

Report of the Guest Lecture of the BuddhistRoad project

23.10.2019 Chen, Ruixuan (Heidelberg):

INSIDE OUT: THE STORY OF A PAIR OF WOODEN BOOK COVERS FROM ANCIENT KHOTAN,

invited lecture at the BuddhistRoad project, CERES, Ruhr University Bochum

The ERC project *BuddhistRoad* invited Chinese scholar, Dr Ruixuan Chen, to present his new findings of a pair of wooden book covers recovered from Khotan (56-1006), an ancient Iranian Saka Buddhist Kingdom located in the Tarim Basin (modern Xinjiang, China). Dr Ruixuan Chen holds the position of an assistant professor in Buddhist Studies at the Center for Transcultural Studies of Heidelberg University.

In his talk, Dr Chen introduced a pair of wooden tablets, which were used as the covers of the main manuscript of the famous *Book of Zambasta*. He pointed out that this book, well-known as one of the most important sources for investigating Khotanese Buddhism, has been studied by numerous scholars. However, the bilingual inscriptions, written on the inside of the covers, are also informative materials, which have not yet received due attention. In this talk, he approached this pair of book covers as written artefacts and emphasized that they have social lives in their own right. After making a detailed description of the physical features of the wooden covers, Dr Chen presented a codicological and historical investigation of the inscriptions. By this effort, he committed himself to reconstructing the functionality of the wooden tablets in history. In the following discussion, Dr Chen indicated the cultic use of the book covers. To elaborate on this aspect, he drew parallels from a variety of Buddhist manuscript cultures in the trans-Himalayan regions, such as the book covers for the later Nepalese manuscripts and some manuscripts from Gilgit.

In brief, this talk explored the Buddhist manuscript culture and shed new light on the functionality and materiality of the pair of wooden book covers recovered from ancient Khotan. It offered comparative insight into the transmission and exchanges of religious ideas and material cultures across the Pamir mountain ranges throughout the second half of the first millennium.

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