

INTRODUCTION

BUDDHIST RITUALS AND PRACTICES IN CENTRAL ASIA: TEXTS AND MATERIAL CULTURE

The articles presented here arose out of a collaboration between the *BuddhistRoad* project, funded by the European Research Council (ERC), under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No. 725519), and the *Dzogchen* research project, sponsored by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (Germany), both projects being based at the Center for Religious Studies (CERES), Ruhr-Universität Bochum.

While the articles address a number of different subjects and issues, they all deal with the theme of Buddhist rituals and practices in Central Asia, either from the perspective of textual studies or from that of research into material culture. This is one of the research topics dealt with in the framework of the *BuddhistRoad* project,¹ and also connects with one of the research questions pursued in the context of the *Dzogchen* project.²

The papers were initially planned as contributions for a dedicated panel organised by Carmen Meinert and Yukiyo Kasai at the XIXth conference of the International Association of Buddhist Studies, which was to be held in Seoul in August 2020. Unfortunately, due to the worldwide Coronavirus pandemic, the conference had to be postponed. Nonetheless, the scholars contributing to the panel decided to go ahead with the writing of their papers despite the new logistical challenges caused by the situation, and we are happy to be able to present the results of this research here.

¹ For all the research topics and related publications, see <https://buddhistroad.ceres.rub.de/en/publications/>.

² For an outline of the research questions, see <https://ceres.rub.de/en/research/projects/dzogchen/>.

The first paper, by Dylan Esler, is about the early Tibetan Dzogchen (Tib. *rdzogs chen*) tradition and its ambivalent relationship to tantric ritual. The article revisits the Tibetan Dunhuang manuscripts which, in various ways, deal with the notion of *rdzogs chen*, looking at several groups of manuscripts in turn: those that mention the term *rdzogs chen* within a Mahāyoga ritual context; those that, even without using the term itself, rhetorically negate ritualised modes of tantric practice, thus prefiguring the Dzogchen approach; and those that are explicitly identified as Dzogchen texts. Esler provides further context for this discussion by drawing on a set of hitherto unstudied Dzogchen commentaries by the renowned meditation master Nupchen Sangyé Yéshé (ca. 844 to mid-10th c., Tib. gNubs chen Sangs rgyas ye shes), who played a formative role in the codification of Dzogchen thought in Tibet. This comparison allows for a greater appreciation of the processes of doxographical demarcation involved in Dzogchen's negotiation of the (rhetorical) absence of ritual.

The next paper is by Carmen Meinert and provides a thorough philological and structural analysis of a Karakhoto manuscript containing a fairly complete evocation (Skt. *sādhana*) of the tantric goddess Vajravā-rāhī. The manuscript may be one of the earliest examples of its kind in Chinese and represents a fine example of the translation initiatives pursued in the Tangut Empire (ca. 1038–1227). The article gives much background information on the elaborate translation procedures that were employed at the Tangut court – presumably including oral exposition of a “text” and involving whole teams of learned translators and editors – and shows that those engaged in compiling and translating such ritual texts from Tibetan sources possessed not only impressive linguistic skills but also a high level of technical ritual expertise. Meinert's analysis reveals that, despite its polished appearance, this manuscript contains a number of inconsistencies in translation terminology and in the manner of rendering mantric seed syllables (Skt. *bīja*), as well as other mistakes. These incongruities suggest that the manuscript reflects a process of textual production involving various phases of editorial intervention, whereby the “finished” text is compiled from several ritual building blocks, assembled according to the local needs of users.

The third paper, by Henrik H. Sørensen, is about a particular ritual text, the *Wuxiang li* 无相礼 [Formless Worship], several copies of which

have been recovered at Dunhuang. This text provides a fascinating example of the manner in which some of the more apophatic elements of Chinese Mahāyāna metaphysics, to wit the notion of “formlessness” (Skt. *animitta/alakṣaṇa*; Chin. *wuxiang* 無相), are integrated within a ritual framework for the benefit of regular performance by practitioners. The article traces the trajectory of such notions from the Indian Prajñāpāramitā tradition to their introduction and adaptation to Chinese conditions, laying particular emphasis on the commentaries deriving from the Esoteric Buddhist (Chin. *mijiao* 密教) and Huayan (華嚴) traditions. A careful analysis of possible links between the *Formless Worship* and the Chan (禪) tradition reveals that both originated around the same period. The implication is that the notion of formless worship is in no wise unique to Chan, but reflects a wider process of engaging in formal ritual activities from a non-dual perspective, which is observable across late medieval Chinese schools of Buddhism.

The fourth paper, by Yukiyo Kasai, deals with Uyghur Buddhist talismans. The Turkish-speaking Uyghur tribe migrated to the East Tianshan (天山) area and there established the West Uyghur Kingdom in the 9th century. While initially Manichaean, they gradually converted to Buddhism through sustained contact with the local Buddhist population of the Tianshan area. The topic of talismans is of particular interest, for it highlights the nature of religious practices “on the ground,” where people sought various means of protection against the difficulties they faced. Moreover, Kasai demonstrates that due to the religious contacts that existed between Turfan, one of the Uyghurs’ cultural centres, and the oasis town of Dunhuang, a comparison of the Chinese Buddhist talismans recovered at Dunhuang with those used by the Uyghur Buddhists is especially useful in enabling the identification of several of the Uyghur talisman images. Such a comparison also shows the influence of Esoteric Buddhism on the everyday life of the Uyghur Buddhists.

It is a pleasurable duty to express our gratitude to Prof. Ingo Strauch for welcoming the articles of our panel in the pages of this journal, as well as to those scholars who have peer-reviewed these pieces and whose detailed comments have helped to improve their content. We would also like to thank Dr Martin J. Boord, whose keen eye for detail and English style has helped to improve the readability of these papers.

We hope that the articles assembled here will provide scholars with some interesting elements for further reflection on and research into the rituals and practices of Buddhism in Central Asia.

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