

The Secularization of Ancient Chinese Religion: A Case Study of the Dazu Rock Carvings

Lulu Deng

Xi'an Academy of Fine Arts, Xi'an, China
aurora10280@outlook.com

Abstract. The Song dynasty marked a pivotal period in the cultural, political, and economic development of ancient China, during which Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism coexisted and advanced in parallel. The Dazu rock carvings, begun in the late Tang and flourishing during the Northern and Southern Song, integrate Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist themes and serve as an important vehicle of historical and cultural development, standing out in Chinese cave temple art for their marked secularization. Situated in the Chongqing region, the Dazu rock carvings are closely intertwined with local customs and cultural practices, exhibiting distinctive regional characteristics that reflect the social life and local ethos of the time, and are of great scholarly and cultural significance. Drawing on previous scholarship and supported by field investigations in the Dazu rock carvings area, this study employs documentary analysis, iconographic methods, and fieldwork to examine the visual features of Bodhisattva images and narrative/allegorical scenes in the rock carvings. By analyzing the process of their secular transformation, the paper identifies the principal factors driving this shift and proposes a path of secularization and indigenization shaped by the interaction between foreign cultural elements and local traditions. The findings aim to offer new perspectives and points of reference for contemporary artistic practice.

Keywords: Dazu, rock carvings, ancient Chinese religion, secularization

1. Introduction

Among China's cliffside sculptures, the Dazu rock carvings in Chongqing stand out for their pronounced secular character, representing the pinnacle of cave temple art's secularization and vernacularization, hailed as the final monumental peak in the history of human rock carving [1].

In the artistic context, secularization typically refers to the incorporation of everyday life, worldly concerns, and ordinary human figures into artistic expression, namely, the popularization of art through the embrace of the aesthetic values of the broader populace. In the Dazu rock carvings, secularization chiefly manifests in shifting traditional religious or mythological themes toward representations with contemporary, worldly significance. These carvings depict daily life and human moral dimensions—good and evil, virtue and vice, beauty and ugliness—integrating religious doctrine with secular experience to vividly reflect the social life, culture, and daily conditions of ancient Sichuan-Chongqing people.

This paper first offers a formal analysis of these exquisite stone carvings, examining their artistic characteristics in composition, figural modeling, and treatment of detail. It then analyzes the socio-political, economic, and cultural factors that shaped their secularization features and traces the development of these tendencies. Finally, it summarizes the historical, cultural, and artistic significance of secularization as manifested in the Dazu rock carvings and explores its implications for contemporary artistic practice. Through a systematic investigation of the Dazu rock carvings tradition, this paper seeks to illuminate the distinctive value of secularization within Chinese cave temple art and its enduring cross-temporal cultural significance.

2. Developmental history of the Dazu rock carvings

The term “Dazu rock carvings” refers collectively to all cave temple art and cliffside sculptural sites within the Dazu region. Over 100 sites, mostly Buddhist, survive, with 75 officially protected as cultural heritage. Carved mainly in stone, they exhibit exceptional craftsmanship [2]. All Dazu rock carvings lie within caves, integrated with surrounding cliffs, offering a direct, striking visual impact. By transcending cultural constraints, the works assume more humanized, secular traits, depicting figures and relationships across social strata; their accompanying explanatory inscriptions further render them of exceptional scholarly value for studying China’s cave temple culture and art.

Dazu rock carvings began in Yonghui 1, Tang dynasty (650), continued through the late Tang and Five Dynasties, and flourished in the Northern and Southern Song. Combining cave temples with cliffside sculpture, they are represented by the “Five Mountains”: North Mountain, Baoding Mountain, South Mountain, Shizhuan Mountain, and Shimen Mountain [2]. The Song Dynasty marked the first era in Chinese history in which governance through culture was comprehensively implemented, and it is often regarded as one of the earliest truly “civilized” epochs in world history. Upon ascending the throne, Emperor Taizong famously argued that “although conquest depended on military strength, effective governance ultimately required civil virtue and cultural cultivation” [3]. The national policies of the Song Dynasty greatly elevated the status of the literati, leading to unprecedented respect for scholars. The flourishing of poetry and intellectual culture, the expansion of maritime trade, and increased intercultural exchange all contributed to the pluralistic prosperity of Song civilization. At the same time, the era was marked by recurring wars. Meanwhile, amid prolonged instability during the Song dynasty, common people turned to cultural forms to express emotions, fostering the recording of customs and moral life in stone and propelling the development of sculpture, laying the foundation for Dazu rock carvings’ golden age.

Despite later periods of conflict, the Dazu rock carvings were preserved remarkably well due to their geographical setting. During modern restorations, Chinese archaeologists strictly preserved sculptural integrity, combining traditional craftsmanship with modern technology and using a realistic yet expressive style to convey the figures’ personalities and enhance their lifelike quality. In this way, the Dazu rock carvings pioneered a new form of cave temple art, uniting the secular and aesthetic and embodying a highly distilled expression of Chinese allegory and aesthetics, making them a treasure of contemporary cave culture.

3. Secularization analysis of the imagery in the Dazu rock carvings

3.1. Secular transformation and re-creation of Bodhisattva images

In Dazu sculptural art, Bodhisattva images constitute an exceptionally large group, with the secularized representations of Guanyin being particularly prominent. As noted by Ms. He Jiang,

“among the 155 well-preserved niche shrines, 84 feature Guanyin-related themes,” underscoring Guanyin’s extensive representativeness in the Dazu region [4]. The Thousand-Armed Guanyin Niche (No. 8) at Baoding Mountain’s Dafowan is a rare three-dimensional stone-carved representation in China. Carved in the Southern Song dynasty (Chunxi-Chunyou), the sculpture bears 1,007 hands on its front and back. The niche is 7.2m high, 12.5m wide, covering 88m². The main Thousand-Armed Guanyin, 3m tall, wears a jeweled Buddha crown with a celestial eye on the forehead; a gentle, maternal smile gives the figure a distinctly secular, humanized quality. On either side stand Thousand-Armed Guanyin’s guardian attendants: Vajravarahi with a boar head and Ganapati with an elephant head. Figures of a poor person and a hungry ghost occupy the lower corners beside the main deity, symbolizing Thousand-Armed Guanyin’s universal salvation, transcending social status and the living-dead divide. While scriptures assign Guanyin fixed duties, common people’s sufferings are diverse; the Thousand-Armed Guanyin thus addresses their psychological and socio-religious needs.

“Due to Dazu’s unique geographical setting and rich cultural environment, the artisans, when creating Guanyin, more often adopted the images of women as the embodied forms, thereby interpreting the Buddha-nature inherent in daily life” [5]. For example, the Guanyin with a Mala (No. 125) at Fowan in North Mountain, although in a standing posture, is depicted with light, fluttering ribbons that deftly reveal the curves of the figure and evoke a sense of a gentle breeze. This Guanyin also features delicate facial characteristics and a faint, smiling expression resembling that of a young maiden and has thus been referred to as the “Charming Guanyin.”

In summary, Guanyin images at Dazu in the Song dynasty exhibit divine humanization, transforming from sacred, standardized forms into depictions based on ordinary women, making the deities more personified and secularized.

3.2. Secular transformation and reframing of sutra-illustration narratives

Mr. Li Zehou argued that “the most successful works at Dazu and Maiji Mountain, those elegant and graceful images, are in fact realistic portrayals of women from the human world” [6]. The Dazu rock carvings indeed employ secular scenes to convey profound ideological meanings.

The “Poultry-Keeping Woman” carving on Baoding Mountain exemplifies elevating the mundane to the refined, depicting a woman bending to lift a basket cover from a brood of chicks in a daily-life scene. The chicks scramble forward to escape the basket, while the woman, with slightly narrowed eyes and a faint smile, exudes a sense of calm contentment imbued with a strong rustic quality. Yet, from the standpoint of Buddhist doctrine, the poultry keeper’s actions constitute a sinful behavior that leads to hell. “The woman feeds the chicks; the chicks peck at earthworms—she assists them in killing; once grown, the chickens become food, thereby providing others with the conditions for killing” [7]. Thus, beneath this secularized labor scene lies a hidden cycle of predation in which the strong prey upon the weak.

The “Wheel of Rebirth” depicts the “Six Realms,” also known as the “Six Destinies”: Devas, Humans, Asuras, Animals, Hungry Ghosts, and Hell Beings. “Rebirth” metaphorically refers to the ceaseless cycle of life and death through which all sentient beings revolve, endless like a turning wheel. Measuring 7.80 meters high and 4.80 meters wide, the carving depicts the wheel’s demons as secularized Great Ghosts of Impermanence. The wheel is divided into four concentric rings. The six rays emanating from the meditator in the central circle divide the wheel into six spokes, expressing the idea that “all conditions arise from the mind; everything is created by the mind.” The sculpture explicates that all phenomena operate within causal relations, rendering the Buddhist doctrine of

“karmic retribution and cyclic rebirth” visually concrete through secularized imagery, thereby admonishing viewers that evil brings evil and good brings good.

The Illustrated Transformation of the Sutra on the Profound Kindness of Parents is a series of continuous narrative carvings. The scenes portray parents raising a child through various stages of growth, closely mirroring everyday life while embedding profound meaning within ordinary themes. For instance, The Kindness of Taking the Wet Place depicts a mother caring for her child late at night after a day of hard work: “The mother lies on the wet spot, while the child rests on the dry; the mother remains fully awake, while the child is entirely unaware,” highlighting how an ordinary mother is enveloped in a halo of sacred maternal virtue.

4. Factors influencing the secularization of the Dazu rock carvings

4.1. Influence of social transformations in the Song dynasty

The Song dynasty marked a critical transition in Chinese history from an aristocratic to a more commoner-based society. In 960, Emperor Taizu (Zhao Kuangyin) ascended the throne and established the Northern Song, consolidating most of northern China under his rule. Following the Jurchen conquest of Bianjing in 1127, the imperial court relocated southward to Lin'an, thereby founding the Southern Song. In pursuit of political stability, the Song dynasty consistently upheld the principle of privileging civil administration over military power. As noted in the History of the Song, “When Taizu launched his revolution, he first empowered civil officials over military commanders; the Song’s reverence for literature began here and was thereafter inherited by his descendants” [8]. This literati-centered politics raised scholars’ status, spurred cultural prosperity, and expanded urban classes and commerce, together fostering a more secular social milieu.

Dazu County, established in 758 (Tang Qianyuan era), lies in western Chongqing at the Sichuan Basin’s southeast edge. Its rocky hills and post-late-Tang remoteness, with minimal warfare, provided exceptionally favorable conditions for artistic creation. In addition, the patronage of local landlords, wealthy families, and officials in the Dazu and Anyue areas provided crucial financial support, collectively enabling the flourishing of rock carving activities.

Chinese cave temple art is generally categorized into three phases: the early period (Wei-Jin and Northern-Southern Dynasties), the middle period (Sui and Tang), and the late period (post-late Tang). The majority of the Dazu rock carvings belong to the Song dynasty and represent outstanding works of this late stage. Building on the artistic achievements of Longmen and Yungang, the late-Song Dazu rock carvings developed distinctly nationalized and secularized features, becoming exemplary Chinese cave temple art.

4.2. Religious demand and development

The Song dynasty, characterized by the coexistence of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism, shaped the Dazu rock carvings as a product of their syncretic fusion. The carvings adapted to social changes, manifesting a religiously grounded secularization that facilitated the popularization of Buddhist doctrine.

On the one hand, Buddhist imagery addressed the need for doctrinal instruction. Before the mid-Tang, Buddhist doctrine was largely esoteric, flourishing among the aristocracy and largely removed from the common populace. In the culturally flourishing Song dynasty, Buddhism needed to expand its influence and secure a wider lay following, making the use of clear, accessible vernacular expressions essential. In the Song dynasty, Buddhist secularization chiefly appeared in adapting

scriptural stories into popular forms, with the rise of urban entertainment districts serving as a key channel for their dissemination. “The Buddhist culture in the Song dynasty found an outlet through secular performing arts in the entertainment quarters, thereby permeating popular culture more deeply” [9]. Numerous Buddhist stories were transformed into theatrical performances and subsequently became subjects for rock carvings. For instance, the hell illustrations articulate the Buddhist doctrines of karmic causality and rebirth, while the Illustrated Transformation of the Sutra on the Profound Kindness of Parents promotes ideals such as filial piety through vivid, narrative scenes.

On the other hand, esoteric Buddhist imagery reflected the need for propagating specialized doctrinal teachings. Zhao Zhifeng, the patron of the Baoding Mountain carvings, was an esoteric Buddhist during the Southern Song. At that time, Chan ideas of everyday enlightenment, “carrying water and chopping wood is the Way,” were widespread, and esoteric consecration could only be given to those who grasped the Dharma. Zhao thus built Baoding Mountain as a site for awakening, using daily-life scenes to instruct followers, with the carvings serving as secularized vehicles guiding practitioners to insight.

“Three hundred years of stability; four centuries as a prefectural seat; thriving market towns and concentrated landholdings; wealthy households competing to sponsor carvings; and the great religious master Zhao Zhifeng establishing the Baoding sanctuary” [10].

In the Song dynasty, Dazu became a southern hub for Buddhist cave temples, driven by its socio-historical and political context, geography, devotional community, and Buddhism’s own developmental needs.

5. Significance and cultural value of secular development

History serves as a repository of cultural accumulation. Culture belongs not to the aristocracy or a narrow elite but should permeate social life, underpinning societal development and historical continuity. The rich content and themes of the Dazu rock carvings reflect the era’s tastes, cultural values, and aesthetic sensibilities. Moreover, their secularized aesthetics reflect the artisans’ attention to contemporary social life and culture, their depiction of social realities, and their expression of humanistic ideals.

Artistically, the secularized aesthetic of the Dazu rock carvings broadened cave temple art’s expressive range while reflecting people’s love of life and pursuit of beauty. For example, Tang- and Song-period Bodhisattva garment variations reflect social conditions and cultural trends of their times, providing invaluable historical and cultural insights.

The carvings also provide a lens through which to observe ancient society, everyday life, and cultural thought, facilitating a deeper understanding of historical progression and cultural transmission. Features such as clothing styles and sculptural forms constitute a significant legacy for Chinese art, furnish rich comparative material for archaeological research, and offer reference points for interpreting socio-historical development. The humanization of Guanyin and the secularization of allegorical narratives in the Dazu rock carvings make the imagery align with popular aesthetics, reflect the period’s civilized spirit, promote ideals of a good life, and exemplify the era’s cultural synthesis.

An in-depth analysis of the Dazu rock carvings’ secular traits enhances appreciation of this ancient treasure and inspires contemporary artists. By applying secularized aesthetics, they can create works attuned to daily life and emotion, perpetuating the art’s spirit, enriching modern culture, and making art more accessible to the public.

6. Conclusion

The Dazu rock carvings epitomize the secularization and domestication of cave temple art. Tracing their secular evolution reveals the development of Chinese culture, history, and art from antiquity to the present, providing a model case for studying cave temple sculpture.

Field investigation of the Dazu region shows that foreign cultures must localize and integrate into Chinese culture to achieve sustained development. In its southward expansion, Chinese rock carving art respected local geology and drew on regional folklore and aesthetics, creating a diverse style that established its distinct system and a prominent place in world sculpture. Beyond their religious and social functions, these works vividly embody the humanistic ethos and regional aesthetic sensibilities of their time. The secular statues of Dazu reflect the Sichuan-Chongqing artistic and cultural spirit, embodying love of life and pursuit of beauty, and form a key part of China's artistic heritage.

Research on the secularization of the Dazu rock carvings not only deepens our understanding of ancient art and culture but also offers insights for contemporary artistic practice. Contemporary artists can draw from everyday life to create works resonating with common experiences and emotions, inheriting and advancing secularized aesthetics while infusing contemporary art and culture with renewed vitality and meaning.

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