

# Iconizing the Daoist-Buddhist Relationship: Cliff Sculptures in Sichuan during the Reign of Tang Xuanzong<sup>\*</sup>

Christine Mollier

## Abstract

This essay focuses on a specific type of dual Daoist and Buddhist iconography found in cliff sculptures in Sichuan. It examines the visual and epigraphical evidence of three major sites where paired images of Śākyamuni and Laojun

---

**Christine Mollier** is a research scholar specializing in the history of medieval Daoism at the French National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS). She holds a Ph.D. in Asian Studies from the University of Paris 7, and was a member of the French research group on Dunhuang manuscripts. She is the author of *Une apocalypse du Ve siècle: Le Livre des incantations divines des grottes abyssales* (Paris 1990), awarded the Stanislas Julien Prize of the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres 1991. She now belongs to the Center of Research on the Civilizations of East Asia (CNRS, CRCAO, Paris). Her work focuses on medieval Daoist eschatology, Dunhuang manuscripts, Buddho-Taoist literature, talismans, and iconography. Her most recent major publication is *Buddhism and Taoism Face to Face: Scripture, ritual, and iconographic exchange in medieval China* (University of Hawaii Press, 2008), awarded the Stanislas Julien Prize of the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres 2008.

<sup>\*</sup> I wish to thank the friends and colleagues who provided me with kind assistance and helpful suggestions during my visits to Sichuan in 2001, 2004, and 2007. They include, in Chengdu, Professors Bai Bin 白彬, Hu Wenhe 胡文和, Huo Wei 霍巍, Lei Yuhua 雷玉華, and Dr. Su Kui 蘇奎; Mr. Long Teng 龍騰 (Pujiang); and the members of the Departments of Cultural Relics of Anyue and Bazhong.

(or Tianzun) as well as other Daoist/Buddhist compositions are particularly prominent: the Daoist cliff of the Xuanmiao monastery (Xuanmiao guan 玄妙觀) in Anyue 安岳, the Buddhist cliffs of the Feixian Pavilion (Feixian ge 飛仙閣) in Pujiang 蒲江, and the Daoist cliff of Niujiiaozhai 牛角寨 in Renshou county 仁壽縣. Significantly, the inscriptions and steles that are preserved in situ demonstrate that all the Daoist/Buddhist combinations of images depicted in these sites were made during the same period, namely under the reign of Tang Xuanzong (r. 712–756 C.E.) who favored Daoism as a state religion. These local examples clearly reflect the politico-religious ideology that then prevailed. The hypothesis that is advanced here is that this specific imagery can be interpreted as a visual expression of the revival of the *huahu* 化胡 (conversion of the barbarians) theory at that time. Both epigraphy and iconology lend their support to this interpretation. The Buddhist and Daoist icons in these compositions are of equal dimensions and are posed symmetrically, but their positions relative to one another—the Buddhist images being consistently situated to the right of the Daoist—indicate an intention to underline Daoism’s superiority over its rival. Far from being arbitrary, this left/right iconographic convention appears to be based on the doctrine of “the religion of the left (yang) and the religion of the right (yin)” elaborated by early Daoism to define its relationship to Buddhism. Created less than half a century after all *huahu* depictions had been officially banned in the Empire, these images of Śākyamuni and Laojun seated side by side, in spite of their seemingly moderate and “ecumenical” demeanor, could certainly never have been exhibited if it were not for the pro-Daoist religious policies of Tang Xuanzong.

Keywords: Buddhο-Daoism, iconography, Sichuan, Tang Xuanzong, *huahu*

從人物造像看佛道關係：唐玄宗時期的四川懸崖雕刻

穆瑞明 (Christine Mollier)

### 摘要

本文將重點研究在四川省懸崖上發現的一種特別的佛道混合造像。本文主要考察三個地區的視像及碑文，這些地區因出現釋迦摩尼與老君（或為天尊）或者其他道士與僧侶的成對人物像而著名。它們分別是：安岳玄妙觀的道教懸崖，蒲江飛仙閣的佛教懸崖，以及仁壽縣牛角寨的道教懸崖。重要的是，經過對這些石碑及雕像的年代考察，發現這些佛道混合造像都產生自同一時期，即尊道教為國教的唐玄宗統治時期（公元712-756年）。這些地區性的雕像也清楚反映了這一時期的政治宗教意識形態。這裏要提出的一個假設：這種獨特的佛道混合造像可被視為是那個時代《化胡經》重新興盛的視覺表達。所有的碑銘和肖像畫皆在支持這一假說。這些組合中，佛教和道教的神像都是相同尺寸且呈現系統性的排列，但它們的位置排列都遵循一個原則，即佛像一直被放在道像的右面，這也暗示了將道教置於佛教之上的意圖。這種左/右的排列方式並非出於武斷，而是遵循了陽性宗教在左、陰性宗教在右的原則，這一原則由早期道教提出，用以定義其與佛教的關係。在《化胡經》被禁的不到五十年時間，釋迦摩尼和老君的形象被並排放置，雖然這些人物像看起來非常溫和並且舉止尋常，但若不是因為唐玄宗扶持道教的特定時代背景，這樣的並排放置永遠不會出現。

關鍵詞：道教、石窟造像、四川、唐玄宗、化胡