

Canadian Journal of Buddhist Studies

ISSN 1710-8268

<https://thecjbs.org/>

Number 13, 2018

Buddhism and Economics:
Individual, City, and State: A Reflection of the
“Buddhism and Business, Market and Merit”
Conference at the University of British Columbia

Shan Shan Zhao

McMaster University

Copyright Notice: Digital copies of this work may be made and distributed provided no change is made and no alteration is made to the content. Reproduction in any other format, with the exception of a single copy for private study, requires the written permission of the author.

Buddhism and Economics:
Individual, City, and State: A Reflection of the
“Buddhism and Business, Market and Merit”
Conference at the University of British Columbia

Shan Shan Zhao
MCMASTER UNIVERSITY

From June 16th to 18th, 2017, an international conference titled “Buddhism and Business, Market and Merit: Intersections between Buddhism and Economics Past and Present” was held at the University of British Columbia (UBC). It was sponsored by UBC Buddhist Studies Forum and the newly funded [SSHRC partnership project on Buddhism and East Asian Religions](#).

The conference was structured as a series of ten panels and three student roundtable discussions. On June 17th, three scholars shared their research on the relationship between Buddhism and economics in medieval China in Panel Four, entitled *Intertwined Histories: Buddhism and Economics I*. At the conclusion of the panel, Professor Ben Brose shared his opinions and comments. The presentations were: “Buddhism and Commerce in 9th century Chang’an: A study of Ennin’s *Nittō Guhō Junrei*” from Professor Tatsuhiko Seo, Chuo University, “Worldly Morality in the medieval Chinese Buddhist anthology *Fayuan Zhulin*” from Professor

Koichi Shinohara, Yale University, and “The Mobilizer of Monks and Money: Integrating and Institutionalizing Buddhist Missions” from Zeng Yang, UBC. Their research, although addressing very different aspects of Buddhist practices and economic activities, all centre on the capital city of Chang’an in Tang dynasty and the role that wealth played in Buddhism based on the principle of merit and renunciation.

Buddhism, Economy, and City

Professor Tatsuhiko Seo’s talk was based on his ongoing research, in which he used Ennin’s travelogue to uncover the role of Buddhist monasteries in economic activity in the Tang-dynasty (618-907 CE) capital, Chang’an. Ennin 圓仁 (794-864) was an eminent Japanese monk who travelled to China and visited Chang’an during the Buddhist Persecution initiated by Tang Emperor Wuzong 武宗 (r. 840-846). Ennin’s celebrated diary, *Nittō Guhō Junrei Kōki* 入唐求法巡禮行記 (The Record of a Pilgrimage to the Tang in Search of the Buddhist Law), is a key source of information on various aspects of Tang China and East Asia.

In his presentation, Professor Seo put Chang’an into a global context as a model capital city that employed Buddhism as a universal and unifying force. He pointed out that the world religious sphere (*shijie zongjiao quan* 世界宗教圈) usually had a very close relation to the economic sphere (*jingji quan* 經濟圈), and Buddhist temples (*fojiao siyuan* 佛教寺院) were closely linked to the cities (*chengshi* 城市). The city of Chang’an was designed and constructed based on the Lifang System (*lifang zhi* 里坊制), which was the ideal city arrangement based on the Rites of Zhou (*zhouli* 周禮). With the Lifang System, the regular street pattern followed a symmetrical layout with the main boulevard running through the centre of the city. Residential and commercial areas were cut into small boxes like a chessboard. Daily social and commercial activ-

ities were restrained in certain areas of the city for security and military purposes. Due to the limitation of public space, religious sites such as Buddhist temples became assembly centres, and attracted a large number of people, including merchants. Besides the practical economic and social aspects, Professor Seo also suggested that Buddhism changed the social structure of Chang'an by introducing metaphysical values beyond the human realm, forming a centre that connects human beings with one another.

Chang'an was not the only ancient capital where Buddhism and commerce were interconnected. This interconnectedness later became a model for Gyeongju of Silla, and Heijiokyo, Fujiwarakyo, and Heiankyo of Japan. Throughout his talk, Professor Seo showed a series of pictures of other ancient Buddhist sites that were once surrounded by prosperous cities, including Dunhuang, Luoyang, Jiankang, Lhasa, and Baekje.

In his commentary on Panel Four, Professor Ben Brose mentioned that Professor Seo had raised a lot of possibilities regarding the ways in which Buddhist institutions and individuals were affected by the economic forces that shaped and changed Chang'an. He also noted the ways in which monasteries had an impact on the economic culture of the city in Professor Seo's paper. This presentation has given us a glimpse into Professor Seo's research, and we are looking forward to hearing more from him in the future.

Buddhism, Wealth, and Poverty

Ideally, Buddhist monastics are not supposed to be motivated by monetary gain, especially personal monetary gain. In practice, Buddhist monasteries and sanghas need financial support and one of the major sources is donation. In the second talk, Professor Koichi Shinohara reviewed the

tension and contradictory views between wealth and poverty in the seventh-century anthology *Fayuan Zhulin* 法苑珠林 (Forest of Pearls from the Dharma Garden).

Compiled by Daoshi 道世 (ca. 607–684) in 668, *Fayuan Zhulin* has a Wealth section and a Poverty section. Through those two, Daoshi seems to shift his favour from the wealthy to the poor. The positive attitude towards wealth in the Wealth section takes a radical change by the end of the Poverty section to reflect an idea that donation and merit accumulation are possible for all regardless of their financial status.

At the beginning of Wealth section, Daoshi argued that wealth and privilege resulted from good deeds and generosity performed in past lives. Professor Shinohara gave several examples from the stories. One story tells that the crown prince was sick and the doctor advised the King to cover the prince's body with ox-head sandalwood incense. Someone told the King that the Elder Tanmili (Tanmili zhangzhe 檀彌離長者) had the incense. When the King visited the Elder's house, he saw many beautiful and elegant maidens and piles of treasures, as well as the precious ox-head sandalwood incense. After receiving the incense, the King informed the Elder that the Buddha appeared in the world. The Elder was delighted and went to the Buddha for teachings immediately. After that, he renounced the household life and became an *arhat*. The Buddha explained that ninety-one *kalpas* ago, the Elder was one of the five monks who practiced in the forest. He walked to the city to beg for food for the other four monks everyday so that the four could achieve the status of *arhat*. With such merit, the Elder was able to be reborn with wealth in either the heavenly realm or the human realm, and to attain enlightenment when he encountered the Buddha. In this story, the wealth in the present life was the consequence of past-life offerings and was celebrated as being virtuous. On the contrary, poor people were presumably suffering from their transgressions in previous lives.

In the Poverty section, however, Daoshi indicated that poverty is the best position to make offerings to the Buddhist monasteries because giving is a bigger sacrifice for the poor and thus they would receive more credits for even a small donation. The section ends with a complex story of Mahākāśyapa, one of the principal disciples of the Buddha and avoided wealthy households when begging for food. In the first half of the story, a dying old lady offered some stinking rice soup, which was the only thing she had, to Mahākāśyapa, and was consequently reborn to the Trāyastriṃśa Heaven after she passed away. In the second half of the story, after witnessing that auspicious scene, Indra and Indrani, who were the king and the queen of the heaven of the thirty-three gods, turned into an old couple in poverty and tricked Mahākāśyapa into accepting their donation so that both of them could receive the blessing and accumulate merit. The story clearly illustrates that even a small offering from the poor produces an enormous auspicious result. Although Daoshi indicated in the introduction of the Poverty section that wealth and poverty are both karmic consequence of past deeds, the stories clearly shift their favour from wealth to poverty.

In his commentary, Professor Brose raised the question of whether the emphasis on donation from the poor is a rhetorical method or an actual shift in focus on selective donations. Professor Shinohara said he believed it was a rhetorical method. Although the central message of the text is encouraging people to offer as much as they can regardless of their financial status, Daoshi pointed out that both wealth and poverty are transitory while the ultimate goal is to attain enlightenment. Therefore, wealth is neither the only consequence nor the ultimate goal of giving.

Buddhism, State, and Money

Besides donations from ordinary people, including the wealthy and the poor, Buddhist monasteries were often closely connected to the imperial court for patronage and state protection. Yang Zeng's presentation on Amoghavajra makes a detailed case of historical reconstruction of the relationship between Amoghavajra (705-774) and the Tang imperial court, especially with the Emperor Daizong 代宗 (r. 762-779). The imperial commission and protection warranted Amoghavajra significant funds to underwrite his religious activities, to establish the esoteric practice system and help him become one of the most influential Buddhist masters in his generation.

The institutionalized sponsorship that Amoghavajra received from Daizong was developed through the political turmoil and decentralization after the An Lushan Rebellion (755-763). After the warfare, the state was facing threats including the unruly provincial military forces, the collapse of the old taxation system and the loss of revenue sources, and natural disasters. Under such circumstances, Amoghavajra was able to obtain imperial patronage for he claimed and proved that the Buddha from the esoteric tradition had the power to protect the state. The underlying principle of the patronage is efficacy. Amoghavajra claimed that the esoteric practice system of the Vajroṣṇīṣa Yoga was the most effective mean of quickly attaining liberation. And the power that liberation bestowed was the most efficient Buddhist method to protect the empire. One of the examples that Yang Zeng gave in his presentation is Amoghavajra's new translation of the *Renwang huguo boreboluomiduo jing* 仁王護國般若波羅蜜多經 (Perfection of Wisdom Sutra for Humane Kings Protecting Their Countries). The original sutra was translated by Kumārajīva (344-413 CE) and the interlocutors who received teachings from the Buddha were the kings of the sixteen ancient regions of India. In the new translation, Amoghavajra drew in deities from a pantheon of esoteric Buddhist traditions and practices which were designed for the protection of the state. Coincidentally, during the grand recitation cer-

emony of the newly translated sutra, another wave of attack on the capital city was defeated due to the sudden death of the enemy leader and the extreme weather. Amoghavajra's efforts and the unusual victories convinced Emperor Daizong of the magical power of his esoteric Buddhist practice.

The relationship between Daizong and Amoghavajra is based on reciprocity. The emperor relied on Amoghavajra to perform major and minor esoteric rituals designed for the protection of the imperial family and the state. Esoteric yogins routinely performed rituals and regularly executed highly confidential missions under instruction of the emperor and often involved political and military schemes. On the other hand, with such a close relationship with the emperor, Amoghavajra could preach Buddhist teachings, build monasteries, and translate and distribute the religious text. Huge amount of money were donated from eunuchs and officials to the promotion of the cult of Mount Wutai and the construction of Jin'ge Temple.

Amoghavajra's success shows that the ruler's patronage of one particular monk can have a major impact on the development and dissemination of Buddhist doctrines and practices. The practices Amoghavajra preached became normative; the text he translated and promoted were spread, and the monks he trained became leading figures in the sangha. At the time, there was a Manjusri chapel in every monastery across the country. With imperial support, Amoghavajra created a whole generation that committed to the same doctrine and practices. Although the esoteric tradition was eventually surpassed by Chan Buddhism, monks were making similar claims of sudden enlightenment and ritual power which could protect the state.

The presentations and discussions in Panel Four presented a sensitive negotiation that takes place between Buddhist ideals and the practical necessity of supporting the monastic communities and teachings.

All the three presentations, although focusing on different groups of participants and topics, reflect the Tang dynasty's struggle with finding the right balance between economic viability and the ideal of non-attachment. Many of the issues, such as how one could secure economic protection without sacrificing ideals or autonomy, continue to challenge contemporary religious communities after more than a thousand years.