**The Northern Wei Manuscripts of the Avataṃsaka Sūtra**

**Found at the Dunhuang Grottoes: A Study**

**Abstract**

Among the document unearthed in the Buddhist Grottoes of Dunhuang 敦煌, a set of manuscripts of the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra* was found, dating from the Yanchang 延昌 era of the Xuanwu Emperor 宣武帝 in the Northern Wei 北魏. According to a preliminary investigation, at least nine of the manuscript fragments were copied in 513 C.E., yet all these fragments were transcribed separately at different times by different scribes. Due to its great length, making a copy of the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra* requires a long time and a sustained effort. Among the extant manuscripts, the few fragments from the reign of the Xuanwu Emperor of the Northern Wei are second in content only to those from the Northern Liang 北涼, preserving the set with the largest number of dated manuscript fragments and with the highest concentration of copies of the period, and reflecting the importance of the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra* and its circulation in society at the time. As such, they are extremely noteworthy. What is the reason why Yuanke 元恪, during the second year of the Yanchang era of the Xuanwu Emperor in the Northern Wei, vigorously promoted the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra* and its thought? To begin answering this question, this paper will first explore the historical background of the relevant personages active at the time of Emperor Xuanwu in the Northern Wei. Second, referring to scribal inscriptions from Dunhuang, this study will shed light on the official scribal organization and the scribes who were active at Dunhuang in that period, as well as their relationship with the stone inscriptions of the Longmen Grottoes 龍門石窟, exploring the mutual influences between Dunhuang and Luoyang

洛陽 whereby Buddhism developed. Finally, by analyzing the calligraphy employed in writing the manuscripts and in carving the inscriptions, this paper will further explore the nature and origins of the southern styles of calligraphy particular to Buddhist writing.

**Key words: *Avataṃsaka Sūtra*, Dunhuang, Buddhist Scribes, Northern Wei, Longmen Grottoes**

1. Introduction

Before the rise of printing, the transmission of Buddhist scriptures in the Chinese language and the formation of the Buddhist canon belongs to the period of handwritten manuscripts. Thus far, a systematic study of Chinese manuscript canons has been carried out in Fang Guangqi’s 方廣錩 *Zhongguo xieben dazangjing yanjiu* 中國寫本大藏經研究 (*A Study of Manuscript Canons in China*), with special emphasis on the period from the eighth to the eleventh century. While the period from the third to the seventh century represented the stage of incubation and maturity of the manuscript canons, no systematic study to date has examined the period preceding this critical time prior to the eighth century. Not only is this stage the source of the Buddhist canon, but it is also the key to an important transition of textual materials from writing to engraving. In this respect, intricate and complex cultural factors exist that await further exploration. Based on relevant manuscripts of the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra* found in Dunhuang and in Turfan, I will initially examine the early relationship of such manuscripts with the formation of the Buddhist canon.

Preliminary investigations of the manuscript scrolls of the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra*, revealed that about 220 titles (pieces) were unearthed from the Dunhuang Buddhist Grottoes; according to the *Dunhuangxue dacidian* 敦煌學大辭典 (*Dictionary of Dunhuang Studies*), there exist about 300 titles (pieces) altogether, yet this number is still much lower than the number of documents found at Turfan. I have sorted a preliminary list of the documents unearthed at the Dunhuang Grottoes and in Turfan. There exist a total of 12 manuscript fragments of the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra* bearing an early date or a presumable date before 550 C.E. With the exception of the earliest, which date from the Northern Liang 北涼, these manuscripts include at least nine pieces from the time of Emperor Xuanwu in the Northern Wei. The *Avataṃsaka Sūtra* and related manuscripts dating from the time of Emperor Xuanwu are listed according to Ikeda On’s 池田温 *Chugoku kodai shahon chiiki kiroku* 中國古代寫本識語集錄 (*A Collection of Sayings from Ancient Chinese Ancient Manuscripts*) in the Appendix [Table: The *Avataṃsaka Sūtra* and related manuscripts from the Northern Liang to the Northern Wei Found in Dunhuang and in Turfan]. Concerning this Dunhuang set of manuscripts, Fang Guangchuan 方廣錩 observed: “As we enter the Northern and Southern Dynasties, there is a phenomenon that deserves our attention. During the Yongping 永平 and Yanchang 延昌 years in the Northern Wei, a set of scriptures was transcribed among others by copiers of classical works such as the teacher of the canon Linghu Chongzhe 令狐崇哲...” The concentration of these documents’ origins from the years of Yongping and Yanchang in the Northern Wei is somewhat startling and inevitably raises questions. Why did this set of scriptures appear in such a sudden way? Did such a distinctive phenomenon arise from certain social or historical factors? Before we move on to discuss the manuscripts of the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra* from the Yanchang period of the Northern Wei, let us first become acquainted with the Buddhist background of Emperor Xuanwu and of his times.

1. Buddhist Developments during the Period of Emperor Xuanwu in the Northern Wei

Emperor Xuanwu Yuan Ke 元恪 (483–515) and Empress Dowager Hu 胡太后 of the Northern Wei both had a deep appreciation for the teachings of the Buddha. On one occasion, Emperor Xuanwu expounded on the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Sūtra*, while Empress Hu could also give lectures and explain the Buddhadharma. They both spared no effort in promoting Buddhist culture and contributed in many ways to the development of Buddhism. There are three aspects to their achievements in promoting Buddhist culture and art:

(1) Actively building Buddhist monasteries, stūpas, and cave temples

As the development of Buddhism extended from the Northern Liang, when the Northern Wei established their capital in Pingcheng 北魏, the country was already in a strong position.

Under the influence of Emperor Xiaowen’s 孝文帝 Sinicization policies under the Northern Wei, a solid foundation was laid to move the capital of the Northern Wei to Luoyang. Religious culture and politics were flourishing through the time of Emperor Xuanwu. As recorded in the *Beishi* 北史 (*Northern History*), the prosperity was such that “since Buddhism had entered China, the stūpas and temples had never been that flourishing.” It was also a time when the temples, the stūpas, the caves, the statues, and the steles came to proliferate. Historical records show that, in various prefectures and counties of the Northern Wei, there was a total of 13,727 monasteries and nunneries during the Yanchang era (512–515) alone, while the members of the ordained saṃgha were too many to be counted. Economic and trade exchanges between East and West were very frequent at this time. In addition, imperial support and advocacy caused numerous members of the Buddhist saṃgha to migrate to the area. Luoyang welcomed so many monks from India and from Western Central Asia that it became necessary to establish monasteries to support the foreign saṃgha there. In the *Luoyang jialan ji* 洛陽伽藍記 (Record of the Monasteries of Luoyang), it is recorded that Luoyang’s Yongming Temple 永明寺 was built specifically for the foreign saṃgha and that it supported as many as 3,000 ordained individuals. After Emperor Xuanwu’s passing, Empress Dowager Hu intensified her worship of the Buddha. Setting aside the caves and the statues at Longmen, the Yongning Temple 永寧寺 according to historical records was the most famous temple built in the Luoyang area. Its scale and structure can be regarded as the foremost in the history of Buddhist architecture. Other large imperial monasteries include the Yaoguang Temple 瑤光寺, the Jingming Temple 景明寺, and the Yique Grottoes 伊闕石窟 at Longmen in Luoyang.

The construction of the Binyang Sandong 賓陽三洞 at Longmen in Luoyang during Emperor Xuanwu’s period dates from around 510–520 C.E. Zenryū Tsukamoto 塚本善隆 pointed out:

From the time when the Northern Wei moved the capital to Luoyang, the carving of statues at Longmen increased tremendously. The peak was between Xuanwu (Shizong 世宗) and Xiaoming 孝明 (Suzong 肅宗), when the period between the two dynasties amounted to less than 30 years (500-527 C.E.) [...] This was the golden age of the Luoyang Period of the Northern Wei, bringing unprecedented prosperity to economic power and to the Buddha’s teachings.

Scholars have demonstrated the existence of a close relationship between the grottoes in the Longdong 隴東 area and the south and north cave temples in Jingzhou 涇州, all of which were all excavated at this time. Because Empress Dowager Hu was born in Jingzhou, she felt strong amity toward her hometown. In the second year of Emperor Xuanwu’s Yongping era (509 C.E.), Emperor Xuanwu’s trusted commander and provincial governor of Jingzhou excavated the Nanshi Cave Temple 南石窟寺 on the north bank of the Jing River 涇河. Five of such caves are still extant. In 510, the Beishi Cave Temple 北石窟寺 was also excavated under Mount Fuzhong 覆鐘山 on the east bank of the confluence of the Pu 蒲 and Ru茹 Rivers, all of which are important Buddhist sites in Longdong 隴東.

(2) The Translation of Buddhist Scriptures and the Unfolding of Huayan 華嚴 Thought

During his reign, beyond actively cooperating with foreign monks in the translation of Buddhist scriptures, Emperor Xuanwu invited eminent monks such as Bodhiruci and Ratnamati to take charge of the translation of Buddhist scripture. In Vol. 6 of *Xuefo kaoxun* 學佛考訓 (*Admonitions for the Students of Buddhism*), it is recorded: “During the Wei, the Xuanwu Emperor taught himself the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Sūtra* in the Shigan Hall 式乾殿, he requested the śramaṇa Bodhiruci to translate the treatises in the Ziji Hall 紫極殿, and built the Yongming Temple 永明寺 and the Yaoguang Temple 瑤光寺, with a total number of thirteen thousand temples and two million members of the saṃgha.”