

Imagining the Beginnings of the Cult of the Diamond Sutra*

Chiew Hui Ho

Abstract

The *Diamond Sutra* (Sk. *Vajracchedikā-prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*; Ch. *Jin'gang bore boluomi jing* 金剛般若波羅蜜經) is an important Mahāyāna sutra, which remains to this day one of the most influential Buddhist sutras in East Asia. However, little is known about why it began to gain widespread popularity in the Tang even though it had been translated two centuries earlier. It is baffling to find little trace of religious activities related to the *Diamond Sutra* in the Six Dynasties period. Although there is evidence that monastics recited the *Diamond Sutra* as early as late fifth century, it had not gained a following among either the monastics or lay Buddhists during the Six Dynasties. Extant records, however, indicate that a substantial body of narratives relating to it appeared, circulated, and were compiled in the Tang, reflecting the extent to which it featured in the lives of people in that period. This paper aims to shed light on the beginnings of the cult of the *Diamond Sutra* in medieval China. By broadly contextualizing the sutra within its socio-historical milieu, it discusses the ways it was engaged by

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monastics, why it was given recognition by members of the Tang monarchy, and how the interest of literati might have popularized it. This paper argues that these developments, when conceived within a web of human interactions, impacted people's knowledge of the sutra and prompted increasing engagement with it, resulting in the cult of the *Diamond Sutra*.

Keywords: *Diamond Sutra*, Vajracchedikā, Tang Buddhism, medieval Chinese Buddhism, lay Buddhism

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