

## Epigraphy in China with a Focus on Buddhist Stone Sutras on Cliffs and in Caves

by Claudia Wenzel

Chinese stone inscriptions mainly fall into two categories: Those carved on stone slabs, in form of tablets or upright stele (*beiwén* 碑文, *beiming* 碑銘), and those carved in the living rock, either under the open sky (*moya* 摩崖), or nestled in caves. While the slabs of the first category are moveable and might be transported to and erected in designated places like tombs, temple halls, or the imperial academy, those of the second are intimately tied to the surrounding topography. They are generally found on famous mountains and in all kinds of scenic spots.

In China, stone inscriptions are indeed ubiquitous. This simple fact may account for the long tradition of Chinese epigraphical studies, named *jinshi xue* 金石學, literally “the study of inscriptions on bronze and stone”, and the large impact this kind of studies had on the beginnings of archaeology in China. The first use of the term “investigation of the ancient” (*kaogu* 考古), almost the same word as the modern expression for archaeology, *kaogu xue* 考古學, is attested in the *Commentary to the Classic of Waterways* (*Shuijing zhu* 水經注), a compendium on China’s major rivers, lakes and waters, compiled ca. 515–524 by Li Daoyuan 酈道元 (d. 527). Apart from topographical descriptions and classifications, this book also contains the first notice of about 20 rock art sites, and records about 350 stone inscriptions.

The First August Emperor of Qin (Qin Shi Huangdi 秦始皇帝; r. 221–210 BCE) had already known to tap the full potential of stone inscriptions for his newly unified empire: In order to stake out the political geography of his empire, he performed rites on seven mountains located in the recently conquered eastern territories, and erected stelae on their peaks. The series of texts carved on these stelae are praising the achievements of the First August Emperor, thus setting each topographical site into a larger historical and cosmological frame.<sup>1</sup> Only a few text fragments of the stelae have survived; their exact original shape is unknown.

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1 On the stelae of the First August Emperor see Martin Kern, *The Stele Inscriptions of Ch’in Shih-huang: Text and Ritual in Early Chinese Imperial Representation*. New Haven: American Oriental Society, 2000. Seen in the larger context of world-history, however, the seven stelae erected by Qin Shi Huangdi were not that innovative. About one generation earlier, the Mauryan King Aśoka (reigned from ca. 269 to ca. 232 BCE) had his famous rock

Stone inscriptions pre-dating those of the First August Emperor are rare; worth mentioning are the ten drum-stones (*shijie* 石碣), probably from the fifth century BCE, with a series of inscribed poems on expeditions of Qin kings before the unification of the empire.<sup>2</sup> Specimen of upright, free-standing stelae are attested since the first century CE, when they started spreading rapidly under the Eastern Han dynasty (25–220). The texts carved on them commemorated outstanding people and events; exhibited in public space, they often served as legal documents.

A particular case of such publically displayed stelae were the Confucian stone classics (*shijing* 石經). A first set of this normative text canon was carved on a total of 46 stelae, which were displayed, after their completion in 175, outside the instruction hall of the imperial academy in the capital of Luoyang. Their main purpose was to establish a standard version of the classical texts. Later dynasties also launched comparable carving projects: The original stelae with the twelve stone classics carved under the Tang dynasty (618–907), which were completed in 837, are well-preserved and at display in the Forest of Steles (*beilin* 碑林) museum in Xi'an.

Another kind of stone inscriptions of considerable historical value are tomb tablets (*muzhi* 墓誌), which supply supplementary bibliographical and historical information on individuals, mainly of the upper strata of society.

The earliest known specimen of the *moya* 摩崖 cliff inscriptions also date to the Eastern Han dynasty. They are found next to a place called “Stone Gate”, which is the entrance to one of the tunnels along the cliff-face road (*zhandao* 棧道) through the Qinling mountains that connected the fertile lands in the Sichuan basin to the central region of the empire. Like the texts carved on free-standing stone stelae, these early cliff inscriptions were also public works, carved for mainly administrative reasons.<sup>3</sup>

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edicts carved on the Indian subcontinent, thus propagating to the world the founding principles of his reign according to the *dhamma*, the Buddhist teaching. Aśoka also erected stone pillars with inscriptions throughout his empire. So far there is no solid evidence supporting any connection between the Aśokan edicts and the stelae of the First Chinese Emperor; see Endymion Wilkinson, *Chinese History. A New Manuel*. Fourth edition. Cambridge (Massachusetts) and London: Harvard University Press: 2015, 703.

2 Gilbert L. Mattos, *The Stone Drums of Ch'in*. Nettetal: Steyler Verlag, 1988.

3 See the chapter on “Public Works and Public Writing at the Stone Gate” in Robert E. Harrist, *The Landscape of Words: Stone Inscriptions from Early and Medieval China*. Seattle, University of Washington Press, 2008.

Cliff inscriptions of a different character emerged in the sixth century: In the years 510–512, purely literary compositions by the Daoist adept Zheng Daozhao 鄭道昭 (455?–516) were carved at several sites in the mountainous regions of Shandong Province, which came to be known as the Cloud Peak Mountain (Yunfeng Shan 雲峰山) inscriptions. Partly commemorating historical events of relevance for Zheng's family, partly describing imaginary, mythical scenes, these inscriptions evoked the presence of supernatural beings and thus transformed the topography into an other-worldly terrain.<sup>4</sup>

This kind of Daoist inscriptions are considered the prototypes for the Buddhist stone sutras, the sacred Buddhist scriptures that were carved under the Northern Qi (550–557) and Northern Zhou (557–581) dynasties in Shandong Province. In addition to such cliff inscriptions, free-standing stelae with carved sutras or sutra passages were also produced at that time. However, their importance for the general distribution of Buddhism in China was outweighed with the beginning of the golden age of image stelae, which display, instead of sacred texts, a large variety of image niches, often accompanied by votive inscriptions.<sup>5</sup>

A special type of Buddhist cliff inscriptions are texts carved into the exterior and interior walls of caves that were hewn out of the natural rock. Such grottos or cave temples (*shiku* 石窟) have a long tradition in India, the home land of Buddhism, but also in China. The walls of these caves have been decorated, for the most part, with images. Under the short-lived Northern Qi dynasty, which fervently supported Buddhism, the first sutra texts appear on the walls of such cave temples, side-by-side with image niches.<sup>6</sup> In the seventh century, the walls of an entire cave in Shaanxi Province were covered with texts venerated by the Buddhist Teaching of the Three Levels (*sanjie jiao* 三階教).<sup>7</sup> Finally, in the beginning of the eighth century, an entire complex of caves

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4 The best non-Chinese publication on Cloud Peak Mountain to date is also Harrist 2008, 93–155.

5 On Buddhist image stelae, see Dorothy Wong, *Chinese Steles: Pre-Buddhist and Buddhist Use of a Symbolic Form*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004.

6 For a recent, rather encompassing work on the Northern Qi imperial caves at Mount Xiangtang, see Katherine R. Tsiang, *Echoes of the Past: The Buddhist Cave Temples of Xiangtangshan*. Chicago: Smart Museum of Art, the University of Chicago, and Washington, D.C.: Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, 2010.

7 The cave is located at Jinchuanwan 金川灣 in Chunhua 淳化 County. For a study on the Teaching of the Three Levels in English, see Jamie Hubbard, *Absolute Delusion, Perfect Buddhahood: The Rise and Fall of a Chinese Heresy*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001.

containing sacred sutra texts was planned at the Grove of the Reclining Buddha (Wofoyuan 臥佛院) in Anyue County 安岳 in Sichuan Province. Next to and on the opposite side of a monumental, reclining Buddha sculpture, more than 130 box-shaped caves were opened for extensive sutra carvings. Today, the walls of 15 of these caves have been covered with texts carved in characters approximately 2 cm high. The sutra carving project at Wofoyuan was seemingly never completed; only about one third of the main sutra, the *Nirvanasutra*, could be carved in several phases inside the caves. It is accompanied by longer and shorter sections taken from a total number of 20 other sutras.

Yet, the largest sutra carving project in Chinese history ever is without doubt the one initiated in 616 at Cloud Dwelling Monastery (Yunju Si 雲居寺) in Fangshan 房山, Beijing 北京, which originally aimed at carving the entire Buddhist canon. More than thirty million characters of Buddhist texts were carved on separate stone slabs, which were then stored away: At first, the slabs were set into the walls of Thunder Sound Cave (Leiyin Dong 雷音洞), which also contained a relic deposit. Later on, more caves were opened to stack away the growing number of standard-size slabs; finally, the slabs were interred in long rows in a large pitch in the monastery ground. The project came to a halt under the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368).<sup>8</sup>

From early on, all of the above types of inscriptions, stela texts, cliff inscriptions, tomb inscriptions, and votive inscriptions on various media, were noted and commented upon by members of the Chinese literati elite. Under the Northern and Southern Song dynasties (960–1279), the collection of inscribed artefacts like antique bronze vessels and rubbings taken from stone inscriptions boomed as never before. The collectors were most of all interested in obtaining samples of ancient script for calligraphic model books. Thus rubbings were taken from stone inscriptions and circulated in bound books (*taben* 拓本).<sup>9</sup> Learning in this way from famous calligraphers of old, the scholars, when travelling themselves to scenic spots and sacred mountains, had in turn their own hand-written compositions carved in stone.

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8 The literature on the Fangshan stone canon is immense. Rubbings of all the stela excavated are published in *Fangshan shijing* 房山石經 [The Stone Sutras in Fangshan], ed. by Zhongguo fojiao xiehui 中國佛教協會 and Zhongguo fojiaotushu wenwu guan shijing zu 中國佛教圖書文物館石經組. 30 vols. Beijing: Huaxia chubanshe, 2000.

9 On the technique of taking rubbings in China, see Kenneth Starr, *Black Tigers. A Grammar of Chinese Rubbings*. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2008.

The rubbing collections of many renowned scholars were later transferred to museums and libraries in China. Among them, the largest collection of books of rubbings is held at the National Library of China 中國國家圖書館 in Beijing, which, as a supplement to its numerous print publications, also maintains a database.<sup>10</sup> The collection of the Academia Sinica 中央研究院 in Taipei 臺北, Taiwan, can also be accessed digitally.<sup>11</sup> For rubbings of Chinese stone inscriptions kept in Europe, the database maintained by the École Française d'Étrême-Orient in Paris is most useful.<sup>12</sup> In Japan, the most comprehensive collection is found at the Institute for Research in Humanities (Jinbun kagaku kenkyūjo 人文科学研究所) at Kyōto University 京都大学.<sup>13</sup>

While these databases provide for the future of Chinese epigraphical studies, the outweighing part of publications is still only available as printed matter. Especially since the late eighteenth century, when epigraphy advanced as a major field in historical and philological, “evidence-based studies” (*kaoju xue* 考據學), an enormous amount of epigraphic literature was published by private scholars.<sup>14</sup> In addition, almost every local gazetteer contains a section listing artefacts with stone inscriptions and providing some historical information.

In modern China, these epigraphic materials have primarily been researched and appreciated for their historical value, finally putting into practice the famous remark by the Song scholar Ouyang Xiu 歐陽脩 (1007-1072) that stone inscriptions “can be used to correct omissions and errors in historical works.”<sup>15</sup> Subsequently, inscriptions have been documented mainly to supplement the information transmitted in official historiography, or to initiate grass-root studies of the lower strata of Chinese society. For the same reason, Daoist or Buddhist votive inscriptions have been paid attention to, while the actual carvings of sacred texts have often been neglected. Only in the last twenty years have these religiously motivated inscriptions finally been

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10 <http://mylib.nlc.cn/web/guest/beitiejinghua>

11 For rubbings of the Liao (907–1125), Jin (1115–1234) and Yuan (1279–1368) dynasties: <http://rub.ihp.sinica.edu.tw/lcyrub/>; for rare books: <http://rbook2.ncl.edu.tw/>

12 <http://www.efeo.fr/estampages/catalogue.php>

13 [http://kanji.zinbun.kyoto-u.ac.jp/db-machine/imgsrv/takuhon/t\\_menu.html](http://kanji.zinbun.kyoto-u.ac.jp/db-machine/imgsrv/takuhon/t_menu.html)

14 A very useful collection of such works is the *Shike shiliao xinbian* 石刻史料新編 [New Edition of Historical Materials Carved on Stone], published in four series and 100 volumes. Taipei: Xinwenfeng chuban gongsi, 1977–2006.

15 “可與史傳正其闕謬者”; a quotation taken from the preface of his *Collection of Ancient Inscriptions* (*Jigu lu* 集古錄).

surveyed and documented, thus laying the foundation for a future evaluation of their place in Chinese history.

The project on *Buddhist Stone Sutras in China* 中國佛教石經 under the supervision of Lothar Ledderose that is hosted by the Heidelberg Academy of Sciences and Humanities hopes to fill in this gap by means of a series of publications of the same title.<sup>16</sup> It encompasses the above mentioned Buddhist cliff carvings in Shandong Province, some additional free-standing stelae with sutra texts, the text caves in Shaanxi and Sichuan Province, and more on the Fangshan stone sutras. Step by step, the picture of an early corpus of stone-cut sutras emerges, which hopes to contribute to a better understanding of Buddhist history in China, and epigraphy in general. The print publications will be followed by an online database, thus securing these valuable materials for future research.

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16 In these series, six volumes have to date been published, three on Shandong Province, and three on Sichuan Province. The title of the Shandong volumes is *Zhongguo fojing shijing: Shandong Sheng di yi/er/san juan* 中國佛教石經•山東省第一/二/三卷. *Buddhist Stone Sutras in China: Shandong Province Volume 1/2/3*. Hangzhou and Wiesbaden: China Academy of Art Press and Harrassowitz Verlag, 2014 (vol. 1), 2015 (vol. 2), 2017 (vol. 3). The editors are Wang Yongbo 王永波 and Lothar Ledderose (vol. 1); Wang Yongbo 王永波 and Claudia Wenzel (vol. 2); Wang Yongbo 王永波 and Tsai Suey-Ling 蔡穗玲 (vol. 3). The title of the Sichuan volumes is *Zhongguo fojiao shijing: Sichuan Sheng di yi/er/san juan* 中國佛教石經•四川省第一/二/三卷 *Buddhist Stone Sutras in China: Sichuan Province Volume 1/2/3*. Wiesbaden and Hangzhou: Harrassowitz Verlag and China Academy of Art Press, 2014 (vols. 1 and 2), 2016 (vol. 3). The editors are Lothar Ledderose and Sun Hua 孫華 (vol. 1); Tsai Suey-Ling 蔡穗玲 and Sun Hua 孫華 (vol. 2); Claudia Wenzel and Sun Hua 孫華 (vol. 3).