conrad Schirokauer in his article "Neo-Confucians Under Attack" notes that Wei succeeded in the imperial exam of 1199 CE, during what was the height of the anti-*wei-xue* ("spurious teachings") campaign at court. See Schirokauer's contribution to *Crisis and Prosperity in Sung China*, 163-198, John Winthrop Haeger, ed. (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1975): 193.

⁵⁷DZSKMWL, 230-231. For transcribed Chinese texts of the literati inscriptions see Appendix C.

⁵⁸Mark R. Halperin, "Pieties and Responsibilities: Buddhism and the Chinese Literati, 780-1280," Ph.D. diss. (University of California: Berkeley, 1997): 29. Halperin, 30-32, points out that some literati were paid for their inscriptions, although very little is known about the overall process and whether or not a person could or would refuse to accommodate a Buddhist institution's request. Even within the Buddhist clergy, it was often difficult to say no to a request for a piece of writing. In his biography of the noted Tang Buddhist master Zongmi, Peter Gregory points out that during his exile in Sichuan, Zongmi wrote a commentary to the *Yulanben Scripture* after having conducted rituals involving the text, largely in response to his fears of offending those local clergymen who had made the request. See Peter N. Gregory, *Tsung-mi and the Sinification of Buddhism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991): 89. Stevenson, personal correspondence 02/01/02, notes

the Baodingshan inscriptions as well as their very generalized content is in keeping with most of the inscribed works produced within the Song period found at Buddhist sites.⁵⁹

The most prominent and most widely reproduced textual image at Great Buddha Bend was inscribed by Du Xiaoyan (fig. 20). The oft-photographed name placard of “Baodingshan” sits at the entrance to the grotto from the river below. Du’s dates are unknown, although he and Wei Liaoweng both achieved *jinshi* status in 1199.⁶⁰ Du Xiaoyan’s brief inscription, carved to the left of the final character “*shan*”, is typical of the inscriptions at Great Buddha Bend in that it is a listing of titles and offices held by Du, finishing off with the ubiquitous “Du Xiaoyan wrote this.” Alongside the large-character placard reading “Baodingshan”, Du’s inscription reads as follows:

Grand Master for Closing Court, with the authority of minister, Director of the Bureau of Military Appointments, concurrently Associate State Historiographer, concurrently Recorder for the Bureau of Army Activities, the official litterateur Du Xiaoyan inscribed this.⁶¹

Were Du Xiaoyan and Wei Liaoweng firm adherents of Buddhism?

Not necessarily. According to two recent studies done on literati activity

that “the monks were not always so venal in their request for literati inscriptions. Many such examples bespeak conditional respect, and the connection between the literatus, the monk initiating the request, and the community as a whole.”

⁵⁹Halperin, 30-32.

⁶⁰DZSKMWL, 231. Both men were also active within the Ministry of Rites.

⁶¹Ibid. Du is listed in the *Song shi* as the compiler of *Wenzhou su ji* (Supplementary Record of Wenzhou) (*Song shi*, vol. 15, fascicle 204, 5162) as well as being listed as one of a

during the Song, making major contributions of money, land or commemorative steles by the local elite was simply a conventional way to show one's community-mindedness.⁶² Such an act also had the added benefits of prestige and posterity. For many of the elite, contributing to communal enterprises like the building of a Buddhist site was one means by which their names and achievements could be inscribed in stone, thereby creating a permanent record to pass down to future generations.⁶³

Halperin describes the Song dynasty culture of stele inscriptions as that of well-educated individuals on "outings to view relics, and monasteries featured readings of inscriptional works, and visitors would scrutinize their script, literary style, organization, and historical veracity. In effect, stele functioned as props in very public displays of erudition, memory, and connoisseurship."⁶⁴ Baodingshan was visited by literary-minded individuals right up until its "rediscovery" in the 1940s.⁶⁵ Records indicate that the site's

group of illustrious Song scholars, including several who were charged during the anti-*weixue* campaigns (*Song shi*, vol. 36, fascicle 430, 12788. See also Schirokauer, 185).

⁶²Robert P. Hymes, *Statesmen and Gentlemen* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1986): 179-182, and Mark Halperin, 35-38 and 184.

⁶³Halperin, 29. Halperin, 102, stylistically differentiates earlier Tang inscribed works from later Song ones based upon the length and detail of their content. Earlier works are brief and less likely to concern themselves with the temple itself whereas later Song works are apt to supply more of a portrait of the people and the place. In this respect, the generic inscribed designatory placards can be considered "old-fashioned" or traditional, while the stele carved with Yuwen Ji's lengthy prose inscription outlining the activities taking place at the grotto is more in keeping with Song stylistic trends for commemorative inscriptions.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, 23. Monks almost always had local literati sponsors and donors who were quite actively involved with the religious communities. Generally in the Song dynasty, the appointment to and ratification of the post of abbot required just such a connection. No information regarding whether or not Zhao Zhifeng was sponsored by any of the Song officials who visited the site has yet been found, although such a scenario would seem highly probable.

⁶⁵DZSKMWL, 207-270, lists all of the later Ming, Qing, and Republican era inscriptions found at the site.

highest-ranking visitor was Prince Xian of Shu (1371-1423 CE), in whose honor the pagoda above the grotto was built in the early Ming dynasty.⁶⁶

From the available information, one could preclude that Baodingshan was the playground of the elite, the only evidence for any audience being these steles carved from calligraphy provided by men who all belonged to the upper echelon of society. Norman Bryson tells a cautionary tale of the hubris involved in reconstructing reception, and with respect to the issues he has raised, it is necessary to immediately follow this detailing of the educated elite presence at Baodingshan with a rejoinder.⁶⁷ What may at first glance appear to be a very strong and overt presence on the part of the literati at Baodingshan does not preclude the presence and participation of many other classes of society. Clearly the members of the literati class would have been best prepared to utilize the inscribed textual works which accompany the imagery at Great Buddha Bend to their fullest advantage; however, given the

⁶⁶The Prince of Shu, Zhu Chun, took up residence in Chengdu in 1391, being designated Prince Xian of Shu in 1378. His mother was a concubine of Zhu Yuanzhang, the first Ming emperor, and he was the 11th of the emperor's 36 sons and 16 daughters. The prince was best known for his literary and learned leanings. His life is discussed primarily within the biography of the Neo-Confucian thinker and statesman Fang Xiaoru. The young prince and Fang regularly traveled to famous scenic spots in Sichuan, among which Mt. Emei and Du Fu's "thatched cottage" in Chengdu are specifically cited in the histories. While in Sichuan, both the prince and Fang were at an equal remove from the capital, and as such the two were kindred souls. Extant correspondence between them shows a dynamic of Confucian scholar/mentor toward his young devoted student. Fang reminded the prince of his Confucian responsibilities, earning for himself a reputation as a man of principle, which eventually led him back to the capital and the court. This can be seen as a fortunate, albeit in the end unfortunate, change in events, one that would lead to Fang's martyrdom along with the execution of his entire extended family. See L. Carrington Goodrich and Chaoyang Fang, eds., Dictionary of Ming Biography 1368-1644, 2 vols. (London and New York: Columbia University Press, 1976): 426- 432.

⁶⁷Norman Bryson, "Art in Context" in Studies in Historical Change, ed. Ralph Cohen (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1992): 31-38.

evidence at hand, this representative sample of audience participation is by default incomplete and extremely small.

Fortuitous circumstances are in fact the only reason for such a sample being skewed in the literati class' favor. The monastic complex at Baodingshan burned at some point during the Yuan dynasty, an event that destroyed all documentation at the site not carved in stone.⁶⁸ Drawing from evidence found at other sites in Dazu County, it is safe to assume that the images at Great Buddha Bend grotto were viewed by men and women alike, rich as well as middle-class, layperson alongside monk.⁶⁹ This assumption would appear to be further supported by the wide breadth of imagery depicted at Great Buddha Bend as well as by the inclusion of both text and image.⁷⁰ These aspects of the site and their effect on the utilization of Great Buddha Bend by a varied audience will be considered within the final analyses of each of the chapters to follow.

⁶⁸*Dazu xian zhi: Sichuan sheng*, 498-99.

⁶⁹The number of inscriptions found at the numerous other sites in Dazu County and neighboring Anyue County attest to a prolific Buddhist community with a diverse body of patrons. See Hu Wenhe, *Anyue Dazu Fo diao* (Taipei: Mei shu chu ban she, 1999) for more on the connections between both the artists and patrons of these two areas within Sichuan province, and DZSKMWL for transcriptions and rubbings of the extant inscriptions within Dazu County, the number of which easily runs into the hundreds .

⁷⁰Some scholars disagree that the site was used by all levels of society. Stephen F. Teiser, "The Growth of Purgatory" in *Religion and Society in T'ang and Sung China*, eds. Patricia Buckley Ebrey and Peter N. Gregory, 115-45 (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1993): 127, states that the placement of the Great Buddha Bend imagery at eye-level denotes an illiterate or semi-literate audience for the works. Clearly Teiser does not take into consideration the physical evidence left behind by highly-literate individuals like Wei Liaoweng and Du Xiaoyan.