

Text as Relic: Another Reading of the Baodingshan Inscriptions

§ Overview of Baodingshan

The Baodingshan site – a large, horseshoe-shaped grotto of thousands of sculpted images carved into a limestone hillside just outside of Dazu City, Dazu County, Sichuan – has become more widely known within the field of Chinese studies over the last few decades. Dated to the late Southern Song and taking approximately seventy years to construct Baodingshan was peripheral in time as well as location – created long after the glorious monuments of the Tang and far removed from the mainstream of China's civilizing metropolitan regions.

§ overview of hell

Since the mid-1980s interest in the site has grown, leading to a number of theories being posited to explain Baodingshan's unique characteristics. My own work has focused on the large amounts of text that are included at the site, and how these texts relate to the imagery that surrounds them.

§ overview of FMEZJ

Carved in stone, I have argued that these Buddhist scriptures functioned in a fashion well beyond simply accompanying or clarifying the meaning of the images constructed around them. Although the Baodingshan inscriptions could function akin to text and image illustrated handscrolls to some degree, the mere fact that such extensive effort was put into making these scriptures eternally permanent in stone belies greater concerns. Such a monumental effort in such a short frame of time clearly highlights the historical urgency of the Baodingshan project. In my earlier work on the site, I argue that

Baodingshan may have been designed to serve as a repository of the Buddhist faith in all its variations – an attempt to preserve the Buddhist teachings for future generations.

§ overview narrative side and § text as icon drawing

My earlier work also led me to think about the texts at Baodingshan as images, in the sense that Buddhist sutras and the dharma they preach can be seen as differing manifestations of the historical Buddha Shakyamuni himself. More recently, I have begun to consider the texts as presented within the Baodingshan site as one aspect of the *trikaya* system. One of the more common and later variations is that of the *rupa-kaya* [physical or "form" body], the *dharma-kaya* [teachings or "law" body] and the *nirmana-kaya* [transformation body]. For the purposes of this paper, I shall focus mainly on the earlier conceptual division of the *rupa-kaya* and the *dharma-kaya*.

§ image in moonniche

§ text

One of the earliest instances of the historical Buddha equating his physical self with his teachings can be found in the *Milindapanha*, "He who sees the *Dharma* sees me, and he who sees me sees the *Dharma*." Later texts would develop this idea by saying that the Buddhist teachings were his *dharma* body [*dharma-kaya*] in contrast with his form body [*rupa-kaya*]. This concept would lead to the practice of utilizing texts for relics, as first described in eyewitness Chinese accounts by the seventh-century monk-traveler Xuanzang, although there is evidence that the actual practice in China goes back as far as the fifth-century CE.

§ Buddha & father

If one sees the texts at Baodingshan as representative of the *dharma-kaya*, then one could also argue that the texts (as alternate images of the Buddha) could have been

created with corporeal "relics" in mind. In analyzing the Baodingshan inscriptions, especially those found within Great Buddha Bend, a number of interesting qualities present themselves.

§ text translation

First, unlike the carved texts found at other sites within Sichuan and elsewhere in China, the texts carved at Great Buddha Bend are not complete. Rather, they are select portions of scriptures, "highlights" as I have referred to them elsewhere, and therefore one might argue that they are the very "essence" of the various sutras being carved.

§ rubbing of chant

§ translation

Second, within these carved inscriptions, one phrase filters out as perhaps the core nugget, the primordial "*sarira*". This is the phrase, "Even if a red-hot iron wheel rotated on the top of my head, I will not, because of this suffering, give up the mind of enlightenment". This phrase reoccurs throughout the Baodingshan site, three times within Little Buddha Bend and seven times within Great Buddha Bend. It has been labeled the "spiritual signature" of the site's creator, Zhao Zhifeng, and regardless of the veracity of that claim, it is clearly making a significant statement since it appears in at least ten places within the site.

§ hell pagoda w/ rubbings

§ pagoda at Little Buddha B

Lastly, almost half of the known occurrences of this phrase appear within a pagoda context at the Baodingshan site. In addition, as I will argue later on, the placement of these four may have served to influence the perception of the other six as textual relics.

§ keep hell pagoda image

§ dharani pillar

Precedence for text serving as relic can be documented within China as early as the Tang dynasty, when political changes in control over Central Asian trade routes cut off the standard route by which physical relics came into China. Under the reign of Empress Wu and Emperor Gaozong, a relic campaign was launched in an attempt to emulate the legendary redistribution of relics of King Asoka. This dispersal of bits of the Buddha came hand in hand with new texts arriving in China that extolled the virtues of such acts as a talismanic device to aid in the protection of the state. The idea of textual relics was reinforced by the texts themselves, in essence allowing an "out" for a country such as China, which was hard-pressed to find sufficient physical relics to match its needs as time wore on. A common form for these textual relics to take was that of inscribed text on a stone pillar.

Akin to the circumstances seen at the inception of the Tang dynasty, the Song era also suffered from tremulous times. Yet the emperors of the Song ruling house, while not overtly malevolent towards Buddhism, are most often remembered for their strong support of Daoist and Neo-Confucian teachings. In reality, Buddhism under the Song imperial house thrived, albeit in a different fashion. According to several scholars, Song Taizu and his successors consciously chose to emulate their more glorious [and stable] Tang predecessors, and in doing so, they did not neglect the Buddhist establishment and all it had to offer their reign.

§ funerary portrait of Song Taizu

Song Taizu was eventually won over to Buddhism, though not necessarily by the veracity or depth of the Buddhist texts. Rather it was a more magical moment – Taizu attempted to burn a tooth of the Buddha, and after failing to do so, declared his

amazement at the bone's immutability. The tooth itself is an interesting artifact, its history clearly meant to create a firm link between the Tang and Song. Once in the possession of the monk Daoxuan [596-667 CE], it was presented to Tang Taizong [r. 627-649] who then paid homage to it. Oddly enough, it is the history of this particular corporeal relic that provides an argument for textual relics at Baodingshan. Taizu's successor Song Taizong is also thought to have become a believer in Buddhism after failing in his own attempt at a similar experiment on the Buddha's tooth. Taizong also wrote verses extolling both the Buddha and his teachings, and engaged in extensive temple and pagoda renovation and construction in spite of his own imperial orders banning this type of activity.

Perhaps inspired by Song Taizong, his two successors, Song Zhenzong [r. 998-1022 CE] and Song Renzong [r. 1023-1063 CE] also paid reverence to the Buddha's tooth. Zhenzong and Renzong persisted in their admiration for, and support of, Buddhism despite their heavy Daoist inclinations. One rationale for this may be that they both felt a need to carry forward a legacy begun in earlier reign eras. Renzong himself stressed this connection in one of the many prefaces he penned for Buddhist texts.

§ maps of northern southern Song dynasties

Relic veneration made the Buddha "present", and the transmission of relics made China as good or perhaps even better than India, a chosen land filled with spiritual authority run by enlightened rulers. If the cult of relics flourished under the Song, it needed to be supplied.

§ image of people crossing the desert

The re-emergence of diplomatic and Buddhist missions to India under the Northern Song rulers clearly helped to reestablish the flow of relics. Yet there is also considerable evidence to support the fact that the Song empire not only received relics as tribute, it more importantly served as a conduit for relic dispersal to the Tangut, Khitan, Korean and Japanese religious establishments. The number of relics passing through China was not small – one inscription dated to 1038 from the Tangut kingdom records the veneration and interment of 150 relics in one ceremony.

§ DFB Buddha

One might question the rationale of bringing up this extended history of a Buddha's tooth, a corporeal relic, in trying to argue for textual relics at Baodingshan. Why return to the Northern Song dynasty to justify the contents of a site built during the Southern Song? Because the creators of Baodingshan consciously chose to make that connection. Carved front and center within one of the large narrative relief tableaux within Great Buddha Bend, there is a lengthy inscription, flanked on two sides by low-relief scrolling dragons.

§ rubbing of inscription

The title of this inscription in medium-size script reads "In Praise of the Three Sage Prefaces on the Tooth of the Buddha". The subsequent smaller script text extols the virtues of three Northern Song emperors - Song Taizong, Song Zhenzong and Song Renzong - all of whom paid homage to the Buddha's tooth. The inscription lauds these three as exemplary imperial leaders for their support of Buddhism and their reverence for the Buddha relic. Concluding this inscription is a poem written by Song Renzong in praise of the Buddha's tooth. The last line, " Only our master's [Buddha] relics are still

there; their color remains fresh after being refined a hundred times by fire," is repeated in large character script flanking the central inscribed text.

§ overview

The placement of this statement extolling the virtue of these three imperial leaders and quoting their own thoughts on the worship of relics is vital to reading the textual relics found within the rest of Baodingshan.

§ drawing of DFB

This laudatory inscription highlighting these three imperial prefaces extolling the virtues of the Buddha's tooth relic is placed at eye-level within the context of the same tableau from which the repeated phrase "Even if a red-hot iron wheel rotated on the top of my head, I will not, because of this suffering, give up the mind of enlightenment" is taken.

This tableau depicts scenes from *Fo shuo Dafangbian fo bao en jing* or The Buddha Preaches the Mahayana Sutra on the Skillful Means for Repaying Kindness. Unlike earlier textual relic campaigns, the "relic" at Baodingshan is not a magical *dharani*, but an excerpt from an apocryphal Chinese text with strong Confucian overtones, a text highlighting self-sacrifice for family and nation.

§ Left side of DFB

The story from which the repeated phrase was taken is entitled "Shakyamuni Cuts His Own Flesh to Nourish His Father and Mother". Located on the second tier, off of the central Buddha figure's left shoulder, the inscribed text tells the story of the Buddha in a previous life as a young prince. Due to betrayal, the king and his wife are forced to flee their homeland with nothing more than their young son.

§ detail of Prince jati story

Noticing that his parents are starving, the young prince encourages his father the king to make “one hundred cuts” on the prince’s own body in order to feed himself (the king) and his wife. It is at this point that the young prince proclaims his willingness to suffer at length to achieve enlightenment, uttering the phrase found repeatedly carved throughout the Baodingshan site.

§ image with dharani pillars

§ image whole

Why select a "textual relic" from a non-canonical, heavily Confucian work? The strong overtones of filial piety and self-sacrifice undoubtedly would have appealed to imperial and literati desires alike. Already under the Northern Song, remonstrances had been made against what was perceived as lavish expenditures by the court on Buddhist projects. To the court, pulling away from their support of Buddhism did not mesh with their vision of themselves as universal enlightened rulers.

§ daochang image

Would a relic campaign akin to the Tang Emperor Gaozong and Empress Wu's attempt to emulate King Asoka have been something also utilized by the Song imperial house to create stability in uncertain times? By the Southern Song, at least one emperor still understood the power a Buddhist relic held within the populace's mindset. Emperor Ningzong [r. 1195-1224 CE] once again brought the Buddha tooth to the court for veneration. Further evidence for miraculous relic moments involving Ningzong can be found within Baodingshan itself.

§ rubbing of inscription

Carved on the back of the small constructed meditation cell located within Little Buddha Bend is an image of the Buddha Shakyamuni, floating above a pagoda, styled in the Asokan fashion. The miraculous apparition of a stupa at the palace in 1215 CE is described in the text found below the image. The text detailing this event, along with an offering for imperial longevity, was carved at Baodingshan in 1231 CE under the reign of Ningzong's successor, Emperor Lizong [r.1225-1264 CE]. It is worth noting that the miraculous relic pagoda appears at court near the end of Ningzong's reign, after the Yuan dynasty had already been declared [as of 1206]. One could reason that the auspicious omen of such an occurrence was viewed as vital to keeping a jittery populace calm, and maintaining the appearance of the universal monarchy that the Northern Song rulers had tried so hard to establish.

To include references to the more glorious Northern Song past within the same framework as miraculous moments occurring in a less than perfect Southern Song world would have resonated well with both the government and the local populace. A textual reference to the young princely Buddha who literally gave of himself for his parents' survival served to remind the people of how Emperors Ningzong and Lizong were filially honoring their predecessors.

§ pagoda with text

§ pagoda with image

Based upon the prominent placement of the imperial prefaces on the worship of the Buddha's tooth, and the inclusion of the detailed description of the miraculous relic apparition at court, relic veneration during the construction of the Baodingshan complex clearly was still of interest. The difficulty for the creators of the Baodingshan site most likely lay in how to actually procure a 'true' relic, the route to Central Asia now cut off by

the Mongols. The creators of the site clearly understood that relics came in a variety of forms, and as such availed themselves of what they had the most experience with, the inscribed written word. Throughout the Baodingshan complex there are numerous carved pagodas functioning as reliquary images containing meditating Buddha figures.

Interspersed among them, the pagoda with text imagery at Baodingshan would have been seen as equal to the pagoda with image – text replacing image. If the figural image within the pagoda can be seen as a replacement for the corporeal remains of the Buddha, then it follows that the textual image can also be seen to work in the same fashion. This in essence brings us back to the *trikaya* theory, the texts representing the *dharmakaya*.

§ text as icon drawing

Although I argue here only for textual relics in the form of one select repeated phrase found within a pagoda context, one might also contend that the worshipper may have extended his understanding of text serving as relics outside of the pagoda construct, thereby encompassing the six other instances where the phrase is found. If that were the case, the worshipper may have gone so far as to perceive all the portions of texts inscribed within Great Buddha Bend as textual relics. Viewing the inscribed portions of text within the rubric of Baodingshan as a repository for the Buddhist faith, these textual relics can now be visualized as sprinkled throughout the Baodingshan site, functioning like 'brilliant bits' of *sarira*, hardened by multiple readings akin to being smelted 100 times over – their message eternally fresh and new.