EARLY BUDDHIST ILLUSTRATED PRINTS IN HANGZHOU

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I. Introduction

In 1073 in the Northern Song capital Kaifeng, the Japanese monk Jōjin (1011–81) visited the Chuanfa yuan (Institute for Propagation of the Tripitaka) set up by the government in conjunction with the Buddhist Monastery Taiping xingguo si (Monastery of the Great Peace and Prosperous State). He and his assistants borrowed the woodblocks of Wubai luohan moyin (Five Hundred Lohans) and of Damo liuzu mo (Six Chan Patriarchs of the Bodhidharma Sect)—both sets of woodblocks bearing Buddhist illustrations—from the repository to print more copies on paper. Although Jōjin stayed in China, he sent the prints back to Japan by boat as soon as the printed copies were made.

This episode retrieved from a Japanese source highlights religious illustrated prints as a new aspect of Chinese print culture at that time, a topic that has not been fully explored. In this chapter, we will shift the focus from the textual sources to the visual dimensions of early religious printing, drawing on extant Buddhist illustrated prints produced in the Hangzhou area as primary sources.

It is widely recognized that Buddhism was a driving force behind printing in the Tang Dynasty (618–907), and that large-scale religious printing projects, Buddhist and Daoist alike, were sponsored by the courts and the elites in the Wu-Yue (907–978), Song (960–1279), Liao (907–1125), Jin (1115–1234), and Xi Xia (1038–1227) states. Nevertheless, the mainstream scholarship on Buddhist printing has been based thus far primarily on texts, and studies on Buddhist illustrated prints have focused on comparing different

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1 Hirabayashi Fumio, San Tendai Godaisan ki, 201, 205.
2 Nakano Genzō, “Sō shōrai zuzō no denpa,” 33. The Japanese drawing of Six Patriarchs of the Bodhidharma Sect was said to be based on the Six Chan Patriarchs print Jōjin acquired in Song China; Fontein and Hickman, Zen Painting, 2–4.
versions and assessing the correlation between texts and accompanying illustrations.3

When evaluating prints made during the tenth through thirteenth centuries, modern scholars have followed the lead of the Northern Song book collector Ye Mengde 葉夢得 (1077–1148) and acknowledged the superior quality of prints made in today’s Hangzhou, Zhejiang 浙江 Province, a flourishing printing center in south China for centuries.4 Ye’s evaluation remains valid with regard to Buddhist illustrated prints dating to this period, which are among the richest extant visual databases of such prints.5

The following study will explore the visual vocabulary and visual logic underlying the making of illustrations in early imprints. The first part will focus on the printed frontispieces and the single-sheet prints commissioned under Wu-Yue rule in the tenth century. The study will then move on to the eleventh-century sutra frontispieces, published by some of the earliest commercial publishers ever recorded in Chinese printing history. Finally, we will examine a Southern Song set of sutra frontispieces designed by a recorded illustrator. From this visual angle, we will begin to see the process of standardization and the nascence of a local tradition of visual printing culture in Hangzhou. The wide-ranging visual vocabulary deployed by the Hangzhou Buddhist prints complements the established database of Chinese print visual culture of this period, which consists of technical images concerning agriculture, architecture, maps, medicine, military arts, etc.6 This study also adds to the scholarship on Chinese visual culture, which has been expanding its scope from painting and calligraphy by famous masters to anonymous printed matter and religious artifacts.

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4 Ye Mengde, Shilin yanyu, 8.6b.

5 Another unexplored repository of early Buddhist illustrated prints is that associated with the archaeological discovery in Khara Khoto, a site related to the medieval Xia Kingdom; see Ecang Heishuicheng wenxian.

6 For selected scholarship, see Bray, Dorofeeva-Lichtmann, and Métalilé eds., Graphics and Text; Hegel, Reading Illustrated Fiction.