Carving Out a Space for Women's History within Buddhist Studies: New Studies in Epigraphy

The six essays in this special issue of *Hualin International Journal of Buddhist Studies* originated from a weekly series of work-in-progress sessions that took place online during the 2022–2023 academic year. These sessions were unique in that they brought together scholar members of the Buddhist Studies community with practitioner members of Buddhist communities,[1] all of whom shared the goal of understanding what the practice of Buddhism looked like for women in premodern times. These online sessions provided a forum to discuss the question of whether or not epigraphical sources provide rare details on the lives of Buddhist women in history. It was clear to those who attended that, yes, epigraphical sources provide new data on women's lives in history, and that this data is helpful for historians to better understand the development of various Buddhist traditions just as it is for religious practitioners to have a fuller picture of the possibilities for women's involvement in Buddhist tradition, past and present.

Questions that all of us in attendance circled back to again and again were: 1) Can we identify women's agency in premodern sources, particularly an agency that speaks to women's involvement in the development of Buddhist tradition?; 2) Can we actually find women's voices in the past, and, if so, do these voices speak to women's financial and social autonomy? 3) Does the study of Buddhist epigraphy bring to light new histories of women that are different, perhaps even liberating or transgressive, by comparison to the ones we already

[1] Patton, 'A New Weekly Series on Epigraphy'.

know? We return to all of these questions in many places throughout this collection of essays.

In this special issue, you will find stories of women that are known to us today only because they were carved in stone a long time ago. These are the stories of queens, nuns, patrons, mothers, wives, and daughters that are not preserved in any other sources. We know of these women only through rock inscriptions. In the pages below you will find translations of long and rare epigraphs that one can read like literature—looking for voices, shifts in voices, subtle nuances that suggest something about the social and personal lives that women lived. At the other end of the spectrum, you will also see short and formulaic epigraphs clustered together in site-specific studies that tell us about how women gathered and organized in religious undertakings in the past. In all cases, the authors of the contributions to this volume—Megan Bryson, Alice Collett, Li Lan, Kate Lingley, Bruno Shirley, and Trent Walker—offer either new translations of previously untranslated materials or re-translations of epigraphical texts that have been translated before but remain understudied. The pieces in this volume are not meant to be standalone, argumentative essays; rather, they all contain brief introductions to the translated material that describe the physical and historical context of the epigraphs themselves, just as they also offer brief conclusions that aim to help the reader to appreciate the uniqueness of the text and what it offers to the study of Buddhism and the study of women.

Why study epigraphy to study women, particularly Buddhist women?

In a field-changing article published in 1991 in *History of Religions*, Gregory Schopen spoke to the then-emerging field of Buddhist Studies about the vital importance of utilizing epigraphical and archeological sources in our understanding of early Buddhism in South Asia. Referring to the dominant, text-positivist method employed by scholars of Buddhism in his time as 'decidedly peculiar' even though it has 'rarely been seen to be so', he argues that said peculiarity has been caused by a 'curious and unargued preference for a certain kind

of source material', those being canonical texts of the Buddhist tradition that Schopen refers to as 'literary sources'.[2] Schopen then spends the next twenty pages of the article demonstrating the historical mistake of prioritizing canonical Buddhist texts as sources for the study of Buddhism over and above archeological and epigraphical sources. He notes that not only can religious texts seldom be accurately dated, but also that the preference for using them comes from a false assumption regarding their sacred ahistoricity. Canonical texts of the Buddhist tradition, he cautions, are human attempts at systemization; describing religious ideals that are often at odds with historical practices, these texts are the products of editorial refashioning over time. They describe how religious practice should be considered and remembered from an emic, and often elite, perspective. For a more accurate and datable witness to historical practice, Schopen argues, we must consult epigraphical and archeological sources.

How much more so is this the case with respect to the study of women? If, as Schopen argues, literary texts of the Buddhist tradition represent an anachronistic and idealized picture of what Buddhist communities looked like and took to be important, then we may expect significant omissions corresponding to the blind spots of their authors and compilers, who were, to our knowledge, never women. If reliance on religious text causes scholars to be blind to the lived experiences of Buddhist communities throughout time, then they cause us to be doubly blind in the case of women's history: women are not amply represented in Buddhist canonical texts, and when they are, it is often through a male and monastic gaze. Indeed, the very religious ideals which, Schopen argues, cause religious texts to be unreliable historical witnesses, are also ideals that are not open to women. From such texts, therefore, we know neither what historical women were doing with their lives nor what their own religious goals and ideals were.

As we will see in this collection, the epigraphical record from across the premodern Buddhist world not only contains data regarding women and their lives that is nowhere else recorded, but it also

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[2] Schopen, 'Archeology and Protestant Presuppositions', 1.

includes such data at a much higher volume than other archives of primary source material. The inferences that we can make about women's lives from this data are often significant in the sense that they overturn commonly-held ideas about the social, educational, and economic restrictions that women faced in premodern times. The epigraphs featured and translated in this special issue show that women enjoyed freedom of organization, autonomy in financial projects, decision-making powers within their families, high status as queens and officials, and the ability to create and innovate religious choice. Tantalizingly, such epigraphs also suggest something about the literacy of women; having paid a substantial amount of money to have their names and stories etched in stone, there were no reasons to assume that they were not members of literate communities who valued the enduring presence of the written word and who had textual access to their religion.

The study of Buddhist women in antiquity through epigraphy is also supported by similar projects that focus on other classical cultures. In the world of Ancient Greece, for example, Ian Plant argues that epigraphs allow scholars to 'question the view that women were considered of little consequence in Classical Greek society' by exposing how this idea is itself 'founded on the privileging of the importance of the political and military world, the sole preserve of men'. Indeed, like our sources featured in this volume, epigraphs from Ancient Greece 'reveal some aspects of the lives of women from a female perspective' and they 'should be recognized as representing women's voices'.[3] To return to the context of Buddhist epigraphy, here we are talking about a religion that spans multiple societies and whose source material is not necessarily shaped by political and military texts; however, the observation is the same: with few exceptions, Buddhist canonical and literary texts are the products of male authors who either did not have familiarity with women's lives or did not write about them from a female perspective.

What happens when we preference epigraphical sources in the study of Buddhism? In Anjali Verma's 2019 monograph entitled

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[3] Plant, '"Now I still honour you ...'.

Women and Society in Early Medieval India: Re-interpreting Epigraphs, Verma uses the epigraphical record to reinterpret the medieval history of women and gendered practices in South Asia in ways that challenge patriarchal stereotypes. In resonance with Verma's approach, we too hope to re-imagine the contribution of women to the development of Buddhist tradition. This work has already been started. For example, Matthew Milligan has shown, from epigraphs, that women were substantial economic contributors to early Buddhist sites like Sanchi that are rich in epigraphical data,[4] just as Jinah Kim has used epigraphs to challenge the prevalent idea that women disappeared from the practice of Buddhism in South Asia around the ninth century of the Common Era.[5] I have used the medieval Chinese epigraphical record to argue that women were instrumental to the creation of East Asian Buddhism and that their work shows how they benefitted from substantial freedom of movement, as well as autonomy in education and the economy.[6] With additional and sustained study of the epigraphical record from across the Buddhist world, we believe that an entirely new history of Buddhism will be revealed—one that recognizes the work and contributions of women as indispensable to the growth of the tradition.

What will you find in this special issue?

The six studies in this volume are arranged in chronological order. To begin, Alice Collett's study of royal women from the Ikṣvāku dynasty (third–fourth c. CE) highlights the only known sources of information on these women—rock inscriptions—and analyzes the inscriptions for data regarding their religious practice, suggesting that Buddhism was an appealing choice to them. Moving from South

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4 Milligan, 'The Economic Power of Women in Early South Asian Buddhism'.

5 Kim, 'Unheard Voices'.

6 For examples of how I have used epigraphical material to reconstruct women's history in medieval China, see Balkwill, *The Women Who Ruled China*, 78–108; *idem*, 'A Virtuoso Nun in the North'.

Asia to East Asia, Kate Lingley's contribution uses both art historical and literary methods to read images and inscriptions of women donors in the sixth century. Through her careful analysis, she argues that women's voices are present in donor epigraphy and can be seen to run both alongside and counter to male voices. Li Lan stays in the medieval Chinese context, writing on seventh- to ninth-century epigraphs from among the thousands of inscriptions at the Buddhist cave site of Longmen. Using both archeological and literary analysis, she presents quantitative data on the types and amounts of inscriptions made by women as well as qualitative data that considers women's unique religious wishes. Moving next to Sri Lanka, Bruno Shirley introduces us to three noblewomen from the early second millennium who are largely unknown in others sources. His analysis of the inscriptions shows us that women had a much larger role in the development of Sri Lankan Theravadin Buddhism than previously known. Following Shirley, Megan Bryson brings us to the Dali Kingdom (937–1253) as she analyzes the only record of a Dali-kingdom woman's life, her funerary inscription. Relatively silent on Buddhism, this source describes the woman in Confucian terms; nonetheless, Bryson uses the source to weave together a depiction of how women may have lived in a Buddhist and Confucian environment. Finally, Trent Walker brings us to the kingdoms of premodern Southeast Asia and offers translations of three important inscriptions that offer unique insights on the lives and religious practice of three Buddhist queens. In so doing, he reveals little known insights about women's religious choices, powers, and freedoms that challenge how women are depicted in other, androcentric, source materials.

The studies are arranged in chronological order; however, they also share overlapping themes that could be helpfully drawn out for teaching and research purposes. With the exception of Lingley and Li, all of the studies focus on royal or noble women, a fact that reveals the unique character of the medieval Chinese epigraphical record where we can find women of a wider range of statuses. Walker and Lingley both ask careful questions about authorial voice in their contributions, with both of them suggesting that we can find a premodern Buddhist women's voice in the inscriptions they are working with, and that this voice challenges common narratives of women's

lives in premodern times. Li and Collett raise important questions about how women practiced religion in their contexts, and argue that the inscriptions they are working with provide a rare witness to women's religious choice. The question of how women's lives are depicted within historical contexts that are either multilingual or multireligious is explicitly explored by Collett, Walker, and Bryson, just as Bryson and Lingley explicitly pair their inscriptions with visual materials. Though all of these essays show women's contributions to the development of Buddhism, this line of inquiry is most directly explored by Shirley and Li who reveal a variety of ways in which Buddhism was built through female patronage.

What we offer in these pages is our attempt to increase source materials that document women's lives in history, and that show how women were intimately involved in Buddhist practices of religious devotion, community making, doctrinal innovation, and governance. We hope that the studies included in this special issue of *Hualin International Journal of Buddhist Studies* will inspire innovative and increased scholarship on Buddhist epigraphy and women's history that engage different cultural and temporal contexts than those explored here.

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