In 1913 Friedrich Perzyński published an account of his adventurous journeys to the mountainous areas of Yizhou, present-day Yixian county, about 130 kilometres southwest of Beijing. He described his arduous hikes, sometimes on all fours and using ropes, during which he witnessed the local peasants trying to smuggle objects out of mountain caves. He also reported that glazed ceramic sherd s were scattered along the trails leading to the large cave he visited. Perzyński’s trips, in the summer and again in November of 1912, were prompted by his desire to find more statues similar to a bust that had been brought to his residence in Peking (Beijing). Referred to as a ‘priest’ because of its portrait-like quality, it was later taken to Berlin and until recently was thought to have been destroyed during the bombing of 1945. However, this bust, the surviving upper part of a complete statue, actually still exists, in the collection of the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg.

Despite a lack of clarity and even credibility, Perzyński’s account was the only source of information for scholars to reconstruct the provenance of the eight similar figures as they entered Western museums in the first decades of the twentieth century. The emergence of these Chinese ceramic statues took curators and antique dealers by surprise, as revealed in this statement by R. L. Hobson, a former curator of the British Museum, in 1914: ‘...the three large figures of Lohan [luohan] ... suddenly appeared in London and Paris rather more than a year ago.’ Exhibitions in Europe in 1913 were the main vehicles by which these masterworks were brought to the attention of the Western world. The British Museum and the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (Penn Museum) each acquired one luohan statue in 1913; the Museum of Fine Arts Boston acquired its luohan in 1912; the Royal Ontario Museum luohan was purchased in 1914; two went to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, in 1920 and 1921, respectively; and the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art bought its statue from C. T. Loo in 1931. The above-mentioned bust in the Hermitage was previously in the Fuld Collection in Frankfurt. Two additional figures thought to have been part of the original assemblage have recently surfaced. One is in the Sezon Museum of Modern Art, in Karuizawa, Nagano prefecture, Japan, and Musée Guimet acquired the other one after 1998. (Fig. 1.1) In addition to these two late-comers, there are also copies and possible forgeries. Most of the surviving figures have suffered damage and been subject to repair and even partial replacement. Of the ten extant figures, six are believed to retain their original heads (the British Museum, the Nelson-Atkins, the Penn Museum, the Hermitage figures, and the two Metropolitan Museum of Art..."

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According to Perzyński’s account, the statues were kept in more than one cave, the largest being a grotto named ‘Shanzedong,’ but he did not see any of them on the site. His guide also told him that he had seen three complete statues in the large grotto that may have been destroyed when villagers were moving them down the steep mountain slopes. The original group of these large sculptures of the same size, material and decoration, therefore, could very likely be sixteen.

All of the luohan figures are portrayed as Buddhist monks, with shaved heads and elongated earlobes; two of them show holes in their earlobes. Their monastic clothing consists of an inner garment and an outer garment, over which is a kaṣāya (Ch. jiasha), a monastic robe distinguished by its grid-like patterns. The younger-looking luohan in the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Hermitage bust are dressed in the older, Indian fashion, which leaves their right shoulders bare, while the rest display the more sinicized manner of having both shoulders covered. Both styles can be found in Buddha images of all media and periods in China. The figures sit with their legs folded, facing the