

Introduction: The Creation of Buddhist Sacred Sites in China

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The four articles in this issue discuss four places; two are still very meaningful to Chinese Buddhists today, while two might have been so in times past. Mount Wutai 五台山 and Mount Putuo 普陀山 are famous pilgrimage centers attracting both pilgrims and tourists from all over China. Baoshan 寶山 and the Sūtra Stone Valley 石經峪 at Mount Tai 泰山, on the other hand, though of historical, artistic and cultural interest, are not well known to ordinary people other than scholars. There is a common theme shared by the articles. They all deal with the mechanisms and processes by which the Chinese Buddhists created sacred sites in China. While the pedigrees of Mt. Wutai and Mt. Putuo were based on Buddhist scriptures, Baoshan and Sūtra Stone Valley were modeled upon some Indian prototypes. The articles share the theme of transformation, transposition and replication of sacred sites of Indian Buddhism onto the soil of China. India had always been regarded as the holy land by Chinese Buddhists. Believers made pilgrimages to the places where the Buddha left his traces. In time, driven by what Tansen Sen calls the “borderland complex,”¹ they came to recreate Buddhist holy sites by transposing and replicating the Indian prototypes. The four articles in this issue tell us much about how this was done.

Wendi Adamek’s article is an example of how the Chinese created a Buddhist sacred site based on Indian models but with indigenous characteristics. It was created in conformity to both the Chinese mortuary tradition and the Buddhist cult of relics. The “necropolis” located in Baoshan and Lanfengshan 嵐峰山 consisting of “ash-remains stūpas” was first erected in the sixth century. These are niches in the shape of ornate stūpas with relief

¹ Tansen Sen, *Buddhism, Diplomacy, and Trade: The Religious Realignment of Sino-Indian Buddhism, 600–1400* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003).

images of seated monks and nuns (and occasionally laymen and laywomen). On the base of the niches, there are square reliquary cavities which contain cremation ashes of the deceased. This site is unique on several accounts. First of all, there is a gender differentiation in the siting of the niches. While Baoshan has inscribed niches of only monks and laymen, those on Lanfengshan are only those of nuns and laywomen. Many of the niches have inscriptions, with eulogies, that were composed by disciples and relate details about the lives of the deceased, very much in the fashion of those found on a stele, the traditional Chinese structure for commemoration. Secondly, all the nuns and some of the monks are depicted with small three-legged tables which were traditionally used to help people to sit upright but might also be used as props for reading and meditation. Because of the clear depiction of their hand postures, Adamek suggests that the nuns are represented in the act of writing, perhaps copying sūtras.

Stūpas were the earliest and most honored Buddhist devotional structures in India. They contained the relics of the Buddha and advanced disciples. They were also the sites of pilgrimage. Thus enshrining the ashes of eminent monks and nuns in stūpas was a practice with Indian precedents. However, stūpas in India did not include images. In China, stūpas do include images, but they are not images of monastics. The earliest examples are the votive stūpas of the fifth century studied by Stanley Abe in his book, *Ordinary Images*. Images of the Buddha and bodhisattvas are found in niches enclosed in a dome. In contrast, the images carved on the stūpa-niches in Baoshan were not only of monks and nuns, but one image of a monk was even surrounded by a halo. It is therefore clear that for the makers of these stūpa-niches, the depicted monks and nuns stand in the same position as Buddhas and bodhisattvas. The innovation found in Baoshan is perhaps similar to the “flesh-body” icons. Although the Buddha is absent in the stūpa-niches at Baoshan, his presence is precisely indicated by his absence, for the accomplished monastics depicted on the stūpa-niches and embalmed in the flesh-bodies were perceived as no different from the Buddha.

If this hypothesis is correct, then the question that naturally arises is: why and how could the makers of these stūpa-niches achieve this astonishing development and make such a bold claim? Recent scholarship has yielded important insight into the innovations in Buddhist imagery, doctrines and ritual practices evidenced in north China during the latter half of the sixth century. Adamek connects the “transmutation from body to relic” seen at Baoshan to several contemporary Buddhist practices and religious movements. One was the prevalence of repentance ritual and receiving bodhisattva

precepts. Another was the practice of corpse exposure as compassionate offering to animals before cremation.² The doctrinal inspiration was provided by the good news of universal Buddha Nature. There was the fervent belief that by making vows and carrying out bodhisattva deeds, one could become the Buddha oneself. In this regard, what Katherine Tsiang says about the imagery created in the sixth century in north China might be relevant: "...a pair of seated Buddhas made of bronze and dated 575 bears a donor inscription that reads, 'Wishing for peace, I made a father and mother image.' This indicates that the paired Buddhas may have been identified with the parents of the donor, instead of the more typical dedication of a Buddha image for the sake of the parents. Paired bodhisattvas may also have been carved to represent the potential spiritual apotheosis of devotees themselves. ...The imagery of sixth century Chinese Buddhism thus can be related to practitioners' aspirations to become enlightened, whether by meeting the Buddha or by identifying themselves as bodhisattvas and potential Buddhas."³ Tsiang also drew our attention to the many new Buddha images that were humanlike and suggests that they "might have been made to represent aspiring devotees."⁴ As the Buddha was made similar to human beings, real human beings were also made similar to the Buddha. The images of monks and nuns depicted on the stūpa-niches might follow this new iconographic innovation.

The images on the stūpa-niches were made to glorify those who had successfully trodden the path. They served as models for others to follow. As Adamek writes, "I suggest that one function of the enshrinement of representations at Baoshan is commemoration of the special gifts of the deceased, ranging from chanting and copying scriptures to the extreme offering of the body to feed other beings, through post-mortem exposure." Although it is hard to know if Baoshan ever served as a pilgrimage site and Adamek does not claim that it was, we can well imagine that for the disciples who made these stūpa-niches, if not for the people at large, this was a place worthy of visiting and remembering.

² Kim Sunkyung discusses this practice based on the data found in the nearby Xiaonanhai Caves in the dissertation, "Decline of the Law, Death of the Monk: Buddhist Texts and Images in the Anyang Caves of Late Sixth Century China" (PhD diss., Duke University, 2005).

³ Katherine R. Tsiang, "Resolve to Become a Buddha (Chengfo): Changing Aspirations and Imagery in Sixth Century Chinese Buddhism," *Early Medieval China* 2008, no. 2 (2008): 115–69.

⁴ Tsiang, 149.

Claudia Wenzel's article discusses the site of Sūtra Stone Valley at Mt. Tai, where the *Diamond Sūtra* was carved on the surface of a huge bolder by a stream. The carving was carried out very early, during the sixth century under either the Northern Qi or Northern Zhou. But because there are no donors' inscriptions, we do not know much about the origin or history of the site. It was, however, celebrated by many Ming literati who visited the site in the sixteenth century and either wrote about it or had stele inscriptions set up there. The site has received renewed scholarly attention in recent decades, for it provides one example of the large number of sūtra texts carved in caves or on mountains and boulders in Shandong and elsewhere.

Carving texts on stone is originally a Confucian practice. The "stone classics" were made as early as the Han. According to Kim Sunkyung, the earliest examples of carving passages from the sūtras are found in Xiangtangshan and the Anyang Caves in the sixth century.⁵ The carving of the *Diamond Sūtra* at this site was thus part of this general religious practice. The primary purpose was to preserve the sūtras for perpetuity, anticipating the imminent arrival of the Age of the Decline of Dharma. There are a number of examples of sūtra engravings, the most famous being the collection of carved sūtras on stone slabs at Fangshan begun by Jingwan 靜琬 in 628. But did the sponsors of the Sūtra Stone Valley and the other sites in Shandong share the same motivation? Why did they choose to carve sūtras on the large boulders of Mt. Tai? Could it be a rhetorical strategy to propagate the Dharma, or a way to claim the superiority of this sūtra over others? But this is also part of a long Chinese tradition. Steles were erected by officials and literati to glorify famous mountains. There was a reciprocal relationship between the inscription and the landscape. Awe inspiring landscapes called forth their celebration by commemorative inscriptions which, in turn, further increase the fame of the landscape. The site is thus inscribed with text. By the same token, the text is also imbedded on the mountain. The choice of the *Diamond Sūtra*, as Wenzel rightly points out, is most appropriate. It has protective potency for believers. It is not different from a stūpa, for according to the *Diamond Sūtra*, wherever the sūtra text is, that place is a location as worthy of worship as a stūpa. Since Mt. Tai is one of the five sacred peaks of China, carving one of the most powerful and important Buddhist sūtra there was a fitting way to put a Buddhist stamp on Mt. Tai, while at the same time appropriating its hallowed sacredness.

⁵ Kim, 236.

The main argument of the article, however, goes even beyond this. Because the alternate and perhaps original name of the boulder was “The Rock of Sunning Sūtra” (曬經石), Wenzel suggests that this might be a pilgrimage site modeled upon those in India. Using the travelogue of Xuanzang 玄奘 (602–664) and the paintings in Dunhuang Cave 323, she hypothesizes that the carving of the *Diamond Sūtra* was a replica of pilgrimage sites in northwest India connected with the secondary relics of the Buddha. These are the objects which had contact with the Buddha while he was alive, such as his robe, his footprints, and the shadow left by his body. The places where the Buddha once dried his robe receives the most attention in this article. Xuanzang visited most of the sites and described the robe’s imprints as “gleaming like engravings” or “shining and distinct like a carving.” He also used the Chinese character *wen* 文 (line) to describe the imprints of the robe’s lines or patterns. Wenzel concludes that “the lines of the Buddha’s robe (*buwen* 布文) were transformed into sūtra script (*jingwen* 經文) on their way from India to China, thus creating a replica at Mt. Tai.”

This is a very intriguing and provocative hypothesis. But as Wenzel states, “No historical inscriptions or primary sources about the initiators or the motives for carving the giant *Diamond Sūtra* in Sūtra Stone Valley at Mount Tai have come down to us.” For this reason, the reader might be surprised by the author’s bold hypothesis: “However, I propose that the original Buddhist significance of the site might be reconstructed by assuming that it was planned and executed as a place worthy of pilgrimage, modeled after comparable sites in India.... Sūtra Stone Valley was understood as a Buddhist pilgrimage site, worthy of obeisance, and favorable to the pilgrim’s advance towards enlightenment.”

Instead of assuming that the Sūtra Stone Valley was an actual pilgrimage site, perhaps it is more likely an example of Chinese Buddhists’ efforts to turn China into a Buddhist land by transforming Indian originals into Chinese replicas. There does not have to be a direct correlation between the creation of a holy site and its being a pilgrimage destination. In this case, the carved sūtra could indeed serve as a substitute for the Buddha’s robe or his other relics. The author actually sees this possibility when she says at the conclusion, “When the Chinese created the giant sūtra carving at Mount Tai, they connected with the Indian pilgrimage sites of Rocks for Sunning the Robe to get as close to the historical Buddha as possible, and to partake in his divine powers and awakening.”

The third article, by Susan Andrews, is about Mt. Wutai and the cult of Mañjuśrī. The *Avatamsaka Sūtra* (華嚴經) is one of the scriptures which

identify Mt. Wutai as the abode of the Bodhisattva. But how was this knowledge disseminated among the faithful? Miracle stories function as one of the most powerful media in promoting the fame of both. Andrews uses one miracle story contained in the earliest gazetteer of Mt. Wutai, compiled in the seventh century, to show how the writing and rewriting of the story served as the mechanism to achieve this goal. The story is about the origin of Wangzi Shaoshen Temple 太子燒身寺, a temple on Mt. Wutai. It contains several strands which jointly bolster the fame of the temple, although they also show contestation between scripture and place. The temple was said to stand by the site of the stūpa which housed relics of the Buddha distributed, according to legend, by King Aśoka 阿育王 (304–232 BCE). It was supposed to house the relic of a prince who immolated himself as an offering to Mañjuśrī when he failed to obtain a vision of the Bodhisattva. It was also the site where a eunuch regained his male member when he came to Mt. Wutai for a vision quest and recited the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra* at the temple. Andrews convincingly argues that the story originally celebrated the power of the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra*'s recitation but was later transformed into a legend illustrating the efficacy of making a pilgrimage to Mt. Wutai.

The article highlights one of the means through which Mt. Wutai and other places in China were constructed as Buddhist sacred sites: the creation of the past in which Aśoka was present in China. Promoters of the cult of Mañjuśrī, such as the writers of the gazetteers, incorporated narratives from other times into the lore of Mt. Wutai and thereby created a history for the site of celebrating the Bodhisattva. The earliest gazetteer, *Gu Qingliang Zhi* (Old Gazetteer of Mt. Clear and Cool 古清涼傳), promoted the potency of Mt. Wutai as the ideal site for religious practice. Later versions of the miracle in other sources cited by Andrews make no mention of Mt. Wutai and the temple. Instead, they attribute the restoration of the eunuch's organ to the recitation of *Avataṃsaka Sūtra*. Her suggestion that the story of the eunuch's healing initially circulated independent of any reference to Mt. Wutai or the prince's self-immolation is highly plausible. How the exaltation of sūtra recitation was eventually replaced by the power of vision quest and miraculous healing on Mañjuśrī's Mt. Wutai provides yet another example of the transplant of mythical holy sites onto real locales on Chinese soil.

The last article, by Marcus Bingenheimer, discusses how Mt. Putuo was perceived as a pilgrimage site from the perspective of pilgrims of the late imperial time, the period during which the gazetteers he uses were compiled. Like Mt. Wutai, the fame of the island as the home of Guanyin was based on the claim of the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra*. But why people came as pilgrims and how

they felt once there are questions not easily answered. While monastic and elite writers recorded the history and sceneries of the island, they rarely wrote about their personal religious experiences. Ordinary men and women did not leave a record even if they were willing to talk about their experiences. But gazetteers provide important information because they were compiled by the faithful for the purpose of informing and attracting potential pilgrims. They served as advertisements for the sites.

There are more gazetteers compiled about Mt. Putuo than about other sites, because the island underwent several cycles of construction and reconstruction due to its geographical location. Since the institution of the “ocean embargo” by the Ming court in 1372 to curb the disturbances of the pirates, Mt. Putuo became and has remained till today a military base. Residents were evacuated and temples were demolished several times in the Ming and Qing. After each destruction, temples on the island were rebuilt by monastics mainly with the help of military officials. Bingenheimer’s article uses the travel diary of a naval commander, Hou Jigao 侯繼高, who played an important role in the rebuilding of the island after its destruction in the sixteenth century, to discuss the island as a pilgrimage center for Guanyin worship.

Hou was the sponsor of a Mt. Putuo gazetteer that was compiled after one such episode of destruction on the island. As Bingenheimer points out, the patronage of institutional Buddhism by military officials has received far less attention from modern scholars than patronage of Buddhism by imperial or literati elites. The use of temple gazetteers as primary sources for this and Susan Andrews’s article is worthy of note. Despite the great importance of this genre for the study of local Buddhism, it is only recently that scholars have paid sustained attention to it. Bingenheimer’s book on the island of Mt. Putuo, which draws centrally on its numerous gazetteers, is a welcome contribution to the field.

How Buddhism, an originally foreign religion, became Chinese Buddhism—one of the “Three Teachings” of China—was a long and circuitous process. One medium through which this domestication took place was the transformation of specific localities in China into Buddhist sites. The faithful need not travel over perilous desert and sea to visit the sacred sites connected with the Buddha and other holy beings in the Buddhist homeland of India. Instead, they can visit places in their homeland made holy by scriptures, by relics putatively distributed by King Aśoka, as well as by relics and memories of exemplary monks and nuns who vowed to become the Buddha and bodhisattvas themselves. If a place did not originally enjoy such a pedigree, then it could be made so by transposing and replicating an Indian

prototype. For Buddhism to survive and thrive in China, it had to be physically situated there. These four articles tell us the different ways this was accomplished. They tell us how certain places in China were transformed into Buddhist sacred sites.