

The Creation of Buddhist Cliff Sculpture on Mt. Ch'i-ch'ü in Szechwan

By

Florian C. Reiter (Würzburg)

A map of Mt. Ch'i-ch'ü (Seven Bends) in the north-eastern part of Szechwan province shows two places called Big Thousand Buddhas Cliff (Ta ch'ien-fo yen) and Small Thousand Buddhas Cliff (Hsiao ch'ien-fo yen).¹ They are situated vis-a-vis each other on the left and right side of a road. The road leads through the hills of Mt. Ch'i-ch'ü to the northern part of Szechwan and across the provincial border to Shensi. The two Buddhist sites are shown as being close to the southern honorific arch (Sheng-ching fang „Holy-Land Arch“), which together with its northern counterpart indicates the rank of the area to be visited.² The map shows a variety of towers and roofs on the right hand side of the road. They represent the main temple Wen-ch'ang ling-ying tz'u on the slope of Mt. Ch'i-ch'ü.³

This mountain is famous for its patron saint, Tzu-t'ung ti-chün or Wen-ch'ang ti-chün.⁴ The cult of Tzu-t'ung ti-chün can be traced back to the early Liu-ch'ao period. Research into this theme suggests that a much older thunder cult had been venerated by the local population. However, the character of the cult site has since long been connected with the sphere of religious Taoism, personalizing and sublimating the just mentioned local tradition.⁵

1 See *Chung-hua jen-min kung-ho kuo fen-sheng ti-t'u chi*. Peking: Ti-t'u Comp. 1974, 114, C5 (*Ssu-ch'uan sheng*). For the map see, *TTHC* 1, 46 (7b). The cliff sculpture which shall be discussed in this article was carved in the 13th. century. The history of Buddhist cliff sculpture in Szechwan is of course much older. A very valuable study is A. Falco Howard, *Tang Buddhist Sculpture of Sichuan: Unknown and Forgotten*, in: *BMFEA* 60, 1–164 (1988).

2 See *TTHC* 1, 46–47 (7b–8a), and op.cit. 3, 279; 6, 664–666 (*Ch'i-ch'ü shan Wen-ch'ang miao hsin-chien nan-pei shih-fang chi*). They were built in stone by Chang Hsiang-hai in 1858. The two arches are said to have been destroyed when the Shensi-Szechwan road was built, well before 1949.

3 „On the right hand side“ is correct if the visitor had departed from Ch'eng-tu/Tzu-t'ung city.

4 See T.F. Kleeman, *Wenchang and the viper: the creation of a Chinese national god*. Berkeley: 1988 (Ph.D. thesis, ms). See Wang Chia-yu, *Tzu-t'ung shen li-shih t'an-wei*, in: *Chung-kuo tao-chiao*. Peking: 3, 7, 37–40 (1988).

5 For basic sources concerning these religious traditions, see *Hua-yang kuo-chih (Han-chung chih)*, Tzu-t'ung hsien). Ch'eng-tu: Pa-shu Comp. 1984, 144–147; or *T'ai-p'ing kuang-chi*. Kyôto: Chubun shuppansha 1972, 458.5a–5b.

The map features, across the road and vis-a-vis the extended establishment of the Wen-ch'ang ling-ying tz'u, two pavilions and a large flat rock (P'an-t'o shih). In this place an image of the patron saint, the Imperial Lord (Tzu-t'ung/Wen-ch'ang ti-chün) can be seen. The „cypress from the Chin period“⁶ stands right behind that flat rock and its small temple. They all are close together on a slope of Mt. Ch'i-ch'ü. This part of the mountain has a „Look-down-on-the-River Pavilion“ (Wang-shui t'ing), standing on its very peak high above Nine Bends River (Chiu-ch'ü shui).⁷ All these objects are likely to evoke the interest of the tourist or pilgrim, who may come in quest of religious inspirations.

The map also shows a Kuan-ti temple beside the Wen-ch'ang temple. The foundation of the latter allegedly dates back to the time of Chang Ya-tzu (O-tzu) in the early fourth century. The architecture, however, which we see today dates from Ming-Ch'ing, and for this matter the local gazetteer *Tzu-t'ung hsien-chih* is the best source we have.⁸ We notice that this gazetteer does not give any description concerning the Kuan-ti temple. Most texts in that historiographic compilation date from the Ch'ing period.

There is just one text in *Tzu-t'ung hsien-chih* about the Wen-ch'ang temple on Mt. Ch'i-ch'ü, which dates from the Ming period. Another text of the same period deals with the „cypress from the Chin period“.⁹

The oldest text (Nan-Sung) in *Tzu-t'ung hsien-chih* deals with the installation of those two Buddhist sites with cliff sculpture in the early 13th. century. These Buddhist sites are also made mention of in the text from the Ming period, which describes the Wen-ch'ang temple on Mt. Ch'i-ch'ü. We notice that the Buddhist sites are not being discussed in the other, later texts in *Tzu-t'ung hsien-chih*. We also failed to find generally accessible descriptions of these places.¹⁰ Visiting Mt. Ch'i-ch'ü in 1989 we met nobody who would have men-

6 See F.C. Reiter, Notices concerning an old cypress at Mt. Ch'i-ch'ü in Szechwan (China), forthcoming in *ZDMG* 142.1. (1992).

7 See *TTHC* 1, 47 (8a); 3, 292 (*ku-chi*). This pavilion also is connected with the tradition focusing on Tzu-t'ung ti-chün.

8 See above „Abbreviation“ (*TTHC*). See the texts indicated in note 5, and the study by T.F. Kleemann in note 4. Also see *Ssu-ch'uan feng-wu chih*, (Ch'i-ch'ü shan ta-miao), in: *Chung-kuo feng-wu chih ts'ung-shu*. Ch'eng-tu: Ssu-ch'uan jen-min Comp. 1985, 181–183. The oldest extant construction is the P'an-t'o shih tien of the Yüan period, see Li Hsien-wen, Tzu-t'ung P'an-t'o shih tien, chien-chu nien-tai ch'u-t'an, in: *Ssu-ch'uan wen-wu* 1984, 1, 39–43.

9 See *TTHC* 4, 449–451, see below. The following text in the gazetteer dates from the Ming period, *Wen-ch'ang hsing-tz'u pei-chi*. It refers to a temple in Tzu-t'ung city. Nowadays that temple has disappeared, and we find the Guest-House (Chao-tai so) of the Communist Party on its site. Concerning the cypress, see *TTHC* 4, 511–513, and for a translation, see above note 6.

10 They do not appear e.g. in *Ssu-ch'uan feng-wu chih*, see above note 8. However, a good description is the „*nei-pu*“ source Chung-kuo jen-min cheng-chih hsieh-shang hui-i Ssu-ch'uan sheng Tzu-t'ung hsien wei-yüan hui, Wen-shih tzu-liao wei-yüan hui comp.: *Tzu-*

tioned the former or present existence of Buddhist cliff sculpture in the area. During a second visit in Szechwan in 1991 local informants claimed that the sites were destroyed when the Shensi-Szechwan road was built, well before 1949. Others said that they were knocked away by „chaotic people“ (Cultural Revolution) who „already are dead for that“. In Ch'eng-tu someone stated that the big Thousand Buddhas Cliff still was there, but the heads of the figures had been destroyed. Anyway, we did not see any relics.

The very late emergence of Buddhist sites on Mt. Ch'i-ch'ü is quite remarkable indeed. The text from the Nan-Sung period shows why these Buddhist cliff sculptures were created. There are two questions which we should like to answer. First, why did it happen at all that Buddhist sites were established? Secondly, how did they fit into a much older and flourishing religious sphere?

First of all we have to feature that religious sphere at Mt. Ch'i-ch'ü, following the description in the report *Wen-ch'ang tz'u chi* of the Ming period:

The „Report on the Wen-ch'ang Shrine“ was written by „a Ming author whose name is lost“. This indication in the gazetteer is not correct.¹¹ The technical reproduction of the text also is very weak. Many characters are more or less unintelligible. The collection *Ku-chin t'u-shu chi-ch'eng* reproduces exactly this text in its section „Mountains and Rivers“, describing Mt. Ch'i-ch'ü.¹² Some corruptions in the gazetteer can be corrected on the basis of this edition, which attributes the text to someone named P'an Kao-mei.¹³

The Report (*Wen-ch'ang tz'u chi*) locates the „Shrine of the Magic Response of Wen-ch'ang“ (Wen-ch'ang ling-ying tz'u) on Mt. Ch'i-ch'ü, north of Tzu-t'ung city. Approaching from that settlement the Sung-hsien t'ing (pavilion) is said to be the first place to be reached. It marks the end of all the dangers along the road into Szechwan, and a more secure journey should be ahead.

Another pavilion stands half way up on a precipice, and a well „Dragon Pond“ (Lung-t'an) is somewhere below it. Eventually red vapours appear and float around the precipice. Tradition has it that here the five stalwarts of old¹⁴ had left their swords behind. This place is directly connected with the pious lore around the whole area, allegedly reaching back in time to the Chou period. We notice that the map in *Tzu-t'ung hsien-chih* shows this pavilion just above the lower end of page 7b (p. 46), which correctly indicates that a tourist on his way to Mt. Ch'i-ch'ü first reaches this place and then the Sung-hsien t'ing.

The road soon turns eastwards, according to the Report, and the visitor reaches Mt. Feng-huang („Phoenix“). From this point the journey would take

t'ung hsien wen-shih tzu-liao 8, (1990) 168–170: Chang Chiang-p'o, *Shen-ying, Ch'ien-fo ai, Ta-erh ai*.

11 See *TTHC* 4, 449–451.

12 See *Ku-chin t'u-shu chi-ch'eng, shan-ch'uan tien*. Taipei: Wen-hsing Comp. 1964, 178, 747.

13 See *TTHC* 3, 343, which lists him as Tribute Student (*kung-sheng*, Ming).

14 See *Hua-yang kuo-chih* 144–147; or *T'ai-p'ing kuang-chi* 458. 5a–5b.

him, after one mile or so, to the Thousand Buddhas Cliffs. This is quite in accord with the respective map in *Tzu-t'ung hsien-chih*.

The Thousand Buddhas Cliffs must have been fascinating sites. „Countless figures“ had been carved into the rocks alongside the road, adorned with gold and many colours. In one place nearby the inscription of the text *Tzu-fu fei-hsia tung chi* could be found.

This text is said to have been revealed in 1207 by the divine patron Tzu-t'ung ti-chün, a few years before the Buddhist sites were established. The inscription itself was done later by an unknown person, and no definite date can be given.¹⁵ The Report explains that the inscription was protected by a roof. Tourists came in great numbers to do rubbings of the text. Nowadays no trace of that inscription remains.

Nearby the tourist or pilgrim found a pond where he could water his horse (Yin-ma ch'ih). From there the road would lead straight into the Chung-hsiao lou („Tower Loyalty and Piety“) which was the main gate of the Wen-ch'ang temple or the „Great Temple“ as it is called today.

According to the Report that tower had three storeys and a height of „one hundred *ch'ih*“. The text praises the almost incomparable beauty of this building. The Kao-hsiao t'ai (platform) behind it is said to be connected with the second storey of the Chung-hsiao Tower. This needs some explanation.

The visitor enters the Chung-hsiao Tower which has a spacious entrance hall. As soon as he leaves that building he faces steep and long stairs leading upwards to the Wen-ch'ang temple (Wen-ch'ang tien). These stairs are situated in the open and within a square yard. The yard is formed by the Chung-hsiao Tower on the back side, and by two long pavilions on wooden pillars on the left and right side. They are as high as the second storey of the Chung-hsiao Tower and seem to emerge from the left and right corners of the tower. The fourth side of the yard would be constituted by the Wen-ch'ang temple (Cheng-tien), which is about on the same level as the second storey of the Chung-hsiao Tower and the two connecting pavilions. The Kao-hsiao t'ai is the platform (*t'ai*) or open area right in front of the Wen-ch'ang temple. Having climbed up those stairs the visitor steps on the Kao-hsiao t'ai.

It is possible to walk around in a circle. Starting out from one side of the Wen-ch'ang temple (or Kao-hsiao t'ai), the visitor passes one of the two corridors to reach the second storey of the Chung-hsiao Tower. From there one could return, taking the other corridor to the other side of the Wen-ch'ang temple. These two connecting corridors allow the visitor to look down to the main gate (Chung-hsiao lou) and the stairs, which had brought him up from the main entrance. This is the situation as we know it. It was the same in the Ch'ing peri-

15 „The Report on the cave of the soaring vapours in the purple department“, see *Ch'ung-hsiu Tzu-t'ung hsien-chih*, ch. 4 (I-wen), 1a-2a (Ed. pen-ya ts'ang-pan, dated 1858), copy and postface by Wang Ch'ih, dated 1497. Obviously the inscription was done before this date and after the time of Tu Chung-wu (ca.1220), see below.

od and also earlier in the Ming period. Again, the name Kao-hsiao t'ai points to the open area in front of the Wen-ch'ang temple (Cheng-tien).

The map in *Tzu-t'ung hsien-chih* is not precise enough as to the two connecting corridors. It shows the Chung-hsiao Tower and behind it the Cheng-tien („Proper Temple“), which the Report identifies as Wen-ch'ang temple (*tien*). It also does not show the name Kao-hsiao t'ai.

A bell and a drum tower stand on the left and right side of the Kao-hsiao t'ai. Two corridors (*lang*) are said to provide space for additional sacrifices. It is not quite clear which buildings are being referred to. We notice that within the Chung-hsiao Tower itself such sacrifices may have been performed. The statue of a divinity¹⁶ stands on its second floor. It is tall enough to reach up into the third storey of that tower. An altar table had been placed in front of it. Neither the Report or any other account mentions this statue. Anyway, our text points out that all these constructions and arrangements are very well done.

The Temple Cinnamon Odour (Kuei-hsiang tien) stands behind the Wen-ch'ang temple. Both temples are on the same level. The Temple Cinnamon Odour is said to be embedded in cinnamon trees and flowers, which in autumn produce a marvellous smell and a lot of colour. Here all the time some people offer incense. The building is said to have been established by the household of the King of Shu.

The Report says that close to the Temple Cinnamon Odour there are some other temple halls. The Temple Sphere of the Wind (Feng tung-ching) and the Temple of the Holy Mother who brings children (Sung tzu sheng-mu tien) are places, where many people come to pray. The text says, very much in accord with the map in *Tzu-t'ung hsien-chih*, that stairs again lead upwards to the Temple Opening up the Beginning (Ch'i-yüan) and again farther upwards to the Temple of the Heavenly Worthies (T'ien-tsun). In front of the T'ien-tsun temple the Platform of the Eight Directions (Pa-fang t'ai) once served as observatory. This is an elevated platform with eight corners and *Pa-kua* emblems.

These indications in the *Wen-ch'ang tz'u chi* (Report) describe the very centre of the cult site on Mt. Ch'i-ch'ü. The dedication of these temples in the Ming period evidently was connected with the vast sphere of religious Taoism. The text continues to feature the places of interest across the road, „north of the /Chung-hsiao/ tower“. Most of them, like the P'an-t'o Stone, had already been mentioned in this article.¹⁷ The *Wen-ch'ang tz'u chi* and the map in *Tzu-t'ung*

16 It is the divinity K'uei-hsing, representing an astral constellation. The divinity ranks well within the Taoist Pantheon. In 1991 we saw a red altar-cloth which had been donated to the divinity in order to thank for divine help. The donator wished to address „Buddha K'uei-hsing“ (K'uei-hsing p'u-sa)! The original iron figure (Ming period) was destroyed during the „Cultural Revolution“. It had been cast by craftsmen from Shensi. They had produced a set of ten figures, comprising Wen-ch'ang ti-chün and his entourage of eight servants (in the Cheng-tien) and that K'uei-hsing shen. We are not so sure that the present clay figure continues the hagiographic tradition.

17 Also see note 6.

hsien-chih show that the Buddhist sites on both sides of the road formed sort of entrance passage to these sacred places.

Now we have a look at the text from the Nan-Sung period with the title *Ch'ü-shan hsin-k'ai san-po fo chi* („Report on the installation of the Three Hundred Buddhas on Mt. Ch'ü“).¹⁸

Again, the reproduction of the text in the gazetteer is not very good. There are many misprints, and even the name of the author is not to be deciphered. However, the collection *Sung-tai Shu-wen chi-ts'un* contains an edition of this text (*Miao-shan hsin-k'ai san-po fo chi*)¹⁹ which provides the name of the author, Tu Chung-wu.

Tu Chung-wu states that all the famous mountains throughout the country were places, where traces of the saints remain. Buddhist sculptures, we are told, ought to be alongside the road, indicating that a holy precinct (*sheng-ching*) is ahead. The Grotto Heaven Ch'i-ch'ü, however, was a mountain where such Buddhist sculptures had not yet been installed.

Around A.D. 1220 when Tu Chung-wu came to the area to take up office in the local administration, he decided to do something about it. He was told, that in a distance of about one *li* from the (Wen-ch'ang) temple suitable rocks could be found. Standing on both sides of the road they were „tall as palace towers and square as if they were sliced“. Their popular designation was „Divine Seals“ (*shen-yin*). In past years craftsmen had tried to knock them away, possibly to obtain good working materials. It is not quite clear what they attempted to do, but they were stopped by thunder and rain. Up to the time when Tu Chung-wu arrived, four such incidents were reported.

Tu Chung-wu offered to the local people the interpretation that all of this was due to the will and order of the Imperial Lord (Tzu-t'ung ti-chün). The divinity would have preferred to preserve the rocks „until today“. Tu Chung-wu suggests to find out, if the divinity would tolerate the installation of Buddhist images. If there were neither thunder nor rain, the divinity would signal consent. Thus he ordered craftsmen to carve three huge Buddhist images and eleven small ones. And yet, there was no thunder and no rain at all, reports Tu Chung-wu, and all the local people were convinced that he had made the right decision! Consequently he could order that alongside the road, over a distance of five to six *li*, all these steep rocks were carved to show Buddhist images. This way the images of three hundred Worthies (i.e. Buddhas)²⁰ were produced.

18 See *TTHC* 4, 455–457. The date which is given (5th. month of A.D. 1220 *chia-ting keng-ch'en*) is a Nan-Sung reign title. This report was done some time after the creation of the Buddhist sites. Earlier he had petitioned to be dispatched to the agricultural administration of Tzu-yang hsien (Szechwan). Obviously the author wanted to document his good deeds before leaving the job.

19 See Fu Ts'eng-hsiang comp., *Sung-tai Shu-wen chi-ts'un*. Hongkong: Lung-men Comp. 1971, 92, 1165 (7b–8a). The source is *Chin shi-yüan* ch. 6. Nothing specific is known about Tu Chung-wu.

20 The term *san-po-fo* is not a specific name.

We are told that since then the road was filled with the sound of rejoicing tourists, who inspected these images. Tu Chung-wu analyses that seeing and hearing all of this, the good and pious mind would rise. „Until today“ the people of Szechwan (Shu) would visit Mt. Ch'i-ch'ü, approaching the area on a route which passes these Buddhist images. When all the images in the narrow passage would become visible, after having passed impressive rows of trees alongside the road, there would be a special effect. Although the visitors had not yet seen the Imperial Lord (ti-chün, i.e. Tzu-t'ung ti-chün) and his temple, they already would be filled with awe, respect and expectation. They would not dare to behave remissly and waste time to get there. This indeed was the purpose of creating those Buddhist images, explains Tu Chung-wu.

We do not know what the religious preference of Tu Chung-wu was. Anyway, he had to care about the administration of the temples in the area. He also seems to have been a persuasive man who took an interest in religious matters. Having detected what appeared to be a deficiency of the cult site of Mt. Ch'i-ch'ü, he had the local people accept his point of view. Up to the early 13th. century there was no Buddhist cult site on Mt. Ch'i-ch'ü, which we find to be an interesting information. Tu Chung-wu points out that for the sake of completeness Buddhist images had to be installed. In order to achieve this, he manages to show that the divine patron of the area (Tzu-t'ung ti-chün) consents. The „Imperial Lord“ seems to withhold thunder and rain which both are at his control, and thus signalizes consent. Tu Chung-wu explains that these Buddhist images serve to evoke the proper inner attitude on the part of the visitor, who somehow would speed up the visit to Tzu-t'ung ti-chün and the temples on Mt. Ch'i-ch'ü. In other words, the Buddhist images aid the cult of Tzu-t'ung ti-chün. This at least is the public justification which Tu Chung-wu formulates. We understand that the cult of Tzu-t'ung ti-chün was indeed very prominent in the area. The installation of Buddhist images on Mt. Ch'i-ch'ü was first of all the private effort of a devout man, who adjusted his reasoning to the religious demands of the local population. Being persuaded and convinced of the suitability of the endeavour they went along and worked out noteworthy Buddhist sites which during the Ming period still fascinated the visitor. The Report by P'an Kao-mei (Ming period) documents this reality.

We learn that there was the notion of a certain mandatory completeness of a cult site. Where Buddhist images served to evoke the pious mind, other cults surely were not being diminished or infringed upon. On the contrary, they mutually strengthened the religious and touristic value of the cult site. In this sense we remind of the revealed, divine text and its inscription which attracted learned persons to do rubbings.²¹ This says much about the ways and means of religion in China.

21 See above note 15. Tu Chung-wu's text about the Buddhist sites does not yet mention this inscription.

Abbreviation: *TTHC* Chang Hsiang-hai et.al. comp.: *Tzu-t'ung hsien-chih* (Ch'ing, 19th. ct.), ed.: Taipei: Ch'eng-wen rpr. 1976 (2 vols.).

Glossary of Chinese Characters

Chang Ya-tzu (O-tzu)	張亞子 (惡子)
Cheng-tien	正殿
Ch'i-ch'ü shan	七曲山
Ch'i-yüan	啓元
Chiu-ch'ü shui	九曲水
Chung-hsiao lou	忠孝樓
Ch'ü-shan hsün-k'ai san-po fo chi	曲山新開三伯佛記
Feng-huang shan	鳳凰山
Feng tung-ching	風洞景
Hsiao ch'ien-fo yen	小千佛岩
Kao-hsiao t'ai	高歛臺
Ku-chin t'u-shu chi-ch'eng	古今圖書集成
Kuan-ti	關帝
Kuei-hsiang tien	桂香殿
lang	廊
Lung-t'an	龍潭
Miao-shan hsün-k'ai san-po fo chi	廟山新開三伯佛記
Pa-fang t'ai	八方臺

Pa-kua	八卦
P'an Kao-mei	潘高梅
P'an-t'o shih	盤陀石
shen-yin	神印
Sheng-ching fang	聖境坊
Shu	蜀
Sung-hsien t'ing	送險亭
Sung-tai Shu-wen chi-ts'un	宋代蜀文輯存
Sung-tzu sheng-mu tien	送子聖母殿
Ta ch'ien-fo yen	大千佛岩
T'ien-tsun	天尊
Tu Chung-wu	杜仲午
Tzu-fu fei-hsia tung chi	紫府飛霞洞記
Tzu-t'ung hsien-chih	梓潼縣志
Tzu-t'ung ti-chün	梓潼帝君
Wang-shui t'ing	望水亭
Wen-ch'ang ling-ying tz'u	文昌靈應祠
Wen-ch'ang tz'u chi	文昌祠記
Wen-ch'ang ti chün	文昌帝君
Wen-ch'ang tien	文昌殿
Yin-ma ch'ih	飲馬池