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BOOK REVIEW

Buddhist Stone Sutras in China: Shandong Province, volume 4, part 1 and 2

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The Buddhist Stone Sutras in China project is monumental (excuse the pun). The two-volume set under review here, for example, weighs in at thirteen pounds and includes a list of 94 contributors involved with everything from geodesy to technical realization, and translation to layout design. With funding by agencies in both China and Germany, this project aims to publish with the highest academic standards and in gorgeous fashion—as well as in a bilingual format (Chinese and English)—all of the Buddhist scriptures carved in stone and their related inscriptions found in the People's Republic of China.

Thus far the collaborators have published volumes on the carvings in Shaanxi (2 volumes), Sichuan (5 volumes), and Shandong (4 volumes). The latest two-volume set in the Shandong series is dedicated to the largest and most famous Buddhist inscription in China: the late sixth-century *Diamond Sūtra* that is found on a slightly sloping rock face on the southern side of Mount Tai. Volume one is a detailed study of the sūtra inscription itself—its origin, history, and meaning over time—and volume two echoes these topics through a meticulous study of the sixty-three inscriptions that were made in the Stone Sutra Valley from the late Song period until 2001, when the monument was declared a "Major Historical and Cultural Site Protected at the National Level."

It was not always thus. Rather, for almost a millennium after it was carved in the late sixth century, this remarkable monument virtually vanished from the Chinese historical record. It was briefly rediscovered in the Song period when the Zhenzong emperor (r. 997–1022) went to Mount Tai in order to conduct the *feng* and *shan* sacrifices in response to the Khitan conquest and the implementation of the humiliating Chanyuan Treaty of 1005. But in the context of the Song–Liao rivalry and especially its anti-Buddhist pro-Confucian slant the distinctive calligraphy of the monument was also deemed beneath contempt. For the literati of the Song, it had the barbarian stink of the "fur coat spirit" (*zhan-qiu qi* 氈裘氣) both religiously and aesthetically. And then this monument was forgotten.

This critical evaluation was not reversed until the economic boom of the Ming dynasty, when travel and pilgrimage to Mount Tai exploded. At that time, literati began to marvel at the nature of the script used to write the *Diamond Sūtra*, which—in the words of Lothar Ledderose—is "archaic clerical script with elements

of regular script, often in rounded brushwork typical of seal script–a fusion of calligraphic effects that imbue the writing with a distinct aesthetic quality" (1:7). With the Manchu conquest, this fascination waned and there are only two pilgrim inscriptions from the entire Qing period. But antiquarian interest in the inscription continued, and its script came to be revered. And it was this sentiment that was adopted by late nineteenth-century reformers seeking treasures of cultural heritage, most notably Kang Youwei (1858–1927), who in 1923 declared: "This ranks first among China's calligraphies" (1:74). This evaluation ultimately came to be universally shared and thus fueled a century of fascination with the inscription, culminating in this publication.

Clearly there is much more fascinating history surrounding Stone Sutra Valley, such as when in a turbulent period of the Ming dynasty there was an attempt to Confucianize the valley by inscribing the *Great Learning* above the *Diamond Sūtra* and thereby sublimating the Dharma. Indeed, in the capable hands of all the contributors to these two volumes one gets a sweeping view of Chinese history as refracted through one monumental inscription.

Let us turn to the inscription itself. It lacks a colophon but, based on similar calligraphic carvings in the area, it is conventionally dated to the 570s and attributed to the obscure monk Seng'an Daoyi, who presumably created it as a hedge against the turbulence of the Six Dynasties period and its pervasive fear of the Dharma's impending demise (*mofa* 末法). In carving the inscription, he used as his source text Kumārajīva's iconic translation of the *Diamond Sūtra* from 402. In particular, he wrote out a little more than half of the text in characters each averaging about 50 square centimeters, which resulted in a field of text in 45 columns and 2747 characters, which covers an area 62.1 meters high and 31.3 meters wide. Moreover, in between columns 10 and 11, 18 and 19, and 24 and 25 Seng'an Daoyi left space between the columns so that pilgrims could walk through or circumambulate between and within the sacred text, since, as Tsai Suey-Ling convincingly argues, writing out the text in stone created a stupa or Buddhist shrine. This interpretation is bolstered by the fact that the inscription ends precisely when the *Diamond Sūtra* declares that the reproduction of itself creates a holy relic: "Subhūti, at whatever site this sutra is present, such a site should be venerated by the whole world including celestials, humans and asuras. You should know that such sites shall indeed become stupas, which all need to be venerated by ritual circumambulation and by scattering flowers and [burning] incense all over this site" (1:32).

Nevertheless, sacred scriptures are rarely stable. The sixth-century *Diamond Sūtra* inscription in stone deviates from the received version of Kumārajīva's translation in three aspects. First, it uses an unconventional title for the scripture that was used only in the sixth and seventh centuries. Second, there are ten different textual variations between the stone and the received version preserved in Taishō canon. Those deviations may possibly be explained by Paul Harrison's work on the *Diamond Sūtra*, which shows that Kumārajīva's original translation was based on an earlier and shorter Sanskrit version of the text. The inscribed stone version thus presumably preserves this earlier shorter version of the text. Third, one of the major variations between the stone and canonical versions is a key passage regarding the dating of the Buddha's messianic prophecy and its eschatological implications. This difference may explain why this monumental *Diamond Sūtra*, its apocalyptic visions, and its salvific ritual applications may have tempered the interest of Buddhists in the very different religio-political realities of the Sui and Tang dynasties.

Regardless of such theological thickets and their implications, certainly any future discussions of this monumental inscription will be based on this phenomenal piece of scholarship.