

STŪPA, SŪTRA AND ŚARĪRA IN CHINA, C. 656–706 CE†

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1. Shorter histories and larger questions

To a readership of Buddhologists, a study concentrating on a span of a mere fifty years—and at some remove from the lifetime of the Buddha, too—probably requires a word or two of explanation. The interrelationship between structures, texts and relics is surely a topic for investigation on the grand scale, so as to arrive at an understanding of how Buddhism deals with such matters as scripture and memory within the tradition as a whole. Why select a brief fragment of time, less even than an ordinary lifespan, from one particular regional branch of Buddhism, and subject it to microscopic examination? To state the obvious, because this study is not concerned with Buddhological matters in themselves, but with an attempt at historical reconstruction designed to answer a specific question.

And, as it happens, that high degree of specificity has not helped in reducing the research that follows to the truly microscopic level. China in the late seventh century was an environment which produced a vast amount of surviving textual information, so far from having to eke out what meaning we may from a strictly bounded collection of materials, it is much more of a problem to feel certain that one has read comprehensively enough to arrive at a definitive answer. This study may, then, be improved upon by future researchers possessed of greater assiduity, but the immediate aim here is simply to establish the area of research covered as an important one for making sense of human experience over the past one and a half millennia. For the question which we are attempting to answer is

† Since presenting my paper at the UKABS conference, I have also been able to benefit from some points brought to my attention by Chen Jinhua, to whom I am grateful.

this: what was the religious environment that encouraged the spread of the new technology of printing in late seventh century China?

Here, of course, I cannot answer this question completely, but only in so far as it concerns Buddhism, though I have presented a broader treatment of some of the issues involved in another lecture*. But to understand the need to focus on an answer—albeit a partial one—in Buddhist terms, we should note that the classic study on the origins of woodblock printing in China, which was based on research carried out more than three quarters of a century ago, is quite clear about the importance of Buddhism in the development of printing technology. It refers explicitly to ‘the duplicating impulse that has always been a characteristic of Buddhism’¹. This may sound slightly mysterious in isolation, but a standard general history of the book is more intelligible:

[O]ne of the ways by which the devout Buddhist ... acquired merit was by the ceaseless repetition, orally or in writing, of passages from the Buddhist scriptures. A method of endless reduplication of such merit-bringing passages by means of impressions on paper from wooden blocks was too precious an opportunity for Buddhist zeal to have overlooked².

Thanks to more recent work, by K. R. Norman and others on the oral nature of early Buddhist scriptures, and by Richard Gombrich and others on the link between the rise of Mahāyāna and writing, the general factors stimulating reduplication are now tolerably clear: Buddhists needed to repeat their scriptures orally, lest they forget them; Mahāyānists needed to propagate their ideas in writing as energetically as possible, lest their minority opinions disappear from

* To be published in a collection on China’s technological transfer to the world edited by Glen Dudbridge. A preliminary version is available as ‘The Rise and Spread of Printing: A New Account of Religious Factors’, SOAS Working Papers in the Study of Religions, 2001 (London: SOAS, 2001).

¹ T. F. Carter, revised and edited by L. C. Goodrich, *The Invention of Printing and Its Spread Westward* (New York: Ronald Press, 1955), p. 40.

² Douglas C. McMurtrie, *The Book: The Story of Printing and Bookmaking* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1943), pp. 85–86.

the face of the earth³. But whereas such factors, plus paper and rudimentary text transfer devices such as seals, were present almost from the start of Chinese Buddhism, there are no signs that Buddhists, once introduced to these resources, were in any sense looking for a way of combining them so as to embark on the mass manufacture of meritorious texts. It surely remains important to try to explain through a closer examination of all the factors involved why the large-scale move to woodblock printing took place when and where it did, even if that attempt at explanation remains at times tentative and incomplete.

2. *Printing and the seventh century*

Chinese scholars have long suspected that woodblock printing was known in China during the seventh century, and lately a few examples of *dhāraṇī* found in tombs have been dated by archaeologists there to this period, though I am not sure how securely⁴. Even so, by looking at some of the religious literature of the period, I have established to my satisfaction that the advantages of speed, accuracy and volume conveyed by printing would have been understood at this time⁵. I have also discovered that Taoists were stamping images from woodblock onto paper during the first half of the seventh century⁶. It may further be deduced that they were printing text as well

³ E.g. K. R. Norman, *A Philological Approach to Buddhism* (London: SOAS, 1997), pp. 41–57 (and cf. 77–94); R. Gombrich, ‘How the Mahāyāna began’, in T. Skorupski, ed., *The Buddhist Forum*, I (London: SOAS, 1990), pp. 21–30.

⁴ Su Bai, *Tang-Song shiqi de diaoban yinshua* (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1999), pp. 7–9, gives the most convenient summary of these materials I have seen recently. For some of my doubts over dating (which may perhaps now be set aside), see the study cited in the next footnote.

⁵ T. H. Barrett, ‘Images of Printing in Seventh-century Chinese Religious Literature’, *Chinese Science* 15 (1998), pp. 81–93.

⁶ T. H. Barrett, ‘The Feng-tao k’o and printing on paper in seventh-century China’, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 60.3 (1997), pp. 538–40. This article only provides a *terminus ante quem* for my source; in a

during the latter half of the century⁷. Yet the earliest securely datable printed materials we have from East Asia are all Buddhist. The first is a *dhāraṇī* found inside a Korean pagoda (i.e. stūpa), which was constructed in 751. The latest scholarship on this object, a collection of conference papers from a seminar at Yonsei University, Korea, held October 19–20, 1999, continues to show heated disagreement between Korean and Chinese academics over whether this text, the *Wugou jingguang da tuoluoni*, or *Raśmivimalaviśuddhaprabhā-dhāraṇī*, first translated by 704, was made locally or exported from China⁸.

But until the discovery of this text in 1966, the first material evidence that the world had of woodblock printing was that deriving from a project undertaken in Japan between 764 and 770. During that period the ruler of Japan, the Empress Shōtoku, sponsored the creation of one million miniature pagodas containing printed copies of the same work found in Korea—which, as a mere record in the relevant Japanese chronicle we might be inclined to doubt, were it not that so many survive to this day. As Peter Kornicki notes in a recent summary of this episode, on which he is preparing a substantial monograph, the text in question had already arrived in Korea by 706, for an inscription on the inside of a reliquary box states that another copy was placed inside a pagoda in a different temple in Korea in that year. The proximate source for the Japanese enterprise might therefore have been Korean practice, but he suspects instead some connexion with the Empress Wu, the great Chinese example of female rule, who dominated the court for about fifty years from 655

review—*Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 10.3 (2000), pp. 419–20—of Florian Reiter's monographic presentation of the *Feng-tao k'o* I advance my reasons for dating it to the first half of the seventh century.

⁷ T. H. Barrett, 'Evidence for 7th Century Taoist Printing', *Needham Research Institute Newsletter* 17 (December, 1998), p. [5].

⁸ Thanks to the good offices of my student, Mr. June Seo, a set of these papers is available at the Needham Research Institute, Cambridge.

till shortly before her death in 705⁹. But how may we bridge the gap between the Taoist references of the seventh century and these eighth century materials, particularly in view of the fact that the Empress Wu is chiefly known for her public support for Buddhism, whatever her personal attitude towards the Taoist religion?

At the 1997 UKABS conference I presented research suggesting that the famous late seventh century pilgrim Yijing's remarks concerning the printing of short texts on *paper* for insertion into stūpas in India reflected not Indian practice (which used clay) but the legitimisation for Chinese Buddhists of a practice already known to Taoists, with whom they were in competition for sacred space. I also suggested that Yijing's patron, the Empress Wu, might have stood to gain from this¹⁰. Since this paper was addressed to Buddhologists, I did not expatiate on the Chinese situation, for fear of introducing too much material on Taoism or on Chinese imperial politics, though I gave in footnotes one or two brief indications of my evidence. In the following remarks, however, I hope to provide some documentation suggesting several possible motives for interest in the use of printed texts as relic substitutes on the part of the empress within the context of Buddhist studies, with some tentative conclusions as to what motive in particular may have proved crucial. So before turning to the more specific research task outlined above, it is necessary at least to provide a general account of the phenomenon of the textual relic and its antecedents.

⁹ Peter Kornicki, *The Book in Japan: A Cultural History from the beginnings to the Nineteenth Century* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1998), pp. 114–117. The date of 706 he derives from p. 8 of Kawase Kazuma, 'Shiragi Bukkokuji Shakatō-shutsu no Muku jōkō daranikyō ni tsuite', *Shoshigaku* 2nd series, 33/34 (1984), pp. 1–9, which quotes a Korean epigraphic collection I have not had to hand, but we do return to this evidence below, in the penultimate section of this paper.

¹⁰ T. H. Barrett, 'Did I-ching go to India? Problems in Using I-ching as a Source for South Asian Buddhism', *Buddhist Studies Review* 15.2 (1998), pp. 142–156.

3. *Relics and texts in the Chinese Buddhist tradition*

The conception of relics and texts which came to prevail in China will, perhaps, be relatively unfamiliar to those primarily interested in the Buddhism of the Pāli canon. As I understand the situation described in these materials—for which I have gone little further than the recent recapitulation of earlier research by Kevin Trainor—images of the Buddha did eventually come to be recognized as relics of a sort within this tradition, and ‘relics of use’, objects associated with the Buddha such as the Bodhi-tree, also played a part¹¹. But primary interest remained with corporeal relics, as enshrined in the equivalents of stūpas or, to use the sinologist’s term, pagodas—the terminology even of Indian Buddhism is inevitably more complex than can be conveniently summarized here¹².

It goes without saying that the image of the Buddha was also of immense importance during the period of Chinese history we are about to consider, and one can point to important reasons for this in the Chinese context. Thus Glen Dudbridge has shown that Chinese tales collected about a century later regard Buddha images as supernatural actors in their own right, regardless of any orthodox clerical interpretation of what they were supposed to represent; these beliefs were probably established well before this point¹³. Looked at an-

¹¹ Kevin Trainor, *Relics, Ritual and Representation in Buddhism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 89. Another very useful summary may be found in Steven Collins, *Nirvana and other Buddhist felicities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 244–249.

¹² Cf. Gregory Schopen, *Bones, Stones and Buddhist Monks: Collected Papers on the Archaeology, Epigraphy and Texts of Monastic Buddhism in India* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997), p. 196, n.38. For an account of Indian and Chinese enthusiasm for relics extending over the period covered here, but broader in scope and less chronologically organized, see Xinru Liu, *Silk and Religion: An Exploration of Material Life and the Thought of People, AD 600–1200* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), Chapter One, pp. 25–48.

¹³ Glen Dudbridge, ‘Buddhist Images in Action: Five Stories from the Tang’, *Cahiers d’Extrême-Asie* 10 (1998), pp. 377–391, especially his remarks on pp. 386–7.

other, more ideological way, recent research has also stressed the benefits to the standing of both the local elite and the central state in village society of the public consecration of religious images even some two and a half centuries earlier in China¹⁴.

Even so, control of text by the state had a particular importance in the Chinese world, and the arrival of an imperial edict in local society was in itself evidently the occasion for public ritualized displays of state power which involved local religious communities as well¹⁵. In this respect, moreover, Chinese orientations towards respect for text coincided with those of the Mahāyāna tradition—hence, perhaps, one reason for its success in East Asia—and it is exclusively within the limits of the Mahāyāna tradition as known and understood in East Asia that I have attempted to grasp any larger background to the phenomena I shall describe.

The textualization of relics in the Mahāyāna context links up, of course, with the sacralization of the text, which we have already mentioned. But the point of linkage in doctrinal terms seems to have involved the concept of the *dharmakāya*, the corpus of the Buddha's teachings as a form of his presence—a key term as it emerged in the development of Buddhist doctrine, and one over which much ink has been spilt over the years. Again, my account must be minimal. The very ancient saying underlying this development, 'Whoever sees the Dharma, sees the Buddha', was already known in China in the third century CE¹⁶. The consequential treatment in religious prac-

¹⁴ Liu Shufen, on pp. 28–9 and 46 (summary) and of 'Art, Ritual and Society: Buddhist practice in Rural China during the Northern Dynasties', *Asia Major*, Third Series, 8.1 (1995), pp. 19–49.

¹⁵ E. O. Reischauer, *Ennin's Diary* (New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1955), pp. 180–182, preserves a valuable Japanese observation of this from the mid-ninth century, when the state is generally reckoned to have been much weaker than it was in the seventh century.

¹⁶ N. Ross Reat, *The Śālistamba Sūtra* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1993), pp. 14, 27.

tice of Buddhist texts as relics may be detected there too from the early fifth century¹⁷.

4. *Introducing the empress*

Lastly, before embarking on my brief history, I should explain that the chronological limits of my survey are dictated by the period of ascendancy of the Empress Wu. In 655 she was well on her way to defeating her only two rivals in the imperial harem, so that by the start of 656 they had both been subjected to mutilation and judicial murder at her instigation. By 660 her husband's ill health had obliged him to cede to her a measure of executive power—unusual, but not unprecedented for an empress at this stage in Chinese history. His death in 683 next obliged her to rule through her sons, in the course of which she removed one who showed signs of independence in favour of a more pliable sibling. Eventually she took over as Emperor (using the male title) from 690 until a coup against her shortly before her peaceful death at an advanced age in 705¹⁸.

As we shall see, the bare outlines of her life are not enough to understand the course of religious events during this career. We should take into account from the start the fact that reactions to her were not, and since her lifetime have not ever been, neutral. In a male-dominated society she has generally, except in the case of one or two rare iconoclasts, inspired feelings of strong revulsion, and her whole

¹⁷ See Robert F. Campany, on pp. 37–40 of 'Notes on the Devotional Uses and Symbolic functions of Sūtra Texts as Depicted in Early Chinese Buddhist Miracle Tales and Hagiographies', *Journal of the International Association for Buddhist Studies* 14.1 (1991), pp. 28–72.

¹⁸ Here and below my summary of the dynastic background follows the treatment in D. C. Twitchett, ed., *Cambridge History of China*, Volume Three, Part One (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), Chapters Five and Six. Note in particular that the early involvement of the future empress in Buddhism, though doubted by some, can be confirmed by her own words, as demonstrated by Antonino Forte, *Political Propaganda and Ideology in China at the End of the Seventh Century* (Napoli: Instituto Universitario Orientale, 1976), pp. 281–284.

career has been seen as the carefully planned outcome of a diabolically clever and scheming nature. The following remarks are not intended to exonerate her from all the charges laid against her, since in order to win and maintain her position she was obliged to perpetrate some fairly dark deeds, but rather than see her regime as the outcome of a well thought out plan, it would seem more natural to suppose that she was primarily concerned to ensure her own survival in unpredictable circumstances that were not of her own making; that she laid plans, but was not prescient enough to ensure that everything unfolded just as she wanted. In any case, it is not the personality of this empress as such that concerns us, but aspects of her knowledge of and deployment of Buddhism.

For this remarkable—indeed, terrifying—woman had as a teenager been a concubine of her husband's father, and on the old man's death had been consigned to a Buddhist nunnery, where she would have stayed indefinitely had she not already made sure to catch the attention of his heir apparent. From this, and from other indications of her early interest in Buddhism, we can assume as the starting point of our investigation not only the calculating nature unafraid of risks that is acknowledged by her friends and foes alike but also a basic knowledge of Buddhist texts and doctrines.

5. The empress and India: first reports

In the matter of the construction of multiple miniature pagodas, however, we do know that by 656 she had made the acquaintance of China's chief source of information at this time on the nature of this practice as current in India. For the great traveller and even greater translator Xuanzang maintained close relations with the throne, and in this year was invited to bestow the bodhisattva ordination on the newborn child of the empress—a precaution which Arthur Waley likens to vaccination¹⁹. If this association moved her to read his travel account of India, composed for the old emperor on his return

¹⁹ Arthur Waley, *The Real Tripitaka and Other Pieces* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1952), p. 119.

from his travels, she would have found a full description of how the sagely Indian layman Jayasēna passed his time—quoted here as rendered into the splendid Victorian prose of Samuel Beal:

It is a custom in India to make little *stūpas* of powdered scent made into a paste; their height is about six or seven inches, and they place inside them some written extract from a *sūtra*; this they call a *dharma-śarīra* (*fa-shi-li*). When the number of these has become large, they then build a great *stūpa*, and collect all the others within it, and continually offer to it religious offerings. This then was the occupation of Jayasēna; with his mouth he declared the excellent law, and led and encouraged his students, whilst with his hands he constructed these *stūpas*. Thus he acquired the highest and most excellent religious merit. In the evening, again, he would walk up and down worshipping and repeating his prayers, or silently sit down in meditation. For eating or sleeping he had little time, and relaxed none of his discipline night or day. Even after he was an hundred years old his mind and body were in full activity. During thirty years he had made seven *kōtis* of these *dharma-śarīra stūpas*, and for every *kōṭi* that he made he built a great *stūpa* and placed them in it. When full, he presented his religious offerings and invited the priests; whilst they, on their part, offered congratulations²⁰.

Xuanzang may also have told his later followers in China about this phenomenon, but the account of his meeting with the layman found in his biography, though it mentions a miracle involving the relics of the Buddha which they both witnessed together, passes over his preoccupation with the mass production of miniature texts and *stūpas*²¹. A number of points may, however, be made about this passage, on the assumption that the empress was, indeed, aware of it. First, although an authorial note in the text helpfully (indeed, mercifully) defines a *koṭi* here as one hundred thousand, the productivity

²⁰ Samuel Beal, *Si-yu ki: Buddhist Records of the Western World* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1981 reprint of London: 1888), Volume Two, pp. 146–7.

²¹ Samuel Beal, *The Life of Hiuen-tsiang* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1911), pp. 156–7.

achieved seems extraordinarily high, even for an activity that could presumably be carried on at the same time as participation in other tasks, somewhat in the same fashion as knitting²². The same may be said of the massive production of religious objects achieved by Xuanzang himself, according to the listings at the end of his biography²³. It may be in the Chinese case that we are dealing with the creation of religious images by stamping from woodblock on paper, for one late, second-hand, but not necessarily inaccurate source does allege that Xuanzang did use such a method to create five packloads of religious images annually²⁴. Even so, I notice, in the canonical literature recounting the devotion shown to and copying of various famous Buddhist texts in China, the admission that the total productivity credited in at least one case to a named person was achieved by copyists, for whom he acted as sponsor. That such a practice was common is also suggested by the fact that some of the production totals achieved by individuals appear in any case to exceed what would have been possible in a single human lifespan²⁵. This would

²² This passage, in the best edition of Xuanzang's work now available, is in Ji Xianlin, et al., ed., *Da Tang Xiyu ji jiao zhu* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1985), p. 712.

²³ This part is not translated by Beal; again, a good modern edition supersedes the Taishō: see Sun Yutang and Xie Fang, eds., Huili and Yancong, *Da Ciensi sanzang fashi zhuan* 10 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983), p. 220.

²⁴ This assertion has recently been reexamined positively by Pan Jixing, *Zhongguo, Hanguo yu Ouzhou zaoqi yinshuashu de bijiao* (Beijing: Kexue chubanshe, 1997), pp. 42–45, in the light of the other passages concerning Xuanzang which we have adduced here. It should be said that although we normally think of the great pilgrim translator in terms of his contribution to Chinese textual awareness of Indian Buddhism, there is also some evidence that the religious objects he imported influenced the development of material culture, so there is nothing intrinsically improbable in the idea that his use of Indian technology and Chinese materials contributed to the advance of printing: see, for his apparent influence on sculpture, Li Wensheng, *Longmen shiku yu lishi wenhua* (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin meishu chubanshe, 1993), pp. 47–57.

²⁵ The passage where a copyist is mentioned may be found in Taishō Canon vol.51, p. 46a. Compare also the great Sui period exegete Zhiyi (538–597), who

mean that the artefacts attributed to Jayasena and Xuanzang were actually from the 'school of', rather than the personal creations of the masters concerned—and each man seems to have had a goodly number of disciples.

Secondly, even though no mention is made of printing the scriptural passage inserted into the stūpas in India, there is every reason to believe that stamps were being used to create texts on clay, for there is plenty of archaeological as well as textual evidence to corroborate the account given by Xuanzang which makes entirely clear the printing element involved. Daniel Boucher, in the magisterial published version of his MA work, provides a very full explanation of this, which I can only synopsise here²⁶. Starting from the same notion of *dharmakāya* and the equation 'He who sees the Dharma sees the Buddha', he adds (as we have omitted to do) the simultaneous equation in our source that seeing the Buddha's teaching on causality amounts to seeing the entire Dharma corpus. From the second century CE we find a short statement on causality already used in inscriptions to equate with a corporeal relic; from the end of the sixth century the practice of multiplying such statements, as cast into formal verse, by stamping them on clay is attested by innumerable archaeological examples.

But thirdly, there is still a significant gap between the practice described by Xuanzang and Boucher and the invention of printing as I

is said (*ibid.*, p. 23a) to have produced fifteen copies of the entire Buddhist canon during his lifetime, to say nothing of more than one hundred thousand gilded and painted wooden images: we should recall that in medieval Japan it took ten thousand people to copy out the Buddhist canon in one day. Granted that the canon was appreciably smaller in Zhiyi's day, and that a Chinese monk was probably more single-minded than a crowd of medieval Japanese aristocrats, even so the resulting calculation suggests that Zhiyi must have taken more than one lifetime to complete his task, if it was carried out single handed. Cf. K. Mizuno, *Buddhist Sutras: Origin, Development, Transmission* (Tokyo: Kosei Publishing, 1982), p. 171.

²⁶ Daniel Boucher, 'The *Pratītyasamutpādagāthā* and its Role in the Medieval Cult of the Relics', *Journal of the International Association for Buddhist Studies* 14.1 (1991), pp. 1–27.

understand it. Jayasena hoards up his little stūpas with their clay prints inside, until they are stored inside a larger one. There is no notion of distributing his printed material here, and indeed his clay stamps are not ideal material for distribution in any case, though the practice of simply making miniature stūpas out of clay, minus any obvious textual material, did apparently spread during the period under consideration from Central Asia (where it may have arrived in the sixth century) to the various kingdoms of East Asia²⁷. Only Xuanzang's alleged images on paper are said to have been distributed, as Taoist materials probably were by about this time; paper was a far easier material to transport, but despite its marginal availability around the area of Gilgit does not seem to have displaced clay further south in India, where distribution does not seem to have been envisaged.

The reasons for this we shall discover shortly, but before leaving Indian practice we should note one more facet of it which the empress would have known about through direct observation. For Xuanzang was not the only Chinese to inform their majesties of conditions in the subcontinent; an official named Wang Xuance was also sent out on at least three successive missions by the old emperor and by the husband of the empress, apparently to explore possible diplomatic cooperation with Indian kings. The date of his third mission has been somewhat in doubt, but the surprising recent discovery of an inscription which it left on its way through Tibet would seem to confirm that it went out in 658 and came back the following year²⁸. There are, however, clear indications that he went back yet again, in 660, and brought back a Buddha relic, a portion of skull-bone, which, given that the round trip always took about one year, was presented to the throne in 661, by which time the empress had,

²⁷ See the study of these forms, which are very hard to date except in the most general terms, by Ishida Mōsaku, *Bukkyō kōkōgaku ronkō*, vol 4 (Kyoto: Shibundō, 1977), pp. 245–262, and especially his estimate of dates on p. 253.

²⁸ See p. 263 of Huo Wei, “Da Tang Tianzhu shi chu ming” ji qi xiangguan wenti de yanjiu’, *Tōhō gakuho* (Kyoto) 66 (March, 1994), pp. 270–53 (reverse pagination).

as noted above, taken over executive authority. But besides this relic he had also acquired in India other religious items donated by monasteries, including four objects described as 'Buddha seals'. This can only mean seals for stamping images of the Buddha, and so we can be fairly sure that at least the empress saw and understood the use of these items, since all such gifts were presented at court, not just extraordinarily numinous items such as relics. The sources on this fourth trip may be found cited in the *Fayuan zhulin*, a compilation on which more will be said shortly²⁹.

6. *The empress and Aśoka*

But at this time she and her husband were already engaged in religious activities which, although apparently tangential, do in fact help to explain important factors in her involvement in texts and pagodas. In 659 the couple happened to have invited to the palace a monk renowned for his knowledge of spells, who mentioned to them an ancient pagoda some one hundred kilometers west of the capital, said to have been once attached to an establishment known as the Aśoka Monastery. Now places so named are not uncommon in China, for one of the ways in which the cognitive dissonance between a religion all of whose holy sites were in India and a China all of whose holy sites were originally non-Buddhist was to suppose that Aśoka, as a cakravartin world-ruler, must have ruled China once, though because of the famous 'Burning of the Books' by the First Emperor of China records as to this episode had been lost. This belief inspired a sort of sacred archaeology, already described to some extent by Zürcher, who points out both that it is so easy to unearth ancient structures in China that traces of allegedly Aśokan foundations were not too difficult for pious Buddhists to identify, and that the discovery of such numinous traces in themselves helped to legitimate the

²⁹ Daoshi, *Fayuan zhulin* 29, p. 498a1;39, p. 597b7–12, in edition of Taishō Canon, vol.53, no. 2122. There is just a possibility that the 'Buddha seals' were rubbings taken from the relic, after the fashion mentioned by Yijing, which we shall consider below. But even this, as we shall see, is not without relevance to printing.

reigning monarch in a China where auspicious omens were given great political weight³⁰.

In that these ‘responses to stimuli’ (*ganying*) were in general not construed as accidental, but as reflections of the ruler’s virtue, discoveries of this type naturally allowed any ruler to bask amongst his (or, as we shall see, her) subjects in the reflected glory of the great Buddhist world-ruler. But we can most certainly go further than this, for Zhou Yiliang has noted well before the Tang the use of Sanskrit-based, Buddhist-tinged rhetoric in South and South-East Asian diplomatic correspondence with China in general, and flattering references to Aśoka in particular. These must surely have encouraged Chinese rulers to see the advantages of claiming Aśokan connexions and if possible projecting an overtly Aśokan role on the international stage as well³¹.

So it is not surprising to read that the emperor jumped upon this piece of information with alacrity: ‘Is that not the Aśoka who donated a lump of dirt when he was a lad?’ he asked, showing a detailed knowledge of the legend of king Aśoka³². ‘If there’s something there nowadays, then it’s one of the 84,000 stūpas!’ Doubtless, like the emperor, the reader will recall that with supernatural help the great monarch distributed 84,000 relics of the Buddha in stūpas (in some accounts known in China and elsewhere, within *vi-hāras*) across the length and breadth of his domains in a single day³³. On the thaumaturge suggesting that it would indeed be a good

³⁰ E. Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1959), pp. 277–280. Further information on Aśokan sites in China may now be found in a series of six articles by Murata Jirō in *Bukkyō Geijutsu*, issues 114 (1977) to 123 (1979).

³¹ Zhou Yiliang, *Wei, Jin, Nanbeichao shi zhaji* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1985), pp. 214–215.

³² For the reference, see John S. Strong, *The Legend of King Aśoka* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), pp. 200–201, and cf. the comments on pp. 56–69. The offering is made to the Buddha by a child who is, of course, the future Aśoka; the symbolism is too complex to discuss here.

³³ Strong, *King Aśoka*, pp. 219–221, and comments, pp. 115–19.

idea to check, the enthusiastic emperor replies, 'If we could find a relic that would be a good cause in the most profound way!', and issues instructions for preliminary ceremonies to be carried out for seven days before conducting a search. To cut a long story short, his agents found the relic, and, leaving behind a statue of Aśoka of equal size to the emperor, brought it back to the capital, where it was soon joined by the skullbone from India³⁴. When the relic was returned to its place of origin in 662, on the understanding that it would only be put on display every thirty years, it was accompanied by lavish gifts of clothing from the empress. There these textiles of hers remained undisturbed as property of the Buddha (or rather the fraction of him in that place), until rediscovered in 1981³⁵.

For the monastery in question is none other than that best known as the Famensi, whose lavish reliquaries and donated goods (mainly, in firmly identifiable cases, from later in the dynasty) have astonished the modern world, most recently though the 'Gilded Dragons'

³⁴ Patricia Karetzky, in n.30, p. 224, of 'The Representation of Women in Medieval China', *T'ang Studies* 17 (1999), pp. 213–271, suggests that the statue bore the emperor's features. There were precedents for this under the Northern Wei, but I am not sure that the evidence can be so construed in this case. The capital in question is now Luoyang, not (as above) Changan; the empress alternated between the two, but seems to have disliked Changan (perhaps fearing the ghosts of murdered rivals) and favoured Luoyang.

³⁵ *Fayuan zhulin*, 38, pp. 586b–587a. Much of the Chinese scholarship on these finds has been subsumed into a lengthy study by Kegasawa Yasunori, 'Hōmonji shutsudo no Tōdai bunbutsu to sono haikei', in Tonami Mamoru, ed., *Chūgoku no chūsei bunbutsu* (Kyoto: Kyoto daigaku Jimbun kagaku kenkyūjo, 1993), pp. 581–641: see p. 591 (and comments, p. 595) for a late Tang inscription from the crypt which would appear to suggest that the surviving clothing includes a skirt which once belonged to the empress herself. For some spectacular illustrations of these materials (to say nothing of the other finds), see Wu Limin and Han Jinke, *Famensi digong Tang mi mantuluo zhi yanjiu* (Xianggang: Zhongguo fojiao wenhua youxian gongsi, 1998), pp. 457–9, though this important monograph is mainly devoted to the doctrinal implications of the discoveries.

exhibition in London³⁶. Those fortunate enough to have seen these will have witnessed quite tangible evidence for the imperial obsession with relics. But for our current purposes it is the notion of 84,000 stūpas as a symbol of monarchy that intrigues, for anyone interested in emulating the legendary distribution of such relics would perhaps have been prompted to think of the rapid creation of relics in textual form, and in China would no doubt think of texts on paper rather than clay. Would the empress have had such an interest stimulated? Not necessarily by the discoveries at the Famensi, one imagines, but some other reports reaching her in 661 are far more likely to have caused her to reflect on the manufacture of multiple pagodas. And here again the initial motive for launching an imperial investigation concerned the use of religious space.

7. *The empress and the Five Terrace Mountains*

For there was one great exception to the Indian location of Buddhist religious space, one extraordinary trump card possessed by the Chinese. In the northeast of China lies a series of peaks known as Wutaishan, the ‘Five Terrace Mountains’, which had become identified with a location mentioned in the Avataṃsaka Sūtra, and were therefore by the seventh century widely believed throughout Buddhist Asia to be the abode of the Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī³⁷. The empress, whose family was from the area, at this point commissioned a sur-

³⁶ Carol Michaelson, *Gilded Dragons* (London: British Museum Press, 1999), pp. 148–162. Unfortunately, the surviving textiles were too delicate to send abroad for this exhibition.

³⁷ Or so it would seem from Chinese sources, though the best evidence for the widespread influence of this belief is somewhat later, as we shall see. The considerable body of recent research in various languages into the religious history of Wutaishan has not yet been brought together in any monographic study, though in English the articles by Raoul Birnbaum and Robert Gimello on this holy site may be read with particular profit, and the book by Du (see next note) covers much relevant material in Chinese; cf. also the article cited in n.66 below.

vey of this spiritual asset, and the results must have intrigued her³⁸. For there was plenty of evidence on the mountains of earlier imperial interest, specifically at first from the Emperor Xiaowen of the Northern Wei, who reigned in the late fifth century. A forebear in the Northern Wei dynasty—a unique, half-foreign regime from which the seventh century ultimately derived many of its political institutions—had once savagely persecuted Buddhism, but Xiaowen is best known as a lavish (and perhaps guilt-stricken) patron responsible for the colossal Buddhist art carved out of the mountain at Yungang³⁹. On Wutaishan, it was discovered, his imprint had not been so colossal, but it was impressive, for large numbers of miniature pagodas in stone were found in the mountains, the carvings and (according to one passage) inlaid text or pattern (*wen*) upon them still visible⁴⁰.

Now if there were texts on them, the likelihood is that they would have contained the formula on causality studied by Boucher. A number of examples of short stone pagodas less than a metre tall inscribed with texts of this sort have been found not on Wutaishan but further west, and not from the late fifth century, but from its first half, when the region was initially not under the control of the Northern Wei but of the Northern Liang, on the Central Asian fringes of

³⁸ The speculation that some family interest may have spurred the interest of the empress may be found in Du Doucheng, *Dunhuang Wutaishan wenxian jiaolu, yanjiu* (Taiyuan: Shanxi renmin chubanshe, 1991), p. 111, though it is pointed out that on p. 110 that the Sui dynasty also took an interest in the holy sites there—this precedent in fact gains added interest in view of what follows below.

³⁹ James O. Caswell, *Written and Unwritten: A New History of the Buddhist Caves at Yungang* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1988), provides a recent summary of scholarship, pp. 13–28, showing firm evidence for imperial involvement in the project, even if the argument of his study is mainly directed against the assumption that all construction at this site was due to imperial patronage.

⁴⁰ *Fayuan zhulin* 14, p. 393a11–13, which mentions ‘several thousand’ of these pagodas with discernible *wen* on them, and 39, p. 596a11–12, which again speaks of discernible carving. We shall return to the other monuments of Wutaishan in due course.

China—indeed, conquest by the Northern Wei drove the last rulers of this dynasty right out of what was normally considered Chinese territory⁴¹. These pagodas, then, have been seen as the product of a distinct regional culture, but a recent analysis of their fusion of Buddhist and Chinese symbolism has revealed clear evidence of eschatological interests on the part of whoever made them, for to symbolism indicating the Buddhas of the past they add also pointers to Maitreya, Buddha of the future⁴².

But we cannot be sure that the stone pagodas of Wutaishan that were reported to the empress followed this format, and by the time that we get another report on their existence a couple of decades later they had evidently fallen into disrepair, so that though they still could be seen as late as the mid-ninth century, we learn nothing further of their form or function⁴³. All we can say is that the creation of multiple miniature pagodas was a practice for which the empress would have had Chinese imperial precedents by 662. There is no record of her immediately setting out to emulate this feat, but there is a record in the earliest surviving work to describe Wutaishan in detail, datable to 679, suggesting that she was interested in propagating knowledge of these miniature stūpas, and of the wonderful world of

⁴¹ These stone pagodas are briefly discussed with references to earlier scholarship as part of an overall survey of the distinctive Buddhist culture of the Northern Liang on pp. 71–72 of Susanne Juhl, ‘Cultural Exchange in Northern Liang’ in Søren Clausen, Roy Starrs and Anne Wedell-Wedellsborg, *Cultural Encounters: China, Japan, and the West* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1995), pp. 55–82; a more recent and detailed survey in Chinese may be found in the second part of the article by Liu Shufen introduced below, n.61.

⁴² Yin Guangming, ‘Bei Liang shita shang de *Yijing* bagua yu qi Fo yi Mile zaoxiang’, *Dunhuang yanjiu* 57.1 (1997), pp. 81–89.

⁴³ For the next report, of 679, see Huixiang, *Gu Qingliang zhuan*, A, p. 1094a 11, in edition of Taishō Canon, vol.51, no. 2098. For the mid-ninth century, cf. Reischauer, *Ennin’s Diary*, pp. 239, 243. For the Chinese literature on Wutaishan I have for ease of reference cited the Taishō editions, but have also consulted the annotated versions of Chen Yangjong and Feng Qiaoying, *Gu Qingliang zhuan*, *Guang Qingliang zhuan*, *Xu Qingliang zhuan* (Taiyuan: Shanxi renmin chubanshe, 1989).

Wutai in general. For she at least permitted, or more likely encouraged, the compiler of her official report to issue a brief summary of his findings, accompanying a small map, which was apparently widely disseminated in the metropolitan area⁴⁴. As the proof of the acceptability of a part of her sickly husband's domain as the dwelling place of a bodhisattva this document would surely have been a useful tool in the propaganda of legitimation which seems to have constantly preoccupied the couple. Naturally we tend to think of such matters in Confucian terms in China, but during this period in Chinese history quite different approaches to the demonstration of the right to rule had already been tried out by other regimes, most famously by the Sui dynasty, which had immediately preceded the Tang, and the southern Liang dynasty, organizers and arbiters of much of the elite cultural heritage that the Tang had taken over. As we shall see, there is every reason to suppose that the empress would have had at least some of these precedents in mind⁴⁵.

8. *The empress and the Chinese Buddhist heritage*

For by 668, she would have had potentially at her disposal a source of information not only recapitulating the notable Buddhist events we have mentioned so far for her joint reign with her husband, but providing also a great deal of other items relevant to our topic as well. This was the *Fayuan zhulin*, on which we have relied not only for our account of Wang Xuance's last mission but also for its descriptions of the mission to investigate the Famensi and to survey Wutaishan. The *Fayuan zhulin* is a large encyclopaedia compiled by Daoshi, a monk who worked in a large metropolitan monastery

⁴⁴ Huixiang, *Gu Qingliang zhuan*, A, p. 1098c16–17; the line preceding this passage makes quite clear the agency of the empress in arranging the investigative mission, as would have been natural to someone writing in 679.

⁴⁵ For a very general account of Chinese kingship which at last begins to do justice to these alternatives, see Julia Ching, *Mysticism and kingship in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 206–234.

founded by the husband of the empress⁴⁶. It bears a preface by a layman, a fairly obscure bureaucrat of the day, but one who was used as a calligrapher by the emperor at one point, and so was presumably known to him⁴⁷. Anyone with the leisure to read all of it would, one suspects, gain a remarkable knowledge of seventh-century Chinese Buddhism and its sources. Whether its original readers included the empress we simply cannot tell, though it is not impossible.

Had she picked it up, she could have learned of a sūtra already translated which described the manufacture of miniature pagodas with tiny Buddha images inside ‘as big as a myrobalan’—a fruit particularly associated with Aśoka⁴⁸. She could have read of rediscovered Aśokan stūpas not only in China, but further afield in Korea and Japan⁴⁹. And she could have studied in detail the attempts made by the preceding Sui dynasty to emulate Aśoka by distributing relics across the empire—and by request yet further, to the kingdoms of the Korean peninsula—by the dozen, rather than the thousand⁵⁰. This last information, moreover, she may well have picked up al-

⁴⁶ For this important source, see S. F. Teiser, ‘T’ang Buddhist Encyclopedias: An Introduction to the *Fa-yüan Chu-lin* and *Chu-ching yao-chi*’, *T’ang Studies* 3 (1985), pp. 109–128.

⁴⁷ Cen Zhongmian, *Jinshi luncong* (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1981), pp. 97–99.

⁴⁸ *Fayuan zhulin* 37, pp. 580c–581a; cf. Strong, *Legend*, pp. 90–91.

⁴⁹ *Fayuan zhulin* 38, pp. 584c–589a (with Japan and Korea mentioned in the last two frames).

⁵⁰ *Fayuan zhulin* 40, pp. 602b–604a1—the last frame gives the precise reference to the distribution to the Korean kingdoms; Arthur F. Wright, ‘The Formation of Sui Ideology, 581–604’, in John K. Fairbank, ed., *Chinese Thought and Institutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), pp. 71–104, sets this episode in its larger context. I am also deeply indebted to Chen Jinhua for sending me a copy of his major unpublished monograph, ‘*Śarīra*, Sceptre and Staff: Tanqian in Sui Buddhism and Politics’, which constitutes an excellent reconsideration of the entire enterprise. In particular Chen includes an appendix containing a full translation of the original documents, as preserved in another seventh century compilation which again could have been read by the empress.

ready in any case, for the former rulers of the Sui, the Yang family, had married one of their lesser female family members to a military man who had been one of the first to abandon the dynasty when it failed and support the nascent power of the Tang dynasty. This man's reward was to see his own daughter received into the imperial harem, the very same daring young woman who was to become the Empress Wu—and, ironically, to break the power of the narrow elite that had dominated China through several changes of regime.

The members of that elite, of course, hated her and resented her power, so that had she not demonstrated an unrivalled efficiency in using it to the good of the dynasty she would soon have perished at the hands of her enemies. The main task that confronted the dynasty, now in its third reign, was the perpetuation of power won by force of arms, and it was for this reason therefore, as much as because of the unimpressive physical state of her husband already alluded to, that questions of ideology and the more abstract justification of power loomed large. Under such circumstances it was necessary to go beyond currying the support of the elite in order to seek the goodwill of as large a section of society as possible. Now, as it happens, for reasons not yet fully understood the late sixth century and the seventh were in China—and possibly further afield—an age of unusual doubt and anxiety, expressed in Buddhist circles in the notion of the 'decline of the dharma'. This was in itself not a new analysis of the bleak prospects for Buddhism as the memory of the appearance of the Buddha himself in our world faded into an ever more remote past, but it was certainly an analysis that gained renewed strength at this time⁵¹. And the word analysis is perhaps the wrong one in any case: the feelings of which I speak seem to have

⁵¹ Jan Nattier, *Once Upon a Future Time* (Berkeley, California: Asian Humanities Press, n.d., reprint of Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture, 1991), pp. 110–118, reexamines the notion that sixth century Hephthalite persecutions of Buddhism prompted the formulation of a new timetable of decline, which in conclusion here and on p. 136–7 is designated an East Asian concept. The sources she cites, such as studies by P. Magnin and James Hubbard, however, show that from the start it was an extremely powerful one.

been much more visceral and deep seated than anything susceptible to intellectual analysis. What everyone craved was the reassurance of a form of spiritual presence, an affirmative sense of the immediacy of spiritual power⁵².

9. *The empress and her translators*

It is against such a background, of course, that we must understand the interest of emperor and empress in relics. In the short term, however, a non-Buddhist solution to the question of spiritual presence probably tended to occupy more of their time. For the Tang ruling house claimed descent from Laozi, founder of Taoism, who in current belief occupied a position of cosmic power every bit on a par with the most uplifting Mahāyānist conceptions of Buddhahood. Alleged divine descent was not a novelty in China, but the potency of the particular connexion was obviously well worth exploiting, and I have described elsewhere how this was done⁵³. The empress herself, of course, could not claim divine descent in the same way, but the Taoist religion affords plenty of scope for divine motherhood, as she was evidently quick to appreciate.

Where this could no longer work as a preferred solution was, of course, a situation in which a rift had developed between mother and sons, and where the empress wished to act not as a mother but as a person in her own right. This, as I have already mentioned, is exactly what happened after the death of her husband, especially during the late 680s. It was surely at this point that the Buddhist answers to the problems of spiritual presence once more rose up her agenda—whence they had probably never been omitted, in that Buddhism seems to have had a somewhat firmer grip on the sentiments of the population of China than Taoism, which had been late

⁵² Collins, *Nirvana*, pp. 24–5, cautions against reading Christian presuppositions into this, though Chinese presuppositions were probably somewhat less distant from Christian ones than the South Asian modes of thinking which he explains later (reference in n.11 above).

⁵³ T. H. Barrett, *Taoism Under the T'ang* (London: Wellsweep, 1996), pp. 29–40.

in developing such institutions as a full-time celibate clergy on the Buddhist model, whereas the Buddhist *saṅgha* undoubtedly had played a major role in propagating the Indian religion in East Asia.

Nor had contacts with India ceased: in the final years of her husband's life, and in the years that followed, monks continued to arrive with new sources on Indian Buddhism. Many of these late seventh century missionaries have been studied by Antonino Forte in a number of widely scattered articles, which bring out some intriguing features less evident at other periods. For example, the new dynasty had been quite successful in extending its control into Inner Asia along the trade routes which either carried through to Iran or turned south through Kashmir into India, the area termed by Sir Aurel Stein 'Serindia', and this intermediate zone in due course produced once more learned monks familiar with both cultures and their languages. Whereas in principle an original text in an Indian language had been to the Chinese an obvious guarantee of Buddhist orthodoxy, whatever suspicions modern scholars now harbour about the products of the intermediate Serindian zone, during this period we find at least one clear example of an Indian at the court of the empress who in 693 was able to include panegyrics in Sanskrit on her behalf into a Buddhist composition and then translate the piece into Chinese⁵⁴. The Japanese scholar Osabe Kazuo, who has carried out a very useful study of the importation of new forms of Tantric Buddhism during the ascendancy of the empress also points out that several of these translations include what he loosely calls 'Taoist' elements,

⁵⁴ Antonino Forte, 'Hui-chih (fl. 676–703 A.D.), a Brahmin born in China', *Annali dell'Istituto Universitario Orientale* 45 (1983), pp. 105–134. For an earlier example of what must be taken as a Serindian product incorporating ideas from both cultures, see the research of Nobuyoshi Yamabe as reported on p. 6 of Valerie Hansen, 'The Silk Road Project: Returning Turfan's Scattered Treasures', *Revue Bibliographique de Sinologie*, n.s. 17 (1999), pp. 63–73. For a survey of the special significance of the area to the emergence of Tantrism for East Asia, see Todd Gibson, 'Inner Asian Contributions to the Vajrayāna', *Indo-Iranian Journal* 38 (1995), pp. 1–21.

that is, expressions which would seem more at home in a Chinese rather than an Indian religious environment⁵⁵.

Such a tailoring of translation to their audience likewise suggests to me the presence at least of bilingual intermediaries with a very keen political sense of the advantages of deliberately slanting Buddhist texts towards a potential Chinese readership. This makes me wonder in particular about another translation concerning the benefits of making images of the Buddha, carried out by a monk from Khotan in Serindia, Devendraprajña, in 691, who has also been the subject of an article by Forte⁵⁶. For this text seems to make a point of stressing the benefits of making Buddha images for women in particular, and despite the evidence that some authors adduce for an Indian background to such notions, one cannot help wondering to what extent it may have been written *ad feminam*⁵⁷.

10. The empress and the 'Crowning Glory'

Both the specific examples I have cited actually relate to a later phase in the career of the empress (or emperor, to use the male title she had assumed by that point) when, as we shall see, Forte's research has shown that in any case interpolations on her behalf may be plainly detected in one key translation. The phenomenon is mentioned here because it throws a cautionary backward light over the next episode that concerns us, namely the multiple translation and dissemination of the *Uṣṇīṣa-vijaya-dhāraṇī*, in Chinese the *Foding zunsheng*

⁵⁵ Osabe Kazuo, *Tō-Sō Mikkyōshi ronkō* (Kobe: Kobe Joshi Daigaku, 1982), pp. 1–33. We shall return to Osabe's observations below in due course.

⁵⁶ On this monk and his translations, see Antonino Forte, 'Le Moine Khotanais Devendraprajña', *Bulletin de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient* 66 (1979), pp. 289–297.

⁵⁷ Note *Zao xiang gongde jing* A, p. 795b and especially 795c1–3, in edition of Taishō Canon, 16, no. 604. For some surprising materials on women and image dedication in early Buddhism, see Schopen, *Bones, stones, and Buddhist monks*, pp. 248–250; for women and stūpas in Indian materials, see e.g. Sugimoto Takushū, *Indo Buttō no kenkyū* (Kyoto: Heirakuji shoten, 1984), pp. 414–418.

tuoluoni jing, later as personified as a goddess and translated into English as 'Crowning Victory'. In this form, which does not concern us here, 'Crowning Victory' has been shown by Rob Linrothe to have been the focus of a considerable cult in Tangut territory during the twelfth century, leading to the imperial printing and distribution of thousands of texts and images⁵⁸.

There is certainly no doubt that the Indian practice of combining text and stūpa to provide a site for relic worship in the fashion illuminated by Boucher became known in 680, for he renders into English a short work translated in that year which describes as before the creation of miniature pagodas as big as a myrobalan, but makes quite clear that now they might hold as relics the four-line verse on causality that is the object of his research⁵⁹. There is also no doubt at all that the 'Crowning Victory' text was also transmitted to East Asia at much the same time, for an actual Sanskrit manuscript of the text apparently dating to the seventh century survives to this day in Japan⁶⁰. What is less clear to me at present, pending the researches of other scholars, is the chronology not simply of the translation but of the dissemination of this key text, though we do already possess a number of useful studies relating to it, including an excellent two part article in Chinese by Liu Shufen⁶¹.

It would seem fairly certain, at least, that a translation, perhaps a revision of earlier work done in 679, was made in 682 by the trans-

⁵⁸ See p. 96 of Rob Linrothe, 'Xia Renzong and the Patronage of Tangut Buddhist Art: The Stūpa and Ushinīshavijayā Cult', *Journal of Sung-Yuan Studies* 28 (1998), pp. 91–121. The references given in this article are extremely useful for an understanding of much of the imagery with which we are dealing here, even though they refer to a later stage in the development of the cult concerned. I have also borrowed Linrothe's translation of the title of our text, more for its succinctness than its literal accuracy.

⁵⁹ Boucher, 'Cult of the Relics', pp. 8–10.

⁶⁰ Linrothe, 'Xia Renzong', p. 97, n.20.

⁶¹ Liu Shufen, 'Foding zunsheng tuoluoni jing yu Tangdai zunsheng jingchuan de jianli: jingchuang yanjiu zhi yi' and 'Jingchuang de xingzhi, xingzhi he laiyuan: jingchuang zhi yanjiu er', *Zhongyang yanjiuyuan lishi yuyan yanjiusuo jikan* 67.1 (1996), pp. 145–193, and 68.3 (1997), pp. 643–786, respectively.

lator already responsible for the 680 text examined by Boucher⁶². The date is given in the surviving preface by Yanzong, biographer of Xuanzang, and the text, while not identical with later translations, makes clear that one of the functions of the *dhāraṇī* was to turn any stūpa containing it into a relic site⁶³. The problem arises with the text which bears the name of Buddhapāli, for here we are dependent on an undated preface by one Zhijing, which appears to have been written shortly after 689, that is, during the very period when the empress was moving towards abandoning the Tang dynasty to rule in her own right⁶⁴. Zhijing claims to have obtained his information from Divākara, the translator of the 682 version, who had conveniently died in 688, but early in the next century it was already noted by a normally well-informed but discreet bibliographer that his chronology of events is somewhat awry⁶⁵. Whatever the actual truth of the matter, the story given by Zhijing became extremely widely known, and is even depicted in a small surviving sketch of the Tang period, while the text concerned eclipsed all other translations in popularity⁶⁶.

And no wonder, for Zhijing states that in 676 Buddhapāli had travelled from India to prostrate himself at Wutaishan, declaring that since the Buddha's decease all other spiritual beings were hidden;

⁶² For whom see Antonino Forte, 'Divākara (613–688), un monaco indiano nella Cina dei T'ang', *Annali della Facoltà di lingue e letterature straniere di Ca' Foscari*, 13.3 (1974), pp. 135–174. A convenient survey of the 'Crowning Victory' translations of this period by Misaki Ryōshū may be found in Makita Tairyō and Fukui Fumimasa, eds., *Tonkō to Chūgoku Bukkyō* (Tokyo: Daitō shuppansha, 1984), pp. 115–129.

⁶³ *Foding zuisheng tuoluoni jing*, (no. 969), pp. 355b, 356b–c, in Taishō Canon, vol.19.

⁶⁴ *Foding zuisheng tuoluoni jing* (no. 967), pp. 349b–c, in *ibidem*.

⁶⁵ Zhisheng, *Kaiyuan Shijiao lu* 9, p. 565b5–8, in Taishō Canon, vol.55, no. 2154.

⁶⁶ For the sketch, see pp. 96–7 and the reproduction of the ms. P. 4049 p. 98 of Zhao Shengliang, 'Mogaoku di 61 ku Wutaishan tu yanjiu', *Dunhuang yanjiu* 37.4 (1993), pp. 88–107; for the popularity of this version of the text, see the survey by Misaki cited above, n.62.

only the bodhisattva Mañjuśrī in these mountains continued the Buddha's work, and that therefore, since he had always regretted living in an age without a Buddha, he had crossed the shifting sands in the hope of a meeting. He looks up, of course, to see an old man approaching, who congratulates him on his earnestness, but points out that China is deeply encumbered by bad karma, and that the saṅgha there is none too observant; only the 'Crowning Victory' text can overcome these defects. Buddhapāli confesses that he has not brought a copy with him, to which the old man replies that in that case there is no point in meeting Mañjuśrī; he had better go back and get it, to distribute in China and remedy the situation; only then will his interlocutor tell him the whereabouts of the bodhisattva.

The Indian returns, and reports back again in 683 with the text to the emperor, who commissions others, including Divākara, to translate it, and keeps it in the palace, giving Buddhapāli a reward. This he responds to by saying that he is not in the translation business for the money or fame, but had hoped to benefit sentient beings. The emperor hands back the Sanskrit original, which Buddhapāli has translated with permission outside court circles at the monastery where Daoshi had lived, after which he takes it off to Wutaishan, never to be seen again, leaving both translations to circulate. Later in 687 Zhijiang meets up with Divākara, who goes over both translations with him, paying particular attention to the pronunciation of the Sanskrit, so as to come up with a definitive version.

It is obvious both that this story raises problems concerning the earlier translations and that the emperor, who in 683 was still her ailing husband, does not come out of this very well—indeed, he is guilty of wishing to keep a text of potential mass benefit to the nation to himself. This was no doubt a very convenient thing to emerge just as the empress, rapidly abandoning her recently assumed role of Holy Mother, found it expedient to be done with husband, children and with Taoism, the cult of the Li family, and started looking overtly to Buddhism to legitimate her undisguised personal rule. The story might even provide a convenient excuse to cover her own relative neglect of Buddhism while exploring Taoist options.

And while tales of Indians coming to worship at Wutaishan may already be found in the text of 679 to which we have already alluded, the clearly articulated notion that only China now gave any prospect of contact with an important bodhisattva must be seen as consistent with the attitudes towards sacred space already displayed by the empress. One hopes that future research may uncover more details concerning Zhijing. All we can say at present is that two other monks associated with the dissemination of the ‘Crowning Victory’ text, Xinggan and Bolun, have been identified by Professor Forte as close supporters of the empress in her ideological manoeuvres at this crucial time⁶⁷.

But there is one more point to be made about the ‘Crowning Victory’. The Buddhapāli version recommends dissemination by four methods, and besides the use of writing on clay or paper that we have already mentioned, three of them are epigraphic, in the sense that they require writing upon hard surfaces such as walls, mountains and pillars. The latter means of dissemination has attracted the most attention, since epigraphers have found many examples providing excellent examples of the highly regarded calligraphy of the Tang⁶⁸. This should perhaps not surprise us, when the text itself claims that the very shadow of a pillar bearing its words, the very least particle of dust blown from its surface, could cause the removal of bad karma from anyone within range⁶⁹. But the assiduous research of Liu Shufen has established that the multitude of pillars found cannot be regarded simply as equivalents to the other Tang period steles whence epigraphers are wont to take copies of such materials for other reasons.

Thus it is certainly quite possible that the Empress Wu was alive to the wider symbolism of these new structures, in terms of what has been seen as the association between the pillars of Aśoka, the

⁶⁷ Forte, *Political Propaganda*, p. 99.

⁶⁸ Note the survey by Du Weisheng in Xu Ziqiang, *Beijing tushuguan cang shike xulu* (Beijing: Shumu wenxian chubanshe, 1988), pp. 176–187, of calligraphic materials in his institution collected from pillars featuring this *dhāraṇī*.

⁶⁹ Taishō Canon 19, p. 351b.

stūpa form, and the notion of an *axis mundi*, for an immense octagonal obelisk known as the Axis of the Sky was later one of the glories of her capital⁷⁰. For our purposes, however, it is more immediately significant that to Liu, the format of the pillars on which the 'Crowning Victory' text was transcribed shows unambiguously that they also served as stūpas containing the dharma-body of the Buddha—in short, that the practice already described of inserting text within to serve as a relic was in an important sense the primary purpose of the new form⁷¹. This, indeed, may explain why they became so popular (for example under the Liao dynasty) in memorial contexts⁷². And Liu shows, too, that whatever the true story of the arrival of the text, the earliest dated version of a pillar dedicated to it is 689⁷³. In this way the Buddhapāli story enhanced the appeal of Wutaishan, trump card of the empress in the Buddhō-Taoist struggle over sacred space, and at the same time encouraged the spread across the landscape of a new sanctifying device suitable for local erection which did not require any investment from the state⁷⁴.

11. The empress moves to centre stage

This means that this new form of stūpa had started to spread before the empress finally plumped for Buddhist forms of legitimation and

⁷⁰ Antonino Forte, *Mingtang and Buddhist Utopias in the History of the Astronomical Clock* (Roma: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1988), pp. 233–243; the final page suggests the Aśokan link. See also e.g. Sugimoto, *Indo Buttō*, for more on the wider symbolism.

⁷¹ Liu Shufen, 'Jingchuang de xingzhi'.

⁷² Its relative dominance over other texts in this role during the Liao, at least in epigraphic situations, may be seen from Chen Shu, comp. and ed., *Liao wen cun* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1982), *juan* 9–12, pp. 220, 224, 230, 240, 245, 257, 280, 297, 305, 307, 314, 318, 324, 348, etc.

⁷³ Liu's table at the end of the second part of the study, 'Jingchuang de xingzhi', cites the date from a brief mention of this monument in a report entitled 'Shaanxi suojian de Tangdai jingchuang', *Wenwu* 1959, 8, pp. 29–30.

⁷⁴ This is explained by Liu's earlier article in English, already cited above in n.14, which stresses not simply the benefits to the central state but also to local elites that might derive from the erection of Buddhist structures in rural society.

founded her own, personal dynasty, the Zhou, in 690⁷⁵. It is interesting to note the role played by images and stūpas in the process of legitimation. Forte's very thorough study of this crucial phase in the career of the empress has uncovered the fact that for all the subsequent discussion of the part played by a work known as the *Great Cloud (Mahāmegha) Sūtra*, a completely undeniable interpolation supporting the empress in another Buddhist text, the *Rain of Jewels (Ratnamegha) Sūtra*, has been generally overlooked. This equally important prophecy of female rule produced in 693 reads in part 'May you practise the Ten Good Rules, apply my Law, magnify and maintain it, and erect stūpas and temples'⁷⁶. Two sentences later this spurious prophecy further announces that 'Your name will be Yue-jingguang, Pure Moonlight', which very much reinforces the same point.

For Erik Zürcher has shown that here there is a deliberate reference to the messianic figure Prince Moonlight, the subject of an earlier spurious prophecy to the Sui ancestors of the empress, which he translates: 'He will patronise Buddhism on a grandiose scale, notably by the reproduction and spread of holy texts, the making of Buddha images of every kind, and the establishment of Buddha sanctuaries in all parts of the empire'⁷⁷. In the original 'reproduction' does not plainly signify printing, but 'sanctuary' does stand for stūpa. And if the empress felt obliged to fulfil this prophecy as assiduously as the Sui had done, then she had plenty to do, for we know from the *Fayuan zhulin* that they had financed the (evidently purely manual) creation of literally hundreds of thousands of volumes of sūtras, probably well over half a million in total, to say nothing of 20,358 images⁷⁸. What better response could there be to

⁷⁵ Barrett, *Taoism Under the T'ang*, p. 42.

⁷⁶ Forte, *Political Propaganda*, p. 130.

⁷⁷ Erik Zürcher, on pp. 25–27 of 'Prince Moonlight', *T'oung pao* 68 (1982), pp. 1–75, citing Taishō Canon, vol.14, no. 545, p. 849.

⁷⁸ *Fayuan zhulin* 100, p. 1026b4, gives the precise figures for the first reign alone of '46 canons, 132,086 volumes': these two figures cannot be equivalents, since the contemporary canon contained six thousand and ninety-eight volumes,

the fear, quite apparent in Chinese Buddhist and Taoist circles, that with the onset of final, irreversible religious decline, pending the appearance of a supernatural figure with the power to renew all things, all sūtras and other relics would disappear from this world?⁷⁹

In Buddhist circles, moreover, we do not have to rely simply on a few scattered prophetic utterances to gauge the profound insecurity that afflicted Chinese civilization in the late sixth and seventh centuries over the future of its sacred texts. Ample testimony still survives in the form of the impressive number of sūtras that from this time on started to be carved out of the mountain stone of north China in the explicit hope that this durable medium would outlast the decline that was bound to come. The first efforts in this vein date to the Northern Qi dynasty of the late sixth century, and focus in particular on texts associated with the 'decline of the dharma'⁸⁰. But by Tang times the massive project to carve the whole canon in the form that now survives at Fangshan was already under way, and both the contemporary reports and a surviving inscription in situ explaining the aim of the project make it perfectly plain that the same motivation inspired

according to the standard history compiled by seventh century scholars, *Sui shu* 35 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1973), p. 1095. We should also add in some more for the second reign, though the figures given for this in the *Fayuan zhulin* would appear only to cover volumes conserved, not new products. It is all in all no wonder that this *Sui shu* bibliography chapter concludes (p. 1099) that the Buddhist literature in circulation at this time, thanks to popular emulation of the state's productivity, outweighed the Confucian classics by a factor of 'several tens of hundreds'.

⁷⁹ The original, less threatening form of this ancient doctrine is explained in Collins, *Nirvana*, pp. 247–8; cf. Zürcher, 'Prince Moonlight', p. 28, for much more profound Chinese pessimism at this point.

⁸⁰ The most recent research into the phenomenon is that contained in Kegasawa Yasunori, ed., *Chūgoku Bukkyō sekkyō no kenkyū* (Kyoto: Kyoto University, 1996), which has English summaries of relevant chapters on pp. 495–498: see also pp. 108–131 for a full survey in Japanese of the beliefs involved, by Odani Nakao. For an earlier assessment of the stone scriptures of the Northern Qi, see Yagi Sentai, 'Hokusei no kokkyō ni tsuite', *Indogaku Bukkyōgaku kenkyū* 27.1 (1978), pp. 128–9.

this remarkable feat as well⁸¹. So it was not in the hope of gaining more reading materials that printing spread in China, but rather in the fear that what they had to read and to value—in some quantity, one might add, on the evidence from the Sui period—might not last. Against any objective account of the rude good health of East Asian manuscript culture we may dismiss this fear as entirely illusory, but it was nevertheless a political fact, and one which the empress needed to turn to her own purposes. Ideally, too, in her campaign (as revealed by the ‘Crowning Glory’ preface) to contrast her own inclusivism with the exclusive, ‘divine kingship’ model of legitimation favoured by her Tang in-laws, she needed to make the sacred available in a mass way more easy of access than texts carved in or on distant mountains.

12. *The empress plays Aśoka*

As it happens, we can be quite sure that by the time that the empress made her move to set up her own dynasty, she had taken on another role, one which we have seen her toying with even in the early days of her ascendancy, and one in which the mass distribution of potent symbols from the centre to the periphery formed the most important characteristic. For her propagandists state, in their commentary on the *Great Cloud Sūtra*, a text only rediscovered in this century, that she had already acquired through an auspicious discovery in her capital more than ten thousand relics. To judge by sources located by Forte in his translation of this work, this had taken place in 677, though their ideological use seems to have been delayed until after her husband’s death, till 684, when the omen was associated with

⁸¹ Apart from the work of Kegasawa, mentioned in the preceding note, it is also possible to consult an English translation of a contemporary description from the *Mingbao ji* of Tang Lin in Donald E. Gjerfson, *Miraculous Retribution* (Berkeley: Centers for South and Southeast Asian Studies, 1989), pp. 165–166, and a preliminary account of recent research by Lewis Lancaster, ‘The Rock-cut Canon in China: Findings at Fang-shan’, in T. Skorupski, ed., *The Buddhist Heritage* (Tring: The Institute of Buddhist Studies, 1989), pp. 143–156: note in particular the inscription mentioned on p. 147 at n.13, *ibid*.

the renaming of Luoyang as a 'holy capital' (*shendu*) and other reforms in administrative nomenclature⁸².

This delay in itself is worth remarking, and not only in view of what we have already said with regard to the 'Crowning Victory' concerning the contrast she seems to have been at pains to spell out between her husband's implied desire to keep Buddhist blessings to himself and her own conspicuous commitment to distributing them. For at the same time, as one expert on her reign has already pointed out, her measures of 684 may well have been prompted by the appearance of a Buddhist 'false messiah' and the consequent need to anticipate further popular charlatans by taking on a messianic role herself—another theme already touched upon that we will need to explore further⁸³.

For our immediate purposes, however, the most significant information added by the propaganda team of 690 is that in a former incarnation the empress had vowed to construct ten times the number of pagodas (that is, reliquaries) made by Aśoka himself, and further that by the time that they were writing she had already distributed the relics of 677 to the 'Four Continents'. The last phrase can only mean that she had already taken on an international Aśokan role by sending at least some of the relics overseas⁸⁴. Given that they would therefore have been contained in pagodas of a portable size for transport, a definite historical antecedent for the later Japanese distribution of thousands of relics inside small wooden pagodas becomes immediately apparent, no matter what it was that justified the Japanese ruler's use of relics in printed, textual form.

We can unfortunately expect no confirmation of this in non-Chinese records. The recently formed Japanese centralized state produced its earliest surviving historical works soon after the Empress

⁸² Forte, *Political Propaganda*, p. 202, nn. 112, 113; cf. Sima Guang, *Zizhi Tongjian* 203 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1959), p. 6421.

⁸³ R. W. L. Guisso, *Wu Tse-t'ien and the Politics of Legitimation in T'ang China* (Bellingham, Washington: Western Washington University, 1978), p. 35.

⁸⁴ Forte, *Political Propaganda*, p. 203; cf. pp. 208, 269.

Wu's reign. But it remained too concerned with its own international standing to mention either in its accounts of the late seventh century or in describing its own later eighth century relic distributions the receipt of any relics from China, for this could well be construed as an acknowledgement of the Aśokan status of the empress, and hence of their subordination. Later Korean sources are much more free in describing relics in the Korean peninsula as being of Chinese origin, but nothing of particular relevance to the empress appears to be contained in them, and unfortunately no documentary sources now survive from the seventh or eighth centuries that might provide more useful information⁸⁵. The best that can be said is that Chinese diplomatic records for 681 and 693 detail contacts that could have allowed for a transfer of relics to the newly unified Korea to have taken place⁸⁶. Equally there is nothing to show in this case either that relics in three dimensional, solid form were accompanied to Korea by textual relics, whether printed or in manuscript. But here, as we shall see, the evidence of archaeology, unknown until the late twentieth century, does allow us to conclude that by 706 at the latest in Korea both three dimensional and textual relics were used in conjunction—and in the latter case, the text in question was so newly translated that it must have been deliberately distributed by the central authorities in China, whether at the behest of the empress herself or of her successor.

And it must be stressed that there is plenty of evidence, some of which we shall review shortly, to show that the empress continued to be obsessed with relics and stūpas for the rest of her reign. In the light of what has been said, however, concerning the particular anxieties over the loss of text and the prophetic messages promising messianic renewal of the textual resources available, it is absurd to do as some have done and imagine her to be the victim of some peculiarly anile form of religious fervour, preoccupied with doubtful

⁸⁵ For Korean traditions on the importation of relics as they existed at a much later point, see Iryŏn (1206–1289), *Samguk yusa*, 3, pp. 993a–c, in edition of Taishō Canon, vol.49, no. 2039.

⁸⁶ Wang Qinruo, *Cefu yuangui*, (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1960), 964.9b, 10a.

tokens of sanctity. As we have discovered already, in the apocalyptic atmosphere that had prevailed since the sixth century it was vital for any ruler to be able to preempt the messianic longings of the masses and pose as the very embodiment of utopian prophecies—as Aśoka *redivivus*, Maitreya, or anyone else, all at the same time, the more the merrier, in accordance with the same ‘belt and braces’ principle that suggested, as we have just noted, the use of both textual and solid relics at the same time⁸⁷. So pious in her way the empress may have been, but it was power that she really understood—power, and the role of propaganda in securing and diligently upholding it.

13. Once more the empress and India

It is therefore against this background, and particularly against the chronology of her quite unique efforts at legitimating female rule that I would understand the apparently offhand remark by Yijing about printing on paper in India. Following the research of Wang Bangwei, I note that Yijing returned briefly to China in 689, just when questions of Buddhist legitimation became crucial, allegedly by accident when a ship he was visiting cast off and set sail. He then returned to the world of normative Buddhism that was supposed to exist beyond China—though only to Southeast Asia, not India—and in 691 was able to send his authoritative account of his observations thence to the empress, before returning himself the next year. He is

⁸⁷ Note that on pp. 136–7 of Kang Le, ‘Zhuanlunwang guannian yu Zhongguo zhonggu de Fojiao zhengzhi’, *Zhongyang yanjiuyuan yuyan lishi yanjiusuo jikan* 67.1 (1996), pp. 109–143, the measures taken by the empress in 693, which included the assumption of a title embodying a claim to universal monarchy of the Aśokan type, is seen as the culmination of Chinese trends conflating the separate ‘world-ruler, world-renouncer’ categories of South Asian thought. The best study of what the ideologists employed by the empress actually did, however, is still Forte, *Political Propaganda*, the third chapter of which teases out exactly how popular belief in a messianic Maitreya figure was preempted by having the empress take on this role within safe limits. For an earlier example of a ‘pre-incarnation’ of Maitreya, see Hsiao Bea-hui, ‘Two images of Maitreya: Fu Hsi and Pu-tai Ho-shang’, PhD dissertation, SOAS, 1995.

certainly quite explicit about his aim in this work about helping his ruler achieve the goal of a Buddhist Utopia⁸⁸. We can now see exactly how printing on paper would have played a part in achieving that.

But there is one more aspect of Yijing's account of India that bears indirectly upon printing which has not been remarked before, but which nevertheless merits some discussion. For in another text written at the same time and sent back to China, he remarks equally casually that a monk who had been sent to India on a mission by the husband of the empress had 'taken a printed impression from' (*qu qi yinwen*) a skullbone of the Buddha, possibly the very one that was later conveyed to China, to divine his future⁸⁹. The reference is explained once again by consulting Xuanzang, who describes in more detail how at another relic site a paste spread on a cloth was used to take an impression of the bone in question, again for the purpose of fortune telling⁹⁰. Evidently the practice was well enough known by Yijing's time not to require explanation. The terminology obviously overlaps with that of printing, reminding us that the Chinese use of rubbings can be dated to a stage not long before the invention of the print technology we are considering: though (as experts have pointed out in the past) the two techniques do differ, in some ways, rubbing is much closer to printing than stamping with a seal-like object⁹¹. But if taking an impression of a text could be seen in the same auspicious light as taking one from a relic, this would explain how a printed object could nevertheless be invested with a borrowed sanctity, for otherwise, in the case of copying, the sanctity of the text

⁸⁸ Barrett, 'I-ching', pp. 149, 150.

⁸⁹ See Wang Bangwei, ed., *Da Tang Xiyu qiufa gaoseng zhuan jiaozhu* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983), p. 11, and cf. Liu, *Silk and Religion*, pp. 34, 42.

⁹⁰ Beal, *Si-yu-ki*, p. 96, and more fully, *Life of Hiuen-Tsiang*, p. 59.

⁹¹ For both techniques in the background to printing, see Li Shuhua, 'Yinzhang yu muta de qiyuan ji qi duiyu diaoban yinshua faming zhi yingxiang', *Zhongyang yanjiuyuan lishi yuyan yanjiusuo jikan* 28 (1957), pp. 107–121.

was very much understood as a product of the correct behaviour of the copyist, as contemporary sources attest⁹².

What we cannot see is any immediate evidence of the empress putting Yijing's new and useful snippets of information into practice. Though a number of factors may be involved, the main reason for this probably lies in the extremely hostile attitude taken towards the empress by our standard historical sources, which are overwhelmingly conventional (or, if you wish, Confucian) in tone, and typically exercise their revenge against her assault on patriarchy by simply ignoring much of what she did. One day, perhaps, some chance discovery may illuminate her work, just as a chance discovery among the Dunhuang manuscripts, S.2713, dated to 670, shows the otherwise unknown popular expectations of apocalypse which she had to outbid with her presentation of her own messianic claims in order to calm the outbreak of wilder imaginings amongst her subjects through a judicious doctrine of 'realized eschatology'. In this short text, the Buddha Dīpaṃkara predicts that Mount Tai is about to collapse, releasing tens of thousands of devils upon the land, and that in the fourth month on the fifth day of 670 a noxious wind will arise from Mount Tai which can kill in two days; only one copy of the prophecy can save an individual, or two a whole family, or three a whole village⁹³. It was against the sporadic propagation of

⁹² Most notably in a story known in several versions in the seventh century and later, translated e.g. by Gjertson, *Miraculous Retribution*, pp. 162–3, in which a copyist is obliged to spend eight years in isolation in order to produce a particularly efficacious transcription of the *Lotus Sūtra*.

⁹³ The full text of this prophecy, of which the original came in three copies, is printed e.g. in Jiang Liangfu, *Mogao ku nianbiao* (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1985), p. 241. For Dīpaṃkara's emergence as a significant Buddhist figure, see pp. 68–70 of Richard Gombrich, 'The Significance of Former Buddhas in the Theravādin Tradition', in Somaratna Balasooriya et al., eds., *Buddhist Studies in honour of Walpola Rahula* (London: Gordon Fraser, 1980), pp. 62–72; John Lagerwey, 'Dingguang gufo: Oral and written sources in the study of a saint', *Cahiers d'Extrême-Asie* 10 (1998), pp. 77–129, shows how the cult of a tenth century thaumaturge who adopted the name Dīpaṃkara has lasted into modern times; Nagai Masayuki, 'Jōkō butsu shinkō kenkyū shiron',

just such disturbing visions that a more efficient technology for spreading the supernatural prestige of the monarch had to be directed so as to promote social order and stability.

But if the terrifying fears that might grip the wider populace are generally as hidden from us as the solutions that a daring ruler might devise to calm them, at least we can tell something from the moralising of the convention-bound bureaucrats who dominate our sources. Precisely because they hated the empress, their reactive tut-tutting involuntarily reveals at least something of her activities relating to relics and other signs of the Buddha's presence. Thus Antonino Forte has devoted the greater part of a laboriously researched monograph to what is still at times a quite tentative reconstruction from our reluctant witnesses of the programme of building work carried out by the empress in her capital. Pagodas on a small scale, even if in large numbers, may well have escaped their attention—we hear nothing from them of the relic distribution attested by the document of 690 examined above—but the symbolism of metropolitan architecture was something which they felt more strongly about. For the endeavours of the empress in this sphere constituted a no less than startling attempt to equip the centre of her world with gigantic symbolic structures, including one housing a massive Buddhist statue⁹⁴.

in Nihon Bukkyō Gakkai, ed., *Bukkyō to takyō to no tairon* (Kyoto: Heirakuji shoten, 1997), pp. 79–92, uses materials including some overlap with Lagerwey to suggest cogently a belief in hidden reincarnations of Dīpaṃkara, though his invocation of Manichaean influence fails to persuade.

⁹⁴ Forte, *Mingtang and Buddhist Utopias*, especially pp. 53 onwards, though the introductory study may also be construed as showing to what lengths Buddhists were prepared to go to compete with their Taoist rivals over sacred space: the visions of a normative ordination platform described relate much more to the use of platforms by Taoists, whereas the original Buddhist tradition was content to mark off ordination areas simply by ropes. Something of the standards which the Taoists set in this regard, on the basis of early imperial ritual, may be gathered from John Lagerwey, 'Taoist ritual space and dynastic legitimacy', *Cahiers d'Extrême-Asie* 8 (1995), pp. 87–94.

14. Ruling through relics

These structures were the scandal of the age, and that is why a measure of denunciation of them at least survives, whereas her lesser projects are only heard about occasionally, even indirectly, in our conventional sources. But hear about them we do, even so. In 694, for example, penalties for the theft of any form of Buddhist image, public or private, were included with those for 'great sedition'⁹⁵. This was a category of crimes against the symbols of state power, for which the penalty was instant decapitation for the least offense, with the lesser penalty of strangulation merely for conspiring to carry them out⁹⁶. In 699 an edict was issued forbidding the incorporation of relics of the Buddha into the annual observances of the Buddhist 'ghost festival' in China, as had been done by the monks at one named institution⁹⁷. The perceived problem seems to have been that the context—a festival now ably reconstructed by S. F. Teiser—involved treating the decease of the Buddha as an occasion of actual rather than apparent loss⁹⁸. The promulgation of an edict suggests that there were fears that this practice might spread, indicating that relics were by this point very widely available, though we should remember that in their manifestation as very small, jewel-like objects (some of which have been on display in London recently in

⁹⁵ Wang Pu, ed., *Tang hui yao* 41 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1991), p. 873.

⁹⁶ Wallace Johnson, *The T'ang Code* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), pp. 63–4.

⁹⁷ Song Minqiu, ed., *Tang da zhaoling ji* 113 (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1959), p. 587. The given date of this document is the fifth month of 700, but this can only be correct if it was issued at the very start of the month: see Han Lizhou, *Tang wen kaobian chubian* (Xi'an: Shansi chubanshe, 1992), p. 209; otherwise we must probably assume that a year has been accidentally added, though in either case the month seems curiously disassociated from the timing of the festival.

⁹⁸ S. F. Teiser, *The Ghost Festival in Medieval China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988): see pp. 71–77 for a translated description of the event dated to seven years before the edict.

the ‘Gilded Dragons’ exhibition) three-dimensional, solid relics were considered to have had the power of spontaneous multiplication⁹⁹.

The next year, in 700, the empress was in the Sanyang Palace, a new residence which she had had built on Mount Song, the Central Peak of the Five Sacred Peaks of China, which lay close to her capital. A ‘foreign monk’, whose name our sources do not deign to mention, had persuaded her to stage a massive public enshrinement of a relic, but the ceremony was cancelled due to the furious protests of one of her most famous ministers¹⁰⁰. This was Di Renjie (607–700), the model for the sagacious and upright Judge Dee of the Chinese detective novels¹⁰¹. Di’s objections were not, however, allowed to control events: the year 701, for example, was declared a new era entitled ‘Great Footfall’, when a new footprint of the Buddha was discovered on Chinese territory, and though there are indications that hostile witnesses later tried to put it about that some terrible deception by criminals lay behind this, the most judicious traditional authorities reject that suggestion as betraying internal inconsistencies¹⁰². Footprints of the Buddha were, of course, one of the most dramatic of ‘traces’ showing that those feet did in ancient times walk upon China just as much as India; other examples had already been identified in earlier phases of the ongoing efforts to sanctify Chinese space in Buddhist terms¹⁰³.

⁹⁹ Michaelson, *Gilded Dragons*, p. 146, gives an illustration of these tiny transparent crystals, ‘the size of butter beans’. An example of spontaneous multiplication is given below.

¹⁰⁰ Wang, *Tang hui yao*, 227, p. 602.

¹⁰¹ David McMullen, ‘The Real Judge Dee: Ti Jen-chieh and the T’ang Restoration of 705’, *Asia Major*, Third Series, 6.1 (1993), pp. 1–81.

¹⁰² Sima Guang, *Zizhi Tongjian* 207, p. 6554.

¹⁰³ See for examples, and for some background, the article ‘Bussokuseki’, in P. Demiéville, ed., *Hōbōgirin*, Volumes 2–3 (Tokyo: Maison Franco-japonaise, 1930, 1937), pp. 187–190, and n. 9, p. 102, of T. H. Barrett, ‘Exploratory Observations on Some Weeping Pilgrims’, in T. Skorupski, ed., *The Buddhist Forum*, Vol. I (London: SOAS, 1990), pp. 87–110. Probably the fullest account of the background is Kanai Kasatarō, *Bussokuseki no kenkyū* (Tokyo: Na-

By this time, of course, the empress was about halfway through the last decade of her personal rule, and of her life. Natural vigour and skilful use of cosmetics meant that she was even by the extraordinary standards of her career a rather exceptional old lady—a sort of Mae West figure, but with real pretensions to divinity. To judge from conventional sources, she was mainly engaged towards the end in an attempt to construct one last massive Buddha image. One of her earlier grandiose efforts made of lacquer still survived somehow, even though the structure destined to house it had not reached completion¹⁰⁴. This new statue, however, was to be of bronze, and to stand on a mountain slope to the north of the city. It was to be financed by levying a donation of a single coin from each and every Buddhist monk and nun in her empire, a method which assumes a particular significance because a donation of a single coin was an echo of one of Aśoka's actions, recorded for example in the *Fayuan zhulin*¹⁰⁵.

Whether they were aware of this or not, her Confucian officials kept up a barrage of protest from the time the plan was first mooted in 700 right the way through to 704, when she finally dropped the idea. Their arguments are in fact utilitarian, that the money could be used to charitable purposes, since this is where the proper purposes of Buddhism lie, not in opulent displays of extravagance. Thus the memorial sent in to her by a complaining bureaucrat that seems finally to have tipped the balance accuses her of 'making an end of the trees on the mountains in order to create stūpas, exhausting the smelting of metals to make images'¹⁰⁶. We need not take such rhetoric at face value, but it does suggest that the empress had made a

kayama shobō, 1971), pp. 238–324, though on the last two pages of this study he seems to take an unduly hostile attitude to the empress and her reign period.

¹⁰⁴ Forte, *Mingtang and Buddhist Utopias*, pp. 82–93.

¹⁰⁵ Wang, *Tang hui yao* 49, p. 1003; *Fayuan zhulin* 37, p. 579b; cf. Strong, *Legend*, pp. 254–5.

¹⁰⁶ Wang, *Tang hui yao* 49, p. 1005; the preceding pages carry the criticisms of other minsters, including Di Renjie, some of which are excerpted and translated by Forte, *Political Propaganda*, pp. 151–153.

good job of keeping up messianic appearances in terms of the goals that had earlier been set for her.

15. *Old age and mountains: Wutaishan and Taishan*

But by this stage we also get hints of another agenda beyond appearances, an agenda yet closer to her heart that we cannot discern in her earlier years. What it was emerges most clearly from a contrast between the attitudes she displayed in her later years towards three of China's most sacred mountains. We have already remarked on her evident interest in Wutaishan, and it must be said that her signs of interest there were quite public, and demonstrably known to all. Indeed, there are even signs that her well-known munificence in the region gained in the telling over time. For one of our chief sources for Wutaishan in the ninth century, the travel diary of the Japanese monk Ennin, who was there in 840, lists as structures associated with the empress, or 'Old Woman Wu' as she was remembered more colloquially, three iron pagodas on the 'Central Terrace' of the mountain range; one iron pagoda on the 'Western Terrace'; and one iron pagoda surrounded by many small stone ones on the 'Northern Terrace'¹⁰⁷. Yet the author of our source of 679 on the mountain makes it clear that the largest of the three central iron pagodas was erected by local people in 673, whilst the one on the northern terrace was his own work¹⁰⁸. It is even imaginable that the cluster of smaller pagodas there had accumulated later as a result of the Buddhist equivalent of the practice of 'burial *ad sanctos*', which certainly produced such an effect in South Asia¹⁰⁹. The practice has not been examined in China, but I have noticed one example at least,

¹⁰⁷ Reischauer, *Ennin's Diary*, pp. 239, 240 and 243 respectively.

¹⁰⁸ Huixiang, *Gu Qingliang zhuan*, pp. 1094a, 1099b, respectively.

¹⁰⁹ See Gregory Schopen, 'Burial *Ad Sanctos* and the Physical Presence of the Buddha in Early Indian Buddhism: A Study in the Archaeology of Religions', in *Bones, Stones and Buddhist Monks*, pp. 114–147, originally in *Religion* 17 (1987), pp. 193–225. If, of course, the concept of 'ad sanctos' is capable of being extended to include relics in textual form, the whole use of texts in Chinese funerary practice might need to be considered.

dated to 717¹¹⁰. What appears to be a secular version of the same custom—burial near one's ruler—would certainly appear to have been carried out in the seventh century¹¹¹.

As it happens, an even later source on the Wutaishan area, compiled in 1059, does tell us that in 702 the empress ordered a nun to construct a pagoda on the Central Terrace, but since it is said to have taken a year to complete, it must have been much larger than any of the small or medium-sized structures mentioned so far¹¹². What is most astonishing about this account is that it is said that the following year, after a separate mission charged with refurbishing a monastery had witnessed a most gratifying series of omens, which were duly reported to the empress, she ordered her craftsmen to fashion a likeness of herself out of jade to dispatch to the mountain to worship Mañjuśrī. This attracted such crowds that it had to stop short of the mountain to receive their worship in a monastery in Taiyuan¹¹³. Such a public use of an image as a surrogate is, I think, unparalleled in Chinese history, though her grandson, who clearly learned many lessons from her but used them mainly in the service of the Li family religion of Taoism, did distribute imperial icons about his domain¹¹⁴. This may, however, have been the only way open to her to pay her respects to her favourite Buddhist site, since it has been pointed out

¹¹⁰ See Dong Gao, ed., *Quan Tang wen* 228 (Beijing: Palace edition, 1818), p. 14a2–3. This practice could, of course, also explain the earlier miniature pagodas found on the mountain, but we are told explicitly that in the seventh century they were not understood that way.

¹¹¹ See the diagram on p. 191 of David McMullen, 'Bureaucrats and cosmology: the ritual code of T'ang China', in David Cannadine and Simon Price, eds., *Rituals of Royalty: Power and Ceremonial in Traditional Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 181–236.

¹¹² Yanyi, *Guang Qingliang zhuan* A, p. 1106c, in edition of Taishō Canon, vol.51, no. 2099.

¹¹³ Yanyi, *Guang Qingliang zhuan* A, p. 1107b.

¹¹⁴ Barrett, *Taoism Under the T'ang*, p. 62; cf. p. 64.

that at this time a journey to the remote and occasionally dangerous northern borders of China would have been distinctly unwise¹¹⁵.

Whatever the truth of these accounts, the persistence of stories about the empress and Wutaishan contrasts quite dramatically with the situation regarding another of China's most sacred peaks, Mount Tai in the East. There epigraphic evidence in abundance gives us excellent contemporary documentation of what the empress was up to on the mountain. Yet this material would seem to relate to much less public (or at least publicized) activity, leading modern scholars to conclude from it that she had religious interests quite different from those ostensibly reflected in her more flamboyant construction enterprises¹¹⁶. Mount Tai has a long history in Chinese religion: traditionally the most important ceremonies in the state cult were conducted there whenever a ruler could claim to have brought good government to the empire—something which none had dared to claim for centuries before the time of the empress and her husband, who undertook the ceremonies in 666. This event is fully recorded in conventional sources, and there seems to have been a deliberate stress on its national, public nature, even if the numbers who would have observed on the mountaintop would probably have been quite limited¹¹⁷. At the same time if the empress had later ordered public Buddhist ceremonies on the mountain, this would not have been a surprise: the god of Mount Tai was also considered to be Lord of the Dead in some circles, and this belief was one element in Chinese

¹¹⁵ See p. 10 of Xiao Yu, 'Wu Zetian yu Wutaishan', *Wutaishan yanjiu* 6 (1986), pp. 7–10.

¹¹⁶ Note Rao Zongyi, 'Cong shike lun Wu hou zhi zongjiao xinyang', *Zhongy-ang yanjiuyuan lishi yuyan yanjiusuo jikan* 45.3 (1974), pp. 397–418; and Barrett, *Taoism Under the T'ang*, p. 43.

¹¹⁷ See Howard J. Wechsler, *Offerings of Jade and Silk: Ritual and Symbol in the Legitimation of the T'ang Dynasty* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), pp. 170–194, especially pp. 184–188.

religion which seems to have influenced the formation in China of popular Buddhist texts¹¹⁸.

But all the inscriptions on Mount Tai mentioning the empress are in fact Taoist. And not only that: they date to 661 and 678, during her husband's Taoist phase; to 691 and 692, when her new dynasty was busy using Buddhism to legitimate itself; and to 696, 698, 701 and 704, right through almost to the end of her reign¹¹⁹. This consistent pattern may at first sight seem something of a puzzle, but recently Antonino Forte has advanced evidence suggesting that what hostility we may find towards Taoism during the early years of the Zhou dynasty stemmed not from the empress, but from her alleged lover, the popular religious leader Xue Huaiyi, who though important to her assumption of direct rule, was disposed of in 695¹²⁰.

The majority of the sources make clear that the ceremony carried out for the empress involved the ritual known as dragon hurling, or 'tossing dragons', in which inscribed messages were attached to small metal dragons and cast from a great height, theoretically so as to wing their way as messengers of the gods. Recent scholarship on Tang Taoism has been in two minds about this, seeing the practice as originally dedicated to seeking the personal immortality of the monarch, but later modified to become a ritual dedicated to the common weal¹²¹. All the inscriptions on Mount Tai, at any rate, would appear to stress the wellbeing of society as a whole, though it is worth noting that Taoist inscriptions for 691 by the team of imperi-

¹¹⁸ Osabe, *Tō-Sō Mikkyōshi*, pp. 34–64. The materials drawn upon here are, as Osabe notes, hard to date, but the 'Prophecy of Dīpaṃkara' cited above (n.93) demonstrates that this merging of belief may safely be taken to date back in some forms at least to the time of the empress.

¹¹⁹ Chen Yuan, comp., Chen Zhichao, Zeng Qingying, eds., *Daojiao jinshi lue* (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1988), pp. 56, 67; 79–80 and 80; and 81, 82, 93, 94 and 95 respectively.

¹²⁰ Antonino Forte, 'The Maitreyist Huaiyi (d.695) and Taoism', *Tang yanjiu* 4 (1998), pp. 15–29.

¹²¹ See p. 89 of Russell Kirkland, 'Dimensions of Tang Taoism: The State of the Field at the End of the Millennium', *T'ang Studies* 15/16 (1997–8), pp. 79–123.

ally appointed ritualists survive from one or two other locations such as the birthplace of Confucius, while that for Mount Tai makes it clear that all five Sacred Peaks were selected as sites for Taoist ceremonies in that year. This all suggests that however much a collection of epigraphic materials such as that relating to Mount Tai may help us in understanding the empress, the bulk of our evidence even in this category had unfortunately disappeared before antiquarian scholars and students of calligraphy from Song times onwards embarked upon their remarkable efforts towards preserving inscribed sources of the Tang period and earlier.

16. *A message from Mount Song*

It is a pity in particular that we do not possess more information to clarify all that she did on the central Sacred Peak, Mount Song, which we have already had occasion to mention above as the site of a palace and of the abortive enshrinement of a relic. The empress, like her husband before her, seems to have been obsessed with this sacred space, to an extent which hints that something beyond the admittedly important symbolism of the centre attracted them to it: I have suggested elsewhere that the cause may have been astrological, that they both felt that their fates were literally governed by this mountain¹²². Yet in May 1982 one unexpected piece of additional information precisely dated to the year 700, was found on its slopes, in the form of an inscription from a metal dragon, one of a very small number from medieval times that actually got away¹²³. Omit-

¹²² Barrett, *Taoism Under the T'ang*, pp. 44–5.

¹²³ The text is published in Chen, Chen and Zeng, *Daojiao jinshi lue*, p. 93, but misprints the name of the officiant charged with the task, who was a very important provincial religious reformer of the age. The inscription as reported on p. 11 of 'Henan dixia wenwu xin faxian', *Zhongyuan wenwu* 19.3 (1984) reveals him to have been Hu [Fa]zhao, for whom see Barrett, *Taoism Under the T'ang*, p. 44; Li Fang, ed., *Taiping guangji* 313 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1961), p. 2495; *Xiuzhen shihshu* 36.8a–10b (HY text no. 263 in the Taoist Canon).

ting only the details of the official responsible and the date of the ceremony, it says just this:

With respect, Wu Zhao, ruler of the Great Zhou, delights in the True Way, and the long-lived holy immortals. She has respectfully sent to the Central Peak, to the gate of lofty Mount Song, and cast a metal tablet, begging the Three Officers and Nine Departments of the world of the dead to remove the criminal name of Wu Zhao from their records.

The records mentioned here—one hardly needs to explain—totted up misdeeds to the point where a summons of death was issued; they have been seen as one of the key features distinguishing Taoism from other forms of native Chinese religion¹²⁴. Of all the empress ever wrote or said, of all that historians ever did to transmit to posterity her crimes and achievements, these few words, doubtless known only to her trusted intermediary who actually carried out the ceremony give us the most unmediated, unrehearsed private picture of the real person that we can possibly hope to retrieve. And it is a picture of a forthright and powerful woman who is facing up to the prospect of death and punishment for her crimes, and who will do whatever she can to escape her fate. It is in this sense that I have referred to the empress as ‘pious after her fashion’, and I make no apology for this seeming diversion from Buddhist studies into another religious tradition in order to establish the point. For we shall find that we need to keep the dragon’s message in mind when we turn to the last category of evidence bearing on the topic of *stūpa*, *sūtra* and *śarīra* in China up to the year 705.

17. *The last translations*

This category is the balance of the Tantric materials surveyed by Osabe, of which we have only considered one or two from the earlier portion of the career of the empress. Naturally Buddhist texts, and not just Tantric ones, continued to be translated throughout her

¹²⁴ Isabelle Robinet, *Taoism: Growth of a Religion* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 65.

reign, and of these perhaps the most famous was the retranslation of the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*, completed in 699¹²⁵. It is noteworthy that this occasion too was used by the empress to assert to her public the success of the translation team (which she had assisted clerically herself) in averting eschatological collapse. For in her preface to the work she says ‘Who would have thought that in the latter five hundred years we would suddenly receive word from the Golden Mouth?’¹²⁶. Here the ‘Golden Mouth’ is, of course, the Buddha’s, and the ‘latter five hundred years’ is unambiguously in China a period of the withering away of Buddhism¹²⁷. As before, too, making public the benefits of Tantric texts to all was still very much the approach stressed by the empress. Some time after 697, for example, Bolun, whom we have encountered above as involved in the dissemination in the Buddhapāli version of the ‘Crowning Victory’ text, wrote a preface for a text and icon featuring the Thousand-armed Guanyin, in which he contrasts earlier problems in transmission with the straightforward attitude of the empress, who immediately orders her palace women to produce embroidery versions and her craftsmen to distribute painted copies¹²⁸. Mention of these lavish measures, however, calls to mind that the first reference to printing

¹²⁵ For general accounts of Buddhist translation at this time, and this project in particular, see pp. 297–303 of Stanley Weinstein, ‘Imperial Patronage in the Formation of T’ang Buddhism’, in Arthur F. Wright and Denis Twitchett, eds., *Perspectives on the T’ang* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), pp. 263–306, and Stanley Weinstein, *Buddhism Under the T’ang* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 44–47.

¹²⁶ Dong, comp., *Quan Tang wen*, 97.7a8–9.

¹²⁷ On this phrase in South and East Asia, see Nattier, *Once Upon a Future Time*, pp. 91–92, n.89; 106, n.111; p. 118.

¹²⁸ The version carrying this preface is no. 1057 in Taishō Canon, vol.20; for the order see p. 83c10. The cult of Guanyin in this form became remarkably popular during the Tang: see Kobayashi Taichirō, *Kobayashi Taichirō chosaku shū*, VII: Bukkyō geijutsu no kenkyū (Tokyo: Dankōsha, 1974), pp. 1–296, for a comprehensive study, though the brief mention of this preface on p. 89 simply takes the information given at face value and does not consider its historical background.

on paper by Taoists comes very far down a list of acceptable media in which to create images, so it is perhaps no wonder that references to printing texts are so hard to come by¹²⁹.

For that matter the multiple construction of small pagodas, even quite expensive ones, also seems to have been nothing special in T'ang times. A survey of the monasteries in the capital carried out in the middle of the ninth century discovered one with several tens of thousands of such pagodas surviving out of an even greater number which had originally been manufactured in some haste to deal with a spontaneous multiplication of relics; by comparison another establishment housed one hundred thousand small gilded images produced to expiate the killing of an innocent monk¹³⁰. Even allowing for some hyperbole, it would seem reasonable to assume that the state would have been easily capable of feats achieved by private citizens. True, one *dhāraṇī* translated for the empress by the Khotanese Śikṣānanda, the monk responsible for bringing her the new text of the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra*, did suggest that it was so potent that to place it inside a stūpa would create as much merit as making one hundred thousand ordinary stūpas¹³¹. But this proffered shortcut probably did nothing to discourage mass manufacture, no more than the theoretical lower limit of one to ten invocations of the name of Amitābha ever discouraged Pure Land devotees in China from chanting the holy name incessantly.

For rather than any change in the methods advocated by texts of this later period, it was their aims which have been seen as distinctive. In general, it was only over a decade after the death of the empress that the first Tantric texts started to be translated which produced the East Asian Tantric system known today, for example in

¹²⁹ Since the appearance of my study, listed above in n.6, the passage in question has been translated by Florian C. Reiter, *The Aspirations and Standards of Taoists Priests in the Early T'ang Period* (Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz, 1998), pp. 85–6.

¹³⁰ Duan Chengshi, *Youyang zazu*, supplement, 5 (Beijing; Zhonghua shuju, 1981), pp. 249, 251.

¹³¹ *Baiqian yin tuoluoni jing*, Taishō Canon vol.21, no. 1369, pp. 885c–886a.

Japanese Shingon. Even so at this point, when the goals of Tantric practice were still much more open, one specific benefit seems to be mentioned more frequently than any other, and this, as Osabe's survey makes clear, was long life¹³². This may not necessarily relate to the 'Taoist' elements he describes, or even to a Serindian input into the texts, since it is possible to find *dhāraṇī* designed to confer long life in non-Chinese materials also¹³³. Now that we have read the dragon's message, we can be sure that the empress paid close attention to all such materials. But they must have presented her with a problem, for how could she put such texts to use without appearing to be pursuing entirely private interests, especially after having made such a point of public spiritedness in all her religious activities?

18. *The first printed text*

This question must have been posed in particular by the *Wugou jingguang da tuoluoni jing*, the text printed copies of which survive in Korea and Japan. Its author, a Tokharian whose name seems to have been Mitrasena or Mitraśānta, came to China in 702, according to some remarks by Fazang (643–712) concerning a translation with which they were involved together up to 704¹³⁴. Since this same source states that his work at that time consisted of reviewing an existing translation by Śikṣānanda, it may well be that a catalogue of 730 is correct in suggesting that his work on our earliest printed text was likewise one of revising an existing version by Śikṣānanda as well; unfortunately neither this source nor any other gives a precise

¹³² Osabe, *To-Sō Mikkyōshi*, p. 26, n.13, commenting on Taishō Canon nos. 1080, 1082, 1083, and cf. pp. 27–8, n.21.

¹³³ This is shown by a preliminary study of the topic by Hatsuzaki Shōjun, 'Emmei-hō ni kansuru Bukkyō keiten no kenkyū', *Indogaku Bukkyōgaku kenkyū* 15.1 (1966), pp. 225–9, though one of the texts he cites (p. 236) from Taishō Canon 20, p. 584, was translated in 693.

¹³⁴ Cf. p. 9 of the translation of this information in D. T. Suzuki, *Studies in the Lankavatara Sutra* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1930), pp. 7–10, drawing on p. 430b of Taishō Canon vol. 39, no. 1790.

date for the completion of the work¹³⁵. But what it does show is that again he was working together with Fazang, which may well be significant for several reasons.

First, we know that Fazang's full-time dedication to Buddhism started at the age of fifteen when he burned off a finger as an offering at the Famensi; he would therefore have been familiar from an early age with the legend of Aśoka and his distribution of relics¹³⁶. Secondly, a passage in one of his earlier works, even if it may not be taken as proof of a familiarity with printing, at the very least shows that he appreciated the instantaneousness with which text can be created by a large seal or the like¹³⁷. Thirdly, as Stanley Weinstein observes, he was not just a famous exegete, but also carried out such practical tasks as praying for rain on behalf of the empress—though it may be noted that even his most philosophical essay for the empress, by collapsing distinctions of space and time, actually serves her religious purpose of bringing the time of the Buddha's enlightenment closer once more to a fearful populace¹³⁸. Fourthly, his earliest biography reveals that following conversations with the empress

¹³⁵ Zhisheng, *Kaiyuan shijiao lu* 9, p. 566a9 and 11, b25, c2.

¹³⁶ Weinstein, *Buddhism Under the T'ang*, p. 46. The chronology does not quite work, unless (as is likely) 'fifteen' is a conventional figure alluding to the career of Confucius in Analects 2.4.1, and he was actually a few years older when he made this pilgrimage.

¹³⁷ This source is explored in the article in *Chinese Science* 15 listed above, n.5; to the discussion of the date of the work in question given there may now be added A. Forte, *A Jewel in Indra's Net* (Kyoto: Italian School of East Asian Studies, 2000), pp. 66–68, which shows that it existed in some substantial form by 690, though it is of course impossible to guarantee absolutely that the passage I discuss was included at that date.

¹³⁸ Cf. p. 332 of the translation of his 'Chapter on the Golden Lion' by Leon Hurvitz, in W. T. de Bary, ed., *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, Vol. I (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), pp. 329–333. For Weinstein's observation, see n. 115 above.

it was he who was charged in 704 with going to the Famensi and after due rituals escorting the Buddha's relic back to the capital¹³⁹.

One suspects therefore that he would have known exactly what to do when presented with the problem of how to create a public context for the private goal contained in his newly translated text. His new product consisted of four *dhāraṇī* texts interspersed with praise of their benefits¹⁴⁰. The first, for example, guarantees that if seventy-seven copies are placed in seventy-seven miniature clay pagodas, it will add one year to one's life, and that even if this is done posthumously, it will secure a rebirth in a heaven, while the rest of the *dhāraṇī* weigh in with even more benefits, so that finally it is stated that by placing ninety-nine copies of all four in miniature pagodas almost limitless rewards are possible¹⁴¹. For the empress to carry out such a ritual for herself would have exposed her to the public charge of seeking personal gain in a way that she had always been anxious to avoid, and but for the accidental discovery of her dragon message in the twentieth century would have successfully concealed from history entirely.

Now the obvious solution was to distribute this new talismanic import in Aśokan fashion across her empire as a demonstration both of her legitimacy as a Buddhist ruler and of her desire to share her good fortune. The smallest units of administration under the early Tang empire totalled only some one and a half thousand plus units, but if all territories which entertained friendly relations with the court such as Korea and Japan were included, that would have driven the number up towards a couple of thousand¹⁴². It would have been

¹³⁹ Ch'oe Ch'iwŏn, Pŏpjang Hwasangjŏn, pp. 283b–284a in Taishō Canon, vol.50.

¹⁴⁰ *Wugou jingguang da tuoluoni jing*, Taishō Canon no. 1024 in Vol. 19, pp. 717c–721b.

¹⁴¹ Taishō Canon, vol.19, pp. 718b, 718c, 720c–721a.

¹⁴² For the total of 1551 administrative units before the rise of the empress, see Li Tai, comp.; He Cijun, ed., *Guadi zhi jijiao*, general preface (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1980), p. 5; the empire would have been slightly larger in her day.

enough to distribute a few copies, or even one copy, to each: no one would worry about overproduction at the centre, since it did not tax the scribal resources of the bureaucracy, to judge from the surviving evidence for the later Japanese enterprise¹⁴³.

It is, in fact, an even later episode which gives us the greatest reason to believe that Japanese practice was inspired by a distribution of relics in textual form carried out by the empress. For in the tenth century Qian Shu (929–988), the ruler of the small but prosperous state of Wu-Yue, with territory around the mouth of the Yangtse river, seems to have followed a dynastic policy of strong ideological support for religion, and Buddhism in particular, in order to promote its image in the interstate diplomacy of the period¹⁴⁴. In particular there is plenty of surviving evidence to show that he engaged over a number of years in the Aśokan distribution of relics in textual form, using a *dhāraṇī* unknown in the time of the empress that was translated in the late eighth century by the great confidante of emperors and Tantric master Amoghavajra¹⁴⁵. Copies of this work, variously dated, have been found in China both inside and outside his home territory¹⁴⁶. There is a trace of the distribution of at least one of his textual relics to Korea also, with which he had close diplomatic ties¹⁴⁷.

¹⁴³ Kornicki, *The Book in Japan*, p. 116.

¹⁴⁴ There is a good brief account of Wu-Yue, including an account of Qian Shu's religious activities, by Edmund H. Worthy, Jr., 'Diplomacy for Survival: Domestic and Foreign Relations of Wu Yüeh, 907–978', in Morris Rossabi, ed., *China Among Equals* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983), pp. 17–44.

¹⁴⁵ The text in question is no. 1022 in the Taishō Canon. Amoghavajra represents a later phase in imperial Chinese Buddhism, which may now be studied through Charles D. Orzech, *Politics and Transcendent Wisdom* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998).

¹⁴⁶ As noted in Tsien Tsuen-hsuei, *Science and Civilisation in China*, Vol. V.1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 157–8.

¹⁴⁷ See Hwang Su-yōng, ed., *Chūngbo Hanguk kūmsōk yumun* (Seoul: Iljisa, 1981, third edition), p. 177, for the relic. For a recent summary of the extensive, simultaneously religious and diplomatic relations between Wu-Yue and

But the impact of his distribution of 500 copies to Japan was particularly marked: the manufacture of miniature pagodas, which for a while saw a certain vogue in that country, invariably thereafter used Amoghavajra's text in preference to the one translated in the days of the empress¹⁴⁸. It should not be assumed that our hypothetical distribution by the Empress Wu must necessarily have served as the proximate model for his actions: Abe Jōichi, in a brief account of Qian and the Aśokan ideal, notes a fourteenth century source that speaks intriguingly of a distribution of relics in the mid-ninth century, following a centralization of these objects during the great Huichang persecution of Buddhism¹⁴⁹. But what this episode does show is that though over time the texts involved may have changed, the Sui precedent of playing the Aśokan role, not simply by the production of 84,000 miniature pagodas (as in the Tangut case studied by Linrothe) but in particular by the distribution of relics in such pagodas throughout East Asia as a whole, was by no means forgotten, even centuries later¹⁵⁰.

19. *The end of the empress*

What this does not explain, however, is why a copy of the text (printed, as we might now surmise, even though copies in manu-

Korea, see pp. 356–7 of Wang Tsui-ling, 'Sugyōroku no seiritsu', *Indogaku Bukkyōgaku kenkyū* 48.1 (1999), pp. 358–355 (reverse pagination).

¹⁴⁸ There are several studies bearing on this episode: see e.g. Okazaki Jōji, 'Sen Kōshuku hachi man yon sen tō kō', *Bukkyō geijutsu* 76 (1970), pp. 111–125, and cf. Ishida, *Bukkyō kōkogaku ronsō*, 4, pp. 263–271.

¹⁴⁹ Abe Jōichi, *Chūgoku Zenshūshi no kenkyū* (Tokyo: Seishin shobō, 1963), p. 96. I have not as yet located any earlier source that confirms this centralization and redistribution, but it would not seem to be intrinsically impossible.

¹⁵⁰ Nor did the switch to Amoghavajra's text immediately lead to a complete abandonment of the *Wugou jingguang da tuoluoni jing* as a text associated with relics: for an example of such a use from 1096, see Chen, *Liao wen cun*, 9, p. 252, though this source, while mentioning 2,000 miniature pagodas along with 20 grains of relics and five copies of the text, does not seem to be associated with any act of distribution.

script certainly did circulate later) did not arrive in Korea until 706, well after the removal of the empress¹⁵¹. But the biography of Fazang cited above shows that he would have been preoccupied with the Famensi relic from late 704 into the first month of 705, so he perhaps could not turn his attention to any scheme immediately, if one existed, and by the end of that month the empress had been deposed. All her grandiose religious undertakings were cancelled at once, and Yang Wulian, her chief of engineering, was packed off to a remote provincial post¹⁵². But no one dared lay a finger on her, so that it was not until much later in the year, on 16th December, that she actually died¹⁵³. Doubtless fearful that her spirit in death might be even more formidable than in life, her son and successor immediately revived her favourite scheme for a giant metal statue, aban-

¹⁵¹ Manuscript copies of the *Wugou jingguang da tuoluoni jing* may be found among the Dunhuang manuscripts, mainly (seven) in the Beijing collection, but also two in London, S1634 and S4156, and one in Paris, P3916. Stephen F. Teiser, *The Scripture on the Ten Kings and the Making of Purgatory in Medieval Chinese Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994), p. 99, notes that the Paris manuscript forms part of a small collection of texts in a notebook, a format which to judge from other similar examples suggests the regular use of the text by a ritual practitioner. He also gives on the preceding page a well-known example of a text (the *Diamond Sūtra*) often copied in manuscript in the tenth century from a printed exemplar—this, however, only becomes detectable with the rise of commercial printing, since the copyists faithfully copy in the printer's colophon. What happened in the case of the *Wugou jingguang da tuoluoni* can only remain hypothetical. Whether the copies of our text listed by Japanese pilgrims to China in the ninth century were manuscripts or not is an even trickier problem, which is here dealt with in an Appendix, below.

¹⁵² Dong, *Quan Tang wen* 269.9a5; this is the source used by Forte and dated below, n.154. For Yang, see the rather contradictory images presented in Zhang Zu, *Chaoye qianzai* 2 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1979), p. 36, and 6, p. 142; D. C. Twitchett, *Financial Administration Under the T'ang* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970; second ed.), p. 86 for the context of the former, more negative remarks.

¹⁵³ Sima Guang, *Zizhi tongjian* 208, p. 6596, converted into the Western calendar.

done as we have said in 704¹⁵⁴. If the distribution of the translation for its beneficial posthumous effects on her (to which we have already drawn attention) was ordered at the same time because it was another item left on her agenda, then the work would have been carried out in 706. In both cases a certain amount of haste would have been called for in order to deploy the necessary good karma towards her next reincarnation, which in current belief would have been determined in a mere seven weeks; printing would have commended itself for its speed if nothing else under the circumstances¹⁵⁵.

The final argument for associating the new *dhāraṇī* in printed form with the funeral rites of the empress, however, entails the corollary that far from being a left-over agenda item, now was the time that it came into its own. For Greg Schopen has shown that, with other similar works, it was used precisely as a funeral text in monuments in India¹⁵⁶. And not only that: the inscription of 706 in Korea shows very plainly that that was precisely how it was used already by the end of the fifth month there (12 August in the Western calendar). For it was found in a pagoda originally erected for the repose of King Sinmun (r. 681–692) by his widow and his son King Hyoso (r. 692–792); following their deaths, the reliquary was added by the latter's brother, King Sōngdōk (r. 702–737), not simply (as the inscription states) for their posthumous benefit, but also (as he

¹⁵⁴ This we know from the renewal of protest against it: see Forte, *Mingtang and Buddhist Utopias*, pp. 69–70, where he uses the protesting memorial for its review of earlier schemes; he suggests (n.63) 28th December for the edict reviving her plans for the statue.

¹⁵⁵ For the time scale of rituals determining rebirth, see Stephen F. Teiser, *The Scripture on the Ten Kings* p. 23–25, and Michihata Ryōshū, 'Chūgoku Bukkyō to shichishichisai', *Shūkyō kenkyū* 34 (1961), pp. 85–86: though later rituals envisaged memorial services at fixed intervals, forty-nine days was probably the time limit uppermost in contemporary minds.

¹⁵⁶ Schopen, 'Burial Ad Sanctos', p. 121, and n. 32, p. 142, making the explicit connection with the earliest East Asian printed materials.

states with un-Chinese directness) to increase his own lifespan¹⁵⁷. In view of the surmise that the copy of the *Wugou jingguang da tuoluoni* referred to was in fact one distributed by the empress in printed form, it is unfortunate that no surviving trace of paper material was found by the archaeologists responsible for the discovery, though some decayed slivers of thin bamboo have been seen as evidence for the original existence of a bookbag in the pagoda, presumably containing the text in question¹⁵⁸.

The funerary use in Korea of the the *Wugou jingguang da tuoluoni* is, even so, firmly attested not only by this inscription but by later evidence as well¹⁵⁹. And once the possibility is admitted that the text arrived in Korea in conjunction with ceremonies marking the passing of the empress, it seems to me highly improbable that such a 'one-off' operation of manufacture and distribution would have been undertaken under pressure of time had not earlier exercises of this type taken place already using other texts, so that everyone knew exactly what to do. Once again, one suspects the agency of Fazang, who by this point had probably accumulated considerable experience in handling 'Aśokan affairs'—indeed, a couple of years later, in 708, we find an inscription bearing his name on a relic casket, newly provided at that time, amongst the Famensi finds¹⁶⁰. This would, then, increase the likelihood that the various factors impelling the empress to carry out some distribution of texts by printing had already resulted in action earlier in her own reign or even those of her sons or husband.

¹⁵⁷ The inscription and the other contents found in the reliquary are analysed in Umehara Sueji, 'Kankoku Keishū Kōfukuji tō hakken shari yōki', *Bijutsu kenkyū* 156 (1950), pp. 31–47; cf. Hwang, *Hanguk kūmsōk yumun*, pp. 140–141.

¹⁵⁸ See p. 65 of Kayamoto Somato, 'Nissen jōdai jiin no shari shōgongu ni tsuite', *Bukkyō geijutsu* 32 (1958), pp. 52–81.

¹⁵⁹ As is made clear by the study of Kayamoto (see preceding note), and cf. Chōsen sōtokufu, ed., *Chōsen kinshi sōran*, vol.1 ('Heijō': Chōsen sōtokufu, 1919), p. 55, no. 29; Hwang, *Hanguk kūmsōk yumun*, pp. 161, 166, 172.

¹⁶⁰ Wu and Han, *Famensi digong Tang mǐ mantuluo zhī yanjū*, p. 70.

20. *The empress in retrospect*

I am aware, of course, that we have now reached our target date without turning up the least piece of concrete evidence to say that the empress ordered the printing of anything. But while I should repeat that there is still plenty of room for research even into the materials used in this study, I rather suspect that no such evidence exists. We have already mentioned the historiographic bias against her; we have also drawn out her pursuit of private objectives which she deliberately hid from view; and where ideological control was at stake, one doubts that much would have been allowed to survive in public documents anyhow. One of her ministers, alarmed by the all too blatant deprivations of her chief of police early in her reign, cites Laozi's dictum that 'the sharp instruments of the state are not to be shown to outsiders'¹⁶¹. Even so, in associating her name with the emergence of printing I do not think that we are simply constructing a tottering tower of hypotheses.

Rather, what we have is a field or forest of separate hypotheses growing naturally together to constitute not any specific structure, but a much wider and quite unmistakable environment. That environment was the product of many factors, but it was tended by one person in particular, the Empress Wu, whether the ultimate harvest came before or after her death. Why did printing spread in China, when the seal was known across the Old World from high antiquity? Not, surely, because the Chinese wanted more books, as the statistics for sūtra production under the Sui make abundantly clear. It is more likely in the light of the information reviewed above that printing arose for a number of unambiguously religious reasons associated primarily with Buddhism: to mollify Chinese ethnocentrism by making China more Buddhist; or to calm the apocalyptic fears of a population that fancied it saw the signs of the Buddha's presence fading away as time passed; or to justify the rule of a woman both

¹⁶¹ Wang, Tang hui yao 41, p. 867; the saying, from Daode jing 36, is itself diplomatically blunted by most translators: Michael LaFargue, *The Tao of the Tao Te Ching* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992), pp. 158, 159, is one exception.

nationally and internationally in terms of the fulfilment of Buddhist prophecy; or to salve the conscience of that same woman in her old age, disturbed by the thought that in order to seize and retain her grip on power she had been obliged to kill repeatedly; or, finally, to reassure her nervous son that his late mother had been dispatched to a world pleasant enough to stop her spirit from returning to the one now under his control.

It is possible, of course, that someone had already hit upon printing as a cheap way of manufacturing and selling *dhāraṇī* texts in the seventh century; it is even just possible that the idea occurred independently in Korea and Japan. But there are some indications that might be taken to suggest that it was not until the empress took over from the Tang to rule in her own right that the state became involved in printing, and thus bestowed on it a crucial degree of legitimacy. For the research of Fujieda Akira in the Dunhuang manuscripts has uncovered the singular fact that several dozen copies of the *Lotus* and the *Diamond Sūtras* were actually copied out at the capital, using the resources of state employed copyists in various parts of the civil service, between 671 and 677, evidently in order to provide good exemplars of well edited versions of popular works, though perhaps also to promote acceptable, orthodox Buddhist literature in the face of more dubious concoctions, such as the *Dīpaṃkara* prophecy, which we will recall dated to 670¹⁶². As there is no reason to think that Dunhuang was particularly favoured with these centrally disseminated texts, we must assume that rather a large number were created for China as a whole. Since these, and also the copy of the equally widely distributed commentary studied by Forte in his first monograph on Empress Wu's political propaganda, all exist in manuscript, evidently printing did not commend itself even for the accurate volume production of a work as short as the *Diamond Sūtra* at this point. This is why I have guessed that the funerary associations of the *Wugou jingguang da tuoluoni jing* may have been important, in that the element of speed of multiple production

¹⁶² There is a useful summary of Fujieda's work in Jean-Pierre Drège, *Les bibliothèques en Chine au temps des manuscrits* (Paris: ÉFEO, 1991), pp. 85–86.

would also have been crucial, along with accuracy and volume, in the situations in which it was used. Even so, Fujieda's work does illuminate yet another facet of the medieval Chinese state's persistent and large-scale involvement in the control of textual material—an important aspect of the background to the adoption of printing that could easily be the topic of monographic study in itself.

But, in short, the probability is that printing spread in order to meet the religious needs of China under the exceptional rule of one of its most Buddhist sovereigns. Without her and her unusual sensitivity to popular Buddhism, no doubt, the story would have had much the same ending: some of the basic preconditions for printing, such as paper, were there all the time, and so I have not discussed them¹⁶³. But if there was something distinctive about the empress that marked her off from the male rulers who dominate the rest of Chinese history, it was undoubtedly her open-mindedness—even her daring—in coopting the power of popular religious sentiment to strengthen her regime¹⁶⁴. Most rulers in China after the dramatic and disturbing Yellow Turban uprising of the late second century CE worried (and perhaps still worry) obsessively about the power of popular religion to inspire revolts capable of overthrowing dynasties, and were far more concerned to repress rather than to harness religious movements. The only possible parallel that comes to mind

¹⁶³ The broader background, which I have ignored for present purposes, may be found in Constance R. Miller, *Technical and Cultural Prerequisites for the Invention of Printing in China and the West* (San Francisco: Chinese Materials Center, 1983).

¹⁶⁴ Thus, apart from the Maitreyanist leader Xue Huaiyi and the Taoist reformer Hu Fazhao, whom we have already encountered, the empress also gave credence to a nun who claimed to be a Buddha and her associates, even though they are accused by the historians of having 'misled the masses', a propensity which all emperors tended to regard with some alarm, despite the willingness of many of them to listen to all kinds of holy men who flattered them with more personal attention to their longevity, good fortune, etc. See Sima, *Zizhi Tongjian* 205, pp. 6494–5, dated to 694. Of course, as we have seen, 'co-opting' just as frequently meant forestalling such movements by posing as some form of messiah herself.

is the last Empress Dowager at the end of the Qing, trying much more ineptly to use the Boxers to shore up her tottering power.

So, finally, where does the foregoing information leave our understanding of the introduction of the distribution of texts from woodblock? In some ways, not radically different, in that Buddhism has been shown to have played a major (but not the sole) part in its success. Even so, the specific Buddhist ideas involved have, perhaps, emerged with greater clarity. And it is probably safe to say that while there is nothing that is obviously and specifically 'female' about the origins of printing, its widespread adoption now has to be seen against the overall background of the ideological innovations introduced by the Empress Wu. These were, after all, largely a reflection of her unique position as a female ruler, which in turn elicited from her daring and sometimes unique solutions to the problem of legitimating herself. Without the empress, the saga of the discovery and spread of the new technology would, at the least, have been a very different and probably much longer story.

Appendix: Ninth-century Japanese Buddhist catalogues of acquisitions from China: print or manuscript?

As pointed out above, at n. 145, we know from the Dunhuang finds that manuscript copies of the *Wugou jingguang da tuoluoni-jing* circulated in Tang China, even if the precise dating of these exemplars is unclear. It might be thought that the catalogues of their acquisitions made by Japanese pilgrims in China, since (as Peter Kornicki has pointed out) they distinguish printed materials in their listings, should provide some evidence to place such manuscripts at least in the ninth century, when these monks were active¹⁶⁵. It is certainly true that these catalogues mention the *Wugou jingguang da tuoluoni-jing* several times, but the presumption that since they are not indicated as printed exemplars they must be manuscripts is not

¹⁶⁵ Kornicki, *The Book in Japan*, p. 118, n.9, gives four apparent references to printed matter listed in such catalogues, which are all to be found in volume 55 of the Taishō Canon.

an entirely safe one¹⁶⁶. This is because a close look reveals that the distinction between print and manuscript is only made in certain texts, and for certain purposes; there is no way to be certain in the case of any of the exemplars mentioned that they should be placed either in one category or the other.

The first mention of printing, which is in a catalogue of acquisitions by Ennin (793–864), is apparently of one hundred ‘stamped Buddhas in fine copper’ and ‘a stamp in the form of a pagoda for making impressions in clay’—the Indian practice already noted above for the seventh century¹⁶⁷. There is thus no direct connection with woodblock printing. There would appear to be a reference to a printed text of the ‘Crowning Victory’ in another catalogue by one of Ennin’s contemporaries, Eun, but this is made a little uncertain by the frequent reference in these sources (which are particularly interested in Tantric materials) to *mudrās*, the Chinese translation term for which uses the same word, *yin*, ‘a seal’, also covers the literal products of printing. If there has been some displacement of text in this catalogue (and the copyists responsible, though good, were clearly fallible), then this casual reference to printing disappears¹⁶⁸.

Unambiguous references to printed materials do occur in a further work compiled by the pilgrim Shūei (809–884), but his catalogue is unusual for the amount of physical description of his acquisitions that it contains, and the mention of printing seems in one case primarily designed to distinguish one version of a collection of texts from slightly different manuscript versions elsewhere in his listings¹⁶⁹. Elsewhere he does list two printed dictionaries commercially

¹⁶⁶ For examples of listings of our text in these sources, see Taishō no. 2161, p. 1063b; no. 2165, p. 1074c; no. 2166, p. 1076c; no. 2167, p. 1032c; p. 2168, p. 1091a; no. 2172, p. 1098c.

¹⁶⁷ Taishō no. 2167, p. 1084c; cf. no. 2176, p. 1132a, for a later mention of the second object, which may perhaps be read to mean a pagoda formed of clay from a matrix, though this seems unlikely. The exact metal used in the former object is also a little unclear from the dictionary references I have consulted.

¹⁶⁸ Taishō Canon, no. 2168, p. 1090c.

¹⁶⁹ Taishō Canon, no. 2174A, p. 1110a.

produced, but here the mention of printing is in each case part of their titles¹⁷⁰. Even in this catalogue, then, we cannot be sure that we are consistently given information on whether a work is printed or not. In a somewhat similar fashion, the iconographic section of a catalogue by Ennin's disciple Annen (841–985) includes details on the physical format of icons not found elsewhere in his listings for texts, and here too there is one clear reference to a print¹⁷¹. But this may mean that elsewhere in his work Annen does not distinguish between print and manuscript.

In short, then, unambiguous references to printed books in these materials are somewhat rare—only three explicit examples in the work of Shūei, by my count—but this in itself tells us nothing about the circulation of printed materials in China at the time or even about the nature of the materials brought back. I should note, too, in this connection that I hope to publish a study showing that Japanese sources appear to preserve the text of a piece of printed material brought back at the end of the eighth century which was not even listed in the relevant catalogue of acquisitions. Unfortunately for us, the vibrancy of the contemporary manuscript culture was such that printing did not appear as some major marvel, but rather started off as a technique suitable for relic equivalents that would never be read or for ephemera, and so the distinction between print and manuscript just did not interest observers in the same way that it does us.

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¹⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 1111b

¹⁷¹ Taishō Canon, no. 2176, p. 1131c. This is not mentioned by Kornicki, who is concerned only with books.