

A Brief Overview of Xianglongshan Stone Carvings

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Abstract: As a Major Historical and Cultural Site Protected at the Provincial Level of Sichuan Province, Xianglongshan Stone Carvings are located in the downtown area of Neijiang. Representing millennium-old cliff-carved relics in southern Sichuan, they boast dual values of Buddhist culture, folk beliefs and regional humanities. Its statue system integrates Buddhism, Taoism and secular folk beliefs, reflecting the inclusive and pluralistic characteristics of Chinese culture. At present, Xianglongshan Stone Carvings suffer from severe statue damage, insufficient systematic research and scarce documentary materials. Existing studies are mostly based on limited academic surveys and news reports, and a complete research system has not yet been established. Based on its geographical location, relic status and historical context, this paper sorts out its unique cultural features, artistic values and contemporary significance, and defines its vital position in the Upper-Yangtze River civilization and the Bashu Cultural Corridor. Research shows that Xianglongshan Stone Carvings serve not only as a core carrier of Neijiang's urban cultural heritage, but also as physical evidence for interpreting the pluralistic-integrated pattern of Chinese civilization. They are of great practical significance for exploring the regional cultural features of Tiancheng (Neijiang), promoting local cultural-tourism integration, fostering cultural confidence and advancing rural cultural revitalization.

Keywords: Xianglongshan Stone Carvings, cliff statues, folk beliefs, regional culture, cultural inheritance.

1. Introduction

Folk beliefs constitute an essential component of fine traditional Chinese culture. Compared with institutional and well-organized religions, Chinese folk beliefs are marked by pluralistic integration, secular compatibility and pragmatic rationality⁽¹⁾. Chinese belief systems are not confined to single religious frameworks. Instead, they incorporate Buddhism, Taoism, primitive witchcraft, veneration of ancient worthies and secular blessing customs, forming an inclusive and diverse belief landscape. People revere Sakyamuni, Guanyin, Mahāsthāmaprāpta and other Buddhist Buddhas and Bodhisattvas; they also worship Taoist immortals, loyal historical figures and clan ancestors, while retaining ancient cultural traces such as primitive zoomorphic worship and witchcraft-inspired blessing rituals. Folk beliefs seldom dwell on abstract doctrinal speculation. Centered on practical life demands, they take praying for good fortune, warding off misfortune, ensuring family continuity and pursuing a smooth life as core objectives of religious practice. Divine worship largely serves people's daily production and livelihood, bringing the sacred and the secular into close interconnection[1].

Essentially, Chinese folk beliefs are not blind superstition. Embodied with simple humanistic ideas and life wisdom and adapted to people's practical needs, they are distinctly localized and life-oriented. Such pluralistic, inclusive and symbiotic belief traits are fully reflected in stone carvings and religious relics across China, and constitute the core cultural undertone of Xianglongshan Stone Carvings. Different from standardized religious grotto complexes, Xianglongshan Stone Carvings combine orthodox Buddhist statues with secular folk idols, preserving the evolutionary trajectory of folk beliefs in Bashu across a thousand years and bearing high research value.

2. Remnant Profile and Research Status of Xianglongshan Stone Carvings

Neijiang, reputed as "Tiancheng (Sweet City)", lies in the middle-lower reaches of the Tuo River. Endowed with favorable natural conditions and profound humanistic heritage, it has nurtured splendid regional civilization. Xianglongshan Stone Carvings are situated on Xianglong Road, central urban area of Neijiang. Rare among cliff relics in southern Sichuan, they are embedded within downtown settings. Unlike most grottoes hidden in remote mountains and forests, Xianglongshan Stone Carvings have coexisted with urban civic life for over a millennium. They faithfully witness Neijiang's urban development and stand as key physical evidence for interpreting humanistic changes in inland Bashu.

According to historical records and field investigations, cliff sculptures and inscriptions of Xianglongshan are distributed along the western precipice. There remain 61 niches containing 368 statues of varying dimensions: the tallest reaches 8 meters while the smallest measures only several centimeters, together with 9 cliff-surface inscriptions. The carving tradition originated in the Tang Dynasty, flourished in the Song Dynasty, and underwent renovations in the Ming and Qing dynasties. The site derives its name from the three-character inscription "Xianglongshan" carved by Wang Sanxi, a Ming-jinshi and Salt Transport Commissioner. It is now designated as a Major Historical and Cultural Site Protected at the Provincial Level of Sichuan Province. Covering subjects such as Thousand-Hand Guanyin, assorted Buddhist figures, secular portraits and poetic inscriptions, these relics comprehensively mirror statue art and humanistic customs of Bashu from the Tang-Song through the Ming-Qing periods.

Subjected to natural weathering, historical destruction and human damage, most statues are severely damaged with defaced facial features and worn decorative patterns, which

creates major obstacles for academic research. Systematic and in-depth scholarship on Xianglongshan Stone Carvings remains scarce, and existing findings are fragmented without a complete research framework. Available references mainly include online encyclopedias, folk accounts, news reports and limited institutional field surveys. The field investigation carried out by the research team led by Associate Professor Ma Zhenjun from Neijiang Normal University has produced special survey reports, providing precious first-hand materials for relevant studies. In addition, “Zhao Zhenji in Zhang Daqian’s Poetic Stele” on Xianglongshan Cliff Carvings, authored by Chen Yu, journalist of Sichuan Daily, sorts out historical allusions and humanistic stories related to the site and enriches research resources. Among all surviving relics, the Thousand-Hand Guanyin statue, large-sized and relatively well-preserved, represents the core heritage of Xianglongshan Stone Carvings[2].

3. Core Features and Cultural Values of Xianglongshan Stone Carvings

As a distinctive yet under-studied stone heritage in southern Sichuan, Xianglongshan Stone Carvings possess unique characteristics and outstanding research and social significance. First, it enjoys a distinctive geographical setting. Most ancient grottoes and cliff carvings were constructed in secluded mountainous areas. By contrast, Xianglongshan Stone Carvings are located in the city center, evolving alongside urban development over centuries, which constitutes a rare phenomenon in Chinese grotto culture. Second, notable gaps persist in academic research. Though listed as a provincial-level protected cultural relic, systematic studies on its statue system, artistic styles, religious connotations and historical evolution are still lacking, and its cultural values have not been fully explored. Third, it occupies a prominent position in regional studies. As an essential component of Neijiang’s distinctive culture, Xianglongshan Stone Carvings serve as indispensable materials for studying folk beliefs, stone-carving art and urban changes in southern Sichuan, with great academic and regional research value. Fourth, it bears remarkable practical value for contemporary society. Deep exploration of its cultural connotations can enrich Neijiang’s cultural brand system, empower integrated cultural-tourism development, facilitate local cultural revitalization, and play an important role in inheriting Chinese cultural traditions, strengthening cultural confidence and enhancing public awareness of local history.

Xianglongshan Stone Carvings represent a millennial heritage where natural textures and human accumulations interweave. Not modern imitative landscapes, they were chiseled along original natural precipices. Sculptures and epigraphs follow the undulating rock formations without excessive modification of the mountain body, achieving natural and time-honored aesthetic effects. This ancient cliff face functions as a stone-bound local chronicle, recording Neijiang’s transformation from the prosperous Tang-Song dynasties, through the civic life of the Ming-Qing dynasties, to modern urban prosperity. Stylistic forms, decorative techniques and aesthetic preferences of successive generations, alongside ordinary people’s spiritual beliefs, secular prayers, life scenarios and humanistic sentiments, are all embedded within rock textures.

Absorbing aesthetic traditions of multiple eras and schools,

its carving art combines the solemn elegance of orthodox Buddhist art with the vivid vitality of Bashu folk art. Buddhist sculptures, epigraphs and poetic cliff-steles complement one another. Confucian, Buddhist and Taoist ideas, literati ethos and secular folk beliefs converge here, vividly illustrating the evolution of pluralistic cultural integration in Bashu. It constitutes valuable physical heritage of Upper-Yangtze civilization and offers tangible evidence for researching the stylistic transformation of stone-carving art and social mentalities in central Sichuan.

The iconic Thousand-Hand Guanyin statue stands as the artistic benchmark of Xianglongshan Stone Carvings. Guanyin belief has enjoyed widespread influence across China. Over centuries of sinicization, it transcended pure Buddhist religious attributes and absorbed secular aspirations for blessing and disaster relief, evolving into a spiritual symbol of benevolence and virtue. Magnificent and dignified, the Thousand-Hand Guanyin at Xianglongshan features elaborate details, with each mudra and ritual implement embodying profound religious and cultural implications. Ancient craftsmen transformed abstract religious faith into concrete artistic works, demonstrating extraordinary craftsmanship and creativity of southern Sichuan artisans, as well as people’s age-old spiritual aspirations. Compared with other heavily damaged small-scale statues on-site, this well-preserved masterpiece fully reflects Song-Dynasty Bashu carving aesthetics and craftsmanship, and serves as a key specimen for studying Buddhist statuary in southern Sichuan.

Apart from large-scale statues, relief carvings preserve considerable cultural value. The relics cover diverse themes: solemn narrative scenes of Buddhist scriptures as well as lively secular life episodes. Figures are vividly rendered with smooth, delicate drapery lines and subtle facial expressions, authentically reflecting social customs, costumes, rituals and folk life in ancient Bashu. Going beyond purely divine iconography, donor portraits and worldly activities are embedded in cliff-side reliefs, bridging sacred religious space and secular folk society. These artistic remains assimilate orthodox Central Plains artistic paradigms and exotic stylistic elements from western regions. Their forms, compositions and ornamental patterns demonstrate cross-regional cultural transmission and adaptation. They constitute material testimony for ancient Sino-foreign exchanges and north-south civilizational mutual learning, fully manifesting the inclusive spirit and enduring vitality of Chinese civilization[3].

4. Conclusion

Tucked within Neijiang’s urban area, Xianglongshan Stone Carvings stand as a time-honored humanistic sanctuary amid modern hustle and bustle and Neijiang’s most precious historical treasure. For more than a thousand years, the cliff face has recorded historical vicissitudes and cultural continuity, witnessing urban transitions and civilizational evolution of Tiancheng. Weathered stone surfaces, ancient inscriptions and profound cultural heritage embody craftsmen’s ingenuity and folk spiritual beliefs, presenting a vivid epitome of Bashu’s enduring cultural lineage.

In today’s fast-paced and culturally diverse society, Xianglongshan Stone Carvings transcend simple relic status and become a spiritual asset shaping urban temperament and fostering cultural cohesion. They remind contemporary society to respect history and safeguard cultural heritage amid modern development. In-depth exploration of its historical

origins, artistic values and religious connotations, together with systematic sorting of its cultural system, not only pays tribute to millennial civilization, but also constitutes an important path for exploring Neijiang's local identity, advancing cultural-tourism integration and consolidating public cultural confidence. Future efforts should prioritize in-depth academic research, conservation and restoration of relics, as well as innovative inheritance of historical traditions, so that the millennia-old stone heritage can radiate renewed vitality and sustain fine local culture in the new era.

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