From Sacred Narrative to Ethical Everyday Life: Baodingshan's Pictorial Program and the Changing Viewing Relationship at the Dazu Rock Carvings, 892-1252

Weixiang Gan, Mengfei Xiao*
Lincoln University College, Petaling Jaya, Selangor Darul Ehsan 47301, Malaysia
*Corresponding email: 282584787@qq.com

Abstract

The World Heritage List states that the Dazu Rock Carvings shed increasing light on everyday life over time, a claim never tested at niche level. Drawing on the nomination dossier, published inscription transcriptions, and niche-by-niche studies of Baodingshan, 84 niches across seven carving sites dated 892-1252 were coded. Evidence for image-text matches was graded niche by niche. Cross-period comparisons were performed using Wilson intervals, whole-site permutation tests, and step versus linear models. Close readings of Baodingshan's hymns, precepts, and inscriptions were also undertaken. Among the 23 mid-late Southern Song niches, ethical exhortation and serial narrative each occur in 9, against 3 each among the 61 niches carved before 1174 (risk difference 0.34, 95% CI [0.15, 0.55]). Image-matched text stands at 8 out of 23 against 8 out of 61 when only niche-level records count (0.22 [0.02, 0.43]) and at 18 out of 23 with the dossier's bay-wide summary. No rise is detected before 1174 and increases in ethical exhortation above 0.13 can be ruled out; donor inscriptions had already fallen from 0.86 to 0.44 of niches in the late Northern Song, when carver signatures appeared. The Baodingshan texts address viewers in generic terms and invoke statutes and hell retribution, whereas earlier donor inscriptions vow in the first person for the donor's household. With only 7 sites and no niche-level record of Baodingshan donor inscriptions, inference is descriptive. The change is concentrated at one ritual site; the claim of gradual increase is not supported.

Keywords

Dazu Rock Carvings, Baodingshan, Religious aesthetics, Dedicatory inscriptions



Weixiang Gan
First author
Lincoln University College



Mengfei Xiao
Co-author
Lincoln University College

Introduction

The Dazu Rock Carvings were inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1999 under criteria (i), (ii) and (iii). The

nomination dossier states that 34 carving sites were opened in 892-1252 and hold about 80.00% of all statues carved in Dazu. The value statements keep returning to everyday. International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) values the carvings "for the light that they shed on everyday life in China" in the 9th-13th centuries. The Statement of Outstanding Universal Value adds that "cave temple art has increasingly shed light on everyday life", and the Dazu Rock Carvings Research Academy calls Baodingshan "a palace of art full of secular beauty". "Increasingly" is a claim about a trend, which niche counts can check.

These statements reach a large audience. The scenic area received more than 1 million visits in January-May 2026 and 134,000 overseas visitors in 2025, up 90.07% on the previous year. The 43.608 million tourist visits (preliminary) recorded for Dazu District in 2025 cover every attraction in the district and are not the audience of the carvings. The Academy's guiding, education and study-tour services characterize each of the five carving sites in one line, and these lines have never been checked against niche-level evidence.

Scholars have explained the "secular" character of Dazu along three lines. The local-society line reads inscriptions: Zhou, using 134 inscriptions at Beishan and Nanshan, traced a change from merit spaces of late Tang military officers to cultural spaces of Song gentry [1]. Sun read the deep Song niches at Beishan as places where lay devotees held feasts and offerings [2]. The ritual-site line read the plan of Baodingshan as an esoteric ritual site or a site for Water-Land (shuilu) rites [3]. It is states that Baodingshan "a model" of the "sinicization, secularization and everyday orientation" of Chinese Buddhist art. The text-image evidence draws on the inscriptions on the rock. It demonstrated that six narrative tableaux at Dafowan link extended scriptural passages to images. It also shows that Baodingshan bears no dedicatory inscriptions assigning merit to a donor and the donor's family. Wu argued that Dafowan deliberately blurs the boundary between the sacred and the secular [4]. The viewer-facing character of Baodingshan has long been noted, but no study has counted it niche by niche under one standard of evidence to establish when and where it appeared and whether it grew gradually.

There are four questions: Where are image-matched text, serial narrative, ethical exhortation and everyday-life scenes concentrated, and is any rise detectable before 1174 (RQ1)? How do the Baodingshan texts address the viewer, compared with earlier donor inscriptions (RQ2)? How did donors' traces on the rock change before 1174 (RQ3)? Which official and scholarly value statements do niche evidence support, and what measures follow (RQ4)?

The contribution lies in the method used to count and locate features. It comprises coded data and niche-level evidence grades for 84 niches, with image-text matches documented according to three evidence rules. A temporal difference is identified at one ritual site and bounded before 1174 by confidence intervals. Close readings supply textual evidence concerning how the inscriptions address viewers. A cross-check of 14 value statements against niche evidence is also conducted, with six indicators recording divergence between the textual claims and niche material.

Literature and theory

Secularization on the donor side and on the image side

"Secularization" has at least three uses in the study of Chinese religion. The most frequent category refers to donors of lower social standing. Among 20 dated dedicatory inscriptions from the Former and Later Shu periods at Beishan, Zhou identifies two inscriptions left by titled officials. By comparison, Sun records four military officials and two civil officials within 14 donor records dating to the late Tang and Five Dynasties. A second refers to religious figures entering everyday objects and festivals, as in the Song popularity of

Mahoraga figures [5]. A third concerns the domestication of the sacred: Halperin finds that Southern Song literati writing stupa inscriptions for eminent monks gave up the miraculous for a "domesticated" charisma [6]. It also shows that how Buddhist texts used a mother's suffering in bearing and raising children to argue for her children's debt. Recent English-language work treats Dazu as a single path of secularization and localization or of moral education and social cohesion [7,8]. Applied to Dazu, the term has to be split into change on the donor side (who paid, and for whom they prayed) and change on the image side (what was carved, and whom it addressed). The two may move together or apart, and only separate counts can tell which.

Niche-by-niche studies of Baodingshan supply the evidence for the image side. It collates the sutra passages, hymns and precepts of Dafowan No. 15 and traces them to the *Sutra on Repaying the Kindness of Parents* current in Song Sichuan and Yunnan. A 1999 study transcribes the inscriptions beneath each of Liu Benzun's ten austerities in Niche 21. Jo finds that the reliefs and inscriptions of the hell tableau, No. 20, run in the direction the viewer walks [9]. Kucera discusses how that tableau first frightens and then instructs viewers [10]. Bloom reads the Cave of Perfect Enlightenment as an idealized site for repentance rites [11]. A study describes Zhao Zhifeng's group as a popular sect that carved more than ten grottoes in southeastern Sichuan. For the smaller sites, Hu records Shizhuanshan, Shimenshan, Miaogao-shan and Chenjiayan niche by niche and states that the Wen family of carvers "passed the craft down for seven generations, about two centuries" [12].

Religious aesthetics: How viewing is organized

"Religious aesthetics" refers to the ways in which religious images structure viewing. In *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice*, it describes a mode of seeing that endows images, people, moments and locales with sacred meaning as the "sacred gaze". It employs "sensational forms" to denote relatively stable structures through which religious communities arrange encounters with the transcendent and consolidate group cohesion.

Each niche organizes a relationship among deities, donors and viewers. "Sacred narrative" denotes images centered on buddhas and bodhisattvas that recount their work of salvation. The viewer is a worshipper, and human presence appears at the margins as donor inscriptions or donor figures. "Ethical everyday life" denotes images of ordinary people's conduct and its moral consequences, paired with hymns and precepts that speak to the viewer as someone in need of self-cultivation. This paper measured only this dimension. Secularization of sculptural form, such as the feminized "Seductive Guanyin" of Beishan No. 125, is not measured, because the sources give no niche-level descriptions of form.

Nor does a carved everyday scene by itself amount to secularization: Sørensen reads the Baodingshan ox-herding tableau as a Chan theme of taming the mind [13]. The coding therefore records what is carved (everyday-life scenes, lay figures) separately from what it is used for (ethical exhortation).

Heritage discourse and propositions

In *Uses of heritage,* it calls the way experts and institutions assign heritage value an "authorized heritage discourse", and Zhu shows that the 2015 decision to regild and repaint the Thousand-armed Guanyin presupposed that the statue be treated as a work of art [14]. Users do not simply accept such discourse: Lin finds residents of Quanzhou building counter-narratives from daily life and local memory [15]. Zhang and Mohamad find at the Yungang Grottoes that visitors' ethnic and place identities are more closely linked than their cultural and national identities to interpretive mediation, prior knowledge and embodied spatial experience [16]. Some of the value statements written into the List and into site interpretation can be checked against niche evidence.

This paper tested six propositions, fixed after the first round of analysis and derived from the research questions rather than stated in advance. H1: The text-image program formed by image-matched text and serial narrative is more frequent in P4. H2: Everyday-life scenes and lay figures rise across periods. H3: Filial, precept-and-karma and mind-cultivation exhortation are concentrated in P4. H4: Before 1174, donor inscriptions and family-based donation keep their weight on the rock face. H5: After 1078, Daoist and Confucian content appears at both the site and the niche level. H6: Dated inscriptions shift from merit inscriptions to literati poems and visit records (exploratory). The periods are P1, late Tang (892-906). P2, Five Dynasties (907-965). P3, late Northern to early Southern Song (1078-1173), and P4, mid-late Southern Song (1174-1252).

Materials and methods

Sources and sample

This paper uses only publicly checkable materials, listed with their size and use Online Supplementary Material. The core source is Nomination Dossier No. 912. Its scanned pages contain the 81 plate captions, the inventory of 34 carving sites, and site descriptions transcribed manually from the document. Inscriptions at Beishan and Nanshan come from Zhou, the functions and donors of Beishan niches from Sun, and the niches of Shizhuanshan, Shimenshan, Miaogaoshan and Chenjiayan from Hu. Niche-level texts at Baodingshan, who translates the Dafowan inscriptions on the basis of *The Collected Inscriptions from the Dazu Rock Carvings*. As the document was unavailable, other Baodingshan niche inscriptions were not checked niche by niche. A Chinese Wikipedia article is used only to check niche numbers, dimensions and four image descriptions. Codes that rest on it alone are dropped in the sensitivity analysis.

A niche or sculptural group entered the sample if it is numbered, its date falls within 892-1252 and at least one source gives its subject.

A Dafowan niche also had to appear in the dossier's subject list or plate captions. The 84 records comprise Beishan 35, Baodingshan 22 (Dafowan 20, Xiaofowan 2), Shimenshan 11, Shizhuanshan 7, Miaogaoshan 5, Nanshan 3 and Chenjiayan 1.

This paper gives the exclusions step by step. Inclusion rates vary widely, for example 35/264 (0.13) at Beishan against 20/27 (0.74) at Dafowan, and 16 of the 61 records before 1174 entered only because they appear in Zhou's (2025) tables of dated dedicatory inscriptions. The periods follow the dossier: Two surges of carving in 892-965 and 1078-1173, a standstill between them, and the carving of Baodingshan under Zhao Zhifeng in 1174-1252. Of the 23 P4 records, 22 are from Baodingshan, and all 22 P1 and P2 records are from Beishan. Period and site are thus nested by design, and the P4 contrasts below compare Baodingshan (plus 1 niche at Chenjiayan) with the sites carved before 1174.

Variables, evidence grades and coding

The coding manual defines 11 theme tags, binary indicators and a three-way classification of narrative form to structure consistent, repeatable assessment across all sampled niches. Codes rest only on source text excerpted into an evidence table, with no interpretive inference introduced beyond the explicit content of the transcribed materials. A feature not recorded in the sources is coded 0, so "not recorded" and "absent" are numerically indistinguishable within the coding framework. This limitation carries particular analytical weight for the tersely described early Beishan records, where surviving textual materials are often fragmentary and many original details may have gone unnoted in the preserved documentary corpus.

Viewer-side indicators record what on the rock speaks to the viewer: image-matched text (sutra passages, verses, eulogies, cartouches or name labels paired with the image, excluding donor, carver and literati inscriptions),

ethical exhortation (filial, precept-and-karma or mind cultivation), serial narrative and everyday-life scenes. These categories capture communicative content directed toward visiting audiences rather than documentation of sponsorship. Donor-side indicators record patrons' traces: donor inscriptions, family-based donation and carver signatures, which mark the social and institutional actors behind the creation of each carved niche. At Baodingshan, the coding of image-matched text depends on the level of evidence.

The dossier states in one sentence that every group at Dafowan has "inscriptions and epigraphs attached", a summary that does not separate text matched to images from construction notes, and 3 niches have no original matching text. The main analysis counts only niche-level records (8 niches). Two further rules add the dossier's tableau summary (3 niches) and then its bay-wide summary (7 niches). All 8 positives before 1174 rest on niche-level records. No source records Baodingshan donor inscriptions niche by niche, so the donor-side variables are coded as missing there and analyzed only within P1-P3.

At the site level, Kucera noted that Baodingshan lacks inscriptions attributing merit to a donor or his family. Coding agreement was checked only as far as a single coder can check it, meaning reliability assessment was limited to self-verification rather than cross-coder comparison. The coder's second round followed the first by 35 seconds and is not offered as rigorous test-retest evidence, given the extremely short interval between the two passes. A rule-based dictionary coder written by the same researcher tests whether the classification rules can be reproduced systematically.

The coder adjudicated the 83 disagreements, and a revision layer made 49 further changes, each logged with its governing rule and supporting textual or visual source. Blind coding by an independent second coder has not yet been completed, so all codes should be read cautiously as the interpretive work of a single coder, pending future external reliability validation.

Analysis

Each period's proportion carries a Wilson score interval. Differences between P4 and P1-P3 are risk differences (RD) with Newcombe hybrid score intervals, tested with Fisher's exact test and corrected by Holm's procedure within three families: primary outcomes (niche-level text, ethical exhortation, serial narrative, everyday-life scenes), secondary outcomes and the donor side. Change before 1174 is tested with the 61 P1-P3 records alone, using the RD of P3 against P1-P2, the exact Cochran-Armitage trend test (Armitage, 1955) and the minimum increase detectable with 80.00% power.

Step and gradual change are compared by splitting the chi-square into linear and departure-from-linearity components and by step and linear logistic models estimated by Firth's penalized likelihood, extended with an indicator for niche-level image descriptions and, in the complete 60 cases, log niche width [17].

Width is part of the Baodingshan program and also enlarges the area available for scenes and text, so models with width serve only as an upper-bound check on confounding by scale.

All these tests assume independent niches, yet the 22 Baodingshan niches belong to one ritual site built to one plan, so niche-level p values are treated as descriptive. Site-level inference uses whole-site permutation: If Baodingshan's difference from the other sites has rank k among the 7 sites, p=$k/7$, with a minimum attainable value of 0.14.

Formulas, the theme analyses and the sensitivity specifications are given. The close reading draws on consulted sources only: Nos. 15, 21 and 30 are quoted; No. 20 follows Kucera's English translation; Beishan inscriptions follow Zhou and Sun. All scripts use random seed 20261016, and repeated runs give byte-identical results.

Results

Inscriptions, the three teachings and themes

The 75 dated inscriptions comprise 47 merit inscriptions, 12 literati visit records and poems, 9 carver signatures and 7 of other types (in Figure 1). The sources used contain none from Baodingshan. Merit inscriptions center on the family: 20 of the 47 name deceased relatives, a married couple, the whole household or father and sons.

The latest merit inscription dates from 1155 and the next literati inscription from 1169. Of the 59 inscriptions before 1150, 1 is a literati inscription; of the 16 from 1150 onward, 11 are (RD 0.67 [0.42, 0.84]). The shift overlaps with site and building cycle: 8 of the 12 literati inscriptions are at Nanshan, 7 of them at No. 5, and 11 were written after carving at their site had ended, while all 47 merit inscriptions predate that end.

Old grottoes seem to have become places for excursions once building stopped. H6 holds only descriptively, and because the inscriptions come from Zhou, they do not corroborate that study's periodization independently.

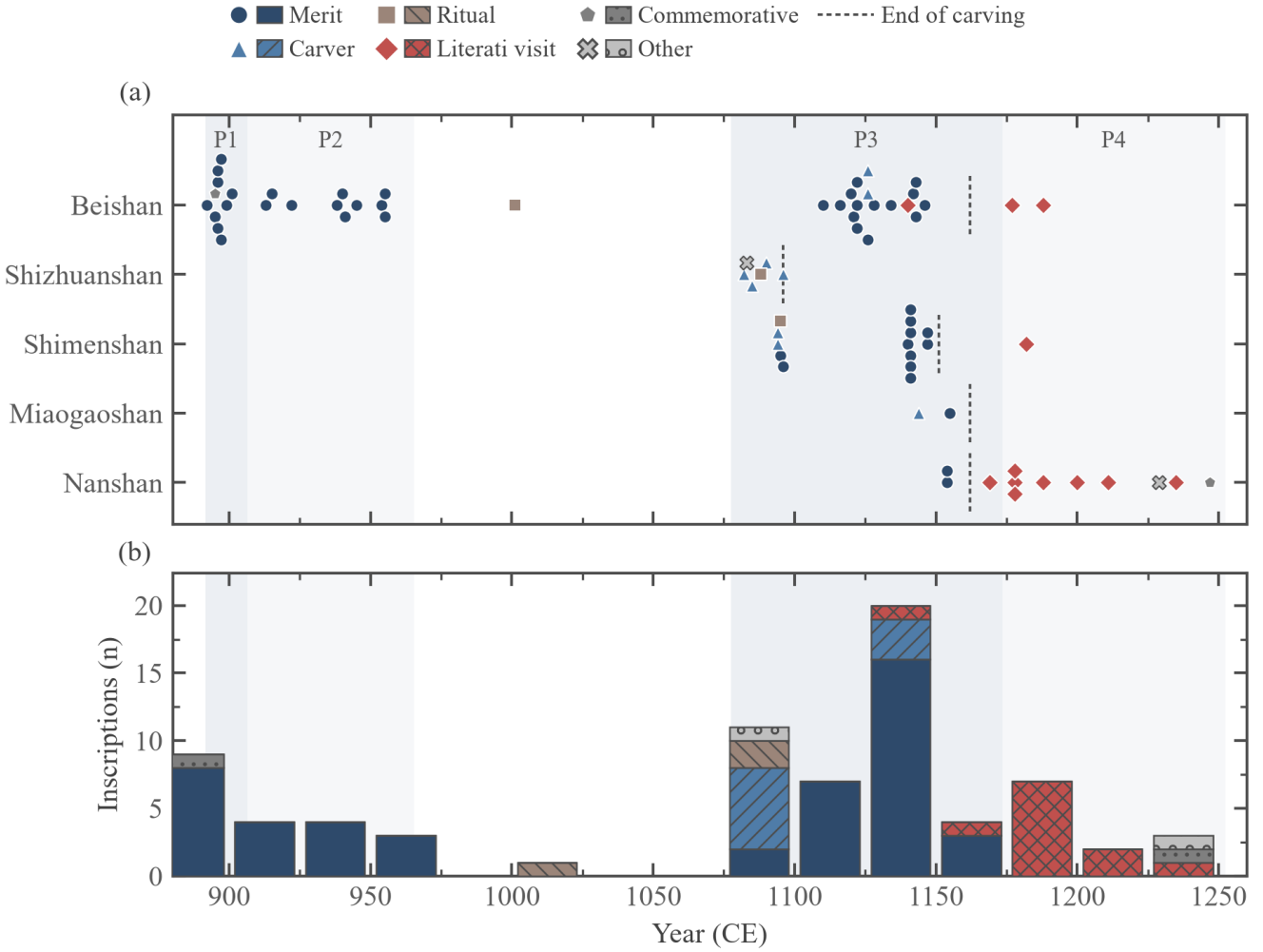


Figure 1. Dated inscriptions by site, year and type (892-1247, N=75).

Note: (a) One symbol per inscription; dashed lines mark the end of carving at each site. (b) Inscription types in 25-year bins.

Daoist and Confucian content belongs to P3. Of the 25 carving sites begun in P3, 14 contain Daoist or Confucian images (0.56), against 2 of the 6 begun in P4 and none of the 3 begun earlier (Fisher's test, p=0.23). The 11 niches that are not Buddhist all date from P3, among them Confucius and the Ten Savants at Shizhuanshan No. 6 and the three-teachings cave at Miaogaoshan No. 2, whereas the main deities of all 22 Baodingshan niches

are Buddhist.

H5 holds only in P3, and Confucian ethics entered Baodingshan through the filial theme of Buddhist sutra tableaux, with no icons of Confucian sages. Theme composition varies by period (permutation p=0.0005), and correspondence analysis places Beishan and its bodhisattva saviors at one end of the second dimension and Baodingshan with narrative tableaux, filial piety and mind cultivation at the other.

The viewer side

The difference is clearest for ethical exhortation and serial narrative (in Table 1 and Figure 2): 9/23 each in P4 against 3/61 each in P1-P3, both with RD 0.34 [0.15, 0.55] (Holm p=0.001). These two indicators show the strongest, statistically robust positive shift in viewer-oriented content in the later period. Niche-level image-matched text stands at 8/23 against 8/61, RD 0.22 [0.02, 0.43] (Holm p=0.065), a marginally significant difference that points to a modest increase in textual material paired directly with individual carved scenes. Adding the tableau summary gives 11/23 and adding the bay-wide summary 18/23, while the 21/23 of the first-round coding also counted 3 niches that Kucera describes as having no original text. This distinction underscores how results depend on whether text is recorded at niche, tableau or bay scale. Every day-life scenes stand at 4/23 against 2/61, RD 0.14 [0.01, 0.34] (Holm p=0.065), another borderline association suggestive of a late-period expansion of mundane, relatable imagery for viewers.

Filial and mind-cultivation exhortation do not occur before 1174, whereas precept-and-karma exhortation has 3 forerunners in P2-P3, though a Ten Kings niche need not show hells. This means the ethical repertoire visible to viewers undergoes compositional change, not merely a simple increase in moral messaging. Lay figures do not rise (6/23 against 12/61), so the greater prominence of viewer-directed content is not accompanied by a corresponding growth in depictions of ordinary lay people. H1 and H3 hold when scale is not controlled. H2 points the same way only for everyday-life scenes.

The evidence for it is weak, indicating that support for this hypothesis is limited and does not extend consistently across the full set of viewer-side indicators.

Table 1. Viewer-side and donor-side indicators by period.

Indicator	P1	P2	P3	P4	RD P4 - (P1-P3)	Holm p	RD P3 - (P1-P2)
Viewer side	/	/	/	/	/	/	/
Text, niche-level	0/10	3/12	5/39	8/23	0.22 [0.02, 0.43]	0.065	-0.01 [-0.22, 0.16]
Text, +tableau summary	0/10	3/12	5/39	11/23	0.35 [0.13, 0.55]	0.014	/
Text, +bay-wide summary	0/10	3/12	5/39	18/23	0.65 [0.42, 0.79]	<0.001	/
Ethical exhortation	0/10	1/12	2/39	9/23	0.34 [0.15, 0.55]	0.001	0.01 [-0.17, 0.13]
Serial narrative	1/10	0/12	2/39	9/23	0.34 [0.15, 0.55]	0.001	0.01 [-0.17, 0.13]
Every day-life scene	0/10	0/12	2/39	4/23	0.14 [0.01, 0.34]	0.065	0.05 [-0.10, 0.17]
Lay figures	1/10	0/12	11/39	6/23	0.06 [-0.11, 0.28]	0.558	0.24 [0.03, 0.40]
Donor side	/	/	/	/	/	/	/
Donor inscription	8/10	11/12	17/39	/	/	0.017	-0.43 [-0.60, -0.18]
Family-based donation	2/10	5/12	11/39	/	/	1.000	-0.04 [-0.28, 0.18]
Carver signature	0/10	0/12	12/39	/	/	0.017	0.31 [0.12, 0.46]

Note: Text=image-matched text; cells give positives/niches. Holm p is for Fisher's test of P4 against P1-P3 on the viewer side and for the exact trend test within P1-P3 on the donor side, where P4 is missing. Summary rules change only P4.

Counted by site, the evidence is much weaker. Baodingshan ranks first among the 7 sites for serial

narrative, everyday-life scenes and the two summary rules for text, and second for ethical exhortation and niche-level text, behind Chenjiayan (1 niche) and Shizhuanshan (3/7) respectively.

Shizhuanshan's texts are names of the Ten Savants and cartouches naming Laozi and the Perfected, whereas Baodingshan No. 15 alone carries 19 pieces of sutra text, verse and hymn totaling 1,053 characters.

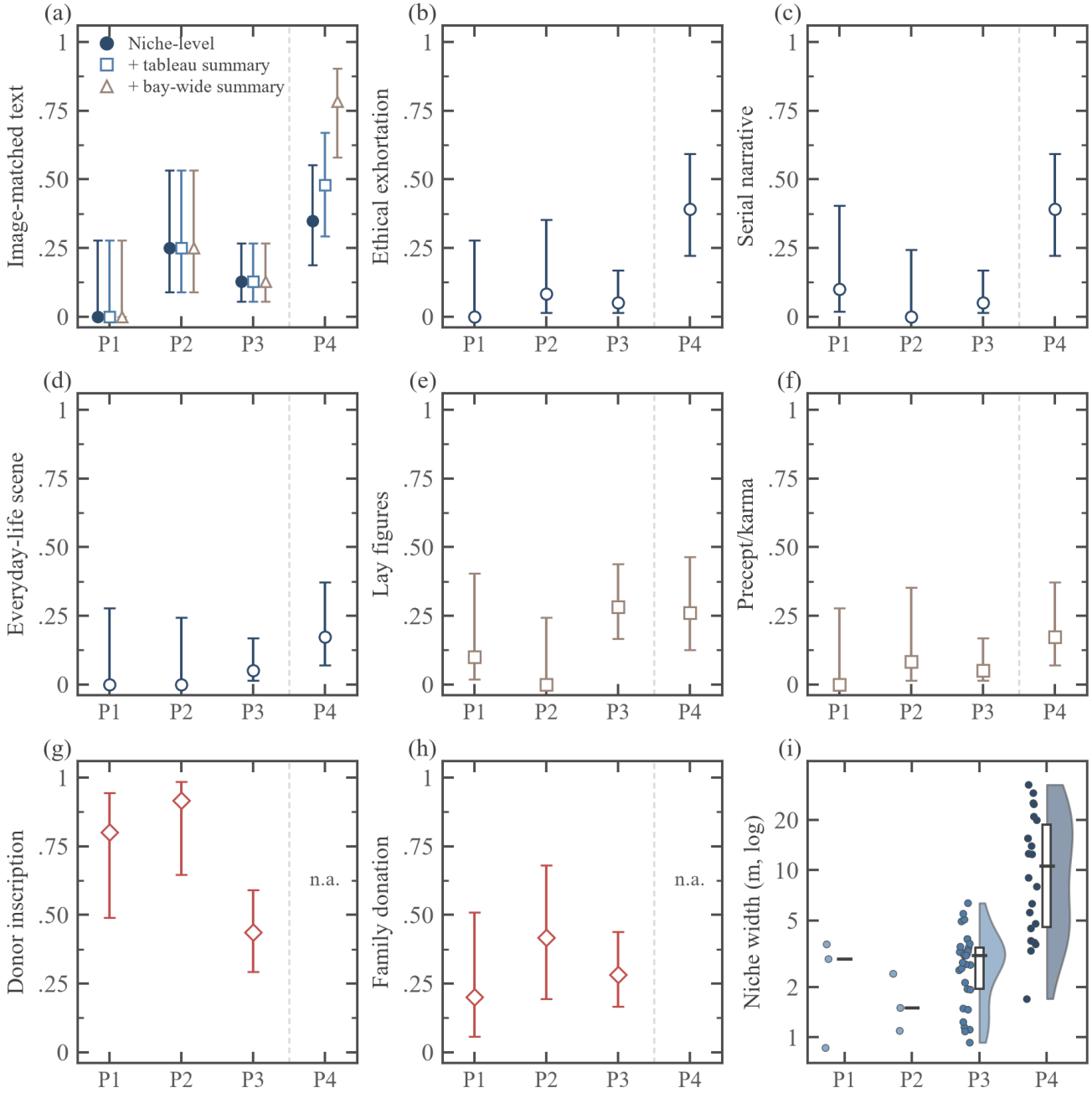


Figure 2. Indicator proportions by period with Wilson 95 % confidence intervals, and niche widths.

Note: (a)-(h) Points are proportions and bars Wilson 95% intervals (n=10, 12, 39 and 23); (a) shows the three evidence rules for image-matched text, and (g)-(h) cover P1-P3 only. (i) Niche width on a logarithmic axis. Source: Niche dataset of this study.

Change before 1174 can be bounded from above. The RD of P3 against P1-P2 is -0.01 [-0.22, 0.16] for image-matched text, 0.01 [-0.17, 0.13] for ethical exhortation and for serial narrative, and 0.05 [-0.10, 0.17] for everyday-life scenes, so increases larger than each upper limit can be ruled out. With the present sample sizes, the minimum increase detectable with 80.00% power is 0.23-0.37. Smaller gradual change cannot be detected,

and these non-detections are not evidence that nothing changed. Lay figures are the exception, rising by 0.24 [0.03, 0.40], mostly as donor figures, Confucius and the Ten Savants, and wet nurses.

For serial narrative the departure-from-linearity component has a permutation p of 0.013, and the step model's penalized deviance is 3.80 lower than the linear models. For ethical exhortation the values are 0.034 and 0.93, while for niche-level text and everyday-life scenes the linear model fits slightly better. With no individual dates at Baodingshan and the latest dated P3 niche from 1155, the data cannot distinguish an abrupt change around 1174 from faster change between 1155 and 1252. Scale overlaps heavily with P4: Median niche width is 10.75 m in P4 and 2.88 m in P1-P3 (Spearman's p=0.70), and with log width added to the complete-case models only ethical exhortation keeps an interval that excludes 1 (odds ratio 6.20 [1.04, 41.43]). How much of these differences are due to scale, the data cannot say.

The donor side before 1174

The proportion of niches bearing donor inscriptions declines across periods. It stands at 0.80 in P1 and 0.92 in P2, before dropping to 0.44 in P3 (in Table 1). This shift yields an RD of -0.43 [-0.60, -0.18], with a Holm-corrected trend p value of 0.017. By contrast, carver signatures increase from zero to 12/39. These signatures cluster in niches produced by hereditary carving lineages, including the Wen and Fu families. Part of the decline comes from how records entered the sample, but the direction holds without the 16 inscription-table records (-0.37 [-0.60, -0.04]) and for Beishan alone (-0.33 [-0.59, -0.02]). Among niches with donor inscriptions, the family share rises from 0.25 and 0.45 to 0.65 (trend p=0.096). Before 1174, then, donors' names were already becoming scarcer on the rock face, and the donors who did leave inscriptions mostly prayed for their own households. H4 holds for family-based donation but not for donor inscriptions.

How the Baodingshan texts address the viewer

In donor inscriptions the speaker is the donor. Shizhuanshan No. 6 closes: "The disciple Yan Xun resolved to carve this niche as a perpetual offering. In life after life, be clever and wise". Shimenshan No. 13 prays "that the household be at peace and young and old in good health". A named donor vows in the first person for his or her own household or deceased kin, beside an icon. At Baodingshan No. 15 both speaker and addressee change. A hymn is carved above each of the ten scenes of parental kindness. The eighth, on committing evil deeds for the child, reads: "The son has barely grown up; marriage is a common thing. The banquet brings much killing; who must bear the guilt?". An ordinary event, the slaughter for a wedding feast, is tied to sinful karma, and the hymn ends by questioning the reader. On the lower register a precept headed penal law states: "All who curse a grandparent or parent: Strangulation! Those who strike them: decapitation". Another reads: "in life they meet the king's law, in death they enter Avīci hell". None of these texts names a donor. They lay down rules in the generic form "All who.", setting secular statutes and hell retribution side by side against unfiliality. It notes that they appear in no version of the sutra and suggests that Zhao Zhifeng composed them.

No. 21 records Liu Benzun's ten austerities in the third person. The ninth tells how the family of Qiu Shao, dead of illness for three days, "took refuge in the honored master and begged for help". After he revived, "Qiu Shao and his wife and their two daughters all came to serve him, in repayment of his kindness". In the Beishan inscriptions the family is sponsor and beneficiary. Here it is witness to and follower of the patriarch's power. The hell tableau, No. 20, matches one act to one hell in conditional sentences, such as that whoever urges a monk to drink falls into the hell of severed knees, while the ox-herding tableau, No. 30, lies near the monastery entrance and may have addressed monks more than lay people. The target of exhortation changes from niche to niche.

The Dafowan program does not dilute the sacred. No. 21 places a 5.2 m figure of Liu Benzun at its center, and

more than twenty groups at Baodingshan center on Liu Benzun and Zhao Zhifeng. Where Halperin finds eminent monks losing their miraculous aura in Southern Song literati writing, Baodingshan carved the patriarch's austerities and miracles on the same cliff as ordinary filial care, drinking and herding: Its "ethical everyday" is organized under the patriarch's authority.

The Cave of Perfect Enlightenment at Chenjiayan, the only P4 record outside Baodingshan, shares the subject of Dafowan No. 29 but has no recorded matched text or serial scenes. One case cannot show whether pairing text with image was a practice of the main ritual site.

Sensitivity

The contrasts hold under most specifications (in Figure 3). With only the 65 records of confidence 3, the RDs for niche-level text, ethical exhortation and serial narrative are 0.40, 0.27 and 0.44, all with intervals that exclude 0. With only the 58 records that have niche-level image descriptions, the RD for everyday-life scenes is 0.16 [-0.01, 0.39].

Without the Wikipedia-based codes, filial exhortation falls to 2/23 (RD 0.09 [0.00, 0.27]), and among niches at least 3.3 m wide every interval includes 0 observations. Before 1174, dropping inscription-table records or using Beishan alone leaves the four viewer-side indicators near 0, while the decline of donor inscriptions and the appearance of carver signatures keep their original direction.

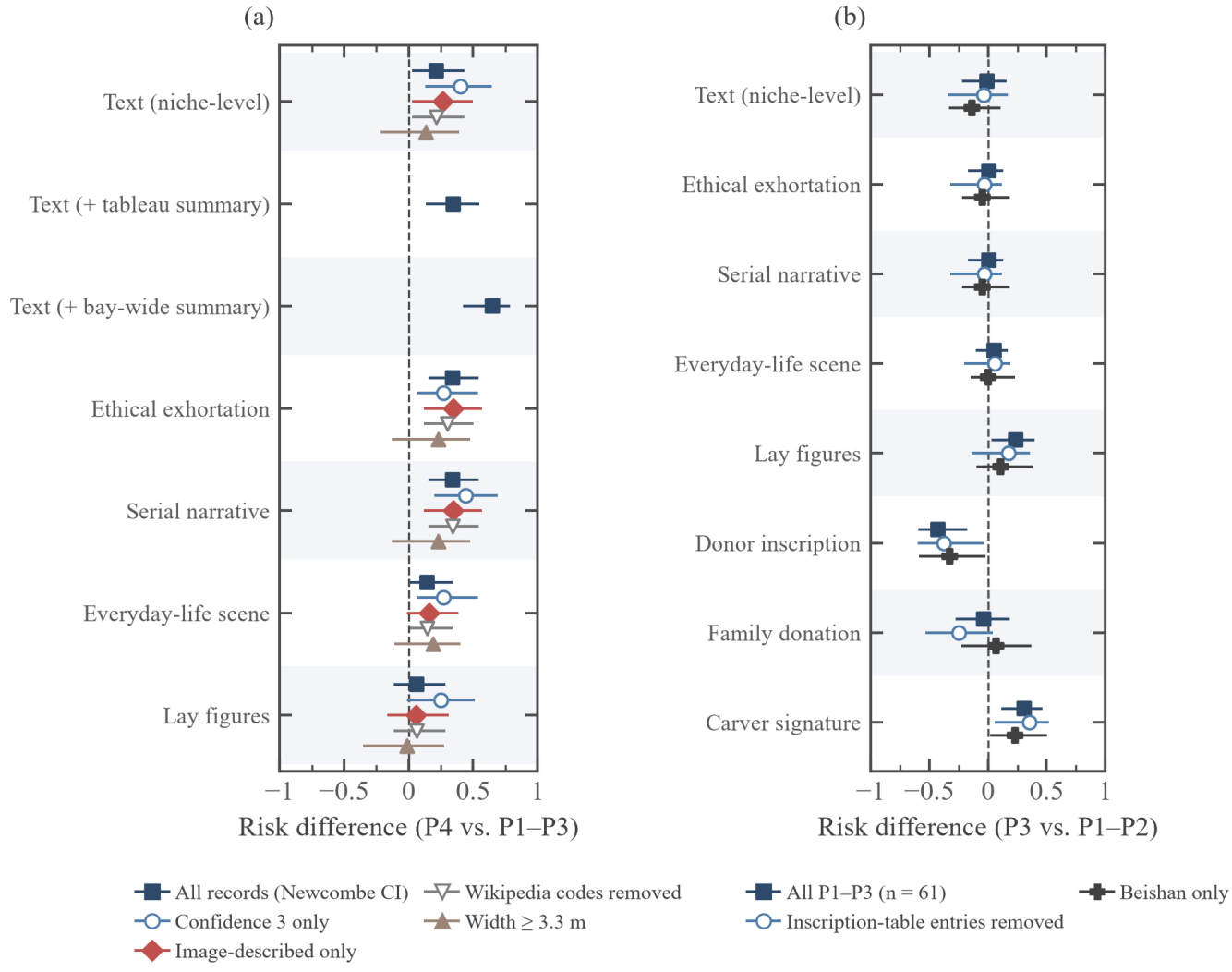


Figure 3. Sensitivity analyses of the P4 contrast and the contrast before 1174.

Note: (a) Risk differences of P4 against P1-P3; (b) risk differences of P3 against P1-P2, including the donor-side indicators. Lines are 95% Newcombe intervals. Source: Niche dataset of this study.

Discussion

Where the change lies

COMOS noted Baodingshan's turn from speculative thought to daily practice, while Kucera examined the integration of text and image within its narrative tableaux. Together, these readings frame the site's core quality as the anchoring of the sacred in the mundane. The coded counts developed in this study add temporal sequencing, spatial attribution and graded evidence assessment to these prior interpretive judgments.

The difference in ethical exhortation and serial narrative is located at one ritual site. No comparable rise is detected at the earlier sites, and increases above 0.13 can be statistically ruled out. The difference in matched text depends critically on the adopted evidence rule, standing at 0.22 when only niche-level records count. This pattern does not align neatly with the List's broad claim that the depiction of everyday life increased steadily over time. At the niche level, the "everyday life" referenced in the ICOMOS description takes two distinct forms: The exhortatory moral images of Baodingshan and the devotional family prayers visible at Beishan and other earlier carving sites.

Engaging the local-society interpretive framework requires a clear analytical separation between donor-side traces and image-side viewer-directed content. Zhou's argument for gentrification aligns with the chronological distribution of inscriptions observed in this dataset, yet both lines of reasoning draw upon the same surviving inscription corpus. What this article adds is the observation that the documented shift coincides with the cessation of carving activity at each respective site.

The rising family share among donor inscriptions fits Sun's reading of the Former and Later Shu niches at Beishan as family-centred religious spaces. Donor inscriptions were already declining in the late Northern Song, prior to the main Baodingshan campaign, mostly at sites produced by established carving lineages. This means site and period cannot be fully disentangled in the analysis. Labelling all of these interconnected changes "secularization", as Deng did for Dazu or Baodingshan as a whole, obscures two separable social and iconographic processes that unfold at different times and across distinct locations.

Whether Baodingshan was an esoteric ritual site or a site for Water-land rites, the indicators of ethical exhortation and serial narrative hold, because they record the rock face itself. Jo, Kucera and Bloom describe the viewer's experience through route, emotion and identification. The counts and close readings supply the conditions they share: Matched text recorded in 8 niches, serial narrative in 9, a median niche width of 10.75 m, and texts that lay down rules in generic terms.

The blurring of sacred and secular boundaries that Wu describes manifests in this dataset as a subtle transformation in the positional and narrative role of lay people within the carved program. The share of niches with lay figures in P4 (0.26) is no higher than in P3 (0.28), but the lay figures of P3 are mostly static donor portraits tucked into the peripheral corners of niches, whereas those of P4 participate actively within unfolding narrative scenes and accompanying inscribed texts. In Meyer's terms, Baodingshan forged a new sensational form in which coordinated images, hymns, precepts and continuous pictorial sequences address an unspecified, broad public, and the sacred gaze is redirected toward the viewer's own moral conduct and daily choices.

Authorized statements and evidence

The value statements are set against the niche evidence in Table 2. The coexistence of the three teachings, the donors of Beishan, the literati of Nanshan and the herding scenes of Baodingshan are supported. The reflection of everyday life across the property and Baodingshan's "secularized character" are partly supported. The increasing reflection of everyday life over time is not supported, and the dossier's comparison of Beishan with earlier grottoes cannot be tested here.

Table 2. Official and scholarly value statements set against niche-level evidence.

Statement (scope)	Source	Niche-level evidence	Verdict
Light shed "on everyday life in China during this period" (whole property)	ICOMOS	Every day-life scenes 6/84, Baodingshan 4/22; family share among donor inscriptions 2/8, 5/11, 11/17	Partly supported
"Cave temple art has increasingly shed light on everyday life" (whole property)	UNESCO World Heritage Centre (n.d.)	Every day-life scenes P3 - (P1–P2) = 0.05 [-0.10, 0.17]; difference concentrated at Baodingshan	Not supported
"The transition from speculative thought to the application of Buddhist ideals in daily life" (whole property)	ICOMOS	Ethical exhortation 9/23 in P4, 3/61 in P1–P3	Supported at Baodingshan only
Baodingshan as a folklore gallery, "distinctly secularized", "a model" of secularization	ICOMOS; DRCRA (n.d.-a); Chen	Niche-level text 8/22 (18/22 with bay-wide summary); everyday-life scenes 4/22, all within exhortatory or ox-herding tableaux	Partly supported
Scenes of herdsmen and ordinary life at Baodingshan	UNESCO World Heritage Centre (n.d.)	Every day-life scenes in 4 niches: the ox-herding tableau and the tableaux of parental kindness, of repaying kindness and of the hells	Supported
Beishan carved by officials, gentry, commoners, monks and nuns	UNESCO World Heritage Centre (n.d.); DRCRA (n.d.-b)	Dated inscriptions name all these groups; family-based donation 12/35	Supported
Beishan subjects result from secularization, unlike earlier grottoes	SBCR	No data on earlier grottoes	Cannot be tested
Three teachings at Shizhuanshan; Buddhism and Daoism at Shimenshan	UNESCO World Heritage Centre (n.d.); DRCRA (n.d.-b)	Shizhuanshan 5 Buddhist, 1 Daoist, 1 Confucian niches; Shimenshan 6 Buddhist, 5 Daoist	Supported
Nanshan as a literati retreat	DRCRA (n.d.-b)	8 of the 12 literati inscriptions	Supported

Note. The 9 rows cover all 14 statements; Chinese-language statements are the author's translations.

The gaps lie in two places. The tagline "secular beauty" treats the everyday scenes within ethical exhortation as objects of aesthetic appreciation and leaves out the hymns, precepts and statutes carved beside them. The Beishan page names the donors but not what their inscriptions say, namely prayers for deceased kin and whole households.

English-language research has also moved toward conservation of the physical fabric: Among English-language OpenAlex records, the share in the humanities, religion and heritage-society domain fell from 0.67 (18/27) in 2006-2015 to 0.23 (13/56) in 2021-2026.

Interpretation and conservation measures

Six measures, each tied to a finding, are listed in Table 3. Their legal basis is the Regulations of Chongqing Municipality on the Protection of the Dazu Rock Carvings (Standing Committee of the Chongqing Municipal People's Congress, 2022) and the Cultural Relics Protection Law (Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, 2024), and their design follows Principles 1, 2 and 7.

Table 3. Interpretation and conservation measures.

No.	Measure	Evidence addressed	Target and evaluation	Legal basis
M1	"Text-image-precept" interpretation at Baodingshan (original text, modern Chinese, English)	Matched text recorded in 8 niches; the website offers only "rich in text and image"	8 niches by the end of 2027; pre- and post-tests at pilot and control niches	Regulations, Arts. 20, 25; Law, Art. 37
M2	Study unit on Beishan donor inscriptions	Family share 0.25-0.65; family prayers absent from website	One session per semester from 2027; pre- and post-class tests	Regulations, Art. 20; Law, Art. 16
M3	Three-teachings route: Shizhuanshan-Shimenshan-Miaogaoshan	All 11 non-Buddhist niches are in P3	Route texts in 2027; visits by site and route choice	Regulations, Art. 25(2)
M4	Local guides and carver genealogies	Carver signatures 12/39 in P3; seven generations of Wen carvers	Annual training from 2027; checks of guiding accuracy	Regulations, Arts. 5, 25(3)
M5	Open niche-level data with evidence grades	Matched text 8/23 to 18/23 by evidence rule	Public repository before acceptance; downloads and reanalyses	Law, Art. 17(2)
M6	Risk-based monitoring coordinated with visitor flows	Tens of thousands at Baodingshan on one festival day	Synchronized microclimate and visitor-flow records from 2027	Regulations, Arts. 16, 19, 24

Note. Regulations=Regulations of Chongqing Municipality on the Protection of the Dazu Rock Carvings (2022 amendment); Law=Cultural Relics Protection Law (2024 revision).

M1 returns to viewers the texts carved at Baodingshan, with pre- and post-tests of how visitors connect the exhortations to their own experience; the controversy over the 2015 regilding belongs in the same interpretation. M2 has students read Beishan inscriptions for deceased kin beside the hymns of No. 15. M3 uses Yan Xun's niche for Confucius and the three-teachings cave signed by Wen Zhongzhang to teach religious coexistence. Cai et al. find that inscription on the List did not boost the host city's tourism economy [18].

By this reasoning, the benefits of a route have to be evaluated and will not appear by themselves. M4 lets local guides tell the story of seven generations of Wen carvers, drawing on residents' own memory. M5 opens the data and evidence grades to testing. M6 chooses monitoring points by risk evidence and reserves time for religious activity: The dossier records tens of thousands of people coming to Baodingshan on the 19th day of the second lunar month, and Chae traces conflicts over living religious heritage to rigid regulation and fragmented responsibility [19].

Conclusion

On the viewer side, change at the Dazu Rock Carvings is concentrated at Baodingshan. Before 1174 the niches centered on icons, no rise in ethical exhortation, serial narrative or everyday-life scenes is detected, and everyday life appeared beside the niche in donor inscriptions praying for deceased kin and whole households. The donor side changed earlier, in the late Northern Song, as donor inscriptions declined and carver signatures appeared.

Baodingshan carved filial care, drunkenness, wedding banquets and herding as serial scenes, with hymns, precepts and statutes that name no donor and address every viewer under the patriarch's authority. What the List describes as an ever-increasing reflection of everyday life appears at the niche level as a difference concentrated at one ritual site. Guided tours and study

programs can give back to viewers the texts written for them in the Song, and tell today's audiences of the Beishan donors' vows for their families.

Limitations

The chief limitation is asymmetric evidence. Only 8 Baodingshan niches have niche-level records of matched text, so the difference in matched text ranges from 0.22 to 0.65 across evidence rules, and Baodingshan donor inscriptions are not recorded niche by niche, so the donor side can be analyzed only before 1174. Checking niche by niche requires *The Collected Inscriptions from the Dazu Rock Carvings* and *The Complete Compilation of the Dazu Rock Carvings*, which are not obtained. Period and site are nested, the 22 Baodingshan niches come from one ritual site, and with 7 sites the minimum attainable p is 0.14, so much of the evidence rests on qualitative comparison of counts and texts.

One coder did all the coding, the recheck came too soon after the first round, the dictionary rules were written by the same person, and blind coding by an independent second coder remains to be done. Beishan inscriptions are taken from English translations, four Dafowan image descriptions come from Wikipedia, the early sample entered mostly through inscription tables (inclusion rate 0.13 at Beishan), and scale overlaps with period.

The dated inscriptions cover about 37.00% of those used by Zhou and omit the 44 inscriptions, travel notes and poems at Baodingshan. The bibliometric data cover only English-language OpenAlex records, and no visitor survey was carried out. Future work can transcribe the Baodingshan texts niche by niche, have an independent coder code blind, extend the coding to Liu-Zhao sites at Anyue to separate sect from site, and test visitor understanding at the M1 pilot niches.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Weixiang Gan, male, Ph.D., is a postdoctoral researcher and serves as Chief International Business Expert, Chief Corporate Academic Advisor, and Senior Corporate Training Mentor at Zhenguigu Technology Co., Ltd. He is also an Associate Editor of the Asia-Pacific Economic and Management Review. His research interests include consumer behaviour, marketing psychology, AI-enabled enterprise digital transformation, AI-driven big data forecasting, ethics, human intelligence studies, corporate internal control, SME internationalisation, higher education curriculum theory, regional economics, industrial economics, sixth-sector industrial integration, and green innovation.

Mengfei Xiao, male, Ph.D., is a postdoctoral researcher and entrepreneur. His research interests include tourism management, human resource management, entrepreneurship, international trade, public relations management, and intellectual property management.