


# BETWEEN EMPIRE AND MOUNTAIN: MONK AN DAOYI, CLIFF SUTRA INSCRIPTIONS, AND THE LOCALIZATION OF BUDDHISM IN NORTHERN DYNASTIES SHANDONG (386–581 CE)

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## Abstract

*This article examines the localization of Buddhism in Northern Dynasties China (386–581 CE) through a focused case study of the monk An Daoyi (安道壹) and the cliff sutra inscriptions associated with his activities in Shandong Province. Moving beyond state-centered narratives that privilege imperial patronage and official Buddhist institutions, the study foregrounds regional monastic agency and material religious practice as critical forces shaping Buddhist transmission. Drawing on epigraphic evidence, historical texts, spatial analysis, and social network reconstruction, the article analyzes how An Daoyi mobilized local elites, monastic networks, and sacred landscapes to inscribe Mahāyāna doctrine—particularly Prajñāpāramitā thought—directly into mountainous terrain. The findings demonstrate that An Daoyi functioned as a monastic intermediary, mediating between imperial Buddhist orthodoxy and local religious ecologies shaped by mountain worship, gentry patronage, and sociopolitical instability. His cliff inscriptions operated simultaneously as textual transmissions, ritual technologies, and spatial interventions, transforming natural landscapes into enduring Buddhist sacred spaces. This bottom-up model of localization challenges dichotomous interpretations of "imperial versus popular Buddhism" and reveals how Buddhist authority was negotiated through materiality, calligraphy, and place-based devotion. By integrating theories of regional religion, social networks, and religious materiality, this article contributes to broader debates on Buddhist localization in medieval China. It offers a methodological framework for studying how religious traditions are reconfigured through localized monastic action beyond imperial centers.*

**Keywords:** Northern Dynasties Buddhism; Shandong Buddhism; An Daoyi (安道壹); Cliff Sutra Inscriptions (摩崖刻经); Buddhist Localization; Religious Materiality; Monastic Agency

# ANTARA KEKAISARAN DAN GUNUNG: BIKSU DAOYI, PRASASTI SUTRA TEBING, DAN LOKALISASI BUDDHISME DI SHANDONG DINASTI UTARA (386–581 M)

## Abstrak

Artikel ini mengkaji lokalisasi Buddhisme di Tiongkok Dinasti Utara (386–581 M) melalui studi kasus terfokus pada biksu An Daoyi (安道壹) dan prasasti sutra tebing yang terkait dengan aktivitasnya di Provinsi Shandong. Melampaui narasi yang berpusat pada negara yang mengutamakan patronase kekaisaran dan lembaga Buddha resmi, penelitian ini menyoroti agensi monastik regional dan praktik keagamaan material sebagai kekuatan kritis yang membentuk transmisi Buddha. Berdasarkan bukti epigrafis, teks sejarah, analisis spasial, dan rekonstruksi jaringan sosial, artikel ini menganalisis bagaimana An Daoyi memobilisasi elit lokal, jaringan monastik, dan lanskap suci untuk mengukir doktrin Mahāyāna khususnya pemikiran Prajñāpāramitā langsung ke medan

pegunungan. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa An Daoyi berfungsi sebagai perantara monastik, menjembatani antara ortodoksi Buddhis kekaisaran dan ekologi agama lokal yang dibentuk oleh pemujaan gunung, dukungan kaum bangsawan, dan ketidakstabilan sosial politik. Inskripsi tebingnya berfungsi secara bersamaan sebagai transmisi tekstual, teknologi ritual, dan intervensi spasial, mengubah lanskap alam menjadi ruang suci Buddha yang abadi. Model lokalisasi dari bawah ke atas ini menantang interpretasi dikotomis "Buddha kekaisaran versus Buddha populer" dan mengungkapkan bagaimana otoritas Buddha dinegosiasikan melalui materialitas, kaligrafi, dan devosi berbasis tempat. Dengan mengintegrasikan teori-teori agama regional, jaringan sosial, dan materialitas keagamaan, artikel ini berkontribusi pada perdebatan yang lebih luas mengenai lokalisasi Buddha di Tiongkok abad pertengahan. Ini menawarkan kerangka metodologis untuk mempelajari bagaimana tradisi keagamaan dikonfigurasi ulang melalui tindakan monastik lokal di luar pusat kekaisaran.

**Kata kunci:** *Buddha Dinasti Utara; Buddha Shandong; An Daoyi (安道壹); Prasasti Sutra Tebing (摩崖刻经); Lokalisasi Buddha; Materialitas Agama; Agensi Monastik*

## 1. Introduction

The study of Buddhism during China's Northern Dynasties (386–581 CE) has long been dominated by narratives centered on imperial patronage, court ideology, and state regulation of the sangha. From the Northern Wei emperors' sponsorship of monumental cave temples at Yungang and Longmen to the Northern Zhou suppression of Buddhism in the late sixth century, scholarship has frequently framed Buddhist development as a function of shifting political attitudes toward religion [1, 2]. While such approaches have yielded valuable insights into the institutional history of Buddhism, they have also produced a historiographical imbalance: regional Buddhist practices and local monastic agency are often treated as peripheral or derivative phenomena. Recent advances in the study of Chinese religions, however, have increasingly questioned the adequacy of top-down models that privilege imperial centers as the primary drivers of religious change. Scholars working on regional religion, material religion, and social networks have demonstrated that religious traditions are not simply disseminated from political capitals to localities, but are actively reconfigured through local actors, landscapes, and social structures [3, 4]. Within this broader shift, cliff sutra inscriptions (*moya kejing* 摩崖刻经) have emerged as a particularly valuable—yet still underutilized—source for reconstructing localized Buddhist practice in early medieval China.

This article contributes to this growing body of scholarship by examining the localization of Buddhism in Shandong during the Northern Dynasties through the epigraphic legacy of the monk An Daoyi (安道壹). Rather than treating his cliff inscriptions as isolated devotional artifacts or stylistic curiosities, the study positions them as material and spatial interventions that reveal how regional monastics negotiated imperial doctrine, local belief systems, and sociopolitical instability [5]. By foregrounding An Daoyi as a *monastic intermediary* operating between empire and locality, the article challenges binary interpretations of "imperial versus popular Buddhism". It proposes a more relational model of Buddhist regionalization. The prevailing historiography of Northern Dynasties Buddhism has largely emphasized three interrelated themes: imperial patronage, state regulation of the sangha, and doctrinal orthodoxy.

Monumental cave complexes such as Yungang, Longmen, and Xiangtangshan have been interpreted as expressions of state ideology, visualizing Buddhist kingship and legitimizing political authority [6, 7]. Similarly, scholarship on the Northern Zhou persecution has framed religious life primarily in terms of suppression and revival cycles dictated by imperial decree [8]. While such perspectives are indispensable for understanding macro-level developments, they risk marginalizing the everyday mechanisms through which Buddhism was sustained, adapted, and practiced at the regional level. In areas distant from political capitals—such as Shandong Buddhist activity often unfolded in spaces where imperial presence was indirect, intermittent, or mediated through local elites [9]. As a result, the lived religious experiences of monks and lay communities remain insufficiently theorized within imperial-centered frameworks. Moreover, an exclusive focus on transmitted texts and court-sponsored

monuments obscures the significance of non-canonical and non-institutional forms of religious expression. Cliff inscriptions, produced outside monastic scriptoria and imperial workshops, do not easily fit into conventional categories of Buddhist literature or art history. However, precisely because they were carved *in situ* by local actors, they offer rare insight into how Buddhist doctrine was materially embedded into specific landscapes and social contexts [10].

In response to these limitations, recent scholarship has advocated a shift toward regional perspectives that emphasize local agency, adaptation, and negotiation. Drawing on anthropological models of regional religion, scholars have argued that religious traditions are reshaped through their interaction with local social structures, ecological conditions, and pre-existing belief systems [11]. Within this framework, Buddhism in early medieval China is understood not as a monolithic system imposed from above, but as a constellation of locally configured practices. Studies of regional Buddhist sites such as Mount Wutai, Mount Tiantai, and the southern Taihang Mountains have demonstrated how sacred geography played a central role in the localization of Buddhist thought and ritual [12]. Mountains, in particular, functioned as liminal spaces where Buddhist cosmology intersected with indigenous cults, Daoist practices, and Confucian notions of moral cultivation. Shandong, with its dense concentration of sacred peaks and its longstanding Mount Tai cult, constituted a fertile environment for such interactions.

Despite these advances, the role of individual regional monastics in orchestrating localization processes remains underexplored. Biographical sources such as the *Xu Gaoseng Zhuan* (续高僧传) provide only fragmentary information about many monks active outside imperial centers, limiting our understanding of how they mobilized resources, established authority, and engaged local communities. This lacuna calls for alternative methodological approaches that can recover monastic agency through non-literary sources [13]. Cliff sutra inscriptions represent one such alternative archive. Carved directly into rock faces, these inscriptions monumentalized Buddhist texts in ways that differed fundamentally from manuscript transmission or from the erection of steles. Their immovability, visibility, and integration into natural landscapes transformed sutras into enduring spatial presences rather than portable texts [14].

Previous studies have examined cliff inscriptions primarily from art-historical or epigraphic perspectives, focusing on calligraphic style, textual variants, or site typologies [15]. While valuable, such approaches often treat inscriptions as passive records rather than as active components of religious practice. More recent work, influenced by theories of religious materiality, has emphasized that material forms do not merely represent religious ideas but actively shape ritual experience and social interaction [16]. From this perspective, cliff inscriptions can be understood as ritual technologies that reconfigure space, authority, and devotion. Their placement along pilgrimage routes, near monasteries, or within sacred valleys suggests intentional strategies of spatial sacralization. The act of carving itself—often involving collective labor, patronage, and ritual dedication—constituted a form of merit-making that bound monastic and lay participants into shared religious projects [17]. Within this material and regional framework, the monk An Daoyi emerges as a particularly illuminating figure. Active primarily during the Northern Qi period (550–577 CE), An Daoyi is associated with a dense network of cliff inscriptions concentrated in the mountainous regions of Zoucheng and Mount Tai. Although absent from major court histories, his presence is repeatedly attested in epigraphic records that document not only doctrinal content but also patronage relationships, monastic collaborations, and ritual intentions.

This article conceptualizes An Daoyi as a monastic intermediary—a figure who mediated between imperial Buddhist orthodoxy and local religious ecologies without occupying formal positions within state-sponsored institutions. His inscriptions reveal how Mahāyāna doctrines, particularly Prajñāpāramitā teachings on emptiness (*śūnyatā*), were reframed through localized language, calligraphic innovation, and the sacralization of mountains. Titles such as "Great Empty King Buddha" (大空王佛) exemplify this process, translating abstract doctrine into place-based religious symbols intelligible to local audiences. By reconstructing An Daoyi's activities through epigraphic, spatial, and social network analysis, this study demonstrates how regional monastics exercised religious authority through material practice rather than institutional hierarchy. In doing so, it highlights a form of

Buddhist localization that operated parallel to, yet distinct from, imperial models centered on court patronage and doctrinal standardization.

## 2. Literature Review

Building on these perspectives, this article advances a relational model of Buddhist localization that integrates monastic agency, material religion, and sacred geography. It argues that Buddhism in Shandong during the Northern Dynasties was not merely a provincial reflection of imperial orthodoxy but a dynamic religious system shaped by regional actors responding to local social and political conditions. The Northern Dynasties period (386–581 CE) was characterized by prolonged political fragmentation, shifting regimes, and recurrent warfare across North China. Successive states—including the Northern Wei, Eastern Wei, Western Wei, Northern Qi, and Northern Zhou—governed overlapping territories with varying degrees of central control. Within this unstable political environment, Buddhism expanded rapidly, yet unevenly, adapting to local conditions while remaining subject to changing imperial policies [18].

Imperial support for Buddhism fluctuated dramatically. The Northern Wei court, particularly under Emperor Wencheng (r. 452–465), promoted Buddhism as a unifying ideological force, sponsoring monastic institutions and large-scale cave complexes. In contrast, the Northern Zhou regime (557–581) pursued systematic suppression of the sangha, dismantling monasteries and confiscating religious property [19]. These oscillations created an atmosphere of doctrinal uncertainty and institutional vulnerability, compelling Buddhist communities to develop adaptive strategies beyond reliance on imperial patronage.

Shandong Province occupied a distinctive position within this context. Situated east of the Central Plains and bordering the maritime routes of the Yellow Sea, Shandong was neither a political core nor a marginal periphery. Rather, it functioned as a frontier zone where imperial authority intersected with powerful local elites, longstanding religious traditions, and dense networks of transportation and commerce. This configuration rendered Shandong an especially fertile ground for localized Buddhist experimentation.

Administratively, Shandong during the Northern Dynasties was governed through a prefecture–commandery system that relied heavily on cooperation between state-appointed officials and entrenched gentry families. Yanzhou 兖州 served as a regional center, overseeing commanderies such as Dongping and Taishan. Although nominally subject to central oversight, these areas were effectively co-governed by local lineages that controlled land, manpower, and social prestige [20]. Prominent clans—such as the Bi (毕) and Wei (魏) families exercised enduring influence across generations, supplying officials, controlling economic resources, and patronizing religious activities. Their dominance was reinforced by the *zhongzheng* (中正) system, which enabled elite families to regulate local recruitment and administrative appointments [21]. As a result, religious initiatives in Shandong often depended less on imperial directives than on the interests and capacities of these local elites. For Buddhist monks operating in this environment, engagement with gentry networks was not optional but essential. Patronage from powerful families provided access to land, labor, and protection—particularly during periods of state persecution. The embeddedness of Buddhism within local power structures thus shaped both its institutional form and its modes of religious expression.

Shandong's socioeconomic conditions further contributed to its distinctive religious landscape. The region's manorial economy, characterized by large estates controlled by elite families, generated surplus resources that could be redirected toward religious projects, including temple construction and stone carving. These estates also supported specialized artisans, including stonemasons and calligraphers, whose skills were crucial for the production of cliff inscriptions [22]. In addition, Shandong's location along major transportation corridors—linking the Central Plains, the lower Yellow River basin, and coastal routes—facilitated the movement of monks, texts, and artistic techniques. Population mobility during the Northern Dynasties, driven by warfare and resettlement policies, further intensified cultural exchange. Buddhist ideas circulating from political centers such as Ye (邺) were thus filtered through regional networks before being rearticulated in local contexts.

These material and logistical conditions made possible the large-scale engraving of sutras into cliffs, a labor-intensive undertaking that required sustained coordination among patrons, artisans, and monastics. Cliff inscriptions, therefore, were not spontaneous acts of devotion but carefully organized projects rooted in Shandong's economic and social infrastructure.

### 3. Result

Religiously, Shandong possessed a dense and multilayered sacred ecology that predated the arrival of Buddhism. Most prominent among these traditions was the Mount Tai (Taishan 泰山) cult, which had functioned since antiquity as a center of imperial ritual, ancestral mediation, and cosmological symbolism. As the axis mundi connecting heaven, earth, and the underworld, Mount Tai occupied a central place in Chinese religious imagination (Robson, 2009). Rather than displacing these traditions, Buddhism in Shandong interacted with them in complex and creative ways. Mountains already regarded as sacred were reinterpreted as Buddhist spaces, while indigenous beliefs concerning longevity, afterlife judgment, and cosmic order were reframed through Mahāyāna doctrines of impermanence and emptiness. This process of integration fostered religious syncretism that blurred the boundaries between Buddhist, Daoist, and Confucian practices [23].

The Northern Dynasties period also witnessed the early formation of what later scholars would term the "Three Teachings" (sanjiao 三教) synthesis. Although not yet systematized, this emerging framework encouraged the coexistence and mutual appropriation of doctrinal elements across traditions. For Buddhism, such openness facilitated its localization within Shandong's religious landscape, enabling monks to engage familiar symbols and ritual spaces while introducing new soteriological meanings. The memory of imperial persecution—particularly under the Northern Zhou left a deep imprint on regional Buddhist communities. The destruction of monasteries and forced laicization of monks exposed the vulnerability of institution-centered Buddhism and underscored the need for alternative modes of religious preservation [24]. In this context, cliff sutra inscriptions acquired new significance as durable, decentralized repositories of the Dharma. Unlike monasteries or portable manuscripts, inscriptions carved into cliffs could not be easily confiscated or destroyed. Their permanence offered material resistance, ensuring the survival of Buddhist teachings even under hostile regimes. The strategic placement of inscriptions in remote valleys and mountainous terrain further enhanced their resilience, allowing religious practice to continue beyond the reach of state surveillance. Local elites played a crucial role in this process. By sponsoring inscription projects, gentry families simultaneously accrued religious merit and asserted moral authority within their communities. Patronage of Buddhist projects thus functioned as symbolic capital, reinforcing elite status while aligning it with religious legitimacy [25].

Taken together, these political, social, and religious factors positioned Shandong as a laboratory of Buddhist localization during the Northern Dynasties. The region's distance from imperial centers, combined with strong local elites and a rich sacred geography, created conditions under which Buddhism could be reconfigured through regional initiatives rather than dictated by court ideology. Within this frontier environment, monastic figures such as An Daoyi operated with relative autonomy, mobilizing local networks and landscapes to sustain Buddhist practice. Their activities demonstrate that localization was not a passive response to imperial policy but an active process of negotiation, innovation, and material engagement. By situating An Daoyi's cliff inscriptions within this broader historical context, the article underscores the importance of regional perspectives for understanding the development of Chinese Buddhism. Shandong's experience reveals how Buddhism persisted and flourished not only through imperial sponsorship but also through the adaptive strategies of local communities navigating political uncertainty and religious pluralism. With this historical foundation established, the next section turns to An Daoyi himself, reconstructing his biography, social networks, and authority as a monastic intermediary who translated these regional conditions into concrete religious practice.

The historical figure of An Daoyi presents a methodological challenge typical of regional monastics active outside imperial centers during the Northern Dynasties. Unlike eminent monks associated with court-sponsored institutions, An Daoyi does not appear prominently in transmitted Buddhist biographies or dynastic histories. His historical presence must

therefore be reconstructed through epigraphic microhistory, drawing primarily on cliff inscriptions, dedicatory texts, and local records. Epigraphic evidence identifies An Daoyi as a monk active in Shandong—particularly in the mountainous regions of Zoucheng and Mount Tai—during the mid to late sixth century, corresponding to the Northern Qi period. Inscriptions refer to him variously as "Seng'an Daoyi" (僧安道壹) and "Great Śramaṇa" (大沙門), titles that signal both monastic status and religious authority. The recurrence of his name across multiple inscription sites suggests sustained leadership rather than isolated participation.

One inscription from Hongding Mountain identifies An Daoyi as a native of Dongping Commandery, situating him within a region dominated by powerful gentry families. This geographic anchoring is corroborated by local genealogical materials that link him—directly or indirectly—to elite lineages active in Yan Province. Although definitive biographical details remain elusive, the convergence of epigraphic, geographic, and social data enables a plausible reconstruction of An Daoyi's role as a regional religious actor embedded within local power structures. This microhistorical approach does more than recover a neglected individual; it reveals the structural position occupied by regional monks who operated between state institutions and local society. An Daoyi's significance lies not in his doctrinal originality alone, but in his capacity to mobilize networks, coordinate material projects, and translate Buddhist teachings into locally intelligible forms.

To conceptualize An Daoyi's role, this article introduces the notion of the monastic intermediary. This category captures monks who mediated between imperial Buddhist orthodoxy and regional religious ecologies without holding formal positions in court-sponsored institutions. Unlike abbots of major monasteries or monks attached to imperial translation bureaus, intermediaries exercised authority through relational networks, material practices, and localized charisma. An Daoyi exemplifies this intermediary position in several respects. First, his inscriptions demonstrate clear alignment with canonical Mahāyāna doctrine, particularly Prajñāpāramitā teachings emphasizing emptiness (śūnyatā). This alignment indicates familiarity with orthodox Buddhist discourse circulating in political centers such as Ye. At the same time, his methods of propagation—large-scale cliff inscriptions, innovative calligraphic styles, and mountain-based sacralization—depart from institutional norms, reflecting adaptation to local conditions. Second, An Daoyi operated within overlapping spheres of influence: monastic communities, gentry patronage networks, and local administrative structures. Rather than functioning as a passive recipient of elite support, he appears to have actively orchestrated collaboration among these groups, positioning himself as a broker of religious merit and symbolic capital. In this sense, the monastic intermediary is neither a purely religious nor a purely political actor, but one whose authority emerges from negotiating multiple domains.

Central to An Daoyi's intermediary role was his ability to mobilize patronage networks that spanned social strata. Dedicatory inscriptions repeatedly name donors from prominent local families, most notably the Wei and Bi clans. These families possessed extensive landholdings, administrative experience, and hereditary prestige, making them indispensable allies for large-scale religious projects. Inscriptions from Mount Jian, for example, record sponsorship by Wei Zishen and his relatives, explicitly identifying them as descendants of a distinguished Han dynasty lineage. Such genealogical references were not incidental; they functioned to convert ancestral prestige into religious merit, reinforcing the donors' moral authority within local society. By associating their lineage with the inscription of sacred texts, elite families publicly demonstrated both piety and cultural refinement.

Beyond local gentry, An Daoyi's network appears to have extended—at least symbolically—into the sphere of royal patronage. An inscription mentions Lady Zhao, consort of Tang Yong, a Northern Qi prince closely associated with state-sponsored Buddhist projects. Although An Daoyi did not operate under direct imperial commission, the invocation of royal figures lent his activities a degree of legitimacy and resonance with imperial Buddhist ideology. Local officials also played a facilitative role. Titles such as governor or magistrate appear in dedicatory contexts, suggesting administrative support in coordinating labor, securing sites, or legitimizing religious activity. These officials served as intermediaries, linking the central authority with local society and reinforcing the embeddedness of Buddhist practice within regional governance.

An Daoyi's projects required not only financial sponsorship but also technical expertise and ritual coordination. Cliff inscriptions required skilled calligraphers, stonemasons, and ritual specialists capable of executing complex, labor-intensive tasks. Epigraphic records indicate that An Daoyi often served as the principal calligrapher, establishing a distinctive style that blended clerical, regular, and seal scripts. This calligraphic innovation was not merely aesthetic. Large characters carved into cliff faces—sometimes exceeding several meters in diameter—transformed written text into a monumental visual presence. Such inscriptions were legible from a distance, enabling them to function as public religious statements rather than private devotional texts. In this way, calligraphy became a medium of doctrinal communication, conveying abstract concepts of emptiness and universality through spatial scale and visual impact. Ritually, the carving process itself constituted a form of collective religious practice. Inscriptions record participation by monks and lay devotees, including organized associations dedicated to merit-making activities. The act of engraving sutras was thus embedded within a ritual economy that linked labor, devotion, and salvation. By coordinating these processes, An Daoyi reinforced his authority as both a spiritual guide and an organizational leader.

An Daoyi's authority did not derive from formal ecclesiastical office but from a combination of doctrinal mastery, artistic skill, and charismatic leadership. Inscriptions praise his calligraphy in terms that place him within the lineage of revered secular calligraphers, implicitly equating artistic excellence with spiritual attainment. Such evaluations suggest that calligraphy functioned as a marker of religious legitimacy, especially in a region where visual culture played a prominent role in devotional life. Doctrinally, An Daoyi emphasized Prajñāpāramitā teachings, particularly the dialectic of emptiness and form. His inscriptions often select concise yet conceptually dense passages, privileging meditative insight over narrative exposition. This focus resonated with contemporary concerns about the Latter Age of the Dharma, during which direct realization was believed to supersede scholastic learning. By embedding doctrine into the landscape, An Daoyi transformed mountains into sites of contemplation and practice. Titles such as "Great Empty King Buddha" reimagined natural formations as embodiments of Buddhist truth, merging cosmic symbolism with local sacred geography. This strategy enabled him to convey sophisticated doctrinal ideas through familiar spatial idioms, thereby enhancing accessibility and appeal.

Compared with monks operating within imperial centers, An Daoyi's model of authority appears both adaptive and innovative. Court-affiliated monks often relied on imperial sponsorship, textual production, and institutional hierarchy to disseminate Buddhism. In contrast, An Daoyi's activities reveal a decentralized approach grounded in regional networks and material practices. This distinction does not imply opposition to imperial Buddhism. Rather, it highlights plural modes of Buddhist transmission operating simultaneously within Northern Dynasties China. An Daoyi's inscriptions demonstrate fidelity to canonical doctrine while embodying local creativity, suggesting that orthodoxy and localization were not mutually exclusive but mutually constitutive. The monastic intermediary model thus offers a conceptual bridge between macro-level analyses of state–religion relations and micro-level studies of local devotion. By foregrounding relational authority and material engagement, it provides a framework for understanding how Buddhism adapted to regional conditions without losing doctrinal coherence.

Cliff sutra inscriptions (*moya kejing*) represent a distinctive mode of Buddhist textual transmission in early medieval China, one that cannot be adequately understood through the paradigms of manuscript culture or institutional exegesis alone. Unlike portable scriptures or stele inscriptions placed within temple precincts, cliff inscriptions are immobile, monumental, and environmentally embedded, transforming Buddhist texts into enduring features of the natural landscape. In the case of An Daoyi's activities in Shandong, sutra inscription functioned not merely as a means of preserving doctrine but as a material and spatial practice that reconfigured mountains into sites of ritual engagement, doctrinal contemplation, and social interaction. Recent scholarship on religious materiality emphasizes that religious objects do not simply symbolize belief but actively shape religious experience (Appadurai, 1986; Kieschnick, 2003). Applying this perspective, An Daoyi's cliff inscriptions can be understood as ritual technologies that mobilized stone, calligraphy, and landscape to produce religious meaning. Their scale, placement, and visual force endowed Buddhist teachings with a physical presence that exceeded the boundaries of textual literacy,

allowing doctrine to be encountered through bodily movement, visual perception, and spatial orientation.

The spatial distribution of An Daoyi's inscriptions reveals a deliberate strategy of sacralizing mountainous terrain. Concentrated in the regions surrounding Zoucheng—particularly at Tieshan, Gangshan, Geshan, Jianshan, and the Sutra Stone Valley of Mount Tai—these sites formed a network of sacred nodes integrated into existing pilgrimage routes and religious landscapes. Mountains in Shandong had long functioned as loci of spiritual power, associated with immortality, ancestral mediation, and cosmological order. Rather than displacing these associations, Buddhist inscriptions reinterpreted them through Mahāyāna frameworks (Robson, 2009). An Daoyi's choice of sites reflects sensitivity to both visibility and seclusion. Many inscriptions were carved on cliff faces overlooking valleys or along mountain paths, ensuring that pilgrims and travelers could see them. At the same time, their placement within rugged terrain preserved an atmosphere conducive to meditation and ritual retreat. This dual orientation—public yet ascetic—allowed inscriptions to serve multiple audiences, from lay devotees to monastic practitioners. Mount Tai occupies a particularly significant position within this spatial strategy. As one of China's most revered sacred mountains, Mount Tai symbolized the axis connecting heaven, earth, and the underworld. By inscribing Prajñāpāramitā texts in its Sutra Stone Valley, An Daoyi embedded Buddhist doctrine within a preexisting cosmological framework, effectively re-signifying Mount Tai as a Buddhist sacred space without erasing its indigenous meanings. This process exemplifies religious localization as reinterpretation rather than replacement.

The doctrinal content of An Daoyi's inscriptions further underscores their material and spatial logic. Rather than inscribing complete canonical texts indiscriminately, An Daoyi favored select passages from Mahāyāna sutras—especially Prajñāpāramitā literature—that emphasized emptiness, impermanence, and meditative realization. The frequent repetition of passages from the *Mañjuśrī Prajñā Sūtra* and related texts suggests intentional prioritization of concise, philosophically dense teachings over narrative exposition. This selective strategy reflects broader Northern Dynasties concerns regarding the Latter Age of the Dharma. In an era perceived as marked by doctrinal decline and social instability, emphasis shifted toward practices capable of producing immediate insight rather than scholastic mastery (Yan, 2016). By monumentalizing key doctrinal phrases, An Daoyi transformed abstract teachings into visual focal points for contemplation, enabling practitioners to engage doctrine through sustained visual and spatial presence. Moreover, the repetition of specific sutra passages across multiple sites created a sense of doctrinal coherence within the regional landscape. Pilgrims encountering similar texts at different mountains experienced Buddhism as a territorially integrated system, reinforcing both religious identity and communal memory. In this way, inscription networks functioned as a form of spatial pedagogy, teaching doctrine through movement and repetition.

Calligraphy occupies a central place in the material efficacy of An Daoyi's inscriptions. Epigraphic evidence indicates that An Daoyi himself often served as principal calligrapher, developing a distinctive style that blended clerical, regular, and seal scripts. This stylistic hybridity was not merely aesthetic but carried doctrinal and performative significance. Large characters carved into cliff faces—sometimes exceeding several meters in height—transformed written language into monumental form. Their scale demanded bodily engagement: viewers had to adjust posture, distance, and movement to apprehend the text. Such embodied viewing practices reinforced the experiential dimension of Buddhist teaching, aligning with meditative disciplines that emphasized bodily awareness and spatial orientation. Contemporary evaluations of An Daoyi's calligraphy, preserved in dedicatory inscriptions, liken his skill to that of celebrated secular calligraphers. This rhetorical elevation of calligraphy suggests that artistic mastery was interpreted as evidence of spiritual cultivation. In this context, calligraphy served as a mediating technology that translated doctrinal authority into a visible, socially recognized form (Davis, 2020).

The production of cliff inscriptions was itself a ritualized process involving collective labor and coordinated devotion. Inscriptions record the participation of monks, artisans, and lay devotees, often organized through merit-making associations. Activities such as preparing rock surfaces, drafting calligraphic grids, carving characters, and conducting dedication rituals constituted a sequence of religious acts embedded within everyday labor. This collective dimension underscores the social function of inscriptions as focal points for community formation. Participation in engraving projects allowed lay patrons and

commoners alike to accrue merit, reinforcing bonds between monastic leadership and local society. The act of carving sutras into stone thus served both as a devotional practice and as a mechanism of social integration [26]. Ritual use continued after completion. Pilgrims circumambulated inscribed cliffs, recited texts, and incorporated them into broader patterns of mountain worship. In some cases, inscriptions were strategically distributed along ascending paths, guiding bodily movement and structuring devotional experience. Through such practices, inscriptions remained ritually active, sustaining religious engagement across generations.

One of the most significant features of cliff sutra inscriptions is their durability. Carved into stone, they resist decay, censorship, and destruction more effectively than manuscripts or wooden structures. In the context of the Northern Dynasties' political instability and periodic persecution, this permanence acquired heightened religious and symbolic importance. During the Northern Zhou suppression of Buddhism, monastic institutions were dismantled and texts confiscated, yet inscriptions embedded in remote mountain cliffs remained largely inaccessible to state intervention. Their survival ensured the continued presence of Buddhist doctrine within the landscape, functioning as a form of material resistance against religious erasure [27]. This durability also enhanced the authority of inscriptions. By situating doctrine within geological formations perceived as timeless, inscriptions aligned Buddhist teachings with notions of cosmic permanence and natural order. Stone thus became both medium and message, embodying the endurance of the Dharma itself.

Through their spatial distribution and ritual use, An Daoyi's inscriptions contributed to the reconfiguration of Buddhist geography in Shandong. Rather than confining religious activity to monastic compounds, inscriptions extended sacred space across mountains, valleys, and pathways. This dispersed sacred geography complemented institutional Buddhism while reducing dependence on centralized structures.

Such reconfiguration had lasting implications. By embedding Buddhist presence into the landscape, inscriptions facilitated the integration of Buddhism into regional identity and memory. Mountains inscribed with sutras became landmarks of religious significance, shaping patterns of pilgrimage and devotion that persisted beyond the Northern Dynasties. From a theoretical perspective, this process exemplifies how material practices enable religious traditions to adapt spatially and socially. Localization, in this sense, emerges not as a doctrinal compromise but as a spatial rearticulation achieved through the strategic deployment of material forms.

Taken together, An Daoyi's cliff sutra inscriptions demonstrate how materiality and space functioned as core dimensions of Buddhist practice in the Northern Dynasties of Shandong. Through strategic site selection, doctrinally charged textual choices, calligraphic innovation, and ritualized production, inscriptions transformed mountains into active participants in religious life. These practices were inseparable from An Daoyi's role as a monastic intermediary. By orchestrating inscription projects, he translated abstract doctrine into durable, spatially embedded forms that resonated with local belief systems while maintaining canonical legitimacy. In doing so, he exemplified a model of Buddhist localization grounded in material engagement and relational authority.

The final section synthesizes the article's findings, reassessing prevailing models of imperial and local Buddhism and reflecting on the broader implications of An Daoyi's case for the study of religious localization and material religion in premodern China.

## 4. Discussion

This study has argued that the localization of Buddhism in the Northern Dynasties of Shandong cannot be adequately explained through a binary opposition between imperial orthodoxy and popular religion. Prevailing historiography has often positioned imperial patronage, court-sponsored institutions, and state policy as the principal engines of Buddhist development, relegating regional practices to secondary or derivative status (Heirman & Bingenheimer, 2007; Yan, 2016). The case of An Daoyi complicates this framework by revealing a mode of Buddhist propagation that was neither centrally directed nor oppositional, but relational and intermediary. An Daoyi's activities demonstrate that regional Buddhism functioned through overlapping fields of authority—imperial doctrine, local elite patronage, monastic charisma, and material practice. His inscriptions adhered to

canonical Mahāyāna teachings while simultaneously embedding doctrine within local sacred landscapes and social networks. Localization, therefore, did not entail doctrinal dilution or resistance to imperial norms; rather, it involved contextual rearticulation, whereby orthodox teachings were rendered meaningful through regionally specific material and spatial forms. This finding supports recent calls to move beyond top-down models of religious diffusion and toward relational approaches that account for negotiation, mediation, and adaptation at multiple levels (Guo, 2020; Robson, 2009). In the Northern Dynasties, Buddhism in Shandong was neither imposed from political centers nor spontaneously generated from below; it was co-produced through interactions among monks, patrons, landscapes, and texts.

One of the central contributions of this article is the conceptualization of the monastic intermediary as a distinct analytical category. An Daoyi exemplifies a type of religious actor whose authority derived not from institutional office or imperial favor, but from the capacity to broker relationships across social, political, and ritual domains. His leadership emerged through networked patronage, artistic and doctrinal competence, and the orchestration of collective religious projects. This intermediary role challenges conventional assumptions that equate religious authority with formal hierarchy. In the absence of sustained imperial support—and amid periodic persecution—monks like An Daoyi cultivated alternative bases of legitimacy rooted in material practice and social embeddedness. By coordinating gentry patronage, mobilizing artisan labor, and translating doctrine into monumental form, he exercised a form of authority that was simultaneously charismatic, practical, and durable. Recognizing the intermediary stratum has broader implications for the study of Chinese Buddhism. It invites scholars to reconsider how religious leadership functioned in regions distant from political capitals and how authority was negotiated in contexts of institutional fragility. Moreover, it suggests that Buddhism's vitality during periods of political instability depended as much on such intermediaries as on imperial institutions.

This study also contributes to scholarship on religious materiality by demonstrating how objects and spaces actively participated in the localization of Buddhism. Cliff sutra inscriptions were not passive carriers of text but agentive mediators that shaped religious experience, social interaction, and spatial perception (Appadurai, 1986; Kieschnick, 2003). Through scale, permanence, and visual impact, inscriptions transformed abstract doctrine into embodied encounter. They demanded bodily engagement—walking, viewing, circumambulating—and thus integrated practice into the rhythms of everyday life. Their immobility anchored Buddhist presence within specific landscapes, enabling doctrine to persist beyond the lifespan of individual institutions or patrons. Importantly, materiality also mediated between elite and popular forms of religiosity. While educated patrons might appreciate doctrinal nuance and calligraphic style, lay devotees could engage in inscriptions through visual awe and ritual participation. This multivocality enabled Buddhist teachings to circulate across social boundaries without relying solely on textual literacy.

An Daoyi's inscriptions reveal a process of geographical reconfiguration whereby Buddhism extended beyond monastic compounds to inhabit mountains, valleys, and pathways. This dispersed sacred geography complemented institutional Buddhism while reducing dependence on centralized structures vulnerable to political intervention. Mountains such as Mount Tai—already embedded in indigenous cosmologies—were reinterpreted as Buddhist spaces through inscription. This strategy did not erase preexisting meanings but layered new soteriological frameworks onto familiar landscapes. As a result, Buddhist geography in Shandong emerged as palimpsestic, integrating imperial symbolism, local cults, and Mahāyāna doctrine. From a comparative perspective, this case underscores the importance of geography in shaping religious adaptation. Sacred landscapes provided not only symbolic resonance but also practical advantages—remoteness, durability, and visibility—that facilitated Buddhist resilience during periods of suppression—localization, therefore, involved spatial as well as doctrinal negotiation.

The prominence of Prajñāpāramitā teachings and the monumentalization of concise doctrinal passages in An Daoyi's inscriptions reflect broader anxieties associated with the Latter Age of the Dharma (*mofa*). In an era perceived as marked by moral decline and institutional instability, emphasis shifted toward practices that promised immediate realization and enduring presence (Yan, 2016). Cliff inscriptions responded to these concerns by offering a form of material assurance. Their permanence countered the perceived ephemerality of human institutions, while their visibility affirmed the Dharma's continued presence in the world. By inscribing doctrine into stone, practitioners enacted a faith in the

enduring efficacy of Buddhist truth despite historical uncertainty. This material response to the Mofa challenges interpretations that frame eschatological concern solely in terms of textual or ritual innovation. It suggests that material strategies—monumentalization, spatial embedding, and durability—were equally central to Buddhist adaptation during periods of perceived decline.

## 5. Conclusion

Through the case of An Daoyi and his cliff sutra inscriptions, this article has argued for a rethinking of Buddhist localization in Northern Dynasties China. Localization emerges not as a marginal or derivative process, but as a constitutive dynamic through which Buddhism adapted to political fragmentation, social stratification, and religious pluralism. An Daoyi's role as a monastic intermediary highlights the importance of relational authority, material practice, and spatial strategy in sustaining Buddhism beyond imperial centers. His inscriptions demonstrate how doctrine, landscape, and community were woven together into a resilient religious system that persisted despite institutional vulnerability. More broadly, this study underscores the need to integrate regional perspectives into the historiography of Chinese Buddhism. By attending to the material and spatial dimensions of religious practice, scholars can better understand how Buddhism was lived, negotiated, and transformed across diverse local contexts in premodern China.

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