

Temples in the Cliffside: Buddhist Art in Sichuan

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Sonya Lee's *Temples in the Cliffside: Buddhist Art in Sichuan* is a welcome addition to studies of the religious cliff sculpture of southwestern China. The book provides accounts of several of the major cliff sculpture sites in the region of the Sichuan Basin within what is now the administrative areas of Sichuan Province and the municipality of Chongqing. The numerous and widely dispersed cliff sculptures of the region provide an important repository of Buddhist and Daoist art (though this book does not consider the latter), which is of great value for the study of medieval Chinese religion and artistic trends. Over the years, the study of these materials has itself become a growing specialized field of Chinese art historical research, as many researchers in the study of medieval Chinese history and religion draw upon the rich corpus of *in situ* iconographical and epigraphical materials found within the region. *Temples in the Cliffside* is a well-researched book, based primarily on the author's prior publications. It contributes to this field of knowledge, especially with regard to the transformation of rupestal sites, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, from active religious sites to cultural heritage sites. The book tries to break new ground in approaching the subject matter from an ecological perspective: one that raises many questions for this reader.

Sonya Lee shows how the cliff sculpture of Sichuan is part of a long continuum of Buddhist rupestal art and rock cut architecture, and one that developed its own unique salient features setting it apart from the cliff sculpture and cave temple architecture of the better-known traditions of western and north central China typified by famous sites like Yungang, Longmen, and the Mogao Caves of Dunhuang, among others. To contribute to the better understanding of the Buddhist cliff sculpture sites in Sichuan, Lee takes a somewhat different approach by situating her study of these sites within the newly emerging discourse of ecological art history, and by providing perspectives on the forces of what she calls the "nature–society relationship" (17) that shaped the creation, preservation, and reception of these sites over time. Because of this approach, her coverage is not limited to the particular periods when the images and caves were first created, but also considers how the sites have been renewed and modified up until the present to meet the changing needs of their stakeholders. Lee also includes several examples of recently created large-scale cliff sculpture and carvings at more ancient sites that have been given colorful folkish face-lifts by local devotees. Her point is to demonstrate a continuity of tradition and how the continual involvement of these sites over time can be understood in terms of eco-compatibility and sustainability, and thereby shine a light on the anthropogenic causes of climatic change; at least, that is the ambitious intent of her book, beyond illuminating the contours of the

histories and cultural contents of the in situ Buddhist art found at several of Sichuan's most fascinating cliff sculpture sites.

The book is organized into two parts, which present a temporal snapshot of Sichuan's prodigious Buddhist rupestral art in five case studies of cliff sculpture sites, explaining how they have been modified and managed over time, and how the design of each responds to its own unique natural ecological setting. Following an introduction that lays out the book's ecological framework and its aspirations, the first part consists of two chapters. The first focuses on the famous Giant Buddha of Leshan at the confluence of the Min and Dadu rivers, and the second on the dazzling sculptural program of the Great Buddha Bend of Baodingshan in Dazu. This part of the book is more along the lines of a standard art historical treatment of these well-known sites. It goes into what Lee believes were the primary motivations behind the establishment of the two sites, summarized as respectively "countering natural disasters and diseases" (13), and tries to identify the impact of the local environment on the design and functions of each site.

Three chapters make up the second part of the book. The focus shifts from the establishment of cliff sculpture sites to how they evolved over time, and to the ways they are currently being managed and used as they transition fully from active religious to cultural heritage sites catering to tourists. Chapter three concerns the management of Dazu's rock carving sites since the early 1950s, while drawing comparisons with how cliff sculpture sites were overseen in pre-modern times. The fourth chapter is on the Nankan site in Bazhong. The fifth and final chapter returns to Dazu and the recent costly restoration of the fabulous Thousand-armed Avalokitesvara of Baodingshan, which has been the subject of a number of detailed conservators' reports before, during, and after its restoration. A short postscript briefly delves into newly created large-scale cliff sculptures, including those of the grandiose Oriental Buddha Capital cultural theme park in Leshan and those of the nearby Lingyun Mountain scenic area. The postscript also provides an example of the continued patronage that commonly occurs at smaller "undesigned" sites, where the local faithful still have some agency in their devotional needs. Regarding the newly created cliff sculpture sites, Lee emphasizes the preferences of the image-makers to employ "traditional technology" rather than "modern construction techniques" (219); a photo of builders at work on page 215 (Figure P.5), however, shows them taking advantage of power equipment, like large stone cutting circular saws, that their earlier brethren did not have. The photo undercuts Lee's argument for using "cave temple" building practices as a model for a less technology-driven, harmonious, human equilibrium with nature.

The central subject of the book is what that author characterizes as "cave temples." Lee explains that she adopted this English term from the term *shiku* 石窟 (artificial cave). She prefers "cave temples" to *shike* 石刻 (rock carvings), a descriptor popularized by Sichuan based researchers, because the term better "conveys a concrete spatial context" (15), and highlights the place of Sichuan's Buddhist cliff sculpture within the larger history of Buddhist "cave temples." This argument may make some sense for Chinese usage, but in English, referring to most of the monuments presented in the book as "cave temples" is misleading. It brings to mind romantic images of large rock-cut architectural interior spaces, or something similar to Shanxi's famous Hanging Temple of Hengshan. Although there are certainly sites in Sichuan that feature caves in the true sense of the word and that may have been construed as temples at some point, these are not the main feature of most rupestral sites in Sichuan. Instead, the vast majority of Sichuan's cliff sculpture sites are made up of images contained within well-defined niches (*kan* 龕). There are some

sites that also feature pictorial assemblages or dioramas and large excavated grottoes, such as at the Great Buddha Bend of Baodingshan, but those are the minority. Although some sites do feature actual caves purposefully designed as architectural spaces, and although some niches are deeply cut to be cave-like, the main effect of most of Sichuan's cliff sculpture, whether a one-off carving on a lone rock outcropping or a cliff densely packed with carvings, is pictorial: the carvings are meant to be viewed from outside, rather than providing interior architectural participatory spatial settings for visitors. Most cliff carving sites take the form of a kind of devotional sprawl resulting from the accumulation of unplanned patronage overtime, such as the Nankan site in Bazhong. Others were created as a single act of patronage, such as Shizhuanshan in Dazu, or appear to have been conceived as an interrelated whole, as most scholars understand the sculptural groups of the Great Buddha Bend. In any case, all of these carving sites were ancillary or supportive features of adjacent monasteries and temples, rather than being thought of as temples in their one right.

Lee's choice of the term "cave temple" relates to her underlying theme: how Sichuan's "cave temples" connect with ecological concerns, in relation both to their intended function vis-à-vis their natural setting and to larger ideas about ecological sustainability. Lee writes that "cave temples" should be understood as places in which our artificial human world interfaces with the natural world; the interface allows "dialogical transcendence," enabling users "to see beyond the here and now" (5). Most, if not all, of Sichuan's cliff sculpture sites are situated in a landscape that has long undergone refashioning for human needs, yet Lee does not mention how cultivated land at many rural sites comes right up to the bottom edge of the rock face of cliff carvings. The sandstone cliffs and rock formations common in the region's topography are among the last vestiges of a non-human natural environment once filled with forests and wildlife. But those very cliffs and rock formations have in certain circumstances been taken advantage of and altered to meet human devotional needs for the production of religious merit and social benefit. The book speaks to the continual human involvement in these hybrid "artificial" sites in efforts to fend off never-ending natural processes and, to some degree, also speaks to the environmental impact that those human activities must have had. Because of these connections, Lee's notion about the ecological significance of "cave temples" and their connection with the larger environmental history of China in pre-modern and modern times, especially land use, the main driver of climate change, is readily understandable. But it is less clear why cave temples are more noteworthy than many other comparable landscape-altering anthropogenic activities in ecological terms, or how such a study lends itself to rethinking critical environmental issues in new and significant ways, as Lee claims. Perhaps larger connections to both China's past and present would bring out more such reflections, especially in regard to the sheer scale of sites like the Giant Buddha of Leshan and the Great Buddha Bend, which, beyond any Buddhalogical content, exemplify the audacious attempts throughout China's history to build big and push the limits of human engineering to overcome nature at great cost: attempts that extend from ancient waterworks to recent public-works projects like Three Gorges Dam and Qinghai-Tibet railway among others. Such projects, completed with great political fanfare for economic development, have brought a host of problematic social and ecological entanglements in their wake.

The book frequently mentions the placement of wooden framed shelters or pavilions in front of cliff sculptures. There are problems with the role of these structures in Lee's argument. First, she calls them a distinguishing feature integral to the design of "cave temples," especially in Sichuan. Evidence comes from historical accounts, material evidence

of carved sockets for beams, and extant structures at some sites both inside and outside the region. But in fact, while some sites in the region have evidence of enclosing shelters, most do not. Second, the author devotes considerable attention to the elaborate multi-tiered structure that once covered the front of the Leshan Buddha, arguing that the multi-tiered structure was a design feature meant to shape viewers' perceptions of the scale of the Buddha. Lee's argument extrapolates the appearance and function of the multi-tiered structure from a miniature depiction of it in a twelfth-century painting, various historical accounts, and the remaining beam sockets carved in the sides of the giant Buddha's niche. This discussion could have been aided by comparable local examples, such as the approximately half-size smaller Rongxian Buddha 荣县大佛, located only about 50 miles east of Leshan, which still resides within a similar multi-tiered wooden pavilion; admittedly, it dates to Qing at the earliest, but it might have been useful.

Lee also connects wooden framed shelters to the Great Buddha Bend of Baodingshan and the monumental style of cliff carving that it exemplifies. She partially attributes the development of that style, around the early twelfth century, to decisions to depart from the use of decay-prone wooden front shelters. According to Lee, abandoning the shelters allowed the builders to conceptualize carvings in a new way, as expansive, continuous compositional spaces filled with life-size and monumental carvings rather than as discrete, self-contained figures in image niches. Further, Lee rightly notes that the design of the carvings of the Great Buddha Bend incorporate overhanging stone awnings, and that lower portions of compositions were undercut to make the higher carvings project outward; both features protect the cliff sculptures from the damaging effects of rainwater, contributing to their good state of preservation. The builders may not have known the underlying geological composition of the particular variety of sandstone found in the Dazu area, which is characterized by the presence of argillaceous (clay mineral) layers that make it more prone to weathering (something not noted in the book), but probably their observation of the impacts of weathering and erosion on older carvings in the area gave them cause to exploit the natural features of the horseshoe-shaped cliff and set most of the carvings deep within it. What the book fails to consider is how these features go beyond offering protection; they also add to the sculptural theatricality and visual impact of the carvings, as they seem to float above the viewer. The importance of the spectacle created by the carvings cannot be understated. Spectacle proselytized; and cliff-carving provided an important revenue stream for religious communities in attracting both audiences and well-to-do patrons to add to them. This is an example of a larger topic the book does not deeply explore, namely, how many anthropogenic ecological changes have been underpinned by profit-driven economic enterprises, including those overseen by Buddhist institutions. While there are no accounting books to determine the amount of revenue raised from activities at cliff sculpture sites overseen by monastics (such as the carving of new image niches, restoring of the old, and performing dedicatory rituals), the few donor inscriptions and dedicatory inscriptions that include monetary amounts show that the revenue must have been substantial, as the sheer number of carvings in cliffs adjacent to temple sites would indicate. At least for the Dazu area, the increasing number and scale of carvings seem to track fairly close to what we know about local prosperity. That—more than any changes in wooden structures—may have contributed to the appearance of larger and more complex carving groups.

The latter portions of the book explore economic and social dimensions of cliff sculpture sites in more recent times. Sonya Lee's discussion of the periods of renewal of Baodingshan during the Ming and Qing dynasties complements the treatment of that site in Karil Kucera's *Ritual and Representation in Chinese Buddhism* (2016), which

explores much of the same material. Lee fills out the later history of Baodingshan, while barely acknowledging Kucera's work. Here, Lee brings up the historical tensions over land ownership that extend to the present with the use of eminent domain to remove local residents from expanded protective zones around Baodingshan and several of the other important cliff sculpture sites in Dazu. She also explores the disenfranchisement of the local residents in favor of the needs of tourist development as a part of a feedback loop to fund and sustain conservation efforts while accelerating the transformation of these religious sanctuaries into tourist-centric heritage sites. Indeed, most of current social and built environment of Dazu is unrecognizable from my first visit to Dazu in the winter of 1988, when it was still a somewhat remote small town that took a good day to reach by bus from Chongqing. It now seems part of the endless suburban sprawl of that expansive hilly industrial metropolis. Not only has the landscape been transformed, but also the air. Because of the atmospheric circulation patterns caused by the terrain of the Sichuan Basin the residents of Dazu and its carvings are now exposed to an increased amount pollutant emissions. The book shows the impact of that transformation on the carvings by offering two photographs of the carving grouping at Guandashan within the protective zone of Baodingshan (206, Figure 5.20) that were taken about thirty years apart. The photos put on full display the way acid rain and particulate matter have sped up the surface erosion of exposed carvings. In exploring these issues, Sonya Lee almost exclusively focuses on Dazu, for which there is a large literature regarding the conservation efforts undertaken and promoted by the Academy of Dazu Rock Carvings over the last several decades. Many of the same issues and conflicting needs of the stakeholders of heritage sites have arisen at other cliff sculpture sites that have become popular tourist destinations. Although not noted in the book, much of what Lee points out regarding the current situation in Dazu is reflected in what Xiaomei Zhao wrote about the Giant Buddha of Leshan in the IIAS Newsletter in Autumn 2016.

Lee's postscript describes the large-scale carvings in the scenic area of Lingyun Mountain in the Gaoping District of Nanchong that were initiated around 2000 by the city government and local entrepreneurs. She highlights the site's religious legitimacy as it "operates much like venerable cave temples" (216)—both in the way in which it was created and the iconography of its sculptures—and contrasts it to the entertainment-driven carvings of the Oriental Buddha Capital theme park neighboring Leshan's Giant Buddha. Her account of the Lingyun Mountain carvings omits their poor circumstances; they have fallen victim to a national campaign to rid the countryside of large-scale religious images that have been created in the last few decades outside of heritage venues, under the pretext of curtailing the immoral commercialization of religion. As a result, the temple associated with the Lingyun Mountain carvings has been closed and the carvings have since 2018 been hidden behind a veil of concrete blocks to prevent the public from seeing them. Elsewhere, some large-scale cliff sculptures have been demolished. The immediate prospects of Sichuan's "cave temples" to function in venerable religious ways that Sonya Lee writes about do not look good, while the central state seems to be holding to the venerable ways of governments of China's dynastic past to assert control over religious institutions and suppress those it perceives as unorthodox and threatening to its authority, on the grounds of protecting the morality of the nation.