

Article

A Sanctuary of Avataṃśaka: The Theoretical and Practical Studies on Huayan Buddhism Embodied in the Sculptures of the Huayan Grotto in Anyue

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Abstract: The Huayan Grotto in Anyue County is one of the most typical caves of the grottoes of Sichuan 四川 and Chongqing 重慶. Being well known for its grand scale and the beautiful style of its sculptures, the cave was designed and carved by the Liu-Zhao sect 柳趙教派 in eastern Sichuan during the Southern Song Dynasty. The Liu-Zhao sect is a local religious group that relies on grottoes and statues to state concepts, propagate ideas, and spread doctrines. The sect is good at integrating a variety of Buddhist thoughts to form its own unique theoretical and practical system. The large-scale statue-making activities under the auspices of the Liu-Zhao sect 柳趙教派 are a classic example of the localization of Buddhism in Southwest China. The ideological system of the Liu-Zhao sect is centered on Huayan, and Huayan Grotto is the very concentration of its special philosophy. This paper considers that the cave constitutes a holy place, with a theme of thoughts of Huayan, which was built based on important doctrines of two masters. Through the combination and arrangement of diversified images, the cave is so far the most complex, complete, and systematic visualized representation of the Huayan's theory and practice. Inside the cave are carved full-length portraits of Li Tongxuan 李通玄, the Elder of Huayan, and Guifeng Zongmi 圭峰宗密, the fifth patriarch of the Huayan sect. There are also statues and inscriptions that illustrate Li's thoughts, such as the Ten Assemblies in Ten Locations 十處十會 and the Sudhana's Pilgrimage 善財遍參 based on Li's exegetical writings on the *Avataṃśaka Sūtra*; the Three Saints of the Huayan School (*Huayan sansheng* 華嚴三聖) carved on the basis of Li's pioneering idea about the trinity of three saints; and the mind-only verse 惟心偈, emphasizing mind as the foundation of Avataṃśaka practice. Zongmi's Avataṃśaka thoughts were mainly expounded through a series of commentaries on the *Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment* 大方廣圓覺修多羅了義經, to which the impressive Twelve Bodhisattvas of Perfect Enlightenment are directly related. In addition to the theoretical system, the cave offers two means for Avataṃśaka practice. Highly qualified Avataṃśaka practitioners practice by viewing the Trinity of Three Saints and the Buddha's Light, and then they go through five phases of fruition to attain Buddhahood, which is the Avataṃśaka practice dominated by Li Tongxuan's thoughts. Less qualified practitioners practice through repentance liturgies and sitting in meditation at the Ritual Site of Perfect Enlightenment, which is the practice of Perfect Enlightenment advocated by Zongmi 宗密.



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Keywords: Huayan Grotto 華嚴洞; Liu-Zhao sect 柳趙教派; Li Tongxuan 李通玄; Guifeng Zongmi 圭峰宗密

1. Introduction

The Huayan Grotto 華嚴洞, perched on Mount Xianggai in Shiyang Town, Anyue 安岳 County, Sichuan 四川 Province, in southwest China, distinguishes itself as the largest Buddhist grotto carved in the Sichuan–Chongqing 川渝 region during the Northern and Southern Song Dynasties (960–1279), with a rectangular configuration, a flattened ceiling, and dimensions of 10.9 m in width, 5.9 m in height, and 9.4 m in depth (Figure 1). The sculptures housed in the grotto are characterized by their imposing stature, exquisite form, and intricate detailing, representing the pinnacle of artistic craftsmanship among the stone grottoes in the region. The grotto also boasts distinctive thematic elements, a logical layout, and rigorous overall planning and construction.

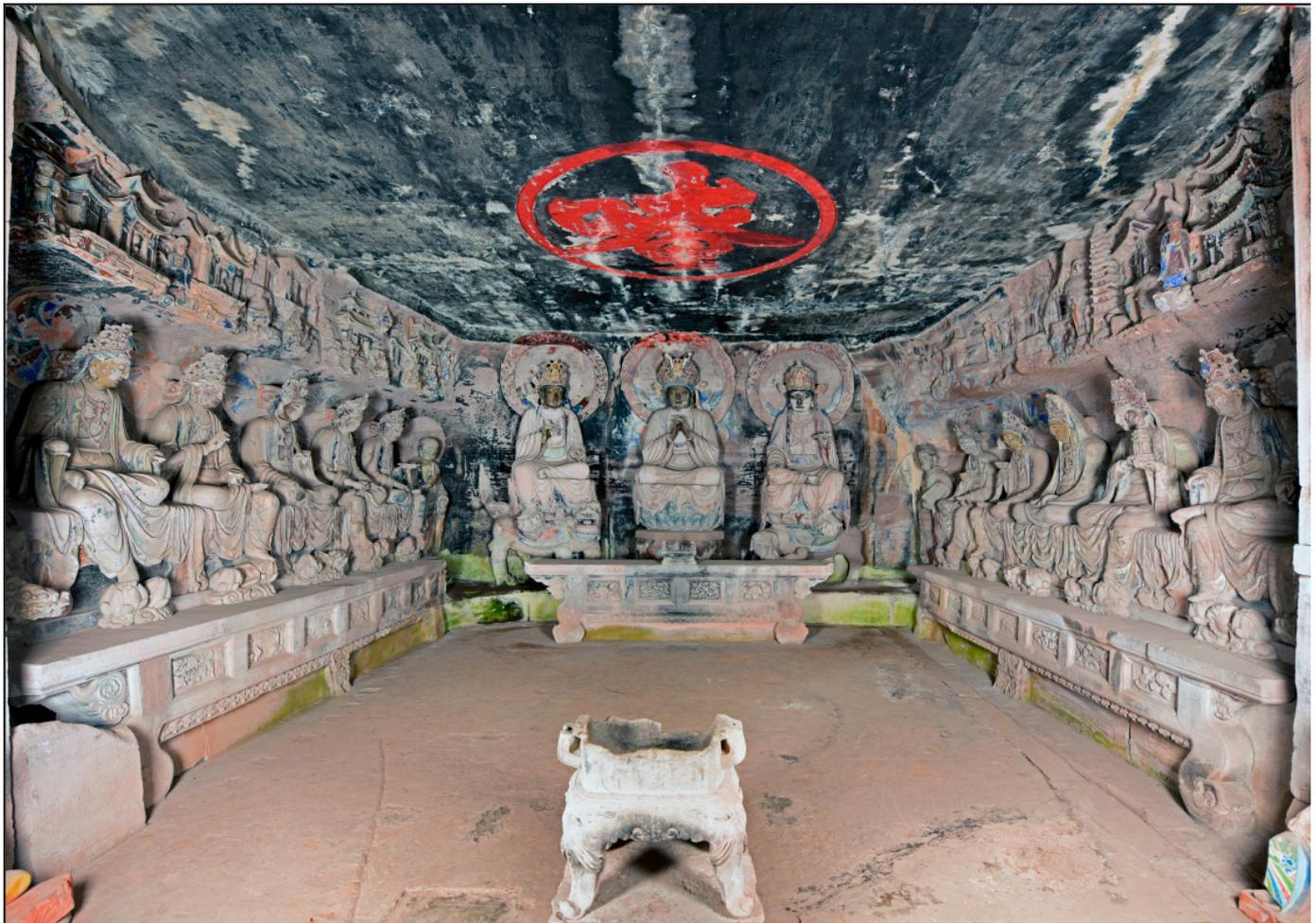


Figure 1. Panorama of Huayan Grotto. Photographed by the author.

Particularly noteworthy is a layman statuette positioned afront the crown of Vairocana Buddha 毗盧遮那佛, the primary statue on the main wall of the grotto. Adorned with a Su-Dongpo-style hat¹ and a cross-collared robe, and with his left arm missing, the layman figure typifies the sculptures constructed under the patronage of a locally influential Buddhist sect that flourished in the late Southern Song Dynasty (1127–1279) in eastern Sichuan. Moreover, Huayan Grotto reflects the sect's unique design ideas in other aspects such as location, scale, and inscriptions. The sect tends to create exclusive statue-making areas away from other folk niches, so Huayan Grotto was carved separately on Mount Xianggai. The impressive size of Huayan Grotto is a result of the sect's passion for creating large caves

and sculptures. The sect is keen on inscribing verses in prominent places and arranging them symmetrically in the form of couplet, like the “mind-only” verse in Huayan Grotto.

This sect reveres Liu Juzhi 柳居直 (reverentially, Liu Benzun 柳本尊, 843–907) as their spiritual leader, a lay Buddhist practitioner 居士 (*gr̥hapati*) from the late Tang Dynasty and Five Dynasties period, who engaged in esoteric 密宗 (*guhya*) practices involving acts of self-immolation and self-mutilation. The statues of Liu Juzhi, depicted with blinded eyes, missing ears, and amputated arms, are ubiquitous in the sect’s grottoes. Its actual leader was Zhao Zhifeng 趙智鳳 (1159–1249), a local monk from Changzhou 昌州 during the Southern Song Dynasty. Within contemporary academic discourse, the sect is commonly referred to as the “Liu-Zhao sect”² 柳趙教派, a term derived from the surnames of its two pivotal leaders. The sect is particularly distinguished by its fervent dedication to the large-scale construction of grottoes, sculptures, and inscriptions to elaborate on its doctrines and ideas. The sculptures and inscriptions constructed by the sect are characterized by their rich content, unique form, and distinctive features, collectively constituting a coherent and self-contained landscape. Dozens of sculpture sites attributable to the sect have been discovered in Anyue County of Sichuan Province, and Dazu 大足 District of Chongqing Municipality 重慶, including the Baoding 寶頂 Mountain in Dazu, the Huayan Grotto, the Pulu 毘盧 Grotto, and the Mingshan 茗山 Temple in Anyue, with the Huayan Grotto being the most representative among these sites.

Compared to other well-known sects in the history of Buddhism, the remains of the Liu-Zhao sect are dominated by sculptures and inscriptions. The lack of relevant historical documents and other archaeological material results in the study of the Liu-Zhao sect relying almost entirely on grotto remains. There is only one geographic document, Yudi Jisheng 輿地紀勝, which describes the Liu-Zhao sect from the viewpoint of a contemporaneous bystander (X. Wang 2003, p. 4367). However, the relevant record is quite brief, with only one sentence mentioning that there are grottoes on Baofeng Mountain, where the monk Zhao Zhifeng practiced. Historical documents about this sect in the Ming and Qing dynasties contain many omissions and errors, and they are mainly concerned with the life stories of Liu Benzun and Zhao Zhifeng. In the 1940s, the Dazu stone carving expedition organized by Yang Jialuo first recognized Baoding Mountain as a mandala of Liu-Zhao sect (Yang 1985, pp. 25–27). In the 1980s, several sculpture sites with similar connotations were discovered in Shiyang Town, Anyue County, and scholars came to realize that Baoding Mountain was not the only stronghold of the sect (Chen and Deng 1986, p. 82). Since the beginning of 21st century, more grottoes by the Liu-Zhao sect have been discovered in Dazu and Anyue. The number of sculpture sites has exceeded 30 according to the statistics of Mi Defang (Mi 2019, pp. 518–19). Recently, the author participated in significant archaeological field work and identified some other Liu-Zhao caves, raising the number to 45. Such a large number of grottoes indicate that the Liu-Zhao sect dominated statue-making activities in eastern Sichuan during the late Southern Song Dynasty.

In recent years, scholars from both the East and the West have taken an interest in the grottoes of the Liu-Zhao sect, and their findings have been published. The Baoding Mountain Grotto, the sect’s largest and longest-operating sculpture site, has received the most attention. It was studied holistically by Chen Mingguang, Li Sisheng, Angela F. Howard, Karil J. Kucera, Li Jingjie, and Lei Yuhua. Li Yuqun, Phillip E. Bloom, Hu Wenhe, and Stephen F. Teiser each specialized in a particular cave or a specific subject in Baoding Mountain. The Mingshan Temple Grotto is rigorous in its overall planning and construction, and its theme, layout, and function were carefully analyzed by Henrik Sorensen and Sun Hua. Some of the subjects from the Pulu Grotto, Huayan Grotto, and Kongque Grotto have also attracted discussions. However, most of the smaller-scale sculpture sites are still unknown.

This local sect extensively assimilated the ideas of prominent Buddhist schools in the history of Chinese Buddhism, including the Huayan 華嚴, Chan 禪 (*Dhyāna*), esotericism, and Pure Land 淨土 (*Kṣetra-vara*) traditions, and integrated them in accordance with their interpretations and needs into a sophisticated and distinctive ideological framework, which is fully manifested in its sculptural landscape. Within its ideological construct, Liu Benzun, the spiritual leader of the sect, and Vairocana, the chief Buddha of the Huayan School, are recognized as reciprocal avatars of one another, highlighting the pivotal role of Huayan doctrines in the sect's ideology. The Huayan Grotto, a solemn sanctuary constructed by the sect as an embodiment of its core doctrines, is just themed around the Huayan doctrines.

As the earliest grotto in Anyue to attract scholarly attention, the documentation and research on the Huayan Grotto have lingered at a foundational level for an extended period. In the decades of the 1980s and 1990s, many scholars contributed articles introducing the grotto (Yuan 1986, pp. 45–52; W. Hu 1994, pp. 76, 317–18; Liu 1998, pp. 22, 24), with “The Huayan Grotto in Anyue” standing out as the most detailed survey (G. Li 1994, pp. 40–43), encompassing the grotto's configuration, statue themes, and significant inscriptions. Recently, “An Archaeological Report on the Huayan Grotto in Anyue County, Sichuan Province” has emerged as the most comprehensive documentation on the grotto (Sichuan daxue kaogu wenbo xueyuan et al. 2021, pp. 43–94), providing a solid foundation for future research through detailed texts and illustrations. Existing research primarily focuses on the chronological dating and thematic identification of the grotto. While a few scholars, relying on the inscriptions from the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) in the grotto, postulate a Five Dynasties excavation, the majority now concurs with a Song Dynasty excavation based on statue themes and styles (W. Hu 1997, p. 94; Zeng 2001, pp. 57–58; Lei 2014, p. 198). Additionally, these articles delve into the themes of the sculptures, with the statues of the Three Saints of the Huayan School 華嚴三聖 on the main wall's center and the Bodhisattvas of Perfect Enlightenment 圓覺菩薩 on the middle-lower sections of the left and right walls gaining widespread academic recognition. However, significant controversies still persist around certain statues, particularly the layman and the monk positioned at the main wall's left and right ends and the fourteen tableaux on the upper sections of the left and right walls. The misidentification of these statues has significantly hindered the overall interpretation of the grotto. Therefore, this article endeavors to correctly identify all the statues, with particular emphasis on the controversial ones; interpret the sect's religious doctrines and design concepts embodied in the statues and inscriptions; and explore the relationship between the statues and the sect's spiritual practices to uncover the primary function of the Huayan Grotto.

There are four main views on the identity of the monk and the layman. Chen Mingguang believes that the monk represents Zhao Zhifeng, that the layman is Zhao Zhifeng's disciple, and that the Huayan Grotto displays three generations of the sect (Chen and Deng 1986, p. 83). Li Guanzhi surmised that the two figures show the monkish appearance of Manjushri and Maitreya (G. Li 1994, p. 41). Wen Yucheng judged that the layman is Huayan Zujue 華嚴祖覺 (1087–1150) and the monk is a worshipper of Liu Benzun (Wen 2007, p. 118). Hu Wenhe identified the two statues to be Yang Zhijing and Yuan Chenggui, disciples of Liu Benzun, based on the “The Tablet of Biography of Liu Juzhi in Tang Dynasty” 唐柳居士傳碑 (W. Hu 2005, p. 231). The evidence provided is not sufficient to support those views, though. Moreover, some problems cannot be solved, such as the images not matching with the assumed identity and the identities not being closely related to other carvings in the Huayan Grotto. Therefore, they are not widely accepted by academics.

The fourteen tableaux are generally regarded as all belonging to Sudhana's Pilgrimages, a view that has been put forward by Li Guanzhi (G. Li 1994, pp. 41, 42), Hu Wenhe (W. Hu 1997, p. 92), and Li Jingjie (J. Li 2011, p. 295). However, some phenomena cannot be comprehended. The number of tableaux is only 10, far less than the 53 episodes of Sudhana's Pilgrimages. Moreover, each figure lacks the typical episode of Sudhana saluting his spiritual guides. In addition, there is a spiritual guide looks like a Buddha, contrary to Avatamsaka Sutra.

2. The Statue of Li Tongxuan 李通玄 (635–730) and the Sculptures Embodying His Huayan Thought

2.1. The Statue of Li Tongxuan

On each end of the main wall, one retinue statue is carved. The layman statue positioned on the left end stands at a height of 2.78 m, featuring a bun atop its head with visible strands of hair. The face is characterized by its round and elongated shape, a radiant beam of light emanating from the mouth to both sides. The statue is dressed in a cross-necked undergarment (Figure 2), with a belt tied around the waist. Over the undergarment, it wears a double-breasted robe with wide sleeves, the front panels of which hang naturally. In its left hand, the statue holds a rectangular scroll, with the Chinese characters “合論” (*He Lun*) inscribed vertically on one corner of the cover (Sichuan daxue kaogu wenbo xueyuan et al. 2021, p. 53) (Figure 3).



Figure 2. Close-up of Li Tongxuan's head. Photographed by the author.



Figure 3. The Statue of patriarch Li Tongxuan. Photographed by the author.

The Chinese characters “合論” on the cover are the abbreviations for “華嚴經合論” (*Huayan Jing He Lun*), a combined version of Li Tongxuan’s commentary on the newly translated eighty-scroll *Avatamsaka Sutra* 華嚴經 (*Huayan Jing*), titled *New Commentary on the Avatamsaka Sutra* 新華嚴經論, and the *Da Fangguang Fo Huayan Jing* 大方廣佛華嚴經 (the *Avatamsaka Sutra*). As recorded in the *Biography of Eminent Monks of the Song Dynasties* 宋高僧傳, “During the Dazhong era (847–860), monk Zhining 志寧 (active during 840s–850s) from Fujian-Zhejiang [閩越] area annotated the *Avatamsaka Sutra* with the *New Commentary* into a 120-scroll version... In the year 967 of the Qiande 乾德 era of the Song Dynasties, monk Huiyan 惠研 (active during 960s) from Fujian rearranged the version and named it *Huayan Jing He Lun* [*Combined Commentary and the Avatamsaka Sutra*], which was widely circulated and highly valued” (Zan 1987, p. 575). *He Lun* is Li Tongxuan’s magnum opus and a collection of his main Huayan thought. It reached the peak of its influence during the Song Dynasties and was regarded as a classic scripture of Huayan Buddhism by its practitioners. As Zhang Shangying 張商英 (1043–1121), the prime minister and dharma protector during the reign of Emperor Huizong 徽宗 (1082–1135), acclaimed in the preface to the *Chan Master Foguo’s Illustrated Verses of Praise on the Teaching of Manjusri* 佛國禪師文殊指南圖贊, “Patriarch Li’s 40-scroll *He Lun*, State Monk Chengguan’s 100-scroll *Commentary on the Avatamsaka Sutra*, Venerable Nāgārjuna’s 200,000 verses [*gāthā*], and Chan Master Weibai’s 54 eulogies—the theories of the four are highly esteemed by scholars” (Weibai 1983, p. 793a). The fact that Li’s *He Lun* was placed on a par with Chengguan’s *Commentary* in the preface reveals a glimpse of the high esteem in which it was held.

Although Li Tongxuan deeply studied Huayan Buddhism, he did not become an ordained monk but spent his entire life as a lay Buddhist and was later respectfully called Patriarch Li 李長者. The documents from the Tang and Song Dynasties record detailed descriptions of his appearance, particularly highlighting his habit of wearing wide-sleeved

robes without a belt. Tang Dynasty scholar Ma Zhi 馬支 (active during 860s–870s) described him as “wearing a birch-bark hat, a hemp robe and a long undergarment with wide sleeves, walking with his waist loose and without a leather belt” (Ma 1993, p. 654b). Zan Ning 贊寧 (919–1001), in his *Biography of Eminent Monks of the Song Dynasties*, also stated that “He [Patriarch Li] wore a coarse cloth robe, with his waist unbelted” (Zan 1987, p. 574). The layman statue in the left corner in the Huayan Grotto, which wears a double-breasted robe with wide sleeves and the front panels hanging naturally, was carved with the intention of highlighting Patriarch Li’s unbelted waist. The two light beams emanating from the corners of the layman statue’s mouth are also important evidence for identifying him. Legend has it that, during the Tang and Song Dynasties, Patriarch Li made many miracles when composing his *He Lun*, among which the light beams emanating from his mouth is highlighted in the Huayan Grotto. The inscription on a stele from the Tang Dynasty describes him as “emanating divine light from his mouth, without lighting a lamp or candle” (J. Wang 1982, p. 15131a). As also stated in *Biography of Eminent Monks of the Song Dynasties*, “When he [Patriarch Li] was composing *He Lun*, there were no lamps or candles in the room; every night he would write with a brush, with white light emanating from the corners of his mouth, more than a foot long and shining brightly, which became a constant” (Zan 1987, p. 574). The layman statue in the Huayan Grotto truthfully depicts Patriarch Li’s emanating light from the corners of his mouth. The image of Patriarch Li holding *He Lun* in one hand appeared in his shrine during the Tang Dynasty, which was described in an inscription on the stele of “Record of Miracles at Shenfu Mountain Temple” 神福山寺靈跡記 in the fourth year (907) of the Tianyou era as “holding the *He Lun*, with a tiger standing beside on the left” (J. Wang 1982, p. 15132a). The posture of “holding the *He Lun*” in the inscription is remarkably similar to that of the layman statue in the Huayan Grotto.

2.2. The Sculptures of “Ten Assemblies in Ten Locations” 十處十會 and “Sudhana’s Pilgrimages” 善財徧參

The profound impact of Patriarch Li and his works on the construction of the Huayan Grotto is evident not merely in the depiction of the lay practitioner but also in the sculptural contents that embody his Huayan thought.

The fourteen tableaux positioned above the Twelve Bodhisattvas of Perfect Enlightenment on the left and right walls have traditionally been interpreted as representing episodes from the Sudhana’s fifty-three pilgrimages (W. Hu 1997, p. 92; J. Li 2011, p. 295). However, this article contends that this interpretation remains arguable. Upon closer examination, the sculptures in the upper sections of the left and right walls of the grotto can be categorized into three ensembles based on their thematic contents (Figure 4).

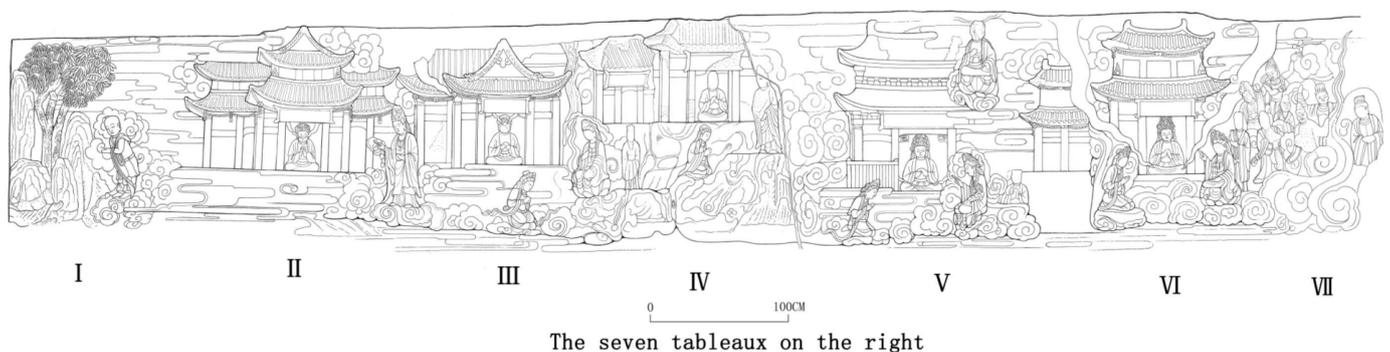


Figure 4. Cont.

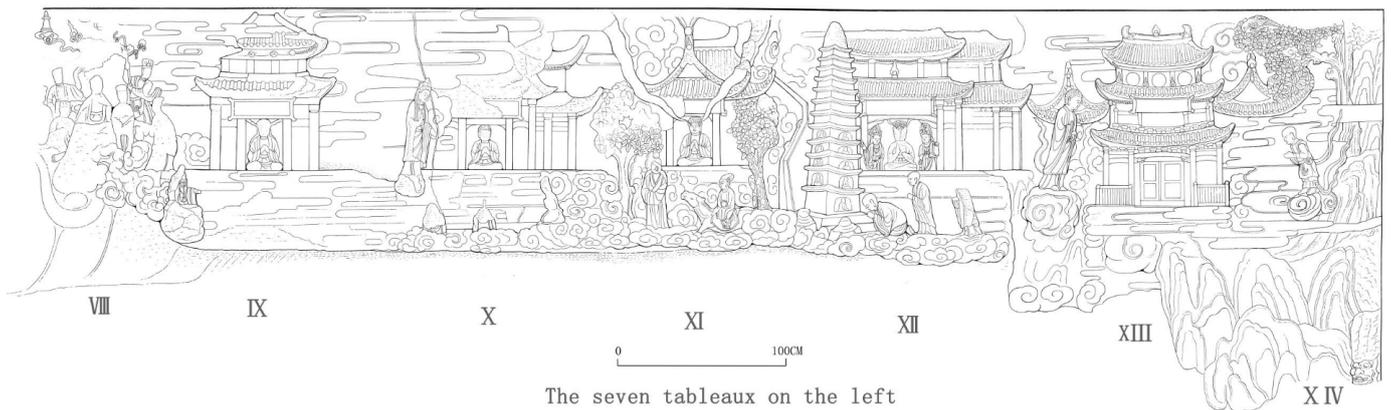


Figure 4. The statue of Ten Assemblies in Ten Location and the Sudhana’s Pilgrimage. Provided by the author.

The first ensemble comprises two tableaux (numbers VII and VIII) positioned closest to the rear wall, both of which portray celestial beings 天人 (*divya-mānasyaka*) astride auspicious clouds, progressing towards the grotto’s entrance. These celestial beings, as delineated in the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, exhibit a diversity of attire and mannerisms, vividly representing the Dharma protectors 護法 (*anudharma-pāla*) who convened for the Dharma Assembly 法會 (*dharna-saṃgīti*): “At that time, a multitude of Dharma protectors assembled in the Buddha’s mandala [道場]. Countless deities, varying in forms and retinues, arrived from all directions to approach and pay homage to the Buddha” (Siksananda 1993, scroll 14, vol. 5, p. 836a).

The second ensemble of sculptures comprises ten tableaux, each displaying a consistent composition positioned centrally on both the left and right walls. Each tableau depicts an ornate pavilion or hall at its center, where a Buddha is seated in full lotus position. The hall is encircled by auspicious clouds and trees, while other narrative scenes unfold in front of the structure. The invariant arrangement of these elements—buildings, Buddha images, trees, and clouds—in all of these ten tableaux aligns precisely with the compositional motifs of recorded Dharma assemblies: “The treasure trees stand in orderly rows, their branches and leaves shining with brilliance... The halls or pavilions housing the Buddha are vast, magnificent, and imbued with beauty extending in all ten directions. The halls, pavilions, steps, and windows are all adorned with solemnity and splendor. The luminous clouds of Mani illuminate one another” (Siksananda 1993, vol. 5, pp. 785b, 786a).

The illustrations of the *Avatamsaka Sutra* discovered in Dunhuang 敦煌 and Dazu are all of the tableaux of “Nine Assemblies in Seven Locations” 七處九會 (W. Hu 2009, pp. 47–54; Quan 2003, pp. 133–55; Pan 2015, pp. 11–19). However, it is noteworthy that the Huayan Grotto marks the first depiction of ten assemblies, which aligns with the major feature of Li Tongxuan’s Huayan thought as revealed in his *He Lun*. According to Li’s interpretation, the number ten symbolizes perfection in the context of the *Avatamsaka Sutra*. He explicitly states, “The various dharmas in this sutra regard ten as perfection; it cannot merely be said to have nine assemblies in seven locations” (Siksananda 1993, scroll 7, vol. 5, p. 753b). This distinction between “Ten Assemblies in Ten Locations” and “Nine Assemblies in Seven Locations” is a significant point of divergence between Li Tongxuan’s and Fazang’s 法藏 (643–712) Huayan thought. This distinction is specifically mentioned by Monk Zhipan: “Li’s *He Lun* emphasizes ten assemblies in ten locations when discussing Dharma realm [法界 *dharmadhātu*], which contrasts with the Fazang’s commentary” (Zhipan 2012, p. 657). Similarly, Zhining also points out in the preface to the *Combined Commentary on the Avatamsaka Sutra* that “there are slight differences from the com-

mentaries of other scholars, as *He Lun* incorporates the meaning of Ten Assemblies in Ten Locations” (Zhining 1993, p. 653a).

In contrast to the distribution of nine assemblies in seven locations, Li Tongxuan consolidates the three assemblies in the Samanta-prabha Dharma Hall 普光法堂 into a singular entity, while incorporating the seventh, ninth, and tenth assemblies. By consulting the *He Lun*, one can accurately ascertain the ten assemblies represented within the second ensemble of sculptures.

On the right wall, proceeding inward from the entrance of the grotto, the first tableau (number II) illustrates the first assembly at the Bodhi-maṇḍas 菩提場, where the Vairocana Buddha, seated in the hall, emanates two rays of light from his nose and mouth. This scene corresponds to the textual record where “the Buddha emitted lights as numerous as temples and dust particles from between his teeth” (Siksananda 1993, scroll 18, vol. 5, p. 890b). A bodhisattva 菩薩 stands on the left side of the hall, pointing with an extended hand, symbolizing that Bodhisattva Samanta-bhadra 普賢菩薩 is “announcing to all the bodhisattvas in all bodhi-mandas” (Siksananda 1993, scroll 20, vol. 5, p. 912b).

The second tableau (number III) depicts the second assembly at the Samanta-prabha Dharma Hall 普光法堂. In this scene, the Vairocana Buddha emits two rays of light from between his eyebrows, representing the second assembly held in the Samanta-prabha Dharma Hall where “the Buddha emits great light from the white hair between his eyebrows” (Siksananda 1993, scroll 78, vol. 6, p. 729a). On the left side of the hall, a bodhisattva sits in lotus position, while another bodhisattva kneels on the right side, listening intently. This tableau depicts Bodhisattva Manjushri 文殊師利 expounding doctrines to the assembly of bodhisattvas: “With the power of the Buddha, Manjushri observes all the assemblies of bodhisattvas and utters these words” (Siksananda 1993, scroll 26, vol. 6, p. 34a).

The third tableau (number IV) shows the remnants of a light ray, heavily weathered but still recognizable, on each outer side of the legs of the Vairocana Buddha, who “emits hundreds of billions of brilliant lights of wonderful hues from the toes of both feet” (Siksananda 1993, scroll 31, vol. 6, p. 107b). In front of the hall, a bodhisattva is teaching, while another is listening. The speaker is Bodhisattva Dharmajna 法慧菩薩, the protagonist of the third assembly held at the Trayastrimsha Heaven 忉利天宮: “Dharmajna arises from meditation and addresses the bodhisattvas” (Siksananda 1993, scroll 33, vol. 6, p. 124b).

The fourth tableau (number V), where the Vairocana Buddha’s feet radiate lights, illustrates the fourth assembly held at the Suyāma Heaven 夜摩天宮: “The Buddha emits hundreds of billions of brilliant lights of wonderful hues from his two feet” (Siksananda 1993, scroll 37, vol. 6, p. 184a). The bodhisattva preaching in front of the hall is Guṇa-vana 功德林, who “arises from meditation and addresses the other bodhisattvas” (Siksananda 1993, scroll 37, vol. 6, p. 190a).

The fifth tableau (number VI) illustrates the fifth assembly held at the Tuṣṭita-bhavana Heaven 兜率天宮, where “the Buddha emits hundreds of billions of brilliant lights from his knees” (Siksananda 1993, scroll 42, vol. 6, p. 251a). The preaching bodhisattva is Vajra-kotu 金剛幢菩薩, who “receives the blessing on his head, arises from meditation and addresses the other bodhisattvas” (Siksananda 1993, scroll 42, vol. 6, p. 262a).

On the left wall, proceeding from the rear outward, the first tableau (number IX) depicts the sixth assembly held at the Paranirmita-vaśavartin Heaven 他化自在天宮, where the Buddha “emits pure lights from between his eyebrows” (Siksananda 1993, scroll 55, vol. 6, p. 432b). Despite the weathering of the statue’s facial features, two beams of light are still discernible emanating from the Buddha’s temples. The partially damaged seated bodhisattva in front of the hall represents Bodhisattva Vajra-garbha 金剛藏菩薩, who is expounding the essentials of spiritual practice to the bodhisattvas, as stated: “Bodhisattva

Vajra-garbha arises from meditation, and addresses all the other bodhisattvas" (Siksananda 1993, scroll 55, vol. 6, p. 429b).

The second tableau (number X), devoid of any apparent light emission, is the seventh assembly held at the Trītiya-dhyāna Heaven 三禪天, an addition attributed to Li Tongxuan. According to the *Sutra of the Garland of a Bodhisattva's Primary Karmas* 菩薩瓔珞本業經, the bodhisattva who initiates the preaching at the assembly is described as "asking questions to all Buddhas and bodhisattvas" (Zhu 1983, p. 1010c).

The third tableau (number XI) clearly portrays the Buddha emitting lights from between his eyebrows, which corresponds to the representation of Vairocana Buddha in the eighth assembly held at the Anātha-piṇḍa-dasyarmah 給孤獨園 who "emits great light from the white hair between his eyebrows" (Siksananda 1993, scroll 89, vol. 6, p. 882a). The tableau also includes mounted laymen and their retinues leading the way, which aligns perfectly with the descriptions of the assembly, which mentions "all the kings of the world and their retinues" (Siksananda 1993, scroll 88, vol. 6, p. 861b), "along with numerous kings of the world, all of whom have made offerings to numerous Buddhas and are always capable of benefiting all sentient beings" (Siksananda 1993, scroll 88, vol. 6, p. 861b).

The fourth tableau (number XII), featuring three monks bowing before a Buddhist stupa, illustrates the ninth assembly held at the Great Stupa Temple 大塔廟 in the east of Juecheng 覺城 (City of Enlightenment). In this scene, Bodhisattva Manjushri raises his right hand to guide Sudhana southward, while the Buddha emits great light in this place: "When all the Buddhas from the ten directions are about to preach, they all emit light from the white hair between their eyebrows to illuminate their body" (Siksananda 1993, scroll 90, vol. 6, p. 892a).

The fifth tableau (number XIII) differs slightly in configuration from the other nine, as it depicts Vairocana Buddha not seated in the hall but arriving on a cloud and it stands at the forefront. As the last assembly of the "Ten Assemblies in Ten Locations", "the Assembly of All Lands and All Worldly Realms" refers to all Dharma assemblies. This tableau utilizes the hall to symbolize the venue of the assembly and the standing Buddha to represent the protagonist of the assembly, thereby constituting the two essential elements of the assembly.

The third ensemble of sculptures comprises two tableaux (numbers I and XIV) positioned closest to the grotto's entrance, both highlighting the portrayal of bald-headed children wearing shawls and trousers, their hands folded in reverence and bowed in a gesture of devotion. The child figure on the left walks towards the tableaux of the "Ten Assemblies in Ten Locations" in the grotto, while the other child figure on the right, having concluded his practice, turns away from the ten tableaux. This typical depiction signifies that the children embody Sudhana, the central figures in the chapter "Entering the Dharma Realm" 入法界品 (gaṇḍa-vyūha) in the latter portion of the *Avatamsaka Sutra*. Notably, this is the sole depiction discovered in the Sichuan–Chongqing region that features two images of Sudhana—one entering and the other exiting—symbolizing Sudhana's pilgrimages. Conversely, other depictions of Sudhana's pilgrimages from the Song Dynasties in the region, such as those at the Wofu Monastery 臥佛院 in Anyue, the Duobao Pagoda 多寶塔 in Dazu, the Baoen Pagoda 報恩塔 in Luzhou 瀘州, and the Shifo Temple 石佛寺 in Guang'an 廣安, all delineate the fifty-three scenes of Sudhana's pilgrimages to spiritual guides 善知識 (*kalyana-mitra*). By contrasting and correlating the content of "Ten Assemblies in Ten Locations" with that of Sudhana's fifty-three pilgrimages, Li Tongxuan contended that the assemblies and the pilgrimages constitute the theoretical and practical facets of the singular entity and are essentially indistinguishable. Consequently, the intricate pilgrimage narratives can be replaced by the Ten Assemblies in Ten Locations, and the dual Sudhana images adequately represent the entire process of *Huayan* practices.

These three ensembles of sculptures collectively represent the Huayan Grotto as a comprehensive embodiment of the *He Lun* that is imbued with the essence of Li Tongxuan's thoughts. The *He Lun* can be divided into two sections: chapters one to thirty-eight expound upon Buddhist doctrines, while chapter thirty-nine, "Entering the Dharma Realm", elucidates the spiritual practice process. The tableaux of "Ten Assemblies in Ten Locations", primarily covered in the first half of the eighty-scroll *Avatamsaka Sutra*, visualize the interpretations of the doctrines, whereas Sudhana's pilgrimages embody the practices described in the second half of the sutra. The Huayan Grotto stands as the most comprehensive and exquisite physical embodiment of Li Tongxuan's concept of "exploring the profound causes and effects of the ten assemblies and enumerating the practice methodologies from Sudhana's fifty-three pilgrimages" (Zan 1987, pp. 574–75).

2.3. The Statues of the Three Saints of the Huayan School

On the main wall of the Huayan Grotto, one Buddha and two bodhisattvas are carved. The Buddha in the center, measuring 2.8 m in height, wears a crown adorned with scrolling grass patterns, with a layman statuette afront the crown. The Buddha, round-faced, clad in a cassock, and with hands cupped in front of his chest, is seated in full lotus position on a Sumeru throne 須彌座. The two bodhisattvas both wear crowns adorned with scrolling grass patterns, each with a seated Buddha afront their crowns. They are also round-faced, adorned with pearl pendants on the chest, clad in cassocks, and seated in a half lotus position on the lotus thrones. The bodhisattva on the left, measuring 3.38 m in height, holds a patra sutra 貝葉經 in his left hand, with the lotus throne resting on the back of a six-tusked white elephant. The bodhisattva on the right, measuring 3.2 m in height, holds a ruyi-scepter 如意 in his right hand, with his lotus throne supported by a lion (Figure 5) (Sichuan daxue kaogu wenbo xueyuan et al. 2021, pp. 51–54).



Figure 5. The statue of the Three Saints of the Huayan School. Photographed by the author.

This ensemble of statues is common in its combination but distinctive in its specific features. Scholarly consensus is unequivocal regarding the thematic interpretation, unanimously identifying the centrally located crowned Buddha as Vairocana, the one astride the elephant on the left as Bodhisattva Samanta-bhadra, and the one mounted on the

lion on the right as Bodhisattva Manjushri, collectively referred to as the “Three Saints of the Huayan School”. Notably, within the context of the Huayan Grotto, Manjushri and Samanta-bhadra possess dual identities. While functioning as attendants to the Buddha on the main wall, they also integrate with the ten bodhisattvas on the adjacent left and right walls to constitute the “Twelve Bodhisattvas of Perfect Enlightenment”. Remarkably, these two bodhisattvas are extracted from the ranks of the twelve bodhisattvas on the side walls and positioned prominently in front of the main wall, with their bodies subtly inclined towards the central Vairocana Buddha. Standing at over 3 m in height, they loom over the other ten bodhisattvas, which measure approximately 1.7 m tall, thereby suggesting that their identity as Bodhisattvas of Perfect Enlightenment is of secondary importance and their role in forming the trio with Vairocana Buddha is more crucial.

The significant emphasis on the Three Saints is closely tied to Li Tongxuan’s concept of “Integration of the Three Saints” (三聖圓融), which has exerted a profound influence on Huayan Buddhism. In contrast to the tendency of Zhiyan 智儼 (602–226) and Fazang 法藏 to favor Samanta-bhadra, Li Tongxuan advocates the equality and integration of Vairocana, Manjushri, and Samanta-bhadra as a trinity, which has subsequently transformed the belief system of the Huayan School (Wei 2017, pp. 57–62).

Li Tongxuan posited that the Three Saints encapsulate the core doctrines and ideas of the *Avatamsaka Sutra*: “The overarching principles guiding the interpretation of the inquiries and responses as well as the truths and representations contained in this sutra are rooted in three primary sources: firstly, Vairocana Buddha; secondly, Bodhisattva Manjushri; and thirdly, Bodhisattva Samanta-bhadra” (T. Li 1983c, Jing Lun, p. 739a). He consistently highlighted the indispensable unity among Vairocana, Manjushri, and Samanta-bhadra, asserting that “these three dharmas are essentially one” (T. Li 1983b, Jueyilun, p. 1013b). Furthermore, he emphasized, “Neglecting any one of the three would dismantle their original integrated system” (T. Li 1983c, Jing Lun, p. 747b). This is because the synthesis of Buddhist wisdom, embodied by Manjushri, and Buddhist practice, represented by Samanta-bhadra, is indispensable for attaining Buddhahood, represented by Vairocana. In Li Tongxuan’s theoretical framework, the Three Saints symbolize the entirety of the doctrines contained in the eighty-scroll *Avatamsaka Sutra*. Consequently, the Huayan Grotto utilizes the Three Saints as the primary deities on its main wall, overseeing the sculptures throughout the grotto. Moreover, the Twelve Bodhisattvas of Perfect Enlightenment are formally separated to represent the unity of the religious doctrines of Vairocana, Manjushri, and Samanta-bhadra, thereby further highlighting the Liu-Zhao sect’s emphasis on Li Tongxuan’s Huayan thought.

2.4. “Mind-Only” Verse 惟心偈

On either side of the Vairocana Buddha, inscribed panels are carved, each measuring 100 cm in width and 140 cm in height. Within each of these panels, there is inscribed one verse in large, double-lined, regular Chinese characters. The characters on the left panel read, “If one aspires to comprehend thoroughly all the Buddhas of the past, present, and future” (若人欲了知, 三世一切佛), while the characters on the right panel states, “One should contemplate the true nature of the Dharma-realm, for all phenomena emanate from the mind only” (應觀法界性, 一切惟心造) (Sichuan daxue kaogu wenbo xueyuan et al. 2021, pp. 80–81) (Figure 6).

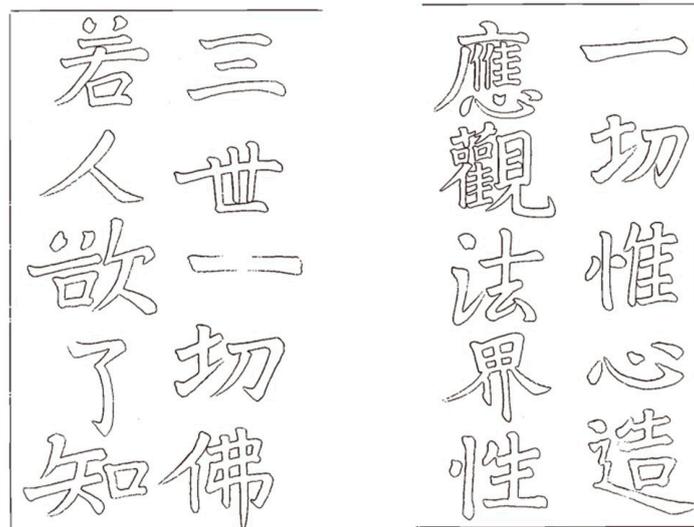


Figure 6. The carved inscription of the “mind-only” verse. Provided by the author.

This verse is excerpted from scroll 19 of the eighty-scroll *Avatamsaka Sutra*, where it is documented that ten bodhisattvas convened at the Dharma Assembly, each chanting a verse. The verse inscribed in the Huayan Grotto was chanted by Bodhisattva Forest of Awakening 覺林菩薩. Among the myriad scrolls of the eighty-scroll *Avatamsaka Sutra*, only a few verses have garnered widespread recognition. The prominent inscription of this particular verse on both sides of the Buddha in the Huayan Grotto is attributable not merely to its widespread recitation but also to its concise encapsulation of another pivotal Huayan concept advanced by Li Tongxuan. His principal works repeatedly underscore the pivotal role of the “mind” in Huayan practice, aligning with this verse’s emphasis on the “mind” as the cornerstone of enlightenment.

Li Tongxuan believed that “all Buddhas are identical with their own mind; all sentient beings are identical with their innate nature” (T. Li 1983c, Jing Lun, p. 768b). He further stated, “If one remains deluded, the obstacles within the mind become boundless, and one remains distant from the Buddha realm. If one is enlightened, myriad Buddha realms are within one’s own pores, layered like shadows” (T. Li 1983c, Jing Lun, p. 817a). According to this doctrine, since the Buddha resides within one’s mind, there is no need to seek externally for enlightenment. The opening of Li Tongxuan’s other significant work, *Ten Manifestations of Resolving Doubts, Manifesting Wisdom, and Attaining Compassion* 解迷顯智成悲十明論, also emphasizes, “If a practitioner seeks to attain the great *Bodhichitta* [菩提心], there is no need to search afar; it suffices to purify one’s own mind” (T. Li 1983a, Shi Ming Lun, p. 768c). He further proclaimed, “The mind of all sentient beings possesses the vast wisdom of the Buddha” (T. Li 1983a, Shi Ming Lun, p. 768b).

This doctrine was not originally conceived solely by Li Tongxuan, nor is it exclusive to the Huayan School. However, it constitutes a significant component of Li Tongxuan’s Buddhist thought. He interpreted the sutras from the perspective of the “mind”, explicitly asserting that the purification and contemplation of the mind are central to Huayan practice. The Liu-Zhao sect placed a verse adjacent to the Buddha that most aptly captures Li’s conception of the mind. This placement not only complements and augments the religious significance of the Huayan Grotto but also serves as a crucial guide for practitioners in their engagement with Huayan practice.

So far, Li Tongxuan and his Huayan thought have been fully materialized by the statues and sculptures in the Huayan Grotto. The statue of Patriarch Li Tongxuan stands prominently at the left corner of the rear wall. The statues of the Three Saints embody Li’s concept of “Integration of the Three Saints”, while the verse inscribed on both sides

of Vairocana Buddha offers a concise articulation of his “mind-only” idea. Furthermore, the sculptures depicting the “Ten Assemblies in Ten Locations” and “Sudhana’s Pilgrimages” encapsulate the essence of his Huayan thought. More than half of the statues and sculptures in the grotto are directly derived from Li Tongxuan and his theories on Huayan Buddhism, reflecting the Liu-Zhao sect’s profound comprehension of Li’s Huayan thought and their profound reverence for the patriarch himself.

3. The Statue of Zongmi 宗密 (780–841) and the Sculptures Embodying His Huayan Thought

In the middle and lower sections of the left and right walls of the Huayan Grotto, five statues of bodhisattvas are carved on each wall, with heights ranging from 1.65 to 1.73 m. Each of the ten bodhisattvas is adorned with crowns embellished with scrolling grass patterns. Positioned in front of each crown, a Buddha sits in the lotus position, exhibiting a graceful and serene demeanor. The bodhisattvas wear pearl pendants on their chests and are dressed in double-collared robes that flow downward. Their gestures and the objects they hold in their hands are varied; some hold lotus flowers or scriptures, while others support pagodas or cups. They are seated in either half lotus or full lotus positions on pedestal altars that imitate wooden designs (Sichuan daxue kaogu wenbo xueyuan et al. 2021, pp. 60–65) (Figure 7).



Figure 7. The statue of the Twelve Bodhisattvas of Perfect Enlightenment. Photographed by the author.

Scholarly consensus holds that the ensemble of the ten bodhisattvas along with Manjusri and Samanta-bhadra positioned on the main wall collectively constitute the Twelve Bodhisattvas of Perfect Enlightenment. Li Guanzhi has provided specific identifications for each of these bodhisattvas (G. Li 1994, p. 41). These sculptures illustrate a tableau where the Twelve Bodhisattvas sequentially solicit teachings from the Buddha in their pursuit of perfect enlightenment. In accordance with the *Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment* 大方廣圓覺修多羅了義經, Manjusri and Samanta-bhadra, positioned on the left and right sides of the main wall, are the first and second to request teachings. The sequence continues with the third, fifth, seventh, ninth, and eleventh bodhisattvas arrayed before the right wall, while the fourth, sixth, eighth, tenth, and twelfth are positioned in front of the left wall.

The Twelve Bodhisattvas of Perfect Enlightenment are pertinent to the identification of the monk statue positioned at the right corner of the rear wall in the Huayan Grotto. The layman statue located at the left corner has already been authenticated as Patriarch Li Tongxuan. The monk statue, standing in symmetrical opposition to Patriarch Li, measures 2.85 m in height, depicting a bald figure with curly hair cascading down the side of his head. He is adorned with a cross-collared undergarment and a double-collared cassock that flows externally, with one corner securely fastened to a Jena ring on his left shoulder. The monk figure extends his left hand forward, clutching a sutra upon which the characters “□略”³ (indicating an abbreviated text) are faintly discernible, while his right hand is raised, palm facing sideways, in front of his chest (Figure 8). In comparison to the statue of Patriarch Li, this monk statue is not particularly prominent in its features, and the name of the sutra has been damaged, necessitating the examination of other statues in the grotto for definitive identification. It is established that Li Tongxuan is directly related to the statues of the Three Saints of the Huayan School as well as the sculptures depicting the “Ten Locations and Ten Assemblies” and “Sudhana’s Pilgrimages”. However, he is not linked to the *Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment* or the statues of the Twelve Bodhisattvas of Perfect Enlightenment. It is hypothesized that this particular theme is intimately connected to the monk figure and may even encapsulate the core of his Buddhist thought. Furthermore, the proximity of this statue to Patriarch Li suggests that he was a prominent figure in the history of Huayan Buddhism.

An examination of the history of Chinese Buddhism reveals that only Master Zongmi of Guifeng 圭峰宗密 has such a connection with the *Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment*. Zongmi, a prominent sutra monk-commentator 義解僧 during the mid-to-late Tang Dynasty, was instrumental in advancing both Chan Buddhism and Huayan Buddhism. As a disciple of Monk Daoyuan 道圓 (active during 800s) from Suizhou 遂州, Zongmi belonged to the fifth generation of the Heze lineage (荷澤系) within the Southern School (南宗) of Chan Buddhism. Additionally, he studied Huayan Buddhism under the guidance of Chengguan 澄觀 (738–839), known as the State Monk Qingliang 清涼國師. Therefore, Zongmi was highly regarded as the Fifth Patriarch of the Huayan School. Chengguan once commended Zongmi, stating, “Of those capable of following me in exploring the pure land of Vairocana 華藏世界, it must be you” (Daoyuan 1983, pp. 305c–306a). Among the numerous commentaries on the *Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment*, Zongmi’s commentaries are the most influential. His Huayan thought is predominantly articulated through a series of annotations and commentaries on the sutra.



Figure 8. The statue of Zongmi. Photographed by the author.

In his early years as a novice monk, Zongmi stumbled upon the *Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment* and was profoundly moved. As recorded, “Upon encountering the *Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment*, he was enlightened to tears before he had even finished reading the scroll. Upon his return, he eagerly shared his enlightenment with his spiritual master” (Pei 1983, p. 523c). Sensing a strong karmic connection with this sutra, Zongmi diligently pursued its study thereafter: “After reading just two pages, I could not contain the immense joy that filled my body and mind. From that moment on, I have been deeply engrossed in its study, a passion that has persisted to this day. I often ponder if I had studied it in a past life, or what karmic ties bind me to it. I simply feel a profound sense of joy that permeates my very being. For many years, I tirelessly sought out eminent monks specializing in commenting on the scripture” (Zongmi 1993, Lueshu Chao, p. 212b). Subsequently, Zongmi’s academic endeavors centered around annotating and commenting on the *Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment* throughout his life. As recorded, “Later, in order to delve deeper into the *Avatamsaka Sutra* and Chengguan’s *Detailed Commentary*, and to explore the roots and fruits of Buddhist teachings, I thoroughly read all of my collections of scriptures. Whatever I heard, inquired about, discussed, or read, I meticulously referred to the *Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment*, comparing the roots and fruits in search of their essence” (Zongmi 1993, Lueshu Chao, p. 213a). Through Zongmi’s interpretation and promotion, the *Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment* emerged as a pivotal scripture of Huayan Buddhism, challenging the supremacy of the *Avatamsaka Sutra* and even gradually supplanting it as the core scripture of the tradition (Gong 2018, pp. 87–95).

Zongmi dedicated his entire life to the elucidation of the *Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment*, producing seminal works such as the *Extensive Commentary on the Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment* 大疏 and its condensed version, the *Abbreviated Commentary on the Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment* 略疏. He further contributed with the *Annotated Extensive Commentary* (疏鈔) and the *Annotated Abbreviated Commentary* (略疏鈔), which are commentaries on the two aforementioned works, respectively. His *Rituals for Cultivating and Verifying the Sutra of Per-*

fect Enlightenment in Bodhimandalas 圓覺經道場修證儀 provides guidance for the spiritual practice of Huayan Buddhism (J. Hu 2013, pp. 29–33). As noted by Jujian 居簡, a Chan Buddhist monk from the Southern Song Dynasty, regarding the widespread dissemination of Zongmi's commentaries on the *Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment* in southwestern China, "Zongmi elucidated this sutra and composed the *Extensive Commentary*, spanning tens of thousands of words. He further condensed this verbose version into the *Abbreviated Commentary*. Both versions have been in wide circulation since the Tang Dynasty, and all the Buddhist practitioners in the southwestern region possess this set of scriptures, indicating their extensive circulation and influence" (Jujian 1993, p. 1b). From this context, the second surviving Chinese character on the scroll held by the monk in the Huayan Grotto, "略" (abbreviated), is derived from the title of the *Abbreviated Commentary*. Although the first character is nearly damaged, the visible vertical strokes in the lower right corner, one long and the other short, suggest that they belong to the right lower part of the character "疏" (commentary). Thus, the original characters on the scroll are likely "疏略" (Abbreviated Commentary). The *Abbreviated Commentary* encapsulates Zongmi's thoughts on the *Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment* and enjoys considerable popularity and influence in the Sichuan region, making it a representative work of his. Zongmi's holding the *Abbreviated Commentary* aligns well with Patriarch Li's holding the *Combined Commentary on the Avatamsaka Sutra* in terms of both formal presentation and doctrinal content.

In the Huayan Grotto, the statues pertaining to Zongmi occupy approximately half of the space. Notably, a monk statue displaying a scroll stands at the right corner of the rear wall, and the large mural depictions of the Twelve Bodhisattvas of the Perfect Enlightenment cover the middle and lower sections of the left and right walls. The monk statue represents Zongmi, while the mural statues encapsulate the essence of his Huayan thought. Half of the Huayan thought represented in the grotto stems from Patriarch Li, and the other half from Zongmi of Guifeng. In this single grotto, their theoretical pursuits of Huayan Buddhism illuminate with the brilliance of celestial stars.

4. The Practical Studies on Huayan Buddhism

4.1. On the Huayan Spiritual Practice and Cultivation

Li Tongxuan is highly regarded by certain academics as a prominent synthesizer of Wutaishan 五臺山 Huayan thought, which is primarily distinguished by its practice-orientedness and populism. This practice-orientedness is particularly evident in its focus on methodologies and paths for spiritual practice. "Li Tongxuan engaged in practicing the 'Contemplation of Integration of the Three Saints' [三聖圓融觀] at Fangshan [方山] in Shouyang [壽陽] County, a southern hub of the Wutaishan Buddhist cultural landscape, and also practiced the 'Contemplation of Jewel-Colored Radiance [寶色光明觀]'" (Kojima 2000, p. 14). Both the "Contemplation of the Integration of the Three Saints" and the "Contemplation of Jewel-Colored Radiance" (also known as the "Contemplation of the Buddha's Radiance 佛光觀") are prominently represented in the Huayan Grotto in Anyue.

The "Contemplation of Integration of the Three Saints" is vividly represented through the statues of these deities carved on the main wall of the Huayan Grotto. In Li Tongxuan's *A Brief Interpretation on the Casuistry of the Practice Sequence in the New Commentaries on the Avatamsaka Sutra* 略釋新華嚴經修行次第決疑論, the core ideas of the *Avatamsaka Sutra* are elucidated from a practical standpoint, with a consistent emphasis on the pivotal role of the Three Saints in meditation. Li asserts, "Moreover, Manjusri, Samanta-bhadra, and Vairocana are all equal in essence and form, and this is called the One Vehicle [ekayāna 一乘]. Those who have newly awakened the Bodhi mind should believe, observe, practice, and attain enlightenment in this way" (T. Li 1983b, Jueyilun, p. 1014a). Furthermore, Li emphasizes, "Practitioners should always take three methodologies represented

by Manjusri, Vairocana, and Samanta-bhadra as the fundamental ways throughout their cultivation. Some practitioners, although having the aspiration to attain Buddhahood, are often engrossed in a single way and lose sight of the further cultivation" (T. Li 1983b, Juey-ilun, p. 1013b). To illustrate this point, Li compares the Three Saints to signposts along the main path: "The fundamental wisdom of Manjusri and Vairocana, combined with the discriminative wisdom of Samanta-bhadra, constitutes the essence of spiritual practice. By emulating these deities, practitioners can avoid losing their way, falling into doubt, or experiencing disorders in their cultivation. They serve as signposts along the main path, guiding travelers to dispel their doubts" (T. Li 1983b, Jueyilun, p. 1048c). Notably, the roles of Manjusri and Samanta-bhadra vary at different stages of practice. "At the stage of Ten Faiths 十信 up to the Five Levels 五位 of bodhisattva cultivation, Manjusri serves as the primary guide for selection and direction, with Samanta-bhadra as the assistant. However, upon attaining buddhahood, the roles reverse, with Samanta-bhadra becoming the primary guide and Manjusri taking a supporting role" (T. Li 1983b, Jueyilun, pp. 1046a, 1046b). Undoubtedly, the statues of the Three Saints in the Huayan Grotto serve as objects of contemplation for practitioners. Throughout the entire process of Huayan practice, Vairocana, Manjusri, and Samanta-bhadra always play a guiding role. Thus, the magnificent statues of the Three Saints of the Huayan School are prominently placed at the front of the main wall of the Huayan Grotto, ready to inspire and guide practitioners to "observe in this way".

The "Contemplation of the Buddha's Radiance" is embodied by the Vairocana Buddha in the "Ten Assemblies" depicted on the upper sections of the left and right walls. This contemplative practice is a methodology peculiar to the Huayan School, which was widely prevalent in the Wutaishan region. Monks such as Jietuo 解脱 (561–642) and his disciple Mingya 明曜 (558–?), from Foguang 佛光 Mountain in the Wutaishan area, were renowned practitioners of this method. Li Tongxuan, another figure connected with the Wutaishan cultural milieu, was evidently influenced by this tradition and coined it as the "Contemplation of Jewel-Colored Radiance". He held the belief that the radiance emanating from the Buddha's body serves as a guiding beacon for practitioners, and the sequential order of this radiation is linked to that of the practice in the Huayan School, so it cannot be disrupted. As Siksānanda noted, "In discussing the ways of radiating, there exist ten distinct ways, each representing Ten Faiths, Ten Abidings 十住, Ten Conducts 十行, Ten Redirections 十回向, and Ten Stages 十地 in a sequential order of cause and effect. This arrangement is immutable, contrasting sharply with the Buddha's radiance in other sects" (Siksānanda 1993, scroll 3, vol. 5, p. 700b). The orderly depiction of the radiating parts of the Buddha's body in the Huayan Grotto aligns with Li's conception. Furthermore, Li enumerated specific correspondences between the Buddha's radiance and the sequence of practice, stating, "Initially, ten kinds of light radiate from between the teeth, glorifying all mandalas within the Dharma realm, thereby marking the initial attainment of enlightenment" (T. Li 1983c, Jing Lun, p. 738a).

The sculptures depicting "Ten Assemblies in Ten Locations" and "Sudhana's Pilgrimages" in the Huayan Grotto illustrate the five-level spiritual practice path of the Huayan School, which refers to Ten Abidings, Ten Conducts, Ten Redirections, Ten Stages, and the Eleventh Stages 十一地. Li Tongxuan equates this five-level practice path with the teachings imparted by the bodhisattvas in the Ten Locations and Sudhana's pilgrimages to seek out spiritual mentors (*kalyanamitra*). For instance, "in the Fourth Assembly at the Suyāma Heaven, the ten bodhisattvas, including Bodhisattva Guṇa-vana, each expound a unique way to enlightenment, collectively forming the ten-conduct ways. This is analogous to Sudhana's southward journey to the Three-Eyed Kingdom, where he encounters monk Shanzhu 善住 and ten subsequent spiritual mentors. Each of these mentors practices the

ten conduct ways as expounded by Bodhisattva Guṇa-vana in the scriptures” (T. Li 1983c, Jing Lun, p. 751a). Together with Manjusri (the bodhisattva who inspires faith), Maitreya (the embodiment of perfection), and Samanta-bhadra (the personification of Buddhist conduct), they constitute a holistic process of Huayan practice. The primary purpose of carving these sculptures in the Huayan Grotto is to demonstrate the intricate steps of Huayan practice for practitioners. As Li Tongxuan notes, “The *Avatamsaka Sutra* contains ways, yet few seek to learn them. Therefore, Sudhana is instructed to inquire about and sequentially carry out each way, as previously stated in the sutra. Merely discussing these ways may lead to confusion in practice. Hence, Sudhana is tasked with personally practicing each of them sequentially, ensuring that future practitioners encounter no obstacles” (T. Li 1983c, Jing Lun, p. 751c).

4.2. On the Spiritual Practice and Cultivation of Perfect Enlightenment

During the mid-to-late Tang Dynasty, when Zongmi lived, the Huayan School was undergoing an ideological shift, transitioning from abstract theory to practical cultivation. Zongmi emerged as a pivotal figure who aligned with this trend and actively promoted this transformation. He “discovered in the *Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment* the path of spiritual practice urgently needed in teaching Huayan Buddhism at that time” (Gong 2018, p. 89).

The *Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment* is intended to illuminate the path to Buddhahood for all sentient beings through the dialectical exchange between the Buddha and the Bodhisattvas of Perfect Enlightenment, thereby encompassing extensive teachings on spiritual practice. As a scholar-monk oriented towards spiritual practice, Zongmi emphasized repeatedly in his commentary on this sutra the indispensable unity of knowledge and action. He stated, “By acknowledging the deficiencies stemming from a lack of practice, one has awakened to the significance of practice and subsequently inquiries into the methods of practice arise. How, then, can one permanently discern through illusions? It is said: Mere aspiration to comprehend the ultimate truth, without engaging in diverse practices, cannot ultimately lead to a pure mind” (Zongmi 1983b, Lueshu, scroll 1, p. 537a). Zongmi’s thought on spiritual practice is epitomized in his *Rituals for Cultivating and Verifying the Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment in Bodhimandalas* 圓覺經道場修證儀, and the Huayan Grotto is meticulously arranged as “a mandala dedicated to cultivate the *Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment*”.

According to the *Ritual*, the first of the seven gateways is “Encouraging Practice” 勸修: “Images of Vairocana, Manjushri, and Samanta-bhadra should be displayed to encourage practitioners to gaze upon these images with reverence, contemplate deeply within their hearts, offer sincere worship, confess their sins with earnestness, and make solemn vows” (Zongmi, *Xiuzheng Yi*, p. 723a). The magnificent and exquisite statues of the Three Saints, carved on the main wall of the Huayan Grotto, serve as objects of admiration, contemplation, prostration, and confession, fostering the development of faith among practitioners. The fifth gateway, “Requirements for Practice 具緣”, stipulates that meditation (*dhyāna* 禪定) requires a tranquil and secluded environment. It lists three suitable locations for meditation: “first, a remote mountainous area where no one ventures; second, a hermitage situated at least three *li* 里 away from human settlements and devoid of disturbing noises such as those from grazing animals; and third, a pure and serene Buddhist temple far removed from layman’s dwellings” (Zongmi, *Xiuzheng Yi*, p. 728b). Considering the location and environment of the Huayan Grotto, it does not fit the description of either a remote mountain or a pure Buddhist temple, but rather aligns well with the second option, a hermitage. The sixth gateway, “Preparations of the Place 嚴處”, reiterates that “one must first choose a simple and quiet place as the mandala for practice, free from noise, filth, and obstacles, as mentioned previously in ‘Requirements for Practice’” (Zongmi, *Xiuzheng Yi*,

p. 729a). This gateway also elaborates on the offerings to the Three Saints: “An image of Vairocana should be placed in the center, with images of Samanta-bhadra and Manjushri on either side, forming the Three Saints. Lotus lamps should be lit, and incense should be burned. All utensils used for offerings must be clean and do not need to be precious” (Zongmi, *Xiuzheng Yi*, p. 729a). A rectangular wooden-imitating table is placed in front of the main wall of the Huayan Grotto (Sichuan daxue kaogu wenbo xueyuan et al. 2021, pp. 55–56). Although the table is now empty, one can envision the lotus lamps, incense burners, and other offerings that were placed on it during the rituals. The positioning of the table in front of Vairocana, Manjushri, and Samanta-bhadra aligns perfectly with the descriptions of the offerings to the Three Saints outlined in the *Ritual*.

The specific activities engaged in by practitioners in the past are no longer observable, yet the Huayan Grotto offers insight into the overall configuration of the mandala recorded in the *Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment* through material relics, particularly in aspects such as site selection, statue arrangement, and offering settings. The *Ritual* promotes a path of spiritual practice that integrates confession rituals 禮懺 with meditation. Within this unique mandala, practitioners of Perfect Enlightenment are not required to concentrate their minds and imagine; rather, the objects of their prayer, contemplation, and prostration are tangibly present around them. Performing confession rituals or engaging in meditation practices beneath the majestic or compassionate gaze of Vairocana and the Twelve Bodhisattvas of Perfect Enlightenment must constitute an unparalleled and profound spiritual practice experience.

The spiritual practice detailed in the *Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment*, such as confession rituals and meditation, serves as a complement to the spiritual practice outlined in the *Avatamsaka Sutra*. In his *Annotated Abbreviated Commentary on the Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment*, Zongmi acknowledges the profound and extensive doctrines of the *Avatamsaka Sutra* while criticizing its complexity, noting that it is less accessible to beginners than the *Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment*. Zongmi remarks, “Given its numerous volumes and intricate doctrines, it is challenging for those who have newly awakened the bodhi mind to delve deeply into it. It is akin to precious treasures in the ocean, hard to obtain” (Zongmi 1993, Lueshu Chao, p. 212b). The mandala of Perfect Enlightenment was initially established for practitioners with lesser or duller wisdom roots 根. Zongmi emphasizes, “A mandala serves as a necessary practice enhancer for those with lesser wisdom roots before they formally embark on their spiritual journey” (Zongmi 1983a, Lueshu, scroll 1b, p. 539a). He further elucidates the significance of the mandala for such practitioners: “The mandala is where one attains enlightenment. It is a place where one vows and resolves to make the necessary preparations within a specified time to seek and attain the truth. Known as ‘jiaxing’ 加行 [practice enhancer], it provides a disciplined and restrictive environment for practitioners with lesser wisdom roots, who may have many distractions and an unsettled mind. By entering the mandala, they can enhance the effectiveness of their spiritual practice” (Zongmi, Lueshu, scroll 2b, p. 571a). The realm of Huayan Buddhism demands high standards from its practitioners. Chengguan, in his preface to the *Commentary*, states, “Even Bodhisattvas who cultivate all forms of practice may still perish at the Dragon Gate [龍門], indicating that the realm of Huayan can only be attained by those possessing great wisdom and morality” (Chongxian and Keqin 1983, p. 193a). The mandala not only offers diverse practices such as confession rituals and meditation but also tailors suitable ways to enlightenment for practitioners with different wisdom roots. The practice advocated in Zongmi’s *Ritual*, combined with the Huayan practice dominated by Li Tongxuan’s thought, constitutes the entirety of practices embodied in the Huayan Grotto.

The Three Saints of the Huayan School, depicted on the main wall of the Huayan Grotto, stand together, overseeing the progression of Huayan Buddhist practice on the

one hand, and functioning as the principal deities of veneration in the mandala of Perfect Enlightenment on the other. The verse that “All phenomena emanate from the mind only” serves as a constant reminder to all practitioners that the “mind” is the key to their practice. The splendid radiance of the Buddha in the sculptures of “Ten Assemblies in Ten Locations” guides the “mind” in cultivating faith and achieving enlightenment. Meanwhile, “Sudhana’s fifty-three pilgrimages” illustrate the whole process of Huayan spiritual practice, encompassing the five sequential levels of spiritual advancement to Buddhahood. The Twelve Bodhisattvas of Perfect Enlightenment, smiling and gazing down, bear witness to the grand confession rituals in the mandala and the meditation of practitioners, each of whom pursues their own path to perfect enlightenment. Those possessing superior wisdom roots are more suited to Huayan spiritual practice, whereas those with lesser wisdom roots may find greater reliance on the rituals of the mandala of Perfect Enlightenment. In light of this, it is evident that the statues and sculptures in the Huayan Grotto are all arranged with the intent of facilitating spiritual practice. Undeniably, the primary objective in constructing the grotto was to aid in the spiritual practice of Huayan Buddhism.

5. Conclusions

In summary, the Huayan Grotto in Anyue serves as a sacred sanctuary constructed by the Liu-Zhao sect, adhering to the prevalent theories on Huayan Buddhism during the Song Dynasties. The sculptures and inscriptions in the grotto are the condensed manifestations of the Huayan thoughts of Patriarch Li Tongxuan and Zongmi of Guifeng. The towering statues of the two esteemed patriarchs of the Huayan School at the left and right ends of the grotto’s main wall, the statues of the Three Saints of the Huayan School, the inscriptions of the “mind-only” verse, and the tableaux illustrating “Ten Assemblies in Ten Locations” and “Sudhana’s Pilgrimages” on the upper sections of the left and right walls were all meticulously carved in accordance with Li Tongxuan’s interpretations of Huayan Buddhism. The Twelve Bodhisattvas of Perfect Enlightenment, located on the middle lower sections of the left and right walls, are closely linked to Zongmi’s theories on Huayan Buddhism. The Huayan Grotto not only functions as a comprehensive repository of the theories on Huayan Buddhism that were prevalent during the Song Dynasties but also offers two distinct paths of Huayan practice tailored to practitioners of varying wisdom roots. Talented practitioners may engage in the “Contemplation of Integration of the Three Saints” and the “Contemplation of the Buddha’s Radiance”, as advocated by Li Tongxuan, in the sequential five levels of spiritual advancement towards Buddhahood. Conversely, less talented practitioners, enhanced by the mandala, can attain Buddhahood through meditation and confession rituals, as espoused by Zongmi.

The Huayan Grotto, sponsored by the Liu-Zhao sect, stands out as the pivotal element of its sculptural landscape, preeminent among the grottoes of the Sichuan–Chongqing region in terms of scale, artistic merit, thematic uniqueness, doctrinal intricacy, and meticulous design and planning. The constructors of the grotto demonstrated a profound grasp of the Huayan School’s mainstream ideas, suggesting that the Liu-Zhao sect was adept in scriptural studies, engaged in doctrinal exploration, and emphasized spiritual cultivation. This reverses the previous misconception of the sect as lacking in profound theoretical understanding and is of immense significance in unveiling the authentic nature of the Liu-Zhao sect. In the history of Chinese Buddhist art, the Huayan Grotto is unparalleled, featuring distinctive themes and combinations that intentionally integrate monks and laymen, the thoughts of Huayan and Perfect Enlightenment, theory and practice, as well as tradition and innovation. This underscores the Liu-Zhao sect’s inclusiveness and innovation. The Huayan Grotto and its sponsor, the Liu-Zhao sect, represent a classic example of Buddhism’s localization in East Asia.

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Notes

- ¹ Su Dogpo-style is a kind of hat style in Song Dynasty, named after Su Shi (also called Dongpo Jushi) who used to wear. The kind of hat is square in shape with obvious edges. It consists of four walls, and there are walls outside. The heights of the outer walls account for two-thirds of the inner walls. The literati of the Song Dynasty were very fond of wearing this hat.
- ² Liu-Zhao sect is a locally influential Buddhist sect active in the Eastern Sichuan during the late Southern Song Dynasty (1200–1240). The sect was founded by the monk Zhao Zhifeng, who promoted the Buddhist practitioner Liu Juzhi as the spiritual leader. This sect absorbed and integrated the ideas of prominent Buddhist schools, and its main goal is to promote the followers to become Buddha through a series of practices. This sect mainly propagates teachings and attracts believers through statues, thus leaving a large number of grotto remains in Anyue and Dazu.
- ³ The first Chinese character is weathered, with only a few strokes remaining visible. Li Guanzhi recognizes the weathered character as “那” (G. Li 1994, p. 41), but the two characters “那略” make no sense as the title of a sutra. See Li Guanzhi.

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