Introduction

In reconstructing the history of esoteric Buddhism in Sichuan from the pre-Song period we are to a large extent forced to rely on archaeological evidence, in particular Buddhist art and data gleaned from the surviving epigraphical material carved on stone or metal. With the exception of a few gazetteers (fangzhi 方志) from the Southern Song, very little in terms of contemporary, written records (books) have been preserved.

If we take the sculptural sites as our guide, esoteric Buddhism entered Sichuan (Jiannan 劍南) via two routes, both from the north. One was the road leading down into Sichuan from Chang’an over the Daba 大巴 mountain range, the other was the route that entered the province from Gansu via Tianshui 天水, which constituted a direct link with the Silk Road. It is also likely that esoteric Buddhism entered Sichuan from the east via the Yangzi River, possibly during the Liang dynasty (502–552), but at present we have nothing with which to support this. That Buddhism entered Sichuan from the south, from India via Yunnan and Burma, is not unlikely either; however, in case it did, there is virtually nothing in terms of cultural material with which to prove it, at least not in Sichuan—and certainly nothing in terms of esoteric Buddhist art. The esoteric Buddhist art that developed in Yunnan under the Nanzhao was essentially derived from Chinese Buddhism—that is, from Sichuan, not from the south.1

The Transmission of Esoteric Buddhism to Sichuan

The sculptural sites in Sichuan dating from the Tang featuring esoteric Buddhist images and iconographical topoi are distributed in such a way that we are able to plot a kind of map indicating the general

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1 A brief discussion of this can be found in Sørensen 1998, 33–67.
spread of this form of Buddhism in the region. This “map” shows a clear line extending from the north to the provincial capital of Yizhou (modern Chengdu) and a gradual spread to the counties directly to the south, southwest, and east of there. The main county towns again served as centers whence esoteric Buddhist iconography penetrated into the deeper countryside.

The earliest examples of esoteric Buddhist art in Sichuan dates from the second half of the seventh century and gradually increased in number during the following centuries. To the extent that the esoteric Buddhist sculptures are indicative of a corresponding religious activity, it would appear that the first flourishing of esoteric Buddhism in Sichuan took place in the course of the ninth century, especially after the Huichang Suppression (845–846), and continued after the fall of the Tang. This is backed by recent research into the history of esoteric Buddhism in Sichuan, which has revealed that orthodox Zhenyan Buddhism entered the Jiangnan at the end of the eighth century. It would appear that it was chiefly monks associated with Huiguo 惠果 (746–805), the famous disciple of Amoghavajra, who spread the more advanced teachings of esoteric Buddhism there. One of these monks was a certain Hongzhao 洪照 (795–872), who had received the fivefold abhiseka at the Da Xingshan Temple in Luoyang (cf. Huang 2008, 107–112). In 833 C.E. he arrived in Sichuan from Chang’an bringing with him the orthodox, esoteric Buddhist teachings of the Zhenyan tradition. Hongzhao’s stay in Sichuan, lasting over four decades, greatly stimulated the spread of esoteric Buddhism with his temple in Mianzhou 綿州 as its center. This success depended to a great extent on the support he received from the local literati and members of the land-holding elite (see Zhao 1998, 67–71).

Despite this influence from orthodox Zhenyan Buddhism during the second half of the Tang, the type of esoteric Buddhism that flourished in Sichuan during the Tang, in particular from the eighth century

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2 For a general overview of the sculptural sites in Sichuan from the Tang, see Howard 1988, 1–164. Note that this survey contains no explicit reference to esoteric Buddhism or its iconography.

3 An indication of the spread of esoteric Buddhist cults in the Chengdu area can be had from the description of painters of Buddhist subjects active there during the second half of the Tang. See Huang 1963, 1–42.

4 For Huiguo see Orzech, “After Amoghavajra: Esoteric Buddhism in the Late Tang,” in this volume.

5 For the Da Xingshan temple see Chen, “Esoteric Buddhism and Monastic Institutions,” in this volume.