Introduction

Although Sichuan and Yunnan share a common border—something that was also the case with the Nanzhao 南詔 kingdom (653–902) and the Tang—it is difficult to establish with any degree of accuracy to what extent their respective cultures exerted influence on each other, in particular during the early phase in the history of the Nanzhao. In the case of Esoteric Buddhism, it would seem that the general direction of influence took place as a north to south movement, that is, that the Sinitic Buddhist forms we encounter in the Nanzhao and Dali (937–1253) material are examples of imports from China. It remains a fact that the Nanzhao rulers adopted many elements from Chinese culture including the Chinese script, and Buddhist texts were exclusively transmitted through this medium. It is very problematic, indeed almost impossible, to trace any direct influence from the Nanzhao and Dali cultures on Sichuanese Buddhism, both during the Tang as well as later during the Song.¹ This being said it must also be acknowledged that the Nanzhao and Dali cultures were also heavily influenced by Burmese, Tibetan, and (indirectly) Indian cultural imports. Buddhism in medieval Yunnan, in particularly its religious art, was a hybrid, a conglomerate of influences from all the surrounding cultures expressed through the sensitivities of the local inhabitants, the Bai people. While Chinese was the official medium for writing, Sanskrit was also very important for the transmission of “magic language,” i.e., for spells and dhāraṇīs. And it would appear that a highly local form of Buddhism came into being as a result of these diverse factors. Although certain forms of exoteric Mahāyāna thrived in Yunnan under the Nanzhao and Dali kingdoms, Esoteric Buddhism more than anything else

¹ Howard 1989, 49–61 has attempted to show that some of the Tang Buddhist sites located in southwestern Sichuan were directly influenced from the south, i.e., from India via Yunnan, but does so without serious historical research to back it up. This theory has been refuted in Sørensen 1998, 33–67. For a study of the Nanzhao in relation to Sichuan and the Tang, see Backus 1981.
represents the heart of the local Buddhist tradition, and has continued to do so even after the area was colonized by the Chinese in the course of the Yuan and Ming dynasties.

On the History of Esoteric Buddhism in the Nanzhao and Dali Kingdoms

Buddhism may originally have entered the area covered by modern Yunnan province from India via Burma before the establishment of the Nanzhao kingdom in 653 C.E., but exactly when and how this took place we do not know for certain. A recorded history of Buddhism in the region only came about centuries later at a time when the Bai people had firmly consolidated themselves in the central and western parts of Yunnan. After the founding of the Nanzhao, Buddhism entered its territory from several directions including Burma, Tibet, and of course Sichuan. Eventually Chinese Buddhism as imported from the north would leave its persuasive imprint on Nanzhao Buddhism, although the local tradition has continued as a blend of many influences (Xu 1979, 316–314). The foundation myth of the Nanzhao kingdom, which may have been formulated as late as the eighth century, is intimately linked with the figure of an Indian Buddhist monk who is credited with manifesting a series of miracles including the heralding of the Nanzhao and its founding clan.

Material evidence from the late eighth to early ninth centuries, mainly in the form of Buddhist sculptures, reveals that various cults relating to Esoteric Buddhism were in vogue in the late Nanzhao period. Prior to the establishment of the succeeding kingdom of Dali in 937 C.E., the appellation ācārya for monk practitioners of Esoteric Buddhism had come into use. This manner of appellation followed the norms of Esoteric Buddhism common during the mid- and late Tang.

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3 For an extensive discussion of this issue, see Chapin 1970a, 5–41. The classical history of the Nanzhao kingdom can be found in the Ming compilation, the Nazhao yeshi huizheng Mu, 1990. The primary concern of this work is to establish the royal genealogies of the Nanzhao and Dali kingdoms and is largely based on Chinese sources. For recent research into the historical sources on the Nanzhao and Dali kingdoms, see Lin 2006.
4 For an excellent overview, see Xu 1979, 309–314.
5 Cf. Wang (2001, 97–224). Although largely without annotation, and relying somewhat uncritically on the late sources, this work contains by far the most qualified and comprehensive study of Esoteric Buddhism under the Nanzhao and Dali kingdoms.