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# The Expansion of Early Buddhism in Yunnan: The Grottoes of Shibaoshan

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# THE EXPANSION OF EARLY BUDDHISM IN YUNNAN: THE GROTTUES OF SHIBAOSHAN

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Fall 2012

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## ABSTRACT

The expansion of Buddhism from India into China followed several different routes, one of which was the Southern Silk Road. The cosmopolitan nature of this crossroads between India, the Tubo Empire of Tibet, the Nanzhao Kingdom in the Erhai region, and the Tang dynasty in China greatly impacted the types of Buddhist sites constructed during this time period.

Buddhism also took on new characteristics from the local ethnic groups in the Erhai region, particularly the Bai ethnic minority. The grottoes of Shibaoshan are one of these early Buddhist sites in Yunnan that reflect the integration of traditional Indian and Tibetan themes, foreign presences in Yunnan, and local Bai beliefs. This paper also looks at how Buddhism has been integrated with local beliefs through stories and briefly touches on its role in Bai religious ceremonies today.

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## INTRODUCTION

The goal of this paper was to take a look at how early Buddhism entered into Yunnan and the way it was adopted into already present belief systems in the area around Dali and Erhai. I began this independent study project with a literature review of the regional trade routes, particularly the Southwest Silk Road and the Tea and Horse Caravan Route, and studied more about the different styles of Buddhism in the region.

My methodology for conducting this fieldwork was to split my time between my two main field sites: Sideng Village in the Shaxi Valley and Spring Village in the Dali plain; as well as conducting both informal and formal interviews<sup>1</sup>. Both of my main field sites' populations were mainly of the Bai ethnic minority in Yunnan. I conducted my research within the Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture west of Kunming. Jianchuan County, which encompasses the Shaxi Valley, is composed of approximately 90% of the Bai ethnic minority while the Dali Plain. While living in Lamp Village I was lucky enough to be able to observe several traditional Bai ethnic minority ceremonies that helped me understand the local version of Buddhism and its incorporation into the local religion a little better. We used Dali Old Town as our main base of operations while exploring the Dali Plain.

Due to time and financial restrictions, some elements of the research were a little difficult. This was mostly a problem with visiting the Three Pagodas Cultural

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<sup>1</sup> Spring Village and peoples' names are pseudonyms unless they are a famous place such as the Stone Bell Temple grottoes, Shibaoshan, or Dali Old Town.

Park in Dali and the Stone Bell Temple grottos in Shaxi due to the high price of the admission ticket. I was restricted to only visiting each park once in order to adhere to my proposed research budget. This was slightly detrimental to my research since I was forced to analyze some of the grottoes from online pictures since I was not allowed to take photos of the grottoes and had a small amount of time I could visit the grottoes due to the length of time it took to hike to the grottoes in the mountains and back from Lamp Village. Fortunately I had much more time to visit the Three Pagodas Cultural Park in Dali Old Town, so even though I was only able to go once financially, I had more time to take thorough notes of the artifacts in the exhibition halls.

In addition to visiting these historical sites, I also spent a good portion of my research trying to understand the local practices of Buddhism within the Bai ethnic minority. While in Lamp Village I was able to learn about the practice of Azhili Buddhism and how it coexisted and merged with the local Bai minority religion, *Benzhu*, that was in the area prior to Buddhism's expansion into Yunnan. This was mainly through observing the role of Buddhism in the traditional sending-off ceremony as well as visiting the local *Benzhu* temple and making note of the Buddhist elements and figures present in the shrines. I also visited Buddhist and *Benzhu* in Spring Village on the Dali Plain.

While in both field sites I attempted to build a relationship with several local individuals. These relationships were invaluable for learning about local histories and legends that helped explain some of the figures present at the historical sites and in local Buddhist and *Benzhu* temples. The local histories and legends show the

integrated relationship of Buddhism and *Benzhu*, which in turn reflects the development of Azhili Buddhism as a way of resolving and integrating the two belief systems.

The study of Azhili Buddhism and these historical sites such as the Stone Grottoes of Shibaoshan and the Three Pagoda Cultural Park also helps to illuminate the historical relationship between Yunnan, Tibet, Tang Dynasty China, and India. Analysis of the material artifacts at each site shows influence from different areas in the region, such as clothing or particular objects like bells or pestles. Azhili Buddhism takes different elements from the various cultures around Yunnan and integrates them into its practices and art styles. This shows the cosmopolitan nature of the region and how the historical interaction in this region served to shape people's beliefs.



## THE HISTORIC YUNNAN AND THE SOUTHWEST SILK ROAD

### An Introduction to the Southwest Silk Road

As early as the second century B.C.E., the Southwest, Overland, and Maritime Silk Roads were circulating exotic goods and new ideas between Tibet, China, Central Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia.<sup>2</sup> These three routes not only circulated exotic goods such as ivory, silk, salt, tea, horses, jade, and precious metals, they also spread new ideas. The Southwest Silk Road (*Xi'non Sichou Zhilu*, 西南丝绸之路) has a couple names, for example: the South Silk Road (*Nanfang Sichou Zhilu*, 南方丝绸之路), the Southern Overland Route (*Nanfang Lushang Zhilu*, 南方路上之路), the Yunnan-Burma-India Ancient Road (*Dianmianyin Gudao*, 滇缅印古道)<sup>3</sup>, the Sichuan to India road (*Shuyandu Dao*)<sup>4</sup>, or the Shu Cloth Road (*Shubu Zhilu*, 属布之路)<sup>3</sup>.

The Southwest Silk Road's main section was the Sichuan-Yunnan-Burma-India Road (*Chuandianmianyin Dao*, 川滇缅印道 / *Shuyandu Dao*) with three smaller branches: the Yunnan-Vietnam Road, the Yunnan-Laos, Thailand, and Cambodia Road, and the Yunnan/Sichuan-Tibet-India Road. Each of these sections of the Southwest Silk Road was in use at different times that sometimes overlapped. This

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<sup>2</sup> Yang, Bin. "The Southwest Silk Road: Yunnan in a Global Context." *Between Winds and Clouds*. Columbia University Press, 2008. 1-44.

<sup>3</sup> *Dian* (滇) refers to the Dian Kingdom in Yunnan, *Mian* (緬) refers to Burma, *Yin* (印) refers to India; *Gudao* (古道) means ancient route.

<sup>4</sup> *Shu* (蜀) refers to the Shu Kingdom (200-263 CE) in Sichuan.

paper will be focusing more on the exchange of ideas through the Sichuan-Yunnan-Burma-India Road (Figure 1) and the Yunnan-Tibet Road (Figure 2) and its impacts on how Buddhism was practiced in the Dali area.

## **The Political and Social Climate of Yunnan and its Neighbors**

The Southwest Silk reached its height in about the sixth century CE and created a network of interaction between Yunnan, India, Southeast Asia, Tibet and China. Around 650 CE King Xinuluo (653-674 CE), with the support of Tang China (618-907 CE) and Tibet, unified the six states in Yunnan by under the Meng-she state, also known as the southern state (*Nan zhao*, 南诏).<sup>56</sup> This new kingdom was known as the Nanzhao Kingdom and its king was given the title “Prince of Yunnan (云南王)” by the Tang court. The Nanzhao Kingdom (653-902 CE) was a periodic vassal state to the Tang court, but also sometimes allied itself with the Tubo Empire in Tibet (618-841 CE) particularly when Chinese officials were abusing their power in Yunnan. The Chinese considered those groups living on the peripheries of the empire as primitive and referred to the people living in Yunnan as the “Southwestern Barbarians (西南夷)” in the *Shiji* (史记), the record of the grand

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<sup>5</sup> Yang, 2008: Ch.1, p.10.

<sup>6</sup> Triratna. “Kings and Dynasties of Yunnan.” Triratna <http://resources.triratna.info/Yunnan-Dynasties.html> (accessed December 6, 2012).

historian.<sup>7</sup> When the Tang established a vassal relationship with the Nanzhao Kingdom

The Nanzhao Kingdom and Tibet reached the height of their power in the 8<sup>th</sup> century and were in their period of closest contact during this time. The Tibetan Tubo Empire controlled northwestern Yunnan and communications between Yunnan and India often went through the northwest branch of the Tea and Horse Caravan Route due to the close relationship between Yunnan and Tibet.<sup>8</sup> Both kingdoms were in an active alliance against the Chinese between 752 and 789 CE.<sup>9</sup> The Nanzhao Kingdom under King Geluofeng (748-778 CE) was even able to rout two attempted invasions by the Tang, one in 751 and the other in 754 CE, with the help of the Tibetans.<sup>10</sup>

During the mid-8<sup>th</sup> century the Nanzhao Kingdom reached its largest area, building a tributary system reaching into mainland Southeast Asia.<sup>11</sup> This network as well as the close relationship with the Tibetan Empire meant that there was a large amount of material and ideological exchange throughout the region. There is a local legend that the founder of Nanzhao was a grandson of King Asoka of West Tianzhu in India.<sup>12</sup> King Asoka had nine grandsons: the eldest was the ancestor of the sixteen states in ancient India, the second was the ancestor of the Tubo in Tibet, the third was the ancestor of the Han people, the fourth was the ancestor of the

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<sup>7</sup> Yang, 2008: Ch.1, p.4.

<sup>8</sup> Yang, 2008: Ch.2, p.10.

<sup>9</sup> Chapin, Helen B. "Yunnanese Images of Avalokitesvara." *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 8, no. 2 (August 1944): 172-173.

<sup>10</sup> Shizhong Temple, Grotto No.2: "Geluofeng, the 5<sup>th</sup> king of Nanzhao"

<sup>11</sup> Yang, 2008: Ch.1, p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> Yang, 2008: Ch.2, p.5.

Eastern Barbarians (probably the ethnic peoples in modern Guizhou), the fifth was the ancestor of the Mengshe zhao (later the Nanzhao Kingdom), the sixth was the ancestor of the Lion Kingdom (Ceylon), the seventh was the ancestor of the Jiaozhi (North Vietnam), the eighth was the ancestor of the Baizi Kingdom (local kingdom replaced by the Nanzhao Kingdom), and finally the ninth was the ancestor of the Baiyi (the Tai people). This legend emphasized the fact that the Nanzhao Kingdom saw all these various ethnic groups in the region as fraternal brothers within a cross-boundary worldview.<sup>13</sup>

## **Buddhism's Expansion into Yunnan**

By the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> century, around 227 monks were calculated to have traveled between China and Indian and many of them would have taken the Sichuan-Yunnan-Burma-India Road.<sup>14</sup> Many Indian monks traveled into Yunnan and China through Upper Burma, bringing with them Southeast Asian and Indian influences. Most of the monks traveling to India went through Yunnan and Tibet where they received exposure to Tibetan Tantric/Esoteric Buddhism. This close relationship between China, Yunnan, Tibet, Burma, and India was reflected in the development of Buddhism in Yunnan. I will primarily be focusing on the impact that Tibetan Tantric/Esoteric Buddhism, Indian Buddhism, and Mahayana Buddhism have had on the development of Azhili Buddhism in the Dali area.

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<sup>13</sup> Yang, 2008: Ch.2, p.6.

<sup>14</sup> Yang, 2008: Ch.2, p.16.

## BUDDHISM AND THE SOUTHWEST SILK ROAD

### Buddhism During the Nanzhao Kingdom Era

Although Buddhism arrived later in the course of the Nanzhao Kingdom's history, it played such a significant role that it overtook Daoism as the state religion and nine out of the 22 kings gave up their thrones to become Buddhist monks<sup>15</sup>.

#### *Three Pagodas Cultural Park and the Chongsheng Monastery*

Excavations around the famous Three Pagodas of Dali and the previously destroyed Chongsheng Monastery have yielded many artifacts that show the influence Tibetan and Indian Buddhism had on the Nanzhao and Dali Kingdoms, for example Tibetan-style bells and *vajras* (ceremonial pestles) (Figures 4 and 5). One of the most famous artifacts found during the renovation of the Three Pagodas was a golden bird with a brilliant peacock-like tail. In India, the golden *hamsa* (goose) is the symbol of the solar spirit and the universal Buddha-heart<sup>16</sup>. According to Chapin, the goose's cry is also similar to the role of the Buddha's "cock-crow" and lion's roar" as the Awakener in which the Truth is proclaimed. The golden bird and the Nanzhao period Avalokitesvara figurines also refer to a legend about the establishment of the Nanzhao Kingdom.

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<sup>15</sup> Huang, Yinwu. *Reading Time in Shaxi*. 1<sup>st</sup> ed. Kunming: Yunnan Nationalities House, 2009, 81.

<sup>16</sup> Chapin, 1944: 156.

## *Mythological Origins of the Nanzhao Kingdom*

The story begins that during the period Yung-hui (65-656 CE) an old Indian monk with a beautiful beard, wearing a red lotus turban and a surplice and holding a bowl came to the house of Xinuluo (细奴逻) in Meng-she to beg for food. Xinuluo was said to be the descendant of *Meng Judu* (蒙苴笃), the fifth son of King Asoka of the Magadha Kingdom in India under the Western skies.<sup>17</sup> Around 630 CE, Xinuluo fled with his father from the Ailao (哀牢) and came to the Meng-she River and ploughed at the foot of the Weishan Mountains.

One day an old monk with a handsome beard, capped by a red lotus turban, wearing a surplice and carrying a begging bowl, came to Xinuluo's begging for food. Xinuluo and his son, Luoshengyan (逻盛炎), were ploughing at the foot of Weishan at the time, so when Xinuluo and Luoshengyan's wives came to bring them food they saw the monk. The women fed the monk and returned home to cook food again for their husbands. However, the monk still stayed there and did not go away. The second time the women went to bring their husbands food the monk met them halfway and again begged for food. The women again fed the monk and returned home to cook food once more.

The third time they returned with food, the two women came upon the monk at Weishan. The monk was seated on a rock and before him was a blue-green ox, to the left, a white elephant, and to the right was a white horse. He was canopied by an

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<sup>17</sup> Chapin, 1944: 148.

aura of clouds and there was two boys in the clouds: one holding an iron staff to the left and one holding a square, gold mirror to the right. The women again offered the monk the food they had prepared and the monk asked them what they desired.

They did not know what to say so the monk said, “Your descendants will follow one after another (on the throne).” After the ladies hurried away, Xinuluo and the others came up, but only saw a man holding a bowl, seated among five-colored clouds and only the marks of his clothes and the footprints of the ox, elephant, and horse were left on the rock. From that time on Xinuluo had extraordinarily good luck.

Later on when the King of Jianning Kingdom decided to recast the iron pillar of White Cliff (白崖), the whole community came to make offerings to the pillar. When they came the bird carved out of gold at the top of the pillar suddenly was able to fly and landed on Xinuluo’s shoulder. All the people were forbidden to move, but then after eight days it went away. Everyone there took the animation of the golden bird as a sign from Heaven that Xinuluo was meant to rule and the King of Jianning consequently married Xinuluo to his daughter and the whole realm obeyed him.

The Indian monk that is said to have established the Nanzhao Kingdom and have brought Buddhism to Yunnan is known as “the Avalokitesvara Who Founded the Kingdom” (建国观世音)<sup>18</sup>. Chapin argues that the belief of the Yunnanese that divine beings walk the earth in human form is similar to the belief by Tibetans in divine incarnations, such as the “living Buddhas.” The Indian monk wears a red

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<sup>18</sup> Chapin, 1944: 153.

lotus turban that represents the red lotus, an attribute of Avalokitesvara. It is even believed that this Indian monk is the origin of the image cast of Avalokitesvara, particularly in the previous Chongsheng Monastery prior to the fire that destroyed it. This image of Avalokitesvara in the main hall of the Chongsheng Monastery was known as the “Rain-copper Kuan-yin<sup>19</sup>,” after the story of the unfinished statue turning to copper after a sudden rainstorm and white light extending from it for three days and three nights.<sup>20</sup> The monk was said to have been the incarnation of Avalokitesvara and inspired the image of the bodhisattva with his right hand in a *vitarka* or *vyakhyana-mudra*. The *mudra* gesture is a traditional Indian symbol of consolatory grace and the promise of rebirth in the Western Paradise of Amitabha Buddha through Avalokitesvara’s grace.<sup>21</sup> Avalokitesvara is also described as wearing thin, flowing robes with scarves tied in a loop on each hip, a jeweled belt ornamented with flowers, armlets and one bracelet on the right arm. His hair is piled like a crown on his head with Amitabha Buddha in an ornament. Avalokitesvara’s earlobes are long from being pulled down by large earrings. Many of the images made of Avalokitesvara in Yunnan all emulate this image from this story (Figure 3).

### *Other Temples from the Nanzhao Kingdom Era in the Dali Plain*

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<sup>19</sup> “Kuan-yin,” or *Guanyin* (观音) is the Chinese name for Avalokitesvara.

<sup>20</sup> Chapin, 1944: 159.

<sup>21</sup> Chapin, 1944: 144-145.



Jizushan is a spiritual mountain that previously had nunneries established on it from the Three-Kingdoms era<sup>22</sup>. The nunneries were expanded with the founding of the Nanzhao Kingdom and the first monasteries were constructed. Over the next thousand years, more monasteries were constructed until there were finally 108, a holy Buddhist number. Various wars and the Red Guard during the Cultural Revolution reduced the amount of monasteries down to just one, the Zhushang Temple, and the Longyun Pagoda also somewhat survived. Other early Buddhist sites that have managed to survive are the Gantong Temple and the Zhonghe Temple in the Cangshan Mountains. Gantong Temple has the most popular Avalokitesvara temple in the vicinity. People generally visit the temple on the 19<sup>th</sup> day of the 3<sup>rd</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, and 9<sup>th</sup> months for Avalokitesvara's special days.

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<sup>22</sup> Goodman, Jim. "Heirs to Nanzhao: Dali and the Bai," *Yunnan: China South of the Clouds*. Hong Kong: Odyssey Publications, 2009. 320.

## THE GROTTOS OF STONE BELL TEMPLE

### Introduction to the Stone Bell Temple Grottoes

The grottoes of the Stone Bell Temple were constructed from 850 CE to 1179 CE during the Nanzhao Kingdom period and into the Dali Kingdom period.<sup>23</sup> There are seventeen grottoes in total with about 140 figures. The grottoes were a place where Buddhist monks could practice their religion and one of the grottoes also serves as a place for *Benzhu* fertility rituals.<sup>24</sup> The artwork of the grottoes not only depicts Buddhist figures, but also the courtly life of the Nanzhao Kingdom. One of the grottoes, for example, depicts the sixth king of the Nanzhao Kingdom, King Yimouxun (779-808), renegotiating the alliance between the Nanzhao Kingdom and Tang Dynasty China after 40 years of separation between the two. The grottoes also show the cultural exchange between Yunnan, Tibet, China, Southeast Asia, and Southwest Asia through each regions' influence on the art and figures portrayed.

### Indian Influences on the “Sweet Dew” Avalokitesvara

Grotto No.7 depicts Avalokitesvara, the Lord of Compassion, with a combination of Indian and Chinese influences on the artwork. Avalokitesvara in the Indian Buddhist tradition is the spiritual son of Amitabha Buddha of the Western Paradise, however, in the Chinese Mahayana Buddhist tradition Avalokitesvara is

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<sup>23</sup> Lu Yuan. “Stone Bell Temple Grottoes Visit.” Lecture, Shibaoshan, Jianchuan County, Dali Prefecture, Yunnan Province, China, October 24, 2012.

<sup>24</sup> Shizhong Temple, Shibaoshan, Jianchuan County, Dali Prefecture, Yunnan Province, China. November 14, 2012.

depicted as a woman. The grotto shows a feminine Avalokitesvara seated on a lotus pedestal holding her heart in her right hand and a bowl in her left. Avalokitesvara wears thin, flowing robes and bracelets on the each arm. Her hair is piled on top of her head like a crown in the form of a Indian *jata-makuta* and has the ornament with Amitabha Buddha in the center. Avalokitesvara's ear lobes are long and pulled down with round, heavy earrings.

One main difference between this Avalokitesvara and older Indian images is that the bodhisattva is female rather than male, showing the influence that Chinese culture had on this image. Avalokitesvara also has a round halo around her head and is seated on a flat stone above a lotus pedestal, which is not present in older images of Avalokitesvara. These halos and lotus pedestals are influences from Han Mahayana Buddhist and Tibetan Tantric Buddhist depictions.<sup>25</sup>

## **Tibetan Tantric Buddhist Influences in the Hall of the Heavenly Kings**

While the "Sweet Dew" Avalokitesvara grotto showed more of the combination of Chinese and Indian influences on the artwork, Grotto No.6 The Hall of the Heavenly Kings showed more of the influences from Tibetan Tantric Buddhism. In the center of the grotto there is a carving of Sakyamuni Buddha flanked by his two disciples, Ananda and Kasyapa. On either side of the central niche are the eight Heavenly Kings or *Vidyarajas*, wrathful saviors committed to the

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<sup>25</sup> Chapin, 1944: 145.

salvation of mankind but angry because of mankind's indifference to Buddha's law (Figure 7).<sup>26</sup>

Flanking the Eight Heavenly Kings there are two Guardian Kings: Vaisravana and Virupaksa. Vaisravana looks fearsome with long canines and two large bulging eyes (Figure 8). He has a central eye in his forehead known as an *urna* in Buddhist scripture symbolizing the ability to see into the divine world. Vaisravana also wears a belt of human skulls across his body as well as a human skin around his waist. These depictions of horrific or mortifying images in Buddhist art show the influence that Tibetan Tantric Buddhism had on the art of this grotto. Tibetan Tantric Buddhism emphasizes using violent or terrifying artwork to shock the Buddhist practitioner into realizing the illusionary nature of reality.<sup>27</sup> The other Guardian King Virupaksa also is shown in a position similar to many Tibetan Tantric pieces of art, such as paintings in the Songzanlin Temple in Zhongdian, Yunnan. Virupaksa is depicted here standing on a figure with bulging, wide eyes and fangs.<sup>28</sup> He is also wearing a human skin around his waist like Vaisravana and is holding a staff in one hand.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Minneapolis Institute of Arts. "Buddhism: Who's Who in Heaven?" The Art of Asia. <http://www.artsmia.org/art-of-asia/buddhism/buddhism-whos-who.cfm> (accessed December 5, 2012).

<sup>27</sup> Mortenson, Eric. "Songzanlin Temple Visit." Lecture, Zhongdian, China. November 2, 2012.

<sup>28</sup> I was not able to include a photo of Virupaksa here due to none being available online and not being allowed to take photos during my visit to the grottoes.

<sup>29</sup> The Red Guard had destroyed Vaisravana's staff and hand during the Cultural Revolution like some of the other figures in the grottoes.

## **The Grottoes as Evidence of Regional Cultural Interaction**

The grottoes of Stone Bell Temple serve as one line of evidence for the cultural interaction between the Nanzhao Kingdom, India, Tibet, and Tang Dynasty China. The influence each region's Buddhist beliefs had on the artwork reflects the development of the Nanzhao Kingdom's Buddhist beliefs. Pieces from each sect of Buddhism were incorporated with local Bai minority beliefs to create a new sect of Esoteric Buddhism known as Azhili Buddhism local to the Dali area.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Huang, 2009: 81.

## AZHILI BUDDHISM IN THE DALI AREA

### **The Merging of Local Legends and Buddhism**

#### *Creation Story of the Dali Plain*

When we visited the *Benzhu* temple complex in the Spring Village outside of Dali Old Town we were fortunate to get to informally interview one of the older Bai men, who I will call Blue Cap. Blue Cap gave us the background on why they built a Buddhist temple next to the *Benzhu* temple complex. The Buddhist temple complex has a main building devoted to Avalokitesvara with a smaller building south of the main hall. This second building features both Buddhist and *Benzhu* figures. The main figure is an old man with a long, white beard who wears red and gold robes. He holds a golden orb in one hand and a golden staff in the other. This figure is Hufa, the protector of the entire Dali Plain. When we talked to the Buddhist caretaker of the shrine, Jigong, he called the figure the Buddhist name Zhangjin.

Before Buddhism came into the valley, the Dali Plain was all under Erhai Lake. The Bai people lived in the mountains around the valley and Hufa served as the protector of the people. One day an evil spirit called Luosa began to torment the people living in the mountains by eating out their eyes. Finally Avalokitesvara entered Dali Valley when Buddhism arrived. Avalokitesvara and Hufa joined forces and together were able to subdue Luosa. When they defeated Luosa the water retreated to where Erhai Lake is now and the people were able to come down from the mountains and begin farming crops in the valley.

The god Hufa is the most revered of the 500 figures of *Benzhu* because he is known for protecting the valley after this story. Each of the 19 peaks that form the Jianshan mountain range around Dali valley has a shrine to Hufa at their base. Avalokitesvara also has many temples around the Dali area and also is featured in some of the local *Benzhu* temples, for example the *Benzhu* temple in Sideng Village even had a figure of Avalokitesvara riding a water dragon. The construction of the Chongsheng Monastery and the Three Pagodas are also attributed to this legend about Avalokitesvara and Hufa subduing the water dragon. Legend says that the nature of dragons is to stand in awe of pagodas and to fear *peng* (golden bird/phoenix).<sup>31</sup> The Chongsheng Temple built the three pagodas and the central pagoda was originally topped with *peng* to control the dragons that still live in Erhai Lake.

After Blue Cap told us this story of Avalokitesvara and Luosa he went on to say that Azhili Buddhism is no longer in practice except in Jianchuan and Shaxi Valley. He explained that there used to be a shrine on one of the nearby mountains by Spring Village that used to be a pilgrimage site for Azhili Buddhism. Unfortunately during the Cultural Revolution all the buildings associated with Azhili Buddhism in the area were either destroyed or decommissioned. The only buildings that were spared were associated with more mainstream religions like Mahayana Buddhism (this is in contrast to many Mahayana Buddhist temples that were destroyed elsewhere during the Cultural Revolution). In addition according to Blue Cap, Azhili Buddhism was also taken over by the three larger religions: Mahayana

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<sup>31</sup> Chapin, 1944: 155.

Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism. This is similar to what happened during the Ming Dynasty to Azhili Buddhism in the Shaxi Valley.

### *The Legend of Skeleton Python Pagoda*

Another example of how Buddhism has merged with local legends is the story of the Fotu Pagoda (佛图塔) outside of the Dali Prefectural capital, Xiaguan.

The Fotu Pagoda is also known as the Skeleton Python Pagoda. The pagoda gets its name from a Nanzhao legend telling of how a python used to prey upon the local villagers until one day the python devoured the fully armed hero Duan Chicheng<sup>32</sup>.

Duan Chicheng sliced open the python from the inside and killed it, but died along with the python. The villagers were so grateful for his actions that they erected Fotu Pagoda and interned both Duan Chicheng and the python inside.

### **Azhili Buddhism in Shaxi Valley**

Azhili Buddhism used to be the official Buddhism promoted by the state during the Nanzhao and Dali Kingdom eras, but after a series of program under the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912 CE), Azhili Buddhism was no longer allowed to be practiced. The Qing dynasty reforms considered it superstitious and not a real form of Buddhism like the Mahayana Buddhism practiced by the Han.<sup>33</sup> Referencing what

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<sup>32</sup> Goodman, Jim. "Heirs to Nanzhao: Dali and the Bai," *Yunnan: China South of the Clouds*. Hong Kong: Odyssey Publications, 2009. 308.

<sup>33</sup> Huang, 2009: 84.



Blue Cap said earlier about Azhili Buddhism, its practice was almost completely wiped out except for in Jianchuan County and Shaxi Valley.

### *Xingjiao Temple in Sideng Village*

These classification efforts and the local practices of Azhili Buddhism shaped the Xingjiao Temple in Sideng Village. The Xingjiao Temple in Shaxi Valley is one of the most important Azhili Buddhist sites in Yunnan. Shaxi Valley is a major trade center along the Tea and Horse Caravan Route, so the temple was constructed nearby the market for convenience in about 1447 CE during the Ming dynasty.<sup>34</sup>

The Xingjiao Temple has been burned many times and repurposed for various reasons through out its history, so many of it's defining features as a Azhili Buddhist temple are no longer there. Prior to a fire set by the bandit Luo Gaocai in 1921, the passing hall of the Xingjiao Temple had a Bodhisattva Tower devoted to Avalokitesvara.<sup>35</sup> This is in keeping with the cult of Avalokitesvara that is throughout the Dali area because of the Indian monk credited with bringing Buddhism into Yunnan and the legend of Avalokitesvara and Hufa defeating the dragon in Erhai Lake.

The entrance of the temple also has the adoption of two legendary war generals, Heng and Ha, as Guardian Kings at the temple entrance.<sup>36</sup> Heng is the red guardian who used to be a general during the Shang dynasty (1600-1100 BCE). He was said to be able to scare the souls out of people with a snort and therefore is shown with a closed mouth and flaring nostrils. Ha, the blue guardian, was a

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<sup>34</sup> Huang, 2009: 88.

<sup>35</sup> Huang, 2009: 90.

<sup>36</sup> Huang, 2009: 107.

legendary general from the Zhou dynasty (1050-221 BCE) who could puff yellow lethal air out of his mouth. The original guardians of Buddhist temples were the hidden-track *vajra*-holders, or *Nryana*. The local people began to associate hidden-track *vajra*-holders with Heng and Ha, showing how legendary figures have been integrated into Azhili Buddhist practices.

For 200 years the Xingjiao Temple served as an empowerment site for Azhili Buddhism until the Qing dynasty. When Azhili Buddhism became a forbidden religion, the Xingjiao Temple's influence declined and Zen Buddhist monks took over the temple.<sup>37</sup> Daoist statues and a Confucian memorial tablet were also added to the second hall during the Qing dynasty. After some time the second hall became a gathering place for gods of any religion, including *Benzhu* gods like the God of Wealth and the Golden Armor God as well as Exoteric Buddhist gods such as Veda and Sangharama.

Although the second hall had become a convergence of many different religions, the main hall of the Xingjiao Temple was still primarily Azhili Buddhist. Within the main hall stood gold-leaf statues of the Five Dhyani Buddhas, one of the major combinations present in Tantric Buddhism (Figure 10). There is also a set of paintings around the outside of the main hall from the Ming dynasty (1368-1644 CE). These paintings are done in the local Bai minority's style of painting and depict Azhili Buddhist stories, for example the "Sakyamuni Subdues Monsters" painting.<sup>38</sup>

The temple is no longer in use for practicing Azhili Buddhism, but now serves as an educational building for the history of Sideng Village. Azhili Buddhism's

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<sup>37</sup> Huang, 2009: 93.

<sup>38</sup> Huang, 2009: 117.

practice has been integrated into the local *Benzhu* practices instead. While we were living in Sideng Village, we were fortunate enough to witness some of these Azhili Buddhist elements within *Benzhu* ceremonies.

### *Azhili Buddhism in Practice Today in Shaxi*

During our stay in Sideng Village, we were able to witness a sending-off ceremony for the souls of two elderly people who had recently died. The ceremony was conducted in Sideng Square by the central tree. An informant told us that the people conducted the ceremony in the square because the tree and the square symbolized the soul moving from this life into the next. Our informant Auntie told us that this ceremony was fairly rare and this was only the third one she has witnessed during the last seven years.

The ceremony was presided over by three Azhili Buddhist practitioners called *fashi*. These older men were not only monks, but also farmers. The people constructed a bridge in the square out of several benches and covered it with a white cloth as a symbolic representation of the bridge between this life and the next. The *fashi* danced around the bridge weaving in and out while holding different instruments. The two figures of Ananda and Kasyapa, the disciples of Sakyamuni Buddha, were featured prominently at the front of the procession. Our informant said that the two figures were said to represent gods who are supposed to lead the

soul from one side to the next. She emphasized that *Benzhu* was for protection while Azhili Buddhism is for dealing with death.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> For a more detailed description and analysis of the sending-off ceremony, see Alina Odom's Fall 2012 independent study project "Valley to Valley: Impacts of *Benzhu* and *Benzhu* Worship on Bai Generations."

## CONCLUSIONS

Yunnan occupies a dynamic political and cultural position on the edge of Southeast Asia, India, Tibet and China. Prior to the inclusion of Yunnan into the Chinese empire, several early kingdoms dominated the area with one of the most prominent being the Nanzhao Kingdom. The Nanzhao Kingdom established tributary relationships extending down into Burma as well as forming alliances with the neighboring Tubo Empire in Tibet and the Tang in China. This cosmopolitan atmosphere greatly influenced the development of Buddhism in Yunnan, particularly Azhili Buddhism in the Dali area. The Nanzhao Kingdom greatly supported the expansion and cultivation of Azhili Buddhism so much so that it declared Buddhism the official state religion. Several important Buddhism sites were constructed as a result of the Nanzhao Kingdoms support such as the Three Pagodas at Chongsheng Monastery and the Stone Bell Temple Grottoes at Shibaoshan. The close relationship between Yunnan, Tibet, and India also meant that the art present at many of these early Buddhist sites reflected the art styles of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism and Indian Buddhism.

Even after the fall of the Nanzhao Kingdom, Azhili Buddhism continued to influence the local flavor of Buddhism in the Dali area. Stories talking about that creation of the Dali Plain are still passed down through the generations and the cult of Avalokitesvara still remains strong in the Dali area. Local legends and beliefs, like some *Benzhu* figures, have been incorporated into the Buddhist pantheon at Azhili

Buddhist temples. This can be seen with the presence of the *Benzhu* protection spirit Hufa at the Buddhist temple devoted to Avalokitesvara in Spring Village and the *Benzhu* gods historically present in the Xingjiao Temple of Sideng Village.

Early Buddhism in Yunnan highlights the political and social relationships present in this crossroads of the world. Buddhist practices not only adopted aspects from neighboring kingdoms like Tibet, India, Burma, and China, but also incorporated the local Bai ethnic group's legends and beliefs. Buddhism took on a dynamic role to fill the needs of the local people as well as reflecting the interregional cultural exchange of the Southwest Silk Road.

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## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

I would recommend further study into the relationship between Indian monks bringing Buddhism into China through Nepal and Tibet. Also a more in depth look at the relationship between Azhili Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism and *Benzhu* would be interesting. While looking at the local *Benzhu* shrine in Sideng Village, I noticed a lot of Daoist elements present. For example, the statue of Avalokitesvara was holding a Daoist trigram and was riding the water dragon mentioned in the creation myth of the Dali Plain. It would be interesting to see how all these different belief systems coexisted together in the Dali area.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: Maps



Figure 1. Sichuan-Yunnan-Burma-India Road (*Chuan-Dian-Mian-Yin Dao* 川滇緬印道)<sup>40</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Jolie Adventure 2009. "Southwestern silk road ethnic village family tour 16." Jolie Adventure. [http://www.jolieadventure.com/html/Family\\_photography\\_tours/view\\_62.html](http://www.jolieadventure.com/html/Family_photography_tours/view_62.html) (accessed December 4, 2012).



Figure 2. Tea and Horse Caravan Trail (茶马古道) passing through Dali and Shaxi<sup>41</sup>

<sup>41</sup> China Travel. "Tea and Horse Caravan Road Travel Guide." ChinaTravel.com. <http://www.chinatravel.com/focus/tea-and-horse-caravan-road/> (accessed December 4, 2012).

## Appendix B: Photos



Figure 3 Indian-style Male Avalokitesvara figure (Three Pagodas Cultural Park Exhibition Hall)



Figure 4 Tibetan-style vajras (Three Pagodas Cultural Park Exhibition Hall)



Figure 5 Tibetan-style bell (Three Pagodas Cultural Park Exhibition Hall)



Figure 6 Shizhong Temple, Grotto No. 7 "Sweet Dew" Avalokitesvara



Figure 7 Vidyaraja, one of the Eight Heavenly Kings<sup>42</sup>



Figure 8 Vaisravana, protector god (Shizhong Temple, Grotto No.6 The Hall of the Heavenly Kings)

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<sup>42</sup> Gunther, Michael D. "Stone Bell Mountain." Art and Archaeology. <http://www.art-and-archaeology.com/china/china.html#dali> (accessed December 4, 2012).



Figure 9 Hufa with ceramic Avalokitesvara figurines (Lamp Village)



Figure 10 The Five Dhyani Buddhas (Xingjiao Temple)

## **Appendix C: Pseudonyms**

“Auntie” – Chang-ayi at the Old Tree Café in Sideng Village, Shaxi Valley

“Blue Cap” – Zhao Guanzhong at Qingdong Village in the Dali Plain

“Spring Village” – Qingdong Village in the Dali Plain