

Dazu Rock Carvings (China)

No 912

Identification

<i>Nomination</i>	The Dazu Rock Carvings
<i>Location</i>	Dazu County, Chongqing Municipality
<i>State Party</i>	The People's Republic of China
<i>Date</i>	30 June 1998

Justification by State Party

[**Note** This is an abridged and edited version of the long text in the nomination dossier.]

The Dazu carvings form an important constituent part of the rock art of China. The five sites nominated are made up of 75 protected sites containing some 50,000 statues and over 100,000 Chinese characters forming inscriptions and epigraphs. Extensive in scale, high in artistic achievement, and rich in content, they constitute a masterpiece of art.

They are the most outstanding manifestations of the latest period in Chinese rock art. The earliest date from around AD 650, but the main artistic flowering was between the 9th and 13th centuries; after this, Chinese rock art virtually came to an end. The Dazu carvings differ from earlier examples in that they provide a synthesis of the sculptural art of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism, at the same time presenting a vivid display of spiritual and domestic life. The wealth of carvings and inscriptions reflect the artistic and religious developments in the period concerned, and they also express historic, artistic, and scientific values not to be found in earlier-rock art groups.

The Dazu carvings demonstrate that Tantric Buddhism (Vajrayana), which had originated in India and was in decline in China around the 9th century, experienced a revival. This branch of Buddhism is characterized by the transition from speculative thought to the application of Buddhist ideals in daily life. The Dazu carvings introduce a spectacular new page into Chinese spiritual history, reflecting the beliefs of the common people and their unsophisticated way of life. They developed a style of their own, raising the representation of life in this medium to an unprecedentedly high level. In both the selection of subjects and their representation, they seek to come as closely as possible to everyday life and to the common aesthetic taste of the people at large. The scenes at Baodingshan in particular

constitute a gallery of the folklore of the Song Dynasty (12th-13th centuries). Whether they are princes, officials, or common people, the characters come vividly to life, depicting Chinese society from different angles and in miniature.

The Dazu rock carvings have made a significant contribution to artistic expression in China, taking into account a new realism and exaggeration in depicting the contrasts between good and evil, beauty and ugliness. In their contents the carved scenes reflect the moral and rationalistic call for the punishment of evildoers, while encouraging people to do good, to control their desires, and to regulate their behaviour. Their layouts demonstrate an ingenious integration of art, religion, science, and nature. Aesthetically they are mysterious, natural, and elegant, fully reflecting traditional Chinese culture, which emphasizes learning from the past.

In spiritual terms the Dazu carvings represent the major change that took place in China between the 10th and 13th centuries, marked by belief in a single god instead of a diversity of beliefs. They show how the three main religions, Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism, came together and found forms of artistic expression that coincided in such a way as to make it difficult to identify clear boundaries between them. The gods originating from Indian Buddhism and the immortals of Taoism were integrated with the deities of the common people of China at the time. These major changes in the religious beliefs of the Chinese laid the basis for those of later generations and profoundly influenced them.

Criteria i, ii, iii, iv, and vi

Category of property

In terms of the categories of cultural property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, this is a group of *sites*.

History and Description

History

The earliest rock carvings in Dazu County date back to AD 650, in the early years of the Tang Dynasty, but the main period began in the late 9th century. In 892 Wei Junjing, Prefect of Changzhou, pioneered the carvings at Beishan, and his example was followed after the collapse of the Tang Dynasty by prefectural and county officials, local gentry, monks and nuns, and ordinary people in 907-65 (the Period of Five Dynasties and Ten States).

The creation of rock carvings ceased during the early years of the Song Dynasty, and was not to resume until 1078, in the reign of Emperor Yuan Feng of the Northern Song Dynasty; work began again at Beishan, continuing until 1146, and the groups at Nanshan and Shimenshan were carved. Between 1174 and 1252 the monk Zhao Zhifeng promoted Tantric Buddhism at Baodingshan and created the only large stone ritual site for this belief, attracting master craftsmen from all over the country.

Widespread warfare caused work to cease again at the end of the 13th century, and was not to begin again until the late 15th century, during the Ming Dynasty. It was to continue, albeit at a much reduced scale, until the late Qing Dynasty (end of the 19th century).

Description

- Beishan

Beishan (known as Longgangshan in ancient times) is located 1.5km from Longgang Town, the seat of Dazu County. The cliff that houses the carvings is c 545m above sea-level, in a region of wooded mountain peaks; it is c 300m long and 7-10m high. It is divided into two sections: the north, with 100 groups of carvings and the south with 190. There are 264 niches with statues, one intaglio painting, and eight inscribed pillars; in all there are over 10,000 carvings at Beishan.

More than half the carvings represent Tantric Buddhism and the remainder relate to the concepts of the Trinity and Sukhavati, all popular beliefs in the period between 897 and 1162 when they were created. Especially noteworthy is niche 254, with 539 carved figures depicting the Amitabha Sutra.

Over one-third of the Beishan carvings date from the mid 10th century (the Five Dynasties Period) and focus on 18 different subjects, including the Sutra of the Master of Healing. The carvings from this period are characterized by their small and pretty figures, varied postures, natural and unrestrained features, and delicate dress ornamentation.

Statues from the Song Dynasty (late 10th to mid 12th centuries), which represent 21 themes, are more vivid and with clearly differentiated personalities, graceful postures, well proportioned figures, and splendid apparel. The Cave of the Prayer Wheel (niche 136), from 1142-46, is the most characteristic example of this period; other fine figures are Avalokitesvara with Rosary (Niche 125) and Mani Pearl Avalokitesvara (niche 136). The seven inscriptions that survive are important for the study of history, religious beliefs, dating, and the identification of historical figures. Wei Junjin's inscription, dated to 895, contains unique historical data relating to the history of the Tang Dynasty. The Stele of Zhao Yijian, made between 1163 and 1189, is in the handwriting of Cai Jing, one of the greatest calligraphers of the Song Dynasty.

- Baodingshan

This is a very impressive site 15km to the north-east of Longgang Town, on the sides of a U-shaped gorge over 500m above sea level, which both protects the carvings and gives it an almost architectural character. The carvings, which are laid out on an overall plan under the supervision of Zhao Zhifeng, form a series. There are two groups of carvings. The first and smaller group, known as Xiaofowan, is on top of the mountain and closely linked with the Holy Longevity Monastery, built at the same time but later destroyed by fire and rebuilt during the Ming and Qing Dynasties; it covers 1.6ha. The second (Daifowan), covering an area c 500m long by 8-25m high, lies to the west of the monastery.

The statues form 31 groups, with themes such as Thousand-Armed Avalokitesvara, the Buddhist Wheel of Life, Suffering from Birth, Ageing, Sickness, and Death, the 31m long Sakyamuni Buddha Entering Nirvana, the Three Saints of the Huayan School (which projects out from the cliff face), and the Nine Dragons Bathing, along with many lifelike scenes - buffaloes grazing under the care of herdsmen and drunkards failing to recognize their relatives. The statues represent the integration of the basic doctrines of Buddhism, the ethics of Confucianism, the tenets of rationalism, and Taoism. In many ways the Baodingshan carvings may be considered to represent the acme of Chinese rock sculpture.

- Nanshan

The Nanshan carvings extend over a length of 86m. For the most part they depict Taoist subjects; they are adjudged to be the best preserved of the five major Taoist groups in China. By the 12th century when these carvings were executed, Taoism had evolved from worship of the Supreme Master and the Three Officials into belief in the Pure Trinity and the Four Emperors.

- Shizhuanshan

These late 11th century carvings extend over 130m, and offer a rare example of a tripartite arrangement of Buddhist, Taoist, and Confucian images.

- Shimenshan

These carvings, from the first half of the 12th century, cover 72m. They demonstrate the integration of Buddhist and Taoist subjects, the latter being the most characteristic. For example, the God of Farsightedness, to the left of the entrance to niche 2, has enormous eyes "as if they could see as far as a thousand *li*." The 92 statues in the Cave of the Gods and Goddess of Mount Tai [Taishan] reflect the important role of the Taishan Family among the Taoist divinities between the 10th and 13th centuries.

Management and Protection

Legal status

In 1961 the State Council of the People's Republic of China (PRC) designated the carvings at Beishan and Baodingshan in the first group of cultural properties to be protected under the provisions of Article 4 of the Law on the Protection of Relics as "sites of ancient culture, ancient tombs, and cave temples." In 1966, when the fourth group was declared, the Nanshan, Shizhuanshan, and Shimenshan carvings were similarly designated.

In addition to this basic protection, the sites are also covered by other statutes: the PRC Laws on the Protection of the Environment and on Urban Planning and on the PRC Criminal Law.

Management

The sites are owned by the People's Republic of China.

Under the terms of the Law on the Protection of Relics, each protected site is a "key protective zone" and

around these there is a “general protective zone,” which is in turn surrounded by a “zone where construction is controlled.” These constitute an adequate buffer zone, as required by the *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention*.

Until the 1950s the Dazu Rock Carvings were mainly managed by Buddhist monks and Taoists, financed by the alms that they collected. With the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 the maintenance of sites became the responsibility of central and local administrations. In 1952 Dazu County established the County Office for the Protection of Cultural Relics and in 1984 Sichuan Province approved the creation of the Dazu Rock Carvings Museum (in Chongqing since 1990).

At the present time management of the protected sites is based on consecutive five-year plans approved by the Chongqing Municipal Bureau of Culture, under the overall supervision of the National Administration of Cultural Heritage (formerly the State Bureau of Cultural Relics) in Beijing.

Conservation and Authenticity

Conservation history

Between 1952 and 1966 efforts were concentrated on two aspects of conservation: investigation of the natural environment, history, current state, and specific problems. A full survey and inventory was carried out and protective zones were defined. More than 20 rescue projects were carried out, involving consolidation of rock bases, restoration of collapsed groups, and creation of access corridors and cover structures. At the same time work began to control water permeation, and this has continued without interruption to the present day.

This phase lasted until the Cultural Revolution began in 1966. With the end of that period in 1977, planned maintenance and protection programmes were instituted. The then State Bureau of Cultural Relics allocated substantial funds for a number of major restoration projects, in addition to the planned maintenance and conservation programmes that were initiated. A number of scientific studies have been carried out, with special attention being given to the control of water permeation (by means of new sealing compounds and the cutting of tunnels behind the statues) and damage from weathering.

Authenticity

The authenticity of the Dazu rock art is high. The carvings have maintained their original form and materials and conservation interventions have been sensitively carried out. The natural environment has also been well preserved, so the authenticity of setting of the rock art is high.

Evaluation

Action by ICOMOS

An ICOMOS expert mission visited the property in September 1998.

Qualities and comparative analysis

The Dazu carvings are outstanding examples of the latest phase of rock art in China. They are of high artistic significance and introduced a major phase in Chinese artistic evolution. They illustrate the transition from speculative thought to the implementation of Buddhist ideas in daily life as represented by Tantric Buddhism, but with an identity specific to this region.

ICOMOS comments and recommendations for future action

The overall condition of the sites is good and there appear not to be any serious problems. The carvings here are in fact much better preserved than those in other parts of China, where cultural sites have suffered from armed conflicts, the Cultural Revolution, or development pressures.

There are, however, some specific conservation problems, notably water permeation, weathering damage, and possible seismic impacts. The authorities are carrying out scientific tests to determine appropriate conservation and protection programmes. It is essential that these incorporate adequate long-term monitoring procedures.

Special attention needs to be paid to the provision of proper access to the sites and the construction of visitor facilities. Care must be taken in siting these, so as to avoid adverse visual impacts.

It is understood that the Dazu area is included in a large World Bank planning scheme, in which specialized Italian firms are being consulted with regard to projects for the conservation and management of cultural sites. The World Heritage Committee and ICOMOS should be kept fully informed of the nature and progress of projects of this kind which might have an adverse impact on the Dazu rock carvings and their setting.

Brief description

The steep hillsides in the Dazu area contain an exceptional series of rock carvings dating from the 9th to 13th centuries. They are outstanding for their high aesthetic qualities, for their rich diversity of subject matter, both secular and religious, for the light that they shed on everyday life in China during this period, and for the evidence that they provide of the coming together of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism in an harmonious synthesis.

Recommendation

That this property be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of *criteria i, ii, and iii*:

Criterion i The Dazu carvings represent the pinnacle of Chinese rock art for their high aesthetic quality and their diversity of style and subject matter.

Criterion ii Tantric Buddhism from India and the Chinese Taoist and Confucian beliefs came together at Dazu to create a highly original and influential manifestation of spiritual harmony .

Criterion iii The eclectic nature of religious belief in later Imperial China is given material expression in the exceptional artistic heritage of the Dazu rock art.

ICOMOS, September 1999