



# Entangled Religions

Interdisciplinary Journal for the Study of Religious Contact and Transfer

2 (2015)

Book Review 2 : VIII-XIV

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## Buddhist Stone Sutras in China: Shandong Province

Vol. 1. Hangzhou and Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz and  
China Academy of Art Press, 2014. XXIV + 506 pages,  
hardcover € [D] 158, ISBN 978-3-447-06931-1.

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ISSN 2363-6696

*Entangled Religions* 2 (2015)  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.13154/er.v2.2015.VIII-XIV>

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This publication, the first in a planned series of several volumes to cover Buddhist epigraphy in China's north-eastern province of Shandong, presents the results of a joint co-operation between Shandong Stone Carving Art Museum and the Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften. The project's stated aim is to scientifically and meticulously record and describe all the many sites in Shandong which holds Buddhist inscriptions of a wide variety of types and purports. In other words, not only formal, historical inscriptions, such as donor inscriptions, i.e. dedications, but also single characters, titles and brief statements of praise are being included. The material under discussion covers roughly the period from the Northern Zhou (557-580) up to the early Ming (1368-1644). Even so the vast majority of the inscriptions date from the 6th century.

The present volume covers seven different sites with scores of individual epigraphies, including some that are relatively lengthy, some short, many consisting of little more than a handful of scattered characters, and several which have almost disappeared leaving one or two, individual characters *in situ*.

A lengthy essay by Ledderose entitled "Buddhist Stone Sutras in Shandong" is meant to introduce the epigraphical sites features in the book (pp. 19-47).

It has been divided into two parts “The Setting” and “The Cultural Fabric”; and sub-divided into different themes including “Buddhism”, “Calligraphy”, and “Landscape”. Here the author presents previous research on early Shandong Buddhism and its epigraphy going back more than half a century. Some attention is given to the persecution of Buddhism by Emperor Wu of the Northern Zhou in 577 CE and its impact on Buddhism in the region, something which is believed to have caused extensive damage locally. Even so, most of the epigraphs treated in the book post-dates the Northern Zhou persecution.

In terms of the formal scholarly approach to the epigraphical sites under discussion, it is strictly technical, even overly-technical, with great attention to geometric measurements, and formal objective observations such as numbers and figures. This is backed-up by fancy technical maps as well as a systematic and well-arranged lay-out for each sites, which follows the same basic structural template throughout the book.

The *Buddhist Stone Sutras in China*, Vol. 1, is easily one of the most beautifully produced books on Chinese archaeology/epigraphy to have appeared for many years, a well-planned and carefully redacted tome which omits little in terms of formal presentation and sumptuous presentation of its topic. Moreover, the massive volume is in bi-lingual Chinese and English, with several of the inscriptions in as many as three different versions, including a rubbing, table of extant text, and a modern redacted version. That being said, one is left to wonder what to make of this impressive book?

First of all one is struck by the fact that Ledderose in his introductory essay makes much out of the Northern Zhou Persecution of Buddhism, but does not refer anywhere to the massive destructions visited upon virtually all the Buddhist sites in Shandong by the Communists during the Cultural Revolution. Certainly the vandalism perpetrated by the ‘red hordes’ are

a significant testimony to the present-day (poor) state of the epigraphies and the sculptural art adorning many of the sites under discussion in the book. Moreover, given that we are here dealing with Buddhist carvings in Shandong province, one rightly wonders why the compilers of this volume have not made use of Sirén's time-honored *Chinese Sculpture from the Fifth to Fourteenth Century*.<sup>1</sup> That book contains one of the best, if not the best documentation of Buddhist carvings in Shandong prior to the devastations of the Cultural Revolution, the sad results of which are otherwise so well presented in *Buddhist Stone Sutras in China*.

Beyond the relatively limited scope of the introductory essay by Ledderose, the majority of cases presented in the book only make minimal attempts at contextualizing the individual sites historically as well as religiously, and nothing in the way of analysis to shed light on their cultic importance or relationship with the creation of Buddhist imagery, neither in the sites themselves nor regionally. This clinical, and 'objectively' scientific approach with its acute lack of contextualization, devaluates the book greatly, leaving the reader with more questions than it solves. It seems as if no scholars from the humanities were involved in this project (?).

The same problem can be seen in regard to the presentation of the individual epigraphies themselves. Again there is no discussion of calligraphic styles, norms or how these fit into the larger picture of the Chinese art of writing. This *lacuna* is especially problematic given that we are here dealing with a book on epigraphy.

Then there is the essential—and may I add—formal problem with many of the epigraphies themselves. As *Buddhist Stone Sutras in China* itself documents, a high percentage of them are today in such a condition that

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1 See Sirén, Osvald. 2006. *Chinese Sculpture from the Fifth to Fourteenth Century*, Kodansha Europe (revised edition in 2 vols).

the kind of meticulous investigation and documentation carried out and presented in the book in most cases makes little sense. For instance, there are quite a number of cases where so little remains of a given inscription, that a scientific recording yields no useful result beyond stating the obvious, namely that there was once an inscription there. This is especially the case where the epigraphs only consist in the name of a Buddha (such cases make up the almost one third of the combined inscriptions in the book). Very little if any historical data can be gathered in connection with these, no understanding of when, who or why. All we have are severely degraded rocky surfaces with little more than human-made scratches on them. Is this really something worth preserving, much less documenting? What use can it possibly have? Does this serve to shed light on Buddhism in Shandong, or Chinese calligraphic styles? I am afraid not. All we can possibly know is that 'Killroy was here.'

To this problem we may add, that the majority of the qualitatively useful and readable epigraphies presented in the book, have already been published or at least made known to the concerned community of scholars, some of them many years ago. So why do we have to be reminded of this material again? Such redundancies are unnecessary, and serve only one purpose, namely to inflate the already weak core-data. How could that be?

Despite their high-resolution, the actual quality of a great many of the photos filling the book, especially many of the *in situ*-images are rather useless, as it is near impossible in many cases to make out the inscriptions or engraved names and titles which they are purported to represent (cf. the examples on pp. 119, 125, 221, 225, 237, 263-64, 275, etc.). Anyone familiar with working with sculptural art *in situ*, an endeavor that is in fact less demanding than photographing epigraphs—in particular those located in hard to access places on crumbling or degraded surfaces of rock as the cases are here—readily knows that a successful photographic rendering

of said inscriptions is a highly delicate and complicated matter. Something that surely also confronted Ledderose's team while in the field. For this reason one may wonder, why they nevertheless chose such an approach? Surely nobody could have ignored this rather significant problem during the pre-publishing process? Of course the often useless photos are made up for by the accompanying technical data, including the rubbings, the carefully reproduced and edited texts, characters, titles, etc. (see for example the redacted text of the Haitan Temple stele, pp. 471). Something which means that we, as readers, may still get a good idea of what we are dealing with.

One may rightly wonder why the project decided on a publication on such a grand and expensive scale, especially since the many photos it contains—as well as a major part of the accompanying text—are neither very useful, nor very relevant. A much more humble publication would have been in order, one which presented those epigraphs with a vested interest, perhaps even limited to those that represent new discoveries, and leave many of those out which are either illegible or otherwise irrelevant due to their evident lack of basic meaning. Just because something has an ancient history, or simply is to be found in a given location, does not necessarily mean that it is worth recording, much less preserving.

Finally, one may add that the Chinese have published several studies on the self-same Shandong epigraphies more than a decade ago, books and articles wherein one may find more or less the same data as in *Buddhist Stone Sutras in China* (most if not all of these studies are in fact included in the extensive and useful bibliography, cf. *ibid.*, pp. 490–508). Given that the amount of scholars world-wide with interest in this specialized, fringe topic is after all relatively small, and that it may be surmised that they all master classical Chinese to a high degree, one is left to guess which academic audience the present book is really meant to address? Hopefully the succeeding volumes in the planned series will not perpetuate the

same pattern as we have seen here, but present the project's findings in a manner that is both less sumptuous but also more relevant academically speaking.

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