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Thus we have heard: imperial Buddhist prefaces and ideology in Tang China

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Thus We Have Heard

Imperial Buddhist Prefaces and Ideology in Tang China

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Abstract

This dissertation provides a systematic examination of imperial Buddhist prefaces—texts written by emperors to accompany Buddhist canonical works—and their ideological significance during the Tang dynasty. Although these texts are numerous, they have been largely overlooked in previous research. Thirteen such prefaces were produced during the Tang, in stark contrast to the limited number of similar texts produced in the Confucian and Daoist traditions, despite these traditions being central to Tang ideology. Furthermore, nine of the thirteen texts were produced during the early Tang period (618–713). It is this that motivates my investigation into these early Tang prefaces.

This study provides an annotated translation of these texts and uses a combination of textual and historical analysis to examine their nature, development, objectives, and implications. The findings reveal that these prefaces were utilised to define the Buddhist tradition and its relationship with the state, a relationship that had become firmly embedded in state ideology by the sixth century. Monarchs, officials, and monastics strategically shaped these texts to negotiate power, establish authority, and resolve doctrinal and political tensions. As the first systematic study of these texts, this dissertation highlights the integral role of imperial Buddhist prefaces in understanding the relationship between the state and the Buddhist tradition, as well as in the formation and reinforcement of Tang ideology. It invites scholars to reconsider the role of the Buddhist institution in early Tang ideology, viewing it not as an anomaly but as a fundamental strand.

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