Zhang Jizhi 張即之 (1186–1266) transcribed the *Diamond Sutra*² in 1248 for his deceased wife. These lines were appended in a colophon by a Confucianist layman. Zhang Jizhi was a devout Buddhist with close ties to disciples of the influential Chan master Wuzhun Shifan 無準師範 (1177–1249). A scholar-official, Zhang was well versed in calligraphy and hailed as the last great calligrapher of the Southern Song (1127–1279). This *Diamond Sutra* was written for religious reasons and the manuscript treated accordingly. It was stored in the sutra repository at Huideng Monastery 慧燈寺 in Suzhou and was only retrieved on important religious occasions. Now it is part of a collection kept by the Palace Museum in Beijing and has been catalogued as a work of calligraphy.

Transcribing a sutra is a religious exercise; the content of the text is chosen matters because of its ritual efficacy. On the other hand, presenting a sutra as a gift adds a new dimension to it that goes beyond this purely religious aspect. The text is fix, for eternity; not a single character may be altered. No personal message or hidden meaning seems to lie below the surface of the words. An ‘innocent’ text – unlike a poem, for example, – always connected to its author and their fate. Yet the calligrapher could and did invest a sutra transcription with a personal, social, historical and even political subtext by consciously selecting a specific, meaningful calligraphic style. The recipient of such a work and later owners demonstrated their ‘reading’ by acknowledging this in colophons appended to the sutra. The majority of colophons discuss such sutra transcriptions in calligraphic terms, ignoring the religious contents of the text.

A painting by Qiu Ying 仇英 (c. 1494–c. 1552), *Zhao Mengfu Writing the Heart Sutra in Exchange for Tea*³ (fig.1), illustrates how a sutra transcription gained new life as a work of art when it entered the literati sphere where it was appreciated according to a different set of values. The picture shows the famous painter, calligrapher and statesman Zhao Mengfu 趙孟頫 (1254–1322) in a garden setting. Across from him, seated at a stone table, is a Buddhist monk. A piece of paper is spread out on the table and Zhao is holding a brush in his hand, ready to write. An attendant approaches with a container of tea, a second servant boy is boiling some water and a third comes onto the scene with a bundle of scrolls in his arms. Beyond the fence, two birds are pecking grain from a lotus pedestal, a hint at a Buddhist ritual for hungry ghosts. The painting was commissioned by one of Qiu Ying’s patrons, the art collector and lay Buddhist Zhou Fenglai 周鳳來 (1523–1555). Zhou himself practised calligraphy in the style of Zhao Mengfu. The painting was meant as a companion piece for a poem in Zhou’s collection. The poem was a piece of calligraphy by Zhao Mengfu in which he writes about copying the *Heart Sutra*⁴ for a certain priest (Gong) in exchange for tea.² The sutra copy mentioned in the poem was no longer extant in the sixteenth century. Thus, Zhou Fenglai asked the famous calligrapher, painter and fellow art connoisseur Wen Zhengming 文徵明 (1470–1559) to create a replacement for it. Zhou resided in Kunshan...
near Suzhou, where Wen Zhengming was the most highly esteemed artist. Their collaboration on this project is a clear indication that they were both part of a closely woven local network, participants in literati cultural activities. Once Wen Zhengming had completed the transcription of the sutra in 1542, it was mounted together with Qiu Ying’s painting and Zhao Mengfu’s poem from Zhou Fenglai’s collection. In 1543, two of Wen Zhengming’s sons, Wen Peng 文彭 (1498–1573) and Wen Jia 文嘉 (1501–1583), both artists in their own right, supplied a colophon each. The texts these contained discuss the sutra copy and the poem exclusively in calligraphic terms. They place Zhao Mengfu’s achievements in the art of calligraphy firmly in line with Wang Xizhi 王羲之 (303–361) and Su Shi (Dongpo style:) 蘇軾 (1037–1101). Wen Peng equates sutra writing in return for tea with two other well-known transactions, involving calligraphy:

[... ] I-shao [Wang Xizhi] wrote in exchange for a flock of geese. Su Tung-po (Su Shi) wrote in exchange for meat [... ]

In 1584, a later owner of this scroll – the art connoisseur Wang Shimao 王世懋 (1536–158), who had obtained possession of the scroll from Zhou Fenglai’s family – cut off Zhao Mengfu’s poem. Wang re-mounted the poem along with a transcription of the Heart Sutra – also by Zhao Mengfu – taken from his own collection. As he explained in a colophon relating to Qiu Ying’s painting:

[... ] I was able to get two complete works of art in one clever stroke [... ]

From the same colophon we learn that this Heart Sutra had been transcribed in xingshu (semi-cursive script), a type of script for which Zhao Mengfu was particularly well known, and not in kaishu (regular or standard script), which was commonly employed to copy sutras. It had been a regular routine for Zhao Mengfu to transcribe sutras, to which he often added paintings of Buddhist deities like the Bodhisattva Guan Yin – usually one before and one after the text. This was more than a purely religious exercise; it was definitely also an exercise in calligraphy (perhaps even more so). Unlike poems, colophons or letters, such sutra copies were free of loaded connotations and accumulated history. The copier’s personal and individual expression was concealed in the style and form of the handwriting he used. Such works of art lent themselves particularly well to meeting one’s social obligations, i.e. as gifts, the possession of which would not endanger the recipient if the political wind happened to shift. Zhao Mengfu had been a scion of the Song Imperial family. His decision to follow the call to serve at the Court of the foreign Mongol rulers as a high-ranking official did not pass uncriticised. When he was asked for a piece of calligraphy by the Emperor, Zhao, his wife Guan Daosheng 管道昇 (1262–1319) and their son Zhao Yong 趙雍 (1289–c. 1360) chose to present him with a sutra transcription on several occasions, thus avoiding any implications or taking an overt stance on the morally difficult issue of loyalty. As a calligrapher, Zhao Mengfu strictly adhered to the orthodox Wang Xizhi school. It was the Tang dynasty (618–907) emperor Taizong 太宗 (reigned 629–649) who had made Wang Xizhi’s calligraphy an authoritative standard. This was a political act only partly motivated by aesthetic considerations. Officials employed the calligraphic style of Wang Xizhi and his son Wang Xianzhi 王獻之 (344–386) throughout the Empire. This fostered a strong sense of belonging to the ruling elite, of shared value, and of allegiance to the central power.

In the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), when factional struggles within the political elite were rampant, this close connection between orthodox calligraphic style and Confucian values was well understood. Thus, when Wang Shimao created

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6 English translation of both colophons in Goodfellow 1980, 205.
7 Translation quoted from Goodfellow 1980, 205.
8 Translation quoted from Goodfellow 1980, 204.
9 At least sixty sutra transcriptions are recorded in secondary texts. Eleven of these are copies of the Heart Sutra. The second most frequently copied sutra was the Diamond Sutra.

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Translation quoted from Goodfellow 1980, 204.
11 Lauer 2012.
12 The two main factions who fought for political power at the Ming Court were the Donglin movement and the supporters of the Eunuchs. The Donglin movement consisted mainly of highly educated officials from the literati class, men deeply concerned about Confucian ethics and morals, which they believed were being violated by corrupt, poorly educated or even illiterate Eunuchs. The choice of an imperially sanctioned and favoured style of calligraphy expressed loyalty and an adherence to Confucian values. For
Dong Qichang 董其昌 (1555–1636), a slightly younger contemporary of Wang Shimao, was a most influential calligrapher, painter, art collector and art historian. He copied sutras for religious reasons, but was also keenly aware, that his writing would be appreciated as a work of calligraphy. In a colophon Dong wrote for his own transcription of the *Heart Sutra* dated 1627, he very specifically records the sources of the calligraphic style (fig. 2) he had employed to transcribe this sutra, namely Ouyang Xun 歐陽詢 (557–641) and Yan Zhenqing 颜真卿 (709–785):

[...] In writing this sutra I used regular script, employing the style of Ou [yang Xun] and Yan [Zhenqing] [...] 12

What Dong Qichang used as models of calligraphy by those two eminent Tang calligraphers were not sutra copies but other works written in kaishu that he had in his art collection. Which specific works of calligraphy by Ouyang and Yan he had actually seen, handled, copied and commented on is documented quite well. 13 Apart from calligraphies in his own art collection, Dong Qichang also had access to first-rate works in the collections of such eminent connoisseurs as Xiang Yuanbian 項元汴 (1525–1590). 14 Whether or not Ouyang Xun or Yan Zhenqing ever transcribed any sutras is a controversial matter. Yet it had been common practice to describe the calligraphic style of a sutra as *Outi* 歐體 (in the style of Ouyang Xun) or *Yanti* 颜體 (in the style of Yan Zhenqins) since at least the Ming dynasty. The *Suti* 蘇體 (in the style of Su Shi) was less prominent. There are rubbings of a *Heart Sutra* by Ouyang Xun (fig. 3) containing his signature and a date from the year 635. The text is a translation by the pilgrim monk Xuanzang 玄奘 (602–664), who translated this sutra in 649. This post-dates Ouyang’s *Heart Sutra* by fourteen years. In other words, it is impossible


14 One of the few excellent scholarly books on Xiang Yuanbian’s art collection is by Zheng Yinshu 鄭銀淑 1984.
that Ouyang Xun used Xuanzang’s Chinese translation of this sutra. These facts point to an interesting phenomenon in calligraphy, to a practice still commonly resorted to in China nowadays, namely that of selecting individual characters from various works of calligraphy and re-assembling them to form a new piece of writing. One well-known example is the Thousand-Character Essay (Qianzi wen 千字文), which consists of a thousand words or characters that only occur once in the entire text. Legend has it that Emperor Wu of the Liang dynasty (502–549) selected a thousand characters from various works of calligraphy by Wang Xizhi and asked the scholar Zhou Xingsi (周興嗣) (470–521) to make a meaningful text out of them. The Thousand-Character Essay, which was written in Wang Xizhi’s distinct style, was intended to serve the crown prince as a model for practising calligraphy.

There are handwritten and printed sutras penned in the calligraphic style of Ouyang Xun and Yan Zhenqing from at least the Song dynasty (960–1279) onwards, although no evidence actually exists that either of these men ever copied a sutra. Sutras created in retrospect in the style of famous calligraphers lent these copies enormous prestige, not because of the contents of the text, but because of the weight and importance of the calligraphic style. Printed editions of these sutras were a political tool. The Imperial Court had complete editions of the Buddhist Canon printed and distributed among the major monasteries. The strategy behind this act was to assure the loyalty and allegiance of these monasteries and the Buddhist community to the Imperial Court. Equally anonymous but important and prominent sutra writing, like the monumental Diamond Sutra engraved into the rock at ‘Sutra Valley’ on Mount Tai around the year 570 were associated with the names of famous calligraphers by later epigraphers. On the grounds of stylistic similarities, it is said that Yan Zhenqing’s calligraphy was influenced by the style of this Diamond Sutra. As Amy McNair has convincingly argued, there is no proof of such influence, though

[…] we have absolutely no evidence that Yan ever visited Sutra Valley or saw ink rubbings taken from inscriptions. The connection cannot be substantiated through documentary evidence, nor is the visual evidence compelling. The critical practice of locating stylistic sources for the writing of well-known calligraphers in certain exceptional anonymous engraved stele inscriptions of the Northern Dynasties period (386–581) arose during the resurgence of epigraphic study that began during the reign of the Qianlong emperor (1735–1796). Chinese scholars are still wedded to this questionable practice today, as are some Western historians of calligraphy. This ‘questionable practice’ certainly reached its peak during the Qianlong reign, but had actually been in place since at

15 See Xu Yuanting 許媛婷 2006.

least the Song dynasty. A prominent example of this practice in the case of the early Qing dynasty was the courtier and art collector Gao Shiqi 高士奇 (1645–1704). He did not manage to pass the imperial examination and consequently had to struggle hard to win the respect of the Emperor and his fellow officials. Gao Shiqi used his art collection and colophon writing as a means of positioning himself in elite society. He was very knowledgeable about painting and calligraphy and perfectly conversant with literati conventions. In 1693, Gao appended a colophon (fig. 4) to a Diamond Sutra written by Dong Qichang in small, regular script in 1625. In his colophon, Gao boldly states that during the Tang dynasty the most important calligraphic style employed when copying sutras was that of Xu Hao 徐浩 (703–782). Specimens of this calligraphy were unobtainable in his time, the early Qing. He continues to prove his connoisseurship by showing his expertise and familiarity with practical aspects of material
The earliest known work of calligraphy by Dong Qichang is a copy of the Diamond Sutra dated 1592. He copied the sutra for the souls of his deceased parents, as indicated in his own dedication. Dong then presented the album to Yunqi Temple 雲棲寺 near Hangzhou. The abbot of the monastery at that time was the reformist monk Yunqi Zhuhong 雲棲超宏(1535–1615). The sutra copy also bears a dedication by Dong Qichang to Yunqi Zhuhong. The former maintained close contact with the abbot and the temple throughout his life. In 1604, he was asked to write the temple record in his calligraphy to be engraved onto a stele. For Zhuhong’s eightieth birthday in 1614, Dong Qichang gave him a copy of a Pure Land Sutra. A comment on this sutra transcript, Dong Qichang does not remark on any religious matters or on his friendship with the highly respected older monk, but considers this transcription a work of calligraphy. He compares his Pure Land Sutra to a copy by Zhao Mengfu, which the latter had dedicated to his friend, the Chan abbot Zhongfeng Mingben 中峰明本 (1262–1323). With unusual modesty, Dong says that the calligraphy used in his transcription is not as good a Zhao Mengfu's. For Dong Qichang, Zhao Mengfu was an arch rival – a calligrapher whom he strove to surpass. By 1614, Dong’s calligraphy had certainly reached a level of maturity and excellency that was on a par with that of the Yuan dynasty giant of calligraphy. With his pretence at modesty, Dong was, in fact, seeking confirmation to the contrary, namely that his calligraphy was actually better than Zhao Mengfu’s. In 1615, Dong Qichang transcribed the Amida Sutra, which he also presented to Yunqi Temple.

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19 Yü Chün-fang 1981.
20 Zhongqian Yunqi chanyuan beiji 重建雲栖禪院碑記. The stele is no longer extant.
22 Hand scroll, ink on paper, 35.6 × 322.6 cm, dated 1316, National Palace Museum, Taipei.
23 Chin. Amituo jing 阿彌陀經, translated into Chinese by Kumārajīva in the year 402, one of the three main Pure Land Sutra texts.
When Dong Qichang copied the *Diamond Sutra*, his calligraphy was still at an early formative stage. Unlike the *Heart Sutra*, which is short and easy to memorise, the text of the *Diamond Sutra* is rather long and lends itself well as a calligraphic exercise. This is precisely what Dong Qichang did. He wrote the sections of the sutra in various styles used by famous calligraphers of the past; the change in style is discernable. Sections one to five are written in the style of Zhong You鍾繇 (151–230), sections six to nine in the manner of the Two Wangs (Wang Xizhi and his son Wang Xianzhi), sections ten to thirteen in Ouyang Xun’s hand, sections fourteen to twenty are based on Mi Fu米芾 (1051–1107) with some elements from Yan Zhenqing, and the final sections (up to thirty-two) again follow Wang Xizhi’s stylistic approach. It is noteworthy that these names read like a Who’s Who of orthodox calligraphic tradition. By copying different sections of this sutra in different styles, Dong Qichang demonstrated his familiarity with works of calligraphy by these earlier masters and at the same time strove to be included in this illustrious lineage as a worthy successor of a centuries-old tradition. From his own comments and other sources, it is known that Dong had had the opportunity to see and occasionally copy or borrow famous works of calligraphy from two of the foremost private art collectors of the time, Xiang Yuanbian and Han Shineng韓世能 (1528–1598). The list of works Dong was able to study and copy prior to making his transcription of the *Diamond Sutra* is truly impressive, including Chu Suiliang’s褚遂良 (597–658) copy of Wang Xizhi’s *Orchid Pavilion Preface* with a colophon by Mi Fu (fig. 5). At this point, what mattered most was calligraphic style, stylistic quotations and the models that were selected. The sutra’s religious function – it was stored in the sutra repository and only taken out and recited in temple rituals on important days – was secondary. When Emperor Qianlong visited the South on his inspection tours, he always stopped at Yunqi Temple and asked to see Dong Qichang’s *Diamond Sutra*. The Emperor’s preference for Dong’s calligraphy was well known. He liked the calligraphy of this sutra transcription so much that he personally wrote the title slip, the frontispiece, appended six lengthy poetic colophons dated 1751, 1757, 1762, 1765, 1780 and 1784 and imprinted a total of nineteen of his seals on it.

Sutra transcriptions produced by anonymous monks in the scriptorium of a monastery tended to – quite literally – lead a cloistered existence in the temple or be sent from one temple to another. Once a sutra copy was associated with the name of a famous calligrapher, it left the religious Buddhist environment and entered the Confucian-dominated literati sphere, the ‘world of the red dust’, 25 where the written characters of sacred words lost their innocence and became part of very worldly matters such as issues of loyalty, status, rivalry or political allegiance. This discourse was not carried out openly in words, but concealed in the style and form of the calligraphy.

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24 Hand scroll, ink on paper, 24 × 88.5 cm, Palace Museum, Beijing.

25 *hong chen* 紅塵, a Buddhist term denoting the secular, material world.
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