# The Agency of Relations at Baoshan

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**Word and Image at Baoshan**

For medieval Chinese Buddhist practitioners, carving inscriptions and images in stone was an important part of devotional and mortuary practice. In this paper I discuss sixth- and seventh-century mortuary niches at a site known as Baoshan 寶山 [Treasure Mountain], in Henan, China. At sites such as this, stone-working techniques went hand-in-hand with the technologies of realisation, shaping one another to shape the landscape. Three kinds of 'work' linking word and image are highlighted. Buddhist textual and visual 'good works' are supported by the Buddhist doctrines of merit (*puṇya*) and skilful means (*upāya*). At Baoshan, there is the work of memorialisation, the processes of transmuting deceased members of the practice community into enduring presences through the carving of mortuary niches. Second, the work of carving eulogies and images is part of the transformation of a landscape into a collective responsive field of merit, an ongoing process that I characterise as a 'practicescape.'[1] Finally, there is the individual practitioner's process of transforming 'self' into realisation of buddha-nature, which the founder of the site describes using metaphors connoting both individual effort and natural response. These three related Buddhist works of word and image involve a shift in focus from the agency of actors to the agency of relations, which I discuss with reference to the work of Bruno Latour and Andrew Pickering.

**Backgrounds and Baoshan**

Over the years, working on mortuary niches for Chinese Buddhists carved on Baoshan and nearby Lanfengshan 嵐峰山 [Misty Peak Mountain], my sense of this necropolis as an interconnected community has only grown stronger. The site includes over two hundred niches with numerous inscriptions dedicated by monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen to deceased teachers and family members. These niches are mid-relief carvings in limestone rock-faces ranging across two mountains. Most are in the shape of small *stūpas* (reliquary towers, also known as pagodas) and are likely to have once held reliquary boxes for cremation ashes. Some of the memorials have a square cavity for a reliquary box carved below or beside the niche, and many of the identification inscriptions refer to the mortuary construction as a *huishen ta* 灰身塔, 'ash-

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[1] This paper draws from my forthcoming book, *Practicescape: The Buddhists of Baoshan*.

remains *stūpa*.' Several of the inscriptions describe the disciples cremating the body and gathering the remains.

Many of the stūpa-shaped niches are elaborately carved, and may still contain remnants of statues representing the deceased. These statues are predominantly seated figures in the robes of monastics, and the robed bodies of nuns are portrayed no differently to those of monks. Prior to this, only buddhas, bodhisattvas,[2] and idealised monks were portrayed in such stūpa-shaped housings, whose closest stylistic counterparts can be seen at the Xiangtangshan 響堂山 caves in neighbouring Hebei. I have not yet found other medieval Chinese examples of stūpa-shaped niches containing statues of the deceased. Famously, Cave 285 of the Mogao 莫高 caves at Dunhuang 敦煌, constructed in 538-539, contains *stūpa* or cave-shaped niches with haloed images of meditating monks. However, these figures are archetypical and are not identified as representations of individuals.

Reliquary *stūpas* were among the earliest Buddhist devotional structures. The Pāli *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta* relates that after the cremation of the Buddha his relics were claimed by eight different groups, all of whom promised to build *stūpas* and hold festivals to honour them.[3] *Stūpas* said to contain relics of the Buddha, his disciples, and later generations of revered monks and nuns eventually became destinations in pilgrimage circuits. As Buddhist scholar Gregory Schopen has pointed out, reliquary *stūpas* functioned as nodes in Buddhist networks, provided economic support for monks and nuns, and sometimes became the focus of violent contestation.[4] However, early Buddhist reliquary *stūpas* did not include images. Until around the beginning of the Common Era, Buddhists eschewed anthropomorphic representations of the Buddha and his disciples in favour of symbols like the wheel of the Dharma, the Buddha's footprint, the Buddha's empty seat and, most

[2] A note on conventions: a buddha is an 'awakened one,' and a bodhisattva is one who has generated the aspiration to become fully awakened and to become a buddha in order to aid other beings. Capitalised, 'the Buddha' refers to Siddhārtha Gautama (c.490-410 BCE). Capitalised, 'the Dharma' refers to the teachings of Buddhism, to distinguish this from *dharmas*, the constituents of existence.

[3] *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta*, DN II. 166-7, in *The Long Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Dīgha Nikāya*, trans. Maurice Walshe (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), pp. 231-77.

[4] Gregory Schopen, 'The Suppression of Nuns and the Ritual Murder of Their Special Dead in Two Buddhist Monastic Codes,' in *Buddhist Monks and Business Matters: Still More Papers on Monastic Buddhism in India* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), pp. 329-59.

importantly, the reliquary *stūpa* itself.[5]

Even in this early period, the notion of merit was at the heart of Buddhist devotional activity. Early Buddhist scriptures such as the *Dakkhiṇāvibhanga Sutta* [The Exposition of Offerings] teach that offerings to the Buddha and to the community of the ordained gain merit for the devotee, which offsets the negative effects of past actions (*karma*) and helps create favorable future conditions in this life and the next.[6] In traditional Buddhism, the most meritorious act was to become a monk, and the highest reward for merit was to be reborn as a monk and attain liberation from rebirth altogether. For laypeople, the most important of the merit-gaining activity was to support the community of monks and nuns. This support took many forms, including providing facilities and supplies, sponsoring vegetarian feasts and memorial services, providing the means for family members to become monks and nuns and, finally, the activities that render Baoshan's practicescape visible to us now: sponsoring the copying and chanting of scriptures and dedicating votive and mortuary images and *stūpas*.

*Stūpa*-building, merit-generation, and relic-veneration were key features of the legend of the first Buddhist ruler, King Aśoka (r.268-232 BCE). He was said to have collected the Buddha's relics and built eighty-four thousand *stūpas* in order to distribute them more widely.[7] When Buddhism spread to China in the early centuries of the Common Era, tales of the ruler's pious fervour and the merit he accrued became sources of inspiration for Chinese Buddhist devotees. Moreover, it was believed that King Aśoka's *stūpa*-building mission had extended beyond India, and therefore miracle-working relics of the Buddha could be discovered in China.[8] Notably, King Aśoka was a role model for the Chinese Buddhist ruler Emperor Wen of the Sui 隨文帝 (r.581-604), who was a patron of the Baoshan founder Lingyu 靈裕 (518-605). The Chinese emperor instituted Buddha-relic distribution campaigns as a means of celebrating and

[5] Peter Harvey, 'Venerated Objects and Symbols of Early Buddhism,' in *Symbols in Art and Religion: The Indian and Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Karl Werner (London: Curzon, 1990), pp. 68-102.

[6] *Majjhima Nikāya* III, 253-257, in *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya*, trans. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), pp. 1102-1106.

[7] See John Strong, *Relics of the Buddha* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), pp. 124-149.

[8] Koichi Shinohara, 'Two Sources of Chinese Buddhist Biographies: *Stupa* Inscriptions and Miracle Stories,' in *Monks and Magicians: Religious Biographies in Asia*, eds Phyllis Granoff and K. Shinohara (Oakville: Mosaic Press, 1988), pp. 119-228.

consolidating his authority as a Buddhist monarch.[9]

*Stūpa*-shaped housings for buddha images, relics, and sacred texts were common motifs of Chinese Buddhist art. Images and relics of the Buddha and the Buddhist scriptures represented, respectively, the Buddha and Dharma [Teachings] facets of the 'Three Jewels' or 'Three Refuges.' Representatives of the third facet, the Saṅgha or community of the ordained, also became objects of veneration, as seen in Mogao Cave 285 mentioned above. Disciples of the Buddha, eminent Indian monks, and soon also eminent Chinese monks were depicted in Chinese Buddhist art and literature.

In Chinese Buddhist hagiographical works and miracle tales, the line between monks and nuns as exemplars and as sources of salvific power is not always easy to draw. These functions are woven together in the notion of 'refuge,' because buddhas and bodhisattvas, Buddhist scriptures, and Buddhist disciples were all copied and petitioned. The pivotal role of the ordained as both models and mediators is reflected in Chinese Buddhist representations of monks and nuns, and also in scholarly debate as to the uses of such representations. References to veneration of images of deceased Chinese Buddhist masters appear in hagiographical works from the sixth century onwards. Sometimes these representations were also relics: lacquered mummies, or statues mixed with cremation ashes.[10]

Notably, at Baoshan we see a significant precedent for the veneration of Buddhist masters. Along with large seated statues of the buddhas Vairocana, Amitābha, and Maitreya, Baoshan's main cave-shrine contains the earliest known (589) representation of a lineal transmission from the Buddha through twenty-four Indian Dharma masters, who were later incorporated into the Chan transmission lineage.[11] These shallow-relief carvings are not portraits and the Dharma masters are not buddhas, but they provide a precedent for associating buddha-images with images of Buddhist masters transmitting the Dharma.

However, in order to understand why stūpa-enshrined representations of deceased Buddhist practitioners became a flourishing practice at Baoshan in

[9] See Jinhua Chen, *Monks and Monarchs, Kinship and Kingship: Tanqian in Sui Buddhism and Politics* (Kyoto: Italian School of East Asian Studies, 2002).

[10] See Bernard Faure, *The Rhetoric of Immediacy: A Cultural Critique of Chan/Zen Buddhism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1991), pp. 148-178; Robert Sharf, 'The Idolization of Enlightenment: On the Mummification of Ch'an Masters in Medieval China,' *History of Religions*, vol. 32 (August 1992), pp. 1-31; T. Griffith Foulk and Robert Sharf, 'On the Ritual Use of Ch'an Portraiture in Medieval China,' in *Chan Buddhism in Ritual Context*, ed. Bernard Faure (London, Routledge Curzon, 2003), pp. 74-150; Wendi L. Adamek, *The Mystique of Transmission: On an Early Chan Text and Its Contexts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), pp. 254-276.

[11] Adamek, *The Mystique of Transmission*, pp. 101-110.

the sixth and seventh centuries, we need to take into account not only devotional practices but also regionally specific self-transformation practices. For this we must turn to the Eastern Wei 東魏 (534-550) and Northern Qi 北齊 (550-577) dynasties, whose brief efflorescence provided lasting inspiration for Buddhist clerics and artisans, including the Baoshan founder Lingyu.

Art historian Katherine Tsiang makes an intriguing surmise about links between image and practice, based on sculptural developments seen in the recently discovered Qingzhou 青州 sculptures in Shandong and the widely dispersed sculptures of the Xiangtangshan caves in Hebei, whose decorative motifs and *stūpa* niches were imitated at Baoshan. She suggests a connection between the sculpting of individualised buddha-images "in the round," seated or standing, with the appearance of prayers for the donor and all beings to "become buddhas" (*chengfo* 成佛). In the middle of the sixth century in the Eastern Wei-Northern Qi area, this prayer and numerous variations (such as the wish to achieve enlightenment, *cheng zhengjue* 成正覺) proliferated. These prayers are seen in donor inscriptions dedicated by ordinary lay practitioners as well as clerics.[12]

Tsiang further links these prayers with ordination rituals in which practitioners performed purification practices and received the bodhisattva precepts, which consecrated the devotee's new identity as a bodhisattva, one on the path to buddhahood.[13] This new identity was at the same time held to be a reflection of ultimate non-duality: one aspires to realisation of buddhahood because the matrix of one's being cannot be anything other than buddha-nature/interdependence. Of the graceful life-sized buddha sculptures found at Qingzhou, Tsiang writes:

> The approachable human quality of these sculptures appears on one level to represent the belief in the continuing presence of Buddha nature in this world. On another level, the individualised characteristics suggest that images might also have been made to represent aspiring devotees.[14]

Born in 518, the Baoshan founder Lingyu matured during a brief period in which ultimate and mundane aspirations appeared to dovetail. However, by the time he designed the main devotional site at Baoshan, the whole region had undergone invasion and subsequent persecution of Buddhism under the Northern Zhou 北周 (557-581). Subsequently, with a new Buddhist mandate

[12] Katherine R. Tsiang, 'Resolve to Become a Buddha (*Chengfo*) – Changing Aspirations and Imagery in Sixth Century Chinese Buddhism,' *Early Medieval China*, vol. 13-14, no. 2 (2008), pp. 115-169.
[13] Tsiang, 'Resolve to Become a Buddha (*Chengfo*),' p. 167.
[14] Tsiang, 'Resolve to Become a Buddha (*Chengfo*),' pp. 148-149.

under Emperor Wen of the Sui and reunification of the empire after several centuries of division, Northern and Southern Buddhist exegetes were attempting to find common ground. Lingyu's practice program amplifies both the renewed fervour and the eschatological anxieties of his times.

Building on Tsiang's argument about connections between sixth-century buddha images and prayers, I suggest that Baoshan's seventh-century images and memorials were intended to carry on the work of representing buddha-nature and transmission of the Dharma in human form. In the following sections we examine selected Baoshan images and inscriptions in order to elucidate various facets of this work, which ultimately reshaped the faces of two mountains.

**The Work of Memorialisation**

The earliest datable memorial niche on Baoshan is dedicated to Dharma Master Fadeng 法澄 (BS 61).[15] The stūpa-shaped niche is simply carved; the figure sits in meditation posture wearing a clinging Indian-style robe with pleated folds across the front. The inscription states: "*Caitya* (reliquary) stūpa of the late monk, Dharma Master Fadeng. Recorded in the first month of the ninth year of the Kaixing 開皇 era (589)." This is the year that the main cave-temple was dedicated, and also the year that the Emperor Wen of the Sui reunified China.

A *stūpa* niche in a similar style on another part of the mountain, dedicated about a year later, has a figure with a halo (BS 3).[16] The inscription reads: "*Caitya* stūpa of Dharma Master Daozheng 道政. Constructed on the fifteenth day of the first month of the *gengxu* 庚戌 tenth year (590) of the 開皇 Kaihuang era of the Great Sui." There does not appear to be another niche with a haloed figure of the deceased, though there may once have been more; many niches have been defaced and their images removed. The figure of Daozheng is seated with his hands placed on a small table in a manner suggestive of writing. This is the most frequently portrayed attitude throughout the site, for both monks and nuns. The image of the monk or nun caught in the act of writing

[15] Niches are identified according to the numbers given in the catalogue *Baoshan Lingquan si* 寶山靈泉寺 [Lingquan Temple at Baoshan], ed. Henansheng gudai jianzhu baohu yanjiusuo 河南省古代建築保護研究所 [Henan Research Institute for the Preservation of Ancient Architecture], (Zhengzhou: Henan Renmin, 1991). I adopted this numbering system for my own catalogue and translations. BS = Baoshan, LFS = Lanfengshan. BS 61 is found in Henan Research Institute for the Preservation of Ancient Architecture, *Baoshan Lingquan si*, pp. 169, 355.

[16] BS 3 is found in Henan Research Institute for the Preservation of Ancient Architecture, *Baoshan Lingquan si*, pp. 170, 355.

conveys the practice of copying scripture. Other statues are portrayed doing other kinds of practice: meditation, as in the first example, and holding a rosary, which is a visual reference for reciting buddha names. All of these practices are considered to generate merit in perpetuity.

Few of the remaining figures have faces, having fallen prey to vandalism or the illegal trade in antiquities. However, on Lanfengshan, the neighbouring mountain where the niches for nuns and laywomen are carved, several figures retain faces of startling detail and individualisation. Nevertheless, these examples of verisimilitude cannot be assumed to be likenesses of actual people without supporting evidence.

Figure 1: LFS 34A. Dharma Master Faguang 法光, nun. Photo credit: Frederick M. Smith

Fortunately, corroboration that likeness was desired is found in five of the inscriptions, though unfortunately none of the corresponding images have

been left with faces intact. Disciples who commissioned and dedicated these niches for their masters include the following phrases in their descriptions of the image-making process. Listed in chronological order, the first two references are to nuns: Dhyāna Master Sengshun 僧順 (555-639), nun, *kanshi tuxing* 刊石圖形 "carved the stone and traced her form;" Dharma Master Puxiang 普相 (566-643), nun, *xie shenyi* 寫神儀 "depicted her supernal appearance;" Dharma Master Huijing 慧靜 (573-641), *tuxing* 圖形 "traced his form" and *tuxing huaxiang* 圖形畫像 "traced his form and drew his portrait;" BS 106,[17] Dharma Master Zhan 瞻 (644-686), *shitu yingxiang* 式圖影像 "modelled and traced his portrait;" BS 110,[18] Master (name illegible) (d. 723), *tu yixiang* 圖儀像 "traced his likeness."

Let us examine more closely the most detailed of these inscriptions, the one for Dharma Master Huijing (LFS 25).[19] Carved on a separate cliff of Lanfengshan, away from the niches for nuns and laywomen, Huijing's large but rather crudely carved *stūpa* is paired with the elaborate *stūpa* of his more famous fellow monk, Dharma Master Huixiu 慧休 (547-646). Like many of these images, he is depicted with a small writing table.

At the end of the biographical part of the inscription, the disciple who dedicated the stūpa describes his feelings and his filial respect for his teacher:

> I, his disciple Fayan 法演, was from a young age favoured with his instruction and guidance, and [thanks to him] have been fortunate in achieving a position in life. I "climb the wooded hill" (i.e. yearn for him as for a father), carrying my gratitude. To show the extent of my sincere filial piety, I have cremated the bone fragments and have respectfully taken up the numinous ashes. I have had a mountain pillar sculpted, traced his form (*tuxing* 圖形) and erected a stūpa, and I have inscribed all his noble deeds. I entrust to the carving on the mountain [the memory of] his great virtues and exemplary services, so that they will be transmitted imperishably.[20]

Then, in the eulogistic second part of the inscription, he says:

> I have not reached the other shore, and he suddenly took leave of the human world. Moved by feelings of filiality and sincerity, I have traced his form and drawn his portrait (*tuxing huaxiang* 圖形畫像). I

[17] BS 106 is found in Henan Research Institute for the Preservation of Ancient Architecture, *Baoshan Lingquan si*, pp. 185, 362.
[18] BS 110 is found in Henan Research Institute for the Preservation of Ancient Architecture, *Baoshan Lingquan si*, p. 364.
[19] LFS 25 is found in Henan Research Institute for the Preservation of Ancient Architecture, *Baoshan Lingquan si*, pp. 213, 330.
[20] My translation from *in situ* inscription.

> crave an audience with his supernal appearance (*shenyi* 神儀) when I come to pay my respects. The mountain is empty and the valley still, the pines are vigorous and the wind is [fresh?]. I have engraved [this inscription] amid these majestic peaks to forever proclaim his illustrious name.[21]

In the memorial, the monk Fayan expresses a desire for 'an audience' with his master when he visits the stūpa. Is this a rhetorical performance or performative rhetoric, and can these aspects be separated? Is a public demonstration of filial piety, which is a form of raising symbolic capital, absolutely antithetical to inscribing words in order to evoke the effect described – in other words, to come into contact with the deceased? Rather than resorting to the reductive exercise of linking Fayan's act with a strategic purpose like the claim to social status by association, let us consider instead the more complex 'agency of relations' at work here.

By 'agency of relations' I do not mean simply the power of collective action, but the way that each representation – textual, visual, or reflexive – emerges out of many intersecting processes of interaction, construction, intention, and action, and in turn has effects within these processes. This entails a broad definition of agency as the capacity to generate effects and be affected within a given field of conditions. In this view, the capacity to act as a self-reflective agent is itself an effect of the agency of relations. (The issue of intentionality will be taken up in the next section.) This model is drawn from the foundational Buddhist teaching that the experience of the agency of a 'self' is an effect of ongoing cyclic processes (interaction, construction, intention, interaction) rather than the property of a self-moving thing or immutable essence. Thus, by looking into the intersecting aesthetic, social, and soteriological constructs that co-produced Baoshan as a matrix of interdependent and interconnecting agency, we engage in practices that have Buddhist analogues.

In the field of conditions in which the monastics and artisans of Baoshan worked together, it is illuminating to look into the interface between the popular Buddhist soteriology of merit production, mentioned above, and elite aesthetics. Long standing Chinese aesthetic principles celebrated the artist's power of tapping into the efficacy or responsiveness of things, over the artist's power of individual creativity or technical virtuosity. Though the phrases used in the inscriptions refer to processes of making a likeness, resemblance was not an end in itself but a means of activating a connection with the inner qualities of the subject. This is articulated in a passage from the ninth century *Lidai minghua ji* 歷代名畫記 [Record of Famous Paintings Through the Ages]:

[21] My translation from *in situ* inscription.

> Ancient paintings could pass down the semblance [of the subject] *and* its inner nature, seeking to depict it with what is beyond semblance; this is very difficult to explain to an ordinary person. Present-day paintings achieve semblance, but they don't produce *qiyun* 氣韻 [vital-energy tone]. If they sought to depict it with *qiyun*, then the semblance would be there in its midst.[22]

Behind the aesthetics of capturing vital essence was the metaphysics of correlation. The notion of sympathetic resonance (*ganying* 感應) held that like things spoke to like. The mutually resonating correspondences of physical bodies, artistic representations, and natural phenomena are their key qualities; understood relationally. Metaphors of sound and tuning were used to convey this; the *yun* in *qiyun* is the word for rhyme and tone.

### *Ekphrasis* and the Correspondence of Things

This aesthetic metaphysics can be usefully compared to the notion of *ekphrasis*. As a technical term in the Greek practice of rhetoric, it referred to descriptions so vivid as to bring an image or even an emotional experience of the subject to the hearer.[23] This appears to have had a performative aspect, evoking an object by calling its name. And, as Robert Buch elaborates, the magical power of ekphrasis to absorb the audience, to the point of self-forgetfulness, into visualised contact with the subject was coupled with the antithetical desire to draw attention to itself: "The ekphrastic is thus based on conflicting aspirations: the self-effacement of the medium and the demonstration and exposure of its power, the semblance of transparence, on the one hand, and self-reflexivity, on the other."[24]

At Baoshan, those who commissioned the memorials called on inanimate objects, the stones of the mountain, by the names of their closest Dharma and blood relations. The agency or mediumship of the memorials increased in proportion to the inspirational and artistic merit of their references to the life-works that they enshrined. The most formal (and expensive) type of memorial began with a description of the deceased's family, meritorious endeavours, and character, and ended with eulogistic verses addressed to

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[22] Zhang Yanyuan 張彥遠, *Lidai minghua ji* 歷代名畫記 [Record of Famous Paintings Through the Age]), fascicle 1, p. 22, compiled in 847, *SKQS* fascicle 812, p. 289. *SKQS* = *Siku quanshu* 四庫全書 [Complete Imperial Library of the Four Treasuries], eds. Ji Yun 紀昀 and Lu Xixiong 陸錫熊 *et al.*, compiled 1773-1782, reproduced digitally by the Chinese University of Hong Kong & Digital Heritage Publishing Ltd., 1999.

[23] Ruth Webb, 'Ekphrasis,' in *Grove Art Online*. *Oxford Art Online*, at: http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T025773. Accessed 7/09/2012.

[24] Robert Buch, *The Pathos of the Real: On the Aesthetics of Violence in the Twentieth Century* (Baltimore, The John Hopkins University Press, 2010), p. 119.

present and future audiences.

Eulogies frequently drew attention to the subject and the eulogist's efforts to commemorate him or her by calling attention to the representation of the subject; this in fact generated a separate genre, the "portrait eulogy" (*zhenzan* 真讚, *xiangzan* 像讚).[25] As an example, the Baoshan eulogy for Dharma Master Linghui 靈慧 (d.716, BS 109)[26] acts like a portrait-eulogy. In the first verse the representation is found wanting: "Even with a skilled artisan, the reality is still difficult to judge." In the third verse, the stone representation itself is the subject: "Above he relies on the marvellous mountain, below he gazes down at the numinous spring." Poignantly, the eulogy is worn and full of lacunae, and the final words are lost: "With no regrets…" To echo Jacques Derrida, the semblance is successful insofar as it cannot succeed – its failure to be the subject is its substance, its effective work of mourning.[27]

However, it is not the abiding essence of the subject that the Buddhist eulogist hopes to evoke and contact. The eulogised master, the realised subject, is venerated as one who has gone beyond the delusion of essence or non-essence, being or non-being. According to basic Buddhist teachings, the realisation that all apparent things arise co-dependently, lacking any independent basis, is the key to realising the fundamental emptiness of apparent phenomena and thus becoming free from the delusions and attachments that lead to suffering, death, and rebirth. The deceased masters represent this successful transformation, and representations of these 'special dead' enact the presence of this transformation in the world.

Yet this Buddhist representation of 'form that is no-form' remains distinct from the Platonic theory of ideal forms that lends a metaphysical dimension to the notion of ekphrasis. In that context, the relatedness of things is their shared imperfect reference to the perfect form that they copy. Paradoxically, mimetic removes, or representations of representations, are more revelatory of reality, not less, because their relationality reveals their common reference to their transcendent form. However, in a manner that sometimes appears to echo Buddhist or Daoist dialectics, in the *Sophist* it is the transcendent coinherence of being and difference that appears as the only relation of all. The apparent paradox of the one in the many is first introduced as a deliberate manipulation: the Eleatic Stranger decries the sophist's ability to claim 'the idea' as his subject; the idea that is "the common notion pervading

[25] Adamek, *The Mystique of Transmission*, pp. 254-276.
[26] BS 109 is found in Henan Research Institute for the Preservation of Ancient Architecture, *Baoshan Lingquan si*, pp. 187, 363.
[27] Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, eds. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2001), pp. 139-164.

all these objects, which you speak of as many, and yet call by the single name of image, as though it were the unity under which they were all included."[28] On the contrary, the only reality of the image is that it is 'really unreal;' instead the Stranger suggests that "my notion would be, that anything which possesses any sort of power to affect another, or to be affected by another, if only for a single moment, however trifling the cause and however slight the effect, has real existence; and I hold that the definition of being is simply power."[29]

However satisfying this reductive proposition of being as agency may appear, the Stranger and his interlocutor reluctantly realise that it affords no ground for distinguishing between being as the perfect immutable and the dependent fluctuations of becoming.[30] As exemplified in the practice of ekphrasis, the mimetic arts have precisely this power to affect yet they are without 'real existence.'

Being is then proposed as a combination of active and passive, or movement and rest, but this unity achieved through the confluence of opposites is admitted to be inadmissible. It is then proposed that while the communion of all with all, and none with none, have been refuted, a third proposition yet remains, that of the communication of some with some. To discover the principles behind this diverse yet ordered communion is the dialectical art of the philosopher, distinct from the rhetorical arts of the sophist. The Stranger claims: "he who can divide rightly is able to see clearly one form pervading a scattered multitude, and many different forms contained under one higher form; and again, one form knit together into a single whole and pervading many such wholes, and many forms, existing only in separation and isolation."[31] In seeking to articulate the underlying principles of these relations it is discovered that, in contravention of the law of "the father," Parmenides, "we have shown what form of being not-being is; for we have shown that the nature of the other is, and is distributed over all things in their relations to one another, and whatever part of the other is contrasted with being, this is precisely what we have ventured to call not-being."[32]

What is held to be irrefutable is that "being, and difference or other, traverse all things and mutually interpenetrate, so that the other partakes of being, and by reason of this participation is, and yet is not that of which is partakes, but other, and being other than being, it is clearly a necessity that not-

[28] Plato, 'The Sophist,' in *The Dialogues of Plato*, 2nd ed., trans. Benjamin Jowett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1892), Vol. 4, p. 368.
[29] Plato, 'The Sophist,' pp. 378-379.
[30] Plato, 'The Sophist,' pp. 380-381.
[31] Plato, 'The Sophist,' p. 386.
[32] Plato, 'The Sophist,' p. 393-394.

being should be."[33] The emergence of things from the derivative medium of language, in which this appears to be a contradiction, is the basis of the false arts of the sophist, while the emergence of things in nature from relative non-being, and even the natural emergence of visual illusions, are held to be the true art of the divine.[34]

Although Buddhists also employ dialectics to reveal the overarching co-dependence of being and non-being, it is in service of revealing these as constructs of the ordinary mind, not the divine mind. In a Buddhist context, the correspondence of things at a remove is a way to point to lack of essence or self-moving movers. It is not that a carved image of X eulogised in verse points to something ineffable that remains ineluctably X. Rather, representation of representation points to the way that the agency of relations acts to *presence* 'X.' Alive or dead, one is a unique virtual subject appearing in the relations through which one is constituted.

'Craving an audience,' did the disciple Fayan want the ghost of his master Huijing to appear before him on the mountainside? On the contrary ghosts were considered a form of negative karmic static that it required much transferred merit to transform.[35] Instead, one could compare these formulaic eulogies to tuning instruments, skilful means of establishing resonance between the merit of devotion to the deceased and the merit of the deceased. The most basic means to generate merit was to make pious donations, and making these memorial niches was considered to be a form of pious donation as well as a form of spiritual filial piety. Merit was the mirror or the resonating 'tone,' both the form and the medium of spiritual relationship.

**The Work of Practicescape**

The 'mortuary grove' (*talin* 塔林) on Baoshan was intended as a merit-field that would grow and extend beneficial relations. It was a work in progress from the sixth century onwards, when Baoshan began to be developed as a place of practice, a *bodhimaṇḍa*. The marriage of a ritually and/or geographically bounded space with a soteriological motivation creates a *bodhimaṇḍa*. Energy and resources devoted to transformation of a physical location are invested in an ideology, the desire to 'save beings' by converting them to Buddhism. Buddhist records and hagiographies are filled with stories of the agency of nonhumans – animals, deities, and even stones – who are bound to particular places, convert to Buddhism, and become part of the community.

[33] Plato, 'The Sophist,' p. 394.
[34] Plato, 'The Sophist,' pp. 403-404.
[35] See Stephen Teiser, *The Ghost Festival in Medieval China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

The term 'practicescape' is derived from combining the Buddhist notion of *bodhimaṇḍa* with anthropologist Timothy Ingold's notion of 'taskscape.' In the *The Perception of the Environment: Essays in Livelihood, Dwelling, Skill*, Ingold says: "It is to the entire ensemble of tasks, in their mutual interlocking, that I refer by the concept of taskscape. Just as the landscape is an array of related features, so – by analogy – the taskscape is an array of related activities. And as with the landscape, it is qualitative and heterogeneous: we can ask of a taskscape, as of a landscape, what it is like, but not how much of it there is."[36]

Of 'practicescape' we also ask what it is like, but cannot say how much of it there is. The Baoshan practicescape is an interlocking of related activities: the desire to *escape* from suffering, modifications of the landscape over time through practice of an ensemble of tasks that were understood as skilful means to aid other beings, and a dwelling-place for those practicing 'non-abiding.' The name of the main devotional cave, Dazhusheng 大住聖, means 'Great Abiding Holy Ones,' referring to the above-mentioned images of buddhas, bodhisattvas and Dharma masters carved on the walls. In order to enable realisation of 'non-abiding', the residents' continual work on the social relations of human and non-human actors (including the deceased and the buddhas) were intended to reproduce and expand the merit field from generation to generation.

The practice of transforming a mountain into a field of responsive images and the practice of transforming a 'self' into realisation of buddha-nature both involve a shift in intention and skill away from the agency of actors, toward the agency of relations. In *Reassembling the Social,* Bruno Latour, paraphrasing Gilles Deleuze, works with the principle that "relativism is not the relativity of truth but the truth of relations."[37] He argues for the importance of tracing the associations and unexamined assumptions that bind together heterogeneous elements, as a means of de-naturalising reified constructs like 'the social.' This process, I suggest, is similar to contemplative means used in some forms of Buddhist practice to de-naturalise reified notions like 'the self,' or subject versus object. However, the crucial difference between any Buddhist 'truth of relations' and Latour's is that the intentionality of the virtual subject is the key pivot in a Buddhist understanding of the agency of relations. The *idea* of the karmic effect of intentional action, including merit-oriented action, is itself a powerful agent. From one perspective we could see this idea as a network effect; from another we could see it as putting into

[36] Timothy Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays in Livelihood, Dwelling, and Skill* (New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 195.
[37] Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 95 note.

effect each provisional agent's capacity to see it as such, and act accordingly (morally).

Though there is this critical difference, Latour's work does help shed light on the workings of soteriological intention within Baoshan's assemblage of human and non-human 'actants.' Latour uses the term 'actant' to capture the agency and morphism of hypostasised entities that include but are not limited to human individuals: things like environments, objects, corporations, and 'Buddhism' are 'actants.' Their shapes and functions emerge from the web of relations.[38]

Moreover, special entities that help direct and exchange flows from one node of relational agency to another are termed 'mediators.' These may be human-made things like ideas and computers, but they also may be natural objects that assume special functions, or shaped natural objects, like the cliffs of Baoshan. They play a role in continually re-translating and reassembling their contexts/conditions. They are shaped by us in such a way that they have the power to shape us in turn, often in unforeseen ways.[39] In contrast to mere intermediaries that do not alter what they convey, mediators are pivotal 'black boxes' translating input into effects that cannot be precisely matched with chartable causes.

The carved stones of Baoshan's crowded necropolis are engaged in these processes of mediating devotional activity, generating social differentiation and reassembling the practicescape. At the same time, their interactively constituted agency and functions are reified as the 'merit field' and the 'lonely mountainside.' Reification of assemblages ('punctualisation') is integral to our daily taskscape, but Latour is not asking us to get rid of these basic building blocks of our lived worlds, only to see them for what they are. Importantly, one of the ways that the 'truth of relations' disappears is when a bird's eye view is projected from a process that is actually more like an ant's, running into rocks and ideas in non-repeatable sequences and trajectories. If we reverse trails and ground we glimpse the unchartable web of relations upon which this business depends.

Though not oriented toward ultimate liberation like the Buddhist critique of conceptual illusions, Latour's critique of sociological illusions does have broader implications. It is both a diagnosis and a prescription. Investigation into the associations of functions brings attention to the processes of reconstruction and projection in which we are continually engaged. This is not simply 'theory' – which is also a punctualised hybrid deriving its agency from our agonistic relations with it. It is clear that Latour, like a good Buddhist,

[38] Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, p. 54.
[39] Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, pp. 63-86; 232-241.

feels that the failure to recognise the true nature/emptiness of our constructions causes unnecessary suffering.

Daringly, Latour asks: "Can sociology become empirical in the sense of respecting the strange nature of what is 'given into experience'?"[40] He presents the following challenge to the sociologist while admitting that it may be beyond the realm of sociology: "We have to let out of their cages entities which had been strictly forbidden to enter the scene until now and allow them to roam the world again. What name could I give them? Entities, beings, objects, things, perhaps refer to them as invisibles. To deploy the different ways in which they assemble the collective would require an entirely different book… "[41]

Latour might not be willing to characterise the ontology of the kind of invisibles and entities evoked in the inscriptions and images at Baoshan, but he would affirm their agency in assembling the collective. Importantly, the collective is not 'the social' – that hypostatisation is precisely the cramped cage from which he desires to free them. Rather, the collective is both the charted and the uncharted web of associations that gives us experience and gives us to experience. What is uncharted he terms 'plasma' or 'the missing masses.' Plasma is "in between and not made of social stuff," it is the "vast ocean of uncertainties speckled by a few islands of calibrated and stabilised forms."[42]

With reference to the tiny Buddhist island that is Baoshan and the tiny island that is the self, 'the agency of relations' refers to the mapped (calibrated and stabilised) and unmapped webs of association and effect as the emergent matrix of ongoing practice and experience. The tiny island of the construct 'self-in-world' appears vast because we learn to channel so much of our energy to unconsciously maintaining, repairing, and carrying it with us, while the ocean of indeterminable agency remains, to greater or lesser degrees, invisible. The island of Baoshan, however, is constructed on the belief that the ocean can be seen.

The pivotal unfathomable agency in between construction and deconstruction is also integral to Andrew Pickering's exploration of "the reciprocal production of science, technology, and society."[43] In *The Mangle of Practice: Time, Agency, and Science*, he takes up Latour's presentation of 'plasma': "One can start from the idea that the world is filled not, in the first

[40] Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, p. 236.
[41] Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, p. 240.
[42] Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, pp. 244-245.
[43] Andrew Pickering, *The Mangle of Practice: Time, Agency, and Science* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 1.

instance, with facts and observations, but with *agency*."[44]

However, to avoid Latour's recourse to semiotics as a means of analogising the agency of human and nonhuman (i.e. as 'representations'), and to avoid a narrow performative approach that relates all agency to the sphere of 'the social,' Pickering proposes that we "think carefully about time."[45] The wholesale (or as Latour might say, 'uncaged') performative agency of material things can be taken seriously if we see the contours of material agency as temporally emergent in practice, in relation to human agency.

Pickering is focused on the practicescape of scientific work. However, I argue that there is analogous co-dependent human and nonhuman agency in the performative emergence of soteriological work, and this can also be seen more clearly through attention to time. Time is the arrival and generation of feedback, the great ongoing punctualisation and mediator of uncertainty. Humans know material agency through our work on time as much as through its work on us. Pickering points out that human agents relating as scientists to nonhuman material agents are continually exploring the responses of material agency, engaging in "delicate material positioning or tuning"[46] for signals. The human does something, a material response occurs, which causes the human to tune her actions in response, and so on – all the way to laptops and iPhones.

It is important to note that technologies of material transformation and technologies of self-transformation share the quality of intentional focus on the feedback process itself. Furthermore, analogous intentional focus is given to the mutual effects of the interaction of human and nonhuman, i.e. the resonance and agency of their relations. The difference, of course, is that technologies of material transformation are based precisely on the attempt to exclude immaterial and indeterminable agents and effects. Yet technology depends on those most slippery and wilful of immaterial actants, marketable 'ideas.' And these ideas have enabled the market to extend so far into the realm of intangibles that interactive effects ricochet around the globe with ever greater intensity and speed. Perhaps our objection to older immaterial and indeterminable agents like gods and buddhas is not so much that they refuse to be seen, but that they refuse to be seen outside their niches, that is, outside of relationships of face-to-face mutual effect.

Though one would not want to erase the difference between material and immaterial mediators, it is also important to see the analogous functioning that blurs their boundaries. For both kinds of mediators, effects are temporally emergent, their structures can be repeated (but not necessarily their effects),

[44] Pickering, *The Mangle of Practice*, p. 6.
[45] Pickering, *The Mangle of Practice*, p. 14.
[46] Pickering, *The Mangle of Practice*, pp. 14-15.

and they are mutually constitutive. It is in the "real time of practice"[47] and relationship that the agency of each emerges.

Significantly, however, Pickering notes that human intentionality "appears to have no counterpart in the material realm."[48] Yet there are parallels in the 'intentional structure' of human and material agency. Human intentionality is always-already shaped by prior acting-in-response to material agency. "The world of intentionality is, then, constitutively engaged with the world of material agency, even if the one cannot be substituted for the other."[49]

This happens to be a fairly good description of the way karma is understood to work. Intention is the threshold of agency that marks an action with particular qualities, qualities that will in turn mark the temporally emergent assemblage that is taken as 'the self.' Early Buddhist contemplative practice is founded on the notion that becoming aware of the moment-by-moment processes of assemblage is the first step in breaking out of the cage of subjectifying that process. Buddhist practitioners developed a complex science and ethics of perceptual and conceptual illusion. Much work was devoted to describing the source and functioning of the subject/object delusion and detailing the existential and moral consequences. Buddhist practice involves the deconstruction, both conceptual and contemplative, of the habits of reification, in order to see through our ongoing co-dependent construction.

Nevertheless, however many mediating translators are generated, Buddhist deconstruction and network theory cannot either assimilate or be assimilated by its 'Western' counterparts. In contrast to Derrida's presencing of irresolvable paradoxes,[50] Buddhists claim that it is possible to experience self-presence as no-presence, without medium, 'trace,' distinction, or deferment. In contrast to Bourdieu's notion of *habitus*,[51] it is believed the practitioner can reshape bodily dispositions in order to completely dissolve identification with dispositions. In contrast to Pickering's attention to time as a means of recognising material agency, Buddhist attention to time is in order to recognise it as our construct. In spite of Latour's call to let forbidden entities out of their cages, it is doubtful that he would ever characterise this is the call of a buddha.

[47] Pickering, *The Mangle of Practice*, p. 16.
[48] Pickering, *The Mangle of Practice*, p. 18.
[49] Pickering, *The Mangle of Practice*, p. 20.
[50] Exploring yet resisting the desire to resolve aporia is characteristic of many of Derrida's works; one well-known example is *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).
[51] Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990).

**The Work of the Practitioner**

Carved on the outside rock-face of Dazhusheng cave at Baoshan, there is a liturgical text that Lingyu probably intended as a script for in situ practice of a repentance ritual of buddha-naming recitations. Known as the *Lue li qijie foming chanhui deng wen* 略禮七階佛名懺悔等文 [The Text of the Abridged Repentance for Venerating the Buddha Names of the Seven Registers, hereafter *Chanhui wen*], the text proceeds through recitations of homage to buddhas of the ten directions, the seven buddhas of the past, the fifty-three buddhas, the thousand buddhas, the thirty-five buddhas, innumerable buddhas, and buddhas of past, present, and future. It then proceeds to a vow of refuge and repentance for all types of offences, beginning with the phrase: "In this way may all the Buddhas, the World-Honoured Ones, who constantly reside in the world, may these World Honoured Ones compassionately be mindful of me."[52] When the many types of offences have been covered, the petitioner concludes: "Now all the Buddhas, the World-Honoured Ones, should bear witness to and know me; should recall and hold me in mind." The petitioner then asks that any merit gained be transferred to "supreme ultimate enlightenment."[53]

Lingyu is also said to be the author of a prayer or didactic verse that provides a step-by-step explanation of the spiritual physics of repentance.[54] According to his verses, if one is able to realise and render apparent one's transgressions through sincere repentance, one's own pure nature innately responds to the mind of the buddhas. The responsive compassion of the buddhas then eliminates 'defilements' (Skt. *kleśas*), the habitual unwholesome delusory patterns or addictions that keep one in bondage. The elimination of these obscuring patterns of behaviour then removes the errors of perception that are the only barrier to enlightenment and the ultimate buddha-realm, which is the recognition of the co-dependent nature of the arising of phenomena, which have no independent basis. In other words, this is the agency of relations and the capacity to realise it as such.

Lingyu's writing and his design of Dazhusheng cave were both

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[52] Bruce Charles Williams, *Mea Maxima Vikalpa: Repentance, Meditation, and the Dynamics of Liberation in Medieval Chinese Buddhism, 500-650 CE* (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2002), p. 123; see pp. 124-136 for a discussion of sources and related texts.

[53] Williams, 'Mea Maxima Vikalpa,' p. 124.

[54] In *Fayuan zhulin* 法苑珠林 (Jade Grove of the Dharma Garden), compiled by Daoshi 道世 (c.596-683), *T*. 2122, 53: 918c23-919a27. *T*. = *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 太正新修大藏経 (*Taishō Era Revised Tripiṭaka*), ed. Takakusu Junjiro 高楠順次郎 (Tokyo: Daizō shuppan kai, 1922-1933).

influenced by his background in the Dilun 地論 or 'Stages Treatise' school, a form of phenomenology. Dilun monks active in Ye during the Northern Qi developed a rather concrete notion of what it meant to achieve buddhahood.[55] Dilun exegetes participated in an ongoing Buddhist debate about the relationship between *tathāgatagarba* (innate potential buddha-nature) and Yogācāra notions of an absolutely pure fundamental consciousness (*ālayavijñāna*). Elimination of defilements became a key focus of practice, as removal of accrued negative patterns of thought and action allowed one's fundamental affinity/identity with buddha-nature to be actualised.

Abandoning the technical language of Yogācāra scriptures, Lingyu's verses provide images of physical processes like mirroring, resonance, and catalysis in order to guide practitioners. He evokes the emergence of the tortures of hell out of toxic emotions as if this were a natural process rather than a mandated punishment. He then describes the mind's gradual purification following the mutually responsive mirror-like awareness generated in repentance.

Similarly, his fellow-monk Tanqian 曇遷 (542-607) also wrote a repentance poem, the *Shie chanwen* 十惡懺文 (Text of Repentance for the Ten Evil Deeds)[56] and in it he uses an alchemical image to express the sudden catalyzing effect of repentance:

> From beginningless time the ten unwholesome acts are all produced from the perverted perspective of *kleśas*. Now, because of relying on the strength of the true perspective of buddha-nature, I confess and repent and [my transgressions] are thereby extirpated. It is like a bright pearl thrown into turbid water; through the power and virtue of the pearl the water immediately becomes transparent. The power and virtue of buddha-nature is just like this.[57]

For Lingyu, repentance transformed the turbulence of the mind into resonant identity between reflective mind and reflective buddha-mind. This individual phenomenological resonance was also meant to be realised in the field of collective practice. Like the opening up and clearing of the mind in repentance, the generous expenditure of one's limited physical and material resources would bring one into correspondence with the inexhaustible merit-field of the buddhas, in a virtuous/virtual feedback loop.

Moreover, correspondence with the inexhaustible merit-field was considered to enable the manifestation of 'merit bodies,' including 'pure

[55] Williams, 'Mea Maxima Vikalpa,' pp. 152-158.
[56] *Fayuan zhulin*, *T*. 2122, 53: 918b9-c22.
[57] *Fayuan zhulin*, *T*. 2122, 53: 918c11-14. I consulted and adapted the translation in Williams, 'Mea Maxima Vikalpa,' p. 155.

lands,' which were trans-mundane practicescapes. We see this in an evocation of the workings of practicescape by the Dilun exegete Huiyuan 慧遠 (523-592), Lingyu's contemporary. He writes of the mutually constitutive and responsive nature of body, intention, and material field:

> It is because of transformation (*hua* 化) that the differentiations are inconsistent. If there is land [of a certain nature] there follows body [of a certain nature]. For example, before Amitabha became a buddha his land (*guotu* 國土) was coarse and uncouth, but after he became a buddha his realm (*guojie* 國界) was magnificent and pure. The locations that other buddhas manifest are indeterminate in their conditions (*buding jinggu* 不定境故). It is all like this: if there is a body [of a certain nature] there follows a land [of a certain nature].[58]

In this passage we see the principles of mutually responsive resonance wedded to the soteriological aim of creating practicescapes, worlds "magnificent and pure," through which devotees could achieve ultimate enlightenment. In this way the individual agency of the practitioner is preserved – he or she still must practice in order to achieve awakening. At the same time, the efficacy of the merit-bodies and merit-practicescapes of the buddhas and bodhisattvas, a Buddhist version of 'grace,' is explained as a natural phenomenon. The agency of relations allows for the mutual work of natural and intentional effect without subordinating one to the other.

**Conclusion**

I have explored the agency of relations in three modes: the work of memorialisation, the work of practicescape, and the work of the practitioner. At Baoshan, the work of memorialisation was meant to actualise reciprocal merit by speaking to the image; its making, and its subject. The work of practicescape was meant to break down the disposition to objectify fields of practice (like the self) as things, and to restore awareness of the agency of relations. Finally, the Baoshan founder Lingyu represented the work of the practitioner as that of a repentant supplicant.

However, his notion of the reception of buddha-aid is founded on the premise that the mind *is* buddha-aid. Aid is possible because of the mirror-like inter-reflection of identity and difference, emptiness and phenomena. The inter-reflection of practitioner and buddha is that of skilful means, which is to say, salvific illusion.

It is as salvific illusion that the three modes of work come together. An absence of essence that is presence, an interactively constituted field of activity

[58] *Dasheng yizhang* 大乘義章 (Essays on the Meaning of the Mahāyāna), *T*. 1851, 44: 837a5-7.

and, ultimately, a practice – this is what *is*, from a Buddhist perspective. When the Buddhists of Baoshan made likenesses of their deceased that were enshrined like buddhas and practiced perpetually like devotees, I do not think it was because they misunderstood no-self and emptiness. Perhaps, with notions like 'actant' and 'plasma,' it is we who are beginning to negotiate our own working relationship with/as the agency of relations.