

Summary

A Report of Discovery and Its Study on the Graded Oldest Stone-Carved Buddhist Sutra in China: On the Inscription of the Chapter of Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva 觀世音菩薩普門品 in the Lotus Sutra 妙法蓮華經 Included in the Remains Named Shayu Rock-Carved Statues 沙峪摩崖造像 in Heshun City 和順縣, Shanxi Province 山西省

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There are remains named 'Shayu Rock-carved Statues 沙峪摩崖造像' in Shayu village 沙峪村, Heshun city 和順縣, Jinzhong county 晉中市, Shanxi province 山西省. It had been known that the rock-carved remains are Buddhist statues and were put up in the period between Bei Wei 北魏 and Sui 隋 era. Through my field survey on the spot, I found out that the remains include a stone-carved Buddhist Sutra 石刻佛教經典 which was not well known and can be now evaluated as the oldest text in the same category. This stone-carved Buddhist Sutra lying around the central spot of the remains is identified with the full text of Chinese version of the chapter of Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva 觀世音菩薩普門品 in the Lotus Sutra 妙法蓮華經 translated by Kumārajīva 鳩摩羅什 in the year of 406 CE. According to the inscription attached to it, this stone-carved Sutra was engraved in the year of 529 CE (2nd year of Yong'an 永安 in Bei Wei). Consequently the text is the next oldest after the Quingtian-he 青天河 rock-carved Buddhist Sutra located in Bo'ai city 博愛縣, He'nan province 河南省, engraved in the year of 509 CE (2nd year of Yongping 永平 in Bei Wei) as the partial translation of the chapter of Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva of the Lotus Sutra, but still this text is the oldest one as the full text of it.

Previous studies on Chinese Buddhist Sutra had to depend on the paper manuscripts unearthed in Dunhuan 敦煌, Turfan 吐魯番, etc. But now, if we can discover texts of stone-carved Sutras and arrange them in order, these may be new sources for researching the genealogy of Scriptures. In this paper, I report that the text of the stone-carved Sutra

found in Shayu remains is not only evaluated as the oldest of stone-carved Buddhist Sutras in China but also has the oldest form of the chapter of Avalokiteśvara Boddhisattva of the Lotus Sutra. And I compare the text with other stone-carved Sutras and published paper Sutras of the Avalokiteśvara chapter, so that I make it clear that the text is limitedly related to the early stone-carved Sutras of the Avalokiteśvara chapter consisting of only few sentences of the Sutra and that the text belongs to the same family with the other stone-carved Sutra containing whole sentences of the Sutra of the Avalokiteśvara chapter engraved in the stone cave of Nan Xiangtangshan shiku 南響堂山石窟.

It is suggestive that this stone-carved Sutra was not closed in a stone cave temple but it was openly engraved on a surface of natural rock. It means that there happens the situation that the story of the Sutra and the teaching of the Buddha can be easily revealed to ordinary people living in worldly society. And it also means that Buddha's teaching being lectured by monks or written in reed sutra books (being very precious) so far, were newly materialized into visible form by ordinary people. In other words, as the result of development of digesting, absorbing, namely, understanding the teachings for worldly ordinary people, this openly engraved stone-carved Sutra emerged. It can be said to take the same line as popular prosperous activity of making sculptures such as small stone-carved Buddhist statues engraved on natural rocks. It is pointed out that movement of making many stone-carved Sutra in the following period from the middle to the latter half of the sixth century were due to other motivation than the thought of Buddhist gradual decline 末法思想. Such situation can be comprehensively regarded as the result of that ordinary people wished for salvation in the present or future lives. People in those days might pursue the original Buddhist purpose such as delivering an answer and a guide for common people to overcome fears about the near future, the faraway future, and the life after death. Under this intention of people, such phenomena as creating stone-carved Sutra and Buddhist statue by lay people became visible like a plain below a mountain. In this way, I think, the state that should be called 'the society based Buddhism as substratum', namely, the situation that Buddhism dominated people's consciousness, appeared.