THE RETURN OF THE STATE: ON THE SIGNIFICANCE OF BUDDHIST EPIGRAPHY AND ITS GEOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION

Liu Shufen

Introductory remarks

Scholars researching the history of early medieval Chinese Buddhism have long been aware of some striking variations in this religion’s development in northern and southern China. While members of the monastic elite translated sutras, preached the dharma, and attracted imperial and aristocratic patronage in both the north and the south, Buddhism appears to have attracted a larger following in the north, both in urban and rural areas. According to Luoyang qielan ji 洛陽伽藍記, this venerable city was home to 1,367 Buddhist temples during the Northern Wei, and its outskirts included numerous sites for the construction of awe-inspiring cave temples. Even after the capital was moved to Yecheng 鄭城 in 534, resulting in the relocation of 400,000 citizens, 421 temples remained in Luoyang. In contrast, the southern capital Jiankang 建康 had approximately 500 Buddhist temples (700 if one counts those located in suburbs near the city) and only a few cave temple complexes. Moreover, during much of the Northern Dynasties, countless monks and nuns traveled throughout the countryside,
transmitting popularized forms of the Dharma (often contained in indigenous scriptures) and founding religious associations (variously known as *yiyi* 義邑 or *fayi* 法義), their activities being recorded on thousands of statuaries stele (zaoxiang bei 造像碑). Millenarian Buddhist beliefs inspired numerous uprisings in the north, and the imperial state’s anxiety over the growth of this religion resulted in a number of suppression campaigns. The south witnessed far fewer Buddhist-inspired uprisings, and no state-sponsored anti-Buddhist suppressions. As a result, most research on Buddhism during the Southern Dynasties tends to focus on the patronage of emperors like Liang Wudi (r. 502–49), or the activities of eminent monks and their aristocratic patrons.

A number of possible causes for the north-south differences described above have been proposed, including the routes by which Buddhism spread into China, variations in forms of imperial patronage, ethnicity, and the roles of Buddhist specialists and their rituals. This paper will explore an additional factor that has yet to be systematically researched: regional variations in Buddhist epigraphy. My interest in epigraphy’s role in our understanding of the broader picture of Buddhism’s development during the medieval era has in part been inspired by Erik Zürcher, who once pointed out that the overwhelming mass of material in dynastic histories, biographical sources like the *Gaoseng zhuan* 高僧傳, and sectarian compilations like the *Fozu tongji* 佛祖統紀, constitutes a mixed blessing. Such sources generally present only one aspect of the Buddhist religion in medieval China—the doctrines, monastic regulations, and meditation rituals that appealed to the aristocrats, officials, and monks.

---


