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## **Sichuan and Chongqing are No Longer Far Away: Virtual Fieldwork and Digital Metadatabase of Sichuan and Chongqing Buddhist Grottoes**

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### **Abstract**

The dissemination of Buddhism was vigorous in the Sichuan region, including the modern Sichuan province and Chongqing city of Southwest China, triggering a flourishing of Buddhist grotto art from the Mid-Tang (the late eighth century) to the Song Dynasty (960-1279). However, since the sites are scattered and the relevant archaeological reports are, at best, rough, consolidating materials for integrated research have been limited. The digital metadatabase of Sichuan and Chongqing Buddhist caves established under Research Cluster 3.4: Typologies of Text and Image Relations (Cliffs/Caves) in the virtual fieldwork in 2022 and the follow-up project in 2023 to 2024 makes it possible for a more comprehensive study of the Buddhist grottoes in this region. The metadatabase mainly contains high-resolution photographs collected from sites in Anyue of Sichuan and Dazu of Chongqing, as well as the corresponding in-depth research descriptions contributed by the participants. This paper aims to introduce the innovative virtual fieldwork and the metadatabase, followed by observations acquired from studying the materials, reflecting the potential connections among the sites through the transmission of Buddhist art and the participation of donors and Buddhist practitioners in the community.

**Keywords:** Anyue, Sichuan, Dazu, Chongqing, Buddhist grotto, donor

## Introduction

This paper aims to introduce the innovative virtual fieldwork and the metadatabase established for the Sichuan and Chongqing Buddhist grottoes under Research Cluster 3.4: Typologies of Text and Image Relations (Cliffs/ Caves) in the virtual fieldwork in 2022 and the follow-up project from 2023 to 2024. In addition, it summarizes the observations acquired from studying the materials, reflecting the potential connections among the sites through the transmission of Buddhist art and the participation of donors and Buddhist practitioners in the community.

Buddhist grottoes, also known as grotto temples, refer to cave-shaped Buddhist constructions established on cliffs. They are one of the earliest forms of Buddhist architecture, which originated in India for monastics to practice or conduct Buddhist activities and were later introduced to China through the dissemination of Buddhism. China's four major Buddhist grottoes in the northern part of the country, namely Dunhuang, Yungang, Longmen, and Maijishan, are renowned and well-studied.

According to the latest statistics from the Chinese national grotto temple survey completed in 2021, 2,134 grotto temples (consisting of cliff statues) were recorded in the Sichuan region (including Chongqing), exceeding 1/3 of the national total.<sup>1</sup> Except for the Western Sichuan Plateau, almost every district and county in the region has grotto temples, primarily located in river valleys and ancient roads in the hilly areas of the Sichuan Basin. These grotto temples are predominantly depicted through rock carvings created from the Mid-Tang (the late eighth century) to the Song Dynasty (960-1279), when the development of Buddhism in the region was at its height. The Dazu Rock Carvings and the Leshan Giant Buddha are remarkable examples. Renovations of certain niches in specific locations were carried out by local communities until the end of the Qing Dynasty and even the present day. These rock carvings and the tracks of human activities recorded in their inscriptions provide vital resources to comprehend the prosperity of Buddhism in this region during its heydays, supplementing what textual evidence is missing.

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<sup>1</sup> "Sichuan shiku 四川石窟," accessed 20-03-2024, <https://www.sckg.com/sichuanshiku/>.

Although the number and significance of Buddhist grottoes in the Sichuan region are impressive, investigations have been insufficient. These Buddhist grotto temples are scattered, and the relevant archaeological reports are not systematic or incomplete. Except for some large sites, such as Baodingshan of Dazu, attention to medium- and small-sized sites is minimal. All these pose challenges for overall and in-depth studies of the grotto temples in this region. In this regard, a digital metadatabase should provide a convenient solution for consolidating materials that facilitate further studies.

### **About the Metadatabase**

Research Cluster 3.4, “Typologies of Text and Image Relations in Cliffs and Caves”, examines how specific patterns of text-image relations developed in East Asian Buddhist iconography. The study focuses on Chinese sites, but—when possible—it also includes data from Korea and Japan. It analyzes how textual and visual media interact and how Buddhist themes were arranged in cliff and cave sites. Furthermore, the research investigates how these arrangements were related to ritual uses and accommodated specific religious and possibly other needs/purposes in the local environments.

Multiple locations in East Asia were initially chosen for the fieldwork. However, due to the pandemic, all fieldwork activities were cancelled during the first two years of this cluster and were replaced by various educational activities in Zoom seminars. In 2022, research visits to China were not possible. As a result, an experimental “virtual fieldwork” was conducted, along with an online seminar in May. As part of the virtual fieldwork, five locations in the Anyue district of Sichuan were chosen for research. The participants relied on high-resolution photographs taken during previous field trips and local experts’ knowledge, including scholars and institutions, to conduct their research. The five sites in Anyue are (1) Kongque dong 孔雀洞 (the Peacock King Grotto), (2) Pulu dong 毗盧洞 (the Vairocana Grotto), (3) Qianfo zhai 千佛寨 (the Thousand-buddha Cliff Sculpture), (4) Wofu yuan 臥佛院 (the Reclining Buddha Complex), and (5) Yuanjue dong 圓覺洞 (the Perfect Enlightenment Grotto). Fourteen associated

researchers and twenty-nine affiliated researchers participated in this virtual fieldwork. Participants were divided into five groups working on the sites they were assigned to. The author also took part in this fieldwork as an associated researcher and was responsible for studying Qianfo zhai. The five full-day fieldwork consisted of group discussions, individual and small group tasks, and daily debriefing to facilitate data analysis and input. Additionally, a follow-up project was taken up by the author from October 2022 to February 2024 to establish the metadatabase of the following sites: Beishan 北山 (Northern Mountain) and Dafowan of Baodingshan 寶頂山大佛灣 (Precious Summit), Dazu, Chongqing; and the southern cliff of Yuanjuedong 圓覺洞 and Mingshan Temple 茗山寺 (Tea Mountain Temple) of Anyue, Sichuan. The table below (Table 1) summarizes the 320 entries generated from both phases. Each entry includes 5 to 12 high-resolution photographs, making a total of over 2,700 photos.

**Table 1. The metadatabase of the nine Buddhist grottoes in Anyue and Dazu**

Phase	District	Site	Number of Entries
Virtual fieldwork (May 2022)	Anyue, Sichuan	Kongque dong 孔雀洞	19
		Pilu dong 毗盧洞	36
		Qianfo zhai 千佛寨	40
		Wofo yuan 臥佛院	39
		Yuanjue dong 圓覺洞	21
Follow-up project (Oct 2022 to Feb 2024)	Anyue, Sichuan	Southern Cliff, Yuanjuedong 圓覺洞南區	19
		Mingshan Temple 茗山寺	10
	Dazu, Chongqing	Beishan 北山	107
		Dafowan, Baodingshan 寶頂山大佛灣	29
<b>Total</b>			<b>320</b>

The metadatabase of the sites mentioned above has been published under the FROGBEAR Database of Religious Sites in East Asia (<https://frogbear.org/frogbear-database-of-religious-sites-in-east-asia/>), a public open-access database housed at the UBC Library Open Collections at the University of British Columbia in Canada. The metadatabase mainly contains high-resolution photographs taken from these sites and

the corresponding in-depth research descriptions contributed by the participants.  
Keywords for searching are also available to facilitate data analysis for further studies.

## Observations and Use of Data

The sites analyzed in this project provide evidence of the community's active involvement in supporting the building and renovation of the niches as well as participating in religious activities. It is demonstrated by the numerous donor images, inscriptions indicating their sponsorship, and the signs of regular worship on the sites. Regular worship, particularly for those medium- to small-sized sites, persists until today. However, investigations of donors' and people's social activities on these sites have not received sufficient attention in past research.

To put it simply, a donor is an individual who donates their private property to others or social groups. The private property being donated can have both material and spiritual aspects.<sup>2</sup> Buddhist donors have existed since the founding of Buddhism, and Buddhist grotto donors emerged with the establishment of the grottoes. In Buddhist grottoes, donors' traces are often revealed by the images indicating them, which are depicted in the grottoes or niches they sponsored, together with the inscriptions recording the intention of sponsorship and/or merits dedicated to specific purposes. Some inscriptions contain precise dating, serving vital information for defining the periodization of the sites.

Surveys to consolidate the inscriptions in the Dazu Rock Carvings were conducted in the 1990s.<sup>3</sup> The materials provide foundations for scholars to study topics related to

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<sup>2</sup> Xiang, Yifeng 項一峰, "Chu tan fojiao shiku gongyang ren 初談佛教石窟供養人," *Dunhuang yanjiu* 敦煌研究, no. 01 (1997).

<sup>3</sup> Li, Fangyin 黎方銀, "Dazu beishan shiku gongyang ren tiji 大足北山石窟供養人題記," in *Dazu shike yanjiu wenji 2* 大足石刻研究文集 2, ed. Chongqing Dazu shike yishu bowuguan 重慶大足石刻藝術博物館, Sichuan shehui kexue yuan 四川社會科學院, and Dazu shike yishu yanjiusuo 大足石刻藝術研究所 (Chongqing: Chongqing chubanshe, 1997); Chongqing Dazu shike yishu bowuguan 重慶大足石刻藝術博物館, Chongqing shi shehui kexue yuan 重慶市社會科學院, and Dazu shike yishu yanjiusuo 大足石刻藝術研究所, *Dazu shike mingwen lu* 大足石刻銘文錄 (Chongqing: Chongqing

donors in the subsequent years. For example, the Beishan Rock Carvings of Dazu contain 81 donor inscriptions from the Tang and Song Dynasties, involving 139 donors.<sup>4</sup> These donors are divided into three categories: officials and their relatives, monastics, and ordinary people. Most inscriptions are made by ordinary people, accounting for nearly 80% of them. Over time, the donors of Buddhist grottoes began to spread from officials and gentry to ordinary people, which intensified the secularization process of Beishan Rock Carvings. At the same time, studies were conducted to analyze specific donor inscriptions. For example, Wang discusses the sponsorship of *zhuangluan* 妝鑿 (decorating statues with pigments),<sup>5</sup> and Deng examines the identity of Feng Daxue 馮大學, a sponsor found in the Duobaota 多寶塔 (Many-jeweled Pagoda) of Beishan.<sup>6</sup> Past studies mostly stay at the stage of recording and simple analysis of the donors' inscriptions. Systematic and comprehensive research on the donors and inscriptions of the Dazu Rock Carvings is still lacking. Li includes some discussions in his publication, such as the wishes of donors to cure eye illnesses dated to the Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279), which are found in Niche 176 of Beishan, Niche 60 of Duobaota, Sanjiaoku of Fo'anqiao 佛安橋三教窟 and Niche 1 of Shuchengyan 舒成岩.<sup>7</sup> These inscriptions may suggest a prevailing purpose for supporting the establishment of Buddhist grottoes during that time and a specific connection between Buddhist culture and traditional medical treatments, pending further investigation.

Taking the Beishan Rock Carvings as an example, the relationship between the intentions behind donations and the choice of niche topics is worth examining. Based on

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chubanshe, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> Song, Shiji 宋世霽, "Dazu Beishan shike shisu hua yanjiu 大足北山石刻世俗化研究" (MA thesis, Sichuan Fine Arts Institute 四川美術學院, 2017).

<sup>5</sup> Wang, Tianxiang 王天祥, "Dazu Beishan shike zhuangluan kao 大足北山石刻“妝鑿”考," *Minzu yishu yanjiu* 民族藝術研究, no. 04 (2009), <https://doi.org/DOI:10.14003/j.cnki.mzysyj.2009.04.020>.

<sup>6</sup> Deng, Can 鄧燦, "Dazu Duobaota gongyang ren Feng Daxue ji Feng Ji de shiliao diaocha 大足多寶塔供養人馮大學即馮楫的史料調查," *Huaxia kaogu* 華夏考古, no. 01 (2007), <https://doi.org/DOI:10.16143/j.cnki.1001-9928.2007.01.013>.

<sup>7</sup> Li, Xiaoqiang 李小強, *Yabi shang de shisu wenhua* 崖壁上的世俗文化 (Beijing: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe, 2012), 55-57.

the inscriptions with recognizable contents and the themes of the niches, it has been noted that sponsoring the establishment and renovation of niches with salvational types of Buddhas and bodhisattvas, such as Amitābha Buddha, Medicine Buddha, Avalokiteśvara (Guanyin 觀音), and Kṣitigarbha (Dizang 地藏), is prevalent. Moreover, apart from transferring merits to the deceased, there are wishes seeking peace in the world, career promotion and wealth, relief from illness, etc. The people's desire to solve the difficulties faced in daily life has promoted the prosperity of grotto construction. The contribution of female devotees is remarkable as well. A female donor with the surname Li 黎 commissioned Niche 52 to create statues of Amitabha Buddha, Kṣitigarbha and the salvational Avalokiteśvara (救苦觀音菩薩) in 897 (the fourth year of Ganning 乾寧 reign) during the Tang Dynasty.<sup>8</sup> Another female donor with the surname Jie 解 sponsored Niche 255 with the depiction of Medicine Buddha Sutra transformation tableau, seeking a speedy recovery from her ear illness.<sup>9</sup> The dating of the inscriptions in Niche 255 is lost. This niche was probably created during the Former and Later Shu 蜀 period (902-965). The above observations from Beishan can be regarded as representative of the region. Expanding research to the surrounding areas should better reflect the donor and people's social activities during that time.

An interesting observation concerning the inscriptions mentioning Li Lingbin 黎令賓, a donor, and Xuanying 玄應, a monk, in the Anyue district, reflects potential connections among the sites through the transmission of Buddhist art and the vigorous participation of donors and Buddhist practitioners. There is an inscription carved between Niche 17 and 18 of Qianfo zhai, in which most characters are eroded, and only a few in the lower part are now recognizable. The six columns read, from right to left, are: 八日丁/ 令賓願/ 亡母及亡/ 身並永為/ 男前州市/ 座玄應書.<sup>10</sup> The records of two earlier surveys conducted in the 1990s indicate that these two niches (previously

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<sup>8</sup> Chongqing Dazu shike yishu bowuguan, Chongqing shi shehui kexue yuan, and Dazu shike yishu yanjiusuo, *Dazu shike mingwen lu*, 14.

<sup>9</sup> Chongqing Dazu shike yishu bowuguan, Chongqing shi shehui kexue yuan, and Dazu shike yishu yanjiusuo, *Dazu shike mingwen lu*, 22.

<sup>10</sup> Anderl, Christoph, and Sau Ling Wendy Yu, "Niche 17 and 18, Qianfo zhai (千佛寨)," UBC Community and Partner Publications, May 22, 2019, doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14288/1.0428635>.

marked as Niches 37 and 38) were sponsored by Li Lingbin and two other donors with the surname Qian 虔 in the 20<sup>th</sup> year of the Kaiyuan 開元 reign (732) of the Tang Dynasty. Li Lingbin, a former fifth-rank Anyue County Cavalry Commander, sponsored the creation of the Buddha statues of the past, present, and future and a niche of salvational Avalokiteśvara for his belated parents and wife. The record was written by Xuanying, a monastery's senior monk.

The inscriptions recorded by Fu are:

[唐][開][元]廿年歲次壬申十[二]月庚[閏]十八日丁口[吉] 前安岳縣錄事騎[都]口勛官[五]品黎令賓 願[平][安]造東面三世諸佛[一][龕][並]為亡父亡母及亡妻 敬造西面救苦[觀][世][音]菩薩一龕三身並永為供養 前安居縣市令普[慈][縣]助教虔恪男前州市[令]口口口口七品虔運口[亦]供養寺上座玄應書<sup>11</sup>

The inscriptions recorded by Wu are:

[開]元廿年歲次壬申十二月庚口朔十八日丁卯 前安岳縣騎都尉勛官五品黎令賓 願敬造東面三世諸佛口口口口亡父亡母及亡口 造西面救苦觀世音菩薩一龕三身並永為口口 前安居縣市令普口[州]助教岌恪男前州市口 尉勛官七品處運口口供養寺上座玄應書<sup>12</sup>

Another set of inscriptions mentioning Li Lingbin and Xuanying is found in Niche 71 (previously marked as Niche 96) of Yuanjue dong. Five vertical lines of inscriptions are engraved on the wall outside the left side wall of this niche. It shows that Li Lingbin sponsored the construction of this niche in the 24<sup>th</sup> year of the Kaiyuan reign (736), and Xuanying of Qiyian Monastery 棲巖寺 wrote the inscriptions.<sup>13</sup> The inscriptions recorded by Fu are:

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<sup>11</sup> Fu, Chengjin 傅成金, "Anyue shike zhi Xuanying kao 安岳石刻之玄應考," *Sichuan Wenwu* 四川文物, no. 03 (1991): 48.

<sup>12</sup> Hu, Wenhe 胡文和, *Sichuan dao jiao fo jiao shiku yishu* 四川道教佛教石窟藝術, 1st ed. (Chengdu: Sichuan renmin chu ban she, 1994), 71.

<sup>13</sup> Anderl, Christoph, "Buddha flanked by attendants, Niche 71, the southern cliff (南岩), Yuanjue Cave (圓覺洞)," UBC Community and Partner Publications, May 22, 2019, doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14288/1.0438607>.





monk's influences in the Anyue district.

Buddhist grottoes may appear as neglected heritage relics. However, in the Sichuan region, some medium- to small-sized sites are still regularly used for worship. In addition, renovation work has been ongoing throughout history, as evidenced by the donation records passed down from generation to generation. In Qianfo zhai, there is a niche that contains three standing Buddha statues. Outside the niche on the right, a record of renovation work done in 1995 titled "A Record of the Restoration of the 'Three-Buddha Grotto'" (三佛窟修復小記) was established.<sup>18</sup> It is likely that the name of this niche, the Three-Buddha Grotto, was given and passed on by locals in the area. The statues are missing their original heads and have been replaced with cement replicas. Based on the style of the drapery on the statues, it is speculated that the bodies might have been created during the Song Dynasty. However, it is difficult to confirm whether or not the original statues were three Buddhas.

Another example is in Mingshan Temple, in Dingxin Town 頂新鄉 of Anyue County. This site contains twelve rock carving niches, mostly dating from the late Northern Song Dynasty to the early Southern Song Dynasty. According to the monumental plaques, a standing Thousand-armed and Thousand-eyed Avalokiteśvara statue was renovated in 2017 with the sponsorship of the local community.<sup>19</sup> The donation records reflect that this site still supports religious and social activities nowadays. It is unclear what the original statue looked like since there is no record in the relevant archaeological report.<sup>20</sup> Over-renovation of the statue may destroy important data for examining the history of the original statue and the site. In this region, the worship of Thousand-armed and Thousand-eyed Avalokiteśvara continues to this day. The most famous example should be the one in Niche 8 of Dafowan, Baodingshan. The statue has undergone numerous restorations since the Song Dynasty,

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<sup>18</sup> Anderl, Christoph, "Niche with three standing buddha statues, Qianfo zhai (千佛寨)," UBC Community and Partner Publications, May 22, 2019, doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14288/1.0428631>.

<sup>19</sup> The metadata of this record will be posted on the internet soon.

<sup>20</sup> Xu, Yanyan 徐胭胭 et al., "Sichuan Anyue xian Mingshansi shiku diaocha jian bao 四川安岳縣茗山寺石窟調查簡報," *Sichuan wenwu* 四川文物, no. 03 (2015).

with the most recent one completed in 2014. Despite severe damage, locals pray and burn incense at the Thousand-armed and Thousand-eyed Avalokiteśvara in Qianfo zhai.<sup>21</sup> The practice of worship may persist for many generations.

## Conclusion

The previous section highlights the potential for further exploration of the theme of donors in the Buddhist grottoes of the Sichuan region. By consolidating the materials in the established metadatabase and the research results of past studies, a more comprehensive investigation on this topic is possible. As reflected in the deterioration of the inscriptions about Li Lingban and Xuanying, the fragility of inscriptions demands high-resolution photographs and accurate descriptions recorded in digital channels to prevent data loss for future studies. Furthermore, examining the religious and social activities of people in those grottoes throughout history can provide a better understanding of the dissemination of Buddhism in the Sichuan region. Some examples mentioned above demonstrate that certain sites still support regular worship. Therefore, striking a balance between people's social activities and heritage conservation is worth considering, to minimize conflicts and achieve a win-win situation.

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Anderl, Christoph. "Niche with a Thousand-armed Guanyin and six other figures, with a smaller niche located to its right, Qianfo zhai (千佛寨)." UBC Community and Partner

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<sup>21</sup> Anderl, Christoph, "Niche with a Thousand-armed Guanyin and six other figures, with a smaller niche located to its right, Qianfo zhai (千佛寨)," UBC Community and Partner Publications, May 22, 2019, doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14288/1.0428622>.

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