

The Eastern Buddhist Society Lecture Series

Toward a More Perfect Future:

Early Conceptions of the History of Buddhist Translation in China

Date and Time: Friday, October 17th, 2025, 09:00~10:30 (JST)

Place: Online via Zoom Webinar

Speaker: Associate Professor Eric Greene
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Abstract:

The translation of Buddhist texts in Indian languages into Chinese was a millennium-long project that stands as perhaps the most complex, long-lasting, and copiously documented translation movement in pre-colonial world history, one that initiated and sustained centuries of literary and intellectual contact between the philosophical and religious traditions of South and East Asia. For good reason, then, the history of this Buddhist translation in China has been the subject of near continuous study by modern scholars. Less often considered, however, is the question of how this history was thought about by Chinese Buddhists themselves. In this talk, I take up this question and suggest that, firstly, medieval Chinese Buddhists engaged in an ongoing project of translation historiography in which they reflected on Buddhist translation work in China as having a historical character and as following certain historical patterns. And secondly, that they tended to present this history as having a particular direction: namely, that Chinese Buddhist canonical literature, produced by translation, continually improved in quality as time passed on. The Buddhist translation project, among other things, in this way helped introduce to the world of Chinese letters a forward-looking, progressive vision in which literature becomes better as time goes on. This vision stands in interesting contrast to more usual medieval Chinese thinking about literary history, in which literary development – and in particular, the kind of expansion and proliferation of texts that Buddhist translation produced – was usually presented as negative development that buries the teachings of the sages beneath the overgrowth of later generations.

Notes: The Lecture will be in English.



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