

The Influence of Japanese Buddhism on The Spread of Engraving, Printing, And Politics: The Dharani Sutra

Yu Yan

Faculty of Humanities and Museums, Nanjing University of the Arts, Nanjing, China

yanyu1@nua.edu.cn

Abstract. The spread and evolution of Buddhism in Japan required the introduction of Chinese art of woodblock printing from the Tang Dynasty, which contributed to the dissemination and advancement of Buddhism in Japan. This was achieved by introducing Buddhist classics from Sanskrit and Chinese, which had been previously unavailable. One of the most significant actions of Emperor Shotoku, influenced by Emperor Takeshi to establish a Buddhist monarchy led by female rulers and strengthening the rule, was to initiate the printing of one million Tathagatas, which can be regarded as a remarkable achievement. This effort intended to pacify rebellion as an opportunity. To weaken the authority of the Buddhist clergy and to consolidate his rule, Emperor Hengmu relocated the capital from Kyoto to Heian-kyo, a move that also affected the documentation of printing in official contexts. Thus, the printing press was no longer used, and gaps in Japan's historical records emerged for an extended period. This paper takes the Dharani Sutra as a case study to examine the impact of Japanese Buddhism on woodblock printing and politics. It elucidates the genesis and trajectory of engraved printing. Japan benefited from the growth of Buddhism within its borders and actively promoted the dissemination of Buddhist teachings. Meanwhile, Buddhism also served as a political tool for Japan's supreme rulers, with political struggles shaping the actions and decisions of those in power.

Keywords: Engraving; printing; the Dharani Sutra; Japanese Buddhist politics.

1. Introduction

During the Tang dynasty, there was a high level of interaction and proximity between China and Japan. The exchange of goods and ideas through merchants and envoys, which included various groups of artisans, foreign students, Buddhists, and learned monks, constituted an important channel through which Japan ingested the maturing Tang culture and indigenized the Tang [1]. The origins of Japanese Buddhism can be traced back to China. This is evidenced by the engraved copy of the Dharani Sutra Mantra, which is regarded as one of the earliest printed texts in the world, and the Dharani Sutra housed within the wooden pagoda of Horyuji Temple. These artifacts illustrate the importation of Japanese printing techniques by the Chinese art of engraving [2, 3]. As a significant mode of communication, engraving undoubtedly played a pivotal role in the dissemination and evolution of Buddhism in Japan.

Buddhism in Japan had always been closely associated with royal power and politics. Thirteen years after the death of Emperor Shotoku, Emperor Hengmu moved the capital away from Nara, and the emptiness of the printing press in the following two to three hundred years of history seems to implicitly testify to the interplay between the printing press and Japanese Buddhism and even the related politics and society [2]. Through the analysis of relevant historical materials and a comparative study of spatial correlation, this paper explores the relationship between Chinese engraved printing and Japanese Buddhism and politics after the introduction of Chinese engraving and printing techniques.

2. Engraved the Dharani Sutra

In *Records of the Eastern Daishi Temple*, Volume 4, Chapter of the Institutes, it states that on September 1st of the eighth year of the Tenpyeong Baoji, Emperor Hyojian constructed one million small pagodas and distributed them to the ten major temples. Each cage contained a folded copy of

the Unsullied Pure Light Dharani. In Volume 30 of the Journal *Renewal of the Nihon Ki*, the article “Bao Gui Yuan Nian Summer and April” records the following:

During the initial eight years of the emperor’s tumultuous rule, a decree was issued to construct three modest pagodas with a total investment of one million base. Each pagoda is four inches and five minutes in height, with a base diameter of three inches and five minutes. The foundation of each pagoda is inscribed with a series of fundamental principles, including the “love heart” and “phase theory” dharanis, as well as the “six degrees” theory. Upon completion, these structures were divided into various temples, with the designation of officials and civil servants exceeding one hundred and fifty-seven individuals [4].

It can be observed that Emperor Hyojin, subsequently known as Emperor Tode, commenced the carving of sutras and repair of pagodas from the eighth year of Tenpyo Boji, in 764, until the fourth year of Shingo Gyeongun, in 770. This was undertaken in accordance with his pledge of eliminating calamities through the making of a wish to quell the revolt.

The small stupa is constructed from cherry wood and measures 13.5 cm in height with a base diameter of 10.5 cm. It comprises three, seven, and thirteen tiers respectively. Each tier is hollow, multileveled and compact. The stupa houses the four mantras of the Immaculate and Pure Light Great Dharani Sutra, the Fundamental, the Free Seal (the Seal of the Self-Mind), the Sangha Wheel, and the Six Degrees (the Six Parameters), collectively known as the Dharani Sutra. These scriptures were carved and printed on hemp and kozo paper, and subsequently treated with a solution of phellodendron bark to inhibit insect decay. They were then placed in ten renowned temples. Each temple houses 100,000 scriptures and is considered a national treasure. This is the origin of the “million towers of dharani” designation. Nevertheless, Japan’s Nara Horyuji still houses over three hundred thousand “million-tower dharani,” a number that is likely an underestimation. The term “million” may thus be regarded as an imprecise description of a quantity that exceeds the actual number [4, 5].

The four mantras exhibit distinct differences in terms of their linguistic composition and the surface area of the paper on which they are printed. Despite these variations, they are all printed on a single sheet of paper. Two visible printing plates have been identified, both utilising the same font but displaying slight differences in layout. The undertaking of the “million pagoda dharani,” even when accounting for the six-year span encompassing both the preparation and printing stages, represents a significant project. Its objective is twofold: to enhance efficiency and to ensure the printing process is conducted in a reasonable manner. The “Fundamental Dharani,” which contains a total of two hundred words, is an illustrative example. According to the logic of the need for four plates, and even when considering the two sets of printing plates, the calculation yields eight plates, on average, each of which must be printed one hundred twenty-five thousand times [5]. The plates utilized for engraving are typically sawn boards composed of fine-grained, solid wood.

In addition to woodblocks, plates are also manufactured from a variety of materials, including copper and wax. While the previous controversy in the domestic academic community in Japan centred on the difference between wood and copper printing, the experimental report made by Seiichiro Inoue at the symposium shared by Kobo Fujie in *The Cultural History of the Chinese Characters* suggests that wood printing is a distinct possibility. Furthermore, the enlarged photos demonstrate that the original wood grain on these The Dharani Sutra can be seen clearly [6].

Furthermore, Seiichiro Inoue posits that, based on the degree of ink accumulation, it is plausible that a wooden seal was dipped in ink and stamped on paper, which would render it an instance of non-engraving in the strictest sense of the term regarding the procedure [6]. Additionally, scholarly debate has emerged regarding the two methods of imprinting and engraving. However, the currently visible Dharani scrolls display the characteristics of the typeface, and the traces of brush fills used to correct the poor printing of the typeface [2]. This paper posits that, in this context, it is not possible to account for and consider all the circumstances and experiences related to the preservation of these mantras. Furthermore, it is not feasible to ascertain and quantify the loss of their ink deposits. Thus, it is an insufficient argument to dismiss the status of these Dharani Sutras as the world’s earliest

engraved prints. Furthermore, the seal was typically employed for the reproduction of Buddhist imagery, rendering it impractical for the replication of extensive textual content at a time when engraving and printing had already become well-established within the Tang Empire. It is, of course, possible to remain sceptical.

Printing was one of the four great inventions of ancient China. The invention of the engraving press in the Sui and Tang dynasties was a significant turning point, marking the beginning of a prosperous era. The Tang Dynasty's economic, technological, and cultural prosperity and development had a profound impact on neighbouring countries such as Japan and Silla. This is evident in various ways, including the phenomenon of Tangization of Japan's domestic territory in the Nara period, the exchange of technology and culture brought by Tang envoys, as well as foreign students, monks, craftsmen, and merchants. The most notable example is the eastward journey of Jianzhen. The most notable of these instances is the eastward journey of Jianzhen. These examples demonstrate that, in such a context of communication and exchange, the introduction of Chinese engraving and printing in Japan is also a distinct possibility.

In a reference to an ancient document from the Tenpyo Boshi period, the Kofukuji Ryuji states that Emperor Shōtoku's mother, Empress Komyo, expressed a desire to construct a five-story crystal pagoda to serve as a repository for the Mukyo Jogyo Dharani as early as the second year of the Tenpyo era (730). This indicates that the sutra had been introduced to Japan from the Tang dynasty prior to that period and that it was among the 1,000 scrolls of sutras that Xuanfang or Jibi Zhenji, who travelled to the Tang dynasty to seek the teachings of the Dharma, took back with them in 735. A document in the Shokurain collection of Todaiji Temple also records that in the seventh year of the Tenpyeonghoji reign (763), Daojingjing brought the Mukyo Jogitsu Daitarani Sutra from Todaiji Temple. This suggests that this sutra was probably a Wuzhu printed copy [5].

In his book, *A History of Metal Printing Technology in China*, Pan Jixing presents a comparison between the extant Nara-zan Million Tatara Nihongo and two examples of Tang Dynasty writing: one from the Dunhuang stone room of the Beijing Library and the other from Gyeongju, Korea. He discovered that the dimensions of the paper, the number of words per line, and the font size of the Nara-zan Million Tatara Nihongo are smaller than those of the Tang Dynasty writing, which excludes the base text for the Tang Dynasty engraving. Additionally, the engraving is somewhat haphazard. The content of the sutra, the disparate characters, the frame shape, the font (Tang Dynasty Regular Script), the size of the characters, the number of characters per line, and even the colour of the paper should be consistent with the base text found in Gyeongju, South Korea [5].

In the case of Gyeongju, South Korea, it was established that Ben had been in possession of four of the 19 new characters created by Wu Zetian, specifically di, shou, zheng, and chu [7,8]. Additionally, the translation of the Great Dharani Sutra of Immaculate Pure Light coincided with the period when Wu Zetian was actively organizing the translation of Buddhist scriptures with the intention of alleviating her ailment, which had manifested in her later years. The first year of Chang'an (701) marked the initial printing of the text in the eastern capital, Luoyang, in 702 [5, 7]. It is recognized as a significant Buddhist scripture from the Wuzhou period, introduced to Silla from Tang. It is unsurprising that the Nara text does not contain the Wuzhou system characters, given that the Wuzhou canonical system was abolished in the first year of the Shinryu era (705). Consequently, the system characters ceased to be used [7]. Given the nascent state of printing technology, it was not uncommon for engraving to be executed in a suboptimal manner.

In the 1970s, a series of discoveries were made in Xi'an, including prints of dharani mantras from the pre-Wuzhou period and a single-page Sanskrit dharani mantra unearthed in 1974. Additionally, bronze mirrors were also found. The artifacts proved to be from the Sui dynasty, and the bronze armlets from the Sui to the early Tang dynasties. The stylistic features of the paper, text, and motifs already demonstrate the maturity of the technology, and the era is earlier than that of the prints found in Japan and Korea [8, 9]. This can be regarded as a more robust affirmation and proof of these points.

3. Buddhism and the Development of Engraving and Printing in Japan

The Dharani Sutra Mantra is a type of Tantric scripture that records spells. The importation of Sanskrit-Chinese classics constituted a significant aspect of the multifaceted Sino-Japanese exchanges previously discussed. Fujiwara Sakae's *Catalog of Japanese Books*, which was modelled on the classification in the *Suishu: Jingji zhi*, indicates that most sutras and legal relics brought back by the eight families that entered the Tang dynasty were Tiantai tantric texts. Furthermore, the Tiantai Zhi Shi and Jing Xi's doctrine of cessation, along with Bukong Sanzang's translation of the majority of Tantric texts from the latter years of Emperor Xuanzong to the reigns of Emperor Suzong and Emperor Daizong, constituted a pivotal influence in the emergence of the Tiantai Zhengyin and Tiantai Zengyin sects in Japan [10].

The Buddhist canon is a principal agent in the dissemination and evolution of Buddhism. Its impact on the development of engraving and printing is profound and enduring, to the extent that one might venture to state that the Buddhist canon has been a driving force throughout the history of these two artistic media [11]. During the Sui and Tang dynasties, when Buddhism was at its height, copying sutras became a popular practice, from the highest to the lowest levels of society, as one of the three treasures of Buddhist merit. The number of sutras written was repeatedly emphasized in many sutras as a way of accumulating merit. The social trend of practicing Buddhism created a significant demand for Buddhist texts, and devotees often attempted to copy thousands of volumes of a single sutra. This resulted in the emergence of professions such as "scripture student" and "servant," who made their living by copying. There was a pressing need for a more convenient and efficient method of copying sutras. There was a pressing need for a more convenient and efficient method to facilitate the accumulation of virtue [12]. It is within this soil that Buddhism has been cultivated, disseminated, and evolved.

Given that this was the case in the Sui and Tang dynasties, it seems reasonable to posit that the Chinese engraving and printing press, which had been introduced to Japan since the Tang, played a role in advancing the dissemination of the teachings of the sutras and even of Buddhism itself in a similar way. This is evidenced by the fact that the number of sutras accumulated as a result of this process, and it is also manifested in esotericism.

Tantric Buddhism flourished during the reign of Emperor Xuanzong of the Tang Dynasty. In 753 A.D., Kanjin arrived in Japan, bearing with him a number of significant items, including the Rudraksha relics, Tendai Buddhist scriptures, Tantric Buddhist statues, and Ashoka Pagoda patterns. As documented in Genmyo Ono's *Nara no Tantra*, Kanjin and his disciples also brought numerous moulded statues of Buddha as relics of the Hotei Tantra. Subsequently, he resided in Japan for a decade, during which he served as the head priest of Todaiji Temple, which was renowned for its role in inscribing and printing the Mantra of the Million Tathagatas. Following his demise, he was succeeded by his disciples Hoshin and Rupo [2].

Furthermore, Volume 7 of the *Biography of the Three Kingdoms* states that, following the correction of all the sutras at the Todaiji Temple, Kanjin also published the three principal divisions of the Ritsu sect. Additionally, the "Origins of the Transmission of Buddhist Dharma in the Three Kingdoms" documents that Kanjin "had the three major divisions of the Ritsu published." In light of the fact that the Million Tathagatas commenced one year after Kanjin's demise and given the aforementioned attestations to his profound connection with Tantra, the Dharani Sutra, and the Todaiji Temple, it is highly probable that he was engaged in the extensive preparations for the undertaking prior to its inception. Furthermore, the four dharani prints placed beneath the luki of the Million Pagoda Dharani are identical to the Dharma relics sent from China. This evidence suggests that the spread and development of Buddhism, initiated by the eastward journey of Jianzhen, marked the beginning of Chinese engraving and printing in Japan [2,13].

The dissemination and advancement of Buddhism thus provided an opportunity for the introduction and refinement of Chinese engraving in Japan. Concurrently, the practice of engraving facilitated the dissemination and evolution of Buddhism within Japan.

4. The Disappearance and Reappearance of Printing in Japan: An Historical Analysis

The combination of multiple exceptions, including her non-royal birth (her mother, Fujiwara Mitsuko, was a non-royal but was later crowned as the empress, later Empress Mitsuko), her coronation as the emperor's daughter prior to her ascension to the throne, and her own unmarried status, contributed to the unique circumstances surrounding her reign. Furthermore, the lack of an heir prompted Emperor Shunrei to alter his policy, shifting from a focus on Confucianism during the Hyō-ken period to a focus on her status as a nun during the Shunrei period. This shift was driven by the intention to construct a Buddhist kingship, utilizing her own knowledge of Chinese characters, Confucianism, and Buddhism. This approach was modelled after that of Emperor Toku. In accordance with the precedent set by Emperor Wu and in reliance on Dogen, the aforementioned actions were undertaken with the objective of upholding the legitimacy of the empress's rule, which had been the subject of contention due to the unique circumstances, and resolving the most significant challenge confronting the empress through the establishment of a novel political structure grounded in Buddhist principles, with the aim of consolidating the empress's authority [14].

The Million Tathagatas represent a crucial element of this extensive undertaking. From its inception, the project was inextricably linked to Emperor Hyō-ken's efforts to establish a Buddhist monarchy and the structure of monastic authority in its advancement. Fujiwara Mazaru, a relative of the Minister of Imperial Government from a foreign background, played a pivotal role in this context. He was displeased with the emperor's partiality towards Michikane and withdrew from the situation, thereby initiating a revolt in September of the eighth year of the emperor's reign in the year of Tenpyō Hogakuji (764) [4].

It is commonly held that the advent of printing in Japan was marked by the production of the "One Million Tattoos." This undertaking, which was commissioned by Emperor Toku, marked the inaugural appearance of engraving and printing in Japan. Since that time, no other printing project has been undertaken on a comparable scale, with the support of the entire nation.

In the late Nara period, the largest edifice in Heijō-kyō underwent a significant transformation. It shifted from serving as the imperial palace to becoming the Daibutsu-den of the Todaiji Temple, which was situated in a prominent position overlooking the emperor's residence. The capital of the emperor underwent a gradual transition to become the capital of Buddhism. The Buddhist temples erected by successive emperors to intercede for national peace and the cessation of misfortune ultimately eclipsed the imperial capital. The influence of the monks, who held political rights, grew increasingly robust, with some even attempting to assume the imperial throne. During the unstable rule of Emperor Hwanmu, the power of the Buddhist community in Hirakujōkyō posed a significant threat to the stability of the state. In consequence of Emperor Huanwu's apprehension regarding the potential influence of Buddhist monasteries and in light of the disruption to the imperial lineage of Emperor Tenmu, which had been broken and returned to Emperor Tenchi's lineage, Emperor Huanwu relocated the capital to Heijō-kyō in 782, thirteen years after the death of Emperor Shōtoku. This relocation was designed to circumvent the potential influence of Buddhist political ideologies. However, it also had a direct impact on the aspects pertaining to the Million Tattoos, resulting in a dearth of documented evidence concerning printing in Japanese history for the subsequent two to three centuries.

As stated in *The Chinese Printing Press and Its Western Transmission*, the practice of printing was not reintroduced to Japan until its reappearance in 987. This is a consequence of the fact that Japanese engraving and printing were entirely imported from outside of Japan [2]. And it was not until the sixth year of Emperor Ichijō's Kuanhong reign, in 1009 AD, that a printed version of the Dharma Flower Sutra and a printed folded image of a small Buddha were produced. The monk Kuran facilitated the return of a copy of the Kaihō Daizokyo, which ultimately resulted in the resurrection of the printing press at the conclusion of the Heian period. The introduction of the Kaitō Daizō Sutra reinvigorated the printing industry in Japan and contributed to its advancement [15].

From this perspective, the association between Buddhism and politics in Japan can be seen as a means of consolidating the power of the supreme ruler, protecting his position, and repelling the influence of other forces. The status and pattern of Buddhism in Japan is entirely dependent on the wishes and considerations of the supreme ruler at any given time. This is reflected in the dissemination of the art of engraving and printing in Japan. The blessing and wishing for blessings are secondary considerations.

5. Conclusion

A review of historical records and documents related to the “One Million Pagodas” in Japan reveals that the introduction of Chinese engraving and printing presses during the Tang Dynasty played a pivotal role in the dissemination and evolution of Buddhism in Japan. These developments were further facilitated by the spread of Buddhism. Furthermore, the profound interconnection between Buddhism and the political milieu in Japan led to the gradual utilisation of Buddhism as a gauge for evaluating the political landscape. The prevailing attitudes and preferences of the supreme ruler, and their implications for the status and significance of Buddhism within a given period, were pivotal considerations.

This paper establishes a connection between Japanese Buddhism, politics, and engraving practices. It projects part of Buddhism’s influence on politics onto the circulation of engraving in Japan, which represents a relatively novel idea. Additionally, the employment of spatial cross-referencing to formulate plausible hypotheses regarding the less extensively documented case of the Dharani Sutra of the Million Tathagatas represents a significant aspect of this paper. However, there is still room for a more in-depth and comprehensive analysis of this case study. Furthermore, the study of the political influence of Buddhism and the circulation of engraved printing in Japan should be more profound, with improvements in visualization and quantification. These are the directions in which the author plan to direct future research in this field.

References

- [1] Guo Shuyun. The spread of Chinese engraving and printing to Japan. Journal of Lanzhou University (Social Science Edition), 1999.
- [2] Sun Weimin. The monk Jianzhen and the world’s earliest printed materials. Journal of Yangzhou University (Humanities and Social Sciences Edition), 1979.
- [3] Hanyu Ion. A Study of the Eastern Transmission of the Tang Printing Monograph “Longshu Izuhinfa” to Japan. Journal of Humanities, 1992 (5): 95-97.
- [4] Cao Zhi. The origin of printing in China. Wuhan University Press, 1994.
- [5] Pan Jixing. History of metal type printing technology in China. Liaoning Science and Technology Press, 2001.
- [6] Fujie, Ko. Cultural History of Chinese Characters. Knowledge Publishing House, 1991.
- [7] Qu Desen. Illustrated History of Printing Development in China. Shanxi Education Press, 2013.
- [8] Lu Jiaxi, XI Zezong, WANG Yusheng, et al. (Colour Illustrated) History of Science and Technology in China. China Science and Technology Press, 1997.
- [9] Shen, Fuwei. Eight Thousand Years of East Asian Civilization: A Foreign History. Shanghai People’s Publishing House, 2023.
- [10] Su Yuanlei. A Review of the History of Cultural Exchanges between China and Japan. History Teaching Problems, 1987 (2): 9-12.
- [11] Xu Guiying. Buddhist texts and engraving. Science and Economy, 2000.
- [12] Yang Li. On Buddhism and the Invention and Development of Printing in China. Social Sciences, 2005, Vol. 20 (5): 239-240.
- [13] Pan Mengbu. On the Influence of Buddhism on Engraving and Printing. Dharma Voice, 1982 (6): 8.

- [14] Chih-Hung Li. The Construction and Display of Buddhist Kingship in East Asia from the Seventh to the Ninth Centuries. Taiwan: Institute of History, National Taiwan University, 2020.
- [15] (Japanese) KIMIYA Yasuhiko; translated by HU Xinian. History of Cultural Exchange between Japan and China. Beijing: The Commercial Press, 1980.