

## Doing Buddhist/East Asian Studies in France: A Guide.

In 2020, I received a Canadian fellowship to spend six months in Paris, affiliated with *École pratique des hautes études*. This was not my first time living in France, but I was never here for graduate studies, so right away I felt disoriented in the face of the complicated system of the French higher education: There are many *établissements* (“institutions”) and their differences are more than just being different universities — they often have different institutional statuses, operating by their own rules, and relating to each other in a complicated bureaucratic network. As for locating resources, there are so many libraries, and each requires a separate library card and has its own database — which ones to use?

In this guide, I want to clarify what has taken me weeks to wrap my mind around. Hopefully the reader of this guide could find the footing in Paris much more swiftly than I did. The guide is primarily for students and researchers in East Asian Studies, especially Buddhist Studies, but could be useful for any foreign researcher coming to France.

Lastly, I want to thank Prof. Costantino Moretti, Prof. Ji Zhe, Dr. Wang Huayan (Cécile) and Prof. Bernard Faure for their suggestions to this guide.

The guide has three components, plus a bonus section that offers tips for living in Paris:

1. [Locate Institutions](#)
  - a. [Public university](#)
  - b. [Grande école](#)
  - c. [Grand établissement](#)
  - d. [Research institutes](#)
  - e. [Laboratoire](#) (research unit)
  - f. [Others](#)
  
2. [Locate Resources](#)
  - a. [Primary source \(e.g. Dunhuang\)](#)
  - b. [Secondary source](#) (libraries)
  
3. [Locate Scholars](#)

52 Buddhist scholars in France and French Switzerland (in a separate spreadsheet).  
Note: if you only have this guide but not the spreadsheet, you can ask it from me by email.
  
4. [\[Bonus: tips for living in Paris\]](#)

## 1. Locate Institutions

It is hard to categorize French institutions. For the expedient sake, I grouped them in the following five categories. I also highlighted the institutions that are important for Religious Studies.

### 1. 13 Public Universities

In 1970, the once uniform University of Paris was divided to 13 universities. Each inherited a domain of specialty from its mother university and is marked by a number from 1 to 13, in addition to their respective proper name.

#### — Paris 1

The famous Paris-Sorbonne is the main inheritor of the Faculty of Humanities. In 2018, it merged with Paris 6, forming the Sorbonne University.

#### — Paris 5 and Paris 7

Both have strong humanities and East Asian studies. In 2019, Paris 5 and 7 merged and formed the Paris University — not to be confused with the Paris-Sorbonne or the defunct University of Paris.

Due to the two merges above, there are now only 11 public universities, but this change has yet to gain traction in the mind of Parisians.

#### — Paris 3 and 4

are also strong in Humanities. Paris 3 has a strong Sanskrit studies.

## 2. Grande École

*Grande école* is often viewed as the counterpart to public universities, despite it also being public and state-owned. The major difference lies in that *grande école* has strong autonomy and could devise their own selection process: After French high school students pass the graduation exam *baccalaureate*, they could choose to enter either public universities (or equivalents) or a “preparatory school” (*école préparatoire*) where they spend two years preparing intensively for the selection exam (*concours*) prepared by each the *grande école* of their choosing. Each *grande école* is known for its *forte* in a certain domain and therefore has its mission to train French elites in different domains that are instrumental to the functioning of French society.

The *grande école* tasked with training teachers and academics is the reputable ENS.

#### — École normale supérieure (ENS)

ENS is strong in many science and humanities disciplines, and perhaps the most prestigious of all *grandes écoles*. It is ranked as the number one Nobel prize producer in the world.

### 3. *Grand établissement*

If *grande école* is an institute for elite undergraduates, then *grand établissement* is for academy-inclined graduate students. Only until recently, *grande école* only had undergraduate program, so for those seeking a higher degree, they would enter a *grand établissement*. Given its academic nature, *grand établissement* usually does not have an undergraduate program. For East Asian Studies, *grand établissement* play more important roles than *grande école*.

— **École pratique des hautes études (EPHE)**

EPHE has a wide-ranging curriculum in both Humanities and Science, but is known especially for its religious studies and history. EPHE only has graduate programs and is the main teaching avenue for graduate courses on Buddhism. It does not have its own teaching space. It outsources classrooms and sometimes professors.

— **Institut national des langues et civilisations orientales (INALCO)**

Library: La Bibliothèque Universitaire des Langues et Civilisations (BULAC)

Inalco is the main avenue to learn Oriental languages. Students from other universities often attend language courses here. As a *grand établissement*, however, Inalco does have an undergraduate program, but unlike *grande école*, it does not have a selective entry exam. Nevertheless, the program is very demanding with a high failure rate (which could reach over 50%), especially with major languages. It is also a strong research institute with 270 faculties and 300 PhD students.

— **École des hautes études en sciences sociales (EHESS)**

EPHESS specializes in social sciences. Some sociologists and anthropologists are interested in the contemporary development of religions in East Asia.

Note: **Université Paris sciences et lettres (PSL)**

You will often see the name of this university, such as in your student/faculty card. It is a collegiate university formed by several universities, formed in 2019 to increase the international visibility of French universities that are often too small to be rated competitively in international rankings.

### 4. Research Institutions

In this category, I grouped institutions that have different institutional status, but I grouped them together anyway to emphasize their shared emphasis on research (rather than teaching).

— **École française d'extrême orient (EFEO)**

Library: Maison de l'Asie

See [page 6](#) for elaboration.

— **Collège de France**

Three Institutes: Institut des Hautes Études Chinoises (IHEC)/ Japonaises (IHEJ)/ Tibétaines (IHET)

See [page 6](#) for elaboration.

— **Centre national de la recherche scientifique (CNRS)**

CNRS is the French state research organization. It is among the best research organizations worldwide (e.g. ranked by Scimago Institutions Rankings as the second best research centre in the world). It operates on research units, commonly referred to as *laboratoire* (see below).

### 5. *Laboratoire* (Research Unit)

CNRS operates on research units known as *laboratoire*. This scientific-sounding name, however, is applied equally to Humanities.

Each *laboratoire* focuses on a specific domain of studies and could be operated either solely by CNRS or in association with other institutions. In the latter case, it is officially called *Unité mixte de recherche* (UMR). A research unit may be further divided into research groups (*équipes*)

Every French researcher has to be affiliated with a *laboratoire*. When a researcher enters a *laboratoire*, the institution to which the researcher is affiliated would contribute a certain sum to the funding of *laboratoire*; this contribution repeats every year.

— **Centre de recherche sur les civilisations de l'Asie orientale (CRCAO)**

Philology and archaeology constitute the main mission of CRCAO. This predilection has to do with its former role as the centre that specialized in cataloguing and studying Dunhuang materials. This team figured among the most important contributors to Dunhuangology but its mission was concluded with the publication of its sixth — and the last — catalogue of all Dunhuang materials in France. It has since evolved, under the name of CRCAO, to become a generalist *laboratoire*. But its ancestral concern with Dunhuang studies and archaeology persists, with many members being Dunhuang specialists. It is currently directed by Sylvie Hureau.

— **L'Institut français de recherche sur l'Asie de l'Est (IFRAE)**

This new *laboratoire* was established in 2019, as the result of the merger of two *laboratoires*. It is not yet well-known due to its young age, but it is, in fact, the biggest research unit of East Asian Studies in France (and perhaps in the world) with 65 lecturers and researchers and more than 90 doctoral students. In addition to size, IFRAE is also the most multidisciplinary *laboratoire* in France for studying East Asia, comprising both traditional disciplines (e.g. philology and history) and such disciplines as sociology, anthropology, literature and economics.

IFRAE has three teams, one of which concerns religions directly — “History and Sociology of Religions in East Asia”. It is not only a hub for studying major religions, but also includes specialists in a wide range of religious traditions such as the historic Manichaeism and various forms of folk religions and new religious movements.

— **Group société religion et laïcité (GSRL)**

GSRL is jointly run by CNRS and EPHE and focuses on the religious issues in the contemporary society. Ji Zhe studies contemporary Buddhism.

— **Chine Corée Japon (CCJ)**

CCJ inherits the tradition of the Annales School and stresses the social history. Even though its members also study ancient East Asia, the majority focus on modern history.

— **L'institut de l'Asie Orientale (IAO)**

Based in Lyon, IAO focuses on the contemporary societies of East Asia. Some members work on contemporary Buddhism.

— **Centre de recherches linguistiques sur l'Asie orientale (CRLAO)**

CRLAO focuses on the linguistics of East Asia.

— **Centre d'études Himalayennes (CEH)**

CEH is an intramural *laboratoire* that operates directly under CNRS. Ethnology, geography and agronomy are the team's key disciplines to study the Himalayan regions, including Nepal, India and the Tibetan region.

## 6. Others

— **Centre d'études interdisciplinaires sur le Bouddhisme (CEIB)**

CEIB was inaugurated in 2017 and is located in Inalco, and co-run by Collège de France and EPHE. It is the first university centre in France that focuses exclusively on Buddhism.

— **L'Institut d'études bouddhiques (IEB)**

On the mid-way between an academic centre and a practitioner centre, IEB is run by researchers who, apart from scholarly research, also intend to spread Buddhist teachings that are well-informed. It hosts regular courses and conferences.

— **Le Groupement d'intérêt scientifique - Études asiatiques (GIS ASIE)**

GIS ASIE is an academic network that connects Asian Studies researchers from 30 *laboratoires* and 22 institutions. It aims to facilitate dialogues among scholars working on different aspects of Asian Studies.

— **Société Asiatique**

A French learned society dedicated to the study of Asia founded in 1822. Its *Journal asiatique* played an important role in the Asian Studies in France. Its library contains over 100, 000 volumes, housed in the storage site of Collège de France outside Paris.

— **Société Européenne pour l'Etude des Civilisations de l'Himalaya et de l'Asie Centrale (SEECHAC)**

SSECHAC aims to diffuse the latest research on Himalayan Studies to the general public and to facilitate the international scholarly exchange.

— **Association pour le rayonnement des cultures himalayennes ARCH**

Its main mission is to organize photography and art exhibitions to preserve and promote the knowledge about the Himalayan region.

Elaboration on two institutions:

### École Française d'Extrême Orient (EFEO)

The French School of the Far East is a very important research institute on East Asian Studies. It does not have a regular body of students but does offer courses in collaboration with universities, especially EPHE and EHESS. It gathers some of the best French scholars in the field of Far East Asian Studies (but also Indian Studies despite the “Far East” in the title). To appreciate the weight of the EFEO members, it suffices to recall that both Paul Pelliot and Paul Demiéville started their career in EFEO.

EFEO is particularly strong in archaeology — which is its original *raison-d'être* when it was created in 1898—and philology. Two current EFEO scholars on Chinese Buddhist, Costantino Moretti and Kuo Liying are both philologists working closely with archaeological materials from Dunhuang.

EFEO also hosts a number of productive journals. Buddhist research usually appears in its *Arts Asiatiques*, *Cahiers d'Extrême-Asie* and *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient*.

EFEO is unique among other Asian research institutes in France for it has oversea branches: 18 centres in 12 countries. This international character could be traced back to the origin of EFEO: it was created in Hanoi in 1898 to encourage archaeologists to stay long term in Indochina and to preserve its cultural heritage. After the independence of Vietnam, the headquarter was moved to Paris. This highly international character about EFEO gives it a semi-diplomatic role in addition to being a research institute.

It is located in a building named *Maison de l'Asie* which also houses EFEO's resourceful library (see the section “Secondary Sources”).

### Collège de France

Collège de France is the most prestigious academic institution in France, but it is not a college, as its name may imply. Rather, it is a research institute and a sort of honorary academic society that selects a handful of scholars of the highest caliber from each major discipline.

In the field of the Far East Studies, there are three scholars: Anne Cheng specializes in the intellectual history of China; Frantz Grenet in the pre-Islamic histories and cultures of Central Asia and Jean-Noël Robert in the philosophy of the Japanese civilisation.

Even though Collège de France does not operate like a university having a regular body of students, it does offer public courses. Anyone could drop in on the course without registration.

The Far East Studies is further divided into five research centres, respectively on Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Indian and Tibetan Studies. Its Chinese Studies institute (*Institut des Hautes Études Chinoises*) has many primary and secondary sources. See the section below on locating secondary sources.

Its library in the Latin Quarter is my favorite study space in Paris — quaint, quiet and uncrowded.

#### 4. Locate Resources

##### Primary Sources

##### 1. Dunhuang primary sources (mostly Chinese+Tibetan)

- **Bibliothèque Nationale de France (BNF)** \*Richelieu Branch
- **Musée Guimet**

Dunhuang materials in France are preserved in the Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF) in its Richelieu branch (manuscripts) and in the Musée Guimet (paintings). The materials are collected in the *Fond* (“collection”) of *Pelliot Chinois* and *Pelliot Tibétains*, named after its collector Paul Pelliot (1878-1945).

All Dunhuang manuscripts from the Pelliot collection have been digitalized and are available in either International Dunhuang Project (IDP) website or Gallica, the online database of BnF (<https://gallica.bnf.fr/>). Due to this availability online, the access to the physical manuscripts is somewhat restricted (but still possible). If you are granted the access, [this blog post](#) written by a former Princeton Ph.D. student could be a useful guide for your visit to the BnF (the post also talks about how to navigate the Gallica database).

##### [Secondary sources on Dunhuang]

All Dunhuang manuscripts have been catalogued in six volumes.

You can find many Dunhuangology books, written both in Asian and Western languages, in the Institut des Hautes Études Chinoises (IHEC), part of Collège de France. See below.

Jean-Pierre Drège is the foremost French scholar working on Dunhuang manuscripts. His books are indispensable for studying Dunhuang manuscripts in France. In particular, his 2014 edited volume *La fabrique du lisible*, co-edited with Costantino Moretti, is a very important contribution to Dunhuang Studies. Its table of contents is also a good place for knowing the name of French scholars working on Dunhuang manuscripts.

## 2. Non-Dunhuang primary sources (Chinese)

— **Bibliothèque Nationale de France (BNF)** \*François-Mitterrand branch

— **Institut des Hautes Études Chinoises (IHEC)**

IHEC is a library of Collège de France. You could use its OMNIA search engine to navigate the catalogue or see *Catalogue Annoté des Ouvrages Chinois Rare Conservés à l'Institut des Hautes Études Chinoises du Collège de France* (Chin. 法蘭西學院漢學研究所藏漢籍善本書目提要).

## 3. Non-Dunhuang primary sources (Tibetan)

— **Centre de documentation sur l'aire tibétaine (CDAT)**

Closed in 2019, CDAT transferred all its Tibetan collection to Campus Condorcet. The collection contains a photography library, over 3000 monographs in Western languages and over a thousand Tibetan documents.

— **L'Institut d'Études Tibétaines (IET)**

Created in 1974 by the scholar Rolf Alfred Stein (1911-1999) and currently headed by François Wang-Toutain, IET houses more than 6000 volumes in Tibetan language and has the most complete collection in Europe of *Mirror of Tibet* (Yul phyogs so so'i gsar 'gyur me long), a Tibetan-language newspaper that was published in Kalimpong, India from 1925 to 1963.



### Secondary Sources

You could find most secondary literature on Asian Studies in the following three libraries.

— **Maison de l'Asie**

(of École Française d'Extrême Orient)

Subscription requires a letter of recommendation from an affiliated faculty.

Online catalogue: <https://catalogue.bulac.fr/>

— **La Bibliothèque universitaire des langues et civilisations (BULAC)**

(of Institut national des langues et civilisations orientales)

You could easily obtain a library card in the reception.

Online catalogue: <https://catalogue.bulac.fr/> (the same as Maison de l'Asie).

— **Institut des hautes études chinoises (IHEC)**

(of Collège de France)

IHEC was created by the famous Paul Pelliot and Marcel Granet and currently headed by Marianne Bujard 吕敏. It houses a resourceful library on sinological materials, one of the most abundant in Europe.

Online catalogue: OMNIA (<http://omnia.college-de-france.fr/>)

Subscription requires a letter of recommendation from an affiliated faculty.

If you have any question, you can ask the *documentaliste* Wang Huayan. She is very helpful, always ready to help newcomers.

In addition:

— **Société Asiatique**

Its library contains over 100,000 volumes in 54 languages concerning 80 countries. It also has the collection of Paul Demiéville and Jean Filliozat. It is housed in the storage site of Collège de France outside Paris. Appointment only.

## Living in Paris

### **Transportation in Paris:**

#### **Navigo Metro Card:**

- Options: 1) Navigo Liberté: charge by ride at discounted price  
2) Navigo Mois: 75.2€ per month for unlimited ride  
3) Imaginair R Etudiant: 350 years per year; available for students

#### **Vélib Bike:**

Public rental bike, with stations throughout the city.  
37.2€ per year (27.6€ for students) ; 250€ deposit.

#### **Scooter:**

Public rental scooter became a popular mode of transportation in recent years.

#### **Batobus:**

60€ per year for unlimited boat rides (“Bateaux Mouches”) along La Seine.

#### **Second-hand bike**

Try leboncoin.fr, the Craigslist of France

### **Transportation in France**

#### **SNCF:**

National rail company; expensive.

#### **Ouigo:**

Low-cost train, a branch of SNCF. Its station is outside Paris, near Disneyland.

#### **Blablacar:**

Carsharing

#### **Blablabus/Flibus**

Bus companies

### **Food**

Students and faculties can eat at the university restaurants operated by CROUS, a governmental student service. For students, it is a mere 3.25 euros for a full meal! Near Bibliothèque François Mitterant, CROUS even owned a boat for restaurants and cafés! You need a card issued by CROUS.

### **Museums**

Most museums are free for under 26 years old and/or for students. Some museums, such as La Panthéon needs to see the student visa, so it is helpful to have a copy of it on your phone.

### **Entertainment**

#### **MK2 Cinema:**

Unlimited pass for under 26 years old for 18€ per month, annual subscription

#### **Onvasortir.fr:**

Events at Paris

#### **Meetup.com:**

Find groups by interest.

## **Accommodation**

### **Housing Aid:**

Students, including international students, can request housing aid from CAF. It covers often half of the rent. You will need your birth certificate, among other documents, for the application.

### **H-France Forum:**

French academics rent out their properties on this website. (I found my current owner on this forum, who is a historian at the Sorbonne).

### **PSL Housing:**

Housing information for students affiliated with one of the partner universities

### **Cité Universitaire**

A residential area for international students at a beautiful location at the southmost end of Paris.

### **CROUS Dormitories**

Several locations; competitive price.

## **Some Fun Reading for Surviving Parisians**

1. Stuff Parisians Like: Discovering the Quoi in the Je Ne Sais Quoi, by Olivier Magny
2. WTF?!: What the French, by Olivier Magny
3. Sixty Million Frenchmen Can't Be Wrong: Why We Love France but Not the French (Jean Nadeau)
4. Dawn of the Belle Epoque, by Mary McAuliffe (a page-turner to learn about the history of Paris from 1870 to the World War).
5. Youtube Channel: "What the Fuck France" by Paul Taylor