

BUDDHISM AND EAST ASIAN CULTURES: REPORT ON THE 2018 WINTER PROGRAM

Maggie Mitchell, University of British Columbia

Over 120 students and monastics gathered at the Dharma Drum Institute for Liberal Arts from January 13-20 for the annual Winter Program on Buddhism and East Asian Cultures. Ranging from undergraduate students, to PhD candidates and instructors, participants were able to attend a variety of academic events ranging in scale from an international conference, to smaller forums where students presented their own research.

The program began with a conference titled "[From the Caoxi Creek to Mogao Cave: Interdisciplinary Studies of Chan Buddhism and the Dunhuang Cache from Multiple Sources and Perspectives](#)," which brought together international scholars to present their research in English and Chinese. Two days of conference proceedings introduced program participants to the work of popular scholars in Buddhist Dunhuang studies, and allowed some junior students to experience an academic conference for the first time. This highly specialized conference presented a variety of approaches to the Dunhuang grotto sources, and conference presenters engaged in constructive debate with panelists on how to best engage with these sources moving forward. Following the conference, participants attended three full days of lecture series, presented by Drs. Jinhua Chen (UBC), James Robson (Harvard), and Barend ter Haar (Oxford).

Dr. Chen shared his work on Buddhism and historical empire building, and turning to the present, the possibilities of an economic system founded on Buddhist ethical principles.

Dr. Robson took a critical approach to Buddhist meditation, suggesting that contemporary discussion around Buddhist meditation has failed to acknowledge the potential dangers of solitary meditative practice. Dr. Robson first turned to meditation manuals to show that there is a precedent within the tradition for practitioners of meditation to encounter dangerous challenges, which an experienced mentor can help mediate. Robson noted that with a growing interest in Zen/Chan practice outside of Asia, there is also growing availability of meditation centers and retreats. These are often not fully prepared to ensure the mental stability of their participants, who sometimes turn to meditation to counteract symptoms of mental illness. In this case, meditation is seen as a (often ineffective) tool for treatment, but Robson presented a model from his fieldwork in Japan to demonstrate that meditation as a therapy is unprecedented and may pose some risk to untrained or unexperienced practitioners.

Dr. ter Haar presented work that challenged scholars of Buddhism to examine the "aural and oral" elements of Buddhist texts. Working against the idea that writing became the dominant form of communication in early China, he framed text as an elite style of communication providing scholars with a limited perspective. Within many texts, however, there are aural/oral elements that can enrich a reader's understanding of the texts' social and cultural context. Understanding some sutras as records of sermons, and emphasizing the performative nature of eminent monks and teachers, we can see texts as part of the oral culture of their time. Additionally, ter Haar emphasized the linguistic diversity of medieval China; many of the people involved in recording, transmitting, and translating Buddhist texts did not fully understand each other, which is reflected in their written records. Finally, ter Haar turned to the role of sound and

music, as well as silence, as an important and culturally dependent part of Buddhism as a lived tradition. Dr. ter Haar's lectures invited students to explore new dimensions of Buddhist texts, and perhaps more importantly, look beyond texts.

Following the lecture series, the Young Scholars Forum allowed students to present their own research. This aspect of the program gave students a rare opportunity to present their research not only to their peers, but also to receive comments from an established scholar. Paper topics were highly diverse, but all touched on either Buddhist and/or other religious (especially Daoist) traditions in East Asia. Commenters gave thoughtful and constructive feedback to presenters, and program participants were given a sense of the wide spectrum of work being done by their peers.

The Winter Program gives its participants the opportunity to meet and share research with international professors in an academic setting. It also generates an important dialogue between Buddhist and non-Buddhist scholars on the role of one's own practices in motivating academic research, and the role of outsiders to the tradition in providing a critical methodological balance. Perhaps most exciting to me, as a program participant, is that this program gives me the chance to meet my future colleagues from universities across the world. Meeting other graduate students and having the opportunity to talk about our interests and academic futures, I feel connected to a network of upcoming Buddhist studies scholars.