China Research Seminar Series, Lent, 2015
Department of East Asian Studies, University of Cambridge

The Rise of Stone Lanterns in Medieval Chinese Buddhism

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5pm, February 11 (Wed), 2015; Rooms 8 & 9, FAMES

Abstract  Nowadays the stone lantern is one of the most popular and visible architectural features in Japanese Buddhism. In fact the stone lantern is a Chinese invention and has a long history in Chinese Buddhism. It appears in many different names and forms, bearing different symbolic meanings. The origins of the stone lantern as a crucial Buddhist architectural design puzzled scholars due to the scattered narratives in traditional Buddhist textual sources and the scarcity of extant stone lanterns. In examining archaeological and inscriptional materials acquired from many regions in China, this paper aims to offer a clear understanding of this important Buddhist monument from multiple perspectives. This paper focuses on the rise and early development of the stone lanterns in medieval China. First, it explores the religious context in which this architecture appeared and suggests that multiple elements including the Zoroastrian fire altars, the Buddhist Stūpas, the Chinese translations of Buddhist scriptures on lamp offerings, and the Daoist lamp rituals have played different roles in the development of the stone lanterns. Second, this paper analyzes the social, cultural, and religious significance of the stone lanterns through reading the inscriptional sources. The stone lantern is a typical hybrid product adapting Buddhist ideas within the Chinese historical context. Third, this paper also links the stone lanterns and other Buddhist architectural features in medieval Chinese monasticism and argues that there is a Buddhist paradox of constructing permanent monuments against the idea of impermanence.

Dr. Huaiyu Chen is Spalding Visiting Fellow at Clare Hall, Cambridge University in 2014-2015. He was trained as a historian of medieval China in Beijing and received his Ph.D. in East Asian Religions from Princeton. He currently teaches Buddhism and Chinese Religions at the School of Historical, Philosophical and Religious Studies and the School of International Letters and Cultures, Arizona State University. His research interests include medieval Chinese Buddhist monasticism, especially rituals and material culture, religious cultures along the Silk Road, Christianity in China, and modern intellectual and cultural history. He has published books and articles in both Chinese and English on these subjects.

All seminars take place on Wednesdays (unless otherwise arranged) at 5pm in rooms 8 & 9 in the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies. Tea will be served at the same venue at 4:45pm. All are welcome!