

## Report of BuddhistRoad Guest Lecture

14 January 2022 Cuilan Liu (Pittsburg)

### **LAW AND SLAVERY ON THE SILK ROAD: HOW DID BUDDHIST MONKS AND NUNS PARTICIPATE IN THE SLAVE TRADE?**

invited lecture at the BuddhistRoad project, CERES, Ruhr-Universität Bochum

On January 14, 2022, The ERC project *BuddhistRoad* invited Dr. Cuilan Liu to give a public lecture on “Law and Slavery on the Silk Road: How Did Buddhist Monks and Nuns Participate in the Slave Trade?” Dr. Liu is an Assistant professor in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Pittsburgh. She is a scholar, documentary filmmaker, and podcast host. Her research focuses on the relationship between religion and law, paying particular attention to Buddhism’s legal interaction with the state in India, China, and Tibet.

Dr. Liu’s goal in this lecture was to show the different roles ordained Buddhist monks and nuns had played in the local slave markets along the Silk Road in Dunhuang and Turfan. Dr. Liu began by explaining how the preservation of legal manuscripts documenting disputes over slave ownership led her to focus on these two regions. Next, she introduced the legal contexts for the slave trade in Dunhuang (敦煌) and Turfan. In particular, she showed how ordained Buddhist monks and nuns are forbidden from owning or selling slaves in the *Tang Code* (Chin. *Tang lü* 唐律) and the *vinaya*, the Buddhist Monastic law code.

In the main part of this lecture, Dr. Liu introduced five lawsuits over the ownership of slaves, all of which had Buddhist monks or nuns involved as plaintiffs or defendants. In the first case documented in the Tibetan manuscript P. T. 1079, two monks and a nun litigated against an unspecified Buddhist monastery over the ownership of several female slaves. In the second case recorded in the Chinese Dunhuang manuscript S. 528, a Buddhist monk accused another Buddhist monk of taking his wife, children, and a female slave by force. The third case in the Tibetan Dunhuang manuscript P. T. 1080 recorded the lawsuit between a Buddhist nun and her adopted daughter. The fourth case was recorded in four separate legal documents found in Turfan and Urumqi. These four documents were all related to a Buddhist novice monk who had filed a petition letter accusing a Buddhist priest of attempting to sell him as a slave in 1280. The novice monk was a slave before. The Buddhist priest first



paid to buy and free him, but later attempted to enslave him. These documents include a receipt of payment to free the slave, a sale contract, a manumission letter issued to free the slave, and the petition letter.

In conclusion, Dr. Liu argued that despite the disapproval of slave ownership in Buddhist canon law and strict regulations on the slave trade in the state laws of the Tang Dynasty (618–907, 唐), Buddhist monks and nuns showed little concern over these restrictions when participating in the trading of slaves in the local markets in Dunhuang and Turfan. When others challenged their possessions of slaves, these monks and nuns showed no reluctance in seeking legal intervention in the state court. In these practices, such Buddhist monks and nuns received evident support from the lay legal system. The local government not only ruled in favor of a Buddhist nun to protect her rights as the adoptive mother but ignored her enslavement of a free commoner's daughter, a severe crime against Tang law.

