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McMaster's Religious Studies Department on  
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# A Reflection on Dr. Cuilan Liu's Visit to McMaster's Religious Studies Department on December 15, 2016

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On December 15th of 2016, Religious Studies faculty and students welcomed Dr. Cuilan Liu to our department as a guest lecturer. Dr. Liu is an Assistant Professor of Buddhist Studies at Emmanuel College of Victoria University in the University of Toronto. Her research focuses on relationships between Buddhism and the State during the middle period in China and Tibet. She seeks to understand the transformation of legal space that occurred as a result of interactions between State law and Buddhist canon law, and how tensions arising from this transformation were mitigated. In her lecture entitled "Buddhism in Court: A Case Study of Puguang Nunnery in Dunhuang," Dr. Liu kindly shared with us the details of one of her ongoing research projects.

Dr. Liu discussed three models of handling legal matters related to Buddhist monks and nuns from the 7th-11th centuries of the Common Era. She presented a case study of the Puguang nunnery, which was one of five nunneries thriving in the Dunhuang region at that time. Dr. Liu noted that she chose this nunnery because it was supported by the government while the Dunhuang area was ruled alternately by Tibet and

China, and many of its nuns came from powerful families. Manuscripts created and hidden away in a cave at Dunhuang in northwest China were among Dr. Liu's sources.

While conducting her research, Dr. Liu discovered that monks and nuns at Dunhuang employed at least three models to deal with clerical issues. The first model, or “internal approach,” involved the use of Buddhist canon law (*vinaya*) and institutional regulations to address troubled monks and nuns. This model has presented some challenges for Dr. Liu, since it has been difficult to find examples of it among the Dunhuang documents. She noted that more research on the internal approach is necessary. The second model, or “external approach,” involved prosecuting clergy members in a public criminal court, using the Tang (618-907 CE) legal code. To gain some insight into this model, Dr. Liu examined memorials sent by clergy members to the State. These documents protested the State's prosecution of monks and nuns. The third model of addressing legal matters involving Buddhist clergy, which Dr. Liu referred to as “the middle way approach” was a combination of the internal and external models. This model was neither secular nor religious in its entirety. It involved a State-controlled office, which addressed all affairs pertaining to Buddhist clergy, including disputes between monks and nuns. It consisted of a hybrid court administered by clerical staff. In 637 CE, a set of regulations modeled upon the Tang legal code was established for Buddhist and Daoist clergies. This set of regulations also took into consideration rules from the *vinaya*. Monks and nuns in the Dunhuang area made use of these three models to address their legal matters, and left behind records of a variety of cases.

Dr. Liu sought to uncover the ways in which these three models worked in actual legal cases. To do so, she examined archival materials from legal cases that were found at Dunhuang. After Dr. Liu presented some detailed examples of the aforementioned legal models, the group

engaged in a fruitful feedback and question and answer session. Audience members were eager to learn more about Dr. Liu's research materials, as well as the specific examples she discussed during her lecture. She emphasized the importance of understanding the nature of our research materials. Why were these documents hidden in this cave at Dunhuang? Were they being protected as precious documents, or were they being discarded as trash? We still do not have an answer to these questions. As I mentioned before, Dr. Liu's research project is ongoing. We look forward to hearing more about this exciting project in the future! On behalf of the Religious Studies Department at McMaster, I would like to sincerely thank Dr. Liu for sharing her work with us.