

Report of the Guest Lecture of the BuddhistRoad project

17 May 2023 Fu Ma (Beijing)

NEWLY DISCOVERED OLD UYGHUR MANUSCRIPTS: PRACTICE AND RITUALS OF THE UYGHUR BUDDHISTS

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

The BuddhistRoad team invited Fu Ma, Assistant Professor at the Center for Research on Ancient History and Department of History, Peking University (Beijing, China) to share his research on Buddhist practice in the Old Uyghur society. Due to the lack of literary sources, various types of written monuments unearthed from ancient sites in Turfan play a crucial role in the reconstruction of the social and religious history of the Old Uyghur people. In recent years, Fu Ma has been working on edition of Old Uyghur Buddhist manuscripts and inscriptions newly discovered or re-discovered in China, providing new data for research into rituals, practice, and daily life in the Uyghur Buddhist society. In this lecture, he presented some findings based on his research on the inscriptions unearthed in the Buddhist site at Toyok, Turfan.

The lecture started with an overall introduction to newly discovered (or re-discovered) Old Uyghur Buddhist texts in China in the past few years. In particular, he drew the audiences' attention to the inscriptions discovered in Cave 26 of the monastery complex on the high platform in the middle of the western section of Toyok valley, stressing their unique value in the study of Uyghur social history. Unlike those discovered in other Buddhist sites, which were left by pilgrims or patrons for most cases, these inscriptions were left by the hands of Buddhist practitioners. By analyzing several typical cases discovered in Room B of Cave 26, Fu Ma proved to the audiences that the visitors to this cave were Uyghur Buddhist practitioners, and their major activities there is practicing Chan (禪) meditation, but not veneration or homage.

The next question to answer is on what occasion did they visit the cave and practice meditation. Fu Ma related the mention of 'three months' in several cases to the summer retreat. According to his survey of the dates of all the inscriptions from the site, most of the visits took place during the period between the 15th of the fourth month and the 14th of the seventh month, during which summer retreat was held annually in the adjacent Dunhuang (敦煌) region in practice. Some Old Uyghur Buddhist literatures also yield clues on the same period when the annual summer retreat



took place among the Old Uyghurs. The inscriptions reveal that not all the Uyghur practitioners stay a full period of three months for summer retreat. Similar practices can be seen in Dunhuang as well.

Since a few inscriptions indicate that visits to the cave also took place during the winter time, Fu Ma further argued that some Uyghur practitioners probably spent the annual retreat in winter time in addition to the summer retreat. Chinese manuscripts reveal that the winter retreat did take place in the adjacent Dunhuang Buddhist community. The Uyghur Buddhist practitioners were likely to follow this practice, as they were strongly influenced by the Buddhist community there. Significant evidence for this argument is found in an inscription from the Yulin caves within the Dunhuang region, which indicates that a West Uyghur monk stayed three months there for the annual retreat during winter time.

In the last section of the lecture, Fu Ma analyzed the nature of the monastery complex on the platform in the middle of the western section. Comparing the archeological data with the information seen from inscriptions and manuscripts unearthed from the same site, he proposed to relate the complex to the monastery intended for meditation practice recorded in the Chinese document dated to Tang (618–907, 唐) times.

The lecture ended with a brief introduction to the current archaeological field work at Toyok site and the brand-new material unearthed there. Besides Buddhist literatures, the newly acquired texts also cover a wide range of contents related to monastic life, including monastic letters, divination book folios, and economic documents. The edition of these texts in the near future is expected to shed new light on further research on the religious and secular life of the Buddhist Uyghur people in Toyok as well as in the whole Turfan region.

