The Mystery of the Precious Seal of the Ruler and the Origins of Printing

T. H. Barrett
with Antonello Palumbo*

SOAS, University of London

ABSTRACT

Although researchers into the origins of printing have already initiated the study of references to seals in Chinese religious texts of the seventh-eighth century, only now has digitization allowed us comprehensive access to Buddhist sources. These reveal a number of references to seals that may well be related to an awareness of printing during the reign of the Empress Wu. The language of Buddhist metaphor is, however, conventional, and therefore cannot yield explicit information on a new technology. It may be that in future Daoist materials will prove to contain more useful materials for linking the use of seals to early printing. Even so, the extensive references to seals in Chinese Buddhist compositions and in translations at this point do help to illuminate the widespread contemporary understanding of the nature of surface to surface pattern transfer at the time that woodblock printing was on the point of appearing in East Asia.

Keywords: Buddhist seals, printing, religious metaphor, Empress Wu, Huayan

Several years ago the first named author above published a study, to which the present short essay is intended as an additional coda, discussing the use of metaphors in religious texts of the seventh century as a source of information on the contemporary understanding of printing processes. These metaphors, however, concerned the transfer of pattern in general, and while valuable as evidence for the degree of understanding of such factors as accuracy, speed and repeatability in that context, could not of themselves be immediately taken as evidence of the existence at that time of printing as we would understand it. The use of moulds and of seals would have provided enough experience of the technologies involved in the transfer of pattern—including the transfer of text—to account for all of the examples discussed. In one particular case, however, the Buddhist thinker Fazang (643-712) uses an extended metaphor concerning enlightenment that involves an entire sentence of text being created at once. In a forthcoming work Chen Jinhua shows that briefer uses of this metaphor occur elsewhere in Fazang’s work, and in that of his later follower Chengguan (738-839), though he feels that none of this evidence amounts to proof that Fazang had witnessed printing as we would understand the term, rather than the use of elaborate seals or the like. His caution is not universally shared: the belief that the first passage at any rate refers to printing, which—as pointed out in the earlier study—originated in Japanese academic circles, has also been endorsed in China.

This first passage, moreover, occurs in a text that for many centuries in
China a nd yet longer in Japan—to say nothing of Korea—was always seen as the best source for studying Fazang’s thought, and so was subject to incessant commentary. Fazang was, after all, regarded as the third and in some ways most important patriarch in the Chinese Huayan school, an intellectual lineage that was also held in great esteem in Korea and Japan. No early commentator provides any remarks on the passage in question, but it is taken up by one of the greatest of East Asian exegetes, the Japanese scholar Gyōnen (1240–1321), who drew on a rich tradition of written and oral commentary, including much earlier information otherwise lost to us. In his massive Gokyo¯ji tsu¯ro ki he explains the metaphor quite unambiguously: ‘The printing blocks have carved characters, and the master printer prints them. The artisan creates (the characters), and they are printed simultaneously. The characters that are printed are in sequence and do not encroach on one another. This has been the constant form from ancient times of the artisan’s method of printing.’ The reference to blocks indicates that the use of seals is definitely not what this erudite of commentators envisages.

Of course a much later commentator, no matter how learned, can always be mistaken. There do exist, furthermore, passages in Chinese Buddhist literature that could at first sight be construed as undermining Gyōnen’s interpretation. For the most obvious way to confirm or deny it is to check the use of similar metaphors in Buddhist writers after the time when printing became unambiguously present, to see if explicit links with printing are made. Even in their absence, however, we cannot be quite certain that we have disproved his interpretation, since the later author may be drawing on received materials from before the epoch of printing. We need also to be sure that we are dealing with metaphors that clearly envisage the transfer of text from one surface to another—ideally in sufficient quantity to indicate a full printing block, given that we hear in fourth century China of one famous talismanic seal carrying one hundred and twenty characters. Seals were in fact so well known in both India (where every Buddhist monastery had one) and China that all sorts of abstract metaphors based on their use can be found in sources originating from both cultures, often shifting the meaning away from the transfer of a written character or design towards much vaguer notions of imparting a characteristic.

Bearing such matters in mind, an examination of a couple of potentially useful passages does reveal some fresh information. One is to be found in the Zhu Xinfu[Annotated rhyme-prose on the mind], a work with auto-commentary by Yanshou (904–975), one of the most eminent monks of his day, who lived to see the small, Buddhistically-inclined kingdom in which he lived in the lower Yangzi valley incorporated into the newly reunified China of the Song dynasty. There is no question but that Yanshou would have understood printing perfectly from actual observation. He was a notable publisher, responsible for putting four hundred thousand printed images of Buddhist figures in circulation. Yet his use of the same type of metaphor as that introduced by Fazang shows not the slightest hint of any connection with any printing process using woodblocks. It occurs in a slightly different context, in which Yanshou is trying to convey in his main text the uniformity of the underlying ‘mind’ that is the topic of his rhyme-prose—that is, as the authorial annotation to the opening lines suggests, the all-embracing ‘mind’ described in the Awakening of Faith. After comparing the coherence of this mind to that of a swarm of bees, the main text continues with the words “It imprints before and after, without any differentiation”.

This the author then glosses with these words: “It is like the precious seal of the ruler[ wang zhi baoyin]. Its text appears all at once; there is no interval between before and after. Furthermore this seals fixes the world. This is like the Buddha’s dharma—if there were no seal of the mind, it would not constitute the Buddha’s dharma. From this we know that before is mind, and after is mind; the past is mind, and the present is mind.”

These words require a gloss or two themselves. Despite the fact that the repeated use of seals sometimes appears as a metaphor for an unchanging single phenomenon capable of multiple reproduction, the opening of this piece of commentary would seem to make it fairly clear that it is the end result of a seal that is in view—that is, its ability to produce a complete written text from beginning to end instantaneously—rather that its function as an unvarying matrix. “All at once” renders the Chinese Buddhist term dun, famous as the epithet given to ‘sudden enlightenment’, though as discussion of that context has shown, in this term the idea of totality is also incorporated into the more obvious idea of instantaneity: ‘at a stroke’ might be on rendering of its meaning. For all the rather abstract use of

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8 For monastic and monkish seals in India, see Schopen 2004:61-2, 85-6, 232-3.
9 Zhu xinfu 1/10d; in Dainihon zoku zokyo 2A 16/1. For Yanshou, see Welter 1988:247-274.
10 Lushan lianzong baojian 4/325a18-19, cf. Tsien Tsuen-hsun 1985:158, which seems to confirm this figure on the basis of a colophon to a twelfth century edition of the Zhu Xinfu that we have not been able to consult.
12 See, in particular, Stein 1987:41-66.
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13 The ‘seal of the mind’ as used in talking of the ‘transmission of the mind’ from Bodhidharma onwards in Chan/Zen circles does not seem to be what is in question here, though Yanshou situated himself within that transmission, and explores the metaphor of the seal as used in that context later on in the Zhu Xinfu (3/44a-b).

14 Yanshou continues with a quotation from another work of his that makes the same point even more explicitly, denying the distinction between flourishing and decline, the Wexin jue (994c).


18 See especially Gimello 1983:321-389, though this painstaking study, while excellent on Li’s influence in Korea and Japan, appears unduly negative concerning his influence in late tenth century China.

19 It may therefore be this ready availability of Li’s work that made Yanshou particularly enthusiastic in his citations from it, but at any rate one recent authority has described Yanshou’s own writings as ‘literally steeped in (sic) Li’s exposition of the Huayan sutra.’

20 For a brief survey of the issues involved, see the editorial introduction to Buswell, Jr. and Gimello 1992:1-36, especially p.9 and n.28 on p.33, which mentions Li’s general standpoint on the matter.

21 The context here is the Huayan path of spiritual progress, which from the commonsense point of view extends over fifty-three stages prior to Buddhahood—though this commonsense understanding, of course, is not the full story. This path is treated metaphorically in the Huayan sutra in the long, originally independent, section devoted to the pilgrimage of Sudana to visit fifty-three teachers. In Li’s comments on this, which have been rendered into English in severely truncated form, we find him duly noting towards the end concerning the overwhelming vision of reality vouchsafed to Sudana by Maitreya, Buddha of the future, that “Because past, present, and future are not beyond a moment, Sudhana saw events of all times.”

22 Broughton 2004:39

23 Cf. e.g. Taisho Canon vol.55, text no.2177, p.1133a4; text no.2183, p.1143c14. Yanshou cites this work explicitly at one point, see Zong jing lu:25/557c17.

24 Xin Huayan jing lun:8/770a 9-10.
Several fascicles later Li again makes a similar point as in the first passage with the same metaphor, though with regard to the commonsense conception of time only: the sequence of past, present and future that has gone on since ‘time without beginning’, in the Buddhist phrase, is imprinted instantaneously with the seal of the One Mind’s great wisdom “just as the precious seal of the ruler imprints in one printing without differentiation.” 24 Yanshou is also picking up this second use of the metaphor in the Zhu Xinju, to judge from the phrase ‘without differentiation’ in his main text, but in this work the earlier passage in Li seems more important to him, since the later writer actually alludes to it again in his next fascicle: “All the ten thousand dharmas are imprinted with Mind, just like the ruler’s precious seal; there is no interval between before and after.” 25 In the Zong jing lu, however, he quotes Li’s second passage explicitly, and verbatim. 26 This clear pattern of dependence provides, it would seem to me, further and quite irrefutable evidence that it is much more likely that in the Zhu Xinju Yanshou is drawing on Li directly in both cases, rather than that both Li and Yanshou are independently drawing on some third source. This is certainly the case with yet another seal-related metaphor in the Zhu Xinju, which from context can only derive from a late eighth century sub-commentary by Chengguan, who as a self-declared follower of Fazang was probably adapting from that source. 27

But even if we decide that Yanshou is dependent on received material, and so not making any link with printing despite his evident knowledge of the technology, this still leaves us with the possibility that Li Tongxuan is using received material too. Were that the case, then the status of Fazang’s original metaphor would come from that source, and not making any link with printing despite his evident knowledge of the technology, which is both worth pointing out in itself and also suggestive of one possibility in reading Li Tongxuan’s text that is at least worth considering. For while there is no avoiding some resort to the argumentum ex silentio, with all the due caution that that implies, the evidence assembled so far—taking both the material from Li Tongxuan and the passages considered in the earlier publication introduced at the start of this study—do at least show a distinct pattern, which is both worth pointing out in itself and also suggestive of one possibility in reading Li Tongxuan’s text that is at least worth considering. For the earlier remarks suggested that metaphors deriving from the transfer of pattern in three dimensions through the use of moulds in casting is something one may find in translated Buddhist sources that propagated the associated imagery quite widely already during the sixth century, imagery derived from the transfer of Daoism, also has strong Buddhist associations, and so like ‘precious seal’ opens up a range of possible associations. 28 The quotation that follows does little to reduce these, though its carefully balanced parallel prose construction at least suggests from its vocabulary a Buddhist provenance, and an educated Chinese Buddhist provenance at that. We also know that there once existed a ‘false scripture’, a Chinese apocryphal text, named The Scripture of the Precious Seal, since it is listed for condemnation in two catalogues of the seventh century. 29 It seems moreover from the way in which the great vinaya scholar Daoxuan (596-667) mentions it not simply in a catalogue but also in a work of vinaya commentary that it covered conduct rather than philosophy. 30 This may explain why it seems sometimes to be confused with a genuine work, now preserved as part of a much larger aggregation of scriptures, with a similar name, which is also devoted to conduct. 31 Thus Daoxuan’s contemporary, the Buddhist encyclopaedist Daoshi, sometimes seems to hesitate between the two texts, and in any case not all his citations from the genuine work can be traced to its text as we now have it. 32 But nowhere in this text or in any quotations that may be from the ‘false scripture’ is there any mention of a king’s precious seal. There is just one story in a Buddhist translation from before Li Tongxuan’s time that does explicitly mention a ruler’s precious seal, but the narrative shows no interest whatsoever in the process of sealing, and so it clearly has no bearing at all on Li’s use of the phrase in question. 33

This, then, would seem to be as much as our current databases of Buddhist materials allow us to discover, and at first sight the results are therefore disappointing. But while there is no avoiding some resort to the argumentum ex silentio, with all the due caution that that implies, the evidence assembled so far—taking both the material from Li Tongxuan and the passages considered in the earlier publication introduced at the start of this study—do at least show a distinct pattern, which is both worth pointing out in itself and also suggestive of one possibility in reading Li Tongxuan’s text that is at least worth considering. For while the earlier remarks suggested that metaphors deriving from the transfer of pattern in three dimensions through the use of moulds in casting is something one may find in translated Buddhist sources that propagated the associated imagery quite widely already during the sixth century, imagery derived from the transfer of

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24 Cleary, tr. 1989:81. Cleary states that he translates (p.5) “a Ming dynasty (14th-17th century) distillation of Li’s commentary”, but fails to identify which one: it would appear to be the Huayan jing hehun quanyao zhuan of Fangze, the preface of which is dated 1567.

26 Zhu Xinju:2/34c17–d2.
27 Zong jing lu:12/481c10–11.
28 Compare Zhu Xinju:3/44a11 and Da fangguang fo huayan jing sanhua yanyi chao:1/4b—a passage that clearly has nothing to do with printing, and so is not listed by Chen Jinhua in the discussion in his forthcoming work mentioned in n.3.
29 Zhu Xinju:1/17a3.
text in two dimensions, as effected by a stamp or seal, appeared to be—somewhat counter-intuitively—rather later. Searching the digital canon does turn up one exception to this, the Zhengfa nianchu jing, translated in 539 under the Eastern Wei, which though it is—like those texts concerned with three dimensional patterns—primarily interested in the accuracy of ‘automatic’ pattern transfer, rather than its capacity for rapid and repeated reproduction, clearly envisages transfer in two dimensions. But the influence of the metaphors in this text cannot be found in China until the Jushe lunshu of Fabao, circa 700CE, that is, precisely the time that we find our seal related metaphors there moving beyond descriptions of accuracy to encompass the other two factors. By this time, in fact, another translation of an Indian text by Xuanzang in 659 had provided a metaphor for the accurate transfer of karma in the intermediate state between rebirths using a two-dimensional pattern transfer from a seal quite similarly to the three dimensional metaphors on this topic discussed in the earlier essay.

Now all three men who use the seal imagery in new ways may be associated, like Fabao himself, with the religious activity surrounding the rule of the emperor generally known to us as the Empress Wu(628?-705), even though she eventually took the male imperial title, and only relinquished it when close to death, when she returned the power she had finally taken overtly to rule her own Zhou dynasty from 690 onward to the Tang. In fact Fabao and Fazang jointly worked on state sponsored translations during her reign. Li's writings show that he was aware of Fazang, though he was certainly not his disciple, and his biography suggests that—like Fazang—he may have been at the capital during the reign of the Empress. The Daoist Wang Xuanlan, discussed in the earlier article, was on the way to the court of the Empress when he died in 695. His is not the only Daoist text apparently written during the Zhou period that mentions the reproduction of sacred text by means of seals, for the Daojiao yishu of Meng Anpai, another writer also indirectly associated with her, contains a passage to this effect, though its exact meaning deserves further study. As it happens, a metaphorical reference to the authority of a royal seal also appears in a fifth, very famous Chinese text of the Manichaean religion, which must also date to this general period. The reference would appear to be the creation of a Chinese editor, though a full demonstration of this point would take us into a discussion of a great number of other problems surrounding this text.

Here the term yinxi is used, in which the second character is that commonly employed in China for an imperial seal, and it is worth pointing out that this particular collocation too is familiar to Li Tongxuan. Glossing on an occurrence of the term yinxi in the Huayan sutra, Li Tongxuan explains it as a reference to the knowledge of “what is mysterious and has not yet happened”, like the “hand-seals” [mudrā] employing fingers symbolically that are used in spells, and more specifically like the seal-talismans [fyūn] attributed to Nagarjuna. Before reaching this conclusion, however, Li states that (probably as an explanation of the peculiar expression yinxi, which normally has nothing to do with mudrās) “for instance or: this is modelled on (the fact that)’ the ruler uses jade to make xi-seals, and copper, iron and wood to make yin-seals”. In this passage, at any rate, the impression he gives is that his idea of the “ruler's seal” has more to do with the wider use of official tokens of identification than with some particular seal.

However, it may be interesting to speculate on what this term yinxi might stand for in the text of the Huayan sutra upon which he is commenting, which was re-translated for the Empress Wu between 695 and 699. This usage occurs in a famous portion of the translated text dedicated to the career of the bodhisattva that in its original Sanskrit existed as an independent work, several copies of which have also survived and been studied by Indologists. We have no less than three Chinese versions of this independent work, which added to two translations of the whole Huayan sutra makes five parallel texts. In our particular passage, there is a short inventory of the varieties of knowledge and practical skills that the bodhisattva-mahāsattva needs to possess in order to bring benefit to all the sentient beings. In this list, apart from such general things as numeracy, literacy, knowledge of natural elements and medical recipes, the 699 version includes the knowledge of “charts, books and seals” [tushu yinxi]. In the earlier complete translation, however, there is no such reference, nor is there in the best-known version of the independent work. An earlier translation of the independent work does mention “all sorts of seal-calculations” [yinshou zonghui], but this would rather seem to point to some kind of mudrās. In fact, mudrās they were: the extant Sanskrit and Tibetan versions make it clear that in the original reference was only made to hand-calculations, and this had been understood correctly by all the Chinese translators before the seventh century. The 699 version, then, stands out inasmuch it includes “charts, books and seals” in the Bodhisattva's know-how rather than just “writing and

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36 Zhengfa nianchu jing(23/131b2) provides a seal metaphor for the accurate working of karma; similar passages may be found ibidem 22/127a and 27/154a. The same text, 4/21b4-6 also uses the seal metaphor in a somewhat different context. On this compendium see Lin Li-kouang 1949.
37 Jushe lun shu I/486a18-19, where the automatic nature of causality is under discussion.
38 Abidan da ibisaha lun 70/361c. This translation was completed in 659, see Waley 1952:122. For the intermediate state and the seal metaphor, see Barrett 1998a:86.
39 On Fabao's work with Fazang, see Song gaozeng zhuan 4/727b1-2.
41 This information is given in the preface to the Xuanzhu lu of Wang Xuanlan.
42 This passage may be found in the Taoist Canon, text no 1129, 1/10b4-5. For the author of this work and our one further source on his background, see Schipper and Verellen 2004:442.
43 This reference may be found in the Traktat Pelliot in the admittedly inferior edition of the Taisho Canon, vol 34, p.1283c-25-26; cf. the absence of this material in the Parthian parallel text, Turfan ms. M 304.
44 These are the talismans studied by Michel Strickmann, see his work 2002:170-178.
45 Xin Huayuan jing lun 23/895b6-9.
46 This translated passage is in the Da jiangguang fo huayan jing 36/192b9-10.
47 Cf. text no 278 25/550c1-3, and Shizhu jing 2/512c1-3.
48 Cf. Jianbei yiye zhide jing 3/474a23-26: this work, though older than any other version discussed, may not be quite as early as its attribution suggests.
49 See Rahder, ed. 1926-45, 5L; cf. Rahder 1928 144(s.v. 'mudrā'); Edgerton 1953:455a(s.v. 'mudrā').
hand-calculations”. So here again we find yet another instance of the religious texts of the end of the seventh century highlighting the role of seals.

And although Li Tongxuan himself at first sight appears to be a figure of a somewhat later period, a case can be made for seeing him as part of this very environment as well. The date recorded for the completion of his Xin Huayan jing lun is, according to its listing in a bibliography compiled in 945, 729. A post-Zhou dating is also borne out by the fact that in his commentary Li Tongxuan occasionally hints at things happening “today, under the reign of the Tang” [jin Tang chao]. However, when at one point he refers to the first, Jin translation of the Huayan jing and then goes on to say that “today, under the Tang, (the scripture) has been retranslated” [zaiyi], we must suspect that either Li himself or some loyalist hand may have reworded a remark originally formulated in the wake of the translation of 699—under the Zhou. More generally, the work gives the impression that a sizeable part of the commentary, or an early draft surviving in the received text, was written when the new translation was still fresh. This is consistent with what we read in the biographical notice on Li Tongxuan which is included in the preface to the Lüeshi Xin Huayan jing xiu xing cì di jüe lü [a summary of the Xin Huayan jing lun] written by the monk Zhaoming and dated August 3, 770; Zhaoming seems to say that Li wrote—or rather started writing—the Xin Huayan jing lun when the new translation came out (in 699), but that he actually “composed his essay(s)” after he retreated to the mountains in 710. In other words, the writing of the Xin Huayan jing lun is likely to have dragged on for several years after 699 and until 729, when Li must have left it more or less as it is; this was shortly before he died on April 19, 730 [Kaiyuan 18.3.28]. If this is correct, then the commentary quite possibly reflects Li’s ideas around 700 to a considerable extent as well.

Now this process of composition and revision over a lengthy and politically unstable period may perhaps help to explain the variation in terminology concerning seals that Li displays in his work. For while the normal word used for an imperial seal was the character xi, given above, during the reign of the Empress Wu and again from 718 onwards the other word we have encountered, namely bao, denoting by itself ‘Precious Object’ or ‘Treasure’, was substituted throughout official terminology. Somewhat later, when the emperor employed such inflated language, and combined it with claims of divine favour, his efforts were perhaps met with a degree of irony. Li, however, does not come across as an ironist, and as language, and combined it with claims of divine favour, his efforts were perhaps

50 A late eighth century version of the independent work also mentions “seals” [yinxin], but this would appear to follow the 699 translation in its wording, rather than provide independent evidence, see Foshao shi jing 4/551a13-14.

51 Thus Heng’an’s Xin Huayan jing lun 735a17, 735a28, 759a12-13, 776b5.

52 Xin Huayan jing lun 761c23-24.


54 Lidai Xin Huayan jing xiu xing cì di jüe lü 1011c9-19.

55 Xin Tang shu 24/524.

56 This at least is the claim of Elling O. Eide (1985:95-107).
seems to be very strictly determined by the text he is writing about, and so his vocabulary is very clearly confined to that of the Buddhist translations of Indian material. The ability that Chinese Buddhists commanded by this stage in imitating translated material is amply attested by their success in producing texts that were long assumed to be Indian in origin before the rise of critical scholarship allied to modern Indology in the twentieth century. Thus the word wang—conventionally translated as ‘king’, but neutrally translated in this essay as ‘ruler’—would normally in this style represent an Indic word equivalent to our modern rajah. But were Li in fact adding something from his own experience in China it could represent something else, such as the ruler who in normal Chinese style would be denoted as emperor. And we might even go further to suggest—just for sake of argument—that the word translated ‘seal’ might equally stand for what in normal Chinese would be the word for ‘woodblock’. So Li’s metaphor might, in short, be a reference to imperial printing in the early eighth century disguised by reason of the linguistic conventions he is observing in his writing.

But though such a hypothesis is, to repeat, at least worth considering, we should also note that it entails some difficulties that might discourage us from putting too much faith in it. For both Fazang and Li (and Yanshou, too, for that matter) are concerned with the basic problem in Huayan thought of conceptualizing the application of a seal upon it, but it is more like the instantaneous impact of a stamp than the pattern upon it, but it is more like the instantaneous impact of a stamp than the application of a sheet of paper to a woodblock. The latter will typically give a longer string of characters, but it is the seal which is quicker, and which can even so include enough text to constitute a reasonably long sequence of text. The extra evidence provided by Li’s writing perhaps nudges Fazang’s metaphor in the direction of printing. But it cannot be taken as clear and unambiguous proof that either man witnessed the use of woodblock, despite the likelihood that the technology existed in their day. Nor can we reliably identify the ‘ruler’ in Li’s text with any specific person in China. So despite the consultation for this essay of the digital database for the Chinese Buddhist canon not employed in the previous study—and it must be said that some early materials in the supplement to the main canon that existed in their day. We can be sure that the processes involved in printing were understood circa 700, but not necessarily that printing from woodblock was seen by the users of the metaphorical language studied. The increasing availability of Daoist materials in digital, automatically searchable form now allows us a relatively exhaustive search of such materials also, and so perhaps will provide new evidence allowing us to refine these findings further. In Daoism, however, despite some overlaps, the conception and use of the seal appears from what has been written so far to be appreciably different, and thus may be better treated in a separate presentation.

For the time being, then, our own new technology has not provided any radical breakthrough in our research. What it has raised, by contrast, is some intriguing possibilities. And even though at this stage we cannot say anything definite about the origins of printing as such, then at least the passages from Buddhist works considered above may help to illuminate the general East Asian intellectual climate in which the first example of printed material on paper, known to us from its discovery in Korea, came into being.

GLOSSARY

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For a recent summary, drawing *inter alia* on the important work of Michel Strickmann (2002), see Verellen 2006:179-182.

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62 Buswell, Jr. 1990 includes studies of a couple of well-known examples, to which others, such as Hakeda’s (1967) the *Awakening of Faith* might be added.
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