

# Illustrating the Efficacy of the *Diamond Sutra* in Vernacular Buddhism

Shih-shan Susan Huang  
Department of Art History  
Rice University

## Abstract

This article examines Song-to-Ming printed illustrations celebrating the power of the *Diamond Sutra*, one of the most widely copied Buddhist scriptures in East Asia. An integral part of printed copies of the *Diamond Sutra*, these illustrations reflect a strong popular taste appealing to common folks, connecting modern readers to a wider realm of vernacular Buddhism and popular Buddhist visual culture in traditional Chinese society, where indigenous beliefs, popular images, and various religious practices are freely borrowed, converged, and re-packaged. The first part of the study, “Buddhist Records of Magical Efficacy,” identifies the round-trip of protagonists to the underworld, and the efficacy of prolonging life in Tang-to-Northern Song miracle tales of the *Diamond Sutra* as two recurring features carried on in the Southern Song-Ming illustrated versions. The second part, “Illustrations of Miracle Tales,” examines illustrated miracle stories of the *Diamond Sutra* highlighting the underworld court, messengers from the underground, miraculous fungi, and magical writing. The third part, “Women in Vernacular Buddhist and Folklore Visual Cultures,” turns to good and evil stereotypes of women pictured in selected miracle tales. The author then also explores the half-animal, half-woman demons subjugated by Buddhist guardians, whose images are juxtaposed with the illustrated miracle stories in the Ming versions. Finally, the fourth part, “Publishers and Donors,” shifts to the social and religious context of the illustrated books of the *Diamond Sutra*. The extant Southern Song-Yuan woodcuts were likely printed by Hangzhou’s commercial publishers. A donor’s colophon and a hybrid Esoteric Buddhist pantheon in an early fifteenth-century version points to a multicultural community in early Ming Beijing.

**Keywords:** *Diamond Sutra*, woodblock print, illustrations, miracle tales, records of magical efficacy, Southern Song Hangzhou, early Ming Beijing, vernacular Buddhism, hybridity

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