

Foreword

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Buddhism originated in India, but due to the emphasis on the oral transmission in the Indian religious environment,¹ and the unique Indian conception of history that is distinct from that in China,² it is often difficult to arrive at a precise historical understanding of key figures and events. Facing this challenge, inscriptions and other archaeological sources prove to be sources with irreplaceable values. Among the inscriptions discovered in the Indian subcontinent, a great many are related to Buddhism, the study of which has provided the foundation for studying the history, philosophy, society and various other aspects of Indian and South Asian Buddhism.³ For in-

¹ Numerous publications have investigated the tradition of oral transmission in India. Latest publications include Scharfe, 'The Oral Tradition,' in Scharfe, *Education in Ancient India*, 8-37. Naturally, this Indian tradition has influenced Buddhism. See Allon, 'The Oral Composition and Transmission of Early Buddhist Texts'; Wynne, 'The Oral Transmission of the Early Buddhist Literature'; Anālayo, 'The Vicissitudes of Memory and Early Buddhist Oral Transmission'; Ji, 'Cong koutou dao shumian'; Anālayo, 'Early Buddhist Oral Transmission and the Problem of Accurate Source Monitoring'.

² Ge, 'Gudai Yindu de shijian guannian fang'ai le lishi xue de fazhan'.

³ An earlier important reference work is Shizutani, *Indo bukkuyō himei mokuroku*. This work has had several editions; the one just cited is the latest. In the Western scholarship, an exemplary work that used inscriptions to study the

stance, it is thanks to inscriptions that scholars came to determine the year of consecration of the king Aśoka (r. 268-232) which, in turn, became the basis to estimate the century that Buddha Śakyāmuni lived in.

Situation ameliorates when it comes to the study of the Chinese history because, by and large, Chinese culture values written records and, unlike India, used to have a ‘culture of court historians’.⁴ Ever since the Qin Dynasty (221-206 B.C.E), there have been historical records recounting a great number of historical figures and events in minute details.⁵ But even then, inscriptions still play a fundamental role in various fields in Buddhist Studies; and Buddhist inscriptions have been amply studied by scholars from various countries with numerous important outcomes already published.⁶ Deserving our special attentions are the research teams and databases established in several reputed academic institutions, such as the project Buddh-

history of Indian Buddhism is Schopen, *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks*. But note that several arguments in this book have been strongly challenged by the more recent research. Another work that studies the early Indian Buddhist history by systematically examining inscriptions is Hazra, *Buddhism and Buddhist Literature in Early Indian Epigraphy*. For an overview of Indian epigraphy, see Salomon, ‘Buddhism’, in his *Indian Epigraphy*, 241-242. Just as Saloman said in the introduction, his work relied on previous works, notably including an earlier masterpiece—Sircar, *Indian Epigraphy* and his *Indian Epigraphical Glossary*.

⁴ Chen, *Zhongguo shiguan wenhua yu Shiji*.

⁵ Some fairly recent and frequently used compilations of Buddhist inscriptions include Zhang, *Gansu Fojiao shike zaoxiang*; *Fojiao taben yandu xiaozu*, *Zhongyang yanjiuyuan lishi yuyan yanjiusuo cang Beiwei jinian Fojiao shike taben mulu*; Long, *Bashu Fojiao betwen jicheng*; Yan, *Beichao Fojiao shike tapian baipin*; Wang, *Henan Fojiao shike zaoxiang*; Pan, *Shanghai Fojiao beike ziliao ji*; Zheng, *Fujian zongjiao beiming huibian*; Zhao, *Wutai shan beiwen*; Li, *Luoyang Fojiao beike jicui*.

⁶ Such as Kegasawa, *Chūgoku Bukkyō sekkyō no kenkyū*; and Kegasawa, *Shinpen Tōdai boshi shozai sōgō mokuroku*; Kuramoto, *Hokuchō Bukkyō zōzōmei kenkyū*.

tische Steininschriften in Nordchina (Buddhist Stone Inscriptions in North China) led by Lothar Ledderose in the Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften (Heidelberg Academy of Sciences and Humanities). Since its foundation, the project has made remarkable contributions, including its monographs published in six volumes.⁷ It also has an online database with open access, where scholars could access the transcription,⁸ the English translation and other data of the inscriptions found in more than 20 locations in Shandong Province, such as Mount Yi 嶧山 or Mount Jian 尖山, as well as those in various locations in Sichuan Province, such as the Wofu Monastery 臥佛院 in Anyue 安岳. Similarly, Academia Sinica in Taiwan created a database of Buddhist rubbings, based on the rubbing collection in the Fu Ssu-nian Library in Academia Sinica.⁹ It comprises mostly the inscriptions in northern dynasties and the Sichuan area from the fifth century to the Republic of China (1912-1949). Inscriptions contain various types of prayers among other data. By studying the demography and the social organization related to these inscriptions, we could glean important information about the social religious history of the medieval period.¹⁰ Likewise, the Dunhuang inscriptions are also precious sources. By collecting and studying

⁷ Wang and Ledderose, eds., *Zhongguo Fojiao shijing: Shandong Sheng diyi juan*; Wang and Wenzel, eds., *Zhongguo Fojiao shijing: Shandong Sheng dier juan*; Wang and Tsai, eds., *Zhongguo Fojiao shijing: Shandong Sheng disan juan*; Ledderose and Sun, eds., *Zhongguo Fojiao shijing: Sichuan Sheng diyi juan*; Tsai and Sun, eds., *Zhongguo Fojiao shijing: Sichuan Sheng di er juan*; Wenzel and Sun, eds., *Zhongguo Fojiao shijing: Sichuan Sheng disan juan*.

⁸ Website (accessed on December 12, 2020): <https://www.stonesutras.org/exist/apps/stonesutras/start.html>.

⁹ Website (accessed on December 12, 2020): <http://rub.ihp.sinica.edu.tw/~buddhism/>.

¹⁰ Some exemplary works include Liu, 'Wu zhi liu shiji Huabei xiangcun de Fojiao Xinyang'; and Liu, 'Cong zaoxiang bei kan Nanbei chao Fojiao de jige mi-anxiang: Shixiang, yiyi he Zhongguo zhuan shu jingdian'; Hou, *Wu liu shiji beifang mingzhong Fojiao xinyang*.

them in a systematic fashion, we may procure a similar benefit for our research.¹¹

Comparing to the systematized Buddhist documents that are conducive to transmission, Buddhist inscriptions present information that is sporadic and unsystematic. But it is precisely because such information has not been edited nor copied in numerous rounds that Buddhist inscriptions may retain important raw data that could enable us to glimpse the disorderly and yet rich and authentic religious social life of the past. In addition, Buddhist texts were often written by middle or upper-class elites or by literati, whereas the inscriptions bore a closer rapport with the middle or lower class. In certain sense, we could consider inscriptions as representing a marginal culture that contrasts the dominant culture of elites, for they reflect the everyday life lived by the populace. For this reason, we could hardly overemphasize the importance of inscriptions as historical sources.

Motivated by the considerations above, we hosted, from August 20th to 21st, 2019, a conference titled ‘Manufacturing, Preservation and Interpretation of Buddhist Metal and Stone Epitaphs in Central and East Asia’ in St Anne’s College at the University of Oxford, in our efforts to promote the academic research of Buddhist inscriptions. This conference was hosted by the Glorison Global Network of Buddhist Studies (www.glorisunglobalnetwork.org) and co-hosted by the Buddhist Classics and Arts Research Centre at the Peking University, the From the Ground Up project (www.frogbear.org) at the University of British Columbia and the Longmen Grotto Research Institute. In this conference, twenty-two scholars from Europe, North America and East Asia engaged in fruitful exchanges in such disciplines as archaeology, history and sociology.

The introduction above foretells the contents of this anthology. The anthology comprises essays that interpret the stone inscriptions in terms of their codicology and historical contexts, as a means to

¹¹ Zheng, *Dunhuang beiming zan jishi*; and Zheng, *Dunhuang beiming zan jishi (zengding dingben)*.

investigate, both widely and deeply, the Buddhist elements that have permeated the cultures in East Asia and even the South East Asian cultures that have come under the East Asian influence. The importance of Buddhist inscriptions as historical sources lies precisely in their numerous diverging features in regard to Buddhist documents: the background of fabrication, the audience, the particularities in ways that they are preserved, transmitted and discovered. They could thus provide valuable and necessary supplements and revisions to the information preserved in Buddhist documents; and a precious alternative perspective to studying Buddhist philosophy and practice, the history of various Buddhist lineages, the relationship between the secular and the sacred, and the interaction between politics and religions, etc.

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