Thus Have I Heard: Writing and Picturing the Dharma

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(Abstract)

Among the early examples of Buddhist illustrated manuscripts in East Asia are the handscrolls known collectively as *E-Ingakyō*, or *Illustrated Sutra of Cause and Effect*, dated to the middle of the eighth century and all of them are preserved in Japan. The scrolls are unique in both content and composition, as their equally divided upper and lower registers are allocated for narrative images and texts respectively. (Fig. 1)

The text is a standard-script transcription of the Buddhist scripture (Chi. *xiejing*; Jap. *shakyō*) known as the *Guoqu xianzai yinguo jing* (*Sutra of the Past and Future, Cause and Effect*; hereafter the *Yinguo jing*), the full Chinese title of the *Ingakyō*. It was translated into Chinese by the Indian Buddhist monk Gunabhadra (Qiunabatuoluo 求那跋陀羅) in 435-443 CE. Although its literary style is akin to that of Buddhist sutras, the *Yinguo jing* is a biography of the Buddha Sakyamuni. It narrates the major events in the life of the young prince Siddhartha, leading to his
enlightenment and ending with the Buddha’s first sermon. The narrative scenes on the upper
registers of the *E-Ingakyō* are painted in ink and color, showing figures in landscapes and
buildings rendered in a manner similar to that seen in portable banner paintings from Dunhuang.
Scholars invariably link the *E-Ingakyō* with “Chinese models” made during the Tang dynasty
(608–906), but except for one recently published fragment, no comparable Chinese works are
known to be extant. The fragment, however, is based on a different Buddhist scripture, the
*Amitābha Sutra*, translated by Kumarajiva in 402 CE. (Fig. 2)

The conclusion of a Chinese origin of the *E-Ingakyō* is based on close resemblance of the
costume, architecture, landscape, figural type, and style of the pictorial narratives to those shown
in dated works and archaeological examples in China. The portable handscroll format (only 25
cm. high) and the elegantly brushed calligraphy suggest that the profusely illustrated biography
of the Buddha was meant to be viewed, and perhaps recited, by a small private audience, rather
than a larger public gathering. The production of the scrolls themselves involved the
collaboration of two separate workshops: one for the text and the other for the painting. The
development of illustration and sutra transcription based on the scriptures of the life of the
Buddha, with their separate function and practice, leading to the merging of these two traditions
in the eighth century, is the focus of this study.
My research proceeds from two major perspectives:

1. **Scriptures of the life of the Buddha and sutra transcription (xiejing)**

   The *Yinguo jing* is one of the five known Chinese translations of scriptures on the life of the Buddha; the first one, *Xiuxing benqi jing* (Acts of the Buddha; Skt. *Buddhacarita*) was translated in the 190s C.E.\(^1\) A careful comparison of these scriptures is essential in identifying the factors contributing to the selection of the *Yinguo jing* as the textual basis for the picture-text handscrolls. The *Yinguo jing* is similar in the scope of events to early versions, but its narrative details are greatly expanded, which may have been inspired by Buddhist storytelling (see next). The regional distribution of these texts also requires consideration, since the *E-Ingakyō* were most likely based on the models available in southern China, and the *Amitābha sutra* fragment was excavated from a pagoda in Wenzhou, Zhejiang province. Not coincidentally, the south was also a center of the Buddhist devotional practice of *xiejing*, in which the art of calligraphy was performed to enhance the pious deed of sutra transcription.

2. **Painting of the life of the Buddha and the use of pictures in storytelling**

   It is known that pictures were used in early Buddhist proselytization, as exemplified by the mural painting on the gable ceiling of Cave 290 in Dunhuang, and several portable banner paintings. Dated to the Northern Zhou dynasty (557-581), the 87 scenes in the Cave 290 painting are distributed along six registers of the two horizontal slopes of the ceiling. Rectangular cartouches drawn in ochre can be seen throughout the entire narrative, but most of them are blank. However, a few traces of writing in ink have survived, inferring that the

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\(^1\) It was translated by the Indian monk Zhu Dali 竺大力 and a Central Asian layman Kang Mengxiang 康孟詳. The other three translations are 1). *Foshuo Taizi ruiying benqi jing* 佛說太子瑞應本起經, tr. by monk Zhiqian 支謙 of Central Asian ancestry in the 3rd cent; 2). *Puyao jing* 普耀經, tr. by Indian monk Dharmaraksha (Zhu Fahu 竺法護) in 308; and 3). *Fo benxing jing* 佛本行經, tr. by Gandharan monk Jñānagupta (Shenajueduo 鶴那崛多) in the sixth century.
cartouches may have originally contained short labels corresponding to the adjacent pictorial scenes (Fig. 3).

According to Victor Mair’s study of *bianwen* (transformation texts), many such inscriptions in Dunhuang murals end with the word *chu 處* (place), and other similar linguistic mechanisms are found in transformation texts. The purpose of these devices was to designate an event in a narrative sequence. A Dunhuang banner depicting the Buddha’s First Seven Steps still retains an inscribed cartouche, but it ends with the word *shi 時* (when), which served the same purpose as *chu*. (Fig. 4)

The *chu* or *shi* in cartouches, therefore, is the vestige of an oral tradition of storytelling with pictures. Dunhunag ms P3317 is another example that the life of the Buddha was the subject of picture-storytelling. It is a list of 108
events based on the *Xiuxing benqi jing*; they are short tags, about ten characters in average, each end in the word *chu*. These would have been suitable for cartouches on paintings on the life of the Buddha.\(^1\) Mair’s study could be significant in connecting Buddhist picture-storytelling to the *E-Ingakyō*, as the latter shares a close stylistic affinity with several extant banner paintings.

One intriguing feature of the *E-Ingakyō* scrolls and the *Amitābha sutra* fragment is the juxtaposition of naïve, sketch-like paintings with the mature, sophisticated *xiejing* calligraphy. Such an unlikely marriage may be explained by the rise of a new type of patronage that required the adaptation of the traditional art of the literati, i.e., calligraphy, to satisfy the need of a different kind of visual experience and Buddhist didacticism.

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\(^1\) P3317 (佛本行集經第三卷以下緣起簡子目號)