

Literacy: Sacred Text

Dr Thomas Jansen

HPAH7011 Theory and Methodology in the
Study of the Ancient World

Modalities of doing religion

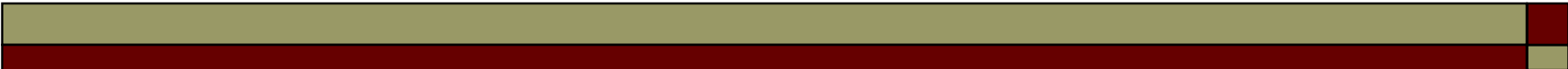
- ❑ **Discursive/scriptural**, involving mostly the composition and use of text;
- ❑ **Personal-cultivational**, involving a long-term interest in cultivating and transforming oneself;
- ❑ **Liturgical**, involving elaborate ritual procedures conducted by ritual specialists;
- ❑ **Immediate-practical**, aiming at quick results using simple ritual or magical techniques;
- ❑ **Relational**, emphasizing the relationship between humans and deities (or ancestors) as well as among humans in religious practices.

See Adam Yuet Chau, *Religion in China* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), p. 25.

Dimensions of sacred texts

All texts can be seen as

- a message → conveys religious ideas/meaning → Interpretation
 - a medium → ways in which the message is conveyed; how a religious text makes itself available to worship and transmission and circulation → performative aspects of religious texts (e.g. oral and/or written)
 - a commodity or object → materiality of the text, including its origins (e.g. Daoist texts as crystallization of life-giving primordial breath (qi))
- Question of how these different aspects interrelate and influence each other.
How does the materiality of a text contribute to its meaning?



Catherine Bell (1953-2008)

- "For many scholars, texts mirror current or incipient social conditions and, as a medium for the spread of ideas, they can act to promote these conditions further. Yet the production, circulation, collection, study, or veneration of texts shape social behaviour not simply by virtue of the ideas that these books communicate, but also by virtue of the practices such 'commodities' promote." (163)

Catherine Bell

- "[T]he significance of a book lies not only in the message of its content, but also in the form and the self-representation with which it makes itself available to worship and transmission." (p. 160)
- **"...texts are not simply expressions of changing social conditions and attitudes, nor are they mere agents or mechanisms of change; they are the very practices that constitute a changing social and religious world."** (Bell, Catherine M. "A Precious Raft to Save the World' The Interaction of Scriptural Traditions and Printing in a Chinese Morality Book." *Late Imperial China* 17, no. 1 (1996): 158-200 (p. 190)



Names of Buddhist Deities. Undated, ca. 1694. Stone inscription, each character ca. 30 cm high. Drum Mountain, Fuzhou, Fujian. Photo: Robert E. Harrist, *A Landscape of Words*, p.



Inscriptions on Great Vista Peak, Mt. Tai, Shandong, China. Photo: Chen Liwei. Source: Robert Harrist,

Stone carvings of the Diamond Sutra at Mount Taishan, Shandong Province, China



Page 121 from first edition
of James Legge's (1815-
1897) translation
of *Confucius Analects*
(1861)

Textual
metaphors/practices
involved:

- Focus on textuality rather than orality
- Linked to scholarly activities, such as translation, writing commentary and annotations, intensive reading
- Text of an educated elite



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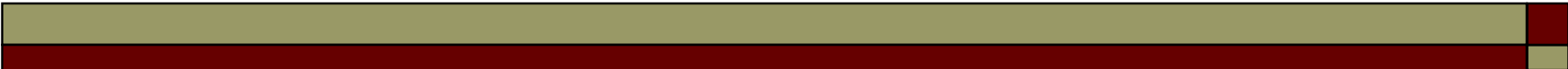
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Printing as a Buddhist textual metaphor

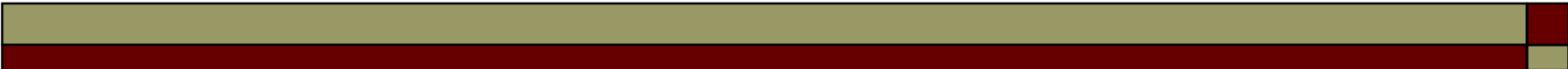


A carved block for sutra printing, Jinling Buddhism Publishing House, Jiangsu Province, China. The publishing of each sutra book involves over 30 procedures of handcraft. The house has printed over 100,000 sutras annually which are published world wide. (Photo by China Photos/Getty Images)



Buddhist textual metaphors

- ❑ Universality of readership and wide circulation
- ❑ Religious merit as a result of book production
- ❑ Sutra production represents religious commitment and piety



Scriptures as the study of social formations

- ❑ Institute for Signifying (on) Scriptures (ISS)
- ❑ “‘scriptures’ as analytical wedge for the study of societies and cultures”
- ❑ Project to “explore and exemplify the human practice of scripture-making for a general audience”

Forum Question

- In what ways does the materiality of the text influence, reinforce or add to its meaning?



Literature mentioned in the lecture

- Bell, Catherine M. 1996. 'A precious raft to save the world': The interaction of scriptural traditions and printing in a chinese morality book. *Late Imperial China* 17 (1): 158-200.
- Harrist, Robert E. 2008. *The landscape of words stone inscriptions from early and medieval china*. Seattle, Wash. [u.a.]: University of Washington Press.

THE LANDSCAPE OF WORDS

Stone
Inscriptions
from Early
and Medieval
China



ROBERT E. HARRIST JR.

Thank you for your attention!